Representations of Labour, Race, and Orientalism in *Tale of a Certain Orient* and *Blackbodying*

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Abstract

The present research paper analyses the novels *Tale of a Certain Orient* by Brazilian author Milton Hatoum, and *Blackbodying* by Canadian author Dimitri Nasrallah, regarding their depictions of the Lebanese migratory experience in two different settings: the Amazon region in the early 20th century, and Toronto in the late 20th century. Using the frame of labour and race relations, as well as analysing the use and rejection of Orientalist stereotypes, I highlight the similarities, but mostly the differences, between various experiences of migration of people originating in the same place. While the Brazilian novel shows us the social and economic ascent of a Lebanese family in the context of early 20th century Manaus, privileged by their position in relation to their local Black and Indigenous employees, the Canadian novel brings forth the hardships and isolation of a recent immigrant fleeing war and left entirely to his own devices in a hostile new environment. I conclude that despite their regional differences, the two novels resonate with universal messages that are relevant to many people's experiences in a globalized world shaped by migration and displacement.

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Introduction

In the present research project, I am comparing two novels by authors who come from the Lebanese diaspora in two different cultural contexts: *Tale of a Certain Orient* [*Relato de um Certo Oriente*], by Lebanese-Brazilian author Milton Hatoum, and *Blackbodying*, by Lebanese-Canadian author Dimitri Nasrallah. My aim is to compare the differences and similarities between the two novels, and, more broadly, between Lebanese diasporic communities in Brazil and in Canada. Specifically, I am interested in how the novels are different or similar in their depiction of labour and economic dynamics between the Lebanese immigrants and the locals, as well as in their expressions of Western Orientalist stereotyping of Lebanese culture. Answering these questions will help me to 1) discover how different host cultures impact the experience of diasporic communities that share the same origins, especially with regard to jobs, work conditions, and economic factors; 2) analyse how time of migration and realities in the host country create differences in economic and social positions of Lebanese immigrants in their new environment and in their labour relations to the host country's existing populations; 3) examine what can be considered individual experiences of first and second generation immigrants and what can be considered general experiences regarding immigrant communities with regard to the host's Orientalist stereotypes of Lebanese culture; and 4) analyse how both authors respond to these Orientalist stereotypes in their respective novels.

The Lebanese diaspora can be found throughout the world, and started to take shape in the late 19th century, still during the rule of the Ottoman Empire on the territory of present-day Lebanon. Large communities of immigrants and their descendants can be found in Europe and throughout the Americas. Today, Brazil is estimated to be home to between 3 and 7 million

Lebanese and their descendants, the largest community of Lebanese people outside Lebanon (Moya xiii). Canada is home to about 219,555 Lebanese and their descendants (Census 2016). Moreover, in 2006, 41% of Arab-Canadians declared Lebanese roots, making the Lebanese the largest group of Arabs in Canada (Hennebry and Amery 25-6). It should be noted that the majority of the Lebanese identify as Arabs, but not all Lebanese are of Arab ethnicity; they can also be of Armenian, Greek, Assyrian, Kurdish, and many other origins. In countries outside of Canada or Brazil, the question of self-identification for Lebanese as not Arabs may arise, but it does not seem to be as much of a big issue in the two countries on which I will focus. In communities in the United States and Europe, Lebanese immigrants might select as their ethnic identity "white" or "Phoenician," thus distancing themselves from Arab communities (Abdelhady 20, 46).

Historical context with brief introduction to the authors studied

Time and space made the Lebanese experience in the diaspora very diverse. However, scholarly works focused on these communities, both in Social Sciences and in Cultural Studies, tend to compare only works and populations within the same linguistic frame (for example, Francophone communities in Quebec and Europe) or within the same geographical region (for example, Canada and the United States). Papers breaching these divides usually work only along the Anglophone–Francophone–Arabophone axis in terms of language, and with the North America–Europe axis in terms of geographic location. In my research, I propose a comparison along North America–South America, with Canada and Brazil as my main focus; and I will use works of Anglophone and Lusophone expressions to represent each country, respectively.

The representative of Brazilian Lusophone Lebanese diasporic literature for this paper is

Milton Hatoum. He was born in 1952 to Lebanese immigrant parents, in the city of Manaus in Brazil, and currently lives in São Paulo; he has also lived in Brasília, Barcelona, Madrid, France, and the United States. His first novel, *Relato de um Certo Oriente*, was first published in Portuguese in 1989, and won the national Jabuti Prize the following year. He has authored six novels (two of which feature families of Lebanese immigrants in Manaus) and two compilations of short-stories and essays, which have won him four Jabuti Prizes[1] (1990, 2001, 2006 and 2008), one Prêmio Portugal Telecom de Literatura[2] (2006), and one honour of the Ordem do Mérito Cultural[3] (2008), as well as two nominations for the International IMPAC Dublin prize. His books have been published in 12 languages and 14 different countries and have generated multiple adaptations, such as movies, plays, one TV mini-series, and one graphic novel adaptation (*Biografia*). *Relato de um Certo Oriente* has been translated and published in English language twice, first in 1994 by Atheneum Books (translated by Ellen Watson) under the title *The Tree of the Seventh Heaven*; and most recently in 2004 with a revised translation by John Gledson, which was published by Bloomsbury under the title *Tale of a Certain Orient.* In this paper, I will be using the Bloomsbury edition for citation purposes. The novel is narrated by an unnamed woman who writes a letter to her brother, who now lives in Europe, telling him about her return to Manaus to attend to their adoptive mother Emilie's deathbed. Although she arrives too late to see Emilie for one last time, at the funeral she meets old friends and family members who tell her stories about Emilie's migration from Lebanon to Brazil, her marriage to a Lebanese immigrant, and other family tales throughout the 20th century in the Amazon region.

[1] The Jabuti Prize is the most important literary prize in Brazil, first awarded in 1959. Unlike other literary prizes, it includes various prize categories, such as awards for workers in the industry, book designers, illustrators, and translators.

[2] Now known as the Oceanos Prêmio de Literatura em Língua Portuguesa, it is considered to be the equivalent of the Man Booker Prize for literature written by Lusophone writers in any country that has Portuguese as an official language.

[3] Honour given by the Ministry of Culture in recognition for contributions to Brazilian culture.

Dimitri Nasrallah was born in 1977 and spent his childhood in Kuwait, Greece, and Dubai before moving to Canada in 1988. *Blackbodying* was his first novel, written as part of his Master's degree in Creative Writing at Concordia University. It was published by DC Books in 2005, became a finalist for the Grand Prix du Livre de Montréal, and won Quebec's McAuslan First Book Prize. It tells the story of two Lebanese men in Canada, who arrive in the country at different times and under different circumstances: One comes as a child and sees his life unfold like a Canadian, having space to develop his artistic projects; in stark contrast, the other arrives as an adult and a refugee, with no prospect of work and ends up seeing his hopes fade away. Nasrallah has published two other novels, which have won him the Hugh MacLennan Prize for fiction, as well as nominations for CBC's Canada Reads and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (*About*).

Literature review

Milton Hatoum is a fairly well studied contemporary Brazilian writer, and unlike in the case of Nasrallah it is not difficult to find scholarly research about his books. A good part of it analyses his first novel, *Tale of a Certain Orient*, from multiple angles. Curiously, the aspect of Lebanese diaspora in his writings seems to be rather neglected by scholars.

Among the topics that have attracted the most attention is that of exoticism in Hatoum's writings. Both Daniela Birman and José Leandro Tonus talk about the "Orient" as an exotic factor in Hatoum's works, but they disagree on how it is represented. Birman claims that Hatoum avoids exoticizing of Arab culture by bringing it closer to a multicultural society. Tonus, on the other hand, has gathered examples of passages that can be interpreted as amplifying the exotic aspects of the Orient. Both authors make relevant points, and it is possible that Hatoum has

deliberately or unwittingly both amplified and avoided exoticism in his novel. Birman describes the exotic as "a kind of barrier to the experience of the encounter or knowledge of what is different from us; a way of seeing the Other that crystallizes them, framing the Other in an unreachable difference" (243). I share Birman' assumption that Hatoum has made an effort to avoid this exoticizing effect and bring the Orient to a familiar place for Western[4] readers because of two biographical facts: Hatoum himself is the product of two cultures, as he grew up immersed in the Lebanese culture of the Amazon region. He positions himself in between cultures, shifting and blending constantly the frontier between them. Besides that, Hatoum is not only aware of Edward Said's works on Orientalism, but is also a great diffuser of this work in Brazil, having even written a preface to one of the editions of *Orientalism* and translated *Representations of the Intelectual* into Brazilian Portuguese (Birman 252). Cultural hybridity, a post-colonial concept found, among others, in the works of Homi Bhabha, is important when talking about authors in diasporic communities, as they belong to spaces of cultural overlapping. This does not imply that there ever existed a "pure" Lebanese culture, nor are there any "pure" Brazilian or Canadian cultures (Jazeel 19), but that different elements for different spaces and histories intermingle to form an individual's identity expression, such as in the case of immigrants of first and second generations. Both Birman and Tonus mention the inclusion of Arabic words in Hatoum's novel, but while Birman believes this to be a way to make Arab culture more approachable, Tonus sees it as the opposite, and considers those inclusions without a "relevant expressive function" in the narrative (143). In this sense, Tonus might be overlooking the identity of the characters as belonging to a particular diasporic group. It is more than just a

[4] "Western" here is being used as an umbrella term for all those who are not of Asian/Middle-Eastern origin, as is the case for the majority of Brazilians. Brazilian mainstream society has often followed and perpetuated the European and North-American model of modernity as a result of its colonial history, something that has been increasingly criticized as maintenance of European hegemony in areas of the world with a complex cultural inheritance, which include American Indigenous populations and African diasporas. Despite its multicultural reality, Brazilian society still preserves some types of discrimination against "Oriental" or Asian populations.

way to mark their difference with regard to mainstream society; it is a manifestation of their identity. Tonus fails to take into account the idea of identity when addressing examples of exoticism in the novel, for this changes the perspective: What is and what is not exotic? Can an identity be intrinsically exotic, regardless of how it is presented in a society? In my perception, the classification of something as exotic comes from those outside looking in and not necessarily from individuals' and communities' expression of their identity.

Another element both scholars touch upon to build their diverging arguments is that of religion, but here I find that both opinions can be convincing. While Birman uses individual expressions of religion as her example to deconstruct exoticism, Tonus looks at religion as a descriptor for a far away land used with the intention to expose the exotic effect. As Birman sees it, the example of the inter-faith Lebanese couple at the centre of the plot (she a Christian, he a Muslim) subverts Western Orientalist ideas that Arabs (and especially Muslims) are incapable of religious tolerance and respect—an idea that grew even stronger after the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990)—, and brings them closer to the Brazilian religious syncretism by adding to the mix of traditional Indigenous practices (246-47). Tonus, however, remembers the passage when the character Emilie describes the Lebanon of her childhood and mixes places with various religious imaginary. This lends the Oriental land (Lebanon) a mythical touch (145). In my research paper, I will focus on these and other elements that either portray or deconstruct the exotic factor of the immigrant identity in both novels under scrutiny. I will focus especially on representations relating to food, Arab vocabulary and religion, and on the way they appear to both the readers and the non-Arab characters in the novels. It is understood that the reader is not a static entity and that each person's background will affect how they experience each narrative. For the purpose of this research, I will narrow down my hypothetical implied reader to one with

little to no knowledge of Lebanese diasporic culture.

The works by Mireille Garcia and Noemi Campos Freitas Vieira revolve more around the identity and memory construction of Hatoum's protagonists. They shed light on *Tale of a Certain Orient*'s unnamed female narrator and her condition as an "in-betweener" in multiple senses: as an informal "adopted" child, as a *Manauara*[5] displaced from her native roots, as an heir of memories of immigration and of a distant original land (Campos Freitas Vieira 12-13; Garcia 15). However, Campos Freitas Vieira alerts us that we are not dealing with an "expatriate narrative" here (15). The Lebanese roots are important for the formation of the character's identity, but the story is not about immigration and neither is it about the issues of recently arrived immigrants. Hatoum is more concerned with the identity of the second and third generations who are cultural hybrids, as opposed to recently arrived immigrants displaced by war. In fact, his immigrant characters belong to earlier generations that had no contact with wars prior to their migration (or at least they do not mention any conflict), and arrived in Brazil long before the more recent civil war that led to a new wave of immigration. The latter is more the interest of Anglophone Lebanese literature.

One aspect that is usually overlooked in scholarship about Hatoum's work, and that I will discuss and compare with Nasrallah's novel, is the relationship of work and the race of immigrants in their new environment. Hatoum's Lebanese characters are integrated in Manaus' society, and this involves working with and around Indigenous Brazilians, Brazilians of European ancestry, and immigrants from other parts of the world. I will be asking the following questions: What does this mean for the work that is expected of them, how do they provide for their families, and what kind of labour is expected of Brazilians in general? Similarly, in Nasrallah's narrative, I will examine the relations between Lebanese immigrants and local

[5] *Manauara* is the demonym for a person born in Manaus.

