

## On Kinship and Belonging: narrating and surviving in Zeyn Joukhadar's *The Thirty Names of Night*

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### ABSTRACT

Zeyn Joukhadar's second novel, *The Thirty Names of Night* (2020) tells the story of a young transgender Syrian American man in New York City who reconnects, through an old notebook and a common love of birds, to a Syrian artist who lived and disappeared in New York decades earlier. Through this journey, in a New York City mysteriously invaded by flocks of birds, and rare birds appearing in the narrative alongside and as metaphors (also) of the 'unseen' young man, Nadir names himself and finds the threads of memory in stories of queer kinship and untold history. This article looks at Zeyn Joukhadar's poetic interweaving of stories, where finding one's place in the world means allowing oneself to see and believe the bonds and commonness of found and chosen family, and of found and chosen community – queer and Syrian American in this case – among migratory lives, just like birds. The linkages of family and memory are intertwined, in the novel, with the sense of longing and belonging inscribed in diaspora, and rootedness acquires a completely different, much lighter, air-borne quality, for those who are willing to see and recognize the stories, and their names.

### Keywords

Arab American literature, queer kinships, queer temporalities, diaspora, memory

This article proposes a reading of Syrian American author Zeyn Joukhadar's novel, *The Thirty Names of Night* (2020)<sup>1</sup> as a reflection on alternative forms of kinship and the possibilities of 'queering' narrative and history. The novel is set in the Syrian American community in New York City, and interlinks kin-making and alternative families in the queer community with the experience of solidarity within the diaspora, tackling issues of memory, belonging, transformation, and, ultimately, survival.

Analyzing at once the experiences of queer and migrant subjectivities does carry with it the danger of conflating the two, and flattening both into a common, undistinguishable ground, or what Meg Wesling discusses as "the tendency [...] to conjoin the queer subject and the diasporic subject as theoretical twins" with the diasporic queer subject, thus "called upon to bear witness to the political, material, familial, and intellectual transformations of globalization" (Wesling 2008, 30; see also Manasalan 2006; Rodríguez 2020, among others). In attending to the dangers of this generalization, or what Gaia Giuliani calls the "mystique of the oppressed"

(Giuliani 2022, 8), it is worth underlining how the two lines of intersecting exclusion come together in Joukhadar's novel to form an articulate and far from superficial aesthetic/ethical interpellation of family and history from both the queer and the diasporic perspectives. Most of all, we are invited by Joukhadar to see how stories unearthed outside the archives of history and hegemonic narratives work to reveal different forms of roots and linkages, or kin-making, in Donna Haraway's foundational sense of survival through *oddkin* (Haraway 2016). The novel is, indeed, an affirmation of the existence and survival of communities erased from official narratives, of the power of relationality and recognition, and of the necessity and beauty of seeing and attending to what is not registered, officially spoken, or written.

*The Thirty Names of Night* is set in New York City in the present-day, with the city uncannily invaded by birds. The narrative is suspended in an almost spaceless and timeless dimension, with the birds appearing and disappearing throughout, and the story alternating between present and past, in a sort of narrative flight of its own. At the same time, there is a tangibly material presence and memory of the city itself, its buildings, its pavement, its lived and stratified matter. The novel tells the story of a young transmasculine artist, part of the Syrian community in New York. The young man's story is interwoven with that of a Syrian artist who had herself immigrated to the US in the 1930s; her name was Laila Z, and she had been well known especially in the Syrian community, before mysteriously disappearing decades before the young man was born. The protagonist is nameless throughout most of the novel, until he comes out as transgender to his family and loved ones, and finds himself, choosing his name: Nadir ("rare" in Arabic).<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Nadir finds a notebook that had belonged to Laila Z, containing sketches and diary entries, in an abandoned community house in New York that was at one time used by Syrian immigrants. Nadir thus discovers that Laila Z and his own grandmother had been in love when they were young, and, also through Laila's diary, uncovers other stories from the early Syrian immigrant community, of migrant solidarity and chosen families, and of queer love and bond. This leads to a recognition, to 'seeing' himself in his history and community. The two parallel storylines – in Nadir's present and Laila's past – are both told in the second person, with respectively Nadir addressing his mother (who died in a suspicious fire five years prior and whose ghostly presence is a constant in the novel until a final resolution), and Laila writing to her lost and impossible first love, Nadir's grandmother.

