Embracing (In)Authenticity: Preserving Heritage through the Reinvention of Tradition in Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati*

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> What is a hakawati, you ask? Ah, listen.
> A hakawati is a teller of tales, myths, and fables (hekayât). A storyteller, an entertainer. A troubadour of sorts, someone who earns his keep by beguiling an audience with yarns. Like the word "hekayeh" (story, fable, news), "hakawati" is derived from the Lebanese word "haki," which means "talk" or "conversation." This suggests that in Lebanese the mere act of talking is storytelling. (Alameddine 36)

With this romanticized etymological analysis, Rabih Alameddine dissipates, a few chapters into his third novel, *The Hakawati* (2008), the mystery of its title, opaque to an audience unfamiliar with the Arabic language. Using his narrator as a means to address his intended readership's presumed ignorance of the cultural context against which the novel is to be read, the author thus strives to encourage a certain reception of the text—to fashion, in other words, a model reader (Eco 72).

While the dissemination of interpretive cues is an inherent component of each and every literary endeavor (Eco 70), its workings within postcolonial literature are often fraught with power imbalances. The metanarrative incursion through which Alameddine elucidates the semantic network surrounding the word *ḥakawātī*, for instance, operates on at least two distinct levels.[1] On the one hand, and in keeping with the general principles of reception theory, it compels readers to perceive this Middle Eastern storyteller under a specific light—one that accentuates both the performative aspect of their craft and its socio-cultural relevance. On the other hand, it provides a predominantly White Anglophone audience with key insights on Middle Eastern cultural practices, therefore contributing to the audience's construction of the author as a native informant.[2]

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1 This paper uses the ISO international standard for the romanization of Arabic script. Nevertheless, those instances of transliteration that are part of a direct quote will not be altered so as to comply with the ISO table.

2 The term, borrowed from the field of ethnographic studies, originally designated a cultural Other willing to provide Western ethnographers with information to support their research (Spivak, *Critique* 6). It is currently used, in the context of postcolonial cultural production, to characterize those diasporic writers who have a tendency to re-essentialize their home countries for the benefit of a Western

This second, unequal relationship between the author and their readership is liable to undermine any efforts made, on the author's part, to promote an interpretation of the text that does not align with the audience's Eurocentric views. In the case of *The Hakawati*, this underlying asymmetry fostered a generalized perception of the novel's Arab characters as little more than "exotic pets" (Srinivas). Such responses were so prevalent among reviewers that some critics felt compelled to outright challenge them, firmly asserting that Alameddine's novel is neither a meditation on cultural identities, nor a re-creation of Arab history (Salaita 53).

True as this may be, *The Hakawati*'s overt preoccupation with the question of familial and cultural heritage unfortunately provided ample grounds for it to be misunderstood as a representation of a presumed Arab essence. The novel is built around two main narrative strands: on the one hand, it details autodiegetic narrator Osama's return to Lebanon after years of living abroad, and his subsequent efforts to retrace his intricate family history; on the other hand, it showcases a queer rewriting of the classic tale of Majnoun and Layla, and of the plethora of Middle Eastern folktales embedded within it.[3]

Aware of the possible instrumentalization of this abundant cultural material, Alameddine endeavored to discourage exoticizing interpretations of *The Hakawati* by openly displaying the pleasure taken, by the narrator and his characters alike, in the act of retelling—and thus, reinventing—a shared lore. In a dynamic that is entirely irreconcilable with the cultural essentialism that structures Orientalist discourse (Said 231), the author depicts both familial and cultural heritage as fluid entities—as manifestations of a past which, in typical diasporic fashion, can only ever be constructed through fantasy, narrative and myth (Hall 226).

The deconstruction of Orientalist notions of authenticity is achieved, as I shall argue throughout this paper, through the strategic refashioning of the novel's eponymous hero, the *ḥakawātī*. Traditionally responsible for the preservation and perpetuation of a narrative heritage essential to the construction of collective identity, the *ḥakawātī* comes to embody, in Alameddine's novel, a non-normative relationship to culture and tradition. In order to fulfill their social role

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readership (Schmidt 71). For a lengthier exploration of this practice, also referred to as re-Orientalism, see Lisa Lau and Om Prakash Dwivedi (1-22).

[3] The tale of Majnoun and Layla, a cornerstone of classical Arabic literature, details the tragic fate of star-crossed lovers Qays ibn al-Mulawwah (later known as Majnun, meaning "mad", due to his love-stricken state) and Layla al-Aamiriya. Their sorrows begin when Layla is wed to another man—causing Qays to retreat into the desert, where he laments the loss of his loved one through poetry—and culminate with the death of both lovers. In Alameddine's retelling, the thwarted romance takes place between two male characters, Shams and Layl: born from the union of an unnamed emir's wife and his slave Fatima, but raised as siblings, Shams and Layl engage in a romantic partnership that is not only queer, but also somewhat incestuous, and as such unwaveringly persecuted by the emir's wife.

as vectors of collective memory, indeed, Middle Eastern storytellers are often called to the revision and adaptation of their repertoire.

