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"THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS TO TELL A STORY": AN INTERVIEW WITH CARLOS MARTÍNEZ ASSAD

Abstract
In this interview, Carlos Martínez Assad reflects on his transition from a long career as an academic and historian to an author of fiction, as well as what it means to be Lebanese in Mexico. Before delving into the creative world of novels, Martínez Assad taught as a professor of sociology at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). As a scholar, he has published prolifically (over twenty books and essays) and received numerous prestigious awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Medal of Historic Merit, and the Mexican National Prize of Arts and Sciences. His fiction draws heavily from his academic research into Lebanese Mexican history, and he acknowledges that although fiction grants the author artistic license, his goal is to write fictionalized accounts that are still as accurate as possible. His creative process, he states, is one of imagining how history might be duplicated, allowing for a new encounter with Lebanon, lived again with the family left behind.

خلاصة

في هذه المقابلة يتحدث كارلوس مارتينيز أسعد عن انتقاله من مسيرة مهنية طويلة كأكاديمي ومؤرخ إلى مؤلف روائي، وكذلك ما يعنيه أن تكون لبنانيًا في المكسيك. قبل الخوض في عالم الروايات الإبداعي، عمل مارتينيز أسعد أستاذًا لعلم الاجتماع في الجامعة الوطنية المستقلة في المكسيك.خلال عمله كباحث، نشر أسعد أكثر من عشرين كتاب ومقال، وحصل على العديد من الجوائز المرموقة، بما في ذلك جائزة غوغنهايم، وميدالية الاستحقاق التاريخي، والجائزة الوطنية المكسيكية للفنون والعلوم. تعتمد كتاباته الروائية بشكل كبير على بحثه الأكاديمي في التاريخ المكسيكي اللبناني، وهو يؤكد بأنه على الرغم من أن الرواية تمنح المؤلف رخصة فنية، إلا أن هدفه هو كتابة روايات لا تزال دقيقة قدر الإمكان. ويقول إن عمله الإبداعي هو كناية عن تخيل كيفية نسخ التاريخ بشكل يسمح بلقاء جديد مع لبنان، وبالعيش .مرة أخرى مع العائلة التي تركها أهله ورائهم عندما هاجروا إلى المكسيك

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This interview was originally conducted in Spanish, then transcribed and translated to English, and edited for clarity and concision.

RACHEL NORMAN (RN): Your fictional work engages directly with the Lebanese Mexican experience, but that's relatively new in the art being made by the Lebanese community here in Mexico. One of Mexico's first famous Lebanese authors was Jaime Sabines, who passed away in 1999. Despite being a prolific poet, he mentions his ancestry briefly in only one of his poems. Why doesn't that show up more in his poetry?

CARLOS MARTÍNEZ ASSAD (CMA): Lebanese immigrants have always insisted on adapting to Mexico as their own country. As a result, they didn't explore past histories about family, or ancestry, very much in their writing. I'm among the first to recreate the past, to go back to the question of Lebanon, to delve into the family history. I think that there's two reasons for this: The first is that when Lebanese immigrants arrived, they wanted to blend in. They tried to be indistinguishable from Mexicans. There was fear that if they were detected, there could be consequences. And second, there was fear about digging into the family history. When people migrate, they do so for various reasons, and often because of conflict. So, there's a fear of the unknown, of what you might find if you go digging in the past. Also, there were so few of us telling stories. Take the film industry, for example. In Mexico, the Lebanese accounted for one percent of those that were in the Mexican film industry, and they never made a story that referred to immigration. Instead, there were only small cultural notes in the movies. There are jokes that are only understood by those in the Lebanese community.

RN: Can you give me an example?

CMA: For instance, in one comedy there was a line: "It happens to you like Antonio Badú." Mexican audiences didn't even know who Antonio Badú was. And then there is language. In Arabic the "p" is not pronounced. "*Papá*" (father), for example, is "*babá*." So, in the movie instead of saying "*paisano*" (countryman), they said "*baisano*." Someone from our Lebanese community would know that they were referring to

a Lebanese person when they said, "No, go ask for the money lent to the *baisano*." But I think that one of the questions that most concerns me is why are there so few cultural references? Furthermore, the ones that do exist are often misrepresented. There weren't even scripts with writing that alluded to Lebanon. For the novel *En el verano, la tierra* (1997), two film directors have worked to make it into a movie but neither has been successful.

RN: So, for you, why is it so important to have Lebanese characters and stories? Has something changed between when someone like Jaime Sabines was writing and now? Or is your fiction a personal project for you?

CMA: For me, it was a personal project that also tried to have a certain impact. Namely, to give people of Lebanese origin a better and more nuanced understanding of the importance of their heritage. In the beginning, there wasn't much attention to or interest in claiming an ethnic identity, but that has changed. There is no longer fear in saying "I'm of Lebanese origin" or "I'm of Syrian origin" or "I'm Jewish and my family came from Aleppo, from Damascus." That fear has dissipated a lot.

RN: Why is that?

