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Following the Pipeline

Petro-phantoms in Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī's The Last of the Angels (*1992*) *and Imīl Ḥabībī's* Saraya, the Ogre's Daughter (*1991*)

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Abstract

Contributing to the fields of eco- and petro-criticism, this article argues for significant connections in the Arabic novel between fantastical and uncanny aesthetics, on the one hand, and ecological awareness and energy anxiety on the other. Moving from nation-based comparisons, in recognition of how energy ecologies similarly traverse sovereign borders, it does so through Iraqi author Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī's *Ākhir al-malāʾikah* (1992) and the Palestinian Imīl Ḥabībī's *Sarāyā, bint al-ghūl* (1991). Set at either end of the Kirkuk-Haifa oil pipeline, in their authors' home cities, these novels were completed within a few weeks of one another, during the first months of the petroleum-driven Gulf War (1990–1991), to which they allude. Through phantoms, jinn, angels, and zombies, they dramatize the emotional, environmental, and social disturbances of petro-modernity.

Keywords

petroleum – pipeline – fantasy – uncanny – Iraq – Israel/Palestine – eco-criticism

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Tread lightly. What is the earth made of, but corpses?

خفّفْ الوطء ما أظن أديم ... الأرض إلا من هذه الاجساد

ABŪ AL-ʿALĀʾ AL-MAʿARRĪ[1]

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Eleventh century poet Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī's (973–1057) injunction to "soften your tread" (*khaffif al-waṭʾ*) connects the personal elegy of his poem to a vision of the material interconnection of transient life, in which every step should attend to those who have gone before and the earth to which their bodies return. An awareness of what lies beyond the usual remit of human thought and vision—above, below, or paralleling—infuses his writing and noncomformist philosophy, as well as his lifelong asceticism and turn to veganism. Today, he is perhaps best known for his *Risālat al-ghufrān* (1033, *The Epistle of Forgiveness*), in which, prompting comparison to Dante's *Commedia Divina* (1320), he satirizes his contemporary, Ibn al-Qāriḥ (962–1030), who, upon being admitted to Paradise, meets prophets, angels and jinn, before being granted permission to see Hell and address its inhabitants. In this journey, al-Maʿarrī draws, in often daringly irreverent ways, on Islam's rich cosmology of worlds, suggested in the *Fātiḥah* by God's designation as "*rabb al-ʿalamīn*" (the God of worlds). From philosophical and legal literature to the tales of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*, this "concept of multiple worlds" remains, as Amira el-Zein comments, "at the heart of the Muslim vision of existence," implying that "there is always more than meets the eye."[2] In *Risālat al-ghufrān*, al-Maʿarrī leaps from realm to realm, poking fun at certain elements of orthodox belief, and exulting in elaborate linguistic play, yet also remains bound by a literary vision of balance between the manifest and the unseen (*ʿālam al-shahādah wa-l-ghayb*) as every action resounds in realms beyond.

1 Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, *Saqṭ al-Zand* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), 7; Emile Habiby, *Saraya, The Ogre's Daughter*, trans. Peter Theroux (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2006), 59.

2 Amira el-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 1.

One millennium later, Palestinian novelist Imīl Ḥabībī (1922–1996) cites extensively from *Risālat al-ghufrān* in *Sarāyā, bint al-ghūl* (1991, *Saraya, the Ogre's Daughter*, 2006). Ḥabībī's last novel (or *khurāfiyyah*/fairy tale, as he calls it), *Sarāyā* reflects on pre- and post-1948 Palestine through autobiography, fiction, and folktale, through the central pursuit of an uncanny phantom.[3] As the narrator describes how he and his brother "tread softly" (*nukhaffif al-waṭʾ*) as they revisit childhood haunts, he further explicitly echoes al-Maʿarrī in his elegy to the land.[4] In this article, I argue for the novel's latent ecological consciousness, rooted in the same division between seen and unseen that marks al-Maʿarrī's vision, as spectres gesture towards disrupted landscapes and estranged individuals.

In his materially-grounded fantasy, Ḥabībī represents one of many Arab novelists in whose writing explicit and latent anxiety over ecological change and the hydrocarbon era of "personal automobile usage, ubiquitous petrochemical products, and commercial air travel" is expressed through creative imaginings and rewritings of the unseen, ranging from the playful to the dystopian and apocalyptic.[5] Phantoms, jinn, and ghouls, drawn from Qurʾānic and folkloric traditions, are stirred up by the sounds, sights, and smells of petro-modernity, marking an irrevocably unbalanced world. In this article, I focus on how this aesthetics manifests in Ḥabībī's *Sarāyā* and Iraqi novelist, Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī's (b. 1940) *Ākhir al-malāʾikah* (1992, *The Last of the Angels*, 2007), set in the northern Iraqi oil city of Kirkuk, and populated by jinn, angels, and phantoms.[6]

In reading Ḥabībī and al-ʿAzzāwī's spectres as expressions of ecological anxiety, I join a larger turn to the uncanny within ecocriticism. Drawing on Freud's definition of "*Das unheimliche*" as "that species of the frightening that

3 Imīl Ḥabībī, *Sarāyā, bint al-ghūl: khurāfiyyah* (London: Riad El-Rayyes, 1992), 12 [First published in 1991 by Dar Arabesque, Haifa].

4 Ibid., 65.

5 Arbella Bet-Shlimon, *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 33.

6 Several critics have already made this connection. Rob Nixon discusses the "spectral" in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf's oil epic *Mudun al-milḥ* (Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 75–76). Ellen McLarney evokes the prophetic, demonic, and apocalyptic language of both *Mudun al-Milḥ* and Ghassān Kanafānī's *Rijāl fī al-shams* (Ellen McLarney, "'Empire of the Machine': Oil in the Arabic Novel," *boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (2009): 193). Layla Hendow discusses the "mythical qualities" of oil in Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī's *al-Ḥubb fī mamlakat al-nafṭ* (Layla Hendow, "Oil and Women: Invisibility as Power in Nawal El-Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*," in *Seen and Unseen: Visual Cultures of Imperialism*, eds. Sanaz Fotouhi and Esmail Zeiny (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 79–96).

goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar," critics have explored how our reawakening awareness of the nonhuman—animals, plants, land, and climate—may be understood as this return of the repressed.[7] Timothy Morton suggests the very uncanniness of living through global warming: "We already know the weather like the back of our hand. But this is weird weather, this global warming weather."[8] For Amitav Ghosh, global warming similarly represents an urgent resurgence of nonhuman nature, as we become uncomfortably aware of the "energy that surrounds us, flowing under our feet and through wires in our walls, animating our vehicles and illuminating our rooms."[9]

Oil, as this suggests, is particularly uncanny; ever-present in modern society, yet below the radar of consciousness and culture as it is extracted from geographical margins and transported underground. Framed by governments and industries as the indispensable lifeblood of modern living, it is rendered invisible in order to protect its ubiquity and detract from the irreconcilable contradiction between its simultaneous necessity, finiteness, and destructiveness.[10] For Ursula Biemann, oil pipelines embody "an age in which, one might say, the secret has gone structural," as companies divest themselves of workforces and accountability, and the production of energy that fuels modern life remains a determinedly concealed process.[11] Art, in response, must navigate a "thin line between unveiling the hidden and respecting the complexity and opacity of things."[12] Literary criticism, meanwhile, must look for oil's subtextual presence. Paralleling Fredric Jameson's "political unconscious," Patricia Yaeger suggests reading for an underlying "energy unconscious" or "anxiety."[13] "We need," Yaeger writes, "to contemplate literature's relation to the raucous, invisible, energy-producing atoms that generate world economies

7 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 124.

8 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 55.

9 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5.

10 Graeme Macdonald, "Containing Oil: The Pipeline in Petroculture," in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 36.

11 Ursula Biemann and Andrew Pendakis, "This is Not a Pipeline: Thoughts on the Politico-Aesthetics of Oil," in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 508.

12 Ibid.

13 Patricia Yaeger, "Literature in the Ages of Wood …," in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 443.

and motor our reading," discovering, in the process, a "new repertoire of analysis energized by class and resource conflict."[14]

In the Arabic tradition, presences of the unseen are, I suggest, the best place to trace the uncanniness of ecological awareness and expose the structural silences of the oil industry, as veils fall from habitual perceptions, and humans are haunted by what they have forgotten. Designated by "*al-ghayb*" in Arabic, the unseen incorporates "what is hidden, inaccessible to the senses and to reason--thus, at the same time absent from human knowledge and hidden in divine wisdom."[15] It is also the realm of angels and jinn, the latter of which convey particularly uncanny connotations within literary tradition, erupting, in the tales of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*, from within serene geographies or long-buried bottles. In Arabic, "uncanny" tends to be translated as "*waḥshī*" (untamed, wild), "*khāriq*" (exceptional), or "*gharīb*" (strange, foreign), but also evokes the root *j-n-n*, the primary meaning of which is "to hide, conceal, veil," while derivations "*jannah*" (paradise) and "*janīn*" (foetus) represent originary, forgotten states, disrupted by "*junūn*" (madness) and, indeed, jinn.[16] As el-Zein observes, "each time the two Arabic letters jim and nun occur together, they carry the meaning of invisible, hidden, and mysterious."[17] In the Arabic novel, the concept of a forgotten *jannah* frequently conjures a haunting, lost ideal, to which jinn and *junūn* serve as reminders. The jinn, furthermore, are far from otherworldly beings, unrelated to the material world. As el-Zein comments, they are real, intermediary forces that reveal themselves in states of heightened consciousness:

> The exploration of the jinn's concept underscores that we and the universe are made from the same fabric. Each resembles the other. Most significantly, both are incessantly in contact … In a blink of the eye, [jinn] retreat into our collective darkness, to emerge again out there when we least expect them.[18]

Imagery surrounding jinn even eerily evokes that of oil. A grainy image of Kirkuk's first oil gusher in 1927 aptly recalls the "column of darkness" (*ʿāmūd*

14 Ibid.

15 MacDonald, D.B. and Gardet, L., "al-Ghayb," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. Consulted online on 10 August 2021 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0231>.

16 Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: Arabic-English, 4th ed.*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, INC., 1994), 1238, 783, 164.

17 El-Zein, 34. Ḥabībī plays on this root in *Sarāyā*, 83–4, 106.

18 El-Zein, 134.

aswad) associated with jinn in *Alf laylah wa-laylah*, as, in both cases, ancient, subterranean presences emerge into view, bringing strange new energies and unpredictable consequences.[19] Like the jinn, oil conjures both the bounty of magic lamps and the accompanying threat of demonic, destructive power.