Canadian populations in big cities like Toronto and Montreal, and how ethnicity influences the work that Lebanese immigrants often perform. For this part of my analysis, I will work with some studies from the social sciences. Boris Fausto reminds us that the first wave of Lebanese immigrants arrived in Brazil just after the abolition of slavery in 1888 (ix). By working in commerce and peddling in urban centres, the Lebanese, among other immigrants, filled middle-class positions, and benefited from anti-Black sentiments in society. At the same time, however, they also had to cope with anti-"Turk" prejudice (xi) in their contacts with European immigrants and Brazilians of European ancestry. Jeffrey Lesser claims that race categorization of Arabs in Brazil was and still is a complex subject, because they do not fit into the usual categories,[6] and although seen as members of an exotic group, they still blend in with the white elite (46). Due to historical factors and colonial legacies, race dynamics and labour relations are different in Canada and in Brazil. The Canadian census has an open-ended question about ethnicity, leaving people to choose how broad or specific they want to be, so people can claim to be "Arab" or "Middle Eastern," but also "Lebanese" or "Palestinian" (Census 2016). Arabs have been seen—like many other groups, such as the Chinese, Eastern Europeans, and others—throughout Canadian history as "undesirable" during certain periods, i.e. during World War I, when they were categorized as "Asiatic" peoples and subjected to large fees (Hannebry and Amery 17). Unlike in Brazil, in Canada Arabs are considered a "visible minority" (25), therefore

[6] The official Brazilian ethnicity categories are separated by skin colour into four categories (*branco, preto, pardo, and amarelo*) with Indigenous as a separate, fifth category. Classified under *branco* are not only those who would be considered white in North America, but also anyone with a white skin. This means that Jews, Middle-Eastern peoples in general (although it can be argued Jews and Middle-Easterners were historically people without a racial category in Brazil, especially in the beginning of immigration), and some people who would be thought as Latino abroad. *Preto* and *pardo* are inside the bigger category *negro*, and are those considered to be black in North America. Although *pardo* can be translated as "brown," it does not hold the same meaning as its English equivalent: *pardos* are those with mixed white and black heritage, or "light skinned black people," while "brown" is commonly associated with racialized groups such as Middle-Easterners and South-Asians. Finally, we have *amarelo*, which is associated with Eastern-Asians only. For these reasons, I have chosen to keep the Brazilian racial categories untranslated.

significantly different from the white population.

There are a few studies written on Francophone Lebanese fiction, on fiction written by the diaspora in Europe, poetry in the diaspora, and newspapers of the diaspora, to name some key areas. The field that interests me the most and has a community of scholars around it is Anglophone Lebanese fiction, most specifically written in Canada. Nasrallah is usually briefly mentioned as an example of his generation of writers, but there is no substantial analysis of his works to be found in academic research. Syrine Chafic Hout authored a study analysing eleven texts by six Lebanese Anglophone writers examining their work about the post-war period (13), and has found similar topics in them—transculturality, notions of home and displacement, trauma, in-betweenness, and identity— that can also be found in Nasrallah's novel. It should be noted that although works of Brazilian authors from the Lebanese diaspora (like Raduan Nassar and Hatoum) are studied separately or in sporadic comparisons. Comprehensive Lusophone Lebanese diasporic fiction studies like the ones we find for Francophone and Anglophone Lebanese literatures are still a desideratum. This is a gap that should be filled in the future, but that would go beyond the scope of the present paper.

There is much to be said about Lebanese diasporic literature written by the first and second generations, and about authors grappling with their hybrid identity as well as their families' (and their own) memories of displacement, immigration, and exile. Furthermore, a rich field could open up when comparing literature by authors beyond the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. By analysing the works of a Brazilian-Lebanese writer and a Canadian-Lebanese writer, I hope to contribute to this under-explored field and thereby fill a gap in the research done so far as well as contribute to the field in a meaningful way.

Brief chapter synopsis

In chapter 1, I will detail the theoretical and methodological aspects of my research, taking into account concepts of diaspora and social studies about the Lebanese migrations. My analysis of the books will be guided by Marxist theories of labour and class, and their intersection with race relations and minority identities. Since this analysis features people moving from the "East" to "Western" post-colonial societies, the work of Said on Orientalism will be especially important when describing the relationship between the newly arrived immigrants and the locals' expectations and prejudice in shaping their identity.

Chapter 2 will explore the historical background of Lebanese migration, from the end of the 19th century to the end of the 20th century. I will focus on the causes in Lebanon that led parts of the population to immigrate to the Americas, their reception in Brazil and Canada, and laws in both of these countries that might have affected this migration and the immigrants' lives. We will also see how these Lebanese communities developed in Brazil and in Canada, respectively, in terms of work performed, social status, and relationship with the communities already settled.

Chapters 3 and 4 will be dedicated to analysing the novels *Tale of a Certain Orient* and *Blackbodying*, concentrating on the passages about labour, race, and the relationships between the Lebanese immigrants and the locals, as well as immigrants from other countries. Analysing Hatoum's novel, I will focus on the character of Emilie and her relationship with the Brazilians of Portuguese origin, the Indigenous Brazilians, and the immigrant community, as well as the stories around the family's store, The Parisian. In Nasrallah's novel, the main object of my scrutiny will be the character of Sameer, his employment situation in Toronto, and his relationship with the local community as well as with other immigrants. I shall also touch on the character of the narrator, who is also Lebanese but arrived in the country under different

circumstances and therefore has a different relationship with his surroundings.

1. Theoretical Approach and Methodology

My analysis of the novels *Tale of a Certain Orient* by Milton Hatoum, and *Blackbodying* by Dimitri Nasrallah will be guided by Marxist theories of oppression and exploitation (Holly Lewis) as I try to position the Lebanese characters in their respective communities regarding their labour. Further to these theories, I will also use racial theories not only to define the Arabs but also to explain how they fit in the host countries in relation to other inhabitants (be they Indigenous, European, African or Asian). I will make particular use of Said and his concept of Orientalism so as to deconstruct ethnic and racial stereotypes.

Issues of labour, race, and immigration are all interconnected and influence each other. Race specifically has the tendency to change its meaning depending on the geographic location and time period: who is and who is not considered "white" is an important question for my research, and is especially mutable. For example, in English North America, in the past, European Catholics such as the Italians or the Irish were not considered white, while today they are classified or self-identify as such (Ignatiev 15-6). Thus whiteness is more than just a concept based simply on skin colour. It intersects with religion, class, and labour relations. As per the Marxist approach, racial concepts are advantageous for the accumulation of capital, in order to maintain the exploitation of the proletariat (Lewis 116)—in this case, the working poor who come from recent immigrant groups, defined as lower on the social scale but at the same time necessary for the capitalist system to function and further the gains made on the new lands that had been acquired through colonial expansion.

According to Lewis (122), oppression should not be confused with exploitation although both concepts are important to our understanding of social relations. Oppression is characterized

by violence (in the form of micro or macro-aggressions) that is systemic to a society, such as sexism, racism, nationalism, and homophobia. Exploitation is the use of the labour force of others to enrich one privileged class and is the result of the division between the proletariat and the owners of the means of production, i.e. the capitalists (or, in Marx's terms, the bourgeoisie). However, exploitation often makes use of oppression as a tool of the accumulation of capital by paying unfairly low wages to marginalized groups (116). For Marxists, class is not measured by quantitative values of wealth, but by the person's qualitative position in the workforce, which divides people into two groups: the exploiter and the exploited. In the Marxist view, the middle-class (or the petite bourgeoisie) is a mixed class that can act both as the exploiter and the exploited depending on different interactions (119)—for example, a person in a managerial position has people working under them, but is also a worker and thus subjected to their own boss; or the small business owner, who is the owner and employer of a couple of employees, but also works and has his own labour force being exploited by bigger enterprises. I will be using this shifting concept of the middle class in my analysis.

In the racial and ethnical realm, micro-aggressions are the result of various forms of oppression happening daily to non-white peoples. However, to understand those manifestations of oppression, for my research I first need to clarify where the Lebanese fit in the racial organization of Canada and Brazil. In Canada, the Lebanese, regardless of their religion, tend to self-identify as Arabs, which in turn is defined as a "visible minority" category (Abdelhady 68). By being a visible minority, the Lebanese are thus also considered significantly different from the white mainstream Canadian population. Brazil, on the other hand, follows a different racial configuration. Unlike the Canadian census, where the classification is connected more to ethnicity than to race (Abdelhady 68) and the respondents can freely name their racial

background in an open-ended question, the Brazilian census, as previously mentioned, only recognizes five categories (*branco, preto, pardo, amarelo,* and *indígena*). Such categorization has very little to do with ethnic background and is purely based on appearances, i.e. essentially skin colour. This is a result of the racial policies that had been taken by the Brazilian government back in the 19th century, which, faced with the high numbers of African and African-decent peoples working in slave labour, decided to "whiten" the population by stimulating the migration of white-skinned Europeans (Dos Santos and Hallewel 3). Lesser (46) argues that, although the Brazilians of Lebanese background tend to self-identify as *branco,* Arabs (and other groups such as the Jews and the Armenians) have always been in a somewhat difficult position regarding race, having migrated to Brazil through a racial loophole: they were not targeted as white, but they were also not as undesirable as the *amarelo* or dark skinned peoples. This is evident in their reception by the white society in Brazil, which did not always recognize Semitic peoples as their own, and believed they could never assimilate to Brazilian mainstream culture (Lesser 55-6, 58-9). Although after a few generations this general feeling has subsided, new sentiments of islamophobia have arisen in the past few years, putting Arabs in a new delicate position as "not quite white" (Abdelhady 4; Lesser 58).

One reason that keeps Arabs out of the "white" category in certain places is Orientalist stereotyping and prejudice. In Said's view, the "Orient," pictured as exotic and romantic but also savage, was a West-European invention (1). Depictions of the Middle East were often constructed by Westerners in a way to justify their colonial aspirations, and they shaped the image of the region accordingly with prejudgments and stereotypes (3). These colonial stereotypes still permeate today's Western thought and ideas about the Middle East but also Asia as a whole. Although the classification of Latin American countries as "Western nations" is

problematic, and Brazil was never a colonial power in the Middle East, for the purpose of this research I will consider Brazilian society as "Western" when it comes to its views of the "Orient," as these tend to follow those of Western European and North American societies. The pre-concepts regarding Arabs (and by extension, the Lebanese) in Brazil are the same, or at least very similar, to those in "Western" cultural centres.

Finally, I will also explore theories of the diaspora (Dalia Abdelhady), used to describe the communities of Lebanese immigrants and their descendants around the world. Diaspora can be defined as a community that extends across different territories, even continents, while sharing a common past (often marked by trauma) and roots. Through many generations, this community maintains, at least to a degree, some of its cultural traits, such as language, cuisine or religion, which forge a link to the original land and are marked by a certain nostalgia (Abdelhady 10). Although the Lebanese did not experience genocide like the Armenians or the Jews, nor slavery, like the Africans who were forcibly brought to the Americas, the collective trauma of war can be considered a part of this collective diasporic identity. This trauma is present in the first waves of migration in the late 19th century, but is even more important in the generation affected by the Civil War of the 1970s to the 1990s.

I will be applying the theories highlighted above in my analysis of sections of the two novels. In my interpretation of *Tale of a Certain Orient*, because of its non-linear structure, I will be relying on selected passages that narrate (from the point of view of other characters) the relationship of Emilie and her unnamed husband with the indigenous and European/European descendent population of Manaus. The novel is not narrated chronologically, but rather as a collection of memories of different characters, following a more thematic than temporal link, moving back and forth in time. In the case of *Blackbodying*, my focus will be on passages of

parts 3 and 4 (“Death of the Author” and “A Canadian Fiction”), set in the decade of 1990, that explore deeper the character of Sameer and his relationship with the narrator. I will apply a close reading to demonstrate how the characters can experience discrimination and orientalisation at the same time as they oppress and exploit others, and show how labour relations in Brazil and Canada have been shaped by racism and classism, even though these factors have different expressions in each country due to their respective colonial histories.

2. Historical Background

The Lebanese diaspora can be found all around the world, in Europe, Australia, North and South America, and East and West Africa. This migration first started in the middle of the 19th century, before "Lebanon" would be recognized as a country, and the territory was still part of the Ottoman Empire (Hourani 3). For this reason, it is hard to differentiate between Lebanese and other neighbouring groups, such as Palestinians, Jordanians, and especially Syrians. In this first wave of migration, until 1943, when the state of Lebanon was officially formed, the Lebanese immigrants were part of a group usually referred to as "Syrians," "Syrian-Lebanese" or, in Brazil, even as "Turks" (*turcos*) because of their Ottoman passports. Today, the "Turk" denomination is considered derogatory, and although it was used by officials in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is no longer in usage, given that neither the Lebanese (nor the Syrian and any other Arab or Armenian groups that migrated to Brazil) are ethnically Turkish.

Hourani (5-6) describes four main phases of emigration:

1) Between the 17th and mid 19th century, limited numbers of Syrians and Lebanese migrated to Egypt and to commercial centres in Europe.
2) From the second half of the 19th century to the early 20th century, great numbers emigrated to North and South America, with some resistance from the Ottoman government because of the potential loss of army recruits.
3) After the First World War, North American countries limited the access of new immigrants, but colonial territories in West Africa opened up as a new possibility.
4) Finally, starting in the 1960's, a new wave of immigration was fuelled with the growth of the economies in the Gulf and the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990).

