

Reassembling a World Literature:
Anton Shammas' *Arabesques* between
Iowa and the Galilee

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Abstract: This article explores how *Arabesques* (1986) by Anton Shammas, a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship, uses the Iowa International Writing Program to interrogate and relocate the consecration of world literature. Creative writing programs and the concept and canons of world literature have become central issues in literary studies over the last two decades. I use a perspective from outside Anglophone literature to examine these concerns in a way that comments on world literature and its institutions. I do so by exploring the critique of world literature and creative writing contained in Shammas' work. *Arabesques* is partly set at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program and questions where the world's literature is assembled and consecrated. Although it is commonly assumed that this process happens in big cities, the novel (along with documents written by the Program's founders) shows how the program tries to relocate the world's wealth of literature to this Midwestern location through the movement of people and artifacts. The novel uses Iowa's bid for centrality in the network of world literature to demonstrate how the canon and concept of world literature can also be assembled in the peripheral location of a small Galilee village. *Arabesques* suggests that the mobility of texts and people can unsettle the global center/periphery and East/West dichotomies, if only for the duration of the novel.

Keywords: Anton Shammas, Palestinian literature in Hebrew, creative writing programs, Iowa International Writing Program, world literature

I. Introduction

As a Palestinian writing in Hebrew, Anton Shammas finds himself in a precarious predicament vis-à-vis the Israeli literary establishment. One way he has secured a stronger position, though not a wholly secure one, is by aligning his work with the world republic of letters. As I show, he constructs a version of this world republic in his novel *Arabesques* (1986). French critic Pascale Casanova coined the term “world republic of letters” to describe and emphasize the international context of the circulation and consecration of literature written all over the world. Her concept can be related to “world literature,” understood as the texts, forms, genres, and other literary material that travel through the international field of literature.¹ The world republic of letters also encompasses the struggles over prestige, authority, and cultural capital that are waged between individual authors, languages, and nations; questions of which authors, works, and national canons are included in the world republic of letters; and strife over where the center, or the republic’s cultural capital city, is located. Although the center might shift—from Paris to New York, for instance—in Casanova’s account it is always a big Western city. Shammas’ *Arabesques* challenges this assumption and quixotically suggests that his own secluded Galilee village can be a center for the reassembly of world literature. He does so by folding the West within the bounds of his childhood home as it is remembered in the novel. This folding takes place through an engagement with the American Midwest, specifically Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* and the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Before situating this argument within theoretical debates about the world republic of letters, I will introduce Shammas’ novel and the strained cultural and political situation from which it comes.

Arabesques has a rare if not altogether unique cultural position in Hebrew literature because it was written by a Palestinian citizen of Israel. Because most discourse concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict revolves around the territories that were occupied during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, it might surprise some readers that there are many Palestinians residing within the pre-1967 borders. These Palestinian men and women have Israeli citizenship. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli

War that coincided with the formation of the State of Israel, many Palestinian citizens fled their homes or were expelled by Israeli troops. A great number were not permitted to return and found themselves refugees in Arab countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan (which controlled the West Bank), and Egypt (which controlled the Gaza Strip). Yet some were able to return—or never left—and were granted Israeli citizenship and nominal equality. There is great variety between sub-groups, regions, and generations in the way this group relates to the State of Israel and to what extent they identify with Palestinians who are not citizens of Israel.

Most Palestinians with Israeli citizenship speak Hebrew as a second language. But Arabic, which is an official language in Israel, remains the main language of education, media, culture, and, of course, everyday life. It must seem curious, then, that Shammas did not write his novel in Arabic, his mother tongue, but in Hebrew.² His decision to work in another language—the language some might think of as the language of his oppressors—has been the focus of much of the attention *Arabesques* has received; Shai Ginsburg goes so far as to assert that the “question of language . . . haunts” the novel’s reception (“Bookcase” 239).³ Hebrew is considered the language of the Jewish people and Zionism (territorial Jewish nationalism). According to classic Zionist narrative, Hebrew was revived from a state of purely religious use as part of the national awakening that led to the creation of Israel. In the 1980s—even more so than today—a non-Jewish person writing a novel in Hebrew seemed like a subversion of the Hebrew literary system. As Hanan Hever, a prominent critic in the field of Hebrew literature, observes in the first academic essay on *Arabesque*, the novel is an example of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call “minor literature,” insisting that any writing by a member of a minority in a majority language is always inherently political (Hever 70). For his part, Shammas has upheld the political implication of his choice by saying that he wished to “un-Jew” the language and free it from its national weight (“Your Worst” 10). At the same time, choosing Hebrew gave Shammas a sense of freedom and artistry. When writing in Arabic, he says, he “kept hearing the relatives breathing down

[his] neck” (qtd. in Marzorati). Gerald Marzorati notes that “[w]riting in a second language would not only provide [Shammas] with the distance he wanted from his storytelling mentors; it would also steer him from convention and cliché” and compares the choice to Samuel Beckett’s much less explicitly political move from English to French. Writing in Hebrew combines the aesthetic with the political in way that has engaged critics since *Arabesque’s* initial publication.