This is, however, not to suggest them as simple analogies. Jinn also represent oil's antagonist, contrasting its dirty flow, as what OPEC founder Juan Alfonzo called the "devil's excrement," with the "clean, smokeless flame" (*mārij min nār*), from which they are formed in the Qur'ān (55:15).[20] Jinn represent a primordial balance, while oil casts ecologies and cultures into disarray. The jinn are originary cosmic presences, while oil brings foreign disruption and apocalyptic threats.

While jinn are not my exclusive focus, the semantic field they suggest informs my approach to the literary spectres of petro-modernity. *Ākhir al-malā'ikah* and *Sarāyā* are both animated by uncanny presences, anchored in transforming ecologies. Both allude to the oil-driven Gulf War (1990–1991), during which they were completed within a few weeks of each other (2nd and 24th September, respectively). Set in Kirkuk, *Ākhir al-malā'ikah* confronts the social fallouts of oil extraction through jinn, angels, and zombies, with all-encompassing toxicity providing a dramatic denouement. Set in Haifa, a major oil refinery hub on the Mediterranean, *Sarāyā* evokes the increasing aridity of Mount Carmel through the phantom of Sarāyā. Combining dark humor, metafiction, and parody, both novels juxtapose technological optimism with an indelible anxiety over the realities revealed by phantomic presences.

Examining these novels together, from Kirkuk to Haifa, I shift from a nation-bound reading of the Arabic novel to one which tracks latent networks of wells, pipelines, and refineries, acting on bodies, consciousnesses, and literatures through spectral yet impactful connections. In doing so, I follow the Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline, completed by the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) in 1935, operational until 1948, and stretching just under one thousand kilometres from Northern Iraq to the Mediterranean coast, from Kirkuk to Haifa, and from *Ākhir al-malā'ikah* to *Sarāyā*. Corresponding to the Sykes-Picot Line, cutting through Iraq and the Levant, the pipeline cemented British interests in the region, with oil chief among them, and was, albeit briefly, central to geopolitical tensions. Through it, Kirkuk and Haifa became politically and ecologically linked. As Arbella Bet-Shlimon remarks, "in both cities the IPC provided fertile ground for actions stemming from both workers' grievances and idiosyncratic

19 *Alf Laylah wa-laylah: al-juz' al-awwal*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2008), 10.

20 Jerry Useem, "The Devil's Excrement," *Fortune Magazine*, February 3, 2003, https://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2003/02/03/336434/index.htm.

political circumstances."[21] Ḥabībī was himself a worker in the Haifa oil refinery, while al-ʿAzzāwī's father worked for the IPC. The oil industry features explicitly in both novels, while their cast of phantoms dramatize emotional, political, and ecological disturbances. Neither has received much scholarly attention, despite their ground-breaking stature. Alongside oil aesthetics, this article therefore aims to contribute to a better understanding of both.

Kirkuk's "People of Oil"[22]

Ākhir al-malā'ikah depicts the neighbourhood of Chuqur in Kirkuk, fourteen kilometers south of Baba Gurgur, the first discovered oil fields in Iraq, in 1927, where a natural gas flame, the "Eternal Fire" (*al-nār al-azaliyyah*), has been alight for some four thousand years. From the outset, this setting lends itself to the uncanny. Rewriting transformative events, from the 1946 oil workers' strike to the 1958 July Revolution, to the imagined 2000s, the novel weaves together cycles of rebellion and revolution through which the modern nation takes shape, along with fantastical occurrences. Through this altered and darkly playful national history, al-ʿAzzāwī depicts the specific drama of a city shaped by petroleum. Variously, his phantoms dramatize the sudden and irrevocable changes visited upon Kirkuk and the ensuing turmoil among local populations, poke fun at proprietary claims to the land, whether ethnically, ideologically, or nationally driven, and uncover the silent agendas of the oil industry and wider geopolitics of the Cold War. At times, they appear in wondrous guise, paralleling the marvels of oil-enabled technologies, but, little by little, they turn to chaos and horror, portraying the very visible violence, toxicity, and degradation to which the land succumbs.

From the beginning of his career, al-ʿAzzāwī has conjured up similarly dystopic visions.[23] His first fragmentary and radically experimental novel, *Makhlūqāt Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī al-jamīlah* (1969, *Fadhil al-Azzawi's Beautiful Creatures*, 2021) portrays a city turned to stone, evocative of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*'s "*Madīnat al-nuḥās*" (City of Brass). Several decades later, *Ākhir al-malā'ikah* represents, as he describes it, a revelatory work of universal scope:

21 Bet-Shlimon, 103–104. See also Rachel Havrelock, "The Borders Beneath: On Pipelines and Resource Sovereignty," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2017): 408–416.

22 Bet-Shlimon, 6.

23 Born and raised in Kirkuk, al-ʿAzzāwī graduated from Baghdad University with a degree in English Literature and was part of the prominent Iraqi '60s generation. He was imprisoned for two years in the early 1960s, under the first Baʿth regime. In 1977, he left Iraq, settling in Berlin where he has prolifically published poetry and prose.

> To see the world in a grain of sand, in the words of William Blake, I turned Jagur [Chuqur], a district in Kirkuk, into a centre for the whole world. It was the only work where I caught a fever after finishing any part of it, and ended up in bed, overwhelmed with emotion.[24]

Like the rest of al-ʿAzzāwī's irreverent and unpredictable writing, *Ākhir al-malāʾikah* unfolds through sudden transformations and overwhelming emotions. Describing how, while reading al-ʿAzzāwī's poetry, his California apartment was struck by an earthquake—in a moment when reality eerily reflected literary journey—fellow poet, Khaled Mattawa, gives a sense of the cosmic and destructive power that inhabits his writing:

> I had never experienced an earthquake before, but also, I had not read Fadhil al-Azzawi until then. I have no doubt that the aftershock was an expression of divine anger at my reading of Fadhil, and I imagine that every time Fadhil's books are opened, the angels are indeed scandalized.[25]

Mattawa's comments equally apply to *Ākhir al-malāʾikah*. Evoking both the proliferating nonhuman worlds of *Alf laylah wa-laylah* and the cosmic weight of scripture, it transforms wonder to horror, and juxtaposes fate and contingency, styling itself as a modern, dystopic counterpart to the unseen worlds of premodern tradition.

In my reading, I focus on its aesthetics of emotional and physical disturbance, as well as the cosmic importance which al-ʿAzzāwī accords Kirkuk, reflecting the city's real but overlooked centrality to global energy transformations. As Bet-Shlimon observes, oil workers and their families constituted almost half the city's population by the late 1940s, with the IPC controlling labour affairs, urban development, and local politics:

> Kirkukis came into contact with petroleum all the time, even in the most literal sense: major thoroughfares were paved with locally derived asphalt, and dirt roads were sprayed with viscous bitumen to maintain their solidity after rainfall. The experience of being Kirkuki was, and is, suffused with oil.[26]

24 Fadhil al-Azzawi, "My Experience with Writing," *Banipal 65* (Summer 2019): 162.

25 Khaled Mattawa, "Fadhil al-Azzawi: A Force of Nature," *Banipal 65* (Summer 2019): 125–126.

26 Bet-Shlimon, 4.

For the city's young litterateurs, the 1960s' "Kirkuk Group" (*Jamāʿat Kirkūk*), oil brought access to books, travel, and foreign languages.[27] In this sense, al-ʿAzzāwī's career is moulded by oil, and the powerful aesthetics of his writing rooted in it. *Ākhir al-malāʾikah*, for one, is animated by a heady sense of wonder and possibility, both fantastical and technological.

Yet al-ʿAzzāwī also highlights the problematics of oil. In broad terms, the fantastic elements of his novel may be read as both an allegorical exposé of the corruption and meddling that overtook Iraq in the twentieth century, and a mockery of colonial imaginings of Iraq as a wild, magic-filled wasteland. As Priya Satia observes, British travellers to Iraq in the early twentieth century described the land as "positively extraterrestrial" and "simply 'uncanny'":

> Arabia was a Biblical land, a place for miraculous conviction, visionary prophets, and extremes of experience. It was not, to them, the kind of place you could *discipline* in the way that European environments were increasingly being disciplined.[28]

Turning the land to myth, Britain permitted itself unparalleled outrages, under the pretence that extreme measures were needed for an extreme land, restoring Babylon's lost glories.[29] Al-ʿAzzāwī, in turn, fills his novel with extremes. Yet he does so precisely to uncover the outrages brought about by the concealed violence of the oil industry. Midway through the novel, the reader is overwhelmed by angels and demons, uneasily juxtaposed to the deceptively casual narration of mass violence. Divides grow between the city's Turkmen, Kurdish, Arab, and Assyrian populations, exacerbated by nationalist, religious, and political ideologies. These divides, as Bet-Shlimon further comments, were historically driven by petroleum:

> Kirkuk's dispute is certainly about the oil. But that does not mean that politicized ethnicity is a flimsy pretence masking a fundamentally mercenary conflict. Rather, it means that oil has shaped the self-identity of Kirkukis and their political practices by dominating their city's economy, running through their mundane interactions, and altering the physical geographies that they inhabit and traverse. Kirkukis became

27 Farouk Yousif, "A Unique Iraqi Icon," *Banipal 65* (Summer 2019): 109.

28 Priya Satia, "'A Rebellion of Technology': Development, Policing, and the British Arabian Imaginary," in *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke III (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), 25–26.

29 Ibid., 40.

> both ethnicized people and "people of oil," the two subjectivities inextricably linked.[30]

In what Stefan Weidner describes as a "fairy tale that has been cruelly copied from reality," al-ʿAzzāwī's supernatural cast explores and challenges this transformation to "ethnicized people" and "people of oil," destabilizing established orthodoxies, as "amazement" (*istighrāb*) and "confusion" (*ḥayrah*) proliferate.[31] Befitting its status as the epic of an oil city, *Ākhir al-malāʾikah* vibrates with strange new energies. A semantic field of the unprecedented and irrevocable dominates through the adverbs "suddenly" (*faj'atan*) and "eternally" (*abadan*), and the adjectives "first" (*awwal*) and "last" (*ākhir*). The opening epigraph, from Herman Hesse's (1877–1962) *Märchen* (1919, Fairy Tales), cements this aesthetic through an image of irreversible degradation, which becomes mirrored in the landscape of Kirkuk: "What turned into wine yesterday is today vinegar, and never will vinegar turn back to wine. Never (*abadan*)."[32] In what follows, I trace this aesthetics through the characters of Ḥamīd Nāylūn, Khiḍr Mūsā, and Burhān ʿAbdallāh, their sudden transformations, and the grim realities these conceal. In my first section, I focus on the interweaving of fantasy and (petro-)politics, before moving to the depiction of fantasy and technology through wonder and disorientation. Finally, I discuss the novel's capitulation to horror.