In *The Hakawati*, this readiness for variation comes to represent the only true marker of a competent *ḥakawātī*, whose craftsmanship is measured not by their adherence to a narrative model, but by their ability to captivate an audience. The reasons behind Alameddine's resolute focus on the performative aspect of the *ḥakawātī*'s trade are, once again, twofold: on the one hand, it allows for a representation of the storyteller that does not perpetuate the stereotypical images so dear to Orientalist discourse; on the other hand, it undermines the belief that the *ḥakawātī* be a mere symbol of times past, dispossessed of their paramount socio-cultural role with the advent of contemporary media.

This strenuous resistance to the erasure of the *ḥakawātī*'s craft as the consequence of a changing cultural context finds its primary expression in the character of Ismail, Osama's grandfather. A *ḥakawātī* by trade, Ismail is shown, in old age, to find new purpose in regaling his loved ones with tales of his youth, thus allowing for the incursion of the (in)authentic art of storytelling within the domestic sphere. Marking a clear break with the Western understanding of autobiographical narratives as essentially factual reports, Ismail weaves a family epic whose main concern is not historical accuracy, but rather the ability to account—by any means necessary—for the family's ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity.

As I shall illustrate, Ismail's non-normative approach to storytelling is precisely what eventually allows Osama—and, hopefully, the reader—to come to an understanding of collective identity as the result of the active choice, on both the teller and the listener's part, to partake in a shared narrative universe, irrespective of its factuality. At the end of my analysis, I will thus turn to Osama's own parable as a diasporic individual, and to his growing awareness of the importance of telling stories as a tool for the construction of collective identity. Osama's ultimate decision to take on the role of family storyteller will be read not only as a means for him to re-integrate family dynamics, but also—and most importantly—as further proof of the adaptability of storytelling, which appears as a vessel for social cohesion, even amidst the disparity of the diaspora.

Staging (in)authenticity: the *ḥakawātī* as a vector of cultural memory

Though the translation of the *ḥakawātī*'s craft to the domestic sphere is largely a consequence of Ismail's dual role as Osama's grandfather and a professional storyteller, by the time Osama is born, his grandfather has long since stopped performing in public. While mention is made of his lifelong employment as an entertainer at the court of the local bey (Alameddine 37), Ismail's masterful storytelling appears to be, in Osama's memories, a gift he has only ever

bestowed upon his loved ones. As a consequence, Osama's first recollection of a true *ḥakawātī* performance is tied to a family expedition to an old Arabic café in a run-down Beiruti neighborhood—a quest set in motion by Ismail himself. The latter's motivation, as soon becomes apparent, lies not in his appreciation for his colleague's craftsmanship, but rather in his quasi-sadistic desire to ascertain that he be as much of "a dimwit" as he expects him to be (Alameddine 105):

> The hakawati, a man in his fifties or sixties, wearing a fez and an Egyptian jalabiya that was short and threadbare at the ankles, walked in from the boisterous kitchen. He carried a plastic sword in his right hand and a tattered book in his left. His gray mustache was waxed into glistening loops. [...] The hakawati lifted the jalabiya slightly and stepped onto the dais. He walked to the front and bowed, even though no one had clapped. (Alameddine 105)

Though the young Osama refrains from passing judgement on this middle-aged performer, the narrator's description lingers on those elements of the *ḥakawātī*'s appearance that, rather than conferring upon him the intended aura of respectability, border on the caricatural. The fez, Egyptian *ǧilābīẗ* and waxed mustache are all reminiscent of a distant age—that of the Ottoman Empire, during which the figure of the *ḥakawātī* began to acquire cultural significance (Romaine 259). Equal symbolic value is also attached to the book and the sword he carries: while the latter is meant to suggest artistic continuity with the Arab warrior poets of the pre-Islamic era, the book metonymically signals the *ḥakawātī*'s inscription within a proper literary tradition—an intention confirmed a few lines later, when the storyteller proudly claims to have been trained by "Sofian, the grand hakawati of Algeria, and Nazir, the Damascene hakawati of the Hamidieh" (Alameddine 106).

If these markers of authority miserably fail to garner the audience's attention, to the point that the *ḥakawātī*'s entrance goes largely unremarked, it is essentially because they fall short of the idealized image they are trying to recreate. Much like the décor of the café he is about to perform in, comprised of "white paint [which] peeled off the walls in sheets" and "cheap wooden chairs with twine seats" (Alameddine 105), not one element of the storyteller's attire is in pristine condition. His book is tattered, his *ǧilābīẗ* is not only visibly short, but also threadbare, and his sword is but a plastic replica, bearing closer resemblance to a child's toy than to a weapon. So visibly inadequate, the *ḥakawātī*'s apparel gives, at best, the impression of an ill-fitting costume—a blundering attempt to breathe new life into an ancient craft through a patently staged authenticity.