Shammas also defies obvious choices—and this has received much less attention—by setting much of the action of his novel outside of the Middle East. *Arabesques* takes place not only in the Galilee and the West Bank, but also in Paris and Iowa. These international locations hint that the novel has much to say about world literature, not just about Arab and Israeli politics (cultural or otherwise). The novel is not only a specimen of world literature, but is, to borrow David Damrosch’s phrase, “both of and *about* world literature” (116; emphasis in original).

Shammas was born in 1950, after the founding of the State of Israel and the accompanying disaster this developments meant for the Palestinian people. A member of the Christian minority within the predominantly Muslim Palestinian population, he spent his childhood in Fassuta, a small village in the Galilee; in his early teens his family moved to Haifa, a large port city, where he attended an integrated Jewish-Arab high school. When he was seventeen he moved to Jerusalem where, at Hebrew University, he studied art history, Arabic literature, and English literature. He worked as an editor and translator in both Hebrew and Arabic, most famously translating works by the prominent Palestinian Israeli novelist Emile Habibi into Hebrew. Even before the publication of *Arabesques*, he was an important presence in Israeli intellectual discourse.⁴

In accordance with the title *Arabesques*, but also in a fashion similar to some of its international and Israeli contemporaries (David Grossman’s *See Under: Love* and Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife* were published that year, while Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* was published two year later), Shammas wrote a complex, self-reflexive, and recursive novel.⁵ Its protagonist is named Anton Shammas and

shares many biographical facts with Shamma's the author. The novel interweaves "The Tale" sections, which are about Anton's youth and his family's history in the Galilean village of Fassuta, with "The Teller" sections, which narrate Anton's 1980s experiences in Israel, the West Bank, Paris, and Iowa. Neither section is told in a linear fashion. Both mix fact and fiction and subvert their own claims to truth. The sections about the village and Anton's early life are highly associative and blend history, autobiography, and myth. These sections, in particular, have been compared (in part because of references contained in the novel) to *Alf Layla Wa Layla* (most closely translated as *A Thousand Nights and a Night*, also known as *The Arabian Nights*) and Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*).

The novel's plots are extremely dense and, well, arabesque. The intricacies of the family mythology set in Fassuta are not altogether pertinent to my argument. The sections pertaining to Anton in "The Teller" are more relevant and easier to summarize. Through a conversation with a Palestinian woman, Anton discovers that his older cousin after whom he is named and whom everyone thought dead might have survived infancy and been adopted by a Lebanese family. Anton then travels to Iowa City via Paris to attend the International Writing Program. En route, he meets an Israeli writer who then plans to write a book based on this encounter. In Iowa, he meets a variety of writers, including an Egyptian-Jewish-French writer and a Palestinian poet, corresponds with his married Jewish lover, *presumably* writes parts of the novel we are reading, and has his Hebrew typewriter stolen. As part of the postmodern topsy-turvy of this fiction, he eventually meets a man who may be his long-lost cousin. This cousin gives him a manuscript that *might* be the novel we have been reading (or parts of the novel).

Shamma's precarious position as a Palestinian writing in Hebrew encouraged him to think about world literature. His language choice was bound to receive some attention, but Shamma's ethnicity also meant that he was unlikely to ever be at the center of a literary canon written in a language considered by many to be the sole property of the Jewish people. Yet writing in a language other than Arabic meant that he was not part of a process of Arabic literary consecration. Shamma,

therefore, may be interested in a third option: reception in other languages and cultures. Indeed, prestige drawn from outside the Hebrew and Arabic traditions is part of what enables the novel to have a more prominent place in Israel.

II. Paris

Calling texts part of the world republic of letters (or world literature) gives them a certain context in which researchers, teachers, and students can understand and interpret them. In his critique of sociology *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour urges against jumping from local interactions to the contexts that operate behind them. Context, he writes, is not a different sphere of existence: it does not hide, camouflaged, behind the observable. Instead, it exists on the same level as the places, processes, or interactions that seem to require contextualization. These arenas of contextualization link to the observed location, and researchers can follow these links. Latour exhorts sociologists and other researchers to find the locations where abstract concepts like the “Oedipus Complex” or “social capital” are assembled and from which they affect other locations. Scholars, he urges, need to follow networks from one location to another. Eventually they may land on a central node. This node or location is more central because it is linked more directly to a variety of other locations. This kind of location will be especially important to understanding what in other approaches would be called context (Latour 182–83). For example, he suggests that economic sociologists should assess the New York Stock Exchange as a central reassembling node in the network of capitalism rather than discuss capitalism abstractly (187). In such locations, a researcher can have an overview or panorama of the social world, but this overview is only a localized construction. A similar location for the reassembling of context, or the social, as he sometimes calls it, is the social scientist’s office—Latour prefers to be specific—where information is sorted, interpreted, repackaged, and sent out in the form of knowledge about society.⁶

