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"I" am History: The Individual as a Historian

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For Amma,
Everything that I am is a reflection of you

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Finally, to Thatha, I miss you.

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Introduction

Writing, "it's to make every trivial detail into a chronicle of history. Everything starts

from the individual - the body's pleasures and pains. If you don't see that, you misunderstand

history"[1]. To Mourid Barghouti, the individual is the locus of history; every small facet of the

individual is history. Telling history, then, is not just the work of the historian. We, as people,

continually reproduce and reconstruct history.

To Radwa Ashour,

Writing is an exercise of power to create, to draw characters, to construct space and
temporality, to effect shifts…to manipulate words and sentences is a re-appropriation of a
threatened geography and a threatening history. But more importantly, writing is a
retrieval of the human will negated.[2]

Writing one's own history is the ultimate means for an individual to reclaim their sense of

agency. It constructs a world where the individual has complete control. They control the

representation of all elements of their world, space and time. This grants them a power and a

level of control that is denied to them in every realm except the one that exists within the pages

of a book. Writing, then, allows a person to reclaim their own story; it is no longer dictated by

others. Instead the individual becomes an agent of power, with the ability to influence his/her

own history. Through an examination of Mourid Barghouti's autobiography *I Saw Ramallah* and

Radwa Ashour's novel *Specters* this project will show the ways in which the individual narrative

is an essential medium to record history, or the story of the collective.

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[1] Mourid Barghouti, interview with Maya Jaggi, "A Life in Writing: Mourid Barghouti", *The Guardian* (*New York*), December 12, 2014.

[2] Radwa Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Storyteller: My Experience as a Novelist," *The Massachusetts Review* 41, no. 1 (Spring, 2000): 5.

Mourid Barghouti is a Palestinian poet who was born in 1944 in Deir Ghassanah, Palestine. He grew up in Ramallah, Palestine and went on to college in Cairo, Egypt. It was while he was in his final year at Cairo University, that Barghouti was displaced from Palestine. In 1967, after the six-day war[3], Barghouti joined the ranks of Palestinians denied return back to Palestine. He was forced to move to Kuwait. It was in Kuwait that Barghouti began publishing poetry and literary articles. His stay in Kuwait, though, was short. Barghouti moved to Cairo in 1971 with his wife, Radwa Ashour, and lived in Egypt until 1977. In 1977, Barghouti was displaced once again, this time from Egypt[4]. He would not be allowed to return for 17 years. Barghouti spent this time in Budapest as a Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) cultural attaché. Finally, in 1994, he was allowed to return to Egypt and two years subsequently, he was allowed to return to Palestine. It is this return that is captured in his memoir *I Saw Ramallah.* Barghouti was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature for this book. He has since published over 12 books of poetry and prose, establishing himself as one of the most distinctive narrators of the Palestinian experience. His aim, ultimately, though is always to "reclaim history"[5]. In his own words, it is so that "for those reading my book, I occupy the stage - or my

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[3] The six-day war was a battle between the Arabs (Egypt, Jordan and Syria) and the Israelis in the year 1967. The Arab defeat resulted in heavy losses not only in terms of the lives of civilians but also territory. The Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank were all taken over by Israel.

[4] Multiple Palestinians were displaced in 1977 as a result of the ongoing talks with the then Egyptian president Sadat and Israeli president Begin. These talks, ultimately, led to the Oslo Accords.

[5] Mourid Barghouti, interview with Bill Parry, "Forty Years of Displacement: Interview with Mourid Barghouti*,*" Electronic Intifada, June 15, 2007, https://electronicintifada.net/content/forty-years-displacement-interview-mourid-barghouti/7008 (accessed November 11, 2015).

people, or victims of the Israeli occupation are occupying the stage"[6].

"Ashour's life offers the perfect example of what is referred to as the "committed intellectual""[7]. Radwa Ashour, born in the El Manial of Cairo, Egypt in 1946, was a "powerful voice among Egyptian writers of the postwar[8] generation"[9]. She studied literature in college and obtained a B.A and M.A. from Cairo University; it was here that, in 1966, Ashour met her husband Mourid Barghouti. Unlike Barghouti, Ashour continued to live in Egypt after she graduated from college, except for a brief spell at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst to obtain her PhD. Ashour, at the time of her graduation in 1975, was already becoming a critical spokesperson for marginalized voices; this was evidenced by her PhD dissertation titled *The Search for a Black Poetics: a study of Afro-American critical writings*. Issues of representation were important to Ashour from the very early stages of her career. Over 15 novels later, each of Ashour's writings are still focused on the same theme: giving a voice to those who have been silenced. *Siraaj*, *Heavier than Radwa,* and *Granada,* to name a few, are all focused on a "loyalty to the idea of resistance and struggle"[10]. Ashour was a prolific intellectual donning many caps; she was a professor at University of Ain al Shams in Cairo, a translator, an author, and even a poet. Ashour also served as the editor of the *Encyclopedia for Arab Women Writers*. She has been awarded both the Constantine Cavafy Prize for Literature and the Owais Prize for Fiction.

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[6] Mourid Barghouti, interview with Stuart Reighluth,"I Saw Ramallah," *Palestine-Israel Journal* 11, no. 3-4 (2004), http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=298 (accessed November 28, 2015).
[7] Sayed Mahmour, "Egypt Loses Committed Intellectual, Novelist Radwa Ashour," *Al Akhbar English*, December 2, 2014, http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/22723 (accessed November 28, 2015).
[8] The 1948 Arab-Israeli war
[9] Marina Warner, "Radwa Ashour Obituary," *The Guardian* (*New York*), December 8, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/08/radwa-ashour (accessed November 27, 2015).
[10] *Al Akhbar English*, December 2, 2014.

Ashour, ultimately, though, did not write for accolades, she wrote "in self-defence and in defence of countless others with whom (she identified)"[11]. Ashour took writing as a mechanism of resistance, one that reasserts "the power of the active self to its maximum limit"[12].

Specters (1999) is Ashour's attempt to reappropriate "a threatened geography and a threatening history"[13] through her own writing. The novel shuttles between Ashour's own life and the life of a fictional history professor, Shagar. The novel is set in Egypt. The first eight years of the novel (until the year 1954) take place in the still largely British controlled Egypt. The rest of the novel follows Ashour's life from 1954 until 1999, when it was published. Egypt, during this time, had three leaders: Gamal-Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak. Each regime brought with it its own problems with governance, but the thread between all these regimes was a continued suppression of freedom of expression. This was exacerbated by western powers that continued, albeit sometimes indirectly, to dictate the narrative of Egypt. The question of individual voice in *Specters* is therefore one that is very much motivated by the historical and geographical context of Egypt. It is a question that Ashour, through her own history, has a vested interest in. The role of the individual in recording history is personal to Ashour. *Specters* is thus a novel that addresses questions of the individual and of collective history.

Palestine is also part of the backdrop of the novel *Specters*. When Ashour married Barghouti, she also married the Palestinian cause. His autobiography, *I Saw Ramallah,* is an existential account of his return to Palestine after years of exile. *Specters* and *I Saw Ramallah*

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[11]Radwa Ashour, "My Experience with Writing," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 2000, , no. 13, Department of English and Comparative Literature, American University in Cairo and American University in Cairo Press: 170–75.

[12] *Al Akhbar English*, December 2, 2014.

[13] Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Storyteller: My Experience as a Novelist," 5.

have a unique bridge between them that is formed out of love: a love for each other and a love for Palestine. *I Saw Ramallah* is a novel that most literally performs the recording of the individual. The whole novel is an attempt by Barghouti to record his individual story, his piece of Palestine.

The story of Palestine is integral to understanding *I Saw Ramallah*. The whole autobiography is centered on the struggles of Barghouti to construct his own identity and that of Palestine after exile. Palestine is arguably the most relevant example that we have today of a threatened geography alongside a threatened history. It has been constructed and reconstructed countless times with each new leader attempting to rewrite its history. The State of Israel established in the year 1948 currently occupies Palestine. Israel has, in its battle against the Palestinians, placed a large focus on reconstructing and appropriating the geography and history of Palestinians. This appropriation of Palestinian history was accompanied, naturally, by a suppression of the existing narrative of Palestine and Palestinians. "Every Palestinian today. . . is in the unusual position of knowing that there was once a Palestine and yet seeing the place with a new name, people and identity that deny them altogether"[14]. Israel has also used forced migration as another means to control the narrative of Palestine. Thousands of Palestinians during the Nakba[15] were forced to leave Palestine. Those that left Palestine were never allowed to return. Their power to contribute to a collective narrative of Palestine, their home and their community, was severely undermined. They were instead forced to live with a stagnant narrative of Palestine before 1948. Their ability to change the narrative of Palestine and, in turn, to have it change their own individual narrative was virtually non-existent. The individual narrative of each Palestinian

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[14] Edward Said, introduction to *I Saw Ramallah*, by Mourid Barghouti, trans. Ahdaf Soueif (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 2.
[15] The Nakba refers to the 1948 Palestinian exodus. In the exodus, hundreds of thousand Palestinians either fled or were forced to leave Palestine.

possesses a sense of urgency, as it is vitally important to the task of recording the history of Palestine, even to recording its very existence at all.

This project is motivated by three larger themes: the individual, the dichotomy between the "real" and the "fictional", and history. The first over arching theme is the individual. I will consider the individual in the texts of Ashour and Barghouti to show how each of their definitions constructs the person as an agent of power. A close reading will show us how each of them conceives of their own individual narrative in their novels. Barghouti's individual is constructed through his relationship to Palestine. We see the role that displacement has had in shaping his identity and his story. Displacement is a collective experience that many Palestinians have had; however, Barghouti asserts that his experience of return is unique, it is his own, individual experience. The whole Palestinian experience of displacement cannot be reduced to his singular experience and yet his individual perspective is a record of Palestinian displacement. The collective is recorded, for Barghouti, by multiple individual experiences.

Ashour uses a completely different mechanism to assert the relationship between the individual and the collective. Rather than recording her identity directly, Ashour uses a dispersion of her own identity. She intertwines her own life with that of Shagar, a character "of (her) age and (her) profession, a kind of double if you want"[16]. Her identity is an important point of interaction between Ashour and Shagar. Ashour uses this interaction to show that just because the individual is one person, they are not limited to a singular constant experience. The individual narrative can be a place of multiplicity, given that as people we change. The same person can have multiple perspectives; the places and people around us are constantly affecting

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[16] Raḍwa Ashour, *Specters*, trans. Barbara Romaine (London: Arabia Books, 2010), 91.

us. Ashour, today, does not have the same narrative as Ashour five years ago. The individual reflects the multiplicity of the collective, s/he is not antithetic to it.

The second theme of this project is the dichotomy between the "real" and the "fictional". Both Ashour and Barghouti force us to reexamine our preconceived notions about what is real and what is fictional. Their central question is one that can ironically be found in Harry Potter. Harry is having a conversation with the deceased Dumbledore and asks if the conversation is real or in his head. To this, Dumbledore replies, "Of course, it's happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it's not real"[17]. This is an example of the importance that we give to real events. The foremost concern that we have when we read or write experiences is whether these experiences are real. We conflate the words "real" and "true", believing that the only real or valid experiences are ones that are "objectively" true. This focus on truth serves to undermine the individual perspective. It penalizes the individual and literature as being subjective while holding up an ideal of objectivity that does not exist. Ashour and Barghouti each use their own novels to critique the privileging of the "real narrative" over that of literature and constructed narratives. They see the search for the "real" event or the "real" narrator, ultimately, as obstructing. Barghouti critiques our assumptions about "real" retellings of history by looking at the varying "real" historical narratives that have been constructed around Palestine and that currently dictate the lives of Palestinians. Barghouti shows that the narrators and the narrative shape the "real" events of history. It is impossible to search for a "real" history without acknowledging the subjective narrative that makes its retelling possible. For Barghouti, we are privileging one voice over another when we establish one narrative as real and another as not.

