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

As a Palestinian writing in Hebrew, Anton Shammas found himself in a precarious predicament vis-à-vis the Israeli literary establishment. One way in which he secured a stronger position is to align his work with the world republic of letters. As I will show, he even constructed a version of it within his novel, *Arabesques* (1986). French critic Pascale Casanova coined the term “World Republic of Letters” as the international context for 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 travels through this system or field.[[1]](#endnote-1) The world republic of letter encompasses struggles over prestige, authority, and cultural capital. These struggles are waged between individual authors, languages, and nations. Beyond the question of which authors, works, national canons are consecrated, one can distinguish strife over where the center, the republic’s cultural capital city, resides. The center might shift, from Paris to New York for instance. However, in Casanova’s account, it is always a big Western city. Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques* challenges this assumption, quixotically, showing how 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, which is embodied by Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* and the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Before situating this argument within theoretical debates about the world republic of letters, let me introduce the book and the strained cultural and political situation from which it comes.

*Arabesques* has a rare if not altogether unique cultural position in Hebrew literature written by a Palestinian citizen of Israel. Because most discourse around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict revolves around the territories that were occupied during the 1967 War, it might surprise some readers that there are many Palestinian residing within the pre-1967 borders. These Palestinian men and women have Israeli citizenship. During the 1948 War that coincided with formation of the Israel (as a Jewish and democratic state), many Palestinian citizens fled their homes or were expelled by Israeli troops. A great number were not permitted to return and found themselves as refugees in Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan (which controlled the West Bank), Egypt (which controlled the Gaza Streep), and others. Yet, some were able to return or never left. This group was permitted Israeli citizenship and nominal equality. There is great variety between subgroups, regions, and generations in the way this group related to the State of Israel and identifies with Palestinian who are not citizens of Israel, residing in the territories occupied during the 1967 War (Gaza and the West Bank) and throughout the world. Most Palestinians with Israeli citizenship speak Hebrew. Arabic though, 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]](#endnote-2) This decision to work in another language, the language of his oppressors even, has been the focus of much of the attention *Arabesques* received; Shai Ginsburg goes as far as to say that the “question of language” is the one question that “haunts” the novel’s reception (“Bookcase” 239; Ginsburg, “Rock” 188). Hebrew is considered the language of the Jews and Zionism (territorial Jewish nationalism). According to classic Zionist historiography it was revived from a state of purely religious usage as part of the national revival that lead to the creation of Israel. In the 1980s even more so than today, the very act of writing a novel in Hebrew by a non-Jew seemed like a subversion of the Hebrew literary system. As Hanan Hever, a prominent critic in the field of Hebrew literature, points out in the first academic paper on *Arabesque,* this novelis an example of what Deleuze and Guattari called “minor literature,” especially in inherently political of the fact that a member of a minority take up the majority language (Hever 70). Shammas himself upholds the political implication of his choice saying the 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 in an interview for *The New York Times* “kept hearing the relatives breathing down my neck.” The interviewer adds “Writing in a second language would not only provide him with the distance he wanted from his storytelling mentors; it would also steer him from convention and cliché” comparing the choice to Beckett’s much less obviously political move to French (Marzorati). So, writing in Hebrew combines the aesthetic with the political in way that has engaged critics ever since the book’s publication.

As crucial as the language question surely is, Shammas not only defies obvious choices by writing in Hebrew, but also 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 that it is, as Damrosch writes about a novel by Georges Ngal: “both of and *about* world literature” (116).

Anton Shammas was born in 1950, after the 1948 War and the founding of the State of Israel, with the accompanying disaster these developments meant for the Palestinian people. A member of the Christian minority within the predominantly Muslim Palestinians, 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 the Hebrew University, he studied art history, Arabic literature, and, more relevant to my argument, English literature. He worked as an editor and translator in both Hebrew and Arabic, most famously translating works by prominent Palestinian Israeli novelist Emile Habibi into Hebrew. Even before the appearance of *Arabesques,* he was an important presence Israeli intellectual discourse.[[3]](#endnote-3)

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*, two year later – Shammaswrote a complex, self-reflexive, and recursive novel.[[4]](#endnote-4) Its protagonist is named Anton Shammas and shares many biographical facts with Shammas 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, and “The Teller,” which narrates Anton’s 1980s experiences in Israel, the West Bank, Paris, and Iowa. Neither section is told in a linear fashion. Both show a willingness to mix fact and fiction and to subvert their own claims to truth. The sections about the village and Anton’s early life are highly associative, blending without qualms history, autobiography, and myth. These sections particularly have been compared, with Shammas’s prompting through references in the novel, to both *Alf Layla Wa Layla* (*A Thousand Nights and a Night*) and Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time)*.