Latour’s perspective not only stresses that these contexts are reassembled but that they are reassembled through connections in networks. Some nodes are more connected or more central. However, this point

does not mean that other nodes do not have the potential to gain more connections and become more central. Arguing in favor of his approach's political potential and against critical sociologists who see themselves as fighting monolithic "social forces," Latour writes: "I think it would be much safer to claim that action is possible only in a territory that has been opened up, flattened down, and cut down to size in a place where formats, structures, globalization, and totalities circulate inside tiny conduits, and where for each of their applications they need to rely on masses of hidden potentialities. If this is not possible, then there is no politics" (252). Thinking of the capital city of the republic of letters as a node of reassembly rather than as a place where cultural capital or prestige is accumulated (as Casanova does) can give us a new perspective on the institutions of world literature and the texts that engage with this concept. Rethinking world literature, through the conjuncture of Latour and Shammas, as a structure or format that is forever reassembled in diverse locations can make the monolithic politics of the building and maintenance of world literature, including in literary studies, more open for readjustment and play.

Shammas' relocation of this center reflects both a decentralized past and a potential for a similar future. Aamir R. Mufti's critique of the process of centralization is pertinent: "Having consigned the languages of the global South, including formerly extensive and dispersed cultures of writing, to narrowly conceived ethnonational spheres, English now assumes the mantle of exclusive medium of cosmopolitan exchange" (488–89). Mufti also reiterates that the centrality of the English language is constructed and that even a century ago it was not the norm: "[A] hundred years ago at least some intelligentsias in the vast stretch of societies from the eastern Balkans, through Anatolia and Persia proper, including swathes of Central Asia and Afghanistan, and stretching across the northern belt of the subcontinent, may have encountered their textual creations in the original and directly—that is, in Persian, Arabic, or Ottoman Turkish" (489).

Some of the works in Shammas' childhood bookcase date back to the period described by Mufti, suggesting that this past configuration still has resonance for him. Indeed, *Arabesques* foreshadows our more net-

worked globe that has most obviously developed as a result of the wide use of the Internet and was only in its beginnings in the mid-1980s.⁷ Shamma suggests that this kind of world may lead to a more diffused power structure for literature. Each localized agent collects, through various routes, its own version of world literature rather than the cultural centers of the West collecting the riches of the world's literature for themselves and then disseminating them back to the whole world. My reading of *Arabesques* is therefore relevant to understanding the world republic of letters both as it was and as it is starting to reform on the web.⁸

In *Where Is American Literature?* (2013), Caroline F. Levander shifts the focus of attention from questions of what American literature is and what defines it to a question of location: where is American literature found? I wish to suggest a similar move in trying to find new locations for world literature as Shamma envisions it. Levander writes that American literature is “[i]n the [e]ye of” the non-American “[b]eholder” (35); thus she identifies the location of American literature with whatever place people read and write about it. The power to define and construct the history, canons, and significance of American literature moves to foreign readers—people such as, to use Levander's example, Jorge Luis Borges (who published an introduction to American literature). I propose a similar reading of Shamma's use of an American writer and an American literary institution but argue that in looking at his eye of the beholder, we find both American literature and world literature as they are constructed in the United States and other Anglophone countries. The central role Iowa plays in this relocation of the world republic of letters becomes even more urgent in our present moment, when the phenomena of the creative writing workshop, which originated to a great degree at the University of Iowa, is expanding globally. Harry Whitehead warns that “this development threatens to unfold a new form of cultural imperialist hegemony, whereby the allure and widespread practice of writing students utilizing seemingly universal craft devices in fact restricts literary production and experimentation” (360). Shamma's experimental novel uses the creative writing workshop and the hegemonic power of the university for its own

decentralizing ends: to relocate the world republic of letters, even if temporarily.

III. Fassuta

The reassembly of world literature is analogous to and enabled by connections between Shammās' village and other places. The Shammās family home, paid for with money earned in Argentina, concretizes this idea. Here is a description of the family's wardrobe and bookcase:

[O]ur bookcase, ensconced within the thick wall, and its olive hued door was locked with the yellow key resting at the bottom of the candy plate in the wardrobe, the same wardrobe that was brought in 1940 from Beirut on a truck and was hoisted onto two camels in Remis near the Lebanon border, hoisted with its doors, shelves, drawers, all covered by brittle brown bark, and with the thick mirror that had a middle door and behind which, locked, one could find the plateful of candy. (Shammās, *Arabesques* 12–13)⁹

Shammās flirts with Orientalist tropes through his invocations of the olive tree and travel on camelback, but he also shows how the Shammās family's living quarters were assembled with pieces from difficult-to-reach cities, just like the family itself. The wardrobe is closely connected to the bookcase because, under a layer of sought-after candy, it holds the attractive key to the mysteries of the bookcase. Ginsburg describes the bookcase as a location built on the tension between its concreteness and the promise of ideal and imaginary dimensions that the texts within it hold ("Bookcase" 242–45). I agree that the bookcase functions as an escape route for Shammās but suggest that it also acts as a kind of funnel that brings the world back to the village.