### The city remembers

The question of community as kin and family is central throughout the novel, starting with the symbolic old community house, the dilapidated building in Manhattan where Nadir finds Laila's notebook. Nadir's mother, an ornithologist, had also been an activist advocating for protection against gentrification and demolition of the building, and this very site will hold the key to the

mystery that runs throughout the novel – a missing piece of art by Laila Z depicting a rare bird that, in the end, Nadir proves to actually exist. It is, significantly, a bird that is almost impossible to spot in the wild because it never settles, following in droves the earth's circumference. This bird, the community house and Laila's missing artwork will in turn become the missing pieces of Nadir's sense of belonging. Addressing his mother in the first chapter of the novel, Nadir writes:

You'd laugh at the way I look everywhere for reminders of you – even in the old community house, I still check the locks and try to get up the courage to slip inside. I haven't succeeded yet. Maybe it's for the best; though I've scoured old newspapers and art history books about the painter you loved who used to live here, Laila Z has always remained obscure. (Joukhadar 2020, 19)

Later, Nadir does break into the abandoned community house, giving cue to the mystery of the missing piece of art – and the unknown bird – to be solved through Laila Z's notebook, which holds stories, notes and sketches dating back to the early twentieth century in Syria and then her own move to the United States. The mystery story angle is, indeed, just one of the multiple genres that overlap in Joukhadar's multi-layered and complex novel. As Cheryl Stobie observes, "its development of the modes of writing of the elegy, the ghost story, the state-of-the-nation novel, and the romance exert complex ethical effects on the reader" (Stobie 2021, 353). Joukhadar's is also, I would add, an epistolary narrative of sorts, with Nadir writing (albeit not proper letters) to his mother, and Laila's diary entries addressed to her lover, both powerfully intimate and transformative. Furthermore, alongside the rightly underlined "state-of-the-nation" mode (Stobie 2021) that depicts present-day US society in its racial and class divisions, some parts also read like a historical novel, reconstructing the early life of the Syrian diasporic community in the US and further adding to the ethical complexity of the author's aesthetic choices. And again, underscoring the entire narrative, is a ghost story, with Nadir's mother appearing to him, and with the community house – and perhaps the entire city itself – as a haunted place, holding memories of a past that never really passes.<sup>3</sup>

The city, indeed, carries memory in ways that are rarely seen in what is normally considered the 'recent', or modern, US urbanization. And yet the protagonist searches for and finds the vibrations of pre-colonial inhabitants of that land, of migrant communities passing through for periods of time, of slavery and subalternity and violence consumed in those streets and at those concrete foundations. Speaking of his mother's activism in defence of the community house, Nadir ponders:

Some people go their whole lives in New York shutting their eyes to the fact that this city was built for the people who took this land from the Lenape. Sometimes I wonder why you never spoke of this – maybe you thought I was too young to understand, or you were just desperate to eke out an existence here. Now I am old enough to understand that we live on land that remembers. I hear the voices when I touch the brick or pavement, catch fragments of words exchanged hundreds of years before the island of Mannahatta was paved. I sometimes think about the Arabs and other immigrants who came here a

century before my own family, hoping they wouldn't be devoured by the bottomless hunger of the very forces that drove them from their homelands, hoping they could survive in this place that was not built for them. (Joukhadar 2020, 7)

Joukhadar thus introduces at the very beginning of the novel the 'memory of the land,' and at the same time the memory (and the present) of the immigrants, those communities that have crossed, and still cross, lands and seas to build better lives for themselves.

In the course of the novel, Nadir finds kinship through such unrecognized stories of community, where instances of solidarity and chosen families among migrants are interwoven with queer relationships in the present, and also in the flashbacks to the first wave of Syrians settling in the US. So, again, the past and history reveal so much more; the erasures of official narratives do not erase non-hegemonic kinships and communities. One, however, must be able or willing to see, or believe, just like Nadir's mother, and before her Laila Z, were able to see (and believe in) an extremely rare bird that almost no one else was willing to believe existed.