For the purpose of this study, I will concentrate on the second and fourth phases.

There were, of course, many reasons that led to the massive migration of people from Lebanon and Syria to distant parts of the world. The first was a population growth and the spread of education through Catholic and Protestant missionary schools in the region, leading to a substantial increase in the educated workforce aware of news from the outside world via commercial routes (Hourani 4). The second main reason was conflict, particularly the civil war of the 1860s, which led to the emigration of mostly Christians caused by religious persecution (4-5). At the same time, places like the Americas and Australia were experiencing a social and economical boom, making them attractive to newcomers (5). Immigration from Syria and Lebanon became massive between 1890 and 1930 (Moya xiv). While other immigrants of other nationalities headed to rural areas and plantations in Brazil, most of the Syrian-Lebanese settled in urban centres, and as such were one of the first groups to arrive, getting an advantage for socioeconomic mobility over other groups. In North America the Syrian-Lebanese were preceded in the cities by immigrants from Northwest Europe, resulting in a different hierarchical position within those societies (Moya xiv-xv).

The process of emigration involved not only the person emigrating but their community as well. Families would invest in the young man (usually the son) taking on the journey, in hopes of seeing a return of their investments (Hourani 6-7). Those migrants hoped to stay only temporarily so they could accumulate some money, and then return to their families in Lebanon. Although some did just that, many others ended up staying and forming families in the new country, usually briefly coming back to their village to find a wife and to convince other family members to emigrate as well (Truzzi 12). Ties with family and place of origin remained strong in the communities, though Hourani argues that, generally, by the third generation, those ties

become so faint that the individuals can be considered “assimilated” (10). This, of course, can vary depending on how insular the community is, but it does seem to be the case in communities in both Brazil and Canada.

One aspect of Lebanese society that is important in order to understand how migrants would organize themselves socially abroad, especially in the period before the Second World War, was sectarianism. The most important marker of Syrian and Lebanese identity was religion, followed by village or city of origin (Truzzi 5). At the end of the 19th century, in a tribal structure, each village was run by a religious authority and a council constituted by the heads of the most important families in the region, recognized by their lineage. The status of these important families created relationships of “loyalty and reciprocity” between the heads of families and their followers (Truzzi 5-6). This sense of loyalty would follow the migrants in their new environment and even determine with or from whom they would receive help settling in. As a result, those migrants did not have a sense of Syrian-Lebanese national identity, but rather a sense of duty to the extended family (Truzzi 6), following what Etel Adnan calls “tribal mentality” (Adnan and Reider 32). Lebanese society also gives a lot of value to personal relationships, reciprocity, gifts, and compliments. Exchanging benefits is an important factor connected to honour, and still today traces of this custom are present in later generations, for example, the habit of serving copious amounts of food to guests (Truzzi 7). All this contributed to the migration wave of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: when one person from a village would successfully migrate and send money back to their family, the other families of the village were compelled to send their own sons as migrants as well, so they could also increase their status in the local community (7-8).

The civil war of 1975-1990 pushed many Lebanese abroad so as to escape violence, look

for employment, and secure a better future for their children (Labaki 606). As a consequence, between January 1975 and August 1989, approximately 990,000 Lebanese left their country (610). According to Boutros Labaki (621), this phase of emigration changed the profile of the Lebanese emigrant, from predominantly Christian to multi-sectarian, and from professional towards family emigration. Between 1983 and 1986, two-thirds of the Lebanese entering Canada were under the status of "reunited families" (623).

2.1 Brazil

Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, Brazil started to receive a massive influx of immigrants from Western Europe and Japan. Most of these immigrants went to work on farms and plantations, to substitute enslaved labour in agricultural production (Truzzi xxiii). By contrast, the Syrian-Lebanese settled mostly in urban environments, filling up a social extract that until then had been underdeveloped in the predominantly rural Brazilian society: the urban middle class. Unlike the other immigrant groups mentioned, the Syrian-Lebanese went on their own, with no subsidies from the Brazilian government and land-owners (Truzzi 2). This made them freer than other groups to rise economically because they did not have debts to pay off, and they also had greater mobility as they were able to choose their economic activity.

It is difficult to specify how many Lebanese immigrants entered Brazil during the early years of migration—between the 1860s and the 1940s—, because they were registered under several different categories, such as "Turks," "Asian-Turks," "Arab-Turks" or "Syrians"; until 1908, they were often just included in the category "Other nationality" (Truzzi 16). The flow of migration began to accelerate in 1895, but was interrupted between 1903 and 1918, with a peak of 11,101 arrivals in 1913. During the 1920s an average of 5,000 Syrian-Lebanese entered Brazil

per year (Truzzi 16). Lebanese immigrants would arrive in Brazil without any substantial capital or skills, so they ended up working in one of the few professions that offered independence (21), namely as peddlers in rural areas for already established businesses (more often than not owned by another Syrian-Lebanese who had also started as a peddler). Once they had acquired enough knowledge of Portuguese and accumulated some capital, they would move on to urban settings and set up their own dry goods or textiles shops, possibly employing other recent immigrants (23-4).

The Syrian-Lebanese success in business was a result of their kinship bonds, their mobility compared to other groups, as well as new commercial practices they introduced to Brazil, like selling on credit, bargaining, dropping prices, and reinvesting money in the business (Truzzi 34). This raised the scorn of other ethnic groups, such as the Portuguese and the Italians, and prompted their spreading an orientalising image of the Arabs with the goal to increase the suspicion of the general population and hinder the economic success of the former (36). Still, the community grew both economically and socially, selling to untouched markets, catering as peddlers to rural labourers, and setting up shops in small towns (22, 31).

One of the tools used to spread the orientalising image of those immigrants was language. The denomination of the Lebanese as “Turks” was, and still is, orientalising. It has emphasized a connection of the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants with the Ottoman Empire, implying that they followed the Islamic faith and customs (even though their majority was Christian), thus ultimately distancing the Arabs from the traditionally South-West European-based faith and customs of the Brazilian white elite (Moya xv). Furthermore, the economic success of the Syrian-Lebanese community in business raised suspicion and resentment of the local population and government (Moya xvii). Compared to European immigrants, the Syrian-Lebanese tended to

be more endogamous. In Brazil it was widely believed that they would not assimilate to Brazilian society, something that did not prove itself to be true with time: assimilation is a non-linear process, involving many variables, but as a whole we can claim the Syrian-Lebanese community was assimilated to Brazilian society even though families still cultivate some traditional cultural expressions such as eating habits (Moya xvii-xviii). At the same time, the integration of the Syrian-Lebanese to Brazilian society, and with time, the decrease of discrimination against immigrant communities, played a part in the exclusion of populations of colour such as the Indigenous and Afro-Brazilians on other grounds. According to Moya, "[t]he greater acceptance and even celebration of immigrants and their descendants coincided with an intensified tendency to associate people of color with poverty, social pathologies, and violence" (xvi). This constant distancing between immigrant communities of marginalized racialized groups contributed to making Lebanese descendants in Brazil self-identifying as white, even though at first they were not recognized as such and micro-aggressions related to ethnic origin are not uncommon even today. Examples include perceiving women of Arab origin as being passive and subservient; men of Arab origin or Arab "appearance" (with characteristic physical features, such as nose of a certain shape, dark beard and thick eyebrows, for example) as being terrorists; or Arabs in general as being greedy. Even though most of these aggressions usually appear as harmless jokes, they are rooted in preconceived notions of race that date back to the arrival of the first immigrants. Violent attacks against recent Syrian immigrants in Brazil are also not unheard of, for example the xenophobic assault against the Syrian sfiha salesman Mohamed Ali in Rio de Janeiro in 2017 (Viana),[7] although such events are progressively unlikely to occur with the

[7] Mohammed Ali Kenawy was a Syrian refugee living in Brazil for 3 years at the time of the incident. He earned money selling sfihas (an Arab dish made like a small pizza which became a very popular street food in Brazil since the arrival of the first Syrian-Lebanese immigrants) at a stand in a street of Rio de Janeiro. In 2017, he was verbally assaulted by a man armed with wooden bats, who broke his cart and merchandise and told him to "get out of (his)

descendants of immigrants born in the country.

From the second generation on, most Lebanese and Syrian families were able to invest in their children's education, which today translates into a high number of Syrian and Lebanese descendants in liberal professions, such as lawyers, doctors, and engineers (Truzzi 67). Starting in the 1950s, the educated socially ascendant children and grandchildren of Lebanese immigrants developed a stronger presence in Brazilian politics, and today they can be found across the entire political spectrum. Some of the most notorious Brazilian politicians of Lebanese origin are Paulo Maluf, Michel Temer, Fernando Haddad, and Guilherme Boulos.[8]

Because of insufficient data collected through the Brazilian census, it is difficult to specify how many Syrian and Lebanese descendants live in Brazil today. As previously mentioned, the Brazilian census only recognized five racial categories, mostly related to skin colour. However, surveys conducted by IBGE (the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, the governmental branch tasked with conducting the census) between 1998 and 2008 indicate that about 0.5% of the general population claimed some sort of Middle Eastern ancestry (Moya xiv). While this may not appear as a high number in percentage, it represents over one million people (in 2019, the population of Brazil amounted to 209.5 million).

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country," claiming that he saw the country as "invaded by bomb-men." Kenawy chose not to press charges against the man, and therefore the police did not formally investigate the incident. The assault was recorded on video by witnesses and went viral online, and despite the initial violence, local people mobilized to show solidarity and help Kenawy expand his business. In September 2017, two months after the incident, Kenawy was awarded honorary citizenship of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

[8] Paulo Maluf (born in 1931) is considered to be the first politician of Lebanese origin to reach widespread recognition in Brazilian society. Known for his populist and conservative policies, he most notably worked as São Paulo state governor from 1979 to 1982. Michel Temer (born in 1940) is the first Brazilian politician of Lebanese origin to have held the position of president, although not through direct elections: he became president following Rousseff's impeachment, between 2016 and 2018. Fernando Haddad (born in 1963) is a well-known left-wing politician, belonging to the Worker's Party. He acted as minister of education during the Lula administration between 2005 and 2012, mayor of the city of São Paulo between 2013 and 2017, and was a presidential candidate in the 2018 elections. Guilherme Boulos (born in 1982) is a social activist with the Homeless Workers' Movement, currently making his way in politics with the Socialism and Liberty Party. He was also a presidential candidate in the 2018 elections, and had as his running mate for vice-president the Indigenous activist Sônia Guajajara.

2.2 Canada

In contrast to the Brazilian example, so far there have not been any extensive socio-historical studies about the Lebanese diaspora in Canada, but some general information is nevertheless available.

While Brazil received most of its Lebanese immigrants before World War II, the greatest wave of future Lebanese-Canadians arrived in Canada during the second half of the 20th century only (Moya xiv). However, the very start of Lebanese immigration fell within a period when immigrants from many other places were admitted to Canada, at the end of the 19th century. Between 1881 and 1890, Canada allowed entry to a total of 886,177 immigrants, compared to only 342,675 in the previous decade (Abu-Laban 228). The first wave of Syrian-Lebanese immigration to Canada thus occurred between 1881 and 1911; in 1911, there were an estimated 7,000 people of Arab origin living in Canada (229). During the following 40 years, the immigration of people from Arab countries to Canada declined significantly because of restrictive immigration policies. Following the First and Second World Wars and the depression of the 1930s there was a general policy to restrict immigration to all national-ethnic groups, except those coming from Britain and the United States; one other restriction was the 1908 Order-in-Council P.C. 926, that targeted people of Asiatic origin and required they had in their possession $200 upon arrival in Canada,[9] which severely limited the possibility of entry into the

[9] The sum of $200 might not seem like much for today's standards, but we should understand the context and the weight of this value to Asian immigrants at the time. The P.C. 926, which increased the monetary value necessary for Asian immigrants to land in Canada, was used in conjunction with P.C. 920 (which required that immigrants made a continuous journey from their land of birth or citizenship to be allowed entry in Canada) to deliberately make it harder for Asians (including Middle-Eastern, South-Asians and East-Asians) to enter Canada (Wallace 66). As a comparison, P.C. 924 established for European immigrants the possession of 25 dollars in summer and 50 dollars in winter as a condition for entry (Aboud 73). The only data available about inflation of the Canadian currency start in 1914, and according to the inflation calculator of the Bank of Canada's website, 200 Canadian dollars in 1914 correspond to 4,613.56 Canadian dollars in June 2020. According to a letter by Presbyterian missionaries in the town of Zahleh is the early 1890, "[a]n unlettered man goes to America and in the course of six months sends back a check for $300 or $400 more than the salary of a teacher or a preacher for more than two years" (Truzzi 12), which suggests that the price of entry was prohibitive to those without help from family

country (229). Between 1896 and 1914, Asian immigration to Canada was very much discouraged because of fears that this population was "morally degenerative" and did not share "British values" (Kelley and Trebilcock 118). People from the Asian continent were not the only ones to face this kind of discrimination. There was an explicit preference for people originating in the United States and Britain, while Continental Europeans and others were only permitted entry to fill gaps the preferred groups could not fill (116). Immigration from Arabic countries restarted in the 1950s, although Baha Abu-Laban alerts that the data about ethnic groups in the Canadian Census through time are not necessarily comparable because of changes in the definitions of ethnicity over the years (Abu-Laban 230). Even so, the 2016 census estimates that presently there are 523,235 Canadians who identify as Arabs, and 219,555 Canadians specifically of Lebanese origin (*Census Profile*).