The novel's narration of village life, mixed as it is with folklore, shows that Shammās is willing to accept his role as provider of local exoticism. Reports of a secluded location are exactly what are expected from a writer who comes from such a location. This expectation is seen, among many other places, in the reviews *Arabesques* received. For example, American critic Irving Howe lauds the novel's depictions of the village but be-

moans its inclusion of postmodern tricks and American locations. But Shammās never takes this exotic role on completely. Nor could he have depicted his village as absolutely secluded. No location is purely local. Instead, as Latour and many others contend, each location is a node of countless connections to other places. The Galilean village can never be fully isolated from its global and historical surroundings. Shammās connects the reassembling of world literature to a more general point about how the seemingly secluded rural location depicted in his novel is in fact deeply connected to the Middle East and the world at large. He does so by first inviting an Orientalist reading and then showing Orientalist assumptions to be false.

This pattern is established early in the novel. *Arabesques* opens: “Grandma Alia has never heard of Communism, despite the sickle that was laid on her stomach on Thursday April First 1954” (9). The sentence confirms readers’ expectations of the secluded Arab village; the international power of communism has not yet reached the old women of Fassuta. In the same paragraph, readers learn that the sickle was placed on Alia’s belly as a folkloric cure for abdominal pains. The tool mutates from a symbol of communism into an item that represents traditional beliefs. But at the same time that he satisfies a desire for folkloric exoticism, Shammās insists that the scene is far from disconnected from the world. The narrator associates communism, the Russian flag, and the sickle, indicating that he is no longer as secluded as his grandmother. Even Grandma Alia’s death is not a completely local event.

The bookcase embodies this duality. Anton’s oldest brother covets an eccentric priest’s antique book collection and “little by little this collection finds its way to our bookcase” (12). The older brother appropriates a version of world literature (via Arab paths) for his and Anton’s consumption. The reason Anton mentions the collection in the first place is because an issue of a Lebanese periodical helps establish his grandmother’s year of birth. But there is another crucial text that Anton discovers in the bookcase that lodges the Midwest within the Middle East. In offering this text, the bookcase makes Anton’s childhood home a legitimate place for the reassembly of world literature.

The importance of *My Ántonia* (1918) by Cather, known for her depiction of the Midwest and her formal experimentation, first becomes clear as part of a scene in an airport, a site central to the circulation of people and commodities. Anton contemplates Jewish-Israeli novelist Yehushua Bar-On's purpose in coming to Iowa, which is, as I explain later, getting to know Anton so he can write about an Arab character. A new paragraph begins with Anton contrasting himself to Bar-On: "As for me, I doubt if I would ever have arrived in Iowa City in the American Midwest, if it was not for *My Ántonia*" (Shammas, *Arabesques* 123). After again recalling the living room—recursively, like a decorative arabesque—in almost exact repetition of the passage quoted above, Anton returns to Cather's novel. As he grows older he learns how to open the bookcase without a key and "that is how I came to the first novel I ever read. It was a hefty volume with a soft turquoise cover with a black on white illustration of a young man and a young woman, their backs turned and their eyes set on what should have been the red grass of the Nebraska prairie. This was an Arabic translation, probably from the 1930s, of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*" (123).¹⁰ His description of the volume is followed by a long excerpt from the novel's opening, set on a train traveling through Iowa.

Anton does not travel because curious Americans invited him (an expectation I explore below), nor does he (like Bar-On) wish that the visit to Iowa be solely an extension of his Israeli preoccupations. His motivation lies somewhere between these two poles. The Midwest is attractive because it is a literary location known to Anton from his seemingly localized childhood. Anton's literary perspective has always spanned the globe through the mediation of family members and various Arab visitors to the village. Part of the reason Anton likes *My Ántonia* is that *Ántonia's* name echoes his own. This kind of resonance is unique to someone with Anton's name and thus highlights that the importance of the novel to him is quite individual, even idiosyncratic. Shammas does not accept the Western perception of its own canon: to be sure, Cather is an important American novelist, but she is far from a central figure in Western or even American literature. Placing unquestionably prominent figures like William Shakespeare, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,

Herman Melville, or James Joyce in the bookcase would have created a different picture and one in which Anton and the other Fassutans had much less authority over what is reassembled within their version of world literature. Concentrating on a book that is not at the very center of American literature and is quite peripheral in world literature shows that Anton and other Arab agents have an active role in shaping what the world looks like inside their own villages.

