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EXCAVATING MASHRIQI ROOTS IN THE
MAHJAR: AGRICULTURE AND ASSIMILATION
IN RADUAN NASSAR'S *LAVOURA ARCAICA*¹

Abstract

First- and second-generation Levantine authors in Brazil have turned to the novel as a means of both excavating ancient Mashriqi roots and negotiating new Mahjari identities. Plantations, farms, and other agrarian spaces have typically played an important role in their literary negotiations of different migrant identities, especially in rooting migrants onto new landscapes. In *Lavoura arcaica* (Ancient Tillage), Raduan Nassar transforms the land into a troubled site of identity contestation and failed assimilation, questioning the viability of earlier literary groundings of Levantine migrants in Brazil.



INTRODUCTION

Over a century of Levantine migration to Brazil has resulted in the production of unique literary genres in both Arabic and Portuguese. Levantine migrants are most famous for their prolific contributions to Arabic poetry. Writing from São Paulo, Brazil, poets like Fawzi Ma'luḥ, Shafīq Ma'luḥ, and Rashīd Khūrī famously participated in innovating neoclassical and romantic trends in Arabic literature.² But Arabic poetry constitutes just a small portion of Levantine cultural production in Brazil. Migrants were also prolific journalists, for example.³ They also wrote diverse prose genres like essays, travelogues, autobiographies, short stories, plays, and novels. Their long tradition of prose writing includes works written not just in Arabic, but in Portuguese as well.⁴ Today, first-, second-, and even third-generation migrants in Brazil have built on this tradition by continuing to engage the question of their Mashriqi roots in their works.

Contemporary writers of Levantine descent in Brazil have turned to the novel as a means of both excavating ancient Mashriqi roots and negotiating new Mahjari identities. While writing exclusively in Portuguese, authors like

Raduan Nassar, Alberto Mussa, Milton Hatoum, and Salim Miguel bring themes related to their identities as descendants of Levantine migrants to the forefront in their novels.⁵ Recent scholarship has demonstrated these writers' thematic engagements with aspects of their Levantine heritage.⁶ But by continuing to present contemporary writers of Levantine descent as heirs to an exclusively Brazilian literary heritage, current scholarship often fails to show how these works also build upon a long tradition of specifically Levantine-Brazilian literature as well.⁷ While sometimes analyzed together, these novels are rarely ever considered alongside earlier works written by Levantine migrants, many of which have been grappling with similar questions surrounding migrant identity formation for over a century.

Recontextualizing Raduan Nassar's debut novel *Lavoura arcaica*⁸ (Ancient Tillage)⁹ within the canon of Levantine-Brazilian literature opens the novel up to a variety of new readings. Specifically, it opens up the possibility rereading the importance of agrarian space in the novel, where it functions as a privileged site for the negotiation and contestation of migrant identities. The agrarian spaces that will inform this analysis include farms, plantations, and other rural spaces associated with agriculture. Asking questions produced at the intersection of eco-criticism and migration studies, this article will analyze how different characters in *Lavoura arcaica* negotiate their relationship to the land in light of their status as migrants in Brazil. This theoretical approach follows Sarah Phillips Casteel's in *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas*.¹⁰ Casteel calls for moving beyond the valorization of the nomadic in migration studies in order to ask questions about rootedness as well, and the sites on which rootedness is performed. She also moves beyond the preference for the urban in migration studies in order to examine the role that less accessible rural spaces play in cultivating migrant identities as well. In addition to Casteel's questions about the sites of rootedness, it is also necessary to consider the excavation of roots in *Lavoura arcaica*. In other words, how characters' Levantine roots are both remembered and narrated, constructed in memory and language.