The material memory of the city recurs in the narrative, when again, for example, the city speaks through its very matter:

When I touch my palm to the brick of a building, the street is flooded with the sound of hoofbeats on cobblestones, the creaking of wooden carriages, the honking of old automobiles. Men argue in Teta's Arabic, now the dated dialect of grandparents and great-grandparents and the long dead, while lovers clasp their pinky fingers in alleyways and children answer their mothers in a language only one of them can understand. This place remembers all its strangers. (Joukhadar 2020, 182)

This corporeal connection to memory takes us into a crucial dimension of Joukhadar's construction of queer kinship and its temporalities: the body. Here, Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman's reflections on queer temporalities seem to offer a fitting and fertile point of view. Following in part Judith Butler's theorization of the key relation between kinship and duration,<sup>4</sup> Tyler and Freeman write: "[K]inship does not exist without extension over time (see Freeman 2007). Kinship promises. Kinship endures — or, as Butler (2017) argues, its grounding in duration is exposed precisely when it fails. It is strangely futural and retrospective, moving in queer temporalities and through corporeal uptakes" (Tyler and Freeman 2022, 3).

Nadir continues, throughout the novel and across the city, to remember, through the concrete he walks on, the breath of the pavement, the ghosts underneath, relocating the haunting presence of personal violence and displacement within the Arab diasporic community he is part of, in a different geography, and history:

I bend down to retie my shoelace and touch the ground. I see the city as the birds do: they trace the road that once ran along the shore here through the marshland called Saponickan, its branches carrying travelers up to what is now Harlem. These roads may be paved over, but their travelers are not gone. You used to tell me stories of jinn; all the other Arabs I know believe in ghosts. (Joukhadar 2020, 130)

The past is central to the novel, its spectral presence proving to be the living core of the present, the bricks and pieces of its very meaning, like Nadir's mother's ghost, who is as a 'present' key to building the need for belonging that traverses the entire novel. The invitation, then, is to re-work the linearity of the narrative, of history, of our relationship with the past. The teleology of 'Western progress' is written in a history that allows for only one point of view, only one language, only one timeline. The only 'authorized' narrative is the universalizing linearity of colonization and European modernity. Instead, what Joukhadar proposes is that the uncertified, and perhaps uncertifiable, other communities, other cultures, other ways of being-together – other birds as we will see – pan out other rhythms. In the intersection of 'queer diaspora', there is not only disruptive mobility (in space and identity), but also a different articulation of time and history. Timelines become tangled, as is the realism of the novel, magical at times, politically clear in its statements at others. When Nadir asks his grandmother why, in all these years, she never said anything about her and Laila's love story, she answers that "[n]ot everything must be spoken to be real" (Joukhadar 2020, 242). In her notebook, Laila recounts the stories her uncle would tell about "the creatures who crossed the Atlantic before ships ever did" (Joukhadar 2020, 61). She imagines such stories were passed down from her grandfather, who, her mother told her, was educated and had memorized Persian cosmographer Zakariyya' al-Qazwini's *Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing*.<sup>5</sup> Laila then adds:

But you know how slippery a story can be. The tale of the birds might have come from a distant uncle or great-great-grandmother rather than a thirteenth-century Persian astronomer, but that doesn't make the story less true. (Joukhadar 2020, 61)

Again, the authority of narrative, the authorized voices, the tales and languages of stories are challenged and re-worked by Joukhadar. The 'objective' perspective of Western knowledge is interrogated and other ways of constructing history, too, emerge in different, unspoken, or 'slippery' modes of narrative.