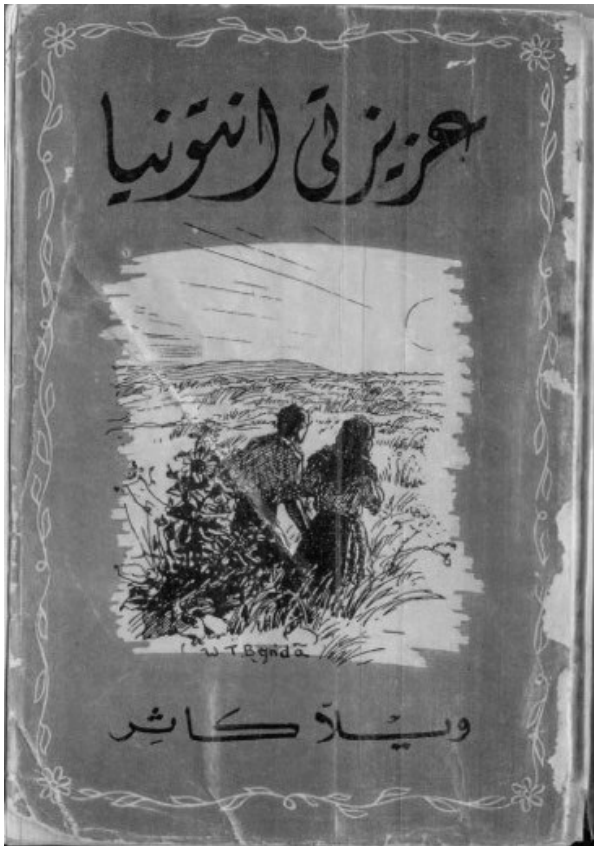


Fig. 1: Front cover of Suhair al-Qalamawi's Arabic Translation of *My Antonia*; image courtesy of Anton Shammas.

IV. Iowa City

My readers may protest that Shammas does not create a center for the world republic of letters but rather assembles a personal canon that is governed by happenstance and personal idiosyncrasies. Each of us has our own personal hall of fame. But though these are part of the processes of cultural consecration, they do not constitute centers or capital cities. What, then, makes the Shammas family bookcase a central location? My first step was demonstrating how *My Antonia* situated the Midwest within the Arab village. This point is crucial because, as I will show, the directors of the Iowa International Writing Program, in the novel and outside of it, try to make their institution a center, a rural capital city, for the world republic of letters. Thus Shammas engages with an institution that already puts world literature into motion. In showing that the Midwest was part of his library Shammas displaces the Iowan efforts and situates world literature in Fassuta.

Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (2009) is an influential history of postwar American fiction and the growth in creative writing programs. It has become the starting point for many discussions of creative writing workshops, especially Iowa's. McGurl argues that the Iowa Writers' Workshop (an MFA program) developed as an institution with a huge impact on the nation's literature. With the founding of the International Writing Program, which gathers writers from around the world for a few months and does not grant MFAs, the Workshop became an institution with global ambitions. This bid for international authority is where McGurl's account ends and I want to begin my analysis. Paul Engle, the first director of the Workshop, (in close cooperation with his wife, Nieh Hualing Engle), eventually "dedicated himself to the cause of world peace, which he imagined could come about through the 'mutual understanding' produced uniquely in and through the medium of literature. . . . [He] devot[ed] all of his energies to the International Writing Program" (McGurl 178–79). The Engles' humanist and international ambitions of transcultural understanding and tolerance explain how writers like Anton find themselves in the Midwestern university for a long autumn. Shammas was a resident in 1981. In the novel, the workshop throws together the Palestinian

writer Paco, the Egyptian-French-Jewish Mira, the Jewish-Israeli Bar-On, and the Palestinian citizen of Israel Anton, along with many others.¹¹ Indeed, some mutual understanding is gained, exactly as the Engles envisioned.

However, another agenda runs parallel to the promotion of world peace. Iowa hopes to become a central node for the world republic of letters. According to Casanova, writers from less well-endowed cultures travel to cultural capitals, often in person but at times only through their texts, in order to gain literary approval and eventual canonization. Think of Joyce settling in Paris, Chinua Achebe teaching at Bard College (near New York), or the many authors of Hebrew literature, including S. Y. Agnon, who have made Berlin their home. Casanova suggests that opportunities for full artistic consecration present themselves only in these central Western locales. Casanova privileges the cultural center of Paris above all others, partly because it holds the power to determine the fates both of Francophone and global authors, as illustrated by the receptions of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner. It is not an accident, then, that Anton has a lover in Paris en route to Iowa City. As he travels through the (almost) undisputed literary capital of the nineteenth century, he visits Proust's grave at the Père Lachaise cemetery, where the graves of famous men and women are a bank of cultural capital. His final destination, however, is an institution that challenges Paris' centrality.

The Engles explicitly want to make the Program into a place where a single world literature is brought to light. They write: "The International Writing Program believes that the human race, in all its colors and languages, is a single group of people, trying to keep its precarious grip on a lurching earth. It also believes that all the literatures of the world . . . make one literature, for they all come from the same old imaginative expression of the gut-with-mind" (Engle and Engle 2). The Engles suggest that the literature of the world is already united but needs Iowa to bring it together and make it aware of its genesis in a universal human nature. However, the Latour-inspired perspective I describe above would claim that this context of world literature is reassembled in Iowa and does not necessarily preexist it. Such a perspective

allows for the idea that what has been reassembled in Paris, and then in Iowa City, might also be reassembled in Fassuta. This readjustment creates the potential to shape this version of the world republic of letters, one that has embarked from Europe to the American Midwest and may even travel further.

