PERIPHERAL AGENTS: MARGINALITY IN ARAB FOLK NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Narrative as a form of expression does more than reflect social conditions; it also comments upon those realities and negotiates their meanings using affective modes. The negotiation of social relationships is what narrative is about, and the aesthetics of performance serve to enhance the power of its message. I find that marginality quite often emerges as significant in folk narrative performances as a relational condition on which the affective axis of a story turns and as it is interwoven across the story-frame to allow performers and audience to rhetorically expand message and meaning by making use of the performance setting and the broader (de)constructions of culture. Examples of folk narrative taken from Arabic sources demonstrate the various ways in which marginality is exploited and contested inside the narrative as well as outside. For the particular examples chosen, the storyteller is of marginal social position in everyday life. Yet, through a deft performance the teller can challenge normal power dynamics in multiple ways via multiple rhetorical strategies. The teller can engage with the narrative capacities that the narrative functions as counterhegemonic discourse, uncovering the hidden transcript that expresses and enacts resistance to power.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration of Arabic words throughout the text, if not taken directly from another source, is done according to the system listed below. Long vowels are distinguished from short vowels, and emphatic consonants are indicated by capital letters, regardless of their position in the word. I only transliterated proper nouns if they are part of a title. Thus, Bani Hilal refers to the name of the Arab tribe, but *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* refers to the name of the epic that commemorates their deeds. For the dialect poetry that I have cited, I have maintained the system used by the source, with the exception of representing emphatic consonants with capital letters. This includes the symbol “x” in place of “kh” and “š” in place of “sh.”

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* The representation of this letter follows the pronunciation guidelines of its grammatical position. I have represented it as “t” when it occurs in construct state; otherwise, it appears as “h.”
INTRODUCTION

It is quite common nowadays to view folklore as a resource by which to resist dominant discourses of modern bourgeois neoliberal capitalism. According to this paradigm, folk cultures everywhere are in danger of dying out or being co-opted by the forces of globalization. The idea of the folk itself takes on global dimensions as a counterpoint to modernity. In the West, we read about a “clash of civilizations” and a struggle between Islam and the West, or else the dimensions of conflict are identified with what are, in most cases, very recently delineated boundaries of nation-states. What gets lost in the discussion is the sphere of the local and the production and performance of community relationships that help ground everyday experience. Ethnographic accounts tend to “use the details and the particulars of individual lives to produce typifications” which makes “‘others' seem simultaneously more coherent, self-contained, and different from ourselves than they might be (Abu-Lughod 1993, 7).” However, local identities are continuously adapting to ever-changing attempts at hegemony (whether cultural, economic, social) in order to perpetuate their own sense of autonomy. At stake is maintaining the distinction between insider and outsider, between native and non-native (Brown 6). Such a distinction presupposes a conception of tradition as bounded, but with a spatial organization that engenders a center and a periphery, where one goes
from being insider to being outsider. The work of defending collective identity thus, conceptually, takes place at the margins of community. Where the margins are, though, depends on how one defines the community as well as who is doing the defining. In the Arab context, the in-group can be small and local (familial, occupational, or gender-based) or broad and regional (dialect group, urban/rural, national, international, or transnational).

One powerful site for constructing and defending collective identity is narrative, and, working with the small sample of Arab folk narratives that provide data related to specific performance, I find that marginality quite often emerges as significant in folk narrative performances as a relational condition on which the affective axis of a story turns and as it is interwoven across the story-frame to allow performers and audience to rhetorically expand message and meaning by making use of the performance setting and the broader (de)constructions of culture. Narrative is about social relationships and their negotiation in a discursive field that is imagined to be separate from that of everyday life, a bounded site where those who are marginalized by the social structure can take an active part in the performance of community. Yet, stories escape their boundaries to be transformative in the “real” world. Narrative in performance is multivocalic and complex on many levels that involve the perspectives of particular audience members, how well they know the teller, and the ability of the teller to command the occasion through a compelling story. This site in which the marginalized have agency does not disappear with the spread of global capitalism; old stories can take on new significance in the face of local and extra-local change.
There has been very scant scholarly attention paid to Arab folk narrative in performance, and among the few researchers who have done so, some, such as Dwight Reynolds, have taken the view that these are “dying” genres (Reynolds 1995, 206). Indeed, this might well be in some cases, but Reynolds work itself as well as the works of Susan Slyomovics and Sabra Webber point to the continued vitality of folk narrative in Arab contexts and its potential for subverting or resisting dominating powers. To be able to see this in practice, one has to have an understanding of not just the story, but also the context in which the narrator tells it to an audience. This could be a productive area for further research as the discipline of folklore moves away from the tendencies that guided it starting in the nineteenth century.

Up through the middle of the 20th century, the study of folklore concerned itself chiefly with the etic classification of structural elements of written or oral folk narrative and with genre with the premise that these were globally generalizable (Bauman 1992, 53). Even until today most studies of Arab world verbal art continue to be of these types with very few scholars of Arab world folklore studying narratives ethnographically.¹ This is the scholarship that has provided folklorists with motif and tale-type indexes that were to be the blueprint for further research in the field (Propp 5),² something that has held true as well for the study of Arab folktales, which has concentrated mainly on the influence that tales from this genre, the Thousand and One Nights in particular, have had upon Western literature (Reynolds 2007, 77). The result of these efforts has been a

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¹ But see L. Abu-Lughod (1993) Writing Women's Worlds for an ethnographic study of Bedouin narratives. While she did not analyze the details of the performance context, she was concerned with the instrumentality of narrative: “A story is always situated; it has both a teller and an audience. Its perspective is partial (in both senses of the word), and its telling is motivated (Abu-Lughod 1993, 15).”

decontextualization of the tales from their local significance and their reinterpretation through the authority of Orientalists.³ In the 1970s, however, the emergence of post-structural theory shifted scholarly focus away from the thematic elements and into performance context.⁴ This new focus brought to light the metadiscursive aspects of performance that help to construct the meaning of a narrative and shape the ways in which it is interpreted.⁵ The performance is recognized as a contested site for the exercise of social relations of power, whether the contestation be agonistic, antagonistic, or dialogic.

Yet, if one reduces everything to social relations of power, how does one account for the affective and aesthetic dimensions of a narrative?⁶ Different narrative genres can serve as vehicles for expression of social critique, addressing the gaps between social ideals and how they are not lived up to in practice. However, transparent didacticism is often seen as unpersuasive, devaluing a work of art.⁷ Raymond Williams stressed the importance of viewing the terms of social experience, including those framed in/as literature, as being in process, and not locked into the past (132). His distinction between residual, dominant, and emergent cultural processes was extremely influential in the

³ Edward Lane approached his translation of the Nights as if the tales were an anthropological account of the essence of Arab culture (Irwin 24).
⁶ See discussion in Nelms (n.d.) of relationality as a tool within anthropology by which to elucidate the social form that is its content (20-24).
⁷ Some critics in discussing early attempts of Arab writers at writing in new literary genres adopted from Europe, i.e. short stories and novels, have bemoaned the tendency to use the genre as a vehicle for didactic discourse without heed to its aesthetic dimensions. Every narrative has a point or perspective that its telling seeks to illustrate, but such concern should be secondary and must emerge from the affective quality of the work. See, for example, R. Allen (1995) The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction, and S. Hafez (2007) The Quest for Identities: The Development of the Modern Arabic Short Story.
performative turn within folklore studies (Bauman 1977, 47-48). The identification of motifs in folklore must be balanced against folklore grounded in a particular context, “specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feelings against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought … in a living and interrelating continuity (Williams 132).” As an analytical tool, a structure of feeling:

is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formations of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced (Williams 133).

Narrative thus shapes and comments on the ways in which such social conditions and relationships are experienced in practice. While Williams identified the need to incorporate the study of forms into the studies of institutions and discursive formations, he went on to include a concern with relationships and interrelationships as integral to the principles of a sociology of culture (138-140). I find that focusing in on marginality while studying Arab folk narratives as a way of thinking about interrelationships is a means of integrating the “two dominant tendencies of bourgeois cultural studies – the sociology of the reduced but explicit 'society' and the aesthetics of the excluded social remade as a specialized 'art' (Williams 140).”

It is important to keep in mind that marginality is not synonymous with minority status, even though many minority groups are marginalized within their respective societies. Examples such as South Africa under Apartheid, where blacks outnumbered
whites by a wide margin, or in the United States where women outnumber men
demonstrate that marginality is not a quantitative concept (Gilbert 5). On a much larger
scale, the entire Arab world in modern times can be seen as being a marginal actor in
global politics (even though it is a major locus for the exercise of global power relations,
the role of dominance is played by external entities like the US or the UN). The
marginalization of Arab identity on the world stage results in a communitas among Arabs
who might not otherwise have much in common as well as a ground inside and outside
the Arab world from which to launch critiques of the inequality of the global power
structure. However, Arab culture versus Western culture is just one potential binary that
is operative within the field of social reference. Other possibilities are rural versus urban,
poor versus rich, uneducated versus educated, female versus male, and so on.

As rulers of Arab nations are sort of an intermediate authoritative institution
(having dominance within the country but not outside), references to them within the
narrative or performance context can portray them as underdog heroes or oppressive
tyrants, depending on the contextual circumstances. An example can be seen in modern-
day performances of the popular Arabic epic Sīrat Banī Hilāl where a centuries old
account of the children of the crescent moon who make their way from Arabia through
Egypt to finally invade Tunisia in the eleventh century can be reworked to address
contemporary political and social dynamics. Thus, Umar Mukhtar, the Libyan nationalist
hero from the colonial era appears fighting alongside the Hilali warriors, achieving a
definitive military triumph in narrative that he was unable to accomplish as a historical
figure. Other versions in Egypt identify Gamal Abd al-Nasser with the central hero of the
Bani Hilal, Abu Zayd, while Anwar Sadat is cast as the most prominent villain, the tyrant Zanati (Slyomovics, 179). Even though we lack the occasional context for these performances, it is not difficult to imagine how these real-life figures are moved to better or worse quality space⁸ by their associations with either Hilali heroes or villains. The performers of such versions of the epic as well gather discursive and perhaps actual power by controlling these prominent figures in Arab lore across space and over time. There can be danger involved as well, and the poet has to be cautious and circumspect in employing such devices to avoid unwanted attention from the authorities (Slyomovics 184).

In the course of this study, I approach a selection of the few pieces of Arab folk narrative for which there exists ethnographic performance data to look for what one can infer about social relationships and marginality. This includes the fieldwork of Reynolds and Slyomovics focusing on performances of Sīrat Banī Hilāl – the epic that celebrates the westward migration of the Hilali Arab tribe – and also local micronarratives (Hikāyāt) collected by Webber in the Tunisian town of Kelibia. I also discuss aspects of Sīrat ʻAntar, another popular epic, through the study of Peter Heath, although he includes no discussion of performance context. For the folktale genre, I look at some stories from the collection of Palestinian folktales, Speak Bird, Speak Again, as well as tales from Mauritania. These folktales have been presented with only general remarks about their performance, which limits what can be said about their function in mediating social relationships.