The Arab community in Canada has historically favoured urban areas, and Quebec and Ontario are the provinces with the largest concentration of Arab Canadians (Abu-Laban 232). Before the Second World War, the majority of Syrian-Lebanese immigrants to Canada were Christian (232)—mostly Maronite, but also Orthodox, Protestant, and Armenian denominations—, working as peddlers or unskilled workers in the service industry (237), while in the post-war wave of Lebanese immigration, they had a more diverse educational and occupational profile, with an increase of immigrants of non-Christian faith (232). The migration conditions pre-Second World War and the ways those immigrants settled in Canada do not seem too different from those in Brazil, even though we do not have the same amount of information. Just like in Brazil, the Syrian-Lebanese in Canada were also mostly Christian, settled in urban areas, the majority worked as peddlers before setting up a commerce or small business. They also arrived first as single young men to send money back to their villages of origin, and had

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members already in America.

strong ties and loyalties to those who shared the same faith and place of birth.

While at first the Lebanese immigrants were socially divided by differences that existed in their homeland (as a reflection of the so-called tribal mentality [Adnan and Reider 32]), such as religion or region of origin, at the end of the 20th century those divisions tended to disappear while others took their place, such as "new versus old immigrants, or Lebanese Maronites versus Egyptian Maronites" (Abu-Laban 238). Although religious barriers have decreased, there is still a political divide within the community that is palpable today, which can be transposed to micro-relations of power between those immigrants relating to class and education dynamics, in professional or social contexts, something we also see in Nasrallah's novel.

According to the analysis made with data from the 1991 census, in 1990 and 1991, 6% of all immigrants arriving in Canada were Lebanese (Profiles Lebanon 1), and people born in Lebanon made up 0.2% of the Canadian population at the time (3). Immigrants from Lebanon where more likely to have a university degree (6), were less probable to be employed, and those who were, were less expected to have full-time year-long jobs, although they were more likely to be self-employed (7) following the trend of the first Lebanese immigrants back in the 19th century. Among those who were employed, 41% of Lebanese men and 64% of Lebanese women in Canada worked in clerical, sales, and service occupations (7). Over the years these numbers have changed a little, although we do not have data specific to the Lebanese. According to data from the 2016 census, 61.2% of the self-declared Arabs in Canada over 15 years of age held at least one postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree, with 53% of them having acquired it outside Canada; the unemployment rate was of 13.5%; and among those with a job, the area of sales and service was the biggest sector of employment, with 26.6% of Arab workers (*Data Tables*).

Compared to Brazil, the bulk of Arab migration in Canada is still very recent. According to data from the 2016 census, most of the self-proclaimed Arabs in Canada are first generation immigrants (381,900 out of the 523,235 total; compared to 137,470 second generation, and 3,865 third etc. generation). This proportion is similar to the total visible minority population and different from the "white" population (whose members among the first or second generations were more numerous and accordingly, so are their descendants into the third, fourth etc. generations). Therefore, it is easier to assess the impact and developments of Lebanese migration in Brazil than in Canada, because the latter community is still developing. The Lebanese community in Brazil has a higher social and economic status, and is identified as white; while the Lebanese community in Canada overall still occupies a lower social and economic status compared to the total population. We can observe these differences in the social reality of Lebanese immigrants in the two novels under scrutiny as well.

3. *Tale of a Certain Orient* by Milton Hatoum

In this chapter, I analyse the novel written by Milton Hatoum, *Tale of a Certain Orient.* The story is set in the city of Manaus, in the North of Brazil, in the Amazon region. In it, an unnamed woman (who is also one of the narrators), adopted and raised by a Lebanese family, writes a letter to her brother, who now lives in Spain, recounting the memories of family members and friends about the group that took them in as infants, as she returns to Manaus in hopes of seeing her Lebanese adoptive mother, Emilie, one last time after hearing about her failing health. In search for her own roots and identity, the female narrator transcribes conversations she had with her "uncle"/adoptive brother Hakim and the family friend Hindié, in the event of the death of her adoptive mother (sometimes referred to as grandmother as well, given the strange position of the orphan girl in the family with respect to age). The stories are told in a non-linear stream of consciousness form, going back and forth in time, connecting events more by theme than by chronological order. The book is divided into nine chapters, each telling the story of a different character through words that the unnamed female narrator transcribes in a letter to her brother. While the Brazilian edition used for this paper does not have any titles for the chapters and leaves the reader to deduce the identity of the various storytellers through context clues, the English translation introduces most chapter titles with the identification of each storyteller by their names or designations: "The Return (A Woman Speaks[10])" (i.e. Emilie's adoptive daughter who writes to her brother); "Hakim" (Emilie's first born son); "Dorner" (a German immigrant friends with the family); "The Father's Story" (Emilie's husband); "Dorner"; "Hakim"; "The Return"; "Hindé" (Emilie's best friend and

[10] English grammar, unlike Portuguese, has virtually no category of gender. While for a Portuguese reader, the gender of the narrator is made obvious by the gendered forms of verbs and adjectives used in the first paragraph of the first chapter, the English translation makes this evident through the use of the respective chapter titles.

confidante, also Lebanese); and "Epilogue" (narrated again by Emilie's unnamed adoptive daughter). Other important characters in the novel that will be featured in this analysis are Samara Délia (Emilie's daughter), Soraya Ângela (Samara's deaf illegitimate daughter, who dies at a young age), Emilie's two unnamed younger sons, Anastácia Socorro (the family's Indigenous domestic servant), and Lobato (an Indigenous healer and Anastácia's uncle).

Like the majority of the Lebanese immigrants in Brazil, the focus-character of the novel, Emilie, arrives in the country from Tripoli in the early 20th century, following her parents, who had emigrated seven years beforehand. Since Emilie dies before the unnamed female narrator can reach her, all the stories about her are told by this very same narrator (who was, with her brother, informally adopted and raised by Emilie's family), Hakim (Emilie's eldest son) and Hindié Conceição (Emilie's best friend), with some second-hand narration from Dorner (the German immigrant friend of the family who told his story to Hakim), and Emilie's unnamed husband (who told his story to Dorner). Thus the novel offers an intricate narrative structure with stories told and retold by various narrators yet ultimately held together by the main unnamed female narrator.

The structure of the novel reminds the reader that of *A Thousand and One Nights*, the collection of Arab and Persian folk tales compiled and spread around Asia and Northern Africa in different languages as early as the 8th century, that were widely adapted and translated by Europeans since the 18th century (the most famous version being the one published in French by Antoine Galland in 1704). One story is told inside another story, and the narrators shift from one tale to the next, and back to the first one. The unnamed woman tells her brother what she heard from Hakim; he again heard that story from Dorner, and Dorner heard it from Emilie's husband. One example of this structure can be found in the passages from chapter 3 ("Dorner") to chapter

4 (“The Father’s Story”), and from chapter 4 to chapter 5 (“Dorner”):

> … One of these notebooks contains quite an accurate record of what your father told me that afternoon in 1929.
>
> The Father’s Story
>
> My trip ended in a place it would be an exaggeration to call a city. (Hatoum 81-2)
>
> … Emilie was an only daughter, and from all I heard about her I couldn’t help falling in love.
>
> Dorner
>
> That was how your father described his arrival in Brazil one afternoon when I searched him out and got him talking. (Hatoum 89-90)

In these passages we can see how one character introduces the topic of the next chapter, as if they were reciting word by word what they heard from the other person, to later return and pick up from where they left off to comment on the tale and expand on the theme. Similarly, what connects the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights* and allows their frame narrator, Sheherazade to continue to tell stories without a break is how the characters in one story begin to recount a new tale to the other characters, and so forth. Hatoum’s choice to emulate the structure of the *Nights* (on a smaller scale) is a way to allude to his own origins and generate a type of authenticity. [11] This can be interpreted as a self-orientalising technique, but perhaps an unconscious one. Self-orientalisation happens when an individual or a group makes use of Orientalist stereotypes to describe themselves. Usually this happens because they are surrounded

[11] The connection between storytelling and life (or living) is also a reference by Hatoum to *A Thousand and One Nights*. Like Sheherazade who escapes death by telling stories, the unnamed woman in *Tale of a Certain Orient* narrates or seeks stories to make sense of her own existence and her own life. Her brother’s words, she remembers, “[l]ife truly begins with memory” (17), and the tales she gathers from Hakim, Dorner, and Hindié are her attempt to unravel those memories to make sense of them. João Pereira Loureiro Junior and Carlos Henrique Lopes de Almeida wrote a more in-depth study of this comparison in their article “Narrar Para (Sobre)viver: Os Homens-Narrativas de Milton Hatoum.”

by Occidental narratives and inserted in a Occidental mode of thinking, leaving as their only identity referential Orientalist literature. For centuries, the only literary texts available in Brazil about the Levant came from Western Europe. Thus the first version of the *Nights* translated directly from Arabic into Portuguese in Brazil was published in 2007, almost two decades after the original publication of *Tale of a Certain Orient*; before that the most popular version of the *Nights* was the one translated from Galland's French translation—so it would be fair to say that Hatoum's own education followed this Orientalist frame (Birman 253). Hatoum's representation of the Lebanese came from the experiences of his own family, on the one hand; and on the other, from Orientalist literature. Tonus (145) relates the connection in Hatoum's novel to the *Nights* as an exotic effect not on the level of the novel's structure, but rather through sexualisation based on the image of Emilie, who becomes representative of an erotic Orient. Although Tonus does not use the term "Orientalism" as such, this eroticism can be understood as orientalising, as Said (167) includes sexuality as one factor used in orientalising representations. That being said, I do not consider Emilie's sexuality (or that of other Lebanese characters in the novel) as any different or more "exotic" than that of other characters, although there is a strong emphasis on *sensuality*, relating to all senses, especially smells. This enhanced sensuality, in my view, is also not really orientalising but rather an expression of the search and retelling of memories, regardless of origin, which is a big theme in Hatoum's oeuvre.

The title of the novel also alludes to the *Nights*: the word "tale" used in the English title is not necessarily the direct translation of the Portuguese word "*relato*" (which would be closer to "account", as in what a witness can tell), but it is also not an incorrect translation, nor one that changes the meaning too much. "Orient", on the other hand, is present in both the original and in the translation convening the same meaning. It is, however, "a certain orient" and not "The

Orient", alluding to the fact that whatever "Orient" is being portrayed by the characters' memories, it is one very particular to those people and their experiences, and not one, objective Orient, reduced to simple concepts, typical of Orientalist works.

The orientalisation process emerged as a relation of power between the Western-European rulers and the colonies in the East. A new dynamic of authority arose through general ideas about the Orient. These notions, created and spread by Westerners to Westerners (and imported to colonies and ex-colonies outside the Orient, like Latin America) generated images of the Orient in the Arts and Academia both with a look of superiority—as a land and people inherently corrupt in need of Western intervention—and exotic curiosity—as a cultural object waiting to be consumed by the Western elites. Galland's version of *A Thousand and One Nights* belongs to the latter type: he extracted tales belonging to many different "Oriental" peoples, changed and rewrote them so they could be more attractive to European audience (enhancing what was considered awe-inspiring and excluding what was offensive to French morals of his time), and surrounded it with an air of authority.

In *Tale of a Certain Orient*, the echo of *A Thousand and One Nights* is also noted by the characters. Dorner comments that he read the book "in Henning's translation"[12] after Emilie's husband mentions it (Hatoum 93). At the same time as the traditional tales are appropriated by the Arab characters (and the author who is of Arabic descent), they are also used as a means of orientalising by characters of European origin. Although well-meaning overall, throughout the novel Dorner cannot escape his German[13] roots, treating the Amazon through the exoticising lens

[12] Max Henning's translation to German was published between 1895 and 1897, in 24 volumes. He based his edition on the Arab stories found in the Cairo canon, and in the English version created by Richard Francis Burton and first published from 1885 to 1888.

[13] The character of Dorner is modeled after other German explorers who had been traveling through South America since the 16th century, recording (in writing and pictures) and analysing the social and natural aspects of the region. Some of the most noteworthy German explorers who traveled through South America were Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), Georg von Langsdorff (1774-1852), and Hans Staden (1525-1576). Dorner is described as

of a European explorer and the Lebanese people as Orientals, while displaying a sense of moral and scientific superiority to the local population. Even though Dorner is a foreigner himself, he is hardly treated as exotic, but rather as somewhat "eccentric" given his personality, not his origin. The only time there is an overt sense of otherness regarding him is when he describes the period of hardships the German community suffered in Manaus during the Second World War. In the case of the *Nights*, Dorner notes that there were some similarities in what he read in the book and the tales he heard from Emilie's husband. Dorner takes it to mean that Emilie's husband was embellishing his life with fiction (94), although the reader cannot find any evidence that Emilie's husband was actually lying about any aspects of his life story at any point. Dorner thus projects his need to see the life of Emilie's husband as exotic and to perceive it through an orientalising lens.