The University of Iowa's location in what is by and large a rural region—it certainly is depicted as such in *Arabesques*—that is usually thought of as peripheral in American history and literature, “flyover country” as some might say, must have made the Program's bid for centrality fascinating for Shammas. Stephen Wilbers writes that it occupies the position of a political capital despite its geographical location in the US: “[P]rograms like the Writers' Workshop have become centers for writers living in a country that has no London or Paris . . . as its literary capital” (134). As McGurl shows using other terms, the Iowa Writers' Workshop reassembles American literature in one place, turning into its command and control center.¹² Wilbers' analogy of the Workshop to capital cities suggests this sense of control. But, as we see, the Engles have global, not merely national, ambitions for Iowa's authority.

Though Shammas did not have access to all the texts quoted above or the full history of the International Writing Program, he shows awareness, at times mocking, of the Program's ambitions. These ambitions are especially important because of Iowa's peripheral location within the US. Iowa's potential is also the Galilee's. As I discuss above, Shammas makes a similar, more implicit, bid for his own village in *Arabesques*. This bid is made possible by the way Iowa had already started moving world literature to the Midwest. The Midwest, you will recall, is already part of Anton's childhood living room.

Anton and many of the other guests satirize the workshop's ambitions to reassemble world literature in a way that helps him take over its authority. During the opening reception at the Engles' home, Anton notices that “[t]he length of the wall is covered with a rare collection of masks, of all colors and races, from the land of China to the land of Ethiopia [*Kush*], from India [*Hodu*] even unto Peru” (Shammas, *Arabesques* 129). The description rephrases the well-known first verse

of the Scroll of Esther: “Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus who reigned, from India [*Hodu*] even unto Ethiopia [*Kush*], over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces)” (Esth. 1.1).¹³ Shamma’s description of the Engles refers back to an ancient Persian Empire that, according to Scripture, stretched from India to Africa.¹⁴ The Engles control an empire even bigger than the Biblical Persia; they are modern-day, artistically minded Ahasueruses. At the same time, the use of Biblical language referring to a grand empire to describe what is, after all, just a collection of art objects ironizes the Program’s ambition of reassembling and even controlling the (literary, aesthetic) world. Comparing Ahasuerus’ political power with the Engles’ will to collect deflates the latter.

Similarly, the masks hint at and ironize what the Engles are trying to do with foreign writers: reassemble them into a collection that they can possess, arrange, and display. Shamma stresses that the masks were presented as gifts by former visiting writers in a sentence that follows the introduction of the collection: “These masks were left behind by Program participants in previous years, whose memory is brought back to Paul’s lips while he presents the masks of the past to the newcomers” (*Arabesques* 129). The fictional Paul Engle shows off, as if saying, “Look at the treasury of world writers I have acquired for myself.” However, the writers leave masks not just literally but figuratively as well. Thus from *Arabesques*’ perspective, the authors are actors who perform a persona for Western/Midwestern curation and consumption. The international authors play-act world literature. They give the Engles externals, husk-masks, not the authentic “unity-within-diversity” they expect and advertise. Shamma risks questioning the entire possibility of world literature when he satirizes the Engles’ ambitions. But because his position within both Israeli and world literature is so tangential, he must rattle and weaken these institutions if he wants to have any control over them.

A less subtle resistance can be found in Bar-On, who is often interpreted by critics as a satirical character who is the butt of Shamma’s jokes rather than one who may present his point of view. Bar-On represents Jewish-Israeli culture in general and novelist A. B. Yehushua

in particular (Hever 58; Brenner 436; Gluzman). Yet, while Bar-On is an object of critique, he also has the important task of resisting the internationalism of Iowa. Bar-On admits his only reason for coming to Iowa was to get to know Anton better—he wants to write a novel about an Israeli Arab. At first glance, Bar-On is interested in mutual understanding between different peoples; he is cooperating with the Program's program. Nonetheless, Bar-On refuses to play the international game. For him, Iowa merely presents an opportunity to understand different components of his own country. On the way to Iowa, he tells Anton: "I am writing a novel with an educated Arab as its protagonist. . . . And it seems to me that such a golden opportunity will never again be within my grasp—to be with such a person in ideal seclusion" (Shammas, *Arabesques* 122). When in due course it becomes clear to Bar-On that Anton is unwilling to open up, Bar-On plans to leave and stays only because of a burgeoning relationship with Paco, the Palestinian writer.