Agrarian spaces have typically played an important role in rooting migrants in Levantine-Brazilian literature. A categorization of all agrarian spaces in what is a decidedly diverse canon is beyond the scope of this article, but an important space worth mentioning here is the Brazilian plantation.¹¹ In Cecílio Carneiro's novel *A fogueira (The Bonfire)*, for example, the plantation gains new significance as the site of the rooting of the Levantine migrant.¹² The Lebanese protagonist in this novel moves to rural São Paulo and starts a large plantation, which is eventually populated by workers from around the world. In receiving this international crowd, his plantation functions like a microcosm for an imagined multicultural Brazilian nation. This idea is reinforced by references to the miscegenation that takes place among the

workers on the plantation.¹³ Indeed, plantations and imagined processes of miscegenation played an important role in dominant narrations of the Brazilian nation, like that of Gilberto Freyre.¹⁴ Importantly, the protagonist also understands agriculture as an inheritance he brings with him from the homeland. His agricultural inheritance thus becomes a means for him to both maintain an imagined connection with the homeland, and also to insert himself into dominant narratives of Brazilian nationhood through his role at the plantation's helm.¹⁵ Following Casteel, it is also necessary to point to how migrants' claims to the land can be at odds with those of indigenous and other groups.¹⁶ While the plantation in Carneiro's novel is able to root the Levantine migrant, for example, it does so by dehistoricizing the site of a history of violent slavery of Africans. Without so much as a nod to this history, the plantation is rewritten as the site of an idealized miscegenation capable of incorporating the Levantine migrant. Representations of the plantation in Levantine-Brazilian literature can thus be said to transform agriculture into an ancient Mashriqi inheritance that can seamlessly root the Levantine migrant in the Mahjar.

Raduan Nassar's later depiction of agrarian space in *Lavoura arcaica* calls to mind this earlier grounding of the Levantine migrant in Brazil, but also seems to question its viability through the transgressions of its narrator, André. Like Nassar himself, André is from a Lebanese family that settles in the rural interior of the São Paulo province. The novel's plot is driven by André's movements away from and towards his familial home. At the beginning of the novel, André's brother Pedro comes to retrieve him from a motel room and bring him back home. His arrival leads André into convulsive forays into the past, including memories of his father's regular sermons to the family. Through his frenzied recollections, the reader learns of André's troubled relationship to his austere father, who demanded that each member of the family submit to his rule and live their lives within the confines of the family farm. But the real reason for André's self-imposed exile emerges later: he has committed incest with his sister Ana, taking his father's message of insularity to its destructive end. Pedro is eventually able to return André to the family home. But the novel ends with a family gathering with tragic consequences. At the feast thrown in honor of his return, André watches his sister Ana dance with such passion that their crime of incest is revealed. His enraged father picks up a hoe—that archaic instrument of ancient tillage—and murders Ana while the family watches in horror.

In the shortest chapter of the novel, André evokes the austere message of his father's regular sermons to the family with a single sentence: "The land, the wheat, the bread, the table, the family (the land); there exists in this cycle, father would say in his sermons, love, labor, time"¹⁷ (*A terra, o trigo, o pão, a mesa, a família [a terra]; existe neste ciclo, dizia o pai nos seus sermões, amor, trabalho, tempo*).¹⁸ André recalls how his father's sermons propagated a

trajectory for the family in Brazil that both began and ended with the land. For the father, agriculture is capable of seamlessly sustaining the family's connection to the ancestral homeland in the Middle East while allowing them to negotiate a new landscape in Brazil. His appropriation of the land calls to mind earlier rootings of the migrant in Levantine-Brazilian literature. But André's transgressions of his father's sermons ultimately transform the land into a troubled site on which the viability of assimilation is questioned. *Lavoura arcaica* thus offers a unique glimpse into the changing aesthetic of the land in Levantine-Brazilian literature, and its role in the formation of migrant identities.

AGRICULTURE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Unlike in *A fogueira*, the small family farm around which *Lavoura arcaica* revolves is never transformed into a booming plantation. Rather than attracting workers from around the world and becoming a microcosm for a multicultural Brazilian nation, the farm remains an insular place that simultaneously ties the family members to one another and isolates them from the outside world. But the father and the son in *Lavoura arcaica* have competing relationships to the land, pointing to a generational rift in understandings of land and belonging.