### **The blood remembers**

Joukhadar builds the two parallel accounts of Nadir's present and Laila Z's past as linked not only by the newly discovered connections between Laila and Nadir's family, but also by the common, reverberating negotiations with belonging –to a land, to a people, to oneself. Here, the element of blood plays a crucial role, both in the interplay between biological and chosen kinships, and in the materiality of Nadir's estrangement within his own body. In one passage, Nadir is at a pool in the Lower East side of Manhattan:

Every step across the wet pool tile heaves my chest up and down, and a despair rises in me that I can't explain, that alarm bell that has been going off in me every day since I began to change, that agonizing

feeling that this body does not belong to me but to all the people who insist on how I should exist inside of it, that unshakeable twinge that tells me that something, perhaps everything, is very, very wrong. (Joukhadar 2020, 76)

This moment of self-reflection is interrupted by the greeting, “As-salaamu alaykum!”, coming from Aisha, an old friend of his mother’s. The protagonist’s estrangement from his body intersects here with the Arabic greeting, with Aisha a few lines down adjusting “the hood of her burkini” (Joukhadar 2020, 76). The spatial and cultural geography of these two bodies, in place and out of place at the same time, is connected in the pool water as liquid conveyor of the weight and at once fleetingness of kinships in the diaspora. Aisha asks about Nadir’s family, and why he hasn’t been coming to the mosque. But Nadir ponders to himself, “I don’t feel comfortable entering a masjid from either the men’s or the women’s entrance, [...] I feel uncomfortable as soon as I clasp my arms around my chest for salah” (Joukhadar 2020, 77).

In the very first pages of the novel, he chronicles his visit to the gynecologist, to check on his IUD, which, instead of halting his period, is causing heavy bleeding and pain:

“I thought this thing was supposed to stop my period.” I pick at a hole that’s starting on the knee of my jeans. “And my chest is sore. Didn’t know that was a side effect.”

“Sure, breast tenderness can happen in the beginning.” The gyno looks at me like I am a puzzle he’s lost a piece to. “It might make your periods heavier, too, but that should settle down after a few cycles.” He asks me about my moods, but I can tell bleeding, cramping, and sore breasts aren’t going to be enough to convince him to take the thing out. [...] My insufficient, unnameable suffering is my own problem. (Joukhadar 2020, 4)

Nadir’s bleeding and his aching are “unnameable”, so much like the fleeting, apparently unseen bird Laila Z drew. Later, Nadir voices his pain, with menstrual blood a recurring marker of his estrangement: “I am tired. I am bleeding again, and my body feels heavy and bloated, my chest so sore that I want to rip off my binder and feel the night air on my skin” (Joukhadar 2020, 101).

From the start, blood is sign of and need for transformation, but it is also memory and mourning. Addressing his mother, as he does throughout the entire narrative, Nadir recalls:

The summer after you died, my periods were the heaviest they’d ever been. I spent the rainless evenings standing in fields at sunset, waiting to be raptured into the green flash of twilight, wishing there were another way to exist in the world than to be bodied. (Joukhadar 2020, 3)

“Another way to exist in the world than to be bodied” becomes, in the course of the novel, another way to make and recognize relations. Indeed, as Tyler and Freeman underline, “kinship and art are both, as social practices, bound up with the work of the body; they work on and through the materiality of the body” (Tyler and Freeman 2022, 5). A relational mode of existing – and therefore surviving – that not only allows Nadir to interpret his own transition

and embodiment, but also to re-interpret the past and how/what is registered into existence, both written and “bodied”.

By the end of the novel, the idea of blood becomes less about the ties that bind one to an unchangeable past, and more about the ongoing process of becoming—a fluid, living force that can change, adapt, and evolve. As Nadir comes out as transgender, he must negotiate not only his embodiment and corporeal geography, but also how his changing identity affects his relationship with his family and society at large, who view his body as part of the ‘blood’ that ties him to tradition and history. Blood too is an ongoing negotiation—between past and present, inheritance and self-creation; it causes Nadir to feel his own body as unfamiliar, and it also marks the continuous work, in the diaspora, of belonging and unbelonging to earth, land, family. When Nadir thinks back to his mother’s funeral, he reflects on roots and earth:

We buried not a person but a continent that day. We’re made from clay, after all, aren’t we, and underground springs and threads of copper run in our veins. When this country asks me where I’m from, they aren’t asking for the city on my birth certificate, but whose earth is in my blood. (Joukhadar 2020, 109)

Blood here is not just the biological matter that defines the body, but something that carries memory, history, and trauma. In the act of transitioning, and in the aesthetic process of Joukhadar’s work, the protagonist is, in part, trying to rewrite his bloodline and identity, not in a way that erases the past, but in a way that allows for transformation.