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[17] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007), 723.

When we give privilege to one voice we are attempting to collapse multiple voices into a singular convenient narrative.

Ashour approaches the problem of veracity through the genres of autobiography and fiction. She uses the parallels between her character and Shagar, the real person and the fictional character, to highlight our expectations of the dichotomy between real and fiction. Ashour shows the arbitrary distinctions that readers apply to each character on the basis of their "realness" alone. She uses her own narrative to offer the possibility that fiction is as much a record of the individual as autobiography is and that, ultimately, all narratives are fictional. This does not serve to detract from narrative, but instead shows a self-consciousness that reaffirms the individual and through him/her, the collective narrative.

The final theme of this project is history. *I Saw Ramallah* and *Specters* are steeped in history. History is not limited to a single form either. Ashour and Barghouti act as scribes chronicling political events in their lives, geographical locations, and even the culture that is around them. Through their own writing they highlight the importance of the individual in representing themselves and their community. History is the culmination of Ashour's and Barghouti's focus on the individual and his/her representation of the truth. They believe that any narrative can record history. It is problematic, then, that the historical narrative is upheld as the only "real" way to record history. To destabilize this notion, they show that the categorization of a historical account is usually on grounds of the alleged "real" events that underlie the narrative. If there are no "real" events, however, then historical narratives become mere narratives that do not acknowledge the influence of their own narrators or their own construction. The person's story is important because it acknowledges the construction that a historical account necessitates. It also posits agency rightfully with the subject of history, the people that are living that history.

In fact, Ashour and Barghouti both show that a search for the real history ultimately legitimizes choosing one voice over the other. It does not acknowledge the multiplicity of narratives that together form and record the collective.

In their narratives, Ashour and Barghouti each show that a record of history always becomes a record of people's stories. Barghouti records for a reader not only his own individual experience of displacement but also his experience of return. He, through his novel and his experiences, presents his own geography and history of Palestine. He achieves this by showing the arbitrariness of the "real history" of Palestine outside the individual narrative that constructs and colours it. The geography of Palestine too, acquires power through the individual and the relationship of the individual to it. Palestine, then, does not exist without becoming Barghouti's Palestine or the Israeli Palestine or the Arab Palestine. The history of Palestine is a reflection of the many individual stories that come together in a single place.

Ashour records history by connecting the multifaceted individual to the plural history. She shows that different parts of the person can record different parts of history, s/he is the point of interaction between the public and the private. The individual, then, can speak to the political history of Egypt from protests to presidents, as well as the experience of being a wife to a Palestinian or a professor at a university. Ashour and Barghouti also use their novels to record the other individuals that have constructed and contributed to their collective narrative. Their novels are full of specters from Darwish and Kanafani to Sadat and Begin.[18] They show how each of these individuals has constructed parts of their collective narrative. Their recording of these individuals, just as with their own narratives, is a recording of history.

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[18] Darwish and Kanafani are Palestinian writers and Sadat and Begin are previous prime-ministers of Egypt and Israel, respectively.

Through the three overarching questions that this project deals with, namely the individual, the dichotomy between the "real" and the "fictional", and history Ashour and Barghouti show that the individual is a medium that produces the collective in their own experience. Each person's story affects the collective narrative; the collective in turn affects the individual. They are both inescapably tied. Both novels, in the end, are testaments to the individual. Ashour and Barghouti are hopeful that in spite of threatened geographies and threatened histories a person's power to speak is not lost. It is in this power that the individual can record his/her own experience. Writing your own narrative, then, is the ultimate defiance. It reclaims and re-characterizes the power to record oneself and one's community.

I

"I am made and remade continually.

Different people draw different worlds from me."[19]

Virginia Woolf, *Waves*

In *Specters,* Radwa Ashour ties together her own story with that of the fictional character Shagar. The novel experiments with our conceptions of the individual, it pushes our boundaries forcing us to reconsider our view of the individual. We conceive of a person as a singular and constant figure who has only one perspective at all times. The problem with such a conception is that the individual becomes stagnant; they do not change or evolve. S/he is reduced or limited to a singular identity. Ashour challenges this view, she believes that an individual is a single point where various perspectives come together. She shows, through an exploration of her own identity, that she is neither singular nor constant. Instead she can speak with multiple voices and perspectives at different times. The individual, then, is transformed into a basis for multiplicity.

This chapter begins by examining the reader's relationship to Ashour and the fictional Shagar through the lens of genre. This will allow us to understand the assumptions we make about the individual when s/he is placed in the categories of fiction and autobiography, respectively. Our reading of the characters in *Specters* is affected by the labels of autobiography and fiction, that is, whether we approach them as fictional or real life characters. I will show how these labels, far from enriching our understanding of *Specters,* fuel false distinctions between the "real" author, Ashour, and the "fictional" character, Shagar. Next, we will focus on the role of

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[19] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1931).

the subject pronoun "I" in deconstructing the basis of the "real" individual within the novel, establishing that a person is neither singular nor constant. A reading that privileges these two factors is reductive, undermining a person's true ability to be varied. Finally, I will use an analysis of narrative voice to show that it is not only that the individual is not singular and constant, Ashour is showing us through the construction of her novel that a person can have multiple voices. Ultimately, she is suggesting that the individual is inherently a reflection of the multiplicity present in the collective.

The Fictional Autobiography

Specters is divided into two narratives, one of the fictional character Shagar and the other of the author Radwa Ashour. Conventionally, the existence of a fictional narrative classifies a novel as fiction. The novel here however, can be classified as an autobiography too. This is because, alongside the fictional narrative, the author's personal narrative is being presented. The fictional and autobiographical genres each designate "an aesthetic as well as a historical function."[20] The genre, fiction or autobiography, affects our expectations. When we read a text through the lens of an autobiography, we have two main expectations. The first expectation is that the author is the narrator and the principle character of the novel. The second expectation is that the narrative is of real events being retold by a real narrator. We do not have the same expectations of a fictional narrative: the events do not need to be true and the narrator does not need to be the author. These differing expectations have an effect on how we read a sentence. Each genre provides a context from which we read a sentence being presented to us.

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[20] Paul De Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 67.

In *Specters*, it is difficult to read a sentence with the singular context of either autobiography or fiction. Instead we must use both to construe meaning from a sentence. For example, " What happened? Why did I leap so suddenly from Shagar the child to middle-aged Shagar? I reread what I have written"[21]. Without an autobiographical context, the "I" in this sentence is confusing. There is no explanation of who this "I" refers to. Within an autobiography, however, we can read the "I" as the author, Radwa Ashour, because we know that in an autobiography the narrator, the "I", is the author. Shagar, the character that Ashour "(has) written", does not make sense in an autobiography. We cannot use the same expectations that we used to classify "I" to infer who she is. The fictional narrative's point of reference must be used instead.

A fictional point of reference allows us to distinguish Shagar from the "I". We can identify that Shagar is not the "I" that is Radwa Ashour, instead she is a separate character. Shagar is a character that Ashour is writing, making Ashour's control over Shagar understandable. We have the expectation that an author, writing a fictional text, changes the narrative and features of her characters whenever s/he wants. Ashour's leap then from "Shagar the child to middle-aged Shagar" is an acceptable change in a fictional narrative. Within the same sentence, the context of autobiography and fiction together help us construe meaning. A singular lens of either fiction or autobiography alone will not help us to read the text. A utilization of both, though, complicates our expectation of the text because now our expectations of both fiction and autobiography compete with each other.

Literary critic Paul De Man argues that the tension between autobiography and fiction can be relieved if the former can contain a fictional narrative; the fictional narrative is embedded

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[21] Ashour, *Specters*, 16.

within the autobiographical one. For De Man, autobiography "may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but (it is always a work in which) these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name"[22]. The autobiographical narrative is the real account with a single subject. The subject's identity is "uncontestably" that of the author. The fictional narrative however, is now the "phantasms and dreams" found within this autobiographical narrative. The author need not be the subject or the narrator of the events in the fictional narrative. De Man's definition achieves two things simultaneously; it allows for a fictional narrative to exist within an autobiographical one and while it reconciles the existence of both, it does not integrate them entirely. The fictional (the phantasms and dreams) is still seen as separate or distinct from the autobiographical (the real narrative of a single subject) within the same novel. We can use De Man's definition, then, in *Specters* to reconcile Shagar and Ashour. A distinction between "the phantasms" and "the real narrative" will allow us to delineate Ashour's story from that of Shagar's.

Identifying Autobiography

When autobiography and fiction are seen as distinct from each other, however, the question of how we can clearly identify them from one another arises. One way is if the fictional narrative is embedded within the autobiographical, then, we can identify the autobiographical parts of the novel and use them as a basis to distinguish the two. French literary theorist Phillipe Lejeune worked on autobiography, arguing that a simple equation could allow for a classification of autobiography. He believed that the author had two roles in a novel: narrator and character. These two roles together create an algorithm to classify autobiography. The author, to Lejeune, is

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[22] De Man, 68.

always the narrator, but the narrator is not always the principal character. This is the basis of Lejeune's algorithm, if the narrator is the principal character then it is an autobiography[23]. If the narrator is not the principal character then it is not an autobiography. The model presented by Lejeune, at first glance, is a simple solution to the problems of identifying autobiography. It provides a simple rubric through which a text can be pushed in and a genre can be pulled out. It is this simplicity however, that ultimately makes it problematic.

This model is not built for a complicated text like *Specters* where the narrator is sometimes the primary character and other times not. Lejeune's model is only built for constant paradigms where the narrator is always the principal character or is never the principal character. If *Specters* were to be classified through this model, we would have to assess whether the narrator is the principal character at the level of each sentence. Each sentence would have to be classified as either autobiography or fiction. A sentence that could be both would only confound the model. For example, Ashour when talking about Shagar's opinions on history says, "Her objection does not, I think, spring from a bias toward her field"[24]. The "her" here refers to Shagar- the fictional character, but the "I" refers to Ashour the narrator. The first half of the sentence, then, would be fiction as Shagar is the principal character but the second half would be autobiography as the "I" in "I think" refers to Ashour - the narrator and the principal character. In the same sentence we have both autobiography and fiction. This only serves to show the arbitrariness that would ensue if we actually attempted to use the distinction of autobiography versus fiction in classifying *Specters.* The idea of using our expectations of autobiography and fiction to understand identity in the text works only theoretically. When an algorithm like

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[23] Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 7.
[24] Ashour, *Specters,* 75.

Lejeune's is actually applied, the genres of autobiography and fiction no longer function meaningfully.

The "I" in Autobiography

We see from Lejeune's attempt to clearly distinguish between autobiography and fiction that a distinction between the two is far from meaningful. We cannot easily categorize parts of the text as either fiction or autobiography. The instability in clearly defining parts of the text as autobiography or fiction outlines for us the insufficiency of each of these terms in clarifying identity in the novel. These genres, though, highlight for us the problem in using 'fictional' versus 'real' to characterize identity in the novel. Genres are a framework from which we can see the impact of our expectations of fiction or veracity on our classification of characters in the text. A 'fictional' character is thought to have no relationship to the author. The 'real' character is assumed to be the author.