The plot, or rather plots, of the novel are extremely dense, interwoven, and well, arabesque. The intricacies of the family mythology set in Fassuta are not altogether pertinent to my argument here. The sections pertaining to Anton, “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 everyone thought dead might have survived infancy and was 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 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, he corresponds with his married Jewish lover, presumably writes parts of the novel we are reading, and his Hebrew typewriter is stolen. Eventually, he meets his long lost cousin, who gives him a manuscript that might be the novel that we have been reading.

Shammas’s peculiar position as a Palestinian writing in Hebrew encouraged him to think about world literature. The choice of language was bound to receive some attention, but Shammas’s ethnicity also meant that he was unlikely to ever be at the center of a literary canon in a language considered by many the sole property of the Jews. At the same time, writing in a language other than Arabic meant that he will not be part of a process of Arabic literary consecration. Shammas, therefore, may have been interested in a third option: a reception in other languages and cultures. At the same time, prestige drawn from outside the Hebrew and Arabic traditions is part of what enables the novel to have a more prominent place in Israel.

## Paris

Calling a text or a group of texts part of the world republic of letters (or world literature) is meant to give these a certain context in which researchers, teachers, and students can understand and interpret them. In his critique of sociology *Reassembling the Social*, Latour exhorts against jumping from local interactions to the contexts that operate behind them. Context is not a different sphere of existence, he tells us. Context does not hide, camouflaged, behind the observable. Instead, it exists on the same level as the places, the processes, or the 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. He urges scholars to follow the links between one location to others, just as local, but with more connections (182-3). To take one of Latour's examples, economic sociologists should assess the New York Stock Exchange as a central reassembling node in the network of capitalism, instead of talking about capitalism abstractly (187). In such locations, a researcher can have an overview of the social world, a panorama, but this overview is only a localized construction. Similar locations 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 (see 177, where the example is a linguist’s office).

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, more central. However, this fact does not mean that other nodes do not have a potential for gaining more connections and becoming more central. Arguing for 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 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 conjecture of Latour and Shammas, as a structure or a format that is forever reassembled in diverse locations can make the monolithic politics of world literature more open for readjustment and play.

Shammas’s relocation of this center reflects both a decentralized past and a potential for a similar future. Aamir Mufti’s critique of the process of centralization is pertinent here: “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” (488–9). Mufti also reminds us that the English language’s centrality was constructed historically and that even a century ago 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’s childhood bookcase date back to the period described by Mufti, suggesting that this past configuration still echoes for Shammas. Looking at the years since the publication of the novel in 1986, we may think of Shammas as foreshadowing a more networked globe, most obviously developing as a result of the wide use of the Internet, which was only in its beginnings in the mid-1980s.[[5]](#endnote-5) Shammas is suggesting that this kind of world may lead to a more diffused power-structure for literature. Instead of the cultural centers of the West collecting for themselves the riches of the world’s literature and then disseminating them back to the whole world, each localized agent collecting through various routes its own version of world literature. The way I read Shammas may therefore be relevant to understanding the world republic of letters both as it was and as it is starting to reform on the web.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In her 2013 book *Where is American Literature?*, Caroline Levandershifts the focus of attention from definitions to locations. I wish to suggest a similar move in trying to find new locations for world literature as Shammas envisions it. In one of the chapters, Levander suggests that American literature is “In the Eye of” the non-US-American “Beholder,” shifting the location of American literature to wherever people read and write about it (35). The power to define and construct the history, canons, and significance of US-American literature moves to foreign readers, people like Levander’s first example Jorge Luis Borges (who published an introduction to American literature). I propose a similar reading of Shammas’s use of an American writer and an American literary institution, but suggest that in looking at his eye of the beholder, we do not only find American literature, but also world literature as it is constructed in the United States and other Anglophone countries. The central role Iowa has to play in this relocating of the world republic of letters becomes even more urgent in our present moment when the phenomena creative writing workshop, originating to a great degree from 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). Shammas’s uses the creative writing workshop as part of his experimental novel in order to relocate the world republic of letters, even if temporarily.