The father's stance toward the land is best encapsulated by the sermons he regularly delivers to the family. The sermons focus, above all, on a message of self-sufficiency, as highlighted in the aforementioned sermon that constitutes the shortest chapter of the novel. With the cycle that he preaches to the family, which both begins and ends with the land, the father imbues the land with the potential to fully sustain each member of the family. The land provides the wheat that, right there on their family farm, they will turn into bread with their labor. Seated around the family table, with their bread at its center, each member of the family will be nourished. In this cycle, the father claims, there is love, labor, and time. He thus suggests the family need not look outside of its own borders for different types of sustenance. In his sermons, the land and the family become a self-sustaining unit. His belief in the land's potential to sustain the family, as well as his disdain for anything outside of the farm, borders on the bucolic.

It is the father who is the unambiguous leader of the family's labor on the farm. His seat at the head of the family table confirms his undisputed authority. And under his rule, all must contribute to the family harvest. André recalls his father's mandate clearly: "no one in our house shall sit idly by while there is land to cultivate, no one in our house shall sit idly by while there is the wall to raise, and still no one in our house shall sit idly by while there is the brother to save" (*ninguém em nossa casa há de cruzar os braços quando existe a terra para lavar, ninguém em nossa casa há de cruzar os*

braços quando existe a parede para erguer, ninguém ainda em nossa casa há de cruzar os braços quando existe o irmão para socorrer).¹⁹ Each member of the family is called to participate in the labor of the family farm in order to continue the cycle the father preaches. The father requires the family's total submission to his mandates. His command to help the brother in need also shows that the cohesiveness and unity of the family unit is an essential part of the cycle he propagates, suggesting everything they need is right there on the family farm.

But what are the implications of the father's bucolic message of self-sufficiency in a migratory context? How can the Levantine migrant family so seamlessly sustain itself on the native Brazilian soil? How does the land left behind—the homeland—figure into the father's understanding of the land in Brazil?

In many ways, there is something ancient and archaic about the father's model for the family's life on the farm. This is implied in the very title of the novel—*Lavoura arcaica* (Ancient Tillage). The model is timeless, reinforcing archaic divisions of labor revolving around submission to a sole patriarch.²⁰ André's memories are replete with images of his mother and sisters baking the family bread, sewing and laundering the family clothes. Meanwhile, he and his brothers follow the father's lead in sowing and harvesting, raising and slaughtering the animals. The father's ancient agricultural model, one that is familiar to many different histories and periods, need not be specific to a certain time and place. At the same time, it is a model that was not uncommon within the specific rural São Paulo setting that serves as the novel's backdrop.²¹

Yet the father suggests that his model for the family is a millennial one that can provide them with continuity with their own past. He tells André, "and there can be so much life in the seed, and so much faith in the hands of the sower, that it is a sublime miracle that grain that was spread millennia ago, although it has not germinated, has not yet died" (*e pode haver tanta vida na semente, e tanta fé nas mãos do sementeiro, que é um milagre sublime que grãos espalhados há milênios, embora sem germinar, ainda não morreram*).²² In the father's figuration, seeds that were planted millennia ago have yet to sprout. In an effort to encourage André to participate in the family's labor, he highlights the role of the faithful sower in perpetuating the millennial inheritance of agriculture.²³ In many ways, this idea calls to mind earlier depictions of the land in Levantine-Brazilian literature. Specifically, it evokes the trope of agriculture as an ancient Mashriqi inheritance that the planter can keep alive in the Mahjar, like in *A fogueira*. The prerogative to cultivate the land here is thus also a means of maintaining an imagined connection to the homeland. The father is also able to draw authority from his role as commander and overseer of this ancient inheritance.

Nonetheless, by infusing the Brazilian soil with his own millennial history, the father's claims to the land have the potential of erasing competing claims to it from other groups. This is not a new phenomenon in Levantine-Brazilian literature specifically, or in migrant literatures more generally. As Casteel argues, new narratives of belonging meant to insert migrants into exclusive imaginings of national identity often do so at the expense of other groups, like indigenous ones.²⁴ In the case of *Lavoura arcaica*, the father's claims also attempt to erase those of later generations like his son's.