Initially developed in the field of tourism studies, the notion of *staged authenticity* encapsulates the practice of convincing tourists of the authentic nature of certain cultural experiences by strategically curating outward markers of deference to a given tradition (MacCannell 99). The term was subsequently imported to the field of postcolonial studies, and used as a tool to

analyze the reception, on the part of Western audiences, of the artistic production of cultural Others, often welcomed as a "possibility of indirect access to 'exotic' cultures" (Huggan 155). The underwhelming performance Osama witnesses as a child functions on both of these conceptual planes. At the intra-narrative level, in fact, the *ḥakawātī* aims to stage for his audience a supposedly authentic cultural experience by presenting himself as a perfect replica of the traditional storyteller—an image which undoubtedly lives up to Western expectations, but which the Arab crowd he is performing for immediately identifies as disingenuous. Simultaneously, at the meta-narrative level, the narrator's implicit discrediting of the caricature so clumsily played by the *ḥakawātī* allows the author to make a stand against the practice of re-Orientalism for the benefit of a Western audience, rather commonplace in postcolonial literature (Lau and Dwivedi 5).

Though prompt to remedy his audience's lack of cultural fluency through the adoption of heterolingual address—as proven by the above-quoted romanticized etymology of the word "*ḥakawātī*"—Alameddine here swiftly resists being cornered into the uncomfortable role of the native informant.[4] Through the depiction of the *ḥakawātī*'s failed attempt at engaging with his audience, the author manages to "tease out" those supposedly authentic elements of his performance that actually answer to an image "constructed by hegemonic voices" (Spivak, "Questions" 61). This allows him, in turn, to make space for the re-definition of cultural authenticity from a non-essentializing perspective—one that more accurately reflects the *ḥakawātī*'s role as a vector of cultural memory.

From a sociological standpoint, in fact, the primary function of the *ḥakawātī* was—and still is—that of "reinforc[ing] the collective identity of the spectators" by allowing them to "recognize themselves in the commonly familiar stories" issued from a shared lore (Pannewick 342). In order for this process of identification to occur, though, the audience must first be charmed—its attention won not through the risible display of plastic props and ill-fitting costumes, but through narrative techniques that are closer to re-telling and reinvention than to mere repetition. This second, more accomplished image of the *ḥakawātī* finds its primary vessel in Zeki, "the master storyteller of Istanbul, [who] bewitched [Ismail's] little town for eight months straight," and thus unknowingly set him on the path to become a *ḥakawātī* himself (Alameddine 97).

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[4] According to Naoki Sakai, who coined the expression, *heterolingual address* may best be understood in opposition to *homolingual address*: while the latter is a regime wherein the "the addresser adopts the position representative of a putatively homogeneous language society and relates to the general addressees," heterolingual address assumes instead "an essentially mixed audience among whom the addresser's relation to the addressee could hardly be imagined to be one of unruffled empathetic transference" (Sakai 3-4).

Having accidentally stumbled upon one of his performances, Ismail, then a young boy, is enchanted by Zeki's ability to spin a tale. The rest of his audience appears to be under a similar spell, so engrossed with his rendition of the story of Majnoun and Layla that "when the masterly hakawati told of Majnoun's exile in the desert [...] every veil turned moist, and every mustache as well" (Alameddine 97). This deeply emotional response is all the more impressive in light of the fact that the tale in question, being a classic, is one the audience is most likely familiar with. Unable to resort to the element of surprise in order to ensure their engagement, the *ḥakawātī* must carefully curate other aspects of his performance:

> When he paused, his audience held its breath. He was by far the best at silence. [...] As he reached a touching moment in the story, he had a habit of holding his hand out in front of him, palm toward God, as if offering Him that lovely moment or, better yet, offering Him the souls of all his listeners. When Zeki told us about the desert birds attempting to distract Majnoun from suicide, he had a different whistle for each bird. [...] His whistling birds broke open my heart. (Alameddine 98)

Unlike the clumsy *ḥakawātī* whose performance Osama witnesses as a child, Zeki proves to have no need for props, nor for outward markers of authenticity. Much like a singer would, he manages to captivate the crowd before him through the skillful modulation of "voice, tone, and inflection" alone (Alameddine 98). Rather than to their rational investment in a well-known tale, he appeals to their emotional resonance with the musical quality of his performance, enriched by a number of *virtuoso* variations, such as the imitation of birdsong.

The effectiveness of his approach is measured by its ability to foster a true sense of community between audience members. Not only is "the place [...] packed," but the café, traditionally constructed as a public space for the exclusive use of men, is exceptionally made accessible to women as well (Alameddine 97). While the latter choose to "[stand] outside, refus[e] seats and [not] interact with any of the patrons" (Alameddine 97), in compliance with cultural norms of gender segregation, their mere presence is indicative of the social relevance of Zeki's performance: as the stage of his tales, the café becomes a locus for the production of a shared cultural identity, to which each and every member of society must be granted access.