## Fassuta

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

our bookcase, which was 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 (12-3). [[7]](#endnote-7)

Shammas flirts with Orientalist tropes – stereotypical depictions of the Middle East – with invocations of the olive tree and travel on camelback, but he also shows how the Shammas’ 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. Shai Ginsburg describes it as a location built on the tension between its concreteness and the promise of ideal and imaginary dimensions that the texts within it hold. I agree with Ginsburg that the bookcase functions as an escape route for Shammas, but it also acts as a kind of funnel that brings the world back to the village (2014: 242–3, 245).

The novel’s narration of village life as it mixes with *Alf Layla wa Layla*-like takes shows that Shammas is willing to accept his role as provider of local exoticism, as does the title *Arabesques*. But he never takes this role on completely, nor could he have depicted his village as absolutely secluded. No location is purely local. Instead, each location is a node of countless connections to other places, as Latour helps us see. The Galilean village can never be isolated from the global and historical surroundings. Shammas connects the reassembling of world literature to a more general point about how the seemingly secluded rural location is in fact deeply connected to the Middle East and the world at large. He does so by first inviting orientalist reading, but then showing orientalist assumptions to be false.

This pattern is established early on in the novel. The novel opens with: “Grandma Alia has never heard of Communism, despite the sickle that was laid on her stomach on Thursday April 1st, 1954” (9). Here expectations of the secluded Arab villages are confirmed. Readers looking for isolation can rest easy because the international power of communism has not reached the old women of Fassuta. In the same paragraph readers learn that the sickle was placed on her belly as a folkloric cure for abdominal pains. The sickle mutates from a symbol of Communism into an item representing traditional beliefs. But at the same time he satisfies a desire for folkloric exoticism, Shammas insists that the scene is far from disconnected from the world. First, Communism and the Russian flag are the first association the sickle brings to the narrator’s mind, signifying that he is no longer as secluded as his grandmother. Second, he dates the event in the international-Christian timeframe, “April 1st, 1954.” The dating of the event by this calendar and not by the Muslim calendar is not surprising because the Shammases are Christian. However, to make the international association even clearer, Shammas has the coffin maker tell four year old Anton that the grandmother only pretended to have died; after all, it is April Fools’ Day. Even Grandma Alia’s death is not a completely local event.

The bookcase marks 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 a volume of a Lebanese periodical that helps establish his grandmother’s year of birth. But there is another crucial text that Anton discovers in the bookcase lodges the Midwest within the Middle East. In so doing, the bookcase makes Anton’s childhood home a legitimate place the reassembly of world literature.

The importance of *My Ántonia* (1918) by Willa Cather (1873-1947), known for her depiction of the Midwest and her formal experimentation, first becomes clear as part of a scene in an airport, the site for the circulation of people and commodities. Anton contemplates Bar-On’s purpose in coming to Iowa: as I will explain later, getting to know Shammas. Then a new paragraph opens 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*.” After recalling the living room once again – recursively like a decorative arabesque – and in almost the same words as in the passage quoted above from another section of the novel, Anton goes back 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).[[8]](#endnote-8) The description of the volume is followed by a long excerpt from the novel’s opening, set in a train traveling through Iowa.

[insert image]

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

Anton, whose name connects him to the Bavarian immigrant Ántonia, did not travel in order to satisfy curious Americans (an expectation I will soon explore), nor did he (like Bar-On) wish the visit to Iowa to 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 trough the mediation of family members and various Arab visitors to the village. That Anton and Ántonia have similar names highlights that giving Cather’s novel such a prominent place is a rather idiosyncratic choice. 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 being the central figure in western or even American literature. Placing unquestionably prominent figures like Shakespeare, Goethe, Melville, or Joyce in the bookcase would have given us a different picture and one in which Anton and the other Fassutans seem to have much less authority over what is reassembled within his version of world literature. A concentration on a book with a somewhat peripheral place in the canon of American and certainly world literature shows that Anton and other Arab agents are active in how the world looks like inside the village.

## Iowa City

My readers may protest that Shammas is not creating a center for the world republic of letters, but rather assembling a personal canon, governed by happenstance and personal idiosyncrasies. Each of us has his or her own personal “hall of fame.” But though these are part of the processes of cultural consecration, they do not constitute centers for these processes. What, then, makes the Shammas family bookcase, within the novel, into a central location? My first step was showing how *My Ántonia* situated the Midwest within the Arab village. This point is crucial because, as I will now 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. In showing that the Midwest was part his library Shammas displaced the Iowan efforts and situated world literature in Fassuta.

Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* (2009) is an influential history of postwar American fiction from the perspective of the growth in creative writing programs. This book has become the starting point for most discussions of creative writing workshops, especially Iowa’s. As McGurl shows, Iowa Writers’ Workshop developed as an institution with a huge impact on the nation’s literature. Its offshoot, the International Writing Program, gathers writers from around the world for a few months. This program is not geared towards an academic degree and should not be confused with the better known MFA program. Nevertheless, with the foundation of the International Program, the Workshop became an institution with global ambitions. This bid for international authority is where McGurl’s account ends and where I want to begin my own analysis. Paul Engle, who was first the director of the Workshop, decided together 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 178–9). The Engles’ humanist and internationalist 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 novelist Yehushua Bar-On, and the Palestinian Israeli Anton, along with many others.[[9]](#endnote-9) Indeed, there even seems to be some mutual understanding gained, exactly as the Engles envisioned.

However, another agenda runs parallel to the promotion of world peace. Iowa has the ambition to become 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 James Joyce settling in Paris or Chinua Achebe teaching at Bard College (near New York). Or in Hebrew literature, think of the many authors, including S. Y. Agnon, who have made Berlin their home. According to Casanova, opportunities for full artistic consecration present themselves only at these central Western locales. Paris is the cultural center that Casanova privileges above all else, partly because it holds the power to determine the fates not only of Francophone authors, but of authors throughout the world, as can be illustrated by the well-known examples of Edgar Allen Poe’s and William Faulkner’s reception histories. It is not an accident, then, that Anton has a layover in Paris en route to Iowa City. He is traveling through the (almost) undisputed capital of the 19th century (and early 20th), where he visits Proust’s grave at the Père-Lachaise cemetery, which is a bank of cultural capital in the form of the graves of famous men and women. His final destination is, however, an institution that is challenging Parisian centrality for literary consecration and the right to reassemble world literature.

The Engles are quite explicit about wanting 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 make one literature, for they all come from the same old imaginative expression of the gut-with-mind” (Engle and Engles 2). According to the directors of the Program, the literature of the world is already united, but it needs Iowa to bring it together and make it aware of its genesis in a universal human nature. However from the Latour inspired perspective I suggested above, 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 opens up the potential to shape this unstuck version of the world republic of letters.

The University of Iowa’s location in what is by and large a rural region – it is certainly depicted as such in Shammas’s novel – and one that is usually thought of as peripheral in American history and literature, a “flyover state” some might say – must have made the Program’s bid for centrality fascinating for Shammas. This comparison between Iowa and political capitals has been made in the context of its place in the United States: “programs like the Writers’ Workshop have become centers for writers living in a country that has no London or Paris… as its literary capital”(Wilbers 134). As McGurl shows using other terms, the Iowa Writers Workshop reassembles American literature in one place, turning into its command and control center (a term often used by Latour, see 181-82). Wilbers’s analogy to the capital cities suggests this sense of control. But the Engles have global, not merely national, ambitions for Iowa’s authority. As Engle writes “the American university will have proved a more understanding and helpful aid to literature than even the old families of Europe” (Wilbers 134) comparing the patronage of American institutions to European nobility on the largest scale possible, the world.

Though Shammas did not have access to all the texts quoted above or the full history of the Writing Program, he shows awareness, at time mockingly, of the International Writing Program’s ambitions. These ambitions are important especially because of Iowa’s peripheral location within the United States. Iowa’s potential is also the Galilee’s. As I have shown above, in *Arabesques*, Shammas makes a similar, more implicit, bid for his own village. This bid is made possible by the way Iowa already started to mobilize 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 “The length of the wall is covered with a rare collection, of all colors and races, from the land of China to the land of Ethiopia [*Kush*], from India [*Hodu*] even unto Peru” (129). In this description, Shammas 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:)" (Esther 1:1).[[10]](#endnote-10) Shammas's description of the Engles refers back to an ancient Persian Empire that stretched from India to Africa (according to the verse).[[11]](#endnote-11) 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 serves to ironize the Program's ambition of reassembling and even controlling the (literary, aesthetic) world. Comparing Ahasuerus’s political power with the Engles’ will to collect seems to deflate the latter.