TIME, LANGUAGE, AND AUTHORITY

The father's authority, rooted in the land, is reinforced by his command of both time and language in the novel. Time exists *within* the cycle he propagates for the family. André recalls him explaining, "time exists, for example, in this old table: first there was fertile land, then there was an ancient tree produced by tranquil years, and finally there was a gnarly board worked in the hands of the craftsman day after day" (*existe tempo, por exemplo, nesta mesa antiga: existiu primeiro uma terra propícia, existiu depois uma árvore secular feita de anos sossegados, e existiu finalmente uma prancha nodosa e dura trabalhada pelas mãos de um artesão dia após dia*).²⁵ In this and other sermons, the father roots time in the same agricultural cycle from which he draws his authority. He demands, above all, the family's patience before time, advising them to allow it to take its natural course in producing objects like the table. His message of patience is highlighted with particular severity in the parable he tells André from *1001 Nights*—The Story of the Barber's Sixth Brother. He recounts the story of a starving man who stumbles upon a palace. His host pretends to bring him food on big empty plates. The starving man pretends to eat and shows his gratitude, only to finally be rewarded for his patience with heaps of food.²⁶

In addition to time, language itself is intertwined in the father's commanding cycle as well. He tells André, "all words are indeed a seed" (*toda palavra, sim, é uma semente*).²⁷ By comparing words to seeds, the father implicates language itself into the agricultural cycle he holds up as a model for the family. Seated at the head of the table, delivering his sermons, the father claims the authority of the oral word. But his authority is rooted in ancient textual sources as well, as evidenced by the texts he often brings with him to the table, written in large calligraphy.²⁸ Three texts that play an important role in his sermons are *1001 Nights*, from which he gets the parable of the starving man, the Bible, from which he also draws parables in preaching to his Christian family, and the Qur'an,²⁹ whose injunction against incest appears as the epigraph to the third part of the book titled "The Return" (*O Retorno*).³⁰ The father's texts, from which he draws his austere lessons for the

family, are all written in Arabic, the same “strange language” (*língua estranha*) with which the mother showers affection on André especially.³¹

The cycle that the father propagates for the family, which begins and ends with the land and contains both time and language, is meant to cement his authority as patriarch and leader of the family. But is the father able to fully embody the authority that he claims? What competing voices of authority emerge in the margins of his sermons? Indeed, for some members of the family, the father’s authority is not as complete as that of their deceased grandfather.³² Speaking of his grandfather, André tells his brother, “it was him, Pedro, it was him that was actually our ancestral vein” (*era ele, Pedro, era ele na verdade nosso veio ancestral*).³³ For André, it is the grandfather who is the rightful bearer of the family’s *lavoura arcaica* or ancient tillage. André explicitly suggest this when he says, “it is in the memory of grandfather that our roots lay dormant” (*é na memória do avô que dormem nossas raízes*).³⁴

What was the grandfather’s stance toward the land, toward time and language? In memory of his grandfather, André transcribes the following words:

To the sun and rains and winds, as to other manifestations of nature that would seek revenge on us or destroy our harvest, grandfather, contrary to father’s promiscuous discernments – in which various geographies were grafted, grandfather always responded with a rough burp that was worth all the science, all the churches, all of father’s sermons: “Maktub.”

*([A]o sol e às chuvas e aos ventos, assim como a outras manifestações da natureza que faziam vingar ou destruir nossa lavoura, o avô, ao contrário dos discernimentos promíscuos do pai – em que apareciam enxertos de várias geografias, respondia sempre com um arrote tousco que valia por todas as ciências, por todas as igrejas, por todos os sermões do pai: “Maktub.”)*³⁵

The grandfather’s “maktub”—an Arabic expression meaning “it is written”—contains his entire life philosophy, the model he has left for the family. But as André realizes here, it contradicts the father’s mandates. The brevity of the grandfather’s “maktub” stands in stark contrast to the father’s prolix exegeses of ancient texts. Yet through it, the grandfather was able to more fully embody the ancient authority to which the father’s long sermons now painstakingly lay claim. As if in its migration from Mashriq to Mahjar, from grandfather to father, that ancient authority has weakened.