A return to the previous example helps make this point. "What happened? Why did I leap so suddenly from Shagar the child to middle-aged Shagar? I reread what I have written"[25]. The use of the fictional narrative, separate from the autobiographical, positions Shagar as fictional and the author as real. The autobiographical narrative invites the reader into the author's construction of the fictional part of the novel. The fictional narrative is therefore seen as the work that we are reading. The fictional character is the constructed character that we are reading. The autobiographical narrative is seen as being outside the work. When Ashour says, "Why did I leap so suddenly from Shagar" it is merely the author's commentary on the fictional character and her narrative. This identification of the fictional narrative as the work with the

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[25] Ashour, *Specters,* 16.

autobiographical narrative positioned outside of the work is important because it affects how we view the autobiographical character or the "real" character. The "I" in the autobiographical narrative is read as the author speaking directly to us**.** The reader sees the author outside of the novel as being represented by the author, the "I", within the novel. The author within the text is identified as a legitimate metonymy for the author outside of the text. The word "metonymy" here, borrowed from literary theorist Lejeune, implies that the author in the text functions as a substitute for the author outside of the text. This is problematic because it assumes that writing can represent the author exactly as s/he is. It requires a consistency where every "I" undoubtedly represents the author. The "I" is seen as a representation of the real person, Radwa Ashour.

The problem in using the subject "I" as a representation of the person, the author, is flagged for us by French literary theorist Roland Barthes: "I is no more than the man who says I; language knows a "subject" not a "person" and this subject, void outside of the very utterance which defines it, suffices to make language work"[26]. To Barthes, the subject "I" cannot be seen as a representation of Radwa Ashour within the text. The "I" is only a grammatical subject. The "I" in a sentence is significant only to identify the subject of that particular sentence. Every "I" cannot be assumed to be a representation of the same person. A dissonance in grammatical subject then would no longer allow the "I" to be read as the author, a real person, in contrast to the character, Shagar. "Shagar? Should I keep her and interweave our stories, or drop her and content myself with telling about Radwa? But then, why did Shagar come to me when I started writing about myself? Who is Shagar?"[27]. The "I" character here, like previous examples, can be seen, at first, as Radwa Ashour. By the end of the sentence, however, this no longer holds. The

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[26] Roland Barthes*,* "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 3.
[27] Ashour, *Specters*, 17.

reader at the end of the sentence is introduced to "Radwa". This pushes the reader to ask, if "I" is Radwa Ashour, then who is "Radwa"? There is a shift from the first person "I" to the third person, as if "I" and "Radwa" were two different people. The distinction between "I" and "Radwa" complicates the reader's assumption that the "I" is Radwa Ashour. The identity of the "I" is no longer "undoubtedly" that of Radwa Ashour. We do not know for sure that the "I" is a real person.

If the "I" is not Radwa Ashour, then the "I" must be a character much like Shagar, that is constructed within the text. The use of the word 'character' here is deliberate, the "I" as a character is very different than the "I" that is the author. The author within the text when seen as a character performs the author function. The "author function," a term coined by literary theorist Michel Foucault, is when the author is constructed, like any other character in a novel, for purposes of "circulation and operation of certain discourses"[28]. This means that the author within the text is not distinct from Shagar. We cannot see this author as 'real' and Shagar as 'fictional', instead we must see them both as characters that are constructed consciously by the author. A simple extrapolation of the "I" no longer being a 'real' person is that Radwa and Shagar are both fictional characters. The larger point, however, is not that *Specters* only has fictional characters, the point being made is that an insistence on the real versus the fictional is ill placed in an analysis of identity in *Specters*. An understanding of identity cannot be limited to only a single 'real' subject.

Specters rejects the derivation of a single constant subject not only through the use of grammatical shifts (i.e. the shift from first person to third person), but also through the construct of time. It suggests that the individual is not constant, s/he is not the same at all times. Time

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[28] M. Foucault, "Authorship: What is an Author?," *Screen* 20, no. 1 (1979): 124, doi:10.1093/screen/20.1.13.

affects the identity of a person such that there are different versions of the same person at different times. For example,

> Shagar meditates on the young woman as she descends the staircase after the meeting with the president: she is angry..."Afraid?" The girl did not pose the question to herself, and, if anyone else had asked it, it would have struck her as an unfair question, a stupid, injurious question. But she was – Shagar now thinks likely - afraid[29].

Shagar here is thinking back to a meeting she had with the president of her college when she was a teaching assistant. The larger context tells us that Shagar is descending "the staircase after the meeting with the president"[30]. The actual sentence in the example however does not call on Shagar by name, instead we are told that a "young woman… descends the staircase"[31]. Shagar is described here as if she were a different person. The sentence pushes us to see the young woman and Shagar as different from each other even though we know from the context that Shagar must be the young woman. The final line of the excerpt confirms this; it reads, "she was - Shagar now thinks likely – afraid"[32]. It tells us that Shagar "now" is commenting that when she was a young woman she was afraid after leaving her meeting with the president. We know, then, that Shagar is the young woman but the text is constructing a discrepancy between Shagar and the "young woman" to signal a difference between Shagar in the past and Shagar in the present.

This is not the only instance of dissonance in this example, the question "Afraid?" in double quotes, in the middle of the excerpt also complicates our reading of Shagar as a single person. It pushes us to ask who is asking this? The question is not asked by the young woman— "the girl did not pose the question to herself"—but it is also not asked by anyone else. The use of the speculative "if" in the sentence "if anyone else had asked it would have struck her as unfair"

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[29] Ashour, *Specters*, 141.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

signals that no one else asked this question. It constructs a scenario where this question "Afraid?" is asked neither by the girl "herself" nor by "anyone else". Who, then, asks the question? Shagar does. Ashour is suggesting that Shagar "now" can be the same Shagar as Shagar "then" and yet distinct. The Shagar "now" is not "herself", the young woman, for she has grown and changed and is looking back at herself from years ago. She is not however, "anyone else" because the young woman is Shagar, just in the past. An acceptance of this is an acceptance of the multiplicity of the individual. The individual is not constant throughout time, instead time creates multiple versions of the individual.

A cursory reading that collapsed Shagar and the young woman into a singular person, would push us to disregard the intentional dissonance between the single constant subject and the individual being constructed. It would ignore the multiplicity that an identity can display. A person, now, is no longer restricted to a singular constant voice. S/he has the power to change. S/he can be seen as representing different voices at different times.

The Multiple Voices of the Individual

The ability of the individual to speak with multiple voices invites a conversation on the role of narrative voice at large in this text. Framing and embedding narrative voice theories become productive in a conversation on narrative voice in *Specters*. Framing is a theory that can be understood in terms of the "frame metaphor (that) likens its narrative effect to the aesthetic effect of the frame surrounding a painting … complex instances [of this] are likened to 'Chinese boxes' (story within story within story)"[33]. The 'Chinese box' metaphor lends itself well to *Specters* because the novel has multiple frames. *Specters* has various subplots that are centered

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[33] David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005), 186.

around a set of interconnected characters. The novel cannot be understood without understanding the many layers of narrative that make it up. Embedding narrative voice theory can be seen as a feature of the layered narratives in *Specters*. Embedding "refers to the narrative situation in which parts of the main narrative or a significant plot detail is displaced atemporally to another location in the narration"[34]. In *Specters*, it is not only that there are stories within stories being constructed, but also that these stories are intercalated in the text. They are atemporal; they resist a conventional linear temporal arrangement. The stories in *Specters* cannot be distinguished from each other through a lens of chronology, instead we must use the features of each of these narratives or subplots of *Specters* to capture the narrative voices that exist in it.

Acknowledging that the text incorporates both framing and embedding narrative voice theory does not allow for a further analysis of identity in *Specters* on its own. In addition to acknowledging the framing and embedding in the text we must look more closely at narrative voice at the level of each story or subplot in *Specters*. For, we know that the individual identity in *Specters* is seen neither as singular nor as constant, a discussion of narrative voice, then, also has to allow for multiplicity. We must acknowledge the presence of not only various stories and subplots, but also the various voices in *Specters*: Ashour the narrator, Ashour the character, and Shagar the character. We have to look at each subplot and ask, at this particular time, who is the narrator and who is the focus of the narrative. We can borrow the structuralist literary theorist, Gerard Genette's term diagesis[35] to help us answer these questions. A diagesis is one level of narrative within a larger story, it is a subplot of the greater narrative. We can examine a specific diagesis from *Specters*, then, and attempt to analyze the relationship of the narrator and the

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Gérard Genette, *Narrative discourse: an essay in method* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980).

primary character to the diagesis. This will help us to have an understanding of the various voices that are present in *Specters*, ultimately allowing us to make the point that the single individual narrative of Ashour can present various diagetic levels and also that each of these diagetic levels can have a different narrative voice.

Ashour, when writing a subplot about Shagar and her history teacher, wonders what relationship she should construct between Shagar and her history professor. She asks, "What am I to do with this teacher I've invented? Should I make her fall in love with him and wait for his release from jail?"[36]. Here, Ashour, acting as the narrator of the text, is pondering the plot of the text. She is deciding whether or not she should make Shagar, her character within the text, fall in love with a history teacher she has "invented". The phrase "I've invented" immediately positions Ashour outside of the diegesis because she is pondering a manipulation that she has control over within the world of the text. The only way that Ashour could decide if her character should fall in love with "the teacher" is if she was positioned outside the diegesis. This is because if the narrator was Shagar or "she" instead of Ashour, she would not know, at this stage, whether or not she fell in love with the teacher. Ashour, however, knows and can control whether Shagar falls in love with the teacher. This means that the narrator is definitely outside the diagesis. Ashour knows and controls things that occur within the story that she would not be able to if she was actually in the story. Additionally, this affirms that this particular diagesis is not focused on Ashour the narrator, instead it is focused on Shagar the character. Genette calls this narrative voice an extradiagetic voice. Extradiagetic means that Ashour the narrator is positioned outside of this particular diagesis.

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36 Ashour, *Specters*, 48*.*

Ashour being positioned outside of the diagesis is intuitive when she is talking about Shagar because she is the author that is talking about the construction of Shagar, her character. *Specter*s, however, demonstrates that Ashour can be positioned outside of the diagesis even when she is talking about herself. This narrative voice, then, cannot be seen as limited to only talking about Shagar. Instead this narrative voice can be seen when Ashour is talking about herself in the text. This at first is very confusing, how is it possible for Ashour to both be outside of the diagesis and yet also in the story that she is retelling? An example from *Specters* will help us to see that a narrative voice is not limited to a single character, the extradiagetic voice can exist when either Ashour or Shagar is the subject of the diagesis.

After a few years, she teaches translation and a course in literary criticism to the students of her own department. Later she will teach poetry. She completes her doctoral degree, approaches the age of 30, and in due course reaches 40, 50[37].

In this example, Ashour is describing the course that her own professional career will take. At first, Ashour can be seen as being in the diagesis because we know that the "she" in the excerpt is Ashour. Upon closer inspection, however, we see that the narrator is omniscient. In this example, the narrator is still Radwa, but she seems to have knowledge of the course of Radwa Ashour's life that Ashour could not have at that time. Ashour the narrator, then, knows something that Radwa Ashour cannot know in that moment. The narrator, who already knows what Radwa will be doing at 30, 40, and 50, is not the Radwa present in that moment, instead she is Radwa looking back at her own life. She possesses a knowledge that is not present in a character within the diagesis at that time. The Radwa from the future looking back at her own life is extradiagetic or outside of the narrative. She is still the same person, she is just separated from the character in the diagesis through time. The same narrative voice, then, can be used in a

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[37] Ashour, *Specters*, 132.

diagesis with either Shagar or Radwa. This is important because it reminds a reader, once again, that in *Specters* a singular construction of narrative voice will fail. The same narrative voice can be used for multiple characters in the text; a single voice can speak to more than a single perspective.

The extradiagetic narrator is not the only narrative voice in *Specters*. Ashour is not always positioned outside of the diagesis. Shifts in where Ashour is positioned in relation to the narrative demonstrate the multiple voices that Ashour can construct within her single text. The easiest example of Ashour's presence within the diagesis is in the context of Ashour talking about herself. She says, "Radwa sits cross-legged on the ground. She is laughing and yet she is not"[38]. Ashour is the subject in this example. Ashour can be seen as being in the diagesis because she is Radwa the narrator narrating the actions of Radwa the character. She is the focus of the diagesis. Genette calls this the intradiagetic narrative voice.