The masks hint at and ironize what the Engles are trying to do with foreign writers: reassemble them into a collection which they can possess, arrange, and display. Shammas makes sure to stress that the masks were presented as gifts by former visiting writers: "Masks that were left behind by Program participants in previous years, and whose memory is brought back to Paul's lips while he presents the masks of the past to the new guests" (129). The fictional Paul Engle shows off, as if saying: look at the treasury of world writers that I have acquired for myself. However, the writers leave masks, not just literally, but, as Shammas seems to be suggesting, figuratively as well. Thus from *Arabesques’*sperspective,the authors perform as actors who only present 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. The masks ironize the Program’s ambition through the medium in which it is concretized.

A less subtle resistance can be found in Yehushua Bar-On, who is usually thought of as merely a target of Shammas’s satire. Bar-On represents of Jewish-Israeli culture in general and novelist A. B. Yehushua in particular (Hever 58; Feldhay Brenner 436; Gluzman). I accept the view of Bar-On as an object for critique. Yet, he also has the important role of resisting the internationalism of Iowa. Bar-On admits that the only reason that he came to Iowa was to get to know Anton better — he wishes to write a novel about an Israeli Arab. At first glance, he is after 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 – to be with such a man in conditions of ideal seclusion” (122). When it becomes clear that Anton is not willing to open up, Bar-On plans to leave and only stays because of a burgeoning relationship with Paco, the Palestinian writer.

The friendship puts them at “the top of the Program’s public relations chart” (152), but only temporarily. With this new development, it now might seem like Bar-On shares the Program’s internationalist agenda. But a closer look shows that Paco is figured by Bar-On as more easily digestible source for literary writing. The first time Anton sees Bar-On and Paco walking “arm in arm,” the former acidly calms our protagonist: “My dear friend, as of today you are free of the terror of my open notebook, for I have found a new protagonist [or, hero]” (151). Bar-On communicates with Paco, Palestinian who does not possess an Israeli citizenship, because he is still relevant for his national concerns: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, the possibility that Bar-On will literarily “inform” on Anton the Israeli security services should be seen as connected to Bar-On’s view of Iowa as an extension of Israeli affairs. Meeting held by Anton with a citizen of Lebanon, possibly a relative, in Iowa are made to seem the business of Israeli security through the presence of Bar-On (231). Taking some poetic license for myself, I may say that for Bar-On, his trip to Iowa is the literary equivalent of a *Mossad* operation, advancing 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 make the literary world come under its control, his ability to resist the force and logic of the institution in which he is place, is impressive. When he fails in the mission he set out for himself, he leaves the workshop and goes back to Israel, proving his independence from the Engles’ globalizing ideas.

Thus, by satirizing Iowa, Shammas makes it possible for himself to mobilize world literature to an even more untraditional center. 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, Shammas collects and concentrates 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 in assembling world literature in the Galilee, just as there isn’t anything necessarily laudable about shifting the center from Paris to the Midwest. What I am suggesting is that this shift is useful for Shammas’s building his identity and authority as a Palestinian writing in Hebrew who has claims on a world literary horizon.

## Palestine, Michigan

In moving towards a close, I want to fortify my argument by showing how Shammas’s imagination seems to run in the direction of geographical relocations of the kind I have been tracing. In the narrative essay “Autocartography: The Case of Palestine, Michigan,” Shammas tells of A., a young woman of Palestinian descent living in Dearborn, Michigan, who wished to go to the home she never knew in Palestine (which is described as no longer existing - “*rahat Falasteen*… Palastine is gone,” (“Autocartography” 467). Her friend, who does not wish her to leave, finds “an instant American solution for every possible non-American problem”; she discovers 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, *a* Palestinian problem). The Midwest was placed in the Shammas family’s bookcase in *Arabesques*; in the later text Shammas places Palestine in the Midwest.

One way to visualize Shammas’s rearrangement of world literature is as a set of Russian nesting dolls, or *babushḳa* as they are known in Israel. In an essay titled “The Nesting Doll’s Fault” (“*Ἀshmat ha-babushḳa”*) Shammas takes up this image in order to explain the nestled and replicating relationship between Israeli Arab population and the Israeli state. This image of nesting is also relevant for his view of the Midwest. It is not that Shammas interprets *My Ántonia* from a Palestinian point of view. He does not look at it from outside, an anthropologist visiting the Midwest. Instead, he places Cather’s novel inside his world thus: 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 you can find the Midwest.