The atmosphere of companionship established during Zeki's eight-month stay is so powerful that, when the storyteller eventually leaves, Ismail can't help but feel "bereft and alone"—a loneliness only alleviated by the knowledge that "all his audience felt the same way" (Alameddine 99). The potential for social cohesion inherent to folktales is thus shown to find its realization through no act other than reinvention: while the recourse to a shared corpus of stories is central to the *ḥakawātī*'s function as a vector of cultural memory, the preservation of this heritage can only be achieved if the teller is able to pique his audience's interest with some unexpected novelty. The art of tweaking, altering and renewing a well-known lore comes to

represent the true marker of a great *ḥakawātī*—an expert storyteller, guided by the core principle that "no matter how good a story is, there is more at stake in the telling" (Alameddine 96).

(In)authentic practices: changing tales for changing audiences

As he must constantly adapt his repetoire, the *ḥakawātī* has no choice but to forgo stringent standards of accuracy, thereby encouraging the restructuring of the concept of cultural authenticity around the seemingly antithetical notion of fluidity. This cognitive shift not only contributes to subverting the essentialized images perpetuated by Orientalist discourse but also undermines the widespread association of traditional storytelling with a distant, irrecoverable past, thus pushing back against its progressive demise. Despite their paramount socio-cultural function, *ḥakawātīīn* seem in fact to have all but disappeared from the public sphere throughout the course of the twentieth century. At the start of the new millennium, this process was advanced enough that a Damascus coffeehouse performer known as Abū Shādī was repeatedly identified as the last *ḥakawātī* in the Arab world ('A'id, qtd. in Romaine 261; Aziz).

The shadow of this impending disappearance also looms over the *ḥakawātī* performance Osama witnesses as a child. Set in the spring of 1971, and only a few pages after Ismail's rapturous recollections of Zeki, this scene provides Osama's grandfather with an opportunity to lament the advent of new media, and their detrimental impact upon traditional forms of entertainment. Having no means to compete with the ubiquitous presence and convenience of the radio and the television, Ismail argues, *ḥakawātī* performances have been relegated to a different era, when "time was much longer" (Alameddine 102-3).

This position, far from being the mere expression of an aging man's refractoriness to change, is shared by many theater and folklore experts, who maintain that present-day *ḥakawātī* performances are nothing more than museum pieces (Aziz). Despite the continued efforts on the part of performers to keep this cultural practice alive, most researchers seem to consider that the conditions of production have changed enough that *ḥakawātīīn* can no longer act as vectors of cultural memory, and are therefore sentenced to extinction (Aziz). Few are the voices who contend that storytelling, as a living and changing art form, can easily adapt to evolving contexts, thus remaining relevant in spite of new socio-cultural circumstances (Aziz; Romaine 262). The issue at hand seems to be, once again, one of authenticity. Each party holds dear traditional practices of storytelling, but while some consider that their authentic essence is too closely intertwined with the specific social and historical context provided by the Ottoman Empire to be preserved in the wake of its dismemberment, others find that a more flexible interpretation of the social role of the *ḥakawātī* would allow for the survival of a figure otherwise destined to disappear (Romaine 263).

Efforts in this latter sense have punctuated twentieth-century Arabic theater, in which the figure of the *ḥakawātī*, appropriately revamped, has often been called upon as a "witness" of their time (Romaine 263).[5] This same goal is pursued, in Alameddine's novel, through Ismail's double characterization as a professional *ḥakawātī* and as the eldest member of Osama's family. Depositary both of a cultural and a familial heritage, Ismail continues to tap into his storytelling abilities long after having retired from the stage, even if only for the benefit of his loved ones. Trained in the art of retelling and *virtuoso* improvisation, he approaches his role as the family storyteller with the same disregard for historical accuracy he became accustomed to through the exercise of his craft—a posture hardly reconcilable with the expectations of truthfulness and transparency that normally regulate autobiographical narratives.

Whether they be written or passed down orally, autobiographical narratives are indeed expected to abide by the standards set by the *autobiographical pact*—the contract-like relationship established between audience and author, whereby the tale is understood to be a personal account of historical facts (Lejeune 26-27; Smith and Watson 153-54). This autobiographical authenticity, while integral to the horizon of expectations of a Western audience, is wholly incompatible with the *ḥakawātī*'s understanding of storytelling as an essentially non-normative practice (Alameddine 61).

In its utter disregard for factuality, Ismail's approach to storytelling not only emphasizes the inevitable fictionalization inherent to any act of narrativization, but also encourages the subversion of Western constructions of the autobiographical self as solitary and transcendent. Though *The Hakawati* is a work of fiction, it thus mobilizes practices of "writing back" which are recurrent in postcolonial autobiographical narratives, and aim to challenge Western tropes of autobiographical representation (Smith and Watson 131).[6] This queering of the genre is achieved by devising a fictional narrating "I" who approaches the narrative of his self as a tool for the construction of collective identity, in much the same right as collective oral storytelling (Smith and Watson 131).

When garnishing his stories with fictional elements, in fact, Ismail never aims for gratuitous embellishments, but strives instead to weave tales that might make sense of the family's extremely diverse background. The illegitimate son of a British doctor and his Armenian maid,

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[5] Syrian dramatist Saʿd Allāh Wannūs, for instance, has been particularly successful in integrating the practice of storytelling into his work (Pannewick 347). For a lengthier exploration of the literary adaptations of the figure of the *ḥakawātī*, see Pannewick. In Europe, similar projects have recently been undertaken by Anglophone playwrights of Arab descent, such as Palestinian-Irish Hannah Khalil.