Certainly, Nadir’s embodiment negotiations echo, in their imagery of flowing and resistance *of* and *from* blood, Judith Butler’s fundamental question of “undoing gender”, not only in the sense of undoing heteronormativity and biological determinism, but also of “gender acts” as articulations of agency and survival (Butler 2004). Joukhadar’s writing speaks, also, to the implications of affect on the construction of the material relationality of lives and bodies proposed by Sarah Ahmed, to “the way emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” (Ahmed 2015, 1). In ‘proximity’ with both theorists, Joukhadar appears to give form to the fundamental dimension of relationality; exploring the place of individual bodily agency within the collective whole (Butler 2004), and the relational nature of emotions, which in turn shape the very “surfaces” of bodies (Ahmed 2015, 8). Again, what emerges is the way relational and emotional economies shape the inevitability of our ‘being bodied’ together.

In speaking alongside and with the question of diasporic rootedness, but also the alternative communities formed within diaspora, the transformation of blood—symbolic of the transformation of self—underscores one of the central themes of *The Thirty Names of Night*: the agency to redefine identity in the inescapable relation to others, in ways that allow for both continuity and radical change. Blood and its refusal are both, here, ways of attending to some form of survival.

### The birds are wonders taken for signs

The birds that pervade Joukhadar's novel can be read as embodying a great variety of symbols and metaphors. They may symbolize community and bonds in many ways: flocks as communities; nests as home; there is even a crow's funeral at one point, in a very touching ritual of mourning amidst Nadir's own ongoing mourning process. As a literary trope, birds certainly have a long and well-studied history, with roots going back to many different mythological traditions (see, among many others, Lutwack 1994; Concu 2016; Pope 2021). The specific element of the rare bird in *The Thirty Names of Night* carries an explicit reference to a fundamental text in Sufi poetry, *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid ud-Din Attar (1177). The scientific name of the fictional bird in Joukhadar's novel is *Geronticus simurghus*, directly recalling the Simorgh, a fantastic bird in Persian mythology that, in Attar's poem, is named sovereign of all the world's birds. The birds begin their journey to find the Simorgh crossing seven valleys, representing seven faults that prevent humanity from reaching enlightenment. As Sholeh Wolpé writes in her "Introduction" to *The Conference of the Birds*,

On the way, many perish of thirst, heat, or illness, while others fall prey to wild beasts, panic, and violence. Finally, only thirty birds make it to the abode of Simorgh.

In the end, the birds learn that they themselves are the Simorgh; the name "Simorgh" in Persian means thirty (si) birds (morgh). They eventually come to understand that the majesty of that Beloved is like the sun that can be seen reflected in a mirror. Yet, whoever looks into that mirror will also behold his or her own image. (Wolpé 2017, 9)

Attar is directly referenced by Joukhadar more than once. *The Conference of the Birds*, specifically, offers an entrance into Nadir and his mother's world and language, and their own form of faith, in a sense:

It's because of your textbooks that I know so many birds by their Arabic names. [...] There is no nightingale among my index of birds, only the bulbul; in Farid ad-Din Attar's Sufi poems, Solomon's confidante is called not the hoopoe but the hudhud, crowned by the other birds to lead them to the legendary Simorgh. Many of these birds I grew up naming without seeing. (Joukhadar 2020, 17)

Later, the elusive, rare bird Laila Z had drawn is explicitly linked to Attar's poem, when the story of its name is revealed. Only one other person believed Laila, an African American ornithologist, and he named the bird precisely with reference to the Simorgh (Joukhadar 2020, 82). Furthermore, the title of the novel itself appears to reference the thirty birds (which also reappear more than once throughout the narrative), with the transformation of "birds" into "names". Naming is, in turn, another key element, not only in the transformative act of Nadir naming himself towards the end of the book, but also in the play between visible/nameable and invisible/unnameable lives, people, birds, kinships.<sup>6</sup>

There is yet another element that may speak to the relevance of birds in Joukhadar's novel from the perspective of temporalities and history proposed in this article: the connection between birds and time. Clearly, birds may be considered as fleeting, passing beings; they potentially fly through and are gone; they also migrate, carrying then not only the symbolic theme of diaspora and migration, but also the marking of time cycles and time passing. Furthermore, birds have always been symbolically tied to divination, bringing messages from the future (in the novel this element, too, is present, with birds bearing both good and bad signs). However, something more may emerge from the link between birds and time, specifically through the element of rarity. The bird that Nadir's mother insisted she saw, and that Laila Z had painted, belongs to the past, thus not only did the act of believing entail the women's faith in what they had seen (against the skepticism of the scientific community), but it also brings Nadir in his own quest, into a completely personal form of faith, that, in the process, allows him to see and be seen, and find kinship.