Politics, Fantasy, and the Vanishing Individual

Ākhir opens as Ḥamīd, a chauffeur for IPC oil engineer, Mr. McNeely, returns home early for the "first time" (*li-awwal marra*), dejected because he has been sacked for presenting Mrs. McNeely with a pair of nylon stockings in a misjudged romantic gesture.[33] Spreading through the neighbourhood, the incident earns him the lifelong epithet "Ḥamīd Nāylūn" (Nylon Hamid), marrying the whimsy of folktale to modern consumer goods, as it both echoes *Alf laylah wa-laylah*'s trade-based nomenclature (think "*Sindbād al-baḥrī*"), and marks

30 Bet-Shlimon, 184.

31 Stefan Weidner, "Dance of Death in Kirkuk," *Banipal 65* (Summer 2019): 145.

32 Al-ʿAzzāwī, *Ākhir al-malāʾikah*, (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2016), 5, trans. William M. Hutchins, *The Last of the Angels* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 1. When making reference to *Ākhir*, I use my own translations except in select cases; in those cases I reference Hutchins' translation (trans.).

33 Ibid., 7.

the novel's petro-modernity. Produced from chemicals found in oil, Nylon 6 is the world's first synthetic fiber, becoming widespread in the 1940s through its use in stockings. The anecdote thus establishes the novel as a folktale about the stuff of oil, inevitably concealing a troubled undercurrent. Though comical, Ḥamīd's dismissal is, after all, representative of more systemic unemployment caused by IPC layoffs and rural migration. His transformation into a quasi-mythic revolutionary, catalysing several of the novel's many strikes and rebellions, similarly frames grave circumstances in absurd form, as, echoing the mirrored structures of folktales, the novel traces the community's rise and fall through individual whims, fantastic presences, and the agendas of distant, energy-hungry nations.

Following Ḥamīd's dismissal, propelled by religious fervour and latent pressure from the underground oil workers' union, the neighbourhood people come out in protest, in a rare act of community action. Marching through the streets, the crowd debates their best course of action, either heading to the local government headquarters or the IPC in Baba Gurgur. However, religious leader Mullah Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn Qādirī instead convinces them, under unspoken pressure from the British, that their true grievance is the long drought they have sustained. Duly, the crowd begins imploring God for rain, and Ḥamīd's dismissal is forgotten. The skies open "suddenly" (*faj'atan*), and collective action succumbs to sectarian infighting as the neighbourhood quarrels over which population was the true recipient of the miracle: Assyrians, Turkmen, Kurds, or Arabs.[34] Characteristic of the novel, this convoluted series of events weaves in and out of the unseen, with the reader's, and the neighbourhood's attention shifting from political protest to fantasy, from colonial meddling to divine intervention, and from levity to community infighting. Ultimately, through both the dissimulations of the "company" (*al-sharikah* [the IPC]) and fantastical intervention, political agency eludes the neighbourhood. Thus, the interweaving of concrete historical detail and fantasy become suggestive of the specific consequences of the oil industry for local communities. As Rachel Havrelock observes of Kirkuk, foreign profits depended on people becoming alienated within their own land through the presence of Iraq's largest oil field beneath their feet.[35]

34 Ibid., 17.

35 Havrelock, 410. In more direct terms, Timothy Mitchell observes how, due to the extraction and transportation of oil requiring significantly less manpower than that of coal, oil workers exercise considerably less collective political power than miners. See Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013), 39.

Beyond the twists and turns of specific episodes, the collective ups and downs through which *Ākhir* is structured align it with both ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf's *Mudun al-milḥ* and what Rob Nixon calls its "great hydrocarbon forebear," Émile Zola's *Germinal* (1885). Nixon indicates the focus within both on "the germination of revolt," as, through panoramas of transforming societies, "collective metamorphosis" supersedes individual character.[36] *Ākhir* follows this pattern, with Chuqur its undisputed protagonist. It also, however, takes it in a darkly comical and deeply cynical direction, dismissing the power of the individual to effect action within the new petroleum order. Despite becoming the novel's central revolutionary, Ḥamīd's first brush with community action is sparked by misguided lust for Mrs. McNeely. Thereafter, he comes and goes from the plot at the whim of other political actants and fantastical presences. An ambivalent hero, he is "suddenly" (*faj'atan*) struck by the idea of revolution, funds said revolution through buried treasure, and discovers said treasure thanks to his nephew, Burhān ʿAbdallāh's, relationship with tiny, silver-winged Yazidi angels.[37] Contingency defines the novel, with intentional action thwarted, as disruptions from *al-ghayb* are coupled with the meddling of the British Intelligence and IPC, and the increasing repressiveness of local and national Iraqi authorities. In one episode, relaying the 1948 oil workers' strike, the governor of Kirkuk receives orders from the Interior Minister, who has in turn been instructed by Prime Minister Nuri al-Saʿid, who himself acts under orders from the Conservative British High Commissioner.[38] Khiḍr Mūsā is later "saddened by the idea that the King [Faisal II] himself was incapable of changing anything."[39] Throughout, a semantic field of "failure" (*fashal*, *khaybah*), accompanies that of sudden transformation, while the trajectory of all main characters is marked by disappearances and transformations from hero to prophet to literal or metaphoric ghost.

Khiḍr Musa, for one, moves from sublimation to disappearance and death, as, from his lowest ebb as an arms smuggler, he becomes a prophet and statesman before disintegrating into an abandoned skeleton in a concrete-sealed tower.[40] Ḥamīd, in turn, frequently vanishes before returning "from the depths of the earth" (*min bāṭin al-arḍ*) or "from nowhere" (*min al-ʿadam*), culminating in his reappearance in 1956 under the name of Lieutenant Colonel Anwār Muṣṭafā,

36 Nixon, 87–88.
37 *Ākhir*, 202.
38 Ibid., 65.
39 Ibid., 140.
40 Ibid., 82.

and his leading of an unsuccessful revolution.[41] Finally, he is imprisoned for two years until 1958, following which he sinks into alcoholism, becoming a figurative, and then literal, "ghost" (*shabaḥ*). This transformation evokes his earlier reflection that, "Once dissimulation (*al-ukdhūbah*) becomes a totalising system (*niẓām shāmil*), only phantoms (*ashbāḥan*) remain."[42] Linking "dissimulation" and "phantoms," Ḥamīd sums up the novel, as a phantomic reflection of petro-politics and the powerlessness of individuals liable to "vanishings" as sudden as those of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*.

ʿAjāʾib al-nafṭ (the Wonders of Oil)?

Yet *Ākhir* also depicts wonder in both fantasy and technologies. In an opening episode, for example, we are introduced to the mad Turkman, Dallī Iḥsān, a jinni who roams the neighborhood, conversing with his invisible fellow species. One night, Ḥājj Aḥmad al-Ṣābūnjī, a rich local merchant, stumbles upon Dallī's jinn kingdom. Depicted in sumptuous detail worthy of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*'s lush revelries, this kingdom demonstrates a joyful celebration of local folklore typical of magical realism. Throughout the novel, it is supplemented by light-hearted anecdotes about the neighbourhood jinn toying with their human compatriots and the coming and going of other fantastical creatures, combining Kurdish, Turkmen, Arab, Assyrian, and Yazidi myth.

This vibrant celebration of local folklore is further entwined in a sense of wonder over oil-enabled technologies, best demonstrated by Khiḍr Mūsā. With his name evoking the legendary and immortal Islamic figure al-Khiḍr, who is said to appear in End Times, and who possesses privileged knowledge of the unseen, Khiḍr Mūsā begins life as an avaricious cattle trader before turning to arms smuggling, then, after receiving "revelation from the unseen" (*risālat al-ghayb*), travelling to the Soviet Union to seek his long-lost brothers.[43] After many years, all three men return in "the first zeppelin" (*awwal munṭād*) that Kirkuk had ever seen."[44] The joyous scene evokes the magical compressions of time and space usually enabled by jinn in the stories of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*, transporting humans in the blink of an eye over unfathomable expanses. This time, however, these startling compressions result from the newfound mobility

41 Ibid., 76, 239.
42 Ibid., 211.
43 Ibid., 84.
44 Ibid., 92.

of petro-modernity (not *jinn*, but en*gine* power), which, as Graeme Macdonald comments, has "altered the shape and geography of literary plot."[45]

However, the incident also carries an invisible menace, as, unbeknownst to Khiḍr, the zeppelin is laden with Soviet surveillance gas, scanning the Iraqi terrain for nuclear sites.[46] Similarly, when Khiḍr makes his first ever telephone call, complaining to the Royal Palace in Baghdad of IPC interference, the momentousness of the event is juxtaposed to its inability to effect change.[47] Both moments reveal a crucial tension within the novel's celebration of fantasy and technology. While initially wondrous, they capitulate to disappointment, conceal hidden threats, and engender a disorientation that spans sensory, emotional, ecological, and ontological levels.[48]

This disorientation is demonstrated in the novel's second main episode, when violent protests erupt following the IPC's decision to build a road to Baba Gurgur through Chuqur's historic Muṣallā Cemetery. In a typical twist, they culminate in the resurrection of the recently deceased barber, Qarah Qūl Manṣūr, from his grave on the legendary horse, Burāq. Given Qarah Qūl's repute as miserly and violent, he is not an obvious prophet, and, rather than delivering any meaningful political message, the episode increases the overriding sense of confusion. People react with extremes of emotion worthy of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*, as helicopters release water to prevent them fainting, the earth shakes beneath their feet, and the moon, stars, and lampposts go out.[49] Through this imagery, the IPC's digging up of the Muṣallā Cemetery becomes another microcosm of the novel's wider aesthetics, with phantoms awoken by the land's literal and figurative disturbance, and local populations disoriented by the transformations of petro-modernity.

As Tarek el-Ariss argues, modernity may be understood not as a particular ideology or manner of comportment, but "a series of experiences and encounters arising from leaving home, aversion to food, disorientation, anxiety attacks,

45 Graeme Macdonald, "The Resources of Fiction," in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 536.

46 *Ākhir*, 99.

47 Ibid., 112.

48 Evoking his childhood reading of Will Durant's eleven-volume *The Story of Civilisation* (1935–75), likely borrowed from an IPC library, al-ʿAzzāwī remarks that, "it convinced me of the holistic nature of civilisation (*shumūliyyat al-ḥaḍāra*), as a collective human endeavour." Elsewhere, he expresses an admiration for British scientific advances, while denouncing the IPC's meddling in Iraq. Tension between optimism in the forward march of "civilisation," and its toll on geopolitical margins, is thus expressed through his critical/autobiographical writing, and also clear in *Ākhir* (al-ʿAzzāwī, *al-Rūḥ al-Ḥayyah: Jīl al-sittīnāt fī al-ʿirāq* (Damascus: al-Mada Publishing, 1997), 22, 67).