The messages André receives from past generations are thus rife with contradictions. How can the authority of the grandfather’s brief “maktub” coexist with that of his father’s verbose sermons? How can Arabic be the language of the father’s authoritative texts but also of the mother’s affection?

It is these contradictions that lead André to cry out from the motel room where his brother has come to retrieve him, “Pedro, my brother, father’s sermons were inconsistent” (*Pedro, meu irmão, eram inconsistentes os sermões do pai*).³⁶

AGRICULTURE AND TRANSGRESSION

André ultimately seizes upon the inconsistencies in his father’s sermons in order to negotiate his own relationship to the land. Despite his father’s sermons, André makes the land malleable in his hands. He recalls, “[Father] was that fibrous farmer picking amorphous rocks from the earth that he did not know would be so malleable in each of our hands...” (*era esse lavrador fibroso catando da terra a pedra amorfa que ele não sabia tão modelável nas mãos de cada um...*)³⁷ Indeed, the land becomes most amorphous, ready to be shaped into something new, in André’s own hands.

Through the convulsive memories occasioned by his brother’s arrival at his motel room, a picture emerges of André as the son that was always apart from the rest of the family. He recalls always being the last to wake up, the last to arrive for the harvest, attempting to escape the father’s prerogative to toil on the family farm in any small way. He also recalls his mother’s effusive affection toward him, her youngest son, and how that afforded him a certain protection from his father’s austere demands. He recalls being the “black sheep” (*ovelha negra*),³⁸ a “different fruit” (*fruto diferente*)³⁹ than the rest of the family. His father’s careful tillage in the Mahjar does not produce the expected fruit with this son.

André, who is the most reluctant to contribute to the family’s labor, still claims his own spaces around the family farm. He triumphantly remembers, for example, the open spaces of nature in which he was able to transgress his father’s sermons. He recalls:

In the slumber of wandering evenings on the farm, it was in a place there in the forest that I would escape the family’s apprehensive gaze; I’d soak my feet in the humid earth to cool their fever; I’d cover my body in leaves and, lying in the shade, I would sleep in the still posture of a diseased plant bent under the weight of a red button.

(*Na modorra das tardes vadias na fazenda, era num sítio lá no bosque que eu escapava aos olhos apreensivos da família; amainava a febre dos meus pés na terra úmida, cobria meu corpo de folhas e, deitado à sombra, eu dormia na postura quieta de uma planta enferma vergada ao peso de um botão vermelho.*)⁴⁰

André finds places in the forest, away from his family’s gaze, in which to negotiate his own relationship with the land. His relationship to nature is

corporeal, at times sensual. Indeed, he imagines himself as very much a part of nature, covering himself in leaves and lying in the position of a plant. His understanding of himself as a diseased plant stems from his knowledge that his relationship to nature falls outside of the cycle the father has put forth for the family. Slumbering in the corners of the forest, he transgresses his father's command to toil on the land.

André's transgressions occur in other spaces as well. He also attends to his pubescent body's desires, which are denied by his father's sermons, in the barns, stables, and other forgotten structures scattered throughout the family farm. The location for his most serious transgression is the "old house" (*casa velha*), in which the family lived before the grandfather's death.⁴¹ André often uses the abandoned structure to escape from the watchful gaze of the main house. He recalls, "I made of it my refuge—the playful hideout for my insomnia and pain" (*fiz dela o meu refúgio, o esconderijo lúdico da minha insônia e suas dores*).⁴² It is in the "old house" that André commits the unspeakable act for which he silently banishes himself from the family home: incest with his sister Ana.