That friendship puts Bar-On and Paco at "the top of the Program's public relations chart" (152), but only temporarily. While this new development may once again suggest that Bar-On shares the Program's internationalist agenda, a closer look reveals that Bar-On thinks of Paco as a more easily digestible source for literary writing. The first time Anton sees Bar-On and Paco walking "arm in arm," Bar-On acidly calms Anton: "My dear friend, as of today you are free of the terror of my open notebook, for I have found a new protagonist [*gibor*]" (151). Bar-On builds a relationship with Paco, a Palestinian who does not possess Israeli citizenship, because he is relevant to his interest in a decidedly national concern, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and not the international fraternity that the Engles may imagine. Furthermore, characters within the novel raise the possibility that Bar-On will literally "inform" on Anton to the Israeli security services and send in reports about Anton's actions in the US. This possibility echoes Bar-On's view of Iowa as an extension of Israeli affairs. A meeting held by Anton with a citizen of Lebanon, possibly a relative, in Iowa is made to seem the business of Israeli security through Bar-On's presence. Bar-On, seeming "perplexed," enters the room momentarily and then exits

it. When he learns Bar-On's identity, the Lebanese man asks, "Do you think he might report on us to the security agencies [or] something like that?" to which Anton answers "possibly" (231). For Bar-On, his trip to Iowa is the literary equivalent of a Mossad operation that advances national causes on foreign ground. Granted, this unwillingness to see the Program as anything but an opportunity to spend time with Palestinians is somewhat ridiculous. However, Bar-On's ability to ignore Iowa's drive to control the literary world, his ability to resist the force and logic of the institution that houses him, is impressive. When he fails in his mission, he leaves the workshop and goes back to Israel, proving his independence from the Engles' globalizing ideas.

Thus, by satirizing Iowa, Shammaas is able to move world literature to an even less traditional center, at least partially and temporarily, within the realm of the novel. By questioning Iowa's world literary ambitions, he creates a place for his own eccentric narrative about where world literature is assembled. In his childhood bookcase, Shammaas collects in a way that is similar to the Engles' more plausible, if not wholly successful, assemblage of world literature. To be clear, I am not saying that there is something inherently better about assembling world literature in the Galilee, just as there is not necessarily anything laudable about shifting the center from Paris to the Midwest. I am suggesting that this shift is useful for Shammaas' project of building his identity and authority as a Palestinian writing in Hebrew who wants to draw authority from world literature.

V. Palestine, Michigan

In moving toward a close, I want to fortify my argument by showing how Shammaas' imagination runs in the direction of geographical relocations of the kind I have been tracing. In the narrative essay "Autocartography: The Case of Palestine, Michigan," Shammaas writes about A., a young woman of Palestinian descent living in Dearborn, Michigan, who wishes to go to the home she never knew in Palestine and which no longer exists: "*rahbat Falasteen* . . . Palestine is gone," she is told ("Autocartography" 467; emphasis in original). Her friend, who does not want her to leave, finds "an instant American solution for every

possible non-American problem,” including a place called Palestine in Michigan, “an ingenious way for you to go to Palestine without even crossing the state border” (472). After some deliberation, A. decides that this solution may be acceptable: “[A] Palestinian refugee who makes Palestine, Michigan, her home—hasn’t she, in a way, ‘returned’ to Palestine? Hasn’t she, in a way, blown the whole concept of displacement from within? Hasn’t she, by this simple twist of fate, actually won the case in the most unexpected manner?” (473). Instead of “displacement,” Shammas offers a kind of replacement. Though it is certainly not a political solution for *the* Palestinian problem, it is an imaginative solution for A.’s Palestinian problem or to introduce a pun I am not sure Shammas intended, *a* Palestinian problem. In *Arabesques*, the Midwest is placed in the Shammas family bookcase; in the later text, Shammas places Palestine in the Midwest.

One way to visualize Shammas’ rearrangement of world literature is as a set of Russian nesting dolls, or *babushka* as they are known in Israel. In an essay titled “*Ashmat ha-babushka*” [“The Nesting Doll’s Fault”], Shammas uses this image to explain the nested and replicating relationship between the Israeli Arab population and the Israeli state. The image is also relevant to his view of the Midwest. It is not that Shammas interprets *My Antonia* from a Palestinian point of view. He does not look at it from outside, as an anthropologist visiting the Midwest. Instead, he places Cather’s novel inside his world: in his Middle Eastern novel, there is a village, in which lies a house with a bookcase. In the bookcase, one can find a novel and in the novel one can find the Midwest.

As extensions of the bookcase, Shammas’ writing desk and *Arabesques* also reassemble world literature. Shammas, who was expected to produce the local for global consumption, instead assembles global literature within the pages of his novel, collecting epigraphs, allusions, styles, and structures from all over the world. The epigraphs include Palestinian, Israeli, Eastern European Jewish, American, Irish, Norwegian, and Australian voices.¹⁵ To these we may add references to French (Proust), Italian (Dante), and Argentinian (Borges) writers, as well as to the cosmopolitan, pre-national traditions of *Alf Layla wa*

Layla and Scripture, turning Shammas' novel into a kind of small personal anthology, a place of gathering akin to a library (as the etymology of "anthology" suggests). Anna Bernard argues that the novel's references to *Alf Layla wa Layla* and other Arabic texts offer "a glimpse at a vast textual archive in Arabic, which attests to an autonomous and heterogeneous literary tradition" (151). While I realize that Bernard's point is that Shammas' Arabic tradition is independent from the Hebrew tradition, I want to highlight that literature in Arabic was never "autonomous" but rather well connected and dependent on other literatures both from the East and the West. Yet it is connected in a way that does not prevent it from controlling and assembling the incoming literary material. The seemingly peripheral Middle East is shown to contain places, even places peripheral in Middle Eastern terms (i.e., not Bagdad or Cairo), from which world literature can be defined and arranged.