The intradiagetic narrative voice is present not only in the example of Ashour talking about Ashour, but it is also seen when Ashour is talking about Shagar. We can look to this example from the text, where Ashour is commenting that she and Shagar would have met at Cairo University had Shagar not been a character, to demonstrate the presence of this narrative voice even when Ashour is not talking about herself:

> If Shagar were not a character, I would have encountered her during my year of study at Cairo University, for the history department in which she studied is located on the second floor of the same building inhabited by the English Department, in which I studied.[39]

The first part of the excerpt, "if Shagar were not a character I would have encountered her", distinguishes Shagar from the "I" that is Ashour the narrator. This example establishes that Ashour is not a character like Shagar. This, in a cursory reading, would be a sign that Ashour, the

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[38] Ashour, *Specters*, 24.
[39] Ashour, *Specters*, 54.

"I", was an extradiagetic narrator because, like our previous example, Ashour the author is discussing the construction of her character, Shagar. Upon closer inspection, however, the narrator, or the "I", is still seen as being present in the diagesis, being narrated, because of the context of the "I". This excerpt tells us that the "I" is not Shagar but Ashour cannot be seen as being outside of the diagesis here because the "I" exists alongside Shagar seeing the "same building" and "history department". Ashour, then, is positioned within the diagesis, she is in the same world as Shagar even when she is not "a character" like Shagar. The intradiagetic narrative voice, then, can be used to talk not only about Ashour but also about Shagar. It is not limited to a single subject at all times. Instead the same voice can speak to different subjects at different times. Depending on the diagesis, the subject can either be Ashour or Shagar.

The two narrative voices, thus, show us that Ashour's own narrative gives rise to different voices. These voices, too, themselves, are not singular, they can speak to more than a single subject. The same voice can represent both Ashour and Shagar. The individual is a complex site for the interaction between various voices and subjects. A simple singular identity that applies to all the diagetic levels at all times cannot be found. A person, then, is not seen as a single constant character, even in a reading using narrative voice. Radwa the writer, Radwa the character, and Shagar the character are all interconnected, just as each of these narrative voices are in *Specters*. Using any one narrative voice, or any one character, to represent the whole reduces the individual to a single dimension, ultimately undermining the role of the individual.

Ashour is elucidating the problems in constructing simple one-dimensional boundaries around the individual. The novel does not show a deterioration of the individual. Instead Ashour shows that s/he need not be limited. S/he does not need to be constructed through a privileging of real versus fictional. A person does not have to be limited to a single subject pronoun. The

individual can be "I" just as the individual can be "she". A single narrative voice does not represent a person as a whole; instead an individual is a medium for multiple narrative voices. Ashour is empowering the individual by displaying the unique position that s/he has in being able to speak to a collective. She is showing that a person has different parts, each serving to show him/her in a different light. Each of these parts can speak to a different part of the collective. Ultimately, the dispersion of the individual in *Specters* serves to affirm the importance of the individual.

II

The title of Mourid Barghouti's autobiography, *I Saw Ramallah,* establishes, from the very beginning, the role of the individual. The "I" in *I Saw Ramallah* is a testimony to the importance of personal identity throughout the text. Barghouti constructs a strong individual voice that guides the reader's perception of him. His voice invites the reader into his private experiences. Barghouti, uses his own story of returning to Ramallah to show that the individual can contribute to the collective. He emphasizes the role that each person's narrative has in constructing the collective, ultimately showing that we have to understand the individual in order to understand the collective.

This chapter looks to demonstrate the instances in which we can grasp the tools that Barghouti is using to establish the importance of his own identity. I will begin by looking at parts of the text where Barghouti's construction of the "I" is apparent. We, as readers, are privy to how Barghouti conceives of his own identity. He uses his identity before and after displacement as counterpoints to play out the tension between the Palestinian Barghouti and the displaced Barghouti. I will also consider the problems that a singular perspective can create, looking at whether Barghouti's insistence on "I", in fact, limits the ability of the reader to connect with him. Next I will show instances in the text that identify the relationship of the reader to Barghouti where he, to affirm his own identity, uses them to extend the scope of his own "I". He includes the reader within his own personal sphere making them an extension of his identity. Finally, I will look at the ways in which Barghouti's insistence on the "I", alongside his positioning of his readers, allows him to speak to the collective, demonstrating the role that the individual can play in speaking beyond his own experience.

The Role of the "I"

Barghouti's displacement is not only the foundation of the text, but also of his conception of himself within the text. It is only intuitive, then, that the first hint we see of Barghouti's self-conscious construction of his identity, or his "I", is in his realization of his own displacement. "I became the displaced stranger whom I thought was someone else…The stranger is the person who renews his Residence permit. He fills out forms and buys the stamps for them. He has to constantly come up with evidence and proof"[40]. After his college Latin exam Barghouti discovers that the war[41] was lost. He cannot return to Palestine. The news is so upsetting to Barghouti that he throws his ink-bottle at the wall. Its shattering is a jarring image that captures the anguish that Barghouti feels in this instance. The above statement is his first reaction to the news of his displacement. The abrupt nature of the scene matches the content of Barghouti's statement. It begins with him saying, "I became the stranger whom I thought was someone else", it transitions quickly, however, to "he fills out forms and buys stamps". The change from the "I" to the "he" is confusing until we realize that Barghouti is both the "I" and the "he". Barghouti is using this change in subject pronoun to indicate the dramatic effect that the news of displacement has had on his own identity. When he becomes displaced, he says he feels like "someone else": "the stranger". This change into the stranger is mirrored by a change from first person to third person. It serves to distance himself from the 'he'. Until the time that Barghouti is still a Palestinian who can return to Palestine, he is still an "I". However, the moment he is displaced, there is also a displacement in identity and the "I" becomes a "he". The sentences that follow, "I became the stranger", are all in the third person as if Barghouti were talking about another

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[40]Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, trans. Ahdaf Soueif (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 3.
[41] The six day war in 1967

person with whom he does not identify. This change in subject pronoun and in perspective thus serves as a literal iteration of his jarred emotional state.

The ultimate purpose of such a transition, however, is the distance that it creates between Barghouti and his reality. As a reader reading from his perspective, the change in pronoun plays out the incongruence between Barghouti's self-conceived identity and his new circumstance of displacement. It relays for the reader a discomfort in accepting this new circumstance as part of the identity that is being constructed in the memoir. A reality in which one has to prove their own identity with "evidence and proof" is not a reality that Barghouti desires. Thus the staging of the distance between Barghouti and the stranger serves as the author's attempt to preserve his own identity, to protect it from the kind of questioning that "the stranger" has to undergo. As if he were a distinct character in the text the stranger has Barghouti's reality assigned to him. Information about this "he" (the stranger) is filed separately from that of the "I" and thus Barghouti's personal rejection of this identity of the displaced becomes a rejection for the reader too of this identity for him.

Barghouti's use of "the stranger" in "I became the stranger" is not unique. Its iteration pushes for it to be approached not as an isolated sentence where Barghouti relegates his reality to a stranger, rather it presents the idea that "the stranger" is a constant in the book. Any invocation of him refers to this same singular character. Barghouti makes a distinction between strangers and "the stranger". We see this in his questioning, "Was I mature enough to realize that there were strangers like me living in their own capital? Their countries unoccupied by foreign forces?"[42]. Barghouti uses the word "strangers" in a literal sense; the strangers that he is referring to are merely people that he does not know. When "the strangers" are just people that he does not

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[42] Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, 4.

know, the strangers are "like him". The only difference between Barghouti and the "strangers" is their circumstances; they are able to live in their own capital and he is not. However, "the stranger" is not him, "he" is a different character; one whose circumstances alone don't make him different but one whose complete identity is different. Displacement, then, is not merely a change in circumstance, it is a change in identity. The "strangers" are not "the stranger." They are not characters being constructed, nor are they representations of Barghouti's displacement. The distinction being made between the two uses of the same word "stranger(s)" is deliberate. It signals the deep problems that displacement has on an individual's identity and their own conception of themselves.

This classification of "the stranger" as distinct from "strangers" becomes obvious when the sentence above, with the "strangers", is contrasted with another sentence with "the stranger". Barghouti says, "The stranger can never go back to what he was. Even if he returns, it is over"[43]. "The stranger" here, unlike the previous "strangers," is immediately noticeable as being definite; "the stranger" is once again being reproduced as a single unit. Barghouti is not saying that a stranger can never go back, instead it is "the stranger that can never go back". This deliberate use of the definite article suggests, once again, the permanence of Barghouti's displacement. It is not that he becomes "a" stranger, instead his change is one that is permanent; he is "the" stranger. He can no longer go back to who he was. Even if he is able to change his circumstances and go back to Palestine he will always be "the stranger". The use of the definite, then, serves to show that displacement is permanent. "The stranger" is Barghouti's new identity, distinct from the one he had before.

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[43] Ibid.

The stranger that we have been considering thus far is a consistent subject. We know this from the use of the definite pronoun but this is also signaled through the use of a consistent subject pronoun. When Barghouti says, "the stranger can never go back to what he was", the "he" in the sentence is replacing "the stranger". Every "he" that follows also refers to "the stranger". There is, then, a consistent single subject that "he" always refers to. This confirms that "the stranger" is in fact a single individual. The stranger is not any person, rather he is a distinct individual. In this way, Barghouti, using a transition in both subject pronoun and in definite article, gives form to the part of his reality that he does not identify with. This serves to create a boundary between the events and the emotions that "the stranger" has and those that Barghouti has, thereby allowing him to assert his power over his own narrative. It allows him hopefulness. Displacement may be permanent for the stranger but it is not permanent for Barghouti. Events in his reality that he does not identify with can be relegated to the stranger, a distinct individual that is not him. This allows him to protect his identity from a displacement that would otherwise be implicit in his physical displacement.

Barghouti, throughout the text, deliberately constructs his own identity. This at first makes it seem as if he is omnipotent. He can decide which parts of his "I" he wants to keep and which parts he wants to lose. If we consider his act of constructing his own identity a facet of his identity too, then it is easier to conceive of his power to select what represents his "I" and what doesn't. In her essay *Contingent Foundations*, Judith Butler suggests that when an individual says "I" that the "I" represents all parts of the individual. In writing, however, an author has a unique power to include some parts of his identity and hide others. To Butler, this does not mean that the parts that the author decides to hide are no longer part of his "I", rather the identity of the author is already a reflection of the parts he chose to hide. The point that Butler is ultimately

making about the selective "I" is that the "I" that is doing the selection, in this case the writer, is already constituted of both the positions that he eschews and the ones he embraces[44]. Barghouti, then, when he decides which experiences he wants to attribute to himself and which to the stranger, is already constituted of both the "I" and the "stranger". Thus the "I" and the "stranger" serve to protect Barghouti's identity when distinguished, and when thought of together serve to reaffirm his identity, displaying all the positions that constitute him.

Barghouti's text is consumed by a focus on the "I". A book that is so centered around the individual's own life can often become very boring. It is so preoccupied with the writer's own life that it becomes like a mirror, something that reflects the author but offers no depth. It is as the Sudanese author Leila Aboulela puts it in her essay *Moving away from Accuracy,* "when I read a book that I can relate to with accuracy, especially domestic fiction…Such a book has not taken me anywhere; it has been as boring as a mirror and as sheepish as a home video"[45]. Aboulela is saying here that writing that is centered around an individual that is relatable to her can often be staid, recording the individual's life but providing no insight to the reader. Autobiography, to her, is a stagnant medium, like a mirror or a home video, that chronicles an event or a period in your life but that is, ultimately, limiting and "uninspired".