In fact, the descriptions of how Emilie's husband arrived in Brazil are not that different from historical accounts. His uncle Hanna had migrated to the Americas at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, and in 1914 he sent a letter to the family saying that he is ready to take in another family member. The family chose the nephew (who later would become Emilie's husband) as the one how should follow the uncle and make a living at the other side of the world (Hatoum 83). Emilie's arrival in the country is described as a little more unusual: her parents immigrated together in 1917, and in 1924 Emilie and her brothers, who had stayed behind with some unnamed relatives, followed them (31, 59). From this configuration, it seems that unlike other immigrants (who undertook the long and at the time still not undangerous journey alone to make enough money to eventually return to Lebanon), Emilie's parents migrated with the

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having a deep connection to Brazil, choosing to live in Manaus rather than returning to Europe, and speaking Portuguese just like a native. He makes constant expeditions to the innings of the Amazon forest, being guided by and learning from Indigenous people, and recording his botanical and social analysis in photographs. Although exploring and researching is his passion, he makes money taking portraits and teaching German in Manaus.

intention to make Brazil their permanent home. This explains why Emilie and her brother's views on work and success in Brazil will ultimately differ from those of her husband. Still during the first chapter, a story about a clock Emilie took no measures to acquire leads to a discussion with her husband, where he says that if she kept the negotiations going, they would have to "be back on a boat to Lebanon empty-handed," to which Emilie replies that she would much rather return to Lebanon poor than be rich in Brazil (22). This is a reflection on how both of them came to be in Manaus and on the different expectations thrust upon them with their journey. The husband was sent specifically to work, make money, and send the money back to his family in the south of Lebanon, while Emilie was uprooted against her will and expected to follow her Lebanese Christian values, which at times were at odds with the traditions of the locals in Manaus (both European and Indigenous). Although she adapted well to the Catholic faith practiced in Manaus and attended the same church as most inhabitants of the city, religion alone is not enough to mitigate the cultural differences between Lebanon and the Amazon, even if both of those regions experienced a history of colonization by Catholic Western-European powers.

Emilie's brother, Emir, also seems to fail the expectations of a Lebanese immigrant in the Americas. According to Dorner, "he simply did not posses the rage and determination of those who arrived young and poor and utterly dedicated to the idea of having an empire to show for themselves by the end of their tormented lives" (Hatoum 70). Emir, unlike other men in the community, does not work in commerce or as a peddler, he does not make any effort to accumulate money, and does not even bother to learn Portuguese so that he could communicate with the locals. In fact, he spends most of his time thinking about his lost love affair in Marseille.[14] His and Emilie's stay in the French city is covered in mystery and all that is known

[14] Marseille, due to its strategic position in the Mediterranean, was an important port of connection between Europe and the Americas, for many different peoples in different times. During the Second World War, European refugees

is what Hakim could piece together while reading his mother's personal letters (99). During their stop in the port Emir seems to have fallen in love with a woman (the only descriptions of her are from Emilie's point of view, calling her a "loose woman") and he tries to run away with her; he is found trying to take a train to an unspecified place in Europe (100). It is Emilie who foils his plans by alerting the local police, mirroring an episode that happened years earlier, when their parents first left for America. In it, Emilie runs away to a convent in the mountain village of Ebrin, hoping to become a nun and prevent her departure from Lebanon one day. Emir finds her in her hiding place and forces her to come back home with him by threatening suicide (31-32). Like Emilie, Emir stays in Manaus unwillingly and grudgingly. However, unlike her, who eventually accepts her new life, adapts to Brazil and inserts herself into her new community, Emir is incapable of all this and, sadly, he ends his young life by committing suicide through drowning in the Rio Negro.

In the novel, Emilie's family are not the only Syrian-Lebanese in Manaus. Hatoum describes the many dinners the family would host with traditional Lebanese cuisine and music, mixed in with typical Amazonian fruits and fish (64). The unnamed narrator recalls "a wall of women exuding scents as strange as their names: Mentaha, Hindié, Yasmine" (19) from her childhood,[15] and Hakim notes that occasionally other neighbours would drop by, including Dorner, the Portuguese family of Américo, and the Benemous, a Jewish Moroccan family (65).

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would depart to America from the port of Marseille. For the Lebanese, it was the first port of triage, where those who did not have the resources to continue to America would then be directed to West-Africa (Hourani 7).

[15] Although the unnamed narrator was raised by the Lebanese family, she does not seem to have the same familiarity with Lebanese culture as does Hakim, Emilie's biological son, as noted in this passage. The woman considers the smells and Arab names unusual to her, or at least reproduces what she heard from other people. This ambiguous position of the narrator as a hybrid, a result of the mixture of many different cultures, not quite belonging to any of them, as an outsider searching for their own identity, is a recurrent feature in Hatoum's novels. Garcia (32) describes these hybrid characters as "bastards" and associates them with a deeper symbolism of the Brazilian identity, while Birman (252) refers to them as "*fronteiriços*" (those from the frontiers or borders). The unnamed narrator is a mystery to the readers, not only for her lack of name but also lack of origins. Her biological mother is vaguely mentioned, enough for the reader to know the biological mother had enough money to travel to Europe from Brazil (Hatoum 201), making it very unlikely that she was one of the Black or Indigenous servants who passed through Emilie's house. The narrator's biological father is never mentioned.

This suggests the high status of the family within the Lebanese community of Manaus, given the regularity of the parties and dinners held in their home and the abundance of food served, according to the Lebanese values of giving and reciprocity. The issue of food specifically is one of extreme relevance. One mark of cultural hybridity can be found in food habits that mix the cuisine of different places, in this case, the cuisine of the country of origin and the one of the host country. According to Truzzi (125), food is one of the most significant marks of the Lebanese community in Brazil, being maintained for generations even after the language was lost. Although an important part of the Lebanese identity in Brazil, maintaining a strictly Arab diet is not practical abroad where the ingredients cannot be found easily; therefore hybridity in food and the constant negotiation of dishes that are adapted, adopted, or abandoned, are an important part of the immigrant experience.

Although loyalty to the family seems important throughout the whole narrative, it is not the same kind of regional loyalty (described by Truzzi) expressed through religion and village or region of origin, within a tribal structure, which dictated social relationships abroad, including those regarding marriage and work relations. Emilie's marriage, for example, is an interfaith relationship: she is a devout Catholic, while her husband is a practicing Muslim. As mentioned, they are both from Lebanon; they meet in Manaus through contact with other members of the community. According to the chapter "The Father's Story," the future husband had heard about Emilie from other members of the Levantine community in Manaus, who congregated in the same neighbourhood near the port, and she seemed to be the most desirable bride for the men of the community (88). It is not hard to imagine that in such a tight-knit community, they would have met through mutual friends; they saw each other for the first time when the father went to Emilie's home to offer his condolences after Emir' body was found in the river (77). Regarding

their difference in religious affiliation, Dorner describes the agreement made for their marriage, in which each would keep their own faith without interference from the other, and the children would be able to choose which religion they would like to follow (79). They managed to maintain this arrangement without further issues, aside from one episode, triggered by the slaughter of a chicken in a manner that the Muslim husband considered barbaric and offensive, which resulted in him destroying Catholic religious images in the house and hiding, out of spite, the statues of saints that were important to Emilie. In turn, Emilie hid his holy book during Ramadan, which seems to be the last incident of clash between the spouses in matters of religion (35).

As mentioned, there are a few unnamed characters in the novel, including the female narrator, but the most striking example is that of Emilie's two youngest sons, who are deliberately unnamed because of the perceived shame they caused the family, according to other characters. The choice not to name the brothers in significant. Unlike the other unnamed characters (i.e. their father and the female narrator, both of whom have distinct personalities and importance), it has the effect of joining the two brothers into one amorphous character. They are always mentioned together, mirroring each other. Hakim, Emilie's eldest son, always refers to his younger brothers as being unusually cruel toward both the domestic workers and their sister Samara. Towards Samara, this behaviour manifests mostly in verbal harassment regarding both her and her illegitimate daughter Soraya. Samara had a child out of wedlock while she was still a teenager, and the little girl, Soraya, born deaf, was kept somewhat isolated and hidden in the house until Soraya's premature death in an accident—she falls off a tree while playing with the unnamed female narrator, who was also only about eight years old at the time. The brothers stopped short of physical violence for fear of being cut off from the family money by their

parents. When Soraya dies, the brothers buy the most expensive crown of flowers for her little head, which Samara interprets as a cynical act as they always showed but disdain for their little niece while she was alive (7-8). Once their father passed away, they "sent Samara threatening letters, they telephoned in the middle of the night to call her dirty names, and once they paid a couple of kids to throw stones at her bedroom window" (179). In the case of the domestic workers, the violence was also verbal, with the aggravating factor that those women did not have Emilie's protection on their side. In addition, it is strongly implied that the two brothers even perpetrated sexual violence and rape against the younger female workers. The fact that the unnamed brothers are two characters instead of one serves as an example that racism and bigotry are not perpetuated in Brazil by only a few individuals, but rather by entire groups of people, united in privilege; the brothers thus become a reflection of Brazilian society.

It is Hindié, Emilie's best friend, who explains the falling out between the two brothers and their father. While the younger brothers despised Samara for getting pregnant and resented the presence of their illegitimate niece, the father stood by his daughter and forgave her on the basis of religious scriptures. It was Hakim, the only child of the couple who could read and understand Arabic, after Emilie devoted herself to teaching him, who, at his father's request, read and translated the sura on women in the Koran for his brothers (177). In his words, the sura states that "a woman who has fallen into sinfulness may repent by meditating alone in a room closed to the light of the sun and to all other eyes for five days and five nights" (178), and although there is no definite evidence that any of the children followed either parent's religion, Samara is remembered by a witness as having spent most of her pregnancy and first year of Soraya's life isolated from the family inside her room as well as attending prayers with her mother in hopes of curing her daughter's disability. The father held Samara in such high esteem that he bequeathed

the family's store to her. Emilie begged her two younger sons to keep the family peace by not mistreating Samara, but she usually took their side or was permissive on other occasions. For example, when a former female worker came to the house pointing at one of the younger brothers as the presumed father of her child, the father reacted with rage against his son for not following the teachings of Islam and acting solely on instincts. In stark contrast, Emilie took the side of her son against the woman, with the following words: "Do you think those half-breeds look to the sky and think of God? They're just a bunch of hussies that'll go off into the woods with anyone who comes along and then come here begging milk and spare change" (103-104). These insults have many layers of meaning. "Half-breeds" was the translator's choice for "caboclas" in the original, which defines people of a mixed white and Indigenous ancestry. Here, Emilie reproduces two very important racist ideas: 1) that the mixing of races produces (morally and physically) degenerate individuals, and 2) that the Indigenous are godless people, not compatible with Christian traditions. Emilie thus sides with the white elite, looking down at Indigenous and mixed-race populations for their alleged lack of morals, including sexual deviation, while overlooking or simply ignoring the same faults in her own children.

The racist treatment of the native workers by the two brothers can thus be seen as a learned behaviour inherited from their mother Emilie. Hakim even mentions these racist and discriminatory sentiments in his family as one of the reasons for leaving for the South (104). As he explains, the maids were forbidden from eating the same food as the family, and were hardly ever paid. Although many women and children are mentioned passing by the house and doing some odd jobs, the most important worker in Emilie's house is Anastácia Socorro, an Indigenous woman born in a village in the Amazon. Even with the prohibition on certain foods, Anastácia would defy the orders and secretly taste the fruits and sweets of the house. As Hakim

remembers:

> The servants were forbidden to eat these special fruits and delicacies. Whenever I was around to witness Emilie catch Anastácia hurriedly swallowing a date, pit and all, or other treats, I'd intercede and insist that I'd offered her the last date from a box I'd just polished off. Not only did this protect the guilty part from reproach, punishment, or threat, but the very thought that a son of hers would devour immense quantities of food made Emilie delirious with pleasure, as if the concept of happiness were very closely related to the act of endlessly chewing and swallowing. (105)

This passage is especially meaningful for two reasons. Firstly, the food and its abundance stand as a symbol of status and power both for the family within the community and within the household itself. Anastácia is very well aware of these power dynamics. Therefore her eating what is forbidden becomes a performance for herself. As the person living in a subordinate position, she does not need an audience for this act of transgressing the boundaries of what is allowed and what is not. She is perfectly happy to overstep the line that separates the servant from the master, and often out of sight of her mistress; she even goes as far as tasting foods she does not even like, such as the muscatel grapes (105). Secondly, Emilie is willing to accept the explanation and be perfectly happy with the thought of Hakim "allowing" Anastácia to eat what was once his. If food were as valuable as the scene makes us believe, Emilie could have reprehended Hakim for breaking the rules and offering sweets to Anastácia, but that is not what happens. On the contrary, this perceived offering of food to a lower-status person is seen as an admirable attitude. This is congruent with the practice of giving: the more you give, the more power you have in relation to those who receive. Emilie herself performs great acts of charity

every year on the anniversary of her brother's death, and Hakim remembers those days as being of such grandeur that it seemed the charity was organized more for Emilie's sake than for those she was helping, given the flamboyant clothes she wore (119-120), the rich presents she received (120-1), and the number of people and amount of food she mobilized (119), to the point that her husband made sarcastic remarks about the "Christian charity" (122). Dorner also observed the role of food as a means of oppression: "'A strange kind of slavery prevails here,' he said. 'Humiliation and threats are the lash; food and the illusion of integration in the boss's family are the chains and iron collar'" (104).[16] The food is coupled with the "illusion of integration in the boss's family," and this power relation is also displayed in the relationship between Emilie and Anastácia. After hearing that Anastácia is related to the Indigenous healer Lobato, whom Emilie admires, the matriarch starts treating the maid much better, but this is also merely an illusion and the power dynamics continue the same. Although for a while Anastácia is allowed to sit at the table with the family and eat the same foods, the arrangement is short-lived because of the disapproval of Emilie's two unnamed sons, and soon Anastácia is kept away from the family once more (115-6).