49 *Ākhir*, 155, 165.

and physical collapse," all of which are "embodied" on "sensorial" levels.[50] These might more specifically be understood as what Stephanie LeMenager terms the "affective and bodily dispositions of petrocultures":[51]

> The petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the soles of one's feet are incorporating practices, in Paul Connerton's term for the repeated performances that become encoded in the body.[52]

In *Ākhir*, the "embodied memory" of the "petroleum infrastructure" is depicted as a series of shocks to the system, evoked in language that both echoes folklore and is rooted in the new substances of asphalt, electricity, and plastic. Through its twists and turns, *Ākhir* thus departs from what Ghosh critiques as the realist novel's celebration of the "new regularity of Bourgeois existence," which, he argues, renders it inherently unsuited to the unpredictability and collective scope of oil and climate change:

> Before the birth of the modern novel, wherever stories were told, fiction delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely. Narratives like those of *The Arabian Nights*, *The Journey to the West*, and *The Decameron* proceed by leaping blithely from one exceptional event to another … Novels too proceed in this fashion, but what is distinctive about the form is precisely the concealment of those exceptional moments that serve as the motor of narrative.[53]

Continuing, Ghosh refers to what Franco Moretti calls the "fillers" of nineteenth-century novels, providing the regularity of everyday detail to "style" existence after the pattern of Bourgeois convention and routine.[54] Contrarily, al-ʿAzzāwī turns to phantoms, erupting in moments of change and stress, and

50 Tarek el-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 2, 5.

51 Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, "The Aesthetics of Petrocultures," in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 430.

52 Stephanie LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief," in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 471.

53 Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 35, 78, 16–17.

54 Ibid., 17.

harking back to their role in *Alf laylah wa-laylah* as what Marina Warner terms "agents of fortune," introducing an "energy of unpredictability" and "dynamic of pure chance which runs alongside the larger designs of fate."[55] These presences open a door to the ecological uncanny and to what Ghosh calls "a 'spirit world'—a universe animated by nonhuman voices."[56]

Ineluctably, fantasy thus capitulates from the register of "*ʿajāʾib*" (wonders), ebbing and flowing throughout the novel, to horror. As its title suggests, the novel concerns the *last* of the angels, moving ineluctably towards the 14 July Revolution of 1958, when the monarchy was toppled, and the Free Officers, under ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim (1914–1963), took power. This revolution, though initially celebrated as a liberation from colonial oppression, marked the beginning of Kirkuk's transformation from ethnic plurality to an "ongoing cycle of intercommunal violence," entangled in Communist and Baʿthist ideologies, and exacerbated by Baghdad's increasing interference.[57] Tensions worsened over following decades through Baʿth policies fuelled by the lucrative presence of oil, including forced displacement and ethnic cleansing of non-Arab populations.

Tracing this trajectory, the plurality that al-ʿAzzāwī initially celebrates infects fantasy with increasing terror as the neighborhood shifts to both "ethnicized people" and "people of oil." Dallī Iḥsān is assassinated in 1958, transforming into a fountain of fire from which his "tribe" (*qabīlah*) descends: "angels of death on horses and motorbikes, raining down destruction on cities and towns."[58] Burhān ʿAbdallāh becomes the titular "last of the angels" with his coming-of-age exemplifying what might be called the "phantomization" of the local population.

Coming-of-Age as the Last of the Angels

Burhān's coming-of-age is structured through the logics of "suddenly" and "eternally," "first" and "last." With the most sustained narrative arc, and parallels to al-ʿAzzāwī himself becoming clear, he is first depicted as a child prodigy of seven, pursuing science and the occult, and deeply marked by both technology and the unseen.[59] The moment his childhood home is hooked up to electricity

55 Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 44.

56 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 73.

57 Bet-Shlimon, 158.

58 *Ākhir*, 288.

59 Ibid., 82, 88.

is described as an "upheaval" (*inqilāb*), and, when the family purchases a radio, he realizes "in an obscure way that the world was changing."[60] In the IPC fields where his father works, oil marks another profound encounter:

> The boy stood, awestruck, before the colossal white pipes, the looming storage towers, and the various dials that reminded him of clocks. Fire blazed, the sky was red, and a film of sand covered all. That heady smell, of oil mixed with soil, would remain forever with him.[61]

> اندهش كثيراً لرؤية الأنابيب البيضاء الضخمة والخزانات الكبيرة واللوحات الدائرية، ذات المؤشرات والتي تشبه الساعات، والنار المشتعلة والسماء الحمراء والرمل. وظلت في أنفه إلى الأبد تلك الرائحة التي لا تنسى، رائحة النفط المخلوطة برائحة التراب.

The sights, smells and sensations of oil are here described in imposing terms, in a strikingly rare literary portrait juxtaposing the technologies of towers, gauges and dials, to the wild natural power of fire, sky and sand. As Ghosh famously comments in a 1992 review of *Mudun al-milḥ*, oil and its extraction sites have been largely absent from world literature.[62] In *Ākhir*, too, they are depicted only fleetingly, yet their semantic field, of the "sudden," "eternal," and "irrevocable," and formational influence on Burhān, resonate through his subsequent fantastical encounters.

These encounters begin as, through an attic chest, he meets three guardian angels, old men in white robes, travelling through time to deliver a bag of spring to Chuqur who declare to him that, "we will be with you forever (*abadan*)."[63] These angels introduce a teleology to the novel; a point of hope anchored in the revivification of nature. Travelling "since eternity" (*mundhu al-azal*), they put Kirkuk at the centre of cosmology and mark the twentieth century as a turning-point, for better or worse.[64] Initially, they fill Burhān with dreams of power and knowledge but disappoint when he most needs them, as his coming-of-age shifts to disappearance and decay.[65] This is reflected on a metanarrative level, as the angels tell him that he is "nothing more than a hero

60 Ibid., 90.
61 Ibid., 34.
62 Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 431.
63 *Ākhir*, 30, 33.
64 Ibid., 85.
65 Ibid.

in an invented novel written by a disgruntled author."[66] The angels themselves confess to be "only three old men, exhausted by our journey through time," and, thereafter, the novel descends into violence and toxicity.[67]

During Ḥamīd's failed revolution, Burhān "suddenly grew up" (*kabura faj'atan*), and, following 1958, he "disappears" (*ghāba*) as though he "had never been" (*lam yakun mawjūdan abadan*).[68] Having begun his life searching, he spends it "waiting" (*fī intiẓār*), between Africa, the Middle East, America and Europe, where, we learn, "He led the student revolution in Paris, even without anyone calling attention to him by name."[69] Just as he rewrites Iraqi history, al-ʿAzzāwī puts his playful spin on European history through the presence of his phantomic protagonist. Like Ḥamīd and Khiḍr, Burhān becomes a ghost, wanting "to be as absent as anything else, hidden, leaving no trace behind him."[70]

In Kirkuk, meanwhile, the "dead" (*al-mawtā*) rise from their graves in a zombie apocalypse that culminates al-ʿAzzāwī's deconstruction of local fantasy and folklore, and his dark take on the wondrous, proliferating nonhuman worlds of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*. This apocalypse, and the toxicity through which it is depicted, points to the horrifying bloodshed of the Iran-Iraq (1980–1988) and early events of the First Gulf War. It also eerily preordains the Second Gulf War (2003–2011), as, after forty-six years, Burhān's angels reappear, and he returns to Kirkuk, placing the novel's conclusion in an imagined 2004, fourteen years after its publication, and evoking a deep anxiety over the land's future liveability. The final chapter begins with a characteristic "suddenly":

> Suddenly everything calmed down. An unusual yellow suffused the heavens. Was it the end or the beginning?[71]
>
> كل شيء هدأ فجأة. صفرة غير معهودة تلبد السماء. أهي النهاية أم البداية؟

Imagery of climatic dysphoria thereafter runs through the chapter, as Burhān shifts between dizziness and tears, anxiety, and despair. At first, his homecoming is idyllic, as his angels release spring into Chuqur, scattering seeds over the ground which becomes alive with flowers and animals. Kirkuk now enjoys laborless wealth and a moneyless economy, flowing with "milk and honey."[72] Everything is constructed by "Unknown workers—perhaps robots made in

66 Ibid. 229, trans., 193.
67 Ibid., 90.
68 Ibid., 268, 289.
69 Ibid., trans., 250.
70 Ibid., 298, trans., 253.
71 Ibid., 291, trans., 247.
72 Ibid., 308, trans., 262.

Japan."[73] All have cars, but none use them. This, then, is the age-old utopia of laborless idyll enabled by petro-technologies. Nature, simultaneously, returns to an originary state, as animals forget their mutual enmity and fear of humans.

Burhān, however, cannot shake an underlying "fear and anxiety" (*al-rahbah wa-l-qalaq*).[74] Repeatedly, he questions whether anything has truly changed, and a sense of repressed realities emerges behind the landscape's brightened colours, as long-awaited spring hints at its ghostly opposite before, with predictable suddenness, idyll ends. In terror, Burhān sees the sun rising from the West, a "strange sun, a sick sun, reminding him that all things must perish."[75] The notion of a "false" or "extinguished" spring (*rabīʿ kādhib*/*muṭaffa'*) becomes a repeated motif, recalling Rachel Carson's famous *Silent Spring* (1964), the literary foundation of the environmentalist movement, which similarly depicts a ruined environment through the juxtaposition of idyll and toxicity.[76]

Struggling to breathe in the stagnant air, Burhān sees his own dead body alongside the skeletons of Khiḍr Mūsā and the personified figure of Death (*al-Mawt*), who earlier gives Burhān the "Book of Destiny" (*Kitāb al-qadar*).[77] A perfect record of human deeds, the book in all its completeness hauntingly contrasts the novelistic chaos of *Ākhir* itself, as, jumping to its last pages, Burhān sees only blankness:

> There was no final chapter in the book, only white pages, bearing a sole word: "Suddenly." Only blankness followed … Burhān was seized by anxiety as he read and reread that word: "suddenly." It awoke terror in his heart. Suddenly, everything can end. Suddenly, humans can die. Suddenly, the Earth can slip from its axis, plummeting into the depths of space.[78]
>
> لم يكن في الكتاب فصل أخير مثل الكتب الأخرى وإنما فصل أبيض حتي النهاية يبدأ بكلمة واحدة "فجأة"، ثم لا شيء سوى البياض … فجأة يمكن أن ينتهي كل شيء. فجأة يمكن أن يموت الإنسان. فجأة يمكن أن تنزلق الأرض من محورها وتغور في أعماق الكون.