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⁸ See p. 17 below for discussion of quality spaces
Chapter 1 will focus exclusively on marginality within the content of the narrative for the epic poetry and *Hikāyāt*. These are the genres of Arab folklore for which there exist studies concerning the performance situation associated with the narrative. In this chapter, I explore the plot structure and language, unpacking their significance in terms of marginality, but I also include in the discussion how marginality is linked to the affective structure of the narrative. In Chapter 2, I step out of the stories to examine the settings in which they are performed (with the exclusion of *Sīrat 'Antar* which lacks performance data) and how this space is framed to invert the hegemonic order of the everyday social structure. Chapter 3 considers marginality in the narrative content of folktales, with inferences about how one can approach them without knowing much about the occasional context. I conclude this thesis with a discussion of what one might be able to look for to recognize the potentially subversive and socially transformative potential of folk narrative, drawing principally on the ideas of James C. Scott and his notion of the hidden transcript.
CHAPTER 1: MARGINALITY IN NARRATIVE CONTENT

Oral narrative in Arab folklore overlaps several genres that differ in type and degree of formal characteristics. The epic poems – *siyar* in Arabic (*sīra* in singular) – are on the more formal side of the spectrum, as performance events are structurally patterned and more formally presented, requiring the performer to be highly specialized in the arts of the genre. These narratives help to form the backbone of the shared cultural history that is important in shaping intracommunal and intercommunal subjectivities that give rise to cultural identities. Tales of fiction, which often include supernatural material, represent another genre of Arab folk narrative that retains some aspects of formality in both the structure and content of the stories, as well as the occasions on which they are told. The Arabic name for this genre is *khurafāt*, and the tales are meant for entertainment, removed to a major extent from the historical plane. Such tales have been held in low esteem by religious leaders and literary elites (at least in public discourse) who disparage both the style of the narratives as well as their focus on the supernatural. Nevertheless, *khurafāt* are widely circulated and the experience of listening to them as a

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9 Ibn al-Nadīm was a 10th century C.E. Baghdad bookseller who compiled all the books known to him in a catalog, *al-Fihrist*, which contains a mention about the circulation of the stories that came to be known as *The Thousand and One Nights* that were in turn based on a collection of Persian tales. While giving a synopsis of the frame story, Ibn al-Nadīm voices his opinion that such stories are vulgar and lacking in aesthetics, an opinion which is believed to be widely shared within the Baghdad intellectual scene (Irwin 49-50).
child and telling them as an adult are framed in the background of the life of an individual (Muhawi and Kanaana 6-8). The collection of tales known as *The Thousand and One Nights* can be included within this genre, although the history of these tales is marked by their place within Orientalist scholarship and discourse. *Hikāyāt* are closely related to *khurafāt*, derived from the Arabic root “to narrate” or “to relate,” but these stories are highly flexible in terms of performance and content. The telling of a *Hikāyah* is often emergent from the occasion on which it is told, arising from conversation or from the more leisurely forms of social interaction (Webber 10). The content of *Hikāyāt*, while retaining some aspects that are fanciful and possibly supernatural, diverges from *khurafāt* in that they are more closely tied to the community in which they are told. They contain past events in the lives of the narrators or of individuals within the community who have attained local and more recent legendary status, whereas *siyar* encompass a larger geographical space and represent events in the more distant past.

When approaching folk narrative, it is critical that one has an understanding of the sociolinguistic character of the community in which a narrative is circulated, including the various linguistic registers that are employed in different types of interaction, as well as the dialectical relationship between the local dialect and the normative linguistic forms of the dominating culture. The idea that there can exist a pure, standardized, and universal form of a language was instrumental in Enlightenment constructions of modernity and served to subordinate linguistic registers associated with communities whose members were largely illiterate and uneducated (Bauman and Briggs 2). Folklore in its beginning stages as an academic discipline was motivated by the principle that the
folklore scholar's function was to “rescue” the cultural artifacts that had been preserved in corrupt form among the peasantry, restoring them to their “original” form as they imagined it to be before it devolved (Bauman and Briggs 121-123). The bias in favor of an ur-form of a narrative has persisted to the present, though there has been a growing movement within the Humanities in the last half-century to dismantle it. To recognize the situational component to folk narrative opens one's awareness to the power of the storyteller to manipulate the framework of social relationships through the medium of the story itself.

There are some parallels between the situation of European modernity and the historical experience among Arabic-speaking societies and attitudes toward folk narrative that are partially rooted in sociolinguistics, but it should be understood that these similar attitudes arose through different and particular historical circumstances. Arabic as a language, as far as can be currently known, has always existed in multiple registers that are employed based upon the situational context of who the interlocutors are and the sociocultural setting of interaction. Most of the linguistic forms that have persisted from ancient times to the present are those associated with Classical Arabic, which is what characterizes the language of the Qur'an as well as pre-Islamic poetry. Classical Arabic is marked by highly formalized grammatical and syntactical structures that require a significant amount of instruction in order to master. Its association with religion has also

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10 Thanks in part to the emergence of Cultural Studies as an academic discipline, essentialized distinctions between high and low art have been largely dismantled. For works that have challenged the primacy of written and individually authored narratives, see A. Lord (1991) *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*, and R. Bauman and C. Briggs (2003) *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*. For works discussing the autonomy of dialects as systems of representation, see P. Bourdieu (1977) “The Economics of linguistic exchange,” and B. Street (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. 
served to elevate this linguistic register within Arabic-speaking societies; but Arab pride in its beauty is also influential as well as perceived attempts to devalue it either in favor of Turkish during the Ottoman period or in favor of European languages or Arabic dialects during colonial occupation. Yet, from most of the available evidence, it does not seem that anyone in history has ever spoken Classical Arabic as their mother tongue (Reynolds 1995, 30-31). It appears that dialectical forms of the language have always coexisted with Classical Arabic, loosening up its strict regularities, not only in spoken forms of the language, but also in the written.  

The contrast between linguistic styles of Arabic is manifest in the different forms of narrative expression. While poetry, religious and scholarly writings, and other literary genres such as 'adab and maqamat continued to be defined by the usage of Classical Arabic, the folk genres described above generally employed Middle Arabic in written, while using local and regional dialects in oral, narrative. These dialects have tended to be marginalized by Arab intellectuals over the centuries, which can be surmised to be part of the reason why the various forms of folk narrative have themselves been marginalized within the discourse of those that hold power.  

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11 The existence of a written register of Arabic known as Middle Arabic that mediates between Classical Arabic and dialectical forms has until recently been the focus of very little scholarly attention. It was thought that Middle Arabic was associated primarily with medieval texts, illustrating evidence of a cultural decline within the Islamic world with the more elevated style falling out of usage. However, recent evidence has indicated that Middle Arabic was in use at the very earliest times in which the language came to be written (Lentin 216-219).
12 In modern usage, 'adab means literature, though as a genre of Classical Arabic literature it had a much more specific meaning, one that does not translate easily, though some render it as “essays” or “belle-lettres.” “[I]t means a way of dealing gracefully with a topic, not too seriously or dryly, but in an urbane and sophisticated way. 'Adab was also used to refer to the qualities and ideal of life – a Muslim version of England’s eighteenth-century gentility – that found expression in such writing (McNeill and Waldman 110).”
13 Picaresque episodic adventures written in rhymed prose (sa’j).
14 But see Ibn Khaldun's defense of epic poetry of Sīrat Banī Hilāl that was performed in dialect. Saad
down upon the sorts of tales that were circulated among the people, even after such tales like those of *The Thousand and One Nights* became an object of fascination for Europe beginning in the 17th century. The marginalization of non-standard forms of Arabic could be a reason why scholars (Orientalist scholars, particularly, but also Arab intellectuals) have largely overlooked the subversive and progressive potentialities of Arab folk narrative.

*Marginality and Affective Appeal in Folk Narrative*

Before looking at some examples from Arab folklore that can illuminate this point, it is necessary to explain in more detail what I mean by marginality. Foucault's essay “The Subject and Power” elaborates upon the notion that subjects cannot exist apart from relations of power with other subjects (218-20). These power relations, broadly speaking, take many forms and have varying degrees of asymmetry depending on patterns of social interaction. Interactions between subjects then exhibit a character that is derived not only from the relations of power between two given subjects, but also from the surrounding network of power relations of larger social contexts and institutional frameworks. These relations are dynamic, and certain subjects occupy social positions of dominance or authority not only through individual strength or ability, but also through

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15 Aside from the linguistic considerations, another aspect of the marginalization of Arab folk narrative is its association with women (with the exception of popular epics), who arguably occupy a position of subordination within Arab societies. The confinement of women to the household sphere away from public domain meant that very few women received the degree of education and training required to master the usage of the elevated language. While all men were exposed to such narrative forms in childhood, and were in all likelihood fascinated and entertained by them, they were expected upon reaching maturity to lose interest. For a discussion of the feminization of folk narrative in European discourses of modernity, see Bauman and Briggs (2003) *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*, Introduction and Chapter 3.

16 But see the debate surrounding the use of quoted colloquial speech in modern Arab literature (Versteegh 126-128).
favorable positioning in the characteristic structure of power relations within a given community. One could define marginality in this respect as the condition of occupying an unfavorable or vulnerable position in a network of power relations. It is thus a relational condition, and it is not always constituted through material factors such as socioeconomic status or physical attributes. A character in a narrative or a person in real life may possess enormous wealth or prodigious strength and fighting ability, yet still be treated as an outcast by the community due to other marginalizing traits, especially those that pertain to character (an unjust king who plays the villain of a story, such as Handal, the enemy of the Bani Hilal). Marginality may be present in one dimension, but not in another and can be manifest not only from material conditions, but from conditions that are imagined.\footnote{Kinship studies has brought to light that there are material, discursive, and performative modes of kin reckoning that are relatively and pragmatically employed. While blood would represent a material mode of kinship, affective imagining allows one to claim as kin those that are not related by blood. See Taylor Nelms (2008) \textit{Virtual Kinship: The Play of Affect and the 'Making' of Family in Urban Ecuador}, p. 6-15.}

Given that power relations are not static, but are in constant flux, those that are on the margins have the potential to strengthen their position and move towards the center, at least temporarily. This activity is ongoing as an individual who demonstrates his or her worth may have to continuously demonstrate that worth to maintain a position of power within the hierarchy. This is particularly important in the case of heroes, whose exploits serve to continually reaffirm their social standing. Individuals who occupy more central and powerful social positions might not have to exert as much effort in maintaining their positions. The relative nature of marginality as a condition means that “marginal individuals may assimilate into the dominant group, assimilate into the subordinate
group, or accommodate (perhaps temporarily and incompletely) between the two groups (Gilbert 3).” But while individuals can move from marginal status into elite status, the position of entire classes of people are more fixed. A slave can become a king, but most slaves still remain slaves. Marginality that is shared by a community, though, can provide the basis for the production of communitas and a sense of pride among the marginalized, even as they look to the dominant group as their frame of reference for conceptualizing their status (Turner 1974, 233). Reference to the symbols of the dominant culture does not necessarily reflect, then, an internalized condition of subordination.