On the surface, Emilie and Anastácia seem to share a relationship of confidants, and they often spend their days together, cooking, sewing, tending to the garden, and sharing stories about their very different places of birth (108). Emilie was born in the port city of Tripoli, and the only place she knew since she arrived in Brazil was Manaus (with brief stays in Recife). It is not specified where exactly Anastácia was born or grew up, but it is mentioned that when Emilie decided to live by herself after all her children left home and her husband died, Anastácia

[16] Slavery had already been abolished by the time Emilie arrives in Brazil, so here Dorner is not talking about the institution of slavery, but about its effects in Brazilian society, still very much present since the recent abolition in 1888. One way to maintain the social order and power structures in the slave society was to give some privileges to a few enslaved people in the form of lighter domestic or supervision work, or small plots of land, with the goal to keep their "loyalty" and diminish rebellions.

"returned to the interior" (169). Throughout the novel, there are constant comparisons of the Brazilian North and Lebanon, with their dependency and affinity for ports (one on the river, the other at the Mediterranean Sea), the smells of fruits and spices native to each land, and the religiousness and mysticism present in the mysteries held in the interior, away from the big cities. In Lebanon, these include the ruins of Baalbek and the convents and sanctuaries in the mountains; in Manaus, in the Amazon forest and all the life it harbours, from the miraculous plants to the natives who could navigate its mysteries. These parallels seem to suggest a kinship between the two women; at the same time, while Emilie seems delighted to hear Anastácia's stories, and depends on her knowledge to grow native trees in her garden, Hakim notes that Anastácia seemed to just tell stories so she could rest and take a break from the hard work (109). The two women could never treat each other as equals even if there could be an illusion of mutual respect between them, because Emilie would always be the boss and Anastácia the employee, a dynamic that sometimes escaped Emilie but that Anastácia could never ignore in her state of constant exploitation. Being subject to strenuous work and experiencing open disdain of the boss's sons, even when Emilie treated her as a friend, Anastácia was always aware of her position and worked within it to keep her life as comfortable as possible. Class struggle between workers and capitalists is the basis of Marxist theory, as labour exploitation is necessary to the maintenance of the capitalist system.

Beside the house where they live, the family owns the store The Parisian, acquired from a French businessman. Before settling in Manaus, Emilie's husband worked as a peddler in the rural areas of the state of Amazonas, traveling up and down the river. After he made enough money, he stopped peddling and acquired the store, which he ran until he passed away. In a patriarchal family structure it is usually the son or one of the sons who inherits the business after

the death or retirement of the father, but in this case, it is the only daughter, Samara, who will take over the store. Maybe as a form of protection from her abusive brothers, she was the only one to assist the father in the business, building a relationship with the customers in the store and attending to the inventory. Later, following the death of her little daughter, she permanently moves to a room in the building where the store is located. In a reversal of Arab stereotyping, Samara becomes the main heir to the family business, as Hakim moves south to attend university and never returns, and the two younger brothers are cast aside as they are not interested nor seen fit by their father to take on the responsibility. She has so much success in her work that Emilie claims Samara earned more money in five years than her father had made in fifty (183). The stereotype that the Arabs are much more misogynistic prevails in the Brazilian collective consciousness, even though Brazil, much like Portugal and other traditionally Catholic societies, was (and still is) a patriarchal society, where women are often marginalized in economic power. Still, Brazilian society likes to think of itself as following the European ideals of liberty while perpetuating traditional conservative ideas at the same time.[17]

Although Samara, as mentioned above, had a child as a teenager and never married, the father seemed more connected to her than to his male children, constantly praising her, which he would not do for his sons. The work and success in commerce gave the family a comfortable position as urban middle class, even though they were not land or big business owners who tended to be at the top of Manaura society. This allowed them to exploit the labour of the lower classes, usually made up of members of the Black and Indigenous populations, in their own home, while applying their own work at the store.

[17] It is not unusual to hear common statements regarding Arabs to discount demands of Brazilian feminists such as "the Brazilian feminists shouldn't complain, Arab women are the ones who are truly oppressed," or "if feminists think this is bad they should go to an Arab country." While not discounting sexism and misogyny in Arab countries, we have to keep in mind that Brazilian society still has a long way to go regarding true gender equality.

This treatment of Black and Indigenous people positions the Lebanese family as part of the capitalist class in Manaus, one that exploits the labour of the lower classes. Nevertheless, this does not save them from being othered at times and regarded as lesser by people of European descent who form the local elite, especially when Emilie would show sympathy for Indigenous practices. The case of her relationship with the healer Lobato is telling. Having a distrust for Western medical practices, Emilie suggests that the diabetic Portuguese neighbour should consult the Indigenous healer. This enrages the local medical doctor (whose name, Dr. Rayol, denotes an European origin, possibly Portuguese, French or even German): "'It's just like a nomad immigrant to rely on the quackery of a witch doctor like that,' he proclaimed to his patients. 'If this kind of thing spreads, before long people will believe fiddlewood tea can cure cancer'" (113).[18] The insult is directed specifically at Emilie ("nomad immigrant"), not at the Portuguese man who follows her advice. Although both Emilie and the Portuguese man believed equally in the possibility that the Indigenous healer could help where Western medicine had failed, only one of them was targeted with stereotyping. We should note that to impose his authority over Emilie's, the doctor makes use of the Orientalist stereotype of the nomad from the desert, "primitive" and uneducated (just like the local Indigenous population), although Emilie was neither a nomad nor uneducated, and had been raised in the cities of Tripoli and Beirut, seemed to be fluent in French and already knew how to read and write before attending formal school. At one time she even sought a convent for religious ordaining as a way to escape forced migration, and continued to correspond with the vice-superior in matters of theology. Friends of the family as well, like Dorner, would occasionally orientalise other members of Emilie's family as exotic. Although it is done with a certain admiration, it stills resonates with a hint of

[18] Not all doctors in Manaus feel as threatened by the practice of traditional Indigenous medicine, though. One Doctor Dorado relies on some of the substances and ingredients Lobato used in his practice—but was only convinced of their effectiveness after studying tropical medicine in London (Hatoum 112).

stereotyping. About Emir, Emilie's brother, Dorner said:

> He spoke in a kind of gibberish; I always felt as if I were listening to a North African storyteller, someone with an incredible gift for convincing people with his voice, rather than his words, since much of what he said was incomprehensible. (69)

Dorner's association of a Lebanese immigrant with the stereotypical image of a North African storyteller is not unlike the doctor's comment about the nomad. Both images are associated with the same geographic region and thought in a highly orientalised and stereotypical manner. Dorner's distance from Emir is made even greater by the fact that Dorner could not understand most of what Emir was saying because of Emir's poor fluency in the Portuguese language: he probably attempted to communicate only in Arabic, or with some heavy accented Portuguese. As a result, Dorner imagined it was some exotic story that would fuel his imagination, and not (most likely) an account of daily problems and issues, which could have led to his suicide. More than that, the very fact that Dorner describes what Emir said as "gibberish" demonstrates that he did not make any real effort to understand what Emir was trying to say nor did he attempt to reach out to him as a true friend would have done.

While Dorner may have had good intentions and had a certain level of admiration for Emir, Emilie, and their family, they ultimately remain orientalised strangers to him. The novel *Tale of a Certain Orient* positions the Lebanese immigrants in Brazil as in-betweeners in the society of Manaus, both in terms of labour and in terms of race. As we can see, the family's position as small business owners and their fair skin gave them all the privileges in relation to the local Indigenous and Black populations who were of a lower class and considered of a lower race. The Lebanese family could exploit the labour of Indigenous people in their home,

disregarding their well-being and putting them down as promiscuous or immoral, and using the practice of a so-called charity to essentially reinforce their social position. At the same time, they were often othered and orientalised by the European elite, at worst times being seen as uneducated “nomads,” and at best as exotic creatures that inspired fascination. This demonstrates the two sides of the orientalising process as per Said: the Oriental Other is constructed both as inferior but also as exotic and seductive. In Bhabha’s words, the Other “is at once an object of desire and derision” (96). In the novel, Dorner, although a friend of the family, uses his authority as a European scholar mainly in regards to Brazilian natives and their cultures, braving the wilderness of the forest, but he also extents this authority in an Orientalist approach toward Emilie’s family. Not by coincidence, the Lebanese characters do not tell their own story, and the only person who briefly does so (the father) is left nameless, as if the production of knowledge about those people could only be achieved through the intervention of the Occident, leaving everything else surrounded by the vague aura of myth.

4. *Blackbodying* by Dimitri Nasrallah

In the previous chapter, I analysed the novel *Tale of a Certain Orient*, written by a second generation Lebanese-Brazilian author, about the life of a Lebanese family in the Amazon region in the first half of the 20th century. I was able to show how Orientalists expectations where used and rebutted in the relationship between the Lebanese immigrants and the local European elite, as well as how the Lebanese family featured in the novel benefited of the social structures pertaining to race and labour in relation to the exploitation of local Black and Indigenous peoples. In the present chapter, I will offer a critical reading of the novel *Blackbodying* by Lebanese-born Canadian author Dimitri Nasrallah, about the life of a Lebanese man in Canada in the last decade of the 20th century following the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War. Given the time and space distinctions separating the protagonists of the two narratives, we are expected to see differences in the way the characters relate to their surroundings regarding their environments, especially in relation to work opportunities and social status. As seen in chapter 2, the Lebanese who arrived in Brazil in the early 20th century were able to fill a gap in the social stratification by forming an urban middle class that had until then been undeveloped in the country. By contrast, the Lebanese war refugees who arrived in Canada in the 1980's and 1990's found a society already stratified by an established class structure and had to struggle to integrate into the Canadian labour market.

Blackbodying is divided into two books, "Book One: Fugues of Fatherhood" and "Book Two: A Canadian Fiction." Book Two works as a mise-en-abyme for the frame narrative and is told by the protagonist of Book One; both are narrated in the first person by their respective protagonists. The first one is about a young boy (presumed to be the autobiographical story of

the author) who leaves Lebanon for Greece when he is still a child, and who later grows up in Canada. Each chapter describes an episode in his life, jumping forth a few years at a time, and focusing on his relationship with different people, especially the complicated relation with his parents. The final chapter of Book One reveals that the narrator, now a young adult, is suffering from the emotional stress of having received news of his father's death, and is struggling with finishing the manuscript of a novel which turns out to be Book Two ("A Canadian Fiction"). This second story, more important for my analysis, is a fictional account about a 34 year-old Lebanese war refugee named Sameer, who, having left his wife and two children behind in Beirut, arrives in Canada alone in 1992. Sameer is trying to make a living in Toronto as a taxi driver while waiting for his immigration papers so that his family can eventually join him. The title of the novel refers to the "black body" or "blackbody" concept in physics, a theoretical ideal physical body that absorbs all light, like a black hole, and is a perfect emitter of radiation[19] (Physics LibreTexts). In the chapter "Death of the Author," the one that concludes the first book, before Sameer's story begins, this effect is transposed to the arts. Nasrallah uses it as a metaphor for how artists absorb everything around them and make it about themselves, in a self-centered way (Nasrallah 110). Although the novel only mentions the absorbing quality of the blackbody, it also has an emitting quality that sends back the modified absorbed "radiation." Artists, therefore, also put something back into the world, a modified version of what they absorbed, in a different quality: what they absorbed through observation comes back as feelings expressed in art about themselves and the world around them. The same chapter makes it clear that what follows in Sameer's narrative is fiction, although it was built from real elements of what the author had experienced in his own life. One example is the case of a man with locked-in

[19] Any object that absorbs radiation also emits radiation. The blackbody is an ideal object, used only for theoretical calculations; a perfect absorber and emitter of radiation. Physicists consider that it absorbs all radiation for calculation purposes, even though no actual object would be able to do it (Physics LibreTexts).

syndrome,[20] and the name of the protagonist, Sameer Gerdak.