It is, then, precisely through their unexplained (but never questioned) appearances and manifestations in the novel that birds become something more than allegories or metaphors, more akin to the sacredness of faith in the uncertified, or the unbelievable. The birds are somehow accepted as they intermingle with human life, perhaps even close to some form of oddkin, as Haraway would put it, in the wider tale of survival that Joukhadar ultimately tells. In the novel, the birds collectively tell a story outside sanctioned and authorized narratives, not only in a different language, but in an altogether different modality. The birds appear seemingly out of nowhere, not only throughout the city, but also throughout time. They carry the power to connect Nadir to his mother after she has passed, even more than her ghostly presence can. At the beginning of the novel he tells her:

A sparrow's beak strikes my hand and gashes my palm. I clutch the wound, the meat of my thumb dark with my own blood. You taught me a long time ago to identify the species by the yellow patches around their eyes, their black whiskers, their white throats, and their ivory crowns. [...] I reach down to scoop the sparrow from the rooftop with my bloodied hands. He weighs almost nothing. There is so much of you – and, therefore, of myself – that I will never know. Tomorrow, when the ghost of you enters my window with the smell of rain, I will tell you how, since you died, the birds have never left me. (Joukhadar 2020, 2)

Working with the different shades and material of bird eggs is, Nadir says earlier in this same passage, what first taught him how to mix paint; it made him into the artist he is. Birds continually reveal the hidden stories and the unearthed, intangible – again, even sacred or spiritual – connections that, ultimately, make up history. They are, in so many ways, 'wonders'. In 1985 Homi Bhabha published the now very well-known article "Signs Taken for Wonders,"<sup>7</sup> in which he famously questions the authority of the English book and its "sudden, fortuitous discovery" (Bhabha 1985, 102) in postcolonial literature as a sign and site of mimicry, as resistance to colonial domination. Looking at Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with Marlow's

discovery of Towson's *Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, or V. S. Naipaul's *The Return of Eva Peron*, with a young Trinidadian finding and reading that very same passage from Conrad's novel, but also "the Bible translated into Hindi, propagated by Dutch or native catechists" (Bhabha 1985, 108), Bhabha sees the "English book" as a symbol and device of colonial rule, discipline, and desire. The European book is, in this sense, a "sign taken for wonder" that "figures those ideological correlatives of the Western sign—empiricism, idealism, mimeticism, monoculturalism" (Bhabha 1985, 105). The "English book" has the discursive capacity to produce and disseminate the European cultural narrative.

Here, I propose Bhabha's use of 'signs' and 'wonders' in reversal, where 'the book' – and therefore the authority of the written word in Western culture – is replaced with birds; fleeting and unfixed, or also as ungraspable as oral culture appears to the cultures 'of the book' (the English book, for Bhabha, is first and foremost the Bible). Birds are material memory elusive as flight. The birds are not 'signs' to be read; they are 'wonders', magical in a sense, miraculous even, appearing and disappearing, bringing on all of the unexpected turns in the novel. Joukhadar writes birds and *with* birds in his novel, as if in their own, other language and mode. Birds might be, then, wonders taken, by Western culture, for signs: something unbelievable to be believed (like unwritten history, or Laila's bird), not necessarily to be deciphered or even re-signified. Birds participate in (or are perhaps the agents of) the fleshing out of queer temporalities in *The Thirty Names of Night*, proposing history in another modality.

This theoretical perspective introduces one of the keys I propose in reading *The Thirty Names of Night*: the queer temporalities of the novel, jointed in alternative kinships and corporeal – human and more-than-human – relations across a present that is always-also its own past. These queer temporalities, I argue, can open up the possibility of re-thinking history itself, outside sequentiality, in 'relational forms', or rhizomatic diagrams of (collapsed) genealogy (Tyler and Freeman 2022).