[6] An example of these practices may be found in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), which "mines paradoxes of subjectivity by voicing the story of a mother her daughter-narrator never knew" (Smith and Watson 131).

Ismail is no stranger to the practice of creating one's own genealogy, and claims to have devoted himself to this task ever since the earliest days of his arrival in Beirut, when he started "creat[ing] [the family's] story" (Alameddine 114).

Apart from his own extraordinary childhood, replete with narrow escapes and near-death experiences, Ismail's repertoire also includes the fanciful reconstruction of his late in-laws' youth, supposedly marked by a number of religious conversions. Druze by birth, Osama's great-grandfather Mahdallah Arisseddine is said to have initially converted to Islam in order to marry his beloved, and later on to Christianity, so as to be eligible for a scholarship sponsored by the Anglican church (Alameddine 222). While the occasions said to have warranted them are historically attested, these repeated conversions border on, as Osama points out, fantasy, because in Lebanon "you didn't change your religion [...] it wasn't done" (Alameddine 222). It is precisely because of its deeply controversial nature that such a fickle attitude towards religious affiliation, though certainly liable to add an adventurous element to the tale by virtue of its forbiddenness, can hardly be read as a mere means for entertainment. Fictional though they may be, Mahdallah's overlapping faiths contribute to his fashioning into a proper founding figure, whose ability to trespass religious boundaries prefigures the ethnic and religious diversity to be found, decades later, within the al-Kharrat family.

Through such implausible anecdotes, Ismail endeavors to create a world in which both his own and his children's inter-faith marriages appear to be, rather than eccentric, entirely coherent with an over-arching narrative of inter-sectarian solidarity. It is the very same spirit in which he claims that Osama's parents were "fated to be married," offering as proof "an improbable nocturnal meeting between [their ancestors] an Arisseddine and a Khoury in late June 1838 during the Battle of Wadi Baka" (Alameddine 409). Replete with echoes of the tales of chivalrous soldiers that typically make up a *ḥakawātī*'s repertoire, and therefore scarcely believable, this origin story is nevertheless told and retold, preserved and passed down as a family heirloom: its value lies not in its supposed authenticity, but in its ability to justify the union between a Maronite Christian woman and a Druze man, in a country whose legal system does not contemplate the possibility of civil marriage.[7]

Forced to retire from the stage on account both of his old age and of the dwindling numbers of his audiences, Ismail is shown to take it upon himself, in his later years, to provide his loved ones with backstories that may strengthen their pride in their burgeoning diversity. A *ḥakawātī* by calling, he finds in this new task a means to continue acting as a vector of collective

[7] Among these traditional narratives, the best known is most likely the *Sīrẗ al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Baybarṣ*, a fictionalized account of the life of the Mamluk sultan Baybars. On the sources of this romance, and on the role played by *ḥakawātīīn* in their re-adaptation, see Pennisi and Bakhouch.

memory, though on the smaller scale offered by the domestic sphere. It is thus to his utter dismay that his loved ones eventually prove to make for a rather disillusioned and disinterested audience: unable—or perhaps unwilling—to understand the workings of the *ḥakawātī*'s craft, his own son Farid warns a young Osama "not to believe any of his father's stories," on the grounds that "he's a hakawati," and therefore "he makes things up" (Alameddine 226).

Though aimed at the fashioning of a stronger family identity, the *ḥakawātī*'s penchant for the alteration of reality is here presented as ultimately responsible for nullifying all of his storytelling efforts, insofar as it singles him out as an unreliable source of information, undeserving of his audience's trust. This lack of faith inevitably hinders Ismail's practice of his craft, for belief is the foundation of the relationship between any *ḥakawātī* and their audience: to beguile a crowd is to have them hang upon each and every word, to enchant them into a suspension of judgment.

It is, in part, to reestablish a trusting relationship with his audience that Ismail chooses, near the end of his days, to regale Osama with one last, lengthy retelling of his own origins. At the end of his tale he asks for no other reward than to be granted, by his youngest grandchild at least, the gift of belief:

> "When I'm no longer in this world," Grandfather said, "and they ask whether you believed me, what will you say? [...] You're eleven now," he said, "and I was eleven...." His voice trailed into nothingness before he whispered, "You know now who I am." [...] He stood slowly, creakily, and stomped to his room. When he came out, he handed me an old white kerchief. "You are my blood," he said. "This is for you." Inside the kerchief was a jewel, a tiny turquoise Fatima's hand with dark-brown and black blood encrusted in its grooves. (Alameddine 114)

The gift, bestowed upon Osama at the epilogue of Ismail's recollection of his childhood, is meant to function both as an heirloom and as proof of the truthfulness of his account. The charm inside the handkerchief matches in fact the description of the "tiny turquoise Fatima's hand" said to have hung around the neck of the strongest pigeon in all of 'Urfa during Ismail's days as an apprentice pigeoneer—the leading male in his mentor's rival's flock (Alameddine 111). Having learnt to replicate its master's whistling, Ismail claims to have been able to confuse the bird for long enough that it could be captured and decapitated, putting an end to its uncontested rule. By Osama and the reader alike, the blood encrusted in the amulet's grooves is therefore understood to be the pigeon's, definite proof of Ismail's sincerity.