Culminating the novel's logic of "suddenly," Burhān's feverish imaginings exemplify Ghosh's comments on the aesthetics appropriate to global warming, in which humans are struck by the "urgent proximity of nonhuman

73 Ibid., trans., 263.
74 Ibid., 301.
75 Ibid., 314.
76 Ibid., 324, 318. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 21–22. Somewhat like al-ʿAzzāwī and Ḥabībī, Carson opens her work with a "Fable for Tomorrow."
77 *Ākhir*, 306.
78 Ibid., 312.

presences," as landscapes shift and heavenly bodies topple.[79] Apocalyptic imagery dominates the following pages, announcing the final breakdown of cosmological ordering, as small green creatures composing the armies of Gog and Magog—apocalyptic tribes referenced in the Qurʾān as "corrupting the land" (*mufsidūn fī al-arḍ*, 18:94)—set stones on fire and launch chemical and nuclear weapons.[80] This wasteland is framed as a "premature Judgement Day" (*al-qiyāma taḥullu qabl al-awān*), and while Burhān is cornered by the armies:

> He raised his hands up high, like a man preparing to die. Just when he had lost all hope of salvation, he noticed that his hands were changing into prodigious wings. He beat the air with them. He lifted himself higher … higher … higher … until he soared into the sky, and disappeared.[81]
>
> رفع يديه عالياً، مثل رجل يتأهب للموت. إذّاك وكان قد فقد كل أمل في النجاة رأى يديه تتحولان إلى جناحين هائلين، ضرب بهما الهواء فارتفع عالياً، عالياً، عالياً، محلقاً في السماء وغاب.

Fittingly, *Ākhir* concludes with the verb "*ghāba*"—a final, decisive disappearance that leaves the reader wondering what horrors Burhān's apparently sublime transformation conceal.

Thus concludes the fantastical epic of Kirkuk, hinting towards the spectral presences of oil imperialism, directing Iraqi history from the shadows, and revealing the utopic dreams of oil technologies and dystopic nightmares of oil-fuelled wars. From a geopolitical margin, Kirkuk gains cosmic centrality, as the stage for the unfolding of the "*Kitāb al-qadar*," as well as the disintegration of this *kitāb*, symbolic of cosmological ordering more broadly, into the chaos of petro-modernity and the modern novel. At every stage, fantasy and wonder hint at their repressed counterparts of horror and degradation, maintaining the novel within the register of the uncanny and aligning it to its ghostly twin, *Sarāyā, bint al-ghūl*, at the other end of the pipeline.

79 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 5.
80 *Ākhir*, 314.
81 Ibid., 322. trans., 274–275.

Haifa's Fairy-tale of a Fishless Sea

In 1927, when oil gushed forth at Baba Gurgur, Haifa was, like Kirkuk, under British Mandate. Due to its coastal location, it was also a designated hub for the refinement and transportation of Middle East crude to Europe. To this effect, the Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline was constructed in 1935 and in use until 1948, when Jewish forces ousted Palestinians en masse from the city, and the Iraqi government shut it down in protest over the new Israeli state.[82] Nevertheless, Haifa continued to develop into Israel's largest petrochemicals base, housing its most significant refinery. Feeding into the Haifa Bay, the Muqattaʿ River became contaminated with chemical by-products, while the city became the state's worst polluted, with elevated instances of cancer, asthma, and heart disease.[83]

Ḥabībī, who himself died of cancer at seventy-three, remained in Haifa until 1956, when he moved to Nazareth, leaving instructions that he was to be buried in his home city, with the words "*bāqin fī Ḥayfā*" (he remained in Haifa) on his gravestone.[84] *Sarāyā*, his final novel, expresses this rootedness through the central, palpably-depicted geography of Mount Carmel and the surrounding coast. Shifting in tone from Ḥabībī's satirical earlier writing which explores the absurdities of existence as a Palestinian Arab within Israel, it reflects melancholically on family, youth, and the cost of political engagement. As what Rachael Brenner terms an "unsparing self-examination" both of Ḥabībī's political activism, and of the "inexorably advancing political and ideological reality of the state," *Sarāyā* expresses, as Stefan Meyer comments, a "need for an emotional element that Habiby sees as having been previously lacking in his life."[85] Structured around the uncanny return of a childhood beloved, Sarāyā, the novel excavates personal and collective histories through numerous phantoms. While the political dimensions of these phantoms are clear, as an ongoing remembrance of Israeli violence and Palestinian dislocation, they are also bound into nagging undercurrents of ecological loss and

82 Havrelock, 409, 413.

83 Alon Tal, *Pollution in a Promised Land: An Environmental History of Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 256, 272.

84 Maysoun Ershead Shehadeh, "The Arabs in Israel—Hybrid Identity of a Stateless National Collectivity," *Mediterranean Studies* 29, no. 1 (2021): 77.

85 Rachel Brenner, Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 221. Stefan Meyer, The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 106. For a further, extensive study of the novel, see: Bashshāra Manṣūr, al-Dhākira al-filasṭīniyyah fī riwāyat Sarāyā bint al-ghūl li-Imīl Ḥabībī (Ramallah: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah al-Filasṭīniyya, 2009).

energy anxiety, as the main narrator, ʿAbdallāh, roams Mount Carmel, lamenting its worsening aridity.[86]

As what Seraje Assi describes as a "supernatural folktale" drawing on "a fascinating amalgam of ancient and biblical narratives, popular tradition, Arabic, Islamic, and Quranic vocabulary," *Sarāyā*'s parallels to *Ākhir al-malāʾikah* are clear.[87] *Sarāyā* is similarly overshadowed by ongoing war, from 1948 to the First Gulf War when Ḥabībī finished the novel. Similarly, it alternates imagery of *al-ghayb* with new technologies, rooted in moments of sensory and emotional shock. As ʿAbdallāh recalls the scent of petroleum at the Haifa Oil Refinery, for example, a central uncanny scene unfolds, entangling the resurgence of forgotten memories with immediate experiences of an altered landscape.[88] Ḥabībī himself worked as a crane driver at the refinery while studying by correspondence for a degree in petroleum engineering at the University of London, and, as with al-ʿAzzāwī, this first-hand experience resonates through his writing.[89] Echoing Burhān's visit to Baba Gurgur, ʿAbdallāh even evokes his "special intimacy" (*ulfah khāṣṣah*) with the "scent of crude oil" (*rāʾiḥat al-nafṭ al-khām*), as the novel interweaves the strange-made-familiar and the familiar-made-strange.[90]

Even preceding their 1990s novels, al-ʿAzzāwī and Ḥabībī employ strikingly similar imagery. Like al-ʿAzzāwī's frozen city in *Makhlūqāt*, Ḥabībī's second novel, *Ikhṭayyah* (1985), depicts a spaceship forcing Haifa's traffic to a hypnotic standstill and explicitly evokes the exemplary uncanniness of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*'s "*Madīnat al-nuḥās*."[91] Alongside the novels' political dimensions as commentaries on state oppression, the juxtaposition of urban spaces, petrified in place while rapidly transforming, also resonates on environmental levels, particularly through *Ikhtayyah*'s central traffic jam. Parallels can also be drawn between the authors' satirical, parodic, and deceptively light-hearted tones, and their embrace of playful metanarrative alongside ambivalent heroes,

86 *ʿAbdallāh is understood as Ḥabībī's alter-ego*, with details of his life paralleling Ḥabībī's biography, from his birth in Wadi Nisnas to his careers as crane driver, author, politician, and editor of *al-Ittiḥād* newspaper. In footnotes, Ḥabībī refers to himself as the "author" (*al-muʾallif*) of *Sarāyā*, while ʿAbdallāh is referred to as the novel's "hero" (*baṭal*), and as Ḥabībī's "friend" (*ṣāḥib*) (*Sarāyā*, 11).

87 Seraje Assi, "Memory, Myth and the Military Government: Emile Habibi's Collective Autobiography," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 52 (2013): 94.

88 Ḥabībī, *Sarāyā*, 187–190. When making reference to *Sarāyā*, I use my own translations except in select cases; in those cases I reference Theroux's translation (trans.).

89 Ḥabībī explicitly mentions the IPC, which his aunt refers to as "*al-absiyyah*" (*Sarāyā*, 142).

90 Ibid., 186.

91 Imīl Ḥabībī, *Ikhṭīyah* (Nicosia: Manshūrāt Muʾassasat Bīsān lil-Ṣaḥafah wal-Nashr wal-Tawzīʿ, 1985), 32.

mockery of monolithic ideologies, and evocation of growing ethnic and religious tensions.

Yet differences are also apparent. Unlike the third-person narrative of *Ākhir*, *Sarāyā* is told through dialogue between ʿAbdallāh and an interlocutor, anchoring the narrative in subjective memory and the cadences of orality, as well as premodern dialogic traditions, from the *maqāmah* to Plato's *Republic*. Linguistically, Ḥabībī's celebrated use of puns, repetition, intertext, and other rhetorical devices further contrasts al-ʿAzzāwī's precise, narrative-driven prose. Finally, unlike the cataclysmic toxicity with which *Ākhir* concludes, ecological anxiety represents more of a nagging undercurrent in *Sarāyā*, perhaps reflecting Haifa's position at the end of the pipeline, on the polluted fringes of the oil industry, as well as how Ḥabībī remained in Israel throughout his life, witnessing the land's gradual environmental shifts. While in Iraq, the horrifying bloodshed of the Iran-Iraq War dominated the 1980s, in Israel, the decade saw "a new era of environmentalism," in Alon Tal's terms, and a shift away from what Hannah Boast calls the previous "high-modernist" belief in technological mastery of the land.[92]

Ḥabībī would undoubtedly have been privy to these shifts. Abandoning the oil industry in 1942, he became a founding member of the Communist Party in Israel, elected three times to the Knesset between 1951 and 1972. Within this capacity, he would have engaged in ongoing environmental debates over state projects, from the National Water Carrier, completed in 1964 and diverting water from Lake Tiberias and the Jordan River to the south, to the infamous draining of the Hula Swamps, fifty miles northeast of Haifa. These changes are mirrored in elliptical form in *Sarāyā*, as the narrator repeatedly evokes the inexorable "drying out" (*tanshīf*) of Mount Carmel's springs alongside the "ashes of Haifa" (*ramād Ḥayfā*).[93]

Alongside its political and emotional symbolism, aridity must be read in environmental terms. Water scarcity in the Middle East, and particularly Israel/Palestine, is widely recognized as a cause of ongoing tensions, with global warming exacerbating droughts and forest fires over the last century, and the 1980s seeing several devastating instances of both.[94] Israeli urbanization, industrialization, and agriculture led to increasing aridity over the same

92 Alon Tal, "An Imperiled Promised Land: The Antecedents of Israel's Environmental Crises and Prospects for Progress" *Journal of Developing Societies* 13, no. 1 (1997): 118; Hannah Boast, *Hydrofictions: Water, Power and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 73.