In the plot of Book Two of the novel, Sameer's superior gives him a device that allows him to listen to random phone calls around Toronto (presumed to be landline calls, although Sameer considers the possibility of being able to hear cell phone calls though the technology was not yet widespread at the time, in the early 1990's). With the pretext to "improve his pronunciation," Sameer starts listening to different unknown people during his breaks from driving the taxi. While he reflects on his life as a refugee and the absence of communication from his wife Najwa and their two sons in Beirut, he comes across a recurrent caller, a man who speaks to a certain woman called Heidi. However, Sameer never hears Heidi's voice. We could consider this one-way communication between the nameless man and the voiceless Heidi a form of mise-en-abyme for Sameer's own one-sided communication with Najwa. It is therefore hardly surprising that Sameer becomes obsessed with this voiceless woman to the point where it starts to affect his health. One night he meets a passenger, John Spier, a mysterious man with no hands who makes him drive aimlessly around the city without a particular destination. Spier is deliberately vague about his identity and past when Sameer questions him. It is implied that he is involved in illegal operations, and that he lost his hands in a dispute over a debt (173). They drive around the city without a fixed destination (Spier commands Sameer to "just drive" and tells him when he is heading in the wrong direction), with the taximeter turned off meaning Sameer can keep the generous pay Spier offered him for his services without informing his employer. Spier stops to meet many women, presumed to be prostitutes, none of whom are

[20] Locked-in syndrome is a rare neurological disorder caused by brain damage that makes the patient completely unable to move any muscle of their body, save for their eyes, even though they are entirely lucid and conscious of their surroundings (NORD). Since the patient is not able to move or produce any sounds, communication is achieved slowly with the help of an interpreter holding up cards for each letter of the alphabet, and the patient can signal by blinking at the letters needed to spell what they want to express, until they can achieve a full sentence. Nasrallah says he took this idea from the story of a man suffering from locked-in syndrome by the name of Alan Pearson to whom he was assigned as a translator (98).

named Heidi. Spier's ethnic origins are not clear, but he is described as "impish-looking," a "thin man with long, oily hair" and "a slow beard coming in to match his prominent and wiry moustache" (171); he often uses the Irish slang "boyo" when talking to the driver. Sameer believes Spier to be the man who spoke to Heidi in the phone calls. When he confronts Spier about it, he suffers a stroke and ends up confined to a hospital bed with locked-in syndrome, unable to speak or move his body, communicating only with his eyes. He is assigned an interpreter to help him communicate, a young Lebanese man who takes interest in his story, and decides to put it to paper, changing what he sees fit to create a compelling narrative. The process of communicating with the interpreter is laborious and slow, as evident in this passage narrated by Sameer:

> All my communications pass through the interpreter, who visits every day. He has with him a little chalkboard, a notebook, and twenty-six flashcards, each bearing a letter of the alphabet. As always we begin with the letter A. If I blink once we move on to the letter B and so on until I eventually blink twice at a particular letter and he writes it down on the little chalkboard. Then we begin again at A. We continue this way until he can discern a word at which point he shows me the chalkboard. If it is correct I blink twice. If that is not the whole word as I imagine it, I blink once and we continue. When we have a sentence, he reads it aloud to me, and I blink once to approve, twice to disapprove. If the sentence is approved, he then transcribes it into the notebook. (Nasrallah 197)

It is by spelling letter by letter that Sameer is able to tell the interpreter his story, about his family in Lebanon, the unanswered letters, his life in Toronto, and Heidi. While this sparks the interpreter's attention and he starts to ask Sameer more questions, it also makes him

impatient when he was supposed to be interpreting, to the point of ignoring Sameer completely and writing down what he believes should be written. In the last paragraph of the novel, Sameer explains the new dynamic and transference of the control over the narrative:

> [The interpreter] goes on about how, in the end, he will take everything I have told him and polish it for effect. Some things, he says, may be added. Others rearranged. Some things even omitted. I will give the story some punch, he says. He has too many ideas of his own. This is not what I'm looking for in an interpreter. (210)

Book Two is narrated entirely in the first person by Sameer, with a few intermittent chapters with the transcribed letters he sent to Najwa and received from the Canadian Government regarding his status. However, when the reader reaches the last chapter, it becomes clear that the interpreter is rewriting Sameer's story to fit his own needs. At this point, we are left to wonder whether what we had read so far were actually Sameer's thoughts, or whether it was the imaginary product of the interpreter's intervention in the story creating a conflict of authenticity. How much of the story is actually real? While in *Tale of a Certain Orient* Dorner is the one who wonders how much of what the Lebanese immigrant man told him may be true (supposing that Emilie's husband imbued his story of migration with fiction), here a Western reader has to come up with the same question. The difference is that in *Blackbodying* it is not the Oriental character who might be lying about himself, but it is the Oriental character's story that is appropriated by a Western (or westernized) writer, committed to the task of making the narrative more appealing and profiting from it. Here, we can see a common Orientalist conception being played out in both novels: the idea that the Orient and the Orientals are incapable of speaking for themselves and require the help of the Occident to have their stories

told (Said 21). Neither Emilie in *Tale* nor Sameer in *Blackbodying* get to tell their own story in their own words; Emilie because she is already dead, and Sameer because he is left completely paralyzed. Instead, their respective narratives are built by people with connections to the Orient, but who are at the same time ultimately local to the place in which the immigrants were newcomers. In the case of Emilie, it is her descendants; in the case of Sameer, it is a Lebanese-born man who was raised and socialized in Canada. Although both come from an Oriental background, they adopt a Western gaze and attitude.

The narrator Sameer describes himself as a highly educated man with two university degrees, who used to be an architect in Beirut but is unable to find a job in an office in Canada (Nasrallah 140). At different times he attributes this difficulty to various factors: being too old (144), although he is still in his 30's; having an accent (131); not having a Canadian diploma (141); and his legal status as a refugee he held during the three years since he arrived in Canada (151). Much of what he expresses are feelings of frustration with what he calls "Canadian fiction" (133)—the idea that outsiders can be easily integrated into Canadian society and be considered for jobs based on their qualifications and merits rather than origin and background.[21] He perceives the condition of the Lebanese around the world as undesirable since the beginning of the civil war in 1975 (162). The only job he is able to find is that of a taxi driver for a Toronto taxi company, and because of his legal status in a limbo, he is told that his pay is lower than that of other drivers with a permanent legal status. Although this practice is discriminatory, refugees and recent immigrants are often not equipped with enough knowledge about their rights nor do they have easy access to resources to fight for them, or fear retaliation if they do. They also often

[21] The title of Book Two carries a double meaning. It is a "Canadian fiction" in the sense that it is a work of fiction written by Nasrallah, but it is also a "Canadian fiction" in the sense that it exposes the lie the immigrants are told that they can achieve a good life in Canada through merit only. This second meaning is further underlined in the title chosen for the last chapter of the novel, when Sameer's complete lack of agency is exposed: "A Canadian Reality."

feel pressured to accept any working conditions because they believe this to be the only way to earn money when nobody else seems to be willing to hire them (Hira-Freisen 39). Sameer mentions that all the drivers are immigrants from different parts of the world (Nasrallah 151), including his Russian supervisor Andrei Bashmakov, who is characterized as having difficulty with the English language even though he had been living in Canada for years (129). Although Sameer is surrounded by other, "older" immigrants, his status is still lower than his colleagues' because of his connection with the war. Sameer describes a class system in Toronto that divides foreigners and Canadian-born people, in which immigrants and refugees work in service jobs, subservient to Canadians.

Although Sameer puts a lot of emphasis on his status as a war refugee, he never mentions the nationalities of his other immigrant coworkers, with the exception of Andrei. It is not unlikely, though, that many of these colleagues were also fleeing conflict in their home countries, since—sadly—the 1980s and 1990s were not short of armed struggle around the world. The difference seems to be Sameer's sense of loneliness and lack of community support, both from his fellow Lebanese and other Canadians. The person who comes closest to be called a friend is Andrei, another immigrant who was promoted from taxi driver to supervisor after years of hard work. Although Andrei sympathises with Sameer's story when he actually opens up, he does not seem to know a lot about Sameer's personal life. Even if Sameer feels hostility from Canadians towards him—as in the job interviews he attends (140-1)—, it does not necessarily mean that he was the only one experiencing it. We could say that he was not aware of how other people were going about in similar situations, or even that he might have misunderstood the source of this perceived hostility (or pity, or disdain); it may not necessarily have been connected with the stigma of the war but more with unemployment or appearance. What we can state with

certitude is that Sameer feels isolated in his new setting. Unlike Emily and her family in *Tale of a Certain Orient*, Sameer is completely alone, without any support coming from other Lebanese nationals and no connection whatsoever to his "tribe", which has a damaging effect on him. As mentioned earlier, Truzzi elaborated on the importance of community ties and acts of reciprocity in Lebanese society and these take on a new meaning abroad. Sameer, however, being disconnected from his peers, is left unable to integrate in his new surroundings and relate to the people around him.

Regarding work relations, the exploitation of marginal communities—such as recently arrived immigrants—is used toward the perpetration of the capitalist system, making exploitation and oppression walk hand in hand. According to Lewis, "The oppression and marginalisation of identifiable groups is critical to the maintenance of capitalism" (116). This includes people who do not hold the "right" documents, or have the "wrong" skin colour, depending on the context. We should note that in *Blackbodying*, there is no obvious discrimination regarding race per se, nor is there any noticeable discrimination when it comes to the place of origin. The most evident forms of discrimination are regarding legal status and place of *formation*. The need for having "Canadian experience" to be hired for a job in Canada is an obstacle faced by many immigrants. People who arrive in the country with non-Canadian degrees and work experience may find that this is not enough for the Canadian labour market which requires previous experience in Canadian jobs or a Canadian degree, which is often unattainable for recently arrived unemployed immigrants, thus locking them into a vicious circle. Degrees acquired in the United States, Common Wealth countries or other Western European countries are recognized more easily, but everybody else has to struggle with this conundrum (Hira-Friesen 37). As an example, a Lebanese man who arrived in Canada as a child and spent most of his formative years in

Canadian schools has better opportunities and a better social position than the Lebanese man who arrived in his 30s (i.e. Sameer), spent all his youth in Lebanon and was schooled there, too. This difference in class is made evident at the end of the novel, when the interpreter tasked to help Sameer actively silences him while appropriating and exploiting—thus offering a prime example of the mechanisms driving the capitalist system—Sameer's story so as to benefit his own ambition and interest. Sameer himself is left literally voiceless and alone.

The war and its effects play a large part in Sameer's story. He reads the book of short stories, *A House Not Her Own* by Lebanese writer Emily Nasrallah.[22] The latter talks about those who experienced war and how this experience can be transformed into something positive for the world, fighting for those who are oppressed (Nasrallah 152-3). Sameer feels how this message resonates with him. He suggests that the Lebanese are undesirable in Canada and around the world because of the perceived stigma of the war, and the only reason to keep living in Toronto, a city that "does not want" him (152), is the possibility of getting a Canadian passport, which would allow him to live anywhere and even return to Beirut. In fact, although he says he feels unwanted and isolated because of the stigma of war, he writes to his wife Najwa that "[i]t is not so horrible to be Lebanese. Not like others think it is" (153), suggesting that despite his pain, he is still proud and happy to be Lebanese, and he feels a strong connection to the place of his origin. It is unclear how much other people in Canada actually project the stigma of the war unto Sameer since he has no direct interaction with anyone who might have led the readers to believe this to be the case, but it is possible that this stigma is something Sameer projects upon himself given the trauma and isolation he suffered both in Beirut and in Toronto. It is not necessarily that

[22] Emily Nasrallah (1931-2018) was a Lebanese writer and activist who produced novels, short-stories, and children's books. Her books often touched on themes of displacement and the role of women in war. *A House Not Her Own* (originally published in Arabic with the title *Khubzuna al-yami*, "Our Daily Bread") was written in the aftermath of the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982, and first published in 1988.

he is marked as different, but maybe he marks himself as distinct, othering his own experience as a justification for his shortcomings. It is clear some othering is real, especially regarding jobs and opportunities offered to him as a recent immigrant not educated in Canada, but at times Sameer seems to resort to self-orientalising as a coping mechanism in his own isolation and abandonment from his family and community. However, if we consider that what we are reading is already the product of the interpreter's intervention to the story, the stigma of the war might have been exaggerated by the interpreter to make the story more dramatic and appeal to a Western audience.