The material findings – Laila Z's notebook and drawings –, the physicalness of the city and its buildings (or sometimes ruins), the blood streaming unwanted yet delivering a crucial corporeal dialogue with Nadir's transition, and the birds, so physically present throughout the book, invasive and pervasive –these may all be elements of a form of 'relational history', or perhaps even something close to the "erotohistoriography" that, again, Elizabeth Freeman (2010) theorizes. Here, an articulation of "the body as method" (Freeman 2010, 96; see also Canning 1999), of physically feeling (pleasure –but not only, I would add), touching, or incorporating, opens up to the possibility of a history beyond the apparent authority of the book, outside the 'scientificity' of the genealogical diagram.

Again, in the overlapping of his own transformations with those of his oddkin family, Nadir traces his own community, "futural and retrospective", in Butler's terms (Butler 2017). Laila Z had, we discover, her own, queer family at a time when she didn't have a name for it. This,

along with many others, is the thread interweaving Nadir's lifeline, finding kin in his past, in Laila's connection to his grandmother, for example; in his present, through the queer and immigrant community he finds and builds around him; through the teachings of that immigrant community, continually emerging within the narrative in stories of solidarity, mutual healing, bonds in difficult times, and bonds in the memory of the common land left behind. When Nadir also comes to find intimacy and love, he, too, sees what is uncertified:

Something could be built here, I think, something resembling a family. If an object can become sacred by placing it on a table and calling it an altar, then who is to say we cannot sanctify our own bodies? (Joukhadar 2020, 265)

In the final scene of the novel, we see Nadir with his chosen family and his sister, looking at the night sky and taking in yet another kind of bird:

When I glance back, my friends are beckoning me to them. I step back from the ledge and turn my face from Brooklyn's silhouette. There is a new moon tonight, revealing Deneb low in the sky. On the edge of the city, planes are landing from Beirut and from Cairo, angling their enormous wings. (Joukhadar 2020, 288)

The giant, steel birds fly overhead, hurling some kind of modernity in a dissonant temporality, carrying their wings like migratory birds –from Beirut and Cairo, each new crossing a new diaspora, or a continuation of the cycle of migration. Nadir is home now, in his own continuation of blood and kin. Sami, his love, has just called out to him, “love of my heart”, “Ya habib ‘albi” (Joukhadar 2020, 288).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Thirty Names of Night* is Zeyn Joukhadar's second novel. His first novel, *The Map of Salt and Stars* (2018), won the 2018 Middle East Book Award, and was translated into twenty languages. Their work has been published in numerous literary journals and is included in anthologies such as *Letters to a Writer of Color*, *This Arab Is Queer*, *KINK: Stories*. Joukhadar is currently working on a theatrical adaptation of *The Thirty Names of Night*. For more details, see <https://www.zeynjoukhadar.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> The 24 chapters in the novel alternate between Nadir and Laila's narrative voices. Those narrated by Nadir bear the chapter number and then a name graphically erased on the page, up until Chapter 19, when finally he has chosen his name, and it is no longer scratched out.

<sup>3</sup> A great volume of scholarly works has been written on the cultural significance of ruins. See, among others, Stoler 2008; Trigg 2009; Dillon 2011; Nelson and Olin 2003; in particular on “modern ruin memory” and “material memory”, see Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to Judith Butler's 2017 University College of London Houseman Lecture, “Breaks in the Bond: Reflections on Kinship Trouble,” published as a pamphlet.

<sup>5</sup> Written in Arabic, the thirteenth century work is a very well-known example of a genre of classical Islamic literature on the ‘wonders of creation’, or *mirabilia*. It was frequently illustrated, was immensely popular and was translated into Persian and Turkish.

<sup>6</sup> Though there is no explicit reference in the novel, it seems there may also be a deliberate resonance, in the title of the novel, *The Thirty Names of Night*, to the Qur'anic 99 names of Allah (Sahih al-Bukhari 2736).

<sup>7</sup> The full title of the article is: “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817” (Bhabha 1985).

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