93 Ḥabībī, *Sarāyā*, 29.

94 See Naama Tessler, "Documentation and analysis of wildfire regimes on Mount Carmel and the Jerusalem hills," *Horizons in Geography* 79/80 (2012): 184–193. For broader

period, while the National Water Carrier drastically reduced water levels in the Jordan River and Lake Tiberias, compounded by pollution from the draining of the Hula swamps.[95] Use of underground springs as a main source of freshwater was replaced by state-run pipes, subject to central (mis-)management.[96] Within the first pages of *Sarāyā*, ʿAbdallāh evokes these contexts, describing how "Tiberias' still surface appeared before them, with its waters then still teeming with fish."[97] In the present moment, he is fishing at sea, after the state's appropriation of the lake forces him to relocate to the haunted coastline, thus becoming the latent catalyst for Sarāyā's appearance, and, indeed, the writing of the novel. Other explicit and latent references to water politics traverse the novel, suggesting it as a significant case study for what Boast terms "hydrofictions," in which, alongside the recognized "territorial focus" of Palestinian literature, water—alongside petroleum—represents an uncanny, nagging undercurrent.[98]

In his focus on ecologies, Ḥabībī is certainly not alone among Palestinian authors, with Rajā Shahādah's (b. 1951) *Palestinian Walks* (2007) raising the profile of environmental protest through its "meanders" (*saraḥāt*) through the West Bank.[99] *Sarāyā* is similarly structured around a "*darb al-ālām*" (Via Dolorosa), as the narrator pursues Sarāyā through Mount Carmel, emphasizing the motif of "treading lightly," with which I began this article, and referring to the novel as "*al-sīra-al-masīra*" (a novel-journey).[100] The resulting narrative evokes Taylor Eggan's concept of the "ecological uncanny," in which the process of journeying into nature represents not a process of self-actualisation, but an estranging experience, dissipating long-held assumptions.[101] Through Ḥabībī's intricate prose, echoes and repetitions create phantomic connections between geographies, from ʿAbdallāh's evocation of his "old intimacy with these hills"

discussion of water conflict in the region, see Jan Selby, *Water, Power and Politics in the Middle East: The Other Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

95 Boast, 87–88.

96 Samar Attar similarly indicates the novel's commentary on water inequality (Samar Attar, "Buried in the Deepest Recesses of Memory: A Queen or a Slave? The Vision of Ghassan Kanafani and Emile Habibi of the City of Haifa," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2007): 48). At one point, ʿAbdallāh states: "Then came Mekorot [Israel's State Water Company] … and made us go thirsty in the months of both Shaʿban and Ramadan" (*Sarāyā*, 87).

97 *Sarāyā*, 29.

98 Boast, 10, 22, 26.

99 Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (London: Profile Books, 2008).

100 *Sarāyā*, 178.

101 Taylor Eggan, "The Ecological Uncanny: Estranging Literary Landscapes in Twentieth-Century Narrative Fiction" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2017), 35.

(*ulfah qadīmah ilā hādhihī al-jibāl*), to his "special intimacy" (*ulfah khāṣṣah*) with oil, to the disorientation and despair that ultimately replace intimacy in both instances.[102] In what follows, I analyse these strands first through the novel's dual thrust as a mournful elegy of land and water and their attempted linguistic revivification, and second through the phantoms of petro-modernity that disturb these attempts.

Mourning Ecologies and Linguistic Revivification

Sarāyā opens as ʿAbdallāh fishes at night on the stormy coast of the deserted Palestinian village, al-Zīb. Perched atop his favorite boulder, he evokes the hapless fisherman of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*'s famous "*Ḥikāyat al-ṣayyāḍ maʿ al-ʿifrīt*" (The Tale of the Fisherman and the Demon), casting his line into ominous depths, and tying the novel's eerie tone to its imagery of sea and mountain.[103] It is 1983, with the Lebanese war a rumbling backdrop, as he recalls rumours of a phantom—a "something" (*shayʾ*)—appearing between Raʾs Nāqūrah in the North and Haifa in the South.[104] Here, Sarāyā materializes as a shadow on the water, an elusive young girl whose cry of "father!" echoes throughout. ʿAbdallāh scrambles fearfully up the beach, and Part 1 thereafter follows his disoriented movement away from, and then towards, Sarāyā, interspersed with local and personal memory. Through classical dictions of the uncanny, referring to "amazing events" (*ḥawādith ʿajabiyyah*) and "fearful sights" (*maẓāhir murībah*), we move from seashore to Mount Carmel, and from the "terrifying night" to the "first rays of dawn," when he drives back to Nazareth.[105]

Rooted in exposure to the elements, ʿAbdallāh's pursuit elegizes water. In the novel's first sentence, "sighs of longing" (*āhāt al-ḥanīn*) evoke the Palestinian literary trope of yearning for the homeland but are directed to the "brook" (*ʿaynmāʾ*) on Mount Carmel, which has, to quote the English translation, "been dried out by grief" (*nashshafahā al-qahr*).[106] While the English uses the intransitive "run dry," and translates "*qahr*" as "grief," the original emphasizes the agency of human misuse through the transitive verb "*nashshafa*" (to dry *s.th* out),

102 *Sarāyā*, 51.

103 Ahmed Gamal describes the novel's style as "Gothic," and evokes its "fantastic ghostly atmosphere," (Ahmed Gamal, "Postcolonial Recycling of the Oriental Vampire in Habiby's *Saraya, the Ghoul's Daughter* and Mukherjee's *Jasmine*," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2013): 9).

104 *Sarāyā*, 26.

105 Ibid., 22, 26.

106 Ibid., 21, trans., 15.

with "*qahr*" also signifying "subjugation." While determinedly heading for "Sarāyā's brook," where the children first met, ʿAbdallāh is eerily aware that it has run dry as the endeavors of memory confront material change.[107]

Through water, Mount Carmel becomes a further elegiac focus. Declared as Israel's first Nature Reserve in 1971, it was central to the early environmentalist movement within the country, whose participants protested the mountain's urbanisation and use as a cement quarry and sought its restoration after the wildfires that ravaged it in the 1980s and 1990s.[108] For ʿAbdallāh, however, Mount Carmel's death is an established fact. Repeatedly, he berates himself for assuming it to be an unchanging monument amidst rapid transformation, declaring "It is a terrible thing to exist while a mountain dies," before invoking a long list of the prophets associated with it, then concluding with the mournful exhortation:

> O Uncle Ibrahim and O Sarāyā, daughter of the ogre: Come, stand with me on this boulder and see how mountains die—how Mount Carmel is dying![109]
>
> يا عمي إبراهيم وسرايا بنت الغول: تعالوا وقفوا معي فوق هذه الصخرة وانظروا كيف تموت الجبال. كيف يموت الكرمل!

As with Kirkuk in *Ākhir al-malā'ikah*, Carmel is depicted through both the transformations of petro-modernity and the mythic weight of eschatology. The path leading to the mountain was once fringed by pines, but is now bordered by cars, "unmoving (*lā tataḥarrak*), as though gathering in an elephant graveyard to await the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-ḥashr*)."[110] Imagery of "uprooting" (*iqtilā*ʿ) joins that of aridity to evoke how the asphalt streets have displaced greenery.[111] Carmel, ʿAbdallāh exclaims, was a certainty more fixed than "sun" and "day," yet, as in *Ākhir al-malā'ikah*, climatic certainties, just like mountains, become unpredictable, as sea and sky, night and day, confusedly merge.[112]

107 See Boast's comments on the uncanniness of the underground swamp in Israeli literature, which she relates to Freud's discussion of underground springs within his extrapolation of *das Unheimlich* (Boast, 91).

108 Tal, *Pollution*, 125.

109 *Sarāyā*, 108, trans., 103.

110 Ibid., 108, trans., 102.

111 Ibid., 205, trans., 205.

112 Ibid., 104, 30.

Against these processes, Ḥabībī urges the land back to life through the linguistic and intertextual play that marks his writing, celebrating the primordial but repressed voices of nature through an enumeration evocative of the classical *maqāmah* with which his writing is associated:

> Nature spoke before her children did. It's from her that people learned to speak. And so we repeat, after nature's voice and example, the rustling of trees, the hissing of snakes, the roar of the sea, the cooing of doves, the spill and surge of water; howling and wailing, meowing and bleating, and whinnying; braying, croaking, and neighing; panting, screeching, whispering, rasping; moaning, lamenting, and longing; clamour, muddle, and din.[113]

> نطقت الطبيعة قبل أن ينطق ولدها. ويكون تعلم النطق منها. فرددنا، كما صوت الطبيعة: "حفيف الشجر وفحيح الأفاعي وهدير البحر وهديل الحمام وانسياب الماء وانصبابه. والعواء والعويل والمواء والصهيل والنعيق والنعيب والنهيق والشهيق والزفير والثغاء والوشوشة والحشرجة. والتأوه والأنين والحنين. والضوضاء والجلبة والبلبلة".

Returning to the pre-Islamic canon, ʿAbdallāh then evokes the "symphony of Imrūʾ al-Qays," which he similarly describes as "formed from the voices of nature," emphasizing the non-human foundations of the foremost text within Arabic literary tradition. In keeping, he continues to infuse language and consciousness with the nonhuman. Through *jināS* (paronomasia), he describes how his "imagination wanders" from "that coast" (*ḥādhā al-shaṭṭ*) to "other coasts" joining each geography through the narration of uncanny terrors that animated them.[114]

In attempting to revive the land, ʿAbdallāh must confront its sudden strangeness, as intimacy and uncanniness are entwined through imagery and syntax. Again and again, he reiterates his knowledge of the land, but this assertion is repeatedly questioned:

> His acquaintance with the sea's many voices was as ancient as his acquaintance with those of Mount Carmel.[115]

> إن تعرفه على أصوات البحر قديم قدم تعرفه على أصوات الكرمل

113 Ibid., 46, trans., 41.

114 Ibid., 34. "*ʿAyn*" further evokes both "spring" and "eye" and Habibi plays on this pun.

115 Ibid., 44.

In this sentence, parallel syntax, repetition, and use of the *mafʿūl muṭlaq* evoke a holistic, seemingly mythic, familiarity. The doubled evocation of "*qadīm*" (ancient) and "*qidam*" (ancientness) at the sentence's centre joins the sounds of sea and mountain, framed by the similarly doubled "*taʿarruf*" (acquaintance). Together, they create a visual and auditory sense of comprehensiveness—of the totality of his emotional and remembered mastery of place.