CMA: With social media, with the internet, with the ability to look at everything all the time. Modernization has increased access to international trips. When I was younger, families could not travel. So, some of the books from that period talk about the uncles who were priests. The Maronite priests were the ones who traveled to Mexico from Lebanon. They're also the ones who brought news, letters, and photographs, but maintaining the connection was very difficult due to the First and Second World Wars. Later, the price of taking a plane was prohibitive. The first few times that I left Mexico, I went on planes that were only occupied at half capacity. Now planes are full. That speaks to economic shifts that allow for more access. Social media is also very important in this regard. After I wrote my novel, I went to Lebanon and the local paper interviewed me. As soon as it was published, my local family saw the article and began to search for me. They had no idea that someone was alive from the family that had come to Mexico. The

news appeared on the front page of the paper in the morning and by afternoon they were in my hotel. Then the first thing they did was take me to my grandfather's house. His brothers are still in Lebanon, and the house where my grandfather was born still exists, it's still in perfect condition.

That was important to me, because while I intended to write a fictionalized novel, I wanted it to be one where the facts were convincing—not something that could never have happened. I wanted it to be something that could have been possible, right? It's not a novel aimed towards impossible questions but more towards reality.

RN: Arabic is central to your fiction, especially to the development of how your characters understand their ethnic identity. What role does language play for the Lebanese community here in Mexico?

CMA: The immigrants at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century didn't speak more than the Middle Eastern language that they came with, which was primarily Arabic. But there were some immigrants who arrived speaking Aramaic, also known as Syrian. Some of the very rural populations coming from the mountains, where the Maronite friars were, still expressed themselves in Aramaic for some aspects of daily life. Aramaic survived here because even in Mexico the religious rite, the mass, is spoken in Aramaic most of the time. But now it's confined to being just a religious language. It's not heard often, even though there are still some words that we all know, interjections for the sacred or profane that you can say. With Arabic, there was José Helú, a poet whose magazine, *Al Jawater*, was in Arabic. People read it that way. Later, time goes on and the new journals are bilingual, using both Arabic and Spanish. The journal that lasted the longest, *Al Gurbal*, at the end was completely in Spanish. That means a loss of language. Why a loss? Because the Lebanese community in Mexico didn't want to pass on the Arabic language. There are very complicated reasons for that. At the time Lebanese Mexicans weren't defining themselves as Arabs. Not being Muslims, parts of the community feel that Arabic is an imposed language. So, having Arabic schools in Mexico isn't widely accepted. Occasionally, there are plans to start Arabic-Spanish schools, but they never come together. It's different from the Jewish community here, whose schools in Hebrew are very good. They have a written pedagogy that dates way back. With the Lebanese community, there was never

the option for formal academic training in the language unless you studied in an academy or in a university. I studied Arabic to familiarize myself a bit with the academic part of Arabic, for instance. Despite all this, families maintained many of the colloquial phrases in daily life. Everyone still says "*habibi*" to call you "beloved" or uses an affectionate greeting in Arabic to say good morning or good night. When you want to think about someone in a very ugly way, you say the insult in Arabic. And then there's food. Everyone generally knows the words for food. That's when you hear the most Arabic, and even the children of the children of the original immigrants will learn to ask for "shawarma" or "kibbeh," but nothing else. Since those seem like very elemental details, I think that they are the details that make up identity. They give identity to a village. In the case of the Lebanese community in Mexico, it is very interesting which foods they maintain. All the families of Lebanese origin know how to make certain dishes. Some make them better and some make them worse, but they all know how to make them, how to combine wheat with meat and such. I think that is a big factor in communal identity. There is still solidarity amongst the community, and I think that solidarity continues to be very strong. When someone needs support, the community continues to give it without too many requirements. That's why I'd like for the language to be conserved more.

RN: In your novels, there's always a negotiation between time, space, and family. How do you see these three things affecting the immigrant in a unique way?

CMA: Space is a very fundamental issue within my fiction because we are a part of two peoples. We always grew between two countries. We always hear talk in Mexico about Lebanon. Therefore, the presence of relatives from Lebanon makes us think from childhood that there is a faraway country where another language was spoken. Even if you spoke Spanish, uncles and grandparents would arrive and we'd hear Arabic all the time in the house. Occasionally even something in French . . . sometimes English! So, we weren't children confined to Mexico but rather children who saw or knew that there was something more, far away. For instance, something the reader sees in *En el verano, la tierra* is that there are family stories that always have happy endings, beautiful accounts of what could happen in the old country. But then the question of time becomes fundamental, because it is time that allows

us to revisit the real locations, and it turns out not all those places are marvelous. They are also filled with stories of war, of loss, of political compromise—and so it all already returns. It's already another time even when we're occupying the same realities because societies have changed. Thus, it was very important in terms of the historic memory to transmit the present but with all the precedents of that past. I think that in the instances of moving from one country to another temporality conflates in the bosom of a family. It's in the family where all of that is being talked about—the past, how it exists in the present, how it is a reality, and how they will articulate it into another reality. It's a bit complicated but I've researched and written many books about stories of Mexico and the Middle East. Even in my fiction, the present is layered with very dense history, as if the present is dressed in the past.