As extensions of the bookcase, Shammas’s writing desk and the novel *Arabesques* reassemble world literature as well. Shammas, who was expected to produce the local for global consumption, instead assembles global literature within the pages of his novel, collecting epigraphs, allusion, styles, and structure from all over the world. If we look only at the epigraphs for the books we will find Palestinian, Israeli, an Eastern European Jewish, American, Irish, Norwegian and Australian voices.[[12]](#endnote-12) To these we may add references to the French, Italian (Dante), and Argentinian (Borges) writers, as well as to the cosmopolitan, pre-national traditions of *Alf Layla wa Layla* and the Bible, turning Shammas’s novel into a kind of small personal anthology, a place of gathering akin to the library (as the etymology of “anthology” suggests). Anne Bernard stresses that the references to *Alf Layla wa Layla* and other Arabic text 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’s Arabic tradition is independent from Hebrew, 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 cancel its ability to control and assemble the incoming literary material. The seemingly peripheral Middle East is shown to contain places, even places peripheral in the Middle Eastern (i.e. not Bagdad or Cairo), from which world literature can be defined and arranged.

In the fascinating later essay in English, “The Drowned Library,” Shammas gives a more elaborate inventory of his childhood bookcase in a way that makes the connection to the concept of world literature in the sense the best literature of the world more explicitly, at the same time that it highlights how it is brought through Arabic channels and mixed with texts by Arab authors.[[13]](#endnote-13) The context for the writing of this inventory is the destruction of his library. After storing his books in a friend’s basement, they are decimated by water damage. Shammas can only reassemble the collection virtually trough writing “The Drowned Library.” This re-collection is also a relocation because Shammas is no longer writing in Israel, but in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This Midwestern location, where he teaches at the University of Michigan, has been his home since he has left Israel (leaving his library behind to be drowned). His recollections of the Fassuta and Jerusalem assemblages of world literature are now placed, like the Palestine of the “Autocathogaphy” essay, 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 sections about the village is a Lebanese-American man, Anton's double and perhaps his cousin, who wrote it while living in the United States. Shammas’s post-publication biography and the fictional possibility that parts of the novel were written by an American do not cancel 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, but once shifted it will not stay fixed.

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1. **Note**

   Versions of this paper were presented at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Cambridge University and John F. Kennedy Institute for American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin. I am grateful to the comments made on those occasions as I am to members of the “Local Literature” reading group at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, to Hannah Landes, and to the anonymous readers for *ARIEL*. A special thanks goes to Anton Shammas who answered some clarification question and provided me with the front cover of Arabic *My Ántonia.*

   This definition is much more restricted than Franco Moretti’s approach to world literature as the sum total of what has been written or even David Damrosch’s definition: “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin” (4). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a succinct yet comprehensive survey of fiction by Israeli-Arabs in Hebrew and Shammas’s place in this short lineage see Kayyal. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For more biographical detail, see Gerald Marzorati’s *New York Times* profile . [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Though by 1986 the heyday of metafiction or postmodern fiction was over, it was still a viable resource, as I believe it still is today. Yael Feldman points out Shammas’s postmodernist techniques and how he highlights them through allusions to postmodern texts (377–9). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In a 2011article, Wai Chee Dimock gives us a glimpse of the potential of the internet for reassembling world literature through a description of a Facebook group she started. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 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 Lital Levy, among others, advocates . [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Translations from Hebrew are mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The novel is referring to Suhair al-Qalamawi’s Arabic translation of *My Ántonia*. The cover shows W.S. Benda’s “Jim and Ántonia, setting sun,” an illustration for the first edition, an image conceived by Cather herself (see Stout). For what is probably the only extensive examinations Shammas’s novel’s intertextual and parodic connections with Cather’s novel see the recent Ginsburg, 2014: 249–54. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I am quoting from the King James Version, checked against the Hebrew *Tanach* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In order of appearance: Clive James, G.B. Shaw, Yehuda Amichai, Palestinian folklore, Walter Abish, Bjørg Vik, A. B. Yehoshua, Nachman of Breslov, John Barth. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. “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 Antonia*, published in Egypt in the 1940s” (“Library” 115). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)