Nearing the end of his days, the *ḥakawātī* thus seems to be willing to curtail his recourse to invention so as to earn back his audience's trust. And yet, the proof meant to attest to his good faith is little more than a common jewel, liable to have come into his possession in a number of different ways—the most unlikely version being, unsurprisingly, the one presented as authentic. Walking the fine line between belief and disbelief is none other than Osama, already

presented, despite his young age, with the conundrum that will go on to shape his later years: as his grandfather's last audience—and the last man of his lineage—he must either wholly accept the *ḥakawātī*'s fanciful accounts or, like his father before him, discard them as figments of an aging imagination, thereby sentencing them to oblivion.

Inheriting the (in)authentic: nurturing community in the diaspora

From this moment forward, Osama carries the delicate responsibility of deciding whether or not the lore built by his grandfather is deserving of perpetuation, and on what grounds. Though the *ḥakawātī*'s accounts lack the factual accuracy that would allow them to be preserved by virtue of their historical relevance, to entirely reject them would amount to doing away with the only family imaginary Osama has ever known. Embellished and fantastical though they may have been, Ismail's tales nevertheless contributed to the fashioning of the al-Kharrat family as a cohesive unit. At the heart of this intricate tapestry sat the *ḥakawātī* himself, weaving together the threads of their individual lives, in the awareness that "reality never meets our wants, and adjusting both is why we tell stories" (Alameddine 434).

Osama's journey is, largely, one of coming to terms with this simple fact, and thus of reconnecting with the practice of storytelling as a valuable means for community-building. Having returned to Lebanon to be at his dying father's bedside, Osama repeatedly finds himself at a loss for words, unsure of how to properly communicate with him. Simultaneously, being back home triggers in him the resurgence of a wealth of memories, mostly associated with his Lebanese childhood and with the early years of his emigration to the United States, when his visits were more frequent. As he carefully sorts through these recollections, Osama begins to realize that his stunted communication with his father is more than a mere consequence of his physical distance from home. It is the expression, rather, of a primarily emotional distance, attested to by the fact that "[his] father and [he] may have shared numerous experiences, but […] [they] rarely shared their stories; [they] didn't know how to listen to one another" (Alameddine 450).

More than in blood ties or in common life trajectories, the source of strong interpersonal relationships is thus identified in the very practice of storytelling, as a process which implies not only the productive skill of speaking, but also the receptive skill of listening (Tabačková 123). The act of sharing a story demands in fact, on the listener's part, a certain readiness to accept the tale as it is told, without questioning the work of the teller. The welcoming disposition associated with the act of listening becomes synonymous to a willingness to make space for and engage with the other's worldview. It is for this very reason that Osama comes to deplore the fact that most of Ismail's tales have fallen on deaf ears:

> My grandfather told stories to his children, but only Uncle Jihad heard him, and even he stopped listening by the time he became an adult. My father pointedly refused to listen, neither to his fairy tales nor to his family stories. "I have very little interest in lies and fabrications," he used to say. (Alameddine 500)

Rather than his grandfather's proclivity for flights of fancy, Osama laments his father's lack of recognition for the efforts made by Ismail to gather his children around a common lore—to bestow upon them, as he would upon his audiences during his public performances as a *ḥakawātī*, the gift of a common heritage, the true foundation of a strong family identity. Whether the stories be factual or fictitious is, in this dynamic, of little relevance: what matters is that they be shared, retold, circulated, so as to keep providing the occasion for collective appreciation of a shared legacy.

Despite this realization, Osama himself hesitates to revive the practice of storytelling as a family activity. In stark contrast to his role as the novel's confident and imaginative narrator, Osama-the-character does not dare take up the position left vacant after Ismail's passing and briefly filled, to his utmost delight, by his uncle Jihad—"[his] father's younger brother, [his] number-one babysitter, and [his] favorite storyteller" (Alameddine 90). On the contrary, he avoids sharing with his relatives even the most trivial details about his life—a reticence which paradoxically offers the opportunity for the unfolding of Osama's narrating "I." When asked by his sister Salwa to tell his aunt Samia about his life "as a computer programmer in the great city of Los Angeles" (Alameddine 24), for instance, Osama-the-character remains silent, and the floor is left to the narrator, who regales the reader with his childhood recollections of Samia (Alameddine 24-25).

In this as upon other occasions, Osama's account of his return to Lebanon thus makes way for the incursion of countless tales from his own and his relatives' youth, each of them offering the opportunity for the embedding of other, more fantastical tales issued from his grandfather's repertoire. The intricate web of competing temporalities born of this endeavor becomes more and more convoluted as the novel progresses, and eventually culminates in the simultaneous telling of fable and family history, one the countermelody of the other. This quintessentially postcolonial technique is perhaps best showcased in the narrator's retelling of the efforts made by his grandmother to obtain financial support from the local bey for her children's schooling, presented as one among many stories "from the lore of the beys" (Alameddine 333) and interspersed with tales of "their origin, valor, heroism, gallantry, generosity, wit or lack thereof" (Alameddine 331).