As narrative in its different forms revolves around conflict and its resolution (Muhawi and Kanaana 13), action on the margins of the community has potential to be the basis for a tale and imbued with affective quality which the narrator can exploit to both enhance the appeal of the story to the audience as well as open up imaginative spaces in which to reconceptualize ideas of community. In The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic, Peter Heath describes the pattern of the hero cycle, made famous through the writings of Joseph Campbell, as it recurs frequently in the 'Antar epics. The four stages are: 1) birth of the hero and overcoming early obstacles; 2) the love story; 3) heroic service; 4) death of the hero and revenge taken by his family and clan (Heath 68-69). Each of these stages correspond to the important phases of life – birth and coming of age, marriage, adulthood, and death. In the stages of the hero cycle, the condition of marginality plays a key function in setting the stage for the extraordinary role that a hero is to play within a society. Heath focuses mostly on the role of
marginality in maintaining the level of dramatic tension within the story; heroes must be in continuous struggle with the circumstances of their lives usually from the time of their births, and these often take place in unusual manners or conditions. As he notes, “Heroes are destined to rise above the normal standards of society. To make their ascent more difficult – and thus their eventual successes more noteworthy – this story pattern frequently begins by placing them very low in society (Heath 70).”

Aside from the dramatic tension, however, the narrative itself has broad cultural appeal in that the idea of a black slave winning freedom for himself within the pre-Islamic Arabian tribal society has resonated amongst Arabic-speaking audiences for centuries (Heath 24). This could indicate a strong level of identification or sympathy with the hero of this particular story. Just why this is so in any particular case, though, necessitates experiencing a live performance, and these seem to have disappeared.¹⁸ The example of 'Antar thus builds off of the inherent appeal of the story as well as the tension created through the hero cycle. In the stage of birth and coming of age, 'Antar was born into slavery as a consequence of having a mother who was a slave. Aside from the lowly social position that he inherited, he also inherited from his father, who was free, a fiery pride and arrogance (Heath 71). The first stage of the hero cycle narrates the struggle for the hero to gain social acceptance, to overcome his marginal status that was his through birth. In the 'Antar epic, social acceptance generally means active accommodation by society as the hero tends to retain his innate flaws as well as his virtues (Heath 72). One sees this as well in the Sirat Banī Hilāl with the hero Dyab who was born in the desert

¹⁸ Of the popular epics that Edward Lane was aware of during his time in Cairo in the 1830s, Sirat ' Antar was among the more rarely performed (414)
because his mother had been abandoned by her caravan when it left in the morning. The nature of this birth confers upon Dyab an association with the jackal – a desert creature that is characterized by “solitude, marginality, an innate knowledge of the desert, cunning, divination (Galley 433)” – an association that would define his character and behavior throughout his life.

The second stage of the hero cycle, the love story, also employs marginality as a setup for dramatic tension. With social acceptance achieved, the hero looks to consolidate his newly won position through marriage. 'Antar fell in love with his cousin 'Abla, but her family did not approve of his romantic longing, and they restricted him from seeing her. In these cases, the hero can only meet his beloved in marginal settings, like the edges of the village in the wee hours of the night. According to Heath, such secret trysts make up some of the most aesthetically pleasing passages in the epic (76), which suggests a connection between affect and aesthetics that is mediated through the condition of marginality. The affective appeal that the narrative situation produces among the audience goes hand in hand with the capacity of verbal arts of resistance to be effective. Abu-Lughod and Lutz stress that one cannot treat affect and discourse or expression as separate variables, arguing that “emotion talk must be interpreted as in and about social life rather than as veridically referential to some internal state (11, emphasis in original).” Being multivocalic, expressive culture can mean in multiple ways at once. They also make the case that emotional discourses are rooted in specific cultural contexts that have been historically shaped (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 15).

Each emotion concept is...an index of a world of cultural premises and of scenarios for social interaction; each is a system of meaning or cluster of ideas
which include both verbal, accessible, reflective ideas and implicit practical ones. The discrete emotion concepts...have nested within them a cluster of images or propositions...[E]motion-language use involves the perception of the legitimacy of the application of a particular emotion concept to what is perceived (however opportunistically) as the occurrence of the culturally defined criteria for an emotion attribution (Lutz 211, emphasis in original).

Furthermore, there is a recognition that the affective dimension of a situation is emergent through the social interactions of two or more individuals (Lutz 211). As Geoffrey White noted, “[c]ulturally defined emotions are embedded in complex understandings about identities and scenarios of action,” whereby events and their interpretations are seen through the framework of “prior structures of understanding (47).”

Situations that move towards a redress of inequality or the elevation in standing of someone whose condition of marginality is understood as being undeserved are thus imbued with affective capacity. The resulting affect, though, is not necessarily indicative of catharsis by which individuals ultimately accept the unfavorable qualities of the everyday power structure. Abu-Lughod observed that love songs among the Awlad ʿAli Bedouins of Egypt have a social function as a “discourse of defiance” that is afforded a grudging respect by the tribal authorities because it asserts attitudes of autonomy and freedom that are validated by the tribal political ideology (1990, 36). Practitioners of love songs in this tribe thus have a means to achieve legitimated freedom to exercise their own agency, even if it entails actions that the local power structure actively suppresses (Abu-Lughod 1990, 36). In a similar way, the affective appeal of narrative, as in the scenes of ’ Antar and ’ Abla, can move community authorities to find identification with
scenarios that they would have a hard time accepting in real life, at least within the discourse and practice of their authority.

To understand why hero tales maintain a level of popularity within any tradition, culturally specific factors regarding the local context should not be discounted; indeed, those factors should be the focus of investigation. As the Arab world encompasses a wide diversity of local experiences, the same hero epic can take on different forms and associations from place to place.19 As the preceding examples from *Sīrat 'Antar* demonstrate, the marginality of a hero's origins can function as a narrative device for setting up the dramatic tension to illustrate the extraordinariness of the hero as the narrative progresses through successive phases of the hero cycle, and can also form the affective framework that draws together in the eyes of the audience, the narrative and everyday life. It also speaks to a larger cultural identification with personalities that overcome significant obstacles that are placed before them. While many scholars have focused their attention on the hero cycle as a recurring archetype that is shared among all cultures, it is important to look for the social reasons why such tales would have appeal. The point that hero tales share similar structures is not generally relevant to those among whom the tale is told. When heroes are associated with the margins of society, they become involved with the work of defending, consolidating, and extending the collective identity of the community. If one looks at real-life “cultural heroes,” such as the stars of country music, one sees a strong identification among them with tradition, but the strength of their contribution lay in keeping “tradition vital by pioneering its forward boundaries (Bau Graves 56).”

19 See, for example, Canova (2003) “Hilali epics from southern Arabia.”
One can perhaps gain a stronger appreciation for the work that the marginalized do to uphold and defend the community through the stories people tell to represent their “real” present or past. These tales, taken from real life or an imagined construction of real life, shape how people in a community see themselves in relation to the outside world. Sabra Webber recorded a tale in the Tunisian town of Kelibia in which a corrupt qādi (and an outsider to the community) is mortally punished by God (his anus falls out) through the invocation of a dervish whose supplication on behalf of an unjustly treated townsman was refused by the qādi (147-150). The dervish is a character whose marginality derives from his unwillingness to conform to the social norms that govern community interaction, in this case by forgoing the greeting rituals that are meant to glorify the qādi. While on the margins of this social power structure, his link to divine power affords him an agency to influence the configuration of the local network of power relations, defending the community against aggressive outsiders if they have sense enough to fear a curse from such a figure.

Another tale from the same community illustrates the insider-outsider dynamic on a much larger scale. The story took place under German and Italian occupation during World War II, and narrates how one townsman got the best of these outside oppressors. The man was traveling, carrying a load of jars filled with butter to sell at the market. An Italian soldier stopped him, demanding that the man sell him the butter for a price that was a fraction of what is was worth. The man had no choice, and came away feeling humiliated. The next week, when it came time for him to make the same journey, he filled his jars with mud, and then put a centimeter of butter at the top. He encountered
the same soldier, but this time the soldier was willing to pay a much higher price, not realizing that he was paying for mud (Webber 158-162). The Kelibian got the better of the outsider on this occasion, and the story lives on as testimony to a sense of defiance among community members against outside aggression. This man's actions come to stand in for the collective desire of the community to take on the more powerful outsiders, allowing them to maintain a sense of pride and dignity in the face of humiliating circumstances.

_Affect at the Linguistic Level of Narrative_

The dialectic between marginality and aesthetics does not only play out in the structure of the narrative, but embeds itself likewise within the language of narration. At the linguistic level, the multivocality of the sign lends itself as a useful tool in resistance to the dominant power structure. James Fernandez defined metaphor as “a strategic predication upon an inchoate pronoun…which makes a movement and leads to performance (8).” The emphasis on its strategic function implies a recognition that a sign's multivocalic meaning is instrumental in the exercise of power in given contexts of contestation. From this, Fernandez proposes a conception of culture as “a quality space of 'n' dimensions or continua, and society [as] a movement about of pronouns within this space (13),” and where individual actors simultaneously occupy multiple dimensions. A speaker can use metaphor with the intention of elevating his or her standing within the social power structure or of reorienting the boundaries of the social field to a more favorable configuration (Fernandez 10)\(^2\). One can think of this as changing the rules in

\(^2\) Especially in humorous contexts, narrative can function as a “gloss” on the social relationships between performer and audience within the everyday hierarchical power structure. By expanding the field of
the middle of a game, or even of withdrawing participation from a game in which one is losing and jumping into a new game in which one holds some sort of pre-existing advantage. Skill in verbal arts thus allows one to reconstruct conceptions of social space in such a way that transforms the condition of marginal status to one of power.

As a tool for the marginalized, double meanings and shifting pronouns are weapons of wit that shield the intent of the speaker (T. Lord 257). The performance of Arab epic poetry achieves this linguistic aesthetic predominately through verbal punning (Slyomovics 1987, 19). Puns exploit the multivocality of signs and, if employed skillfully, embed themselves in the narrative structure, shaping the direction of the plot. From the standpoint of marginality, “[p]uns are about deliberate cultivation of overlap, mess, and struggle (Slyomovics 1999, 59). The ambiguity engendered through punning thus opens up the possibility for coding strategies that support motivated interpretations on the part of the listeners. Susan Slyomovics' analysis of Hilali poetry in Southern Egypt draws focus upon puns as a narrative device.