Sameer recounts he left Lebanon illegally in a desperate attempt to survive after being unemployed for months because of the conflict while the family's savings were diminishing. In hopes to find a job in a new country as fast as he can, he is smuggled to Cyprus on a trade vessel, then to Greece before being able to board a plane to Canada with a fake passport to claim refugee status upon his arrival (167-8, 203-4). He is left alone with the promise that he would send back for his wife and two children when he was able to settle down and find a job that could support them; but this never happens. Besides his inability to find a job that could support both him and his family, his letters and calls to his wife are never answered. The phone line was disconnected and the letters were returned, suggesting Najwa never received them (165-6). Sameer is left to wonder with the trauma of not knowing what happened to his family. They may have died in a bombing, or he thinks that his wife may have given up on him and found a new partner as she obviously did not receive his letters. His unilateral conversations mirror that of the unknown man and Heidi, where only one part (the male) speaks and the woman stays silent, leaving Sameer to cast his own fantasies onto them. In his imagination, Sameer makes Heidi seem like his wife in appearance, projecting his loneliness and using the overheard conversations as a way to distract

himself from his family's possible fate. In an inversion, when Andrei confronts Sameer about his work performance (affected by his obsession with Heidi and the man's voice), Sameer decides to hide Heidi's existence and talks instead about his family, saying that he had received news they had died in a bombing:

> [I told him] How no country would have the Lebanese, as if we'd been diseased by the war. And all we wanted was a different passport, new citizenship so we could work and live. I cried as I, for the first time, spoke openly about the humiliation of declaring refugee status at the airport, the security and personnel, all my age, leading me through the procedures as if I was a lower form of life. Then there was my inability to find decent work because no one would have an old man without North American credentials, or Lebanese, or a refugee without landed immigrant status. The letters that were never answered by my family, the unnerving suspicion they'd never been received, and now word of this. Ah, the things I said to protect you, Heidi. (162)

Although Sameer was saying he was lying to protect Heidi, most of what he told Andrei was true, and his family could very well have died the way he described it. Moreover, Heidi was not being protected by his story because there was nothing to protect her from. Sameer was protecting *himself* and his own fantasies by being honest with Andrei, but he was also using Heidi as an excuse to expose his very real concerns and problems, which in his complete isolation he was not able to share with anybody or deal with in an adequate manner. The humiliation and isolation caused by the lower status of being a Lebanese war refugee marks all his relationships in Canada, from the people he drives in his taxi, who are annoyed by his Arabic music (147), to his employers, who treat him as a lesser being. At the same time, however,

Andrei does show some compassion and understanding for Sameer's struggle when the latter finally opens up and shares his fears and worry about the terrible fate of his family, and gives him paid vacation time he "was not supposed to" give (163), acting like an ally or at least demonstrating some sympathy for a shared destiny among immigrant workers, despite their different origins.

The power dynamics in the narrative translate to people being silenced. Heidi, who seems to be a victim of spousal abuse, cannot be seen nor heard (as is typical for victims of abuse) and has her story framed entirely by the man who speaks to her and essentially on her behalf. In addition to her partner, Sameer, too, overrides her voice and projects onto her his own needs and fantasies. He refers to her as "my Heidi," and constructs an image about her in his head, without any possibility of ever checking its veracity. For all intents and purposes, Heidi does not exist, she is a fiction, a story told by a man, and a part of Sameer's imagination. The same can be said about Najwa. She also has a name and a story, but no voice. All we know about her is told through Sameer, and we have no way of knowing what happened to her after Sameer left. Again, the reader is offered a one-sided conversation, where Sameer tells his wife about his experiences and troubles, but nothing comes back from her side. The blackbodying effect used to describe the work of the artist can be applied to most of Sameer's relationships. He uses Heidi and Najwa for his own stories while silencing completely their voices. Heidi and Najwa are thus absorbed and sent back to the world in a new form, the only one that will be known to the reader and that was entirely shaped by Sameer. Spier, in turn, is both controlled by Sameer and controls Sameer as well. What is actually known about him is very little; Sameer quickly decides he is the man who talks to Heidi, even though there is no real evidence of that, and in this sense, Spier's narrative is also controlled by Sameer. Spier is also a man who has lost his hands and thus depends on

Sameer and others to complete basic tasks and drive him around the city. At the same time, Spier challenges this control constantly by refusing to let Sameer know their destination. Spier becomes a reflection of Sameer himself, both powerful and powerless in relation to his surroundings, struggling to control a narrative he is not able to keep in order and that constantly eludes him.

The blackbodying effect becomes more evident when, suffering from locked-in syndrome, Sameer meets his interpreter. The young Canadian-Lebanese student at a local university shares his last name with Sameer's favourite author, Emily Nasrallah,[23] and is an aspiring author himself. The reader can therefore come to the conclusion that the author Dimitri Nasrallah and the interpreter are the same person, even though Sameer's story is fiction. Initially, the interpreter fulfills his job to help Sameer form phrases and put his thoughts unto paper one letter at a time. But gradually the interpreter stops translating what Sameer wants to say, and starts to write down what *he* thinks Sameer desires to or should say (209-210). Sameer, being completely paralyzed, is powerless in the face of this abuse by the young Canadian man who is appropriating his story of trauma to use for the purpose of his own career advancement. Not unlike a capitalist who explores the labour of a worker, the interpreter explores Sameer's narrative for his own gain. The unequal power relationship between the two men extends beyond the fact that one of them cannot move. The interpreter is much more desirable to Canadian society than Sameer. He is young and even though he was born in Lebanon, he is Canadian. He has less experience and education than Sameer, but he is attending a Canadian university. He was privileged enough to be able to leave Lebanon at the beginning of the war, and has acquired

[23] It is unclear whether Dimitri Nasrallah has any actual connection with the writer Emily Nasrallah, but in the novel the interpreter claims to have discovered she married into a distant branch of his family, and that is why they share the same last name (Nasrallah 209). They are not the only published writers with the last name Nasrallah; some others include Ibrahim Nasrallah, Nawal Nasrallah, and Elie Mikhael Nasrallah.

full rights as a Canadian citizen as his parents were able to work and build a life in the new country. Sameer, on the other hand, is left on the margins of Canadian society as a refugee after almost 20 years of war. His discrimination and silencing are thus the result of the intersection of class, age, politics, and the capitalist economy.

It should be noted that the dates in Sameer's story do not exactly follow historical time. The Lebanese civil war ended in 1990, but Sameer left Lebanon in 1992, and he is still wondering about the fate of his family in 1995. This leaves the reader with the question whether there was an (intended) memory lapse on the part of the author, or if the story is narrated from the perspective of the interpreter who embellished it and invented details rather than respecting Sameer's own narrative. Past and present are mixed together in this novel, recounting events that the author witnessed as a child in Greece in the 1980s as described in the first chapter of the book. Then, a man named *Monsieur Sameer* informs the author's mother that her nephew Eid died in a car bombing while riding his bicycle (13). The inspiration for the name of the character in the second part of the novel is obvious, but so are some other details. *Monsieur Sameer* was also an architect; in the letters Sameer writes to Najwa, it is revealed that one of their sons is called Eid; and when Sameer tells the story of his family to Andrei, he says they were killed by a bomb that exploded in a car driving past them. By mixing the dates and placing the story of the 1980s into the 1990s, when the author/narrator was already an adult and able to develop a sense of his identity, he re-appropriates and controls the narrative of the war and migration for the sake of his own agency.

Sameer faces complete powerlessness in his daily life as a refugee, a Lebanese fleeing the war, aimlessly driving around at the will of the strange Spier, and, later, lying completely paralyzed in a hospital bed, unable to talk or act, only finding some relief in his imagination.

This is his sole remaining form of agency. Nasrallah seems to recognize in his writing that he himself has had many opportunities that his compatriots fleeing the war at a later period as adults lacked. He also notes that the feeling of powerlessness regarding one's economic and social status in a new place is very much a common immigrant experience. To face this, he, too, turns to his own imagination to build a story that gives him more agency and control over things he could not deal with while growing up. At the same time, the power dynamics between the two immigrants (the interpreter and Sameer) is made quite explicit and Nasrallah does not shy away from the responsibilities of writers and artists when it comes to naming and representing these issues. War plays such a big part in Sameer's sense of isolation that we can assume the tale we are reading is actually the one written by the interpreter rather than Sameer's true story. The interpreter, although born in Lebanon, is much more "Westernized" because of his upbringing in Canada and he takes advantage of Sameer's situation in an Orientalist perspective, assuming control of the Oriental's story. By emphasizing Sameer's experience of war in relation to other immigrant realities in Canada, the interpreter responds to his implied readership's Orientalist expectations and holds control of the Oriental's narrative.

Conclusion

In this research paper, I analysed the novels *Tale of a Certain Orient* and *Blackbodying* looking for instances of Orientalist representation and discrimination pertaining to work relations and race. The novels *Tale of a Certain Orient* and *Blackbodying* both have Lebanese immigrants as protagonists, but they are set in different geographic and historical spaces. As a result, the experiences the characters live through are unique to their respective settings and thus different from each other. In *Tale of a Certain Orient*, Emilie and her family have a position of privilege in Manaus's society: they have a network of support among other Arab immigrants and a robust social life; they own a small business that guarantees a middle-class position enabling them to afford domestic servants; and although they are often othered by Europeans or descendants of Europeans, they are mostly regarded as white, especially the children born in Brazil, who do not suffer from language barriers and noticeable accents. By contrast, in *Blackbodying*, Sameer does not have the same network of support from his peers and feels completely isolated. The only other Lebanese national he meets, instead of showing support, immediately makes him the object of his curiosity and intellectual exploitation, putting Sameer in a subaltern position because of the latter's lower status as a recent immigrant. Although the Lebanese tribal mentality is often criticized and can result in rivalries and violence, such as during the episode of the Civil War, Nasrallah's novel demonstrates the detrimental effects of being totally deprived of this group connection when it comes to successful integration in the new society. The exploitation of Sameer in Toronto, who as a newcomer is subjected to lower wages than his peers, is analogous to the exploitation of Anastácia as an Indigenous woman. Even though they are at opposite ends of a scale (a recent immigrant and a native), their position as vulnerable people is used for the

perpetuation of a capitalist system albeit in different racial contexts.

Both Emilie and Sameer have their stories told through the voice of other people: in the case of Emilie, by those who arrived after her (her son and adoptive daughter); in the case of Sameer, by those who arrived before (the interpreter). This is an example of power relations within the immigrant community, where those who are more assimilated have a higher position than recent arrivals or who bear signs of foreignness, like an accent or difficulty speaking the local language. This configuration also acts on an important Orientalist idea, namely that the Orient cannot speak for itself and needs the mediation of the West.

According to Said, Orientalism was part of the Western European colonial enterprise, and created various scholarly works and pieces of art in an effort to define and generate authority of the West over the East. From these works, many Orientalist stereotypes were created and embedded into Western thought, ranging from depictions of the Middle East as a barbarous, uncivilized, and violent place, to mysticism regarding religion and reverence for "exotic" cultural aspects. The Orientalist approach is always reductive and often does not account for the immense variety of peoples and realities in the Middle East.

In addition to presenting Orientalist stereotypes, Hatoum and Nasrallah both seem to be self-orientalising to a certain degree, Hatoum by referencing *A Thousand and One Nights* (the most known literary work from the Middle-East made famous through the French version published by Europeans), and Nasrallah by examining the role of war in Sameer's isolation and difficulties in adapting to Canadian society. Even so, both instances can be explained by biographical circumstances of the respective authors. Hatoum was educated in a society with few Arab models and still very much influenced by Western European thought and intellectual traditions, while Nasrallah used his personal childhood experiences of escaping the war with his

parents.

Aside from some details concerning the inaccuracy of dates used in *Blackbodying*, both novels seem to be fair representations of the respective historical periods they refer to, in particular regarding the challenges faced by recent Lebanese immigrants in each setting. The immigration to Brazil in the early 20th century was marked by mostly young men hoping to make money and ascend economically fast while supporting their communities in Lebanon. These men working in commerce filled a gap in the urban middle class, and had a privileged position in relation to the Indigenous and Black communities. By contrast, the Lebanese who escaped the war and arrived in Canada in the late 20th century had to deal with lack of recognition for their educational background in addition to unemployment, trauma from the war, and a lack of support from those who arrived before them and were already settled in the country. Both narratives are examples in the depiction of Lebanese diaspora with the portrayal of homeland through the memories of immigrant characters, embedded in an idealism and hope of return.

Further research needs to be done about the Lebanese in Canada, especially regarding the social aspects of the community of most recent arrivals, as well as comparisons between the Lebanese communities outside Western Europe and the United States. In the field of literary studies, further scholarly works on Dimitri Nasrallah would be a desideratum so as to deepen the conversation about diasporic Lebanese authors. Beyond matters of diaspora, both authors explore the subject of memory and how it relates to our identity as individuals. The memories we build and cultivate, even when they are romanticized, can be more meaningful than an objective "truth." Hatoum's depictions of family relations and memory are recognized beyond his setting of a Lebanese family in the Amazon in a way that speaks to audiences of all backgrounds, not only in Brazil but through translations of his books as well. Nasrallah's novel is more than just

about the Lebanese, it echoes Canadian society in a deeper and meaningful way bringing to light all those Canadians who arrived in the country from elsewhere, displaced, and with no support. Immigration is at the heart of Canadian society, and regardless of place of origin, the experiences of discrimination, isolation, and displacement resonate with a universal relevance.

The struggles faced by immigrants, whether they come from the Middle East or any other part of the so-called developing world, are not a thing of the past. Immigrants still face economic hardships, xenophobia, and discrimination of multiple kinds, similar to the ones depicted in the novels analysed in this paper, as well as seen in today's news. Both Brazil and Canada have a long way to go in relation to the treatment of immigrants and refugees, both socially and institutionally. The novels analysed here can inspire new policies of today by portraying the past, in a reflection about what can be done for the future in terms of activism and social change. By understanding a society's labour and racial structures, we can develop better strategies to counter its inequalities at a personal and political level.

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