If, at the very end of the novel, Osama finally decides to follow in Ismail and Jihad's footsteps, and to put his storytelling abilities to the service of his loved ones, it is largely thanks to the pleas of his own niece Salwa—now grown, married and eight months pregnant. Pestered by an

old aunt with questions as to the baby's name, Salwa patiently explains that she and her husband have decided to name the child Murad, after a "story [...] about a gorgeous dervish boy called Murat" her uncle Osama "used to tell [her] [...] when he came to visit" (Alameddine 498). Brief as this exchange may be, it lays the grounds for a monumental shift: by choosing to name her son after a potentially fictional character, the protagonist of a story passed down from Ismail to Osama, Salwa not only breaks away from the patriarchal tradition of naming male children after their male ancestors, but also forcefully re-inscribes Ismail's tales within the domain of a family heritage that is constitutive of its members' identity, and therefore worthy of living on in their onomastics.

That the preservation of the family lore be Salwa's true concern is further confirmed by her later wish that her child be raised hearing the same tales that shaped her own formative years—a dream only attainable if Osama accepts, as she believes he will, to "be Murad's storyteller" (Alameddine 499). In voicing the hope that her uncle may reprise the role he so willingly played throughout her childhood, Salwa is implicitly asking him to take on the responsibility of becoming the family's last *ḥakawātī*—to undertake the daunting task of keeping alive the oral heritage passed down by his grandfather and his uncle before him, so as to ensure its preservation for generations to come.

Asked in the intimate conviction of an affirmative answer, this question weighs heavily on Osama's heart, especially given that his most recent return to Lebanon has done all but convince him that the long years spent abroad have estranged him from his loved ones. Accused of having become American (Alameddine 28), Osama is made painfully aware of the fact that he no longer shares the same popular culture references as his relatives (Alameddine 79), and that his cousin Hafez, once as close to him as a twin, is now the image of the person he might have become, had he not left the country to pursue his education (Alameddine 32, 281). Granting Salwa's wish thus entails, for Osama, coming to terms with his own unresolved sense of belonging—not so much to a culture or a nation, but to a family.

When he ultimately caves in, Osama does so in the hope that this role might open up for him new possibilities of inclusion, crafted, in classic *ḥakawātī* fashion, through the simple act of sharing a story. His answer to his niece's request, in the form of an internal monologue, reads as follows: "I would be Murad's storyteller, and I hoped he would one day hear me" (Alameddine 500). Sensitive to the progressive deafening of the family's ears to his late grandfather's tales, the narrator expresses the desire to be met with a more understanding audience—one more willing to leave aside pedantic questions of authenticity, so as to simply enjoy the performance.

It is perhaps in order to silence this underlying fear that Osama ultimately decides not to wait for his great-nephew's birth to start weaving a web of stories, and begins practicing his new

trade as he sits by his unconscious father's bedside. For his debut, which takes place in the very last pages of the novel, he chooses from Ismail's own repertoire a tale meant to illustrate the *ḥakawātī*'s difficult personality, and to identify its roots in his mother's blundering attempts at encouraging in him an entirely different disposition. Instructed by a fortune teller to bathe her son in a tub of wine heated by a red-hot horseshoe, and then to cool him off by placing him in the shell of an unripe watermelon, so as to make him both strong and wise, Ismail's mother Lucine is said to have tried her best to follow the prescribed ritual, despite the very limited resources at her disposal:

> That evening, she searched for wine, but [...] there was none in the house. She took her baby out to the garden, filched an urn being used to make vinegar. She put the almost-vinegar in a stone mortar [...] heated the horseshoe over a fire, and when it turned red, she doused it in the sour wine. And she placed her crying son in the mortar bath. But then she had no watermelon, ripe or unripe, so she cooled her baby in a tub of cold yogurt. (Alameddine 512-13)

As a consequence of these impromptu substitutions, Osama explains, Ismail "didn't inherit the subtlety of wine, but the volatility of vinegar," while "yogurt gave him [...] a sour disposition" and the horseshoe, belonging to a mule, "the stubbornness of a mule" (Alameddine 513). In making such open recourse to old wives' tales and popular superstitions, Osama pushes back against his father's distaste for "lies and fabrications" (Alameddine 500), deliberately presenting him with a version of reality that, though clearly embellished, still proves to be both coherent and engaging. Through this simple act, Osama becomes a vessel for the author to make a stand against the stringent paradigm of authenticity, and to breathe new life in the *ḥakawātī*'s conviction that tales are not meant to be factual, but to bring people together—in this case, through the humorous recollection of a loved one's personality.