As he recalls their act in the old house, André imagines calming his contrite sister down by telling her:

It was a miracle, dear sister, to discover that we are so consistent in our bodies, and that with our union we are going to continue our common childhood, without sorrow for our toys, without ruptures to our memories, without trauma to our history; it was a miracle to discover that, above all, we are enough within the limits of our own home, confirming father's word that happiness can only be found in the family bosom...

*([F]oi um milagre, querida irmã, descobrirmos que somos tão conformes em nossos corpos, e que vamos com nossa união continuar a infância comum, sem mágoa para nossos brinquedos, sem corte em nossas memórias, sem trauma para a nossa história; foi um milagre descobrirmos acima de tudo que nos bastamos dentro dos limites da nossa própria casa, confirmando a palavra do pai de que a felicidade só pode ser encontrada no seio da família...)*⁴³

André thus frames his act of incest not as a lapse, but as a natural extension of the father's message that everything they each needed could be found within the family bosom. He has taken his father's suffocating message of insularity to its extreme. And he has done so in the old house, the grandfather's domain. In explaining how he found Ana waiting for him in the old house, he claims "it was written" (*estava escrito*).⁴⁴ His evocation of his grandfather's "maktub," as well as his use of the grandfather's house as the stage of his transgression, represents a challenge to his father's authority.

In a mad bid for Ana's love, André promises her: "I will share in the sublime sentiment that I also helped, with my own two hands, provide for the family table; contrary to what people think, I know a lot about livestock and crops, but I keep all of that primordial science to myself..." (*vou participar do sentimento sublime de que ajudei também com minhas próprias mãos a prover a mesa da família; ao contrário do que se pensa, sei muito sobre rebanhos e plantações mas guardo só comigo toda essa ciência primordial...*).⁴⁵ André thus confesses his previous reluctance to participate in the family's labor. He also claims for *himself* the knowledge of "that primordial science" of livestock and crops—the *lavoura arcaica*, or ancient tillage, through which the father claims his authority.

André transgresses his father's notion of time as well. In a subversion of his sermons on patience, he exclaims, "time, time is versatile, time creates mischief..." (*o tempo, o tempo é versátil, o tempo faz diabruras...*)⁴⁶ He also corrects the ending of the parable about patience that his father tells, recalling that the starving man ultimately strikes the hand that feeds him.⁴⁷ His rewriting speaks to his transgression of his father's command of language as well. He claims, "my pillow was made of manure, there where the most improbable plant germinated, a certain mushroom, a certain poisonous flower, that sprouts virulently tearing at the moss of the oldest of texts" (*era de estrume meu travesseiro, ali onde germina a planta mais improvável, certo cogumelo, certa flor venenosa, que brota com virulência rompendo o musgo dos textos dos mais velhos*).⁴⁸ André thus imagines that he, the diseased plant, will himself tear at the old texts from which his father claims authority.

Pedro eventually convinces André to return home with him. But in a transgression of the biblical story of the prodigal son, André's return home leads not to submission but to destruction.⁴⁹ When his father notices André lustfully watching Ana's sensual dance at the feast thrown in honor of his return, he discovers their crime of incest. The enraged father uses a hoe, an instrument of ancient tillage meant to promote the fertility of the land, to kill Ana. With Ana's death, the cycle of ancient tillage that has sustained the narrative is destroyed as well. The father is also, in a sense, killing himself, as *ana* is the Arabic pronoun for "I."⁵⁰ In the final page-long chapter, André speaks in his father's memory. While the details of the father's death are ambiguous, it is clear that he can no longer enforce the cycle he propagates for the family.

After the father kills Ana, the mother speaks directly for the first time in the novel. She screams out "Iohána," calling the father by name for the first time – a name which contains that of his daughter (Ana) and thus confirms the link between her death and his own.⁵¹ André recalls that after that, "mother began to mourn in her own language, letting out an ancient lament that even today runs down the poor Mediterranean coast: it had substance, it had salt,

that rough verb had in it the sandy pain of the desert” (*a mãe passou a carpir em sua própria língua, puxando um lamento milenar que corre ainda hoje a costa pobre do Mediterrâneo: tinha cal, tinha sal, tinha naquele verbo áspero a dor arenosa do deserto*).⁵² The mother screams in her own language, Arabic. In place of the ancient tillage, the reader is left with an ancient lament that commands the power of language through its rough verb.