Yet this familiarity is challenged by the aesthetics of his pursuit, in which he becomes disoriented and lost, clambering on all fours, and digressing to other memories themed around physical exposure and existential transformation. When attacked by a shark, for example, he recalls fishing in the Black Sea, when his catch was seized by seagulls, before he himself was attacked by crows that assumed his exhausted form to be that of a corpse. His mirrored, deceptively harmonious syntax, paralleling forms of the root *f-r-s* (to kill/tear), this time reveals his exposure:

> And so suddenly I became prey—me who had thought myself predator.[116]
>
> وإذا بي الفريسة وأنا حاسب نفسي المفترس

Thus, ʿAbdallāh journeys through Carmel as though "enchanted" (*kal-maʾkhūdh*).[117] After initially becoming lost, he allows Sarāyā to become his guide, pulling him north "from the vertigo (*duwār*) of the sea to the vertigo (*duwār*) of the mountain."[118]

The phantom of Sarāyā, above all, combines the familiar and uncanny, as she emerges as nature personified, yet ever elusive. Based on the folktale, "*Sarāyā bint al-Ghūl*," in which Sarāyā is snatched by an ogre while wandering the hills, and must be rescued by her boy cousin, the novel circles around the literal and symbolic identities of both her and the ogre. As el-Zein comments, in Islam the ogre/*ghūl* is associated with the "perpetually changing," and the suggested meanings of both ogre and girl are suitably shifting.[119] The lost beloved, of course, features prominently in Ḥabībī's previous novels, elegizing facets of Palestine and Palestinian identity. In *Sarāyā*, she is consistently tied to disrupted ecologies and, ʿAbdallāh reflects, might more appropriately have been named "Maʿāt," after the ancient Egyptian goddess, embodying, "life in

116 Ibid., 33.
117 Ibid., 51.
118 Ibid., 49.
119 *Sarāyā*, 139; El-Zein, 139.

harmony with the flow of nature (*al-tanāghum maʿ tanāsuq al-ṭabīʿah*)."[120] As it becomes clear, however, ʿAbdallāh has long neglected Sarāyā's cries for help:

> The cries went on and on, until I became used to them, and they became helplessly confused. There are, I realise, two kinds of heartbeat, the natural, life-giving beat, and the pulse of censure and despair.[121]

> تكررت (الإستغاثات) حتى تعودت عليها واختلط عليَّ أمرها. فالقلب ينبض بنوعين من النبضات: النبض الطبيعي ونبض التأنيب والحسرة.

ʿAbdallāh's words speak to the wider turning-away of humanity from the nonhuman, and the latent anxiety this engenders on physical and psychological levels. Echoing *Ākhir al-malāʾikah*, failure is a repeated motif, conveying political powerlessness, but also "censure and despair." Stressing that, rather than politics or literature, his true vocation has been fishing on windswept, "fish-poor" coasts, ʿAbdallāh describes himself as "empty-handed," in an embrace of penury and disappointment aligned with the landscape. Thus, he enunciates a counternarrative to the plenty and restoration of Israeli environmental rhetoric, with its faith in the "ability of progressive technological advancements to 'conquer' nonhuman nature in order to improve human life."[122] Technological ambivalence, meanwhile, emerges more keenly in the novel's later chapters, moving from ʿAbdallāh's fearful scramble to his lengthier Via Dolorosa, from 1983 when he first sees Sarāyā's phantom, to 1990 when the novel is completed, and further back to the turn of the century, to 1948, and beyond.

The Phantoms of Petro-memory

As suggested, a central uncanny moment in *Sarāyā* resonates from ʿAbdallāh's morning commute to the Haifa Bay oil refinery:

> I was working as the driver of a power crane that towered some two hundred and fifty feet over the ground, building one of the cooling towers at

120 *Sarāyā*, 209, 178.
121 Ibid., 171.
122 *Sarāyā*, 27, 37; Boast, 73.

the petroleum refining plants near the mouth of al-Muqattaʿ River at the Bay of Haifa.[123]

كنت أعمل سائقاً لرافعة كهربائية تعلو عن الأرض ثمانين متراً في بناء برج من برجي التبريد في معامل تكرير البترول بالقرب من مصب نهر المقطع في بحر حيفا.

This dizzying description evokes the frequent shifts from above to below in Ḥabībī's writing, exemplified in his first novel, *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-gharībah fī ikhtifāʾ Saʿīd abī al-naḥs al-mutashāʾil* (1974; *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, 1989), in which the protagonist, Saʿid, both spends extended periods in an underground cave and becomes stranded on a pole miles above the earth. In *Sarāyā*, these shifts become the scene for coupling petro-imaginaries and imaginaries of *al-ghayb*, as fog obscures the landscape, and he stumbles into a lamppost (*ʿamūd kahrabāʾ*), prompting the appearance of a "column of light" (*ʿamūd nūr*), upon which angels descend and ascend to the heavens.[124] Disoriented, he seeks Mount Carmel as a familiar point of reference but finds only fog (or, perhaps more likely, smog), as, echoing the themes and imagery of his first encounter with Sarāyā, the scene shifts from idyllic coast to industrialized city, inhabiting both with the same phantoms.

Throughout the novel, technologies further appear in ambivalent terms, failing or menacing ʿAbdallāh. His "torch" "abandons" him (*khadhalanī*) in Part I as he scrambles up the beach while an Israeli "searchlight" (*kashshāf kahrabāʾī*) becomes his sole source of light through its tireless tracking of his movement.[125] Far from incidental details, these references are imbued with significance through their correspondence to the novel's broader energy anxiety. As Fredric Jameson writes, "narrative elements can be intensified and marked from within by an absent cause undetectable empirically but read off their sheerest formal properties."[126] In *Sarāyā*, technologies of light, water, and movement exude an absent anxiety and an underlying fragility, coupled with the novel's more explicit critiques of industrialisation and urbanisation. Underlying all is a sense that the experience of being a spectral Palestinian is profoundly bound into being on the underside of petromodernity, its sources of light and movement.

Part II shifts from Sarāyā, the novel's central phantom, to other "*aṭyāf*"; acquaintances from ʿAbdallāh's past, "walking on all threes: infirm and strange," whose untimely deaths are sometimes bound into events surrounding the

123 *Sarāyā*, 186, trans. 185.
124 Ibid., 190, 191.
125 Ibid., 47, 66.
126 Fredric Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (1986): 316.

nakbah and sometimes entirely unconnected to it.[127] Many are connected to petro-technologies, and lead back both to Sarāyā, and to ʿAbdallāh's poignant ambivalence towards the hydrocarbon era. The first of these is ʿAbdallāh's young niece, Suʿād, who died of an electric shock from the radio ground-wire that was mistakenly connected to a balcony railing. The suddenness of her death is emphasized through the simplicity of the phrase, "All we heard was a solitary cry of 'Mama!'," while anxious repetition of the fact that "she died of an electric shock" (*bi-mass kahrabāʾī* and *bi-ṣadmah kahrabāʾiyyah*) hints at the specific suddenness of energy-related traumas.[128] Echoing *Ākhir al-malāʾikah*, the arrival of the radio is both a moment of transformation and haunting shock. Afraid to approach the girl, the family must await her father's return to disconnect the power surge. Suʿād, meanwhile, is buried in the new cemetery on Mount Carmel, soon to be "swallowed by the houses of Haifa."[129] As in *Ākhir al-malāʾikah*, however, phantoms vie with urbanization. Visiting Suʿād's grave, ʿAbdallāh is unsettled to see it has been tended to, and is "alive and well" (*ḥayyan yarzuq*).[130] Given the many years that have passed since the girl's death, and the emigration of her father to Lebanon, he concludes that the tending hand must belong to Sarāyā, providing an eerily vital pulse to a graveyard destined for destruction.

Through the novel's digressive structure, remembrance of Suʿād then leads to that of three boys who died on the new road from Nazareth to Acre, which, like that in *Ākhir al-malāʾikah*, stirs up yet more phantoms:

> Whenever I think of the fate of young Suʿād, I think of the fate of three boys from Shefaʿamr. The wide new road from Acre to Nazareth cut across their family land, where they had spent their young lives flying paper planes and darting like gazelles in games of cops and robbers. They paid no heed to this wide expanse of pitch and tar. And so the cars, flashing by with breath-taking speed, caught them unawares, snatching their lives one by one, within the space of a month, until their companions grasped the reality of the new borders.[131]
>
> وكلما يأتيني مصير الصبية سعاد يأتيني مصير فتية ثلاثة شفاعمريين شق الطريق العريض الجديد—من الناصرة إلى عكا—أرض عائلتهم التي كانوا درجوا على اللعب فيها وتطيير

127 *Sarāyā*, 63, trans., 59.
128 Ibid., 70–71.
129 Ibid., 72–73.
130 Ibid., 73.
131 Ibid., 75 (I have departed from the published translation here due to an error in its understanding of the syntax).

الطيارات الورقية والركض، ركض الغزلان، فريقين "عسكر وحرامية". فلم يبالوا بهذا الشق العريض من الزفت والقطران. فدهمتهم سيارات كانت تسير بسرعة تخطف الأبصار. فخطفت أعمارهم واحداً وراء اللآخر في مدة شهر واحد حتى تعرف بقية الفتيان على الحدود الجديدة.

Contrasting the children's "darting like gazelles" (*rakḍ al-ghizlān*) to the cars' "breath-taking speed" (*surʿah takhṭaf al-abṣār*), ʿAbdallāh juxtaposes economies of movement, and the "new borders" (*ḥudūd jadīdah*), created not by politics, but hydrocarbon.[132]

Inevitably, these memories invoke Sarāyā, whose phantomic presence is entangled in the disorientation of petro-modernity:

"Sarāyā!"

I call her name now, revealing my living secret to you, with an inward shout not unlike the internal combustion that so altered the face of the world, within the engine of the automobile, the airplane, the harvester, and the rocket to Mars. Perhaps it will also alter my world, to which I returned, as it was the only one I had.

I laugh inwardly, like that same engine backfiring. How often have I heard this laugh coming from the mouth of my old car's exhaust pipe? Now it's returning to the lifeless and useless heap of iron and steel that it was. As I myself am going back to walking on the feet that God gave me and my mother taught me to use.[133]

سرايا!

ها أنا أهتف باسمها الآن، وأنا أفشي لك بسري الحي، هتافاً باطنياً أشبه بالاحتراق الداخلي الذي غيّر وجه العالم—في محرك سيارة أو طيارة أو حاصدة أو صاروخ عابر إلى المريخ—لعله يغير عالمي الذي عدت إليه حين لم يبق لي من العوالم سواه.

ها أنا أقهقه قهقهة باطنية، أشبه بانفجارات العطل في ذلك المحرك. مراراً سمعت مثل هذه القهقهة تخرج من فوهة ماسورة الغاز العادم في سيارتي العتيقة. فتغدو السيارة كومة من الحديد الصلب لا حراك فيه ولا نفع منه. فأعود إلى المشي على قدمي الإثنتين مثلما خلقني ربي ودرّجتني الوالدة.