Because of the ready availability of homophones in Arabic in particular and the ambiguous nature of language in general, frequent punning is a hallmark of much Upper Egyptian performance of epic poetry, and the tale of king Handal versus the Hilali Bedouins, as it is told before Egyptian audiences, is a narrative in which deceit, trickery, and disguise propel the plot, and puns seem not only to govern the way it is articulated by the poet but also to generate the events and the substance of the plot itself (Sylomovics 1999, 56).

In the Handal episode of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the verbal punning of the narrative is

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reference, a new Other can be brought in to view to serve as the butt of a joke, giving the performer a relative sense of elevated status. See Benjamin Gatling (2008) *Negotiations in Performance* p. 30-38.

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heavily intertwined with the double-edged actions of the hero Abu Zayd and his mother. In the story, both of these characters meet in disguise while in the course of travel. Abu Zayd is able to penetrate the disguise of his mother while she does not realize that she has encountered her own son. The hero then exploits the situation by making her believe that her son is dead. The following lines from the epic were cited by Slyomovics illustrating an example of punning from this scene:

56: min ahd abu zēd mitwaffā
57: tammit-lu sab’a -ttiyām
58: šūfī -ddunya -lkaddāba
59: la dāmit li-baša wala sulTān
60: bakit xaDra bi madma’ il’ēn
61: ana fann il’arāyib Hozin(a)
62: bakit xaDra bi madma’ il’ēn
63: ya ma fan il’arāyib Hozî’ana
64: owē ani -zzamān w -īlhēn
65: ṣala kabdi ’annawaH Hazin(a) (1999, 58, italics mine).

In this passage, the word Hozina can be interpreted with different meanings resulting on the similarity in sound of the word for sorrow or the two words (Hozi ana) that mean my possession. Line 61 can thus be translated as “I, the art of the Arabs, sorrowfully,” or “I, the art of the Arabs, my possession (Slyomovics 1999, 58).” Line 63 echoes line 61 with affirmative emphasis, while line 65 can be translated as either “Over my beloved I mourn sorrowfully,” or “Over my beloved I mourn my possession (Slyomovics 1999, 58).” The positioning of these ambiguous lines within the passage allows for the expression of
multiple meanings, while the attribution of sorrow or possession of art to the characters present in the narrative or the poet himself outside is unclear. If it is the poet speaking in line 61, then the claim of the art of the Arabs as his possession is a form of embedded praise to himself while also setting himself up as the “spokesperson” for the Arabs. Thus, the pun illustrates “the instability not only of sounds to which different meanings can be assigned but also meanings to which different nuances can attach in the mouths of different speakers (Slyomovics 1999, 59),” as seen in the translation of this passage.

56: “From the day Abu Zayd died,
57: seven days have passed.
58: See the world of deceit;
59: it does not last long for a pasha or sultan.”
60: Khadra [Abu Zayd's mother] cried tears from her eyes.
61: I, the art of Arabs, my possession / sorrowfully.
62: Khadra cried tears from her eyes.
63: Oh, how the art of Arabs is my possession / sorrowfully.
64: Fate and separation torment me.
65: Over my beloved … I mourn sorrowfully / my possession (Slyomovics 1999, 58).

While this particular example might not indicate the presence of a coded, subversive message that indirectly challenges authority, perhaps it does as the poet claims to transcend the line between life and death with his words that live on (“the art of the Arabs, my possession”), unlike the figures of the pasha and sultan mentioned in line 59 whose power is limited to the short span of their lifetimes. One needs to keep in mind the
fact that language itself is instrumental in the negotiations of power relations. With
Arabic exhibiting multiple linguistic registers of varying degrees of prestige, it becomes
extremely important to be aware of the context in which narrative is performed. As I
discuss in the next section, each performance brings together the narrator and the
audience to create a dynamic that effectively inverts the normal social order, where the
marginalized take center stage.
CHAPTER 2: MARGINALITY IN PERFORMANCE CONTEXT

How can one approach the content of a narrative and investigate its meaning with respect to the social dimensions that surround and permeate it? Furthermore, how does one avoid reducing its meaning to fixed forms or categorical products, that, as Raymond Williams put it, “are relatively powerless, within their specific dimension (129).” To evaluate a narrator's ability to appeal to and move audiences, a framework of reference cannot depend on motif alone. The characteristic structure and juxtaposition of motifs within a narrative is just one level of what Bakhtin described as “chronotopes,” the spatial and temporal intersections of any given narrative performance situation. Each narrative event can involve multiple chronotopic situations, both inside the narrative between the narrator and the characters, as well as outside the narrative among the performer and the audience and the larger community (Webber 59). Chronotopes serve to delimit the field of referentiality that governs how a given narrative in a given instance can be interpreted. Foley argues that interpretation is predicated upon sets of cognitive categories that must be shared to some degree between performer and audience (50). While interpretation allows some room for subjectivity, “the reader will seek imaginative constructions built on what he or she knows of the text, the author, and tradition from which they derive (Foley 41).” The audience or reader has a stake – engendered through
the network of social relations of power that exist in a performance context – in being able to apply culturally “correct” meanings to the story that is being told.

Oral performance of epics in the Arab world is commonly enacted by poets who spend their lives mastering the arts of performance. To recite the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, poets need to dedicate themselves to extensive training. The specialization required in this endeavor serves to set the poets apart as a distinctly separate class within the community that is accorded marginal status by the community. Folk poets tend to be othered in everyday life to various degrees, even if they have a recognized importance within the community. In this way, they are similar to blacksmiths who are also marginalized as a class in Arab culture (and in many other cultures as well). In fact, as Dwight Reynolds suggested in his study of a community of epic poets in the village of al-Bakatush in northern (Lower) Egypt, there could be a historical link between blacksmiths and poets, even if they form separate classes today and have no interactions (Reynolds 1995, 51). A piece of evidence for such a link is that the word for blacksmiths in the Arabian Peninsula is of the same triliteral root as the name of a clan of epic singers in southern Egypt (Reynolds 1995, 51-52). At any rate, the poets of al-Bakatush are marked with Gypsy identity and are considered to be outsiders by the rest of the community, despite the fact that poets have been living there for several generations (Galley 431). Their separateness is realized through residential patterns, lack of land ownership, and exclusion from intermarriage and other patterns of social exchange with the rest of the community.

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21 Each *sīra* is associated with a particular mode of performance that sets it apart. For example, recitation of *Sīrat 'Antar* occurs with the storyteller reading from a text (Kruk and Ott 190). Also, performance of the same *sīra* can vary widely from location to location. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* can be performed with musical accompaniment, as is the case in al-Bakatush, or without.
Despite their marginality in relation to the community, the dynamics are radically altered within the performance context. The poet breathes life into a tale and has the power to use it for different ends. An epic, such as *Ṣīrat Banī Hilāl*, is not an inert vehicle. It recounts events and characters that have helped to shape and define cultural values and resurrects the glory of past heroic deeds while also having the capability to critique current social dynamics. Reynolds points out the ability for poets in al-Bakatush to tie themselves to an ideal identity promoted by the *Ṣīra* as a whole. This ability is tied to the various meanings and associations of the term “Arab” in Egyptian usage. An Arab can be someone from the Arabian Peninsula, a Bedouin, an Arab nationalist, or someone from a marginal social group (Reynolds 1995, 67). These different meanings of the word allow a space of tension and contestation over the tradition of prestige within the culture, something that the poets can use to play one part of the community off of another:

> These competing claims focus on the concept of *aSīl* 'origin' and the derived adjective *aSīl* 'original, noble, of good lineage.' (…) [L]ocal epic-poets easily deploy and manipulate these contestatory views of social power in the village to stir up or rebuke an audience or an audience member (Reynolds 1995, 29).

Poets then, have a willingness to enter into the fray as arbiters of sites of struggle in which they may or may not be directly involved. Dwight Reynolds shares one instance from his fieldwork when a group of young educated men came to watch an evening performance of *Ṣīrat Banī Hilāl*. Their boisterous presence caused discomfort to many of the other audience members, who felt that these men were not showing the respect that should be afforded to one's elders. In response, the poet adapted his performance in a
way that criticized the behavior of the young men, sending them a message through his poetry. The fact that the young men departed abruptly at the next interlude was indication that they had understood that they were the intended targets of the criticism (Reynolds 1995, 206). This improvised performance emerged from a specific chrontopic situation, something that the audience (including Reynolds as the researcher) could appreciate.

Beyond their ability to instigate rivalry within the community and its relationship to its tradition (thus deflecting away attention from their own status), poets can claim an association with the term 'Arab' specifically through their marginality, providing them a connection to the epic that is not shared as strongly by the rest of the community but has overarching meaning across the Arab world. The poets thus position themselves closer than other villagers to their shared cultural history. They become the link between the community and its cultural past, with the ability to govern the forging of that link. Joanne Gilbert, speaking of her experience as a stand-up comic, highlights the inversion of power relations that is enacted through performance by socially marginal individuals:

The artist, fool, the social critic...all stand aside from the center in order to critique it. Although they are not allowed within the ruled lines of society's pages, these “others” gain a certain freedom, a latitude that can only be experienced in the open spaces of margins. By “performing” their marginality, social outcasts call attention to their subordinate status; by commodifying this performance, they ensure that the dominant culture literally pays a price for this disparity (Gilbert xi).

Susan Rasmussen's study of “blacksmith theater” among Taureg peoples of Niger provides another illustration, as the antics of performance are considered to be self-
degrading not only by the audience, who come from the noble class, but also by the blacksmith performers themselves (3). However, the performance functions as a ritual that embodies the relations of patronage between nobles and blacksmiths. The nobles play their part by rewarding the outrageous behavior of the performers with money.

The situation surrounding the narrative of *Sīrat Bani Hilāl* is somewhat different in Upper Egypt, where the exploits of the Bani Hilal are not held in high esteem, despite the popularity of the epic in this region. As Slyomovics reports, the audiences for performances of the epic will often identify more strongly with Zanati, the villain of the narrative, and against the Hilali heroes (1987, 37). There is thus a contestation within the performance context over how the events of the narrative should proceed and be received. Those that claim connection to Zanati or identify with his people's mode of existence (sedentary farming as opposed to the pastoral nomadism of the Hilali tribe) will cheer his actions while responding negatively to the exploits of Abu Zayd (Slyomovics 1987, 37). The events of the narrative cannot necessarily be changed, especially given the wide perception of the epic having a historical basis, but the manner of audience reception and whichever side they choose to support can reflect or influence the dynamics of the local power structure.

While the figure of the poet in Upper Egypt is also afforded a low status, and even the events that he narrates are not necessarily celebrated within the community, there is still a great deal of respect that is given to the art of epic storytelling. A rather interesting dichotomy appears when one thinks of poets as 'merchants of art,' as the poet ʿAwadallah, who collaborated with Susan Slyomovics, represented himself. The art is revered, but the
merchant is not, whereas a 'merchant of objects' can occupy a respected position within the community, while the merchandise that is sold in the marketplace has no special significance (Slyomovics 1987, 16). With the status of merchant and merchandise not necessarily linked, the poet does not receive recognition for his creativity, which is actually implied in the analogy, as merchants are middlemen.

According to the perception of the audience, the teller and his tale are not creatively and dynamically intertwined, and this even though many in the audience acknowledge stylistic changes in a poet's recitation ('uslūbu mitghayyar). Certainly, individual variations, playful elaborations, and musical virtuosity are appreciated and sought out by patrons and listeners. However, since the epic and its plot lines are known to all, the poet, as he is seen by the listeners, is thought only to hand on a familiar, monolithic history, perhaps embellishing it as it momentarily rests within his possession...Both the audience and the poet see the poet as the bearer of tradition, not as an individual creative artist (Slyomovics 1987, 18-19).

It would seem, then, that the elevated status that a poet is afforded in the context of performance cannot be taken for granted – it must be reasserted continuously with the narrative itself as a site of struggle and contestation. For the poet, the stakes taken on a large significance:

The poet's sole weapon against his low status and for the necessity of earning his living by obsequious flattery is a form of artistic revenge that allows him both indirectly and insult his patron. By means of puns the poet characteristically manages to convey the opposite of what he seems to say at the literal level. The audience knows full well that this occurs (Slyomovics 1987, 19).
However, the double-edged discourse of epic poetry performance is not limited to an antagonism between poet and audience. The context of performance can be extended to or juxtaposed against other spheres of practice or discourse. So while audience members are aware of the subversive character of the poet's discourse, when it comes to everyday interaction they themselves are implicated in the very same modes of deception.

The poet's patrons, his Upper Egyptian audience, conduct social exchanges among themselves in a similar manner. So too when dealing with superiors, local government officials, Cairo bureaucrats, and policeman from the north who administer the south, they characteristically employ the indirect, evasive, or innocuous statement that verges, and is recognized as so verging, on the insulting (Slyomovics 1987, 19).

There is the suggestion here that the performance milieu can serve as both a celebration of and a laboratory for the particular coding strategies that the marginalized can use when engaging dominating powers.

This is not to say that tensions within the performance setting never lead to the flaring of tempers. The performance by ʿAwadallah that was recorded by Susan Slyomovics illustrates specific instances in which audience members reacted angrily to perceived insults directed at them. In one of the instances, an audience member lost track of the story and asked for assistance to regain the thread of the narrative. ʿAwadallah responded to this by momentarily breaking away from the narrative and improvised the following four lines as an insult to this audience member, ʿAbd aj-Jalil:

139 ʿḥ Tabīb li -jjārāyiH DA FANNI fēn fēn

Healer of wounds, THIS IS MY ART, where, where?

32
The capitalized phrase could alternatively be interpreted as “he buried me,” referring presumably to the inattentive ʿAbd aj-Jalil who is mentioned by name at the end of the insult poem. The poet is signaling then the importance for his listeners to stay with him as a matter of social duty. Slyomovics notes that the general response to this exchange was laughter from the audience (1987, 110).

One should also be aware that this particular pun, whichever meaning is attributed, involves the use of pronouns as shifting designators. Jakobson noted that as linguistic signifiers, “pronouns are 'purely relational units' that encode the relationship obtaining between sender and receiver and as such may be used … to shift one's attention from the narrated event to the speech event and vice-versa (Babcock 67).” In this case, the shift from the narrative to the performance context is marked through the use of pronouns, but this is perhaps not clear until the actual name is given at the end of the aside. The shifting designation that is inherent to the use of pronouns in narration functions as a metanarrative device that can be manipulated by the poet (Babcock 74).

Later on in this same performance, ʿAwadallah returned to insult the same audience member in a way that was not received with good humor. Instead of breaking away from the narrative, he wove the insult within the fabric of the story which rendered
ambiguous his intentions, though it did not escape the perception of the audience that a
double meaning might be implied (Slyomovics 1987, 110). In this instance, the poet
made a reference embedded in the narrative to a recently deceased blacksmith from the
village, and mentioned that his wife “weeps the day long,” which echoes a common oral-
formulaic phrase, 'the lover weeps all night long' which “give[s] her the sexual yearnings
of a lover in a popular Egyptian love song (Slyomovics 1987, 111).” This widow
happened to have the same name as the mother of 6Abd aj-Jalil, and it is taboo to both
“give voice to the name of the mother in Upper Egypt,” as well as “[t]o identify the name
of the mother with the named eroticism of the blacksmith's wife (Slyomovics 1987,
111).” The reactions of the audience made it clear that many people understood the line
to be an insult, yet the intertextual reference along with the reference to the blacksmith's
widow provides enough cover for the poet to plausibly deny any intention of offending
anyone present. But this passage only carries meaning if one has extensive knowledge of
the community at large, as well as who is who among the audience. Slyomovics
confessed that she did not understand during the performance what this passage was
referencing, not being aware of the connection to the deceased blacksmith (Slyomovics
111). The power of the poet's words depends upon artful poetic applications of the
specific coincidence of place, time, and audience, and this example provides an apt
illustration of the ability of a poet to use his art in a forceful manner, as a weapon within
the negotiation of community relationships.

Aside from his skill with words, an epic poet can also assert his claim to authority
within the performance context through connecting himself to the heroes of the tales that
he narrates. Abu Zayd is a good example of this, since in various scenes he takes up the persona of the poet and conceals his warrior persona. In one scene, he does so to gain entrance to the palace of the enemy king Handal, who had kidnapped some of the Hilali maidens. One of the captives is Rayya, the daughter of Abu Zayd, who implores of him in his capacity as poet – not recognizing her father in disguise – to use his art to spread abroad the news of their misfortune (Slyomovics 1999, 60). She is in essence allowing the poet a claim to heroic action, recognizing his agency to effect their rescue. The role of a hero as poet or poet as hero within the narrative can be transferred to the performance context where the poet can claim a heroic association that cannot be claimed by the audience.

It is not just the poet, though, who possesses agency within the performance context; the members of the audience also play a significant role, through both active and passive participation, in highlighting and constructing interpretations of events within the narrative (Reynolds 1999, 165). This participation is realized from the very beginning of the performance, with the *madih* that involves mentions and praises of the Prophet Muhammad initiated by the performer that elicit formulaic responses of acknowledgement from the audience (Reynolds 1995, 178). The *madih* has a dual function, then, of signaling the boundaries of performance while at the same time evoking the cultural ideals that instill a sense of collective identity among the community, both inside and outside of performance. The *mawwal* is the next stage of the performance introduction, which continues with the invocations and blessings of the Prophet in which the audience is typically silent to allow for the poet to display “the most
highly compacted and cohesive aesthetic form of the evening's activities (Reynolds 1995, 178).” As the poet moves into the narrative of the epic, he monitors the ebb and flow of audience engagement and participation in order to adapt his performance in a way that keeps them entertained. Feedback, whether verbal or silent, allows the poet to ascertain how the audience is receiving the performance, and helps him to evaluate the potentialities of steering the performance in one direction or another. A poet who is adept at reading the backchannel signaling of the audience has the ability to reinforce his position as the central authority in the performance context, able to offer criticism, playful or serious, towards individuals within the audience or towards central social and political authorities whose dominance exists beyond the boundary of performance. But it is not just criticism that the poet offers, but praise as well for gracious hospitality or for notable personalities among the audience.

For a less formal folk narrative genre, such as *Hikāyah*, the boundaries of performance tend to be less explicit, and the occasion emerges contingently from the context of participants, setting, and time of day (Webber 63). The boundaries between the story and real life are generally blurry, which establishes its own aesthetic dimension (Webber 77). Verbal exchange might not always be the focal point of a particular interaction in which a *Hikāyah* is told, but certain conditions can inspire a participant to relate a story – fanciful, didactic, or anecdotal – which can in turn inspire someone else to counter with their own story. This gives the genre a large degree of unpredictability in terms of what kind of content is conveyed through the *Hikāyah* narrative. However, the narrative content may not be as crucial to the significance of its telling as is the dynamic
of social interaction by which the *Hikāyah* is a medium of framing its participants as insiders and outsiders relative to a given social group (Webber 64).

Situation is everything in the telling of *Hikāyāt*, and the narrator must tailor the performative devices to both the setting and who is present as active listeners as well as who is within earshot. Such devices include: “voice pitch or loudness, asking rhetorical questions, judicious use of pauses and giving an impression of guilelessness … Use of dialogue or special sets of vocabulary are two more examples of this sort of device (Webber 101).” Competent use of these performance aspects of narrative works towards binding the speaker and listeners together in a sense of solidarity that can range from a conspiratorial character to and intellectual and/or aesthetic one (Webber 102). In producing communitas, an affective quality emerges from the telling of *Hikāyāt* that shifts the everyday hierarchical power structure and allows for power differences to be distributed in a more equitable fashion. Unlike the performance of *siyar*, where the poet has a professional and, therefore, economic stake in the narrative, the narrators of these stories and anecdotes earn a different kind of capital, one that is not associated with the hegemonic sphere of political economy. The quality space engendered through the telling of *Hikāyāt* forges social relationships along different lines than the normative spheres of family, generation, class, or profession, creating alternate insider-outsider, center-periphery dynamics.²²

²² Breaking down the totality of the social as a whole, the conception of separate social spheres allows patterns of relationality to emerge between them that reflects a power differential between dominant and marginalized spheres (Nelms n.d., 5). The conspiratorial character produced by the affective aspects of narrative performance suggests that there is an interplay of hegemony and counterhegemony as the economically devalued sphere, narrative, maintains an autonomy and subverts the dominance of the sphere of relations of production.
CHAPTER 3: MARGINALITY IN ARAB FOLKTALES

In the popular epic tales, as I have discussed, the hero in effect bridges the gap between the margins and the center of the community, producing a sense of identification that can be shared across the everyday power structure. In folktales, however, as a more marginalized form of expression within Arab culture, the protagonist also tends to be a marginalized figure, but his or her action within the narrative has a somewhat different aim – creating space in which he or she can express her own agency despite the condition of marginality. Unlike the epic poetry genre, studies of Arab folktales have paid very little attention to performance as the focus has been on the stories themselves. While Hasan El-Shamy argues for the importance of contextual information in the collection of folktales (149), the available sources contain only generalized remarks about performance.23 As a result, it is easy to consider these tales as static representations of the culture, rather than about the negotiation of social relationships. With the absence of performance data for the examples of folktales that I discuss in this section, it can still be possible to infer what they might tells us about the nature of the social structure. For that, it is useful to refer to the work of Victor Turner in emphasizing culture as process.

One of the main focuses of sociological and anthropological study has been attention to social structure. As I argue, marginality is a characteristic of unequal power distribution across the range of social relationships, and it is therefore necessary to ground relations of power in actual communities and specific sites of interaction. Structure-function theories tend to assume homeostatic models of social life, taking the larger community form as a given (Alexander 53). But in positing the apparent constancy of the forms of community relationships and practices, structure-function theoretical models do not account for the possibilities of change from within the community, nor do they speak to the range of variations in forms and customs in different communities. This limits one to a highly abstract understanding of social activity, alienated from the specific products of that activity and the processes by which they arise (Turner 43). Levi-Strauss' paradigmatic analysis of cultural myths exemplifies the inability of purely structural understandings to deal with anything but atemporal forms (Turner 43). As Victor Turner asserts:

> The explanations for both constancy and change can, in my opinion, only be found by systematic analysis of *processual* units and temporal structures, by looking at phases as well as atemporal systems. For each phase has its specific properties, and leaves its special stamp on the metaphors and models in the heads of men [sic] involved with one another in the unending flow of social existence (1974, 43, italics in original).

Turner is not rejecting structural-functional analysis out of hand, but is arguing that dynamics are of greater importance (1974, 44). With the distinction that Raymond Williams made between residual, dominant, and emergent cultural forms operating in
tension and mediation with one another, a diachronic framework of analysis opens up, in which the contingencies of the past and the present can be accounted. History, class configurations, and gendered relationships are thus significantly relevant to the study of folklore and its forms, despite their dismissal by structuralist and formalist models.

In the collection of Palestinian folktales, *Speak Bird, Speak Again*, the majority of stories are told by women. The patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal character of Palestinian kinship groups centers around sets of brothers, confining women to a subordinated position within the space of the family. A woman begins her life under the power of her father, only to leave his house when she marries to become part of her husband's house and under his authority. She is thus perceived as having a divided loyalty and not fully belonging anywhere, an Other within the family of her childhood and the family of her adulthood. Yet, her marginalized position does not completely deprive her of power to act within the structure of the family (Muhawi and Kanaana 18).

Upon reaching maturity (which in Palestinian society means being past the time of childbearing and sexual activity), women reach the height of their authority (Muhawi and Kanaana 3). As the telling of folktales is generally considered to be the domain of elderly women, it should not be surprising that the narratives would express the struggles of

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24 Since these tales qualify as *khurafāt*, fanciful tales, men tend not to take them very seriously and are generally reluctant to tell them (Muhawi and Kanaama, 3).
25 Abu-Lughod cautions us from adhering to rigidly to anthropological logic regarding social institutions as analytical categories: Anthropologists often characterize societies in terms of social “institutions” like patrilineality …, patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage …, or polygyny. These constructs allow one to compare different groups and to grasp, in a nutshell, some basic facts about the way things work in a particular place. Although intended as analytical categories, these terms can, however, have the unfortunate effect of creating a mechanistic vision of society in which the members play designated roles. No matter how much sophisticated theoretical discussion of strategies, dialectics, and articulations we engage in … we are still left with little sense of individuals' experiences of such forms of organization and the individual acts that constitute them (1993, 18).
marginalized characters in pursuing their desires.

The general processual model of social structure that Turner posited depends upon a dialectical relation between hierarchy and egalitarianism. The former is characterized by asymmetrical relationships of power that arise through the differential division of social labor where individuals are consigned a status based upon the perceived relative value of the labor that they perform. One can clearly see this in the everyday power structure of Palestinian society. The inequality engendered through hierarchical social structures is considered integral to the stability of the society, even if the configuration of any particular social structure is contingently constructed (Bourdieu 1977a, 87). It is not just the social elites who hold this attitude, having an interest in maintaining their positions of dominance, but the lower classes as well can view the structural integrity of the community as preferable to any likely alternatives, despite their own subordination within the social structure. The pragmatism associated with the social division of labor and the hierarchical social structure that arises helps to explain why it is valorized by the community at large (Turner 1969, 133).

The telling of folktales need not be subversive; oftentimes entertainment is the primary motivation for a storytelling event. However, one should consider what is it about the story that makes it entertaining, and how that relates to the occasion and the people present. Feminist scholarship has shed much light upon coding strategies as a way for subordinated groups to construct spheres of autonomy and influence (such as the storytelling occasion) within which one can exclude the figures and symbols of authority.
of the everyday social hierarchy. Radner and Lanser developed a qualitative typology of such strategies that they identified specifically in women's resistance which include the exaggerated appropriation of culturally-subordinated feminine roles, ironic juxtaposition of texts, artifacts, or performances, distraction from the subversive content of a message through interference or “noise,” indirection, trivialization, and feigned incompetence (10-23). The intentionality of the author or performer of such coded messages can never be inferred with certainty, and part of the effectiveness of coding is that its subversive potential can be plausibly denied. But Radner and Lanser also appreciate the importance of aesthetic considerations in coded performances, drawing on Meir Sternberg's structural psychoanalytic understanding of intention:

> [G]iven the impossibility (especially with respect to coded performances) of any certainty about an individual's desires, intention must be inferred from the contextual knowledge available, and this knowledge includes an understanding of the conventions for aesthetic production in a given cultural circumstance. By locating meaning in the “communicative context,” Sternberg shifts the site of intention from the author to the receiving community. Like Sternberg, we acknowledge all interpretation to be uncertain, but we assume that plausible, if provisional, meanings can be inferred through an understanding of the situation in which they have been produced (7).

The link between aesthetics and coded resistance is especially crucial in understanding the attention given to the condition of marginality within the domain of narrative and

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26 See for example Angela Bourke (1993) “More in anger than in sorrow: Irish women's lament poetry” suggesting that the central and elevated function of women in mourning rituals allows them to effectively oppose the intrusion of male authority figures such as priests into the space of the ritual. The normal rules become suspended in such times.
other domains of expression.

The tale “Tunjur, Tunjur”\textsuperscript{27} provides an example in which the marginalized attempt to break out of the social constraints to which they are relegated. The story\textsuperscript{28} starts out with a woman expressing a wish for a daughter, even if she were only to be a cooking pot.\textsuperscript{29} Already, we can see that this story is cutting across the grain of normative expectations, as sons are to be preferred as offspring over daughters, for the reasons mentioned above. Her wish is literally granted as she indeed gave birth to a cooking pot. The mother is content to have her sit upon the shelf, but the daughter has aspirations of going out in the world. While being reluctant at first, the mother allows her to do so, seemingly out of the prospect of economic gain. Again, though, this is quite outside of the norms of social expectations for the activity of women, who are not supposed to venture into public. The first three times that the daughter left the house, she is spectacularly successful, using trickery to gain wealth for the family at the expense of unwitting strangers who think that the pot is a suitable place in which to store their valuables. The mother was pleased at this outcome, but out of a sense of restraint and prudence suggests that the daughter not go out anymore. The daughter insists, though, but this time she becomes a victim of her own ruse, as a man that she had previously duped recognizes her and defecates into her (Muhawi and Kanaana 55-59).

\textsuperscript{27} The word \textit{Tunjur} comes from an onomatopoeic designation of the sound made by a rolling cooking pot (Muhawi and Kanaana 55)
\textsuperscript{28} International Tale Type No. 591 (El-Shamy 2004, 340).
\textsuperscript{29} It is interesting to compare this to the case of Abu Zayd's mother who prays for a son to be born even if he were to be as black as the bird that she encountered in the desert. Again, the realization of the wish takes on a literal form.
At this point, the lesson is learned, that public space is not an appropriate place for
women. However, one can interpret the delayed comeuppance as condoning the
daughter's roaming spirit up to a certain point. More importantly, it opens up an
imagined space without the constraints of social norms, even if those norms eventually
reappear. Masking subversive intent is a hallmark of the condition of marginality. Those
who are subordinated within the social power structure have access to what James C.
Scott calls the hidden transcript that mimics and deviates from the public transcript of the
powerful. The fact that it is called a hidden transcript refers to the inability for one to
identify with precision the intentions of a speaker within the sphere of interaction (Scott
4).

We do not wish to prejudge, by definition, the relation between what is said in the
face of power and what is said behind its back. Power relations are not, alas, so
straightforward that we can call what is said in power-laden contexts false and
what is said offstage true. Nor can we simplistically describe the former as a
realm of necessity and the latter as a realm of freedom. What is certainly the
case, however, is that the hidden transcript is produced for a different audience
and under different constraints of power than the public transcript (Scott 5).

The space that is engendered by narrative performance is one where different constraints
of power are operative, lending itself as a context within which to articulate the hidden
transcript. Of course, this does not mean that every narrative performance is articulating
a subversive message. If that were the case, the task of surveillance by the dominant
would be made very easy.
Certain other tales in *Speak Bird, Speak Again* focus on sibling relationships between brothers and sisters. Within Palestinian society, this particular relationship bond takes on great significance and is seen as more stable than the father-daughter or husband-wife relationships (Muhawi and Kanaana 112). The tales that portray the brother-sister bond illustrate the mutual love which characterizes the relationship. “When brother(s) and sister are left to face the world on their own, they seem to do better at it than husbands and wives, whose relationship inevitably involve some self-interest and therefore conflict (Muhawi and Kanaana 112). As these are tales that are mostly told by women, though, the action of the narrative emphasizes the agency of the sister in maintaining the integrity of the sibling bond, while the brother gets led astray.

The tale “The Green Bird”\(^\text{30}\) opens up with a family of a man living as a widower with his son and daughter. They have a neighbor who is a widow who was seeking to marry the father through the naiveté of the children. The father delays for a while, out of concern for the upbringing of his children, but eventually gives in and marries the woman. The new wife immediately brings strife into the family, and works to divide the father from his children. She succeeds in slaughtering the brother to cover up the evidence of her own misdeed, and manages to conceal everything from the father. It is left to the sister to rescue the remains of her brother's bones and bury them. The tenderness of her act produces a supernatural transformation in that from her brother's bones, a green bird appears. At a wedding celebration, an event attended by the whole community, the green bird comes and amazes everyone by singing a song. With everyone transfixed with wonder, the bird proceeds to enact revenge against both the

\(^{30}\) International Tale Type No. 720 (El-Shamy 2004, 397).
stepmother and the father, who had been duped by her, and with the aid of the sister, is transformed back into his original shape (Muhawi and Kanaana 98-102). Thus, with the conflict resolved, the siblings returned home and lived together.

The preceding tale demonstrates the agency of the sister in mending the wrongs that had been committed, while the brother was essentially an unwitting victim. In the tale of “The Woman Whose Hands Were Cut Off,” though, the story presents us with a situation in which the brother commits wrong against his sister. The opening scenario is with a sister and a brother whose parents have died. One day, the sister comes upon the money that their father had been saving up for them before he died. She continues to keep the money secret so that it could one day be used for her brother to get married. When this day arrives, the brother chooses as a wife a girl who lived alone (something that is not considered proper in the culture), and soon afterwards a daughter is born to them. The wife eats the child one night, but makes it look as though that her sister-in-law had done the deed. After the same thing happens with the next child, the brother confronts his sister with the accusation and cuts off her hands and feet, casting her out of the house. She responds by entreating God to curse her brother with a thorn in his foot that no one could remove as punishment for his betrayal. This comes to pass, and the brother soon learns that it was his wife who had been the culprit. The sister, meanwhile, has her hands and feet restored to her through magical assistance, and is able to get married and have children. One day when her brother comes wandering by with the thorn still stuck in her foot, she conceals her identity from him, removes the thorn from his foot, and tales him in as a guest. She then tells him her story, though does not reveal

31 International Tale Type No. 872E (El-Shamy 2004, 497).
that it is her story until the very end. Upon the recognition by the brother, the story ends with everything forgiven (Muhawi and Kanaana 241-243). Again in this tale, the agency of the sister is central in restoring the stability of the sibling bond, despite the brother directly inflicting harm upon her. In fact, the story portrays the sister as having a sounder character than her brother, subverting the cultural norm that emphasizes the importance of male offspring as the backbone of the kinship group as well as the community.

The opposite pole from hierarchy in Turner's processual model is the production of communitas, in which the hierarchical relationships of everyday social life dissolve to allow for an essentially egalitarian relation among community members. Turner's fieldwork among the Ndembu tribal society of Zaire focused upon the function of ritual in the production of communitas. His important conclusion is that “[t]he primary motivation behind ritual is the desire to break free of social structure temporarily in order to transcend its existential limitations and reconfigure it along communitarian lines (Alexander 46).” As such, ritual, in a broad sense, is anti-structure, opposed to the hierarchical structure of everyday life (Turner 1974, 45-46). However, communitas does not mean a complete dissolution of social structure, but becomes a crucible through which alternative forms of social relationships can be imagined and then generated, moving the marginalized to a better quality space.32 If we approach the preceding tales

32 One may observe that the dominant power structure makes use of ritual for the purposes of legitimating its claims to authority, something that Turner recognized. As he noted, “the spontaneity and immediacy of communitas – as opposed to the jural-political character of structure – can seldom be maintained for long. Communitas itself soon develops a structure, in which the free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae (Turner 1969, 132).” Thus, domains of expression through which the production of communitas can be effected, such as ritual, art, drama, literature, etc., are themselves subject to the embodiment of rules by which limits on the range of social intercourse are constructed. It could be useful, again, to turn to Williams' distinction between residual, dominant, and emergent cultural forms to gain a more complex understanding of the
with this in mind, we may be able to get a better sense of why these stories are told and what exactly it is that makes them entertaining.

The performance of folktales such as those from the collection *Speak Bird, Speak Again* also have recognizable boundaries from other types of social interaction, but are perhaps more understated than the performance of popular epics. These tales “are told in a special setting that distinguishes them not only from the [epics] recited in the men's *diwan* but also from other types of folk narrative current in the society (Muhawi and Kanaana 3). The setting for folktales tends to be in small family gatherings, with the most engaged participants being women and children, and often takes place in the evening when there is no other work to be done. Muhawi and Kanaana note that:

> [t]elling these tales … is a social activity, part of a culture that puts heavy emphasis on the oral tradition and verbal ability and where conversation is valued for its own sake. People do not go visiting expressly to hear folktales, but rather they enjoy each other's company and like to sit around in the evening chatting … At these small, intimate, family gatherings people casually drift into telling folktales. Someone might say, “Tell us a tale!” and if the mood is right a session begins (4).

Compared to the performance of popular epics, which generally excludes women in both the telling of and listening to the tales, the central figures in the performance of these folktales, as mentioned before, are elderly women. Formulas are given at both the beginning and the end of the story, but do not approach the level of elaborateness of a *madih*. However, they do retain an affective capacity, evoking an atmosphere of

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dialectic in which power and resistance are continuously evolving in reaction to each other.
expectation and anticipation for the unfolding of a story, as well as maintaining a separation between life and fiction, which the events of the story might otherwise blur (Muhawi and Kanaana 5).

Like the epic poets, the tellers of folktales are not considered to be the creators of their narratives, but rather they are looked upon as transmitters, passing the tales from one generation to another. As such, there is not much license for improvisation or altering details. If some variation is detected – if an audience member remembers a particular story having been told on a different way – the teller “will never claim originality but always say she is telling it the way she remembers it. Or she might say she knows two versions of the tale and has decided to tell one rather than the other (Muhawi and Kanaana 8). The role of transmission in Arab culture, though, is highly significant, given that a major source for the understanding of the religious duties of Islam are the sayings of the Prophet, the Hadith, whose veracity was ascertained through careful research of the chains of transmission and the moral character of those attested to be involved. Even the most famous storyteller, Scheherazade, introduced her tales to the king with the remark, “It has reached me that …” implying that she herself was only a vessel for transmission rather than a creator (Irwin 64-65).

One of the most defining attributes of the telling of such folktales is the presence of children in the audience (Muhawi and Kanaana 6). It would not happen that they would be told in a gathering composed exclusively of adults. While primarily serving to entertain, folktales also serve a function of socializing the younger generation into the customs of the community and develop a shared framework of cultural knowledge. The
supernatural happenings that color the stories appeal primarily to children, but being in the presence of adults helps to keep their imaginations from going too far in the consideration of ghouls and jinn and spirits (Muhawi and Kanaana 7). Overall, it would seem that these folktales can effect a kind of communitas within the performance setting. As noted earlier, the narrative can depict instances in which normative patterns of social interaction are breached, allowing for a re-imagining of the possibilities for the exercise of individual agencies. The centrality of the elderly mother or grandmother in this setting opens up a domain in which the publicly marginalized can speak.

There are some scholars, like Theodore Schwartz, who would argue against the progressive and liberating potential of folktales through the production of communitas, supposing instead that the occasion functions as a sort of social catharsis, a sublimation that substitutes for any genuine redress of inequality in the everyday social structure (Schwartz 905-906). Likewise, Edward Jayne treats narrative fiction as a means of tension reduction by means of self-deception that denies the unacceptable experiences of reality (17). Such viewpoints tend to preclude the possibility of progressive social action through expression, as individuals who are marginalized in society are allowed an outlet by which to relieve pent-up feelings without effecting permanent change (Alexander 46). In fact, the participation of the marginalized in such productions of communitas can be seen as beneficial to those who hold positions of power within the social structure, as the preoccupation with modes of entertainment diverts any momentum towards challenging their authority. Some types of stories as well may circulate in order to marginalize or justify the marginalization of certain people within the community and maintain the
social hierarchy. The following examples to be considered are taken from Mauritanian folktales in which the central characters belong to marginal social classes: blacksmiths and slaves.

Mauritanian society is heavily stratified according to tasks of production “assigned” to certain groups. The people identify themselves with Arab culture, and speak a dialect of Arabic known as Hassaniya which contains a lot of words and expressions from Berber dialects. Nomadic lifestyle predominated in the region until very recently, and still maintains a significant role in the countryside. In this setting, the pastoralists tend to comprise the social elite. Those that perform manual labor are looked down upon. Thus, blacksmiths, who are the fabricators of the various items of utility and aesthetics for the community, are held in low esteem as a class. Certain negative stereotypes have been conferred upon them, such as cowardice, gluttony, and talkativeness (Tauzin 63). The two following tales invoke these negative stereotypes about blacksmiths and serve to reinforce their social marginality. Aline Tauzin recorded them in villages in the eastern regions of the country, and they were told by middle-aged Haratanī men and women who are dark-skinned, descendants of slaves (XIII).

The first one, “The Tortoise and the Blacksmith,” begins with a blacksmith encountering a talking tortoise on the road\textsuperscript{33} that was repeating the statement, “Whoever does not hold his tongue, his mother will be insulted.” As the blacksmith happened to be on his way to visit the king, he decides to relate this strange sight. His report arouses the curiosity of the king, who asks the blacksmith to bring the tortoise before him. If what he said was true, the blacksmith would be rewarded with gold, but if it were a lie, he would

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{33} Motif H561.1.2 (Uther 2004, 494).}
have his head chopped off. 34 So the blacksmith goes out to bring back the tortoise, but it
would not speak in the presence of the king. However, after the blacksmith had been
executed, it began to repeat the same statement (Tauzin 67). The lesson of keeping
quiet 35 is made explicit through the warning statement of the tortoise as well as by what
happened to the blacksmith when he failed to heed the content of the warning. The
blacksmith is shown as being more concerned with gossip than with the consequences
that it might entail. It is easy to imagine, though, other subordinated groups standing in
for the position of the blacksmith in this tale, something that could be reflected in
different contexts of narration.

The second tale involves an encounter between a hyena and a blacksmith. The
hyena is an animal that is associated with blacksmiths in Mauritanian folklore, and they
are thought to share the same qualities. In the tale, a hyena comes upon a blacksmith in
the bush and intends to eat him. The blacksmith becomes extremely afraid and his
buttocks began to tremble. 36 The hyena asks why his buttocks were trembling, and the
blacksmith replies that his buttocks were those of a dog. The hyena, being terrified of
dogs (as all hyenas are in folktales), 37 asks the blacksmith to keep the dogs at bay until it
had gotten far away (Tauzin 69). By highlighting the cowardice of both the blacksmith
and the hyena (who is a blacksmith in animal form), the tale reinforces the negative
stereotype applied to all blacksmiths. One could interpret both of these tales as
illustrating the absence of the virtues that are possessed by a hero like ' Antar (courage

34 Compare with International Tale Type No. 922B (Uther 2004, 554), International Tale Type No. 175
(Uther 2004, 120) and International Tale Type No. 879A (Uther 2004, 501-502).
35 Motif J2356 (Uther 2004a, 142).
36 Compare with International Tale Type No. 1775 (Uther 2004a, 412).
37 Compare with International Tale Type No. 103 (Uther 2004, 77) and Motif A2281.1 (Uther 2004, 126).
and cunning) and justifying the marginal social status which blacksmiths occupy. But, with the absence of performance data connected to these tales, it is difficult to make any such assertions with confidence.

In other tales, the condition of marginality does appear in the context of social justice, particularly in the relationship between masters and slaves. Slavery in Mauritania has been practiced down to the present times. It was officially outlawed by the government in the 1980s, but there are many who retain the status of slave today as there are localities that are seemingly unaware of the law, while government enforcement has little effect in the remote areas of the country. And while it is understood that the duty of a slave is to carry out the master's commands, the following tale provides a moral that the master must act with fairness towards his or her slave.

In this tale, the protagonist is a female slave who is overworked by her master and his family, who are constantly harassing her with demands to the point where she cannot complete one task before they demand something else of her. As she becomes worn out by the situation, she decides to ask God for help since she had heard that God will grant requests that are made during prayer on the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan, the night commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's ascension to heaven. Her request was that for each time her master or someone in the family called her name to do something, they would fart. So the next day when the master calls her name, he farts and becomes extremely embarrassed. This happens each time he calls for her, so he asks his wife to call the slave, but the same thing happens to her. Eventually, the family understands the

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38 Compare with International Tale Type No. 779 (Uther 2004, 436).
39 Compare with International Tale Type No. 1588* (Uther 2004a, 322).
connection, and they give up shouting orders, and the slave is able to go about her tasks in peace (Tauzin 75-77). The slave still maintains her marginal status within the social context, but this tale does promote the need for justice to govern social relations between the strong and the weak. Also, by God being on the side of the slave (as God was on the side of the dervish who cursed the corrupt qādi), the tale connects the marginalized with the virtues of divine favor.

Given the lack of context and performance data associated with the folktales that I have discussed in this chapter, it is difficult to ascertain how their circulation mediates social relationships. For future collections of Arab folktales to avoid being nothing more than an exercise in antiquarianism, attention must be paid to the performance situation, i.e. who is telling the tale, to whom, in what location and time of day, and what sort of dynamic is established between the narrator and the audience.40 One should approach folklore with an appreciation of its dynamism which is influential in producing the ideas and practices of community. Folk narrative circulates among the marginalized, providing them a channel through which to express an agency that does not have a place in the dominant discourses of power. The potential relationship between folk narrative and resistance is what I now turn my attention to in the conclusion to this essay.

40 Webber and Mullen (n.d.) write:

Unlike Pierre Bourdieu, who dismissed scholarly studies foregrounding the local performative moment as unworthy of scholarly consideration, and those that attend to them victims of the “occasionalist illusion,” we want to claim a seminal place and occasion for local oral narratives within the body of what are referred to by contemporary Western scholars as “micronarratives,” “little narratives,” “small stories” to be considered in counterpoint to, means of intervention into, or interrogation of, the macros—national, continental, or global (2).
CONCLUSION

The idea of folklore as resistance can be traced back to the writings of Gramsci. In criticizing the tendency of folklore to be studied as a “picturesque” element – which he recognized as a method by the dominant class of neutralizing its potentially progressive potential – he laid out a conception of folklore as primarily counterhegemonic.

Folklore should … be studied as a 'conception of the world and life' implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part implicit, mechanical, and objective) to 'official' conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process...This conception of the world is not elaborated and systematic because, by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development (Gramsci 188).

The stress on the implicitness of folk resistance to dominant worldviews prefigures Bourdieu's notion of habitus in that such counterhegemonic practices take place below the awareness of those that carry out such acts. However, given the array of coding strategies available to subaltern groups, one cannot discount the possibility of conscious
intentionality that can nevertheless carry a plausible deniability.

Gramsci’s view of folklore as the practices of an essentially oppositional culture that is fragmented, contradictory, and unsystematic puts him at the other end of the spectrum from mainstream anthropology that has approached subaltern cultures with an aim of deducing a systematic logic of a bounded entity (Crehan 108). He also moves to blur the common distinction between traditional and modern cultures, with folklore being the output of the former. He recognized that folklore has a readiness to spontaneously incorporate motifs from the arts, sciences, and technologies of modernity, absorbing them through a process of development that can be “in contradiction to or simply different from the morality of the governing strata (Crehan 108).” Like Turner's processual model of culture, this conception of folklore sees it in a dialectical relationship with hegemonic culture, working to subvert the everyday hierarchical power structure even as those who hold power work to strengthen it. Likewise, dominant discourse attempts to extend its power to incorporate residual folk forms in order to neutralize their subversive potential. The portrayal of folktales as quaint, trivial, or archaic serves the purposes of the dominant.

The condition of marginality is thus not necessarily one of passive subjugation to social elites. Those who are marginalized have the capability of using the very terms of their own marginalization as means of resistance. While this may seem paradoxical, Feierman notes that “[l]ong-term continuity and active creation are in fact compatible. Even when forms of discourse are inherited from the past, the peasant must make an active decision to say that they are meaningful at this moment, to select a particular form
of discourse as opposed to other possible forms, and to shape the inherited language anew to current problems (3).” In his view, the discourses of peasant experience are continuously recreated and transformed through their active employment among existing communities (Feierman 4). When it comes to folk narrative, the affective capacity of performance is a way in which discourse can be linked to practice. Oral epic poets occupying marginal social positions in Arab culture are not considered to be intellectuals (though some of them might be considered wise within the community), nor is their discursive genre, narrative, considered to be learned discourse. Nevertheless, their abilities to craft an aesthetic narrative discourse and to creatively interweave it with the metadiscursive aspects of performance allows for a reconceptualization of the social power structure in which the high are brought low and the low brought high.

No dominating power is absolute in the control over the entirety of the social sphere, despite the fact that its agency and its effects are most visible. As Catherine Boyle observed in Chile during the years of the dictatorship, there can never be a total “cultural blackout (17).” Sometimes the efforts of hegemony can be successful in circumscribing the innovative capacity of expression. Yet, wherever subversive agitation is controlled, the dynamic nature of social structure suggests that resistance will emerge from other quarters. In modern-day Arab countries, for example, strictures on freedom of expression and freedom of speech are notoriously overbearing; however, this has not stopped every channel of opposition to the existing state power structures among authors or playwrights, despite the practice of censorship (Hafez 316). The social sites for expressing resistance are engendered alternatively and pragmatically in relatively isolated
and marginal physical locations and in linguistic or gestural coding strategies (Scott 120-121). As I have discussed earlier, coding strategies can be employed in direct view of the powerful, as long as the content of a message or act is sufficiently ambiguous.

The fact is that ideological insubordination of subordinate groups also takes quite a public form in elements of folk and popular culture. Given the political handicaps under which the bearers of this folk culture operate, however, its public expression typically skirts the bounds of impropriety. The condition of its public expression is that it be sufficiently indirect and garbled that it is capable of two readings, one of which is innocuous. As with a euphemism, it is the innocuous meaning … that provides an avenue of retreat when challenged (Scott 157).

While both written and oral forms of expression are capable of transmitting the hidden transcript, oral communication tends to be more democratic, transmittable by large numbers of individuals in idiosyncratic fashion, and also decentralized, unable to be pinpointed to a single source (Scott 161). The degree of safety in which counterhegemonic discourse can be circulated depends upon the number of people present for each particular transmission event and whether or not the instruments of power are directly observing the event. In the face of a potentially hostile audience, however, the performer of a subversive narrative can increase the level of disguise through nuance and indirection while still communicating the intended message to those that are familiar with its hidden meaning (Scott 162). Also, even when there is no mass gathering of subordinated groups, messages and stories can be circulated through “the geometrical progression of serial tellings,” reaching thousands or tens of thousands of people in a short amount of time, despite the lack of a single channel of transmission

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(Scott 162). Not having access to the media of hegemony does not prevent the flow of narrative that counters the discourses of power.

Attention to marginality within Arab folk narrative and the agency therein expressed by the marginalized has the potential to refine our understanding of social relationships and the way that power mediates them. If we think of the subaltern as not being able to speak per Spivak (1988), then what is it that millions of people across the Arab world and billions of people across the globe are doing throughout their lives? The negotiation of social hierarchy is a complex day-to-day activity. In both the narrative and performance contexts of the tales that I have discussed, the various characters and agents can exchange their positions within the social hierarchy. Heroes like 'Antar or Abu Zayd, though born in lowly and undesirable circumstances, become nonetheless central figures in Arab folklore which has celebrated their deeds for centuries. Other narratives dealing with marginality carry a progressive potential just by allowing one to imagine scenarios where the boundaries of social norms are set aside, even if only for an instance. As the tales of the blacksmiths show, however, characters do not always overcome their marginal status in folklore. The events of the story justify the outsider remaining on the outside. Although not addressed in this current study, tricksters can be seen as important marginal figures that also do important work in policing the boundaries of the community; yet, tricksters by their nature tend to be uninterested in raising their own social status.

Outside the performance context, the poet is a marginal individual, but within it, he is invested with a power that is not shared by the audience. The inversion of the
normal hegemonic order facilitates the function of folklore as counter-hegemonic discourse. As Reynolds puts it, he has an “ability to narrate and continually re-create a nonexistent world of past heroes and their antagonists (Reynolds 1995, 100).” Such power can have bearing on the present, as the past disguises commentary on contemporary social and political affairs. This ability brings the poet into a more central status where he is granted a form of respect for his art and is afforded leverage to act within the social network and influence the shape of that order. In might be germane to ask, though, whether for such social criticism to be effective, the poet needs to retain a marginal status in the everyday context.

One could consider the corollary to folk narrative's function as social criticism to be a valorization of the community vis-a-vis outsiders. The performer marks the boundaries between insider and outsider, representing them both through narrative. As Sabra Webber notes, “[t]he most powerful “resistance” is to have a community that demonstrably works (227).” This is even more interesting in the case of the story of the corrupt qādi who was mortally punished by God when one learns of the actual circumstances surrounding the historical event. It had actually been a local shaykh who had been corrupt and mistreated his fellow townsman, which caused a rift in the community. The narrative account transfers the wickedness to the character of the qādi who came from the outside while the hero comes from the social margins, giving space for internal reconciliation as well as representing the matter in which good and bad behavior break down along the categories of insider and outsider, respectively (Webber 150-151). One could say, then, that there is a tension between progressive and
conservative tendencies of folk narrative in representing the local. Which way it will go might be inferable if one is aware of what the stakes are of a given performance.

Finally, the aesthetic dimension of the role played by marginality in folklore is something that can be a future area of inquiry within the discipline. This dimension of folk narratives has been largely untouched within scholarly folklore analysis, though not necessarily ignored, as there is enormous difficulty (and maybe futility) in establishing objective evaluative criteria for the aesthetics of folklore. But the increased focus on affect that post-structural theory has engendered can provide a framework through which to understand the relationship between the story, the performer and audience, and the wider society. Marginality is a thread that winds through all these elements, and the depiction of the overcoming of marginal conditions through narrative can resonate among individuals and communities that experience actual marginalization within the social matrix.


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