In his English-language essay "The Drowned Library," Shammas provides a detailed inventory of his childhood bookcase in a way that more explicitly makes a connection to the concept of world literature as the best literature of the world while simultaneously highlighting how it is brought through Arabic channels and mixed with texts by Arab authors:

Inside the bookcase you could find volumes of the Lebanese literary magazine *Al-Jinan*[.] . . . the magazine whose extremely young editor . . . wrote what was later to be considered as the first Arabic novels . . . and a series of textbooks for teaching the Arabic language called *Al-Mushawwaq*, which included abridged excerpts . . . from the works of famous Arab and European authors . . . where I first came across names I couldn't pronounce: Homer, Cervantes, Victor Hugo (which I still can't pronounce properly). But I was more fascinated by the texts of modernist Arab authors, writing in the 1930s and 1940s, some of which I can still recite from memory. And then there was an Arabic translation of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, published in Egypt in the 1940s. (115)

The context for the writing of this inventory is the destruction of his library. While storing his books in a friend's basement, they are decimated by water damage. Shammas can reassemble the collection only by writing "The Drowned Library." This recollection and collection anew is also relocation because Shammas is writing from Ann Arbor, where he teaches at the University of Michigan, rather than Israel. His recollections of the Fassuta and Jerusalem assemblages of world literature are now placed, like the Palestine of "Autocartography," in Michigan. This irony is foreshadowed in the novel when, in one of the final "The Teller" chapters, the possibility arises that the real author of the text's sections about the village is a Lebanese-American man, Anton's double and (possible) cousin, who wrote it while living in the US. Shammas' post-publication biography and the fictional possibility that parts of the novel were written by an American do not negate the Galilee's potential for reassembling world literature. They do, however, suggest how difficult it is to maintain this position. The center of the world republic of letters can be made to shift with enough imagination and ingenuity, but once shifted it will not stay fixed.

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Notes

- 1 This definition is much more restricted than Moretti's concept of world literature as the sum total of what has been written, or even Damrosch's definition, which includes "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin" (4).
- 2 For a succinct yet comprehensive survey of fiction by Israeli-Arabs in Hebrew and Shammas' place in this short lineage, see Kayyal.
- 3 See also Ginsburg, "Rock" 188.
- 4 For more biographical detail, see Marzorati's *New York Times* profile.
- 5 Though by 1986 the heyday of metafiction or postmodern fiction was over, it was still a viable resource, as I believe it is today. Feldman points out Shammas' postmodernist techniques and how he highlights them through allusions to other postmodern texts (377–79).
- 6 See Latour 177, where the example is a linguist's office.
- 7 Dimock gives us a glimpse of the potential of the Internet for reassembling world literature through a description of a Facebook group she started.
- 8 Let me add that this decentralizing of world literature may also be instrumental in adjusting the overly European emphasis of Hebrew literary history, a project for which Levy, among others, advocates.
- 9 All translations from Hebrew are mine and are meant to be more accurate than pleasing, though I sometimes slightly changed sentence structure. When it seemed that the exact Hebrew word choice would be highly significant, the transliterated Hebrew word appears in square brackets.
- 10 The novel is referring to al-Qalamawi's Arabic translation of *My Antonia*. The cover shows W. S. Benda's "Jim and Antonia, Setting Sun," an illustration for the first edition that was conceived by Cather herself (see Stout). For what is probably the only extensive examination of Shammas' novel's intertextual and parodic connections with Cather's novel see Ginsburg's "The Bookcase and the Language of Grace" (249–54).
- 11 Paco is nicknamed for the Paco Rabbane perfume he uses. Bar-On's last name means powerful or potent and his first name is that of the Biblical leader of the Israelite settlement of Canaan, Joshua. Shammas is probably also expecting his readers to think of the Israeli novelist A. B. Yehushua. The first letters of Bar-On in Hebrew are Beth and Alef, just like Yehushua's initials, making the character's name a mirror of the famous author's.
- 12 A term often used by Latour, see 181–82.
- 13 I am quoting from the King James Version of the Bible, checked against the Hebrew *Tanach*.
- 14 There is no scholarly consensus over which actual places are referred to in the verse. However, in Modern Hebrew, *Hodu* refers to India. While few use *Kush* in everyday speech, it is usually accepted as Africa or a certain part of that continent.

15 In order of appearance: Clive James, G. B. Shaw, Yehuda Amichai, Palestinian folklore, Walter Abish, Bjørg Vik, A. B. Yehoshua, Nachman of Breslov, and John Barth.

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Reassembling a World Literature

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