Aboulela's critique of autobiography is relevant to our discussion of *I Saw Ramallah* because *I Saw Ramallah* is a text that prides itself on its insistence on the individual's perspective. This critique is flawed though because it works on the assumption that writing, just as a mirror, can serve as an exact representation of an individual. It proposes that it is possible

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[44] Judith Butler, "Contingent foundations: Feminism and the question of 'postmodernism'," in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[45] Leila Aboulela, "Moving Away from Accuracy," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 22 (2002): 207, doi:10.2307/1350056.

that writing, just as a home video, can present a stagnant image or images of an individual. This presents a view of autobiography as merely a chronicle of a person's past, exactly as that past was. It does not take into consideration the subjectivity present in an author looking back on his past. Barghouti's autobiography does not serve as a mirror that obediently reflects his identity. Instead, our reading of *I Saw Ramallah* must acknowledge the present construction of a narrative on an author's past.

Louis Renza, a literary theorist, highlights the importance of the present in the recording of the past when he says in his essay *The Veto of Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography*, "The writer's references to his or her past are subordinate to (as though they were a mere contingent source of "life-images") a narrative essentially representing the writer's present self-identity"[46]. Renza is saying here that the past can be recorded only through the filter of an author's current identity. It is the author's present "I" that does the selecting between things in the past that he wants to record and those that he does not. The past, then, exists as a function of the present. Barghouti constructs a metaphor that speaks to this. He says, "When we arrive at a new place living its new moment we start to look for our old things in it"[47]. Barghouti is saying that we can see pieces of the past in our present self. The past and the present do not exist separate from each other. An autobiography, then, like Barghouti's can never be just a video recording the past. It is instead a "new moment" that celebrates and empowers the "I" that is made of both old things and new.

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[46] Louis A. Renza, "The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography," *New Literary History* 9, no. 1 (1977): 3, doi:10.2307/468434.
[47] Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, 50.

I am Barghouti. Who are you?

Barghouti's insistence on his "I" allows his identity to become the center of his memoir. The whole text, then, is about establishing his unique experience. A focus on only one's own experiences, however, can make a person's narrative very singular. It becomes hard to identify with the memoir because the stories are so specific to the individual. The person's story cannot be used to talk about the communal as any discussion of his/her story always leads back to the specifics of their own perspective. This limits the scope of an autobiography. This is the basis of Aboulela's second critique of autobiography. She says, "when I write I move away from myself, touch something common, universal, something that includes me but is not exclusively me. If I don't go away from myself how can I produce something strange, something surprising, something lifted up from the ordinary"[48]. To Aboulela, one has to move away from themselves in order to be able to create something that is "lifted up from the ordinary" into the inspired. An insistence on your own identity, then, undermines your ability to produce something universal. This is problematic because it suggests that autobiographies that center around the individual are unable to speak to the collective. This critique of both autobiography and the centering of a text around the "I" can be seen as undermining the work of Barghouti. Barghouti does not move away from himself in order to construct his text, instead he clings to himself. He chronicles not only his personal experiences but also presents a book that is littered with the "I": "I look", "I lived", "I wonder". If in order to present "something lifted up from the ordinary" Barghouti has to move away from himself, then *I Saw Ramallah* fails profoundly at this task. Barghouti is trapped by an insistence on the individual or the "I".

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[48] Aboulela, 3.

This critique, however, would be out of context if levied at the text. It has not taken into consideration the nature of the text nor the mechanisms used by the author to allow the individual "I" to speak to the 'communal', that is to speak to something beyond "myself". Barghouti escapes the trap of the ordinary, or the uninspired, and constructs a text that "both includes myself but is not exclusively me" by his very insistence on the "I" or the individual. This is demonstrated by Barghouti's relationship to the reader in the text. Barghouti influences not only the construction of his own "I", but also that of the reader's. The reader in this text is positioned self-consciously by the text in relation to Barghouti's "I". This can be seen when Barghouti recalls his view of the Jordan River, "I was not surprised by its narrowness: the Jordan was always a very thin river. This is how we knew it in childhood"[49]. Here Barghouti recalls his view of the Jordan River from the checkpoint as he waited to be allowed to pass into Palestine. He is not surprised at the narrowness of the river that he sees, because "this is how we knew it in childhood". The question that emerges from this is who is the "we"? There is no previous context that establishes who the "we" that Barghouti references are. The ambiguity of the "we" here allows for multiple explanations.

One explanation is that Barghouti is referencing all the Palestinians who grew up by the river. The use of the "we", and its accompanying ambiguity, however, serves two distinct purposes. The first is that it makes the reader responsible for the jump from the "we" to the Palestinians. Barghouti could have easily said 'other Palestinians and I remember this river from our childhood', but by saying "we" he leaves the onus of the actual assumption that he is referring to the Palestinians on the reader. This allows the second purpose of his use of the "we" to become apparent. While reading the phrase "we knew it in childhood" the reader becomes part

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[49] Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, 3.

of the "we" and, with no further clarification from the text on whom the "we" is, remains in the "we". Thus, when the reader makes the intuitive jump that Barghouti is referencing the Palestinians, he/she is included amongst 'the Palestinians'. The reader is positioned inadvertently within the same group as Barghouti, allowing him to invite the reader into the sphere of his identity regardless of their own identity outside of the text. This positions the reader within the realm of Barghouti's identity and narrative.

Barghouti's positioning of the reader does not occur with his use of "we" alone. Instead the "we" can be seen as an echoing of other instances in the text where Barghouti positions the reader inside of his own sphere of identity. The purpose of this, however, is that once within the sphere of Barghouti's "I", the reader becomes imbied with experiences and opinions that are part of Barghouti's own experience and identity. The reader is under Barghouti's control as s/he is now a part of the narrative that, like that of the "stranger", can be used to establish Barghouti's identity. An example from *I Saw Ramallah* demonstrates this.

> When you hear on the radio and read in newspapers and magazines and books and speeches the words 'the Occupied Territories' year after year, and festival after festival, and summit conference after summit conference, you think it's somewhere at the end of the earth. You think there is absolutely no way that you can get to it. Do you see how close it is?…I can hold it in my hand[50].

Barghouti is referencing a "you" here. At first reading it is possible to believe that Barghouti is referencing only himself through the "you"; that he is thinking on the characterization of the "Occupied Territories" in an internal monologue. This reading, however, collapses the multiplicity that Barghouti offers in his use of the pronoun "you". It ignores the significance of the change in pronoun in the last sentence of this excerpt; the consistent "you" becomes an "I". Barghouti moves from the second person to the first person. He transitions from "you think

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[50] Ibid., 6.

(thinking) that there is no way you can get to" Palestine, to him being able to hold Palestine in his hand. This constructs a separation between the "you" that he has thus far been referring to and the "I" that is him. This separation signals the text's own awareness of the ambiguity that the "you" offers. The "you", much like the "we", allows for the possibility that the reader has been entertaining the same thoughts that Barghouti has. Barghouti can now invite the reader into a position where s/he has also been "hearing on the radio" and "reading in the newspaper" about the "Occupied Territories". Thus, here too, Barghouti is able to invite the reader into his own identity. This makes the thoughts on the "Occupied Territories" thoughts that are not Barghouti's alone. Instead these become concerns and thoughts of the reader too. The reader effectively becomes an extension of Barghouti. Thus he is able to control not only his own narrative, but is also able to utilize the reader as a mechanism to reaffirm his identity.

This assertion that the reader is an extension of Barghouti's identity is highlighted in the contrast that Barghouti makes not only between the public and the private, but also in who is allowed into the private. A striking example of this can be seen when Barghouti, while waiting for the Israeli officer at a check point, comments on his desire to screen his inner world from his outer world. He says,

> In that room, I found myself retreating to 'there'; to that hidden place inside each one of us, the place of silence and introspection. A dark private space in which I take refuge when the outside world becomes absurd or incomprehensible. As though I have a secret curtain at my command: I draw it when I need to, and screen my inner world against the outer one[51].

Barghouti is referring to a metaphorical curtain that he uses in times of confusion to create a barrier between that which is private or his own and that which is public or exists in the outer world. This private space that Barghouti is defining is his alone. He says that in this space "there

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[51] Ibid., 21.

is no room for conversations with others". The Israeli officer that is in that room with Barghouti is clearly defined as 'other'. He is not allowed behind Barghouti's curtain and is not privy to Barghouti's introspection. Barghouti outlines a distinction between thoughts that are his alone and thoughts that can be shared with the 'other'.

The seeming contradiction in Barghouti's distinction however, is that the reader is privy to these introspections. A particularly poignant moment is when, after all the formalities and years of waiting, Barghouti finally walks back to Palestine. While walking, he says, "Here I am walking toward the land of the poem. A visitor? A refugee? A citizen? A guest? I do not know"[52]. Barghouti is externalizing his conflict with his identity. He is questioning his relationship to Palestine and through it his relationship to himself. He is unsure of who he is. The absurdity of 'visiting' Palestine as a Palestinian, forces him to question the very basis of his own identity. This portrays a difficult moment for Barghouti, a private one, and yet the reader, this 'other' person, is invited into this moment and is walking alongside Barghouti as he is introspecting. The question this invites is if this sphere is private and separate from others, a sphere where there is "no room for conversations with others", then how is the reader, an 'other', allowed into the space? In order to answer this question, one has to re-examine a principal assumption that makes this contradiction possible, the assumption that the reader is 'the other'. For the contradiction of 'the other' being allowed into Barghouti's personal space exists only so far as we consider the reader to be 'the other'. If the reader is instead considered to be positioned not as 'the other' but instead as part of Barghouti's personal sphere, as an extension of him, then it is only natural that the reader too exists behind the curtain with him. In this way, like in the

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[52] Ibid., 11.

instances of the "we" and the "you", Barghouti can be seen as positioning the reader once again, beyond just subject pronoun, as an extension of himself and thus as an iteration of him.

The "I" that speaks beyond itself

Barghouti uses the reader to answer a critique that implies that a narrative about the self can only speak to a limited audience. Barghouti's experience of return as a Palestinian is unusual because most Palestinians are not allowed the right to return. The event, then, that he is retelling in his memoir, that of his return to Palestine, is even more potent. This individual experience is so unique that it can serve to alienate Barghouti's ability to speak beyond himself to the universal, even more than just his insistence on "I". Edward Said outlines just how unique an experience this is in the foreword to the book.

> Palestine after all is no ordinary place…an incoming political movement of Zionist Jews, of largely European provenance…set up a Jewish state there…Every Palestinian today is therefore in the unusual position of knowing that there was once a Palestine and yet seeing that place with a new…identity that deny Palestine altogether. A 'return' to Palestine therefore is an unusual, not to say urgently fraught, occurrence[53].

The battle, then, to connect to the "collective", is far more difficult for Barghouti. He is limited by not only his insistence on the "I" but also the particular event that is the basis of his narrative. It is hard for most people to identify with Barghouti not only as a Palestinian but also as a Palestinian who is returning to Palestine. We have just established, however, that Barghouti includes the reader into his individual sphere. How then does Barghouti's inclusion of the reader into his sphere allow for his "unusual" text to become universal? We must return to a close reading of the text to answer this question. We must attempt to conceive of how the individual can use his or her own 'limited' perspective to speak to the collective.

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[53] Ibid., viii.

When Barghouti returns to Palestine, he questions the relationship between his individual experience of returning to Palestine and that of the countless Palestinians, like his brother Mounif, who will not and have not been able to return to Palestine. Barghouti wonders if when he returned to Palestine the Palestinians returned with him: "Do they look with me out of the window? Do they see what I see? Do I rejoice in what gives them joy, make fun of what they mock, object to what they object to? Can I write with pens on their snow-white paper the things that come to my mind?"[54]. Barghouti questions if his individual experience of returning to Ramallah can represent all the Palestinians that cannot. He is wondering if his feelings, "what I see" and "what I rejoice in", represent what they would be able to see or what they would be able to feel upon returning to Palestine. Barghouti is capturing an important tension between the limitations of an individual perspective and the possibility of that individual representing a community or a group. It outlines for us, the added responsibility that Barghouti feels that his perspective has. He has to write not only to capture the things that come to his mind but also to record the things that would have come to theirs.