It is in this very same spirit that Osama offers, shortly thereafter, to regale his father with tales from Farid's own childhood, passed down to him by none other than Ismail: Osama's claim that knows "how [his father] used to steal meat as it was being fried" (Alameddine 513) is meant to make Farid feel seen and recognized—to prove to him that sharing the same stories, rather than merely the same experiences, is still possible. Given the reciprocal nature of this act, Osama is quick to clarify that he not only "know[s] [his father's] stories," but is also willing to share his own: "And I can tell you my stories. If you want. [...] Listen" (Alameddine 513).

The novel's last word, "listen," echoes its very first (Alameddine 5), leaving the reader to wonder whether the story they have just read, with its artful interweaving of family history and Middle Eastern folktales, is not after all the same tale that Osama is about to recount to his ill father. This final act, which frames the narrative so that it should belong both to the past and to the unexpressed future, is but the culmination of the delicate balance between multiple

temporalities that underwrites the entirety of the novel, linking generations past, future and present in a convoluted, spiral structure.

Understood within this framework, this final scene grants Osama-the-character the opportunity to finally claim (fictitious) authorship of the novel's intricate narrative. Far from being a mere pastime, the act of storytelling presents Osama with an unhoped-for opportunity to recover a dwindling relationship with both his family and his culture—all while resisting Western expectations of authenticity. As this superposition of beginning and end suggests, in fact, Osama is not only the heir to his family's lore, but also the creative mind behind the queer—and thus necessarily "inauthentic"—retelling of the classic tale of Majnoun and Layla that makes up the novel's second story line. Though thematically separate from Osama's quest for belonging, this narrative too contributes to "reappropriate the sourcebooks of Orientalist stereotypes" by "returning [them] to [their] original realm of pure, and often subversive, storytelling" (Hassan 211). What binds the two plots together, other than their common narrator, is therefore their contribution to the never-ending task of preserving collective heritage by constantly revisiting, retelling, and reinventing it.

Conclusion

The epilogue of Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati,* characterized as it is by a multilayered temporality, thus opens perspectives not just with regards to Osama's quest for belonging, but also—and perhaps most importantly—as to the social relevance of storytelling and, consequently, of the storyteller. The latter appears, at the end of the novel, to have little in common with the hapless character so poorly played by the *ḥakawātī* of Osama's childhood recollections. Gone are the smoky atmosphere provided by the old Arabic café and the traditional apparel meant to bestow upon the performer an aura of authenticity: all that remains is the *ḥakawātī*'s voice, narrating, and his audience, listening.

In moving away from the stereotypical image of the Ottoman era *ḥakawātī*, the approach to the art of storytelling modeled by Ismail and Osama counters those cultural essentialisms so central to Orientalist discourse and encourages the perpetuation of this craft beyond the mythical past in which storytellers would enchant entire neighborhoods for weeks on end. Forced into retirement by the advent of modern media, *ḥakawātīīn* are shown to strive to continue shaping collective life at the smaller scale of the family unit, by acting as the depositaries of a common (hi)story.

If this transition from the public to the domestic sphere proves to be arduous, it is largely because it calls for the construction of an entirely different relationship between the storyteller

and their audience. Thrust into the domain of autobiographical narratives, Ismail is confronted with the fact that the art of skillful variation, so essential to the *ḥakawātī*'s craft, is entirely incompatible with the standards of truthfulness established by the autobiographical pact. Though effective as a fictional vessel for the queering of this genre, Ismail's approach nevertheless fails to win his loved ones' attention: increasingly aware of the implausible embellishments that fill his tales, Ismail's children begin to draw away, refusing to partake in the game of willing deception so exquisitely imposed by the *ḥakawātī* upon his audience.

After Ismail's passing, the weight of bringing to completion this difficult transition comes to rest on his grandson Osama's shoulders. The sole heir to the wealth of tales collected by Ismail throughout his lifetime, Osama finds in the recuperation of his grandfather's craft a means not only to preserve the family's collective heritage, but also to carve out for himself a renewed sense of belonging. Having realized that his estrangement from his loved ones stems from a lack of emotional rather than spatial proximity, Osama turns to telling—and listening to—stories as a means to bridge the gap between himself and the rest of the family. If he can confidently undertake this daunting task, it is largely thanks to his niece's unrelenting encouragement, which provides him with the much-needed assurance that his audience counts at least one enthusiastic member.

In this newfound dynamic, the notion of cultural authenticity as conceived by Orientalist discourse loses all meaning: rather than on the faithfulness to a supposed original, the focus is here on the ability to adapt both stories and cultural practices so as to ensure their perpetuation, even in the face of displacement. It is the same spirit in which those living in the diaspora still endeavor to recite traditional folktales to their children and grandchildren, "changing [their] accent, in true hakawati fashion, to fit the character [they are] voicing" and "always [leaving] the family in suspense" (Aziz). In a quintessentially postcolonial maneuver, authentic cultural heritage thus comes to consist, both within and without literary fiction, not of the rediscovery, but of the re-telling of the past (Hall 226). The invitation to listen, upon which the novel comes to a close, functions as a reminder of this simple fact—as an appeal to bear witness to the never-ending cycle of adaptation which constitutes the one authentic feature of all cultural heritage.

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