

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

REPORTING CONSPIRACY (THEORY): SONALLAH
IBRAHIM'S *AL-LAJNA* AND PAUL AUSTER'S *CITY OF GLASS*

by

ANNA ISABELLA SERIO

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut
Beirut, Lebanon
April 2015

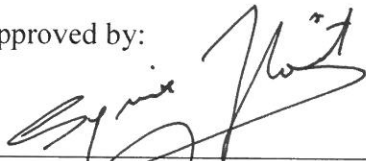
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks are for Dr. Fawwaz Traboulsi for first introducing me to the topic of conspiracy theory during his two-part course on Occidentalism at the American University of Beirut, for Drs. Syrine Hout and Sirene Harb for their help in developing this thesis, and Dr. Christopher Stone for never failing to be a continuous source of support for the past six years.

My recognition and gratitude are addressed to Dr. Maya Kesrouany for helping me hone my research topic, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick for sharing his research on conspiracy theory discourse in Egyptian media, and Yousef Al-Taai for his motivation and encouragement.

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Anna Isabella Serio for Master of Arts
Major: Middle Eastern Studies

Title: Reporting Conspiracy (Theory): Sonallah Ibrahim's *al-Lajna* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" began the scholarly debate on conspiracy theory, which originally focused on the United States and then later included other regions such as the Arab World. For the most part, both Arabic and English scholarship on the subject treats conspiracism in different regions as separate phenomena rather than part of a larger global politic. Accordingly, they have different approaches: while scholarship on conspiracism in the United States deals with representations of conspiracy in the media and the arts, writing on the Arab world focuses almost exclusively on media and historical accounts, and is linked to political rather than social factors.

This thesis will address the lack of comparative scholarship, as well as the lack of scholarship on the representations of conspiracy and conspiracy theory in Arab cultural production, by making an interdisciplinary comparison of the novelistic treatments of conspiracism in *al-Lajna* (1981) by Egyptian author Sonallah Ibrahim and *City of Glass* (1983) by American writer Paul Auster. Specifically, this thesis explores how these two novels report conspiracism in the age of multinational capitalism by examining the ways each present the political and linguist implications of conspiracism, portrays the role of the conspiracist in relation to the role of the writer, and treats the relationship between mental illness and conspiracism. In doing so, it draws from the economic debate over the terms "imperialism" and "globalization," looks at the connection between writer and detective in the two novels, and analyzes the relationship between paranoia, what 'Issam Mahfuz refers to as "*ghurba*," and Timothy Melly terms "agency panic."

This thesis finds that while both novels portray conspiracism as both an empowering and disempowering reaction to a perceived structural agency, *al-Lajna* describes a structure manned by human agents while *City of Glass* suggests that these structures, while perhaps human-made, have become superhuman. The lack of human agents in the latter particularly points to a perceived lack of responsibility on the part of an imperial power, which is only possible through the substitution or threat of violence with language. Ultimately, this thesis addresses the failure in political as well as artistic dialogue between two authors reacting to overlapping phenomena and it reveals the extent to which political paradigms affect one's approach to conspiracism as well as narrative production.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION

All translations from Arabic are mine unless otherwise indicated. As this thesis is written in English, I use the English translations of *al-Lajna (The Committee)* by Mary St. Germain and Charlene Constable and of *Yawmiyyat al-Wahat (Notes From Prison)* by Robyn Creswell for quotes, with modifications or clarifications when necessary.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration method I follow is that outlined by IJMES, in which the *hamza* at the beginning of a word is written as a vowel and the *tā marbūta* is written as “a” rather than “ah;” in an *iḏāfa* the *tā marbūta* is written as “at.” I have retained the accepted English spelling of Sonallah Ibrahim in accordance with IJMES, for the ease of the reader and consistency with other texts.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis looks to Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim's *al-Lajna (The Committee)* (1981) and American writer Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1983) in order to answer the question: how can cultural artifacts report and comment on conspiracy theory? Or more specifically, in what way do novelistic representations of conspiracy theories inform the burgeoning academic discourse on the subject? At first glance it appears that these novels have little in common aside from the time during which they were written and their masculine perspective (women rarely appear in either). An analysis of the two books in particular emphasizes this difference. On the one hand, the majority of scholars who have written about Ibrahim, such as Samia Mehrez, Muhsin al-Musawi, and Ceza Qasim-Draz interpret *al-Lajna* as a reaction to Egypt's political climate, or more specifically, to the rise in censorship that followed Sadat's open door policy, *al-infitāḥ*. Auster's critics, on the other, tend to approach *City of Glass* as an apolitical work, with scholars such as Pascale-Anne Brault, Steven E. Alford, and Sylvia Söderlind devoting their focus to the way the novel comments on the role of the writer and the role of the detective.