Barghouti serves as a scribe of the experiences of the displaced Palestinians when he says of his deceased brother Mounif, "When I entered Deir Ghassanah his hand was in mine; we walked side by side to Dar Ra's, our old house"[55]. His perspective and his return have to record theirs too. He is not alone in his return, instead the Palestinians are 'with him' as he returns. This shows us how Barghouti uses his "unique, urgently fraught" experience that is centered around his "I" as a medium, or a "pen", to talk about the Palestinian experience. The reason that this is an important counterpoint is because, in addition to the Palestinians, the reader too is included within Barghouti's experience. Barghouti is, thus, using his text and his "I" to allow not only the

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[54] Ibid., 37.
[55] Ibid., 36.

Palestinians but also the reader to return to Ramallah, as if it were not only he that was seeing Ramallah after exile but also them. Thus this "unusual" experience becomes one that they too are a part of. This outlines the way that Barghouti uses his "I" to move beyond the limitations of a restricted perspective. Despite having a unique experience, he constructs a text that can reach out to others and that can invite them into his experiences and his narrative. This allows him to speak not only for himself but also for those beyond him. The individual story, then, no matter how unique is a place for multiplicity. It can speak beyond itself to a collective that is varied. It is not limited merely because its narrative is centered on the "I" or the self, instead the "I" can be used to connect to the collective.

Rosemary Betterton, an American author, in her own autobiography, highlights the unique quality that autobiography has in being able to demolish the boundaries between the reader and the author. She says, "an autobiography creates a strange aura of impersonality, an open edged voyeurism into every biography wherein You and I are no longer margined out by our specific histories"[56]. Betterton suggests that voyeurism is an implicit part of reading an autobiography because it destabilizes the boundaries between "You" and "I", i.e. the reader and the author. She claims that this destabilization is facilitated by an impersonality that is characteristic of the very genre of autobiography. The "you" and the "we" that Barghouti uses, then, allow his autobiography to speak beyond his own story. Betterton is rightly arguing that if the reader and the writer are not so separate, then the differences in their histories too are less separate. The contrast, however, with Barghouti's own perspective exists in the nuances of destabilizing these boundaries. Barghouti does not believe that "impersonality" or "voyeurism" is what allows the destabilization of these boundaries. Instead Barghouti, contrary though it may

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[56] Rosemary Betterton, "The self-portrait and the I/eye," in Unframed Practices and Politics of Women's Contemporary Painting (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 103.

seem, uses an insisted personalization, facilitating the destabilized boundaries by including the "you" or the "other" within his "I". He makes what would otherwise be a "voyeuristic" activity, a shared one. He makes the point that an autobiography, an opportunity to empower the "I" or the individual identity, when truly embraced, can speak to the universal without a move away from the "I"; in fact, it is all the more pervasive because of its ability to reach out to the universal well within the sphere of the individual.

Ultimately, *I Saw Ramallah* outlines for a reader the power that their own perspective has in being able to record their own identity and story. It suggests that the individual gains agency through an affirmation of their own identity. Their identity, then, can serve to be not a limited stagnant perspective but instead a starting point to understand the multiple perspectives that form the collective. The collective does not have to be collapsed into a single easy narrative that describes the identity of everyone in it, instead the individual can be expanded to include and to connect to parts of the collective.

III

The individual, in *I Saw Ramallah* and *Specters*, is a voice of the collective. The ability of the individual to tell their own story, allows them to record their own narrative. The act of recording is always a historic one. Conventionally, however, historical narratives are thought of as the only medium to record history. Historical accounts are made up of 'real' events. In contrast, fictional accounts are made up of fictional events. They cannot record history. Fictional accounts are instead resigned to a position opposite the historical narrative. This is problematic because a history that is solely dependent on 'real' events undermines the subjective experience. It uses a flimsy lens of objectivity to exclude the individual from telling their own history. This chapter destabilizes this view of history. It outlines instead the importance of the fictional narrative as a medium to record history.

My first section will show that history cannot be told without narrative. Narrative is the representation that makes recording history possible. The dichotomy, then, between the fictional and the historical narratives is an imagined one. A fictional text, like a novel, can function as a historical account. This is because the historical account, as we shall discover, is largely an imagined narrative. The second section of this chapter answers the question: how does the individual's imagined narrative record history? The recording of physical space is one way that the individual can record history. Ashour and Barghouti show that physical spaces are constructed and recorded through people's relationships to them. They achieve this using their personal relationships to Palestine and Egypt, respectively. A recording of physical space, too, though, ultimately becomes a recording of the individual stories that construct and give meaning to these spaces. History is centered on the subjects of history, recording the collective records

history. To Ashour and Barghouti, the collective can be accessed through the individuals that make it up. A documentation of the lives of individuals is the work of history. Ashour and Barghouti demonstrate this through a recording of not only their individual stories but also the stories of the people that make up their community: family, friends, and colleagues. *I Saw Ramallah* and *Specters*, ultimately, establish that the only conception of history that functions is one that acknowledges the power of the individual and their own story.

History without Narrative

A historical account is dictated by its two components: history and narrative. History is the content; it is the collection of events around which a story is constructed. The narrative orders and simplifies these events into causal sequences that give it meaning[57]. The events of history, traditionally, are what classify history. Narrative is a stylistic component which makes it possible for multiple stories to be told of the same set of events. Though the events are always the same, a narrator introduces their own biases to them through their own telling of them. Thus, history is at odds with narrative.

History is what allows narrative to become historic. This seems inane but what it means is that the historic and the ahistoric can be distinguished on the basis of the events alone, disregarding the narrative. If the events in a narrative are real, that is they actually occurred, then the narrative is historic, otherwise it is not. The distinction, then, between historical and fictional narratives is first and foremost their content. The contents of historical narratives are real events while those of fictional ones are imaginary events, events that did not really occur. The question 'are the events real?' can, however, only be asked if we believe that the events can be separated

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[57] William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1347, doi:10.2307/2079346.
We are borrowing Cronon's conception of narrative.

from the narrative. This conception of history will collapse if the events are so intertwined with the narrative that they cannot be seen separately.

In *Specters*, Shagar tries to separate history from the narrative. In the novel, she is trying to write a historical account of the Deir Al Yassin massacre[58]. Her first task is to find the events that took place in Deir Yassin. In order to find these events, she attempts to separate the events from the two dominant narratives about them; one told by the Arabs and the other by the Israelis. The Israeli narrative "claims that the attack on the village was justified because it was a center for Iraqi soldiers"[59]. The Arab narrative is that the villagers in Deir Yassin acted "as sacrificial lambs, helpless…as they faced the butchers' knife"[60]. The two narratives are very different, neither of them allows Shagar to see the real events that occurred in Deir Yassin. Shagar's question, then, is "How (could) she put herself in the village"[61] to find the real events that occurred? How could she find the history separate from the Israeli or Arab narratives? Her answer is to return to the "audiotapes the first person testimonies"[62] of the villagers and officers present at Deir Yassin.

The first person accounts allow Shagar to bypass the narrative to get to the events. Finally, she is able to know the history of Deir Yassin. As she listens to each of the voices on the audiotapes, however, she begins to realize that even the first person accounts are narratives. Each of the residents constructs their own narrative of the events at Deir Yassin, each from their own

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[58] The Deir Yassin massacre took place in 1948. It was an attack by a Zionist militia on the village of Deir Yassein near Jerusalem. The militia brutally killed 107 Palestinians. The attack served to not only relieve the blockade of Jerusalem after the 1947–48 Civil War between the Jewish and Arab communities in Palestine but it also scared a lot of Palestinians into leaving their homes.

[59] Ashour, *Specters,* 64.

[60] Ibid., 64.

[61] Ibid., 67.

[62] Ibid., 199.

point of view. Even if she were able to separate, once again, the events from the narrative, her challenge would be to create a single list of events from all these different first person accounts. She would have to record every single event no matter how small or large in all the narratives. As this is impossible, the only way, then, to create a chronicle of events is to separate important events from the unimportant ones. For example, in Abou Yassin's chronicle the "bullets flying over our (his) head like rain"[63] would be an important event whereas Umm Aziz's bread that was "left inside the oven"[64] to burn would be an unimportant one. A distinction, however, between important and unimportant events is the construction of a narrative; it takes a series of random events and allows a narrator to select between them constructing an order and ultimately, a story. Shagar's search then for history will always lead to a narrative. A narrative is a "covert exercise of power: it inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others"[65]. The connection between narrative and history, however, allows us to read a historical account critically. It acknowledges that history is always an 'imagined narrative'[66]; we see a set of events and then imagine a story where they would fit meaningfully together.

The "imagined narrative" is not restricted to events that we use to construct a historical account. Instead, the imagined narrative exists even in our recording of simple objects around us. Barghouti uses the example of naming to make this point. We see names of objects as merely facts of what they are. What happens, then, when a name is seen not as a signifier of an object but instead as a narrative? Let us look at the names of the bridge that connects Jordan to Palestine to answer this question:

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[63] Ibid*.,* 207.
[64] Ibid*.,* 203.
[65] Cronon, 1350.
[66] Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23, no. 1 (1984): 33, doi:10.2307/2504969.

> Fayrouz calls it the Bridge of Return. The Jordanians call it the King Hussein Bridge. The Palestinian Authority calls it Al-Karama Crossing. The common people and the bus and taxi drivers call it Allenby Bridge. My mother and before her my grandmother and my father and my uncle's wife, Umm Talal, call it simply: the bridge[67].

Each of the names represents a different narrative and through it a different bridge. The Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian authorities each call the same bridge something different. The names of the bridge allow each of the governments to take ownership of the bridge. It allows them to assert their own authority and their own narrative over the bridge. This "short unimportant bridge"[68] becomes a part of the Jordanian or Israeli retelling of Palestine. Its naming, then, automatically constructs a story around the bridge.

The naming of an object, also, situates it in a larger narrative. In the above instance, it allows the story of the bridge to connect to a larger story. When Fayrouz, the famous Lebanese singer, calls the bridge "the Bridge of Return" the bridge is not just a "piece of dark wood"[69] it is a piece of wood that can one day return a whole nation to its dreams. It will return Palestinians to Palestine, allowing them to take "their coffee in homes that were theirs"[70]. The "Bridge of Return" does not exist separate from the narrative that it represents. The naming, then, pulls the bridge into the larger story of Palestine. Even the term "the bridge", that Barghouti's mother and grandmother use to refer to the bridge, is a (part of a) narrative. It is tantalizing at first to see their term "the bridge" as a name that can be outside of narrative; it is merely an account of what the bridge actually is, a bridge. However, upon examination, their use of "the bridge" represents

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[67] Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, 10.
[68] Ibid., 9.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.

a narrative too that is embedded in its naming. Barghouti's family calls it "the bridge" as it was just a bridge that connected Jordan and Palestine before the Palestinians' displacement. The bridge represents a narrative of Palestine before Israel and before displacement. It is only after the displacement that this bridge became a "piece of dark wood able to distance a whole nation from its dreams"[71]. Thus, the term "the bridge" cannot be separated from the narrative. Each of the names of the bridge implies its own story.

Hayden White, a historian of literary theory, suggests that it is not the names of an object that constructs a narrative alone, it is our very conception of objects that is a narrative. White is saying that it not possible for us to ever conceive of an object exactly as it is[72]. We always view objects in relation to our own intrinsically human valuation system (what is important versus unimportant, what is historic versus ahistoric). We are always mapping our imagined narrative onto an object. History, then, regardless of whether it is recording objects or events is always an imagined narrative. The dichotomy between "real" and "imaginary" does not hold.