The novel ends with André remembering that in his sermons, his father would say, “the cattle always return to the watering hole” (*o gado sempre vai ao poço*).⁵³ Despite the destruction to which his and his father’s competing relationships with the land has led, André and subsequent generations will continue their attempts to negotiate a place for themselves on different landscapes. For while *Lavoura arcaica* suggests there can be no idyllic return to origins, the impulse to search new territories for old and new homelands remains. The violence yielded by André’s own search is, in a sense, mitigated by the regenerative act of representation.

CONCLUSION

The competing relationships to the land in *Lavoura arcaica* represent a powerful example of intergenerational conflict in a migratory context. The father’s stance toward the land, which he harshly imposes on the entire family, can be understood as a suffocating message of insularity. In the father’s figuration, the land represents a connection to imagined ancient Mashriqi origins and their continuity in the Mahjar. But it also represents containment, as it ties each member of the family to a cycle that denies any desires and commitments outside of it.

Diaspora, in its Greek root, means to scatter. Yet incest, in keeping within the family unit, can be read as the ultimate attempt to return home; it is the father’s message taken to its destructive extreme. Among André’s transgressions of his father’s commands is his relocation of the ancient Mashriqi origins to which his father lays claim. André relocates these to his grandfather’s “maktub,” as well as to his own “diseased” body’s desires. The tensions that play out on the Brazilian landscape provide a poignant portrayal of each generation’s struggles to negotiate their own relationship to the land. André’s struggle leads to destruction, doing away with the idea that there can be an idyllic return to origins. While evoking a tradition of prior literary imaginings of agrarian space in Levantine-Brazilian literature, *Lavoura arcaica* ultimately questions the viability of earlier groundings of the Levantine migrant by transforming a family farm in Brazil into an immigrant dystopia, the site of failed attempts to either access Mashriqi roots or assimilate into the Mahjar.

Nassar's novel can perhaps be understood as a corrective to overly celebratory approaches to Levantine migration to Brazil – approaches that espouse a peddler to proprietor model of social ascension and easy assimilation. Nassar also goes against the historical facts of Levantine migration – a largely urban phenomenon – in order to return to the land as an important site of migrant identity formation. His treatment of agriculture and assimilation thus offers insights into the specific phenomenon of Levantine migration to Brazil, while also pointing to more universal tensions that can surface as different migrants try to root themselves onto new landscapes.

Raduan Nassar wrote just two more books—*Um copo de cólera* (A Cup of Cholera) and *Menina a caminho e outros textos* (Girl on the Way and Other Stories)—before retreating from the literary scene almost as quickly as he had entered it.⁵⁴ He has since devoted himself to a reclusive life of farming, famously declaring: “Indeed, if I once suspected this was true, I now suspect even more that there is no artistic or literary creation that compares to a chicken farm” (*Aliás, se já suspeitei uma vez, continuo agora mais desconfiado ainda de que não há criação artística ou literária que se compare a uma criação de galinhas*).⁵⁵

NOTES

¹ Portions of an earlier version of this paper were presented at the *Jil Jadid* Conference in Arabic Literature and Linguistics. University of Texas, Austin, February 2011.

² Salma K. Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

³ For more on Arabic journalism in Brazil, see: María del Mar Logroño Narbona, “The Development of Nationalist Identities in French Syria and Lebanon: a Transnational Dialogue with Arab Immigrants to Argentina and Brazil, 1915-1929” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2007).