RN: In both of your novels, you have complex narrative structures. Why play with the narrative expectations in this manner?

CMA: Well, regarding *En el verano, la tierra*, fundamentally there are two voices. It's the voice of the grandfather and the voice of the grandson. I was thinking about that in relation to how I could juxtapose two voices for the two different visions that they have. And what I'm writing now goes very much in the same sense. It's nothing more than a father who speaks, and then the son finds the father's story. But that still doesn't have a name, nor do I know when it will be ready, but I could no longer do it in a way where everything comes together in a linear story. The son speaks in one time period and the father is talking in another time period that already happened. I think that in each narrator you find a different form of speaking, a different way of making sense, and that is what gives it meaning. I still haven't found any other way to do it when I write fiction.

RN: So, what does it mean to you to work in fiction? Being that you're an intellectual and an academic, what's the difference with working in fiction?

CMA: It does seem like there's a big difference between academic writing and fiction. But when I was a student, from a very young age, I always read literature alongside textbooks. Now my critics say that

my history books seem to be particularly well written, and that's because I don't immerse myself in the formalities or jargon of academic work. I know the value of theory, but I don't like to start with twenty pages defining a concept. Rather, I tell a story. If the reader notices that behind that story are the lectures of Gramsci, of Lukács, of the classics, good. But if it's not immediately noticeable, then I think people read in a more enjoyable way. Let me tell you a story. I wrote a history book that's called *Los rebeldes vencidos* (1990), which is about the last armed rebellion in Mexico, against the government of Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s. When it was reviewed, a journalist read it and thought it was a novel. He read the book and said the novel that Martínez Assad had written about the farmers was one of the best novels he'd read! But it is an academic work and not a novel. As if! But what I want to say is that even though I know that in fiction there are licenses that enable the fiction, I've also realized that even the most formal history must be told in the most readable way, in a way that the public can take an interest in.

RN: What do you think makes something readable? How do you go about telling a story, whether it's a factual historical text or a piece of fiction?

CMA: There are so many ways to tell a story. I think that there are many forms of transmitting stories and that the ones you have at hand are the ones you have to use, right? For instance, we see travelogues by people going to Lebanon and writing about family history, but they don't have any literary or academic training. I still read those narratives, though, because suddenly there's some tidbit that's important even though the text doesn't have a narrative structure. They're not novels. They're not academic books. But you could find the story of a grandmother who returned to Lebanon because she didn't like living in Mexico. There are many people writing that way. Those texts seem like very important accounts for understanding what history was like. If I had time, I'd like to do a study on testimonies that don't have the virtues that one looks for in a novel or in an academic book. For instance, I've found the diary of one of my ancestors who arrived in Mexico in the nineteenth century and wrote down his experiences. I've got his letters, too, from 1893 to 1903, that talk about what arriving in Mexico was like, what he was doing here in the country. But I'm distracting you from your questions!

RN: No, not at all! I do have one more question, though. For Lebanese Mexicans, where is their homeland? Where is their "village" located? In Lebanon? In Mexico? Or is it that for subjects of diaspora, there's something else?

CMA: That's an interesting question. I do think there's a "real" Lebanon, which is the current, existing Lebanon, and which has transformed a lot. When many emigrants left Lebanon, there wasn't a Lebanese state yet, there was no clear territorial conformation. The territory is only established in the Treaty of Sèvres after World War I—Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine are carved out of Greater Syria. This, I think, generates something very peculiar in the imaginary. Most immigrants today, or I should say the children of immigrants, don't know that their parents didn't come from a Lebanese state. They came from a historic Lebanon, from a biblical Lebanon, if you will, from the Lebanon of Mount Lebanon, which is even more restricted than the size of the current nation of Lebanon. Beirut wasn't even a Lebanese port—it was a Syrian port. All of this has evoked a mythical Lebanon, an imagined Lebanon, that exists between the historic Lebanon and the Lebanon of today. The Lebanon that many Mexican Lebanese imagine, even if they go to Lebanon, is a very special Lebanon. It's a constrained Lebanon—they can't see the suffering in the country, they can't see the Palestinian conflict. I think that, at times, the imagined Lebanon is a fundamentally Christian one for Lebanese immigrants in Mexico. Here's something almost unacceptable to say amongst members of the diaspora: Islam is the majority in Lebanon now. Nonetheless, here in Mexico we maintain the idea that it's a Christian country. We still think of Lebanon as a fundamentally Maronite country, but it no longer is. That makes it hard for our immigrant community to understand what is happening in contemporary Lebanon. What's so important about that is there are more descendants of Lebanese emigrants living abroad than Lebanese in Lebanon. There are more people around the world that carry this imagined Lebanon within them than there are people in the current Lebanon, who are intimately familiar with how it is now. That fascinates me.