The Narrator and the Narrative

An acknowledgement of the imagined narrative in all of history forces us to move away from a focus on real events or objects. We must analyze historical accounts instead through their narrative elements. The most basic of these elements is the narrator. When we looked at the various names of the bridge and at the different accounts of Deir Yassin, we noticed that the stories of the events and objects were always impacted by the positions of each of the narrators. A historical account is always influenced by who is telling the account.

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[71] Ibid.
[72] White, 31.

In *Specters,* Shagar is the fictional narrator of the events at Deir Yassin. Her historical account is delivered through a fictional premise: Shagar is working on her account of the Deir Yassin massacre as part of her PhD dissertation and hopes to present her findings to her college, Cairo University. It is then not only Shagar who is not real, but also the premise of her narrative is not real. Any reader, however, will already likely recognize Deir Yassin as a real historical event. The first person accounts of the Deir Yassin massacre that are provided though, are introduced only through Shagar's research. The fictional narrator, Shagar, forces a reader to question the veracity of the historical account: can we, as readers, trust the fictional narrator's account of events? We know that Deir Yassin is a real place where a massacre took place, but we also know that Shagar is fictional. This tension pushes the reader to have to choose between one of two explanations. The first is that the accounts are real and that a fictional character is presenting this real historical narrative. The second is that the accounts are fictional because the narrator is fictional, regardless of the reader's knowledge of the events of Deir Yassin. Either case forces the reader to make a compromise. They cannot have both a 'real' narrator and a 'real' historical narrative; they must choose one or the other. The author's note at the end of the text, ultimately, provides a citation for all the accounts used to construct the historical narrative, validating the accuracy of the accounts. We know then that Shagar, the fictional character, is able to tell a real history.

The exercise serves to highlight the impact of the narrator on the narrative. We are forced to admit, through the presentation of citations, that a fictional character working on a fictional project can give an accurate, "real", historical account. The fictional narrator and narrative are, then, no longer confined to fictional events. This demonstrates the arbitrariness of a distinction between fiction and history because the historical is, largely, fictional. White captures this when

he asks "How else can any past, that by definition is composed of events...that are considered to be no longer perceivable be represented...in discourse except in an 'imaginary' way?"[73] The 'imagined', then, is intrinsic to the historical; there is no history without the function of imagination.

Ashour and Barghouti now have the power to use their novels to recount history. Like each of the bridges we saw in Barghouti's list, each of the individual narratives together can serve to record the collective. This can be understood if the multiplicity in history is acknowledged. The purpose of the individual narrator being able to scribe history through an 'imaginary' means is not to limit a whole collective to an individual's telling of history, but to offer the idea that history cannot be told as if there was a singular history that can be told of all people or of all places. Instead, we must understand multiple recordings of individual stories in order to then construct a collective history.

The Individual, the Historian

The narratives of Ashour and Barghouti, by highlighting the individual, demonstrate his or her role in scribing history by highlighting the individual. We can look to two specific examples in their texts where they elucidate the individual's role in recording the collective. The first is geographical space. Places are recorded in *Specters* and *I saw Ramallah* through a person's relationship to them, they are constructed by people's stories of the place. The second is community, which is recorded through the people that are in Ashour and Barghouti's lives: their friends, family, and colleagues. Their approach to recording community is two-fold. First, at a personal level across the two texts, Ashour and Barghouti connect and record their own lives

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[73] White, 33.

from their marriage to their children. Second, they extend that lens beyond themselves, showing how it is possible to record not only their own lives and histories through their texts but also that of other prolific writers, singers, and even artists at that time. They create an account of the community around them through their own narrative.

The book, *Urban Space in Contemporary Egyptian Literature* by Mara Naaman, begins with one statement: Space is not neutral. Naaman, a Literature professor, begins with this because this is the principal idea of any discussion of space. "Space-urban or rural, public or private is something we infuse with meaning"[74]. A physical space can exist without ever entering our awareness until we have a personal experience with it. The physical space is a repository for the stories and the memories of the people that live in it. "Places...acquire meaning when you get to know their stories-maybe not the whole story but a glimpse of a story, a piece of it that suddenly illuminates the place, so that you see it in a way that you never saw it before"[75]. The physical space, then, is a representation of the collective imagination. It is an atlas of people's stories, one that acquires symbolism when we are able to access those stories and contribute to them.

Ashour describes in *Specters* her own experience with connecting to the collective space of Tahrir Square. For many years, Ashour lives around the iconic Tahrir Square but does not really think of it as important. "For nine years I'll go by bus and pass close to the square and cross it, or go around it, and spend the whole of every day-except for weekends, and holidays around but I won't know a thing in it or about it"[76]. Ashour is saying that a space can be a large part of your everyday life, but if the space has no meaning attached to it, then the place can

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[74] Mara Naaman, "Preface," in *Urban Space in Contemporary Egyptian Literature: Portraits of Cairo* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[75] Ashour, *Specters,* 51.
[76] Ibid.*,* 50.

remain unknown. Spaces acquire symbolism "based on the extent to which we view them as central to our identity"[77]. Tahrir Square, for Ashour transforms into a significant place in the year 1972. In 1972, Ashour becomes a part of a student protest that occurs in Tahrir Square. This is not the first protest that Tahrir Square has been witness to, there was a student protest against the British in 1946, but it is the first protest that Ashour is a part of. Tahrir Square, in the collective imagination, is a symbol of resistance, but this symbolism exists only through people's stories of Tahrir Square. Ashour, then, can connect to Tahrir Square, only after "the story of 72…(for) - that one I (she) witnessed and participated in"[78]. Though Tahrir Square has always existed, it is only constructed as a space for Ashour through her own experience with it. Spaces, then, only become important when we have stories that can connect us to them.

Individuals' narratives of space allow them to create collective stories of space. The '72 and '46 protests each had hundreds of students and professors, like Ashour, protesting at Tahrir Square. Each of the individuals who took part in these protests have a story of Tahrir Square, not just as a square but as a symbol of their collective narratives of protest. Each of these accounts of Tahrir Square constructs the collective space of the square. The Tahrir square of '46 or of '72 exists only in so far as each of the protester's individual experiences exist. The square is a recording of each of their experiences just as they are the recorders of its existence. The individual and the place have an interconnected relationship, such that the recording of an individual's story becomes a recording of a collective space.

Tahrir Square is just a microcosm of the relationship between people's stories and places. Palestine is the ultimate example of this. Palestine is a country that has been dictated by individuals' narratives of it. In fact without these narratives, we are forced to ask, "What is so

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[77] Naaman, Preface.
[78] Ashour, *Specters,* 50.

special about it…It is a land, like any land"[79]. Palestine becomes a "special" land because of the conflicts between the individual stories mapped on to it. When Barghouti is finally able to return to Palestine he is almost shocked that it is a physical land. The stories and the arguments around Palestine are so encompassing that it is hard to remember that Palestine is just a space. "It is no longer 'the beloved' in the poetry of resistance, or an item on a political party program, it is not an argument or a metaphor. It stretches before me, as touchable as a scorpion, a bird, a well; visible as a field of chalk, as the prints of shoes"[80]. Palestine had been represented, for Barghouti, for so long as an idea or "a metaphor" that it is difficult to reconcile the land that he sees with the Palestine that he has constructed in his imagination. This Palestine is one he can touch and walk in, it is not the same one that he has to read about in "poetry of resistance". Barghouti is remarking that it is not the space itself that is an argument or an ideal, it is our own conception of the space that makes it seem that way. The contested Palestine is not the Palestine that is "visible as a field of chalk", it is the Palestine that is a symbol of home, of comfort and, ultimately, of return.

Our conception of space is also a reflection of our stories. The land of Palestine is abstracted into Palestine "the beloved" because it represents a time in the lives of Palestinians that was simpler and happier. When Barghouti returns, the Palestine that he sees is "bare and chalky"[81]. The Palestine that he remembers, however, is "green and covered with trees and shrubs and wild flowers"[82]. Why was there this disconnect between the Palestine that he saw and the Palestine that he remembered? "Had (he) been lying to people, then?...Did (he) paint for

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[79] Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, 6.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.

strangers an ideal picture of Palestine because (he) lost it"[83]. Barghouti realizes that his separation from Palestine has coloured how he remembers Palestine. His idealization of Palestine had changed the topography of Palestine. His hopes for return, then, manifest themselves in his relationship with Palestine as a space. In his attempt to hold it close he had reimagined Palestine. This is, ultimately, true of every physical space. We are constantly reconstructing space to reflect our changing stories. Just as our stories change, so too do the physical spaces.

We conceive of Palestine as a place, but if the place is told through the individual's story then place is actually time. When place is told through a person's narrative, the place designates a certain time in the person's life. An attempt to return to the place, then, is an attempt to return to that time. Barghouti realizes this when he returns to Palestine, convinced that Palestine was the land that he lost.

> I walked on the land that had occupied my imagination for many years. What is it that was lost in this that I have found? A specific look of the sidewalks I trod? A rhythm? A type of sunrise and sunset?...It is always the same problem: the problem of stitching two times together. It cannot be done[84].

Barghouti, like many other Palestinians, has dreamed of returning to Palestine for many years. His hope is that returning to Palestine will finally allow him to be home. He will have found that which was missing for so many years of his displacement. Once he actually returns to Palestine though, he realizes that the place "the sidewalks", "the sunrise and the sunset" are not what he was missing. When a return to Palestine is envisioned, it is always talked about in terms of place. The dream of returning to Palestine, though, is actually a dream of returning to a time. "The places we desire are actually times"[85]. A time before all the problems of displacement even began. The dream of a return to Palestine, then, to Barghouti, is actually an attempt to stitch

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[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 76.
[85] Ibid., 88.

together two times: the times before and after displacement. Stitching together Barghouti's pre-exile life and post-exile life, however, is as impossible as an attempt to change all of Palestine from being "bare and chalky" to being green and beautiful. The physical space, then, is not only a representation of our experiences and our hopes then are mapped on to it but it is also a representation of a time in an individual's and a community's narrative.

The individual's story is what records a place. There has to be an emphasis on the person's story, in order, to record place; for a recording that attempts to focus only on the place will inevitably lead back to the individual. When Barghouti returns to Ramallah, he attempts to reconnect with her. Ramallah, though, is not interested,

> You have to take the first step. Ramallah will not take it. Ramallah is content with what she is. She knows what she has lived through. The near ones are near and the far ones are far. She has gone her way, sometimes as her people willed and more often as her enemies willed. She has suffered and she has endured[86].

Ramallah does not feel emotional about her distance from Barghouti. In her narrative, Barghouti is not of consequence nor are the displaced Palestinians. She is where she has always been. The people that live in Ramallah "are near" and those that do not "are far". Ramallah does not recognize who they are. She is just a space; a site for the battle between men. Ramallah, the space, has "endured and suffered" while "her enemies" and "her people" fought over her. Ramallah, does not need us to chronicle her life; she "knows what she has lived through". We chronicle Ramallah so as to chronicle the people in Ramallah. When we talk of losing Ramallah, or moving away from Ramallah, it is the individual that has moved away or lost her. The story of Ramallah is essentially a story of human actors. The multiple individual narratives of residents of Ramallah chronicle Ramallah today and before she was lost. Individuals constantly produce history through their reimagining of places around them. Barghouti and countless other

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[86] Ibid., 35.

Palestinians construct the Palestine we know today. The collective space, Palestine, then, exists only through people's stories of it

Ramallah, Tahrir Square, and all the examples we have seen of physical space acquire meaning only when seen through the perspective of the individual narratives that construct them. The place alone is not symbolic nor does it have a collective narrative. It is each individual's story that together records and constructs the collective imagination of space. A recording of place, then, is intimately tied to the recording of an individual and through him/her a community. The community is always made up of multiple individuals. If the lives of the individuals in a community can be documented, then the community's history can be documented. This is ultimately the idea at the heart of history. History is about the human actors. Ashour and Barghouti, affirm this view of history by recording in their texts, not only each other's stories at a personal level but also the stories of important Palestinian literary figures like Darwish, Naji Ali, and Saed.