⁴ For more on these Portuguese prose genres, see the chapters on literature in: Paul Amar, ed., *The Middle East and Brazil: Perspectives on the New Global South* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). For prose genres in Spanish, see: Christina Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs: Argentine Orientalism, Arab Immigrants, and the Writing of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); and Evelyn AlSultany and Ella Shohat, eds., *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

⁵ See, for example: Milton Hatoum, *Relato De Um Certo Oriente* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989). Milton Hatoum, *Dois Irmãos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000). Alberto Mussa, *O Enigma De Qaf* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2004). Salim Miguel, *Nur Na Escuridão* (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 1999).

⁶ For examples of contemporary scholarship on *Lavoura arcaica*, see: Sabrina Sedlmayer, *Ao lado esquerdo do pai* (Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Editora UFMG, 1997); Maria Salete Daros de Souza, *Desamores: A destruição do idílio familiar na ficção contemporânea* (Florianópolis, Brazil: Editora UFSC; São Paulo, Brazil: Edusp, 2005); and Renata Teixeira, *Uma lavoura de insuspeitos frutos* (São Paulo, Brazil: Annablume, 2002).

⁷ By Levantine-Brazilian literature, I mean literature written by Levantine migrants to Brazil in both Arabic and Portuguese.

⁸ Raduan Nassar, *Lavoura arcaica* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989).

⁹ This translation of the novel’s title is borrowed from: Karen Catherine Sherwood Sotelino, “Notes on the Translation of ‘Lavoura Arcaica’ by Raduan Nassar,” *Hispania* vol. 85 no. 3 (2002): 524-533.

¹⁰ Sarah Phillips Casteel, *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

¹¹ For a full analysis of the importance of the Brazilian plantation in Levantine-Brazilian literature, see: Silvia C. Ferreira, “Turco Peddlers, Brazilian Plantationists, and Transnational Arabs: The Genre Triangle of Levantine-Brazilian Literature,” in *The Middle East and Brazil: Perspectives on the New Global South*, ed. Paul E. Amar

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 279-295.

¹² Cecílio Carneiro, *A fogueira* (Rio de Janeiro, J. Olympio, 1942).

¹³ Ferreira, 288.

¹⁴ Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-grande & senzala: formação da família brasileira sob o regime de economia patriarcal* (Rio de Janeiro: Jose Olympio, 1966).

¹⁵ Ferreira, 288-290.

¹⁶ Casteel, 49.

¹⁷ All translations in this article are my own.

¹⁸ Nassar, *Lavoura*, 181.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁰ Sedlmayer, 19.

²¹ Milton Hatoum, "Os Companheiros," *Cadernos de Literatura Brasileira*, no. 2 (1996): 20.

²² Nassar, *Lavoura*, 161.

²³ This image also supports Sedlmayer's argument about parallels between *Lavoura arcaica* and the biblical Parable of the Sower (46).

²⁴ See Chapters 2 and 3 in Casteel.

²⁵ Nassar, *Lavoura*, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 77-85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁹ See Sedlmayer and Teixeira for readings of the novel connecting it to Biblical and Qur'anic narratives.

³⁰ Nassar, *Lavoura*, 143.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

³² Leyla Perrone-Moisés, "Da cólera ao silêncio," *Cadernos de Literatura Brasileira*, no. 2 (1996): 64.

³³ Nassar, *Lavoura*, 44.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴¹ For a full reading of the implications of the space of the “casa velha” (old house), see Chapter 2 in de Souza.

⁴² Nassar, *Lavoura*, 91.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-84.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁹ For a full reading of the novel as a transgression of the parable of the prodigal son, see Sedlmayer.

⁵⁰ Leyla Perrone-Moisés, “Da cólera ao silêncio,” *Cadernos de Literatura Brasileira*, no. 2 (1996): 65; Sedlmayer, 54.

⁵¹ Alva Martínez Teixeira, *Maktub: da retórica na ficção de Raduan Nassar* (Santiago de Compostela: Laiovento, 2006), 27.

⁵² Nassar, *Lavoura*, 192.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵⁴ Raduan Nassar, *Um Copo De Cólera* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1984). Raduan Nassar, *Menina a Caminho E Outros Textos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997).

⁵⁵ Nassar, *Um Copo*, “Biografia,” 85.