132 Ibid., 75.

133 Ibid., 74–75, trans., 68.

Concluding the chapter, ʿAbdallāh links his internal realizations to the globality of the world's shifted energies. As Morton writes, discussing the uncanniness of human-induced climate change, "There you are, turning the ignition of your car. And it creeps up on you. You are a member of a massively distributed thing. This thing is called *species*."[134] In *Sarāyā*, cars are consistently treated with ambivalence, from ʿAbdallāh "treading lightly on the gas pedal" (*ukhaffif al-waṭʾ ʿalā daʿāsat al-banzīn*), in another echo of al-Maʿarrī, to description of the "unmoving cars" of Mount Carmel, pre-empting his own "lifeless" heap as he returns to his pedestrian Via Dolorosa.[135] Through narrative echoes, these local memories and geographies are woven together, then connected to a more expansive whole—the "face of the world" (*wajh al-ʿālam*), and the "internal combustion" (*al-iḥtirāq al-dākhilī*) that has altered it. As with natural geographies, language is infused with this "internal combustion," as ʿAbdallāh imagines his laugh like an "engine backfiring" (*infijārāt al-ʿuṭl*), revealing him as a son of both land and hydrocarbon. Rejecting the framework of the efficient, smoothly operating modern world, ʿAbdallah dwells on accidents, breakdowns and stuttering. To discover Saraya, he must leave the breath-snatching speed of cars, and the straight road, "lightening his tread," and accepting his fate on the underside of petromodernity, where torches fail, searchlights pursue, and electricity and automobiles kill.

Gog, Magog, and the Gulf War

Like al-ʿAzzāwī, Ḥabībī also invokes the wonders of technology and deploys the drama of aliens and flying saucers in both *al-Waqāʾiʿ* and *Ikhṭayyah*. Introducing *Sarāyā*, he urges all Arabs to embrace the "new world" of "astonishing scientific achievements," while the novel's conclusion features flight from earth, not as an angel, but in a spaceship:

> Sometimes, he imagines the cell to be a spaceship, adrift in the outer reaches of the universe. And within this ship, there is a special unit for the inhabitants of the Green Planet: a cell with a glass dome, under which we sit, pondering whether this is the beginning journey or the end journey? The setting-out, or the coming-back?[136]

134 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: for a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 7.

135 *Sarāyā*, 94, 89.

136 Ibid., 13, 209.

> ويتخيل هذه الصومعة، أحياناً، سفينة فضاء تائهة في مجاهل الكون. وفي السفينة قسم مخصص للمسافرين من سكان الكوكب الأخضر، أشبه بصومعة ذات قبة من زجاج نجلس تحتها متسائلين: هل هي رحلة البداية أم هي رحلة النهاية؟ رحلة الإنطلاق أم رحلة العودة؟

As with *Ākhir al-malā'ikah*, this imagined departure from the local and the land is uncomfortably juxtaposed to the fractured, uncanny landscape left behind. "End" and "beginning" are confused, alongside the language of sci-fi and eschatology.

Thus emerges an ambivalence, bound into the paradoxical conditions that Hannah Arendt notes of modern humans as "earthbound creatures" who "have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe," and "thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is."[137] In *Sarāyā*, the sense of being "earthbound" is expressed through exposure of the self and written text to precarious ecologies, creating, as with al-ʿAzzāwī, a tension between belief in human progress shaped by petroleum, and painful awareness of the debris in its wake.[138] Both Burhān, transforming into an angel, and ʿAbdallāh, drifting through space, cannot but evoke Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History":

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[139]

Through their angels and phantoms, both *Ākhir al-malā'ikah* and *Sarāyā* are caught between the debris of the past and anxiety over future sustainability, not just of political situations, but the liveability of lands. The events of the 1980s undoubtedly shaped this anxiety through early awareness of global

137 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 3.

138 Brenner similarly describes *Sarāyā* as existing in tension between the forward-looking telos of Communist ideology, and melancholy over the personal loss and historical erasure that attachment to this ideology brings. Brenner also refers to Benjamin's Angel of History (Brenner, 223–24).

139 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Mariner Books, 2019), 201.

warming and the hole in the ozone layer, in addition to the catastrophes at Bhopal (1984) and Chernobyl (1986), awakening the uncanny realisation, as Morton puts it, that "the end of the world has already occurred," as the scale of climactic catastrophe gradually proves to be beyond our collective power to alter.[140]

More immediately, anxiety is felt through both authors' reference to the threat of chemical and nuclear warfare associated with the 1991 Gulf War. This war, whose immediate cause was an oil dispute between Iraq and Kuwait, directly impacted Palestinians, many of whom had settled in Kuwait and found themselves uprooted once again, suffering the hardships of Iraqi occupation and scapegoated for the PLO's perceived sympathies with Saddam Hussein.[141] In Part IV, "*al-Ghūl*," Ḥabībī evokes these events in his own apocalyptic terms, echoing the horrors of *Ākhir al-malā'ikah* through repeated references to "*yawm al-ḥashr al-filasṭīnī*" (Palestinian Judgment Day):

> Palestinian Judgement Day has come, "a Day when no patron can avail his client in any wise, nor will they be succoured" [Qur'ān 44:41]. The land has split open, either swallowing them whole or spitting them out, or awakening their dead as phantoms, "tumbled upon their faces—on the Day of Resurrection—blind, dumb and deaf" [Qur'ān 17:97].[142]
>
> الآن جاء "يوم الحشر الفلسطيني"—"يوم لا يُغني مَوْلىً عن مولىً شيئاً. ولا هم يُنْصَرون". لقد انشقت الأرض فإما ابتلعتهم وإما لفظتهم وإما أحيت أمواتهم أطيافاً يهيمون على وجوههم عمياً وبكماً وصماً".

Citing the Qur'ān twice, Ḥabībī depicts Palestinians fleeing "the Gulf and the land of Gog and Magog."[143] Both he and al-ʿAzzāwī further describe their protagonists/narrators, (Burhān in the case of al-ʿAzzāwī), glued to phones and televisions for the latest news of the crisis, dramatizing its status as what Douglas Kellner calls the "first war played out on TV with the whole world watching it unfold, often live."[144] The shared moment of television spectacle and witness in both novels draws them together once again. More broadly,

140 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 7.

141 Philip Mattar, "The PLO and the Gulf Crisis," *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 42.

142 *Sarāyā*, 123–24. I use my own translation here, relying on Tarif Khalidi's Qur'ānic translation.

143 *Sarāyā*, 170.

144 *Sarāyā*, 170; *Ākhir*, 292, 319; Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Michigan: Avalon Publishing, 1992), 234.

it frames the Gulf War, with its entanglements in petroleum politics and its long-term environmental consequences for Iraq and Kuwait, as a particular moment of ecological stress within Arabic literature and critical thought.[145]

Both authors' depictions of Gog and Magog, and the accompanying apocalyptic imagery, further suggest the eschatological language that has formed around the petroleum industry, both within colonial and neo-colonial discourse, and local literatures directly exposed to extraction and refining sites. From Satia's discussion of the uncanniness that early British oil prospectors attributed to northern Iraq, this connection between petroleum geographies and societies, on the one hand, and myth, uncanniness, and apocalypse, on the other, stretches to George W. Bush's alleged infamous claim in 2001 that, "Gog and Magog are at work in the Middle East. Biblical prophecies are being fulfilled."[146] In the context of both Iraq and Israel/Palestine, such language, steeped in imagery of good and evil, blessing and curse, was used to justify resource imperialism. As this article has shown, it is also creatively adapted to evoke the mournful phantoms left in its wake, from the horrors of *Ākhir al-malā'ikah*, conjuring up the volatile, shifting geographies of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*, to the slower, less spectacular violence of *Sarāyā, bint al-ghūl*.

Conclusion

Following the pipeline, this article has argued for the uncanny echoes unearthed within literary aesthetics through little-recognized, yet deeply impactful, material connections between geographies. More broadly, it argues for the fantastical impulse of ecological awareness and energy anxiety in the Arabic novel, as disrupted landscapes impinge upon the mind, and the troubled mind impinges upon the land. As el-Zein suggests, the universe in Islamic cosmology represents a macrocosm of the individual, with the ordering of angel, jinn and human paralleled in that of intellect, imagination and sense.[147] Ideally, these levels should remain in harmony, with the intermediary realms of imagination and the "unseen" representing a healing energy, the "infinite power of the universe to renew itself."[148] In the novels examined, there is, in contrast,

145 In a future article, I intend to explore the significant body of critical and literary writing in Arabic, English and French, produced in the immediate wake of the First Gulf War, which features environmental instability as a central theme.

146 Stephen Spector, "Gog and Magog in the White House: Did Biblical Prophecy Inspire the Invasion of Iraq?" *Journal of Church and State* 56, no. 3 (September 2014): 534–552.

147 El-Zein, 135.

148 Ibid.

a collapse of healing energies, causing seen and unseen realms to interact in unpredictable manners and reflecting the neuroses of petro-modernity, as oil rises to the surface, water is contaminated, phantoms stirred, and survival threatened. Cosmological order collapses, and, from literary spaces rich with phantoms, a disturbing possibility arises that, after all, the human is alone in the universe; al-ʿAzzāwī's last angel, or Ḥabībī's hermit-cum-cosmonaut.

Commenting on modern literary fantasy, Jean-Paul Sartre suggests its true function as a comment not on the other-worldly, but the human, stripped of the comfort of this other-worldly realm:

> The footprint (*l'empreinte*) on the shore, we realise, is our own: no succubi; no ghosts; no weeping fountains. Only men. And the creator of the fantastic makes clear his identification with the fantastic object. For modern man, the fantastic is just one method among many to glimpse his own image.[149]

While Sartre's words are informed by his existential, secular humanism, they are also suggestive for the operation of ecological uncanniness within *Ākhir al-malāʾikah* and *Sarāyā*, in which the human face of monsters from the deep becomes increasingly clear, alongside the lack of cosmic meaning to Carmel's dried springs or Kirkuk's toxicity. Both novels thus adopt and upend the language of scripture, cosmology and *al-ghayb*, evoking a meaningful universe populated by a hierarchy of beings before collapsing this order, as destiny capitulates to contingency, leaving lone, haunted individuals with the consequences of their actions. Returning to my opening citation of al-Maʿarrī's "*khaffif al-waṭʾ*," the "footprint" (*l'empreinte*/*waṭʾ*) represents an apt summary of this, combining the uncanniness of an unseen footfall with the material impact of our heavy, petroleum-fuelled tread.

149 Jean-Paul Sartre, "'Aminabad' ou du fantastique considéré comme un langage" in *Situations, 1: Essais critiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 118 (translation mine).