We may know Barghouti's story from his autobiography *I Saw Ramallah* but Ashour's version of Barghouti allows us to think of him not only from a singular perspective but also through the various roles that he has. The individual as we have seen in our first two chapters is not singular and constant. His/her story is a site of multiplicity. Each new narrator and each new story can give us a new perspective of the individual.

Mourid Barghouti is introduced to us in *Specters* not as a 'poet in exile' nor as an acclaimed literary figure, instead his role is that of a husband. We are not looking at a listing of who Barghouti is like those demanded by immigration officials; "The name on passport was Mourid Al-Barghouti. Occupation: poet. Birthplace: Deir Ghassana, Algeria"[87]. Instead we are

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[87] Ashour, *Specters*, 170. The passport says Algeria, to avoid using Palestine.

introduced to a version of Mourid Barghouti that is constructed through Ashour's personal relationship with Barghouti; not only as her husband but also as the father of her son.

> We would go to meet him at Cairo airport, wait in the depressing corridor to watch from nearby as the passengers emerged from the arrival hall. We would wait an hour, two hours which seemed bearable, perhaps because we are used to it, but also because what mattered in the end was that Mourid be permitted to enter[88].

Barghouti has immense difficulty travelling to and from Egypt as a Palestinian. In November of 1977, "five security officers came to our (their) house and took Mourid and deported him from Egypt"[89]. This deportation is just the beginning of the struggles for Ashour and Barghouti who have to grapple with long forced separations throughout their marriage. The narrative of Barghouti's displacement here, is told through a different experience than that of his return to Palestine. We feel the weight of his displacement through the pain of a wife, just waiting to see her husband, hoping that he will make it through the airport to her. The circumstances of displacement are the same but it is told through a completely different individual perspective. Ashour's narrative serves to present Barghouti in a different light, it chronicles his experience of displacement through her own experience as his wife. The individual's narrative, then, can chronicle not only its author's own story but the stories of others through an extension of its narrative.

Barghouti is an easy example of this as Ashour's husband; her narrative naturally extends to his, but their narratives are not limited to each other by virtue of their marriage alone. Instead, they can each record the other individuals in the community around them. An example of this is the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al- Ali. Naji al-Ali was assassinated by Mossad in 1987. His life and his story are recorded for a reader through Ashour's and Barghouti's narratives. Ashour

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[88] Ibid., 172.
[89] Ibid., 156.

attempts to write a scene of Shagar's accident in *Specters* but finds that any attempt to construct the scene of the crime inadvertently leads to Naji-al-Ali's house. "Shagar had not met Naji-al Ali. She didn't know when she entered the street where her friends lived that Naji's house-now the home of Widad, his widow and his four children…-was in the same place where she was headed"[90]. In the scene of Shagar's attack, Naji-al-Ali's house is constructed, by Ashour, in detail for a reader. "The kitchen, the stairs, Usama's room… Naji's sketches hung upon the wall"[91]. The physical space of his house is a site that is representative of both his story and that of his family. Details of Naji-al-Ali's life from his family and his home are constructed for us through Ashour's story of Shagar's attack. Ashour tells us in the construction of Shagar's attack, what Naji- Ali's family would have done if Shagar were in fact real. Ashour, thus, constructs a mini narrative within her own story, one that stars Naji's wife Widad and his son Usama. The story is built around Usama finding Shagar in the street and helping her along with Widad to get to a hospital. Ashour thus uses her own story to record a narrative of Naji-al Ali and his family. The narratives of other individuals, then, can be embedded within a person's story.

Barghouti introduces the reader to Naji-al Ali in his text as well. Here, however, we encounter Naji-al-Ali before his death. Through the experience of Barghouti with Naji-al Ali we gain a look at a different time in Naji's life; we see the intersection between different people's narratives. Barghouti's story connected with Naji's story, the first time he met him. "I got to know Naji in 1970 in Kuwait. He was the cartoonist of Al-Siyasa in Kuwait and I used to spend some evenings in his small office…I came to know him well and saw how one could touch talent with one's fingers. I also saw how courage can be clear as a coffin"[92]. Barghouti highlights the

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[90] Ibid., 223.
[91] Ashour, *Specters,* 224.
[92] Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, 169.

time that Naji entered his life or his story. He reminds the reader of how intertwined narratives are, the individual's story can still speak to the community because all our stories are constantly intersecting. Barghouti, here, also serves as a witness to Naji's life. This is because he records the final outcome that Naji's brave cartoons had - death. Barghouti's voice documents the "hate campaign against him (Naji-al-Ali)"[93] that "tempted any silencer to exploit him"[94]. Barghouti's story serves as an opportunity to remind an audience of how interconnected individuals are. It offers the possibility that a person can be a witness for other people that can no longer speak for themselves. The individual, then, is an agent that can empower other individuals through their own narratives.

The role of the individual in telling other people's narratives is never more important than in the case of those that have been silenced. Ashour and Barghouti take this role very seriously. Their narratives are filled with records of deceased Palestinian figures. We see the grave of Ghassan Khanafani – "murdered in Beirut,"[95] the funeral of Darwish, the death of Wadi Haddad, Emile Habibi, and, on a more personal note, the death of Barghouti's brother Mounif. Their individual narratives consistently make an effort to record the history of Palestinians as a community. They record the individual stories that have been, time and time again, silenced.

The ultimate purpose of *Specters* and *I Saw Ramallah* can be distilled to this one idea: the individual is an active agent that can empower others through their own narratives. Ashour and Barghouti through a discussion of history first establish that "imagined narratives" of individuals can, in fact, tell history. Each person's narrative is empowered to be able to contribute to a telling of history. There is no history, then, outside of the sphere of the individual,

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[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 170.

even physical spaces are conceived only through the collective imagination, which itself is made of people's stories. Ashour and Barghouti finally show that a person's story can also document the stories of other individuals around them. This is to, ultimately, make the point that the individual is the beginning of multiplicity; for history, the collective story, is built piece by piece with each person's own story. History is always the concern and the construct of the individual.

Conclusion

> In stories there are always two paths- one to safety, the other to calamity- and blocking the way to safety is the ogre, whom those who are clever must get past by means of cunning and artifice. I don't know what it is I need, to begin with, in order to make a choice between the two paths. The possibilities have multiplied, the threads have become tangled, and it seems that they became more knotted each day, while I am as yet not even able to distinguish safety from calamity.[96]

We conceive of history as a subjective retelling of real events that happen to a collective. The individual in such a conception is merely a small part of the collective. The narrative is important only because it makes the retelling of 'real' history possible. This project serves to reexamine our basic conceptions of the process of recording history. The role of both the individual and narrative are reconstructed not as inconsequential to history but instead as invaluable.

This project, in its early stages, was meant to be an exploration of the dichotomy between real and fictional stories. I chose novels that had an autobiographical bent to them because I believed that the individual's retelling of their own stories had an inherent subjectivity; it is an imagined narrative about real events. Autobiography is a grey area between reality and fiction. I had hoped that I could chronicle the real events in an autobiographical novel. I believed that this would allow me to conclude that the imagined narrative could also be a historical account, i.e. a real narrative because there were real events that occurred in it. Ultimately, this first idea failed because it was based on three faulty principle assumptions. The first was that there was a singular individual who was always the same whom I could find in a text. The second was that the individual because s/he was singular could not speak to the collective. The third was that I assumed that the historical narrative was a real narrative that could be found within a fictional narrative.

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[96] Ashour, *Specters,* 34.

The first chapter looked at the role of the individual in *Specters*. I began conceptualizing this chapter with the mindset that I would find Radwa Ashour, the singular individual within *Specters*. A close reading of the text, however, thwarted any search for a single consistent person. The novel necessitated a reconsideration of the definition of an 'individual'. We saw in the first chapter, that the individual was not in fact single or constant. Ashour showed instead through a fracturing of her own individual identity, the multiplicity that the individual perspective could provide. By intertwining her own story with that of Shagar's, she also destabilized the divisions between the real and fictional characters. The individual, then, is not only a site for multiple perspectives but additionally they could now be represented even through a fictional medium (i.e. both a fictional character and narrative). S/he is not a counterpoint to the collective. Instead, s/he is a reflection of the multiplicity present in the collective. The collective could not be reduced to a single story just as the individual could not be restricted to a single perspective. A person, then, has the power to construct and represent the collective.

The second chapter looked at the individual's ability to speak to the collective. In *I Saw Ramallah,* we see that Barghouti insisted on an autobiography, that centered around his own "I" and that focused on his own perspective. To Barghouti, it was important, to construct his own identity. He used his own story and his experiences to show that each of our narratives is important and unique, that just because we come from a single perspective does not mean that we are limited; instead our unique story is what allows us importance. The collective is not really made of a single story that can be told of all people instead it is a narrative that is coloured by each of our experiences. The "I" is not a limiting factor that undermines our ability to speak beyond ourselves, instead it is an acknowledgment of the individual perspectives that together

make up the collective. The individual's story, then, is integral because it builds the collective, if a person's story is not recorded then the collective cannot be recorded.

If an individual's story could record the collective, is the individual a historian? This is the final question of Chapter three. At first, I attempted to answer this question by privileging "real" events over "fictional" events. I hoped that if I could look at *Specters* and *I Saw Ramallah* and find the "real" events, separate from the fictional (imagined) narratives, then I could classify both texts as historic. I could show that the fictional narrative could have "real" events, making *Specters* and *I Saw Ramallah* historical narratives. An attempt to separate "history" and "narrative", however, was wholly in vain. The real events of a historical account could not be found outside the narrative. Any attempt to separate the events inevitably led to the construction of a story. There were no events that were not a function of the narrative. This identified the principle problem with my initial thesis; *I Saw Ramallah* and *Specters* did not need to be classified as "real" in order to be historical narratives. Instead to truly understand history, we have to identify that history itself is an imagined narrative. The individual then is an ideal historian who reimagines and reconstructs events and places.

Ashour and Barghouti serve as perfect examples of the scribe. Chapter three, also, outlines their recordings of place, showing how they record the history of symbolic places through their own stories of the place. The stories of each of the individuals, that interact with a place, construct the space. Ashour and Barghouti do not want to show merely that place can be recorded through the individual. Instead they assert that the place itself is not meaningful without our stories; a place is just an empty receptacle. Our conceptions of space reflect the value that we give our own stories and the stories of others. Place is not an isolated example. Ashour and Barghouti are making the point that it is not only that a person can record history; instead history

itself is only about individuals. The best mechanism to record history, then, is to document the lives of the subjects of history. Ashour and Barghouti do this by recording the lives of Palestinian artists around them, but this is not a role that is limited to them. Instead each of us has the power to record the community around us: our family and our friends. Every individual's recording creates a documentation of more people. Our own stories, then, have the power to speak even for those that cannot speak for themselves. Each of our stories contributes to the richness and diversity of the collective narrative. We are active agents that are responsible for our own representation.

Changing our conception of history is not merely an esoteric conversation. Instead rethinking our definition of history redistributes power. A history that acknowledges the individual and the importance of the individual's unique perspective in constructing it, makes the subjects of history into the agents of history. It demonstrates the utilization of "objectivity" or "realness" as a mechanism to stifle individual voices. It legitimizes the few speaking for the many. A view of history, instead, that is dependent on imagination celebrates the multiplicity of individuals; it allows for difference. It acknowledges the subjectivity that is innate to any act of perceiving or recording events. History is ultimately always the story of the collective imagination.

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