However, when put in historical context, these texts reveal a missed opportunity for political dialogue between the two writers. Through their investigations of the relationship between universal truths and narrative production, both explicitly and implicitly comment on the political and economic transformations of their times, and more specifically, the role that literature can play in these transformations. Through their explorations of conspiracy theory production, both question the nature of the relationship between language and humanity, the ways in which both individual words and narratives can construct and destruct an

individual—or even a population. Therefore, this thesis will examine how these novels reflect the discourse on globalization and imperialism, approach the role of the writer, and illustrate the relationship between psychological disorders—specifically paranoia—and conspiracism. Ultimately, this thesis finds that under the guise of a search for universal harmony, combined with the assumption that there is a correlation between knowledge and power, conspiracy theory functions in these novels as an attempt to engender the conspiracist’s ideal political environment. Although the conspiracy theories they report are formulated as arguments, the influence power structures hold over narrative production renders the veracity of their claims irrelevant. Consequently, if the theory challenges the status quo, the conspiracist is subject to both accusations of delusion, or if that proves ineffective, counter-conspiracy theories. “Paranoia,” then, is less useful to describe the mental state of the conspiracist than terms such as ‘Issam Mahfuz’s use of the term “*ghurba*” (a sense of unfamiliarity or alienation), and Timothy Melley’s “agency panic,” which both allow for social and political context. In the end, these novels reveal that conspiracy theory can be both the cause and reaction to power shifts and can be empowering or disempowering to the conspiracist.

Comparing texts written in different languages and that come from separate narrative traditions is a project rife with potential pitfalls. There is the potential of mistranslation, the potential of misreading or ignoring key cultural references, the potential of treating the novel or the novelist as representative of an entire nation, culture, or peoples—just to mention a few. Another danger is the mistaken notion that the two novels could have been *intended* to be in dialogue with one another, despite the fact that they only existed in their respective languages. While Ibrahim and Auster both draw from United States and European literary and intellectual traditions, it becomes clear from the way they report conspiracy theory that the authors use conspiracism to different ends. Beyond this, neither could have been aware of the other because neither novel was translated into the other language until over a decade

after their publications, with *City of Glass* appearing in Arabic in 1993 and *al-Lajna* in English in 2001 (Meyer 248; Ibrahim, *The Committee*).

Despite the difficulties, the cross-cultural and cross-lingual nature of this comparison is useful in order to highlight the differences one might come across in conspiracy theories and helps one avoid attributing conspiracism to any one social, linguistic, or geographical region. Looking at these novels in both their shared and local political contexts also helps avoid the common pitfall of the hyper-politicization of “Third World” novels on the one hand, and de-politicization “First World” literature on the other. As Aijz Ahmad points out in his critique of Fredric Jameson’s essay on “Third World” literature, treating this body of literature as a political allegory fails to acknowledge the “multiplicity of significant difference” within both “First” and “Third World” countries, and I would add, similarly neglects to notice parallels between the two (95).

Though keeping this in mind, this thesis does not deal with two separate bodies of literature, but two individual works that are not necessarily representative of their national literary heritages. And while it may be true that politics are only one dimension of these works, the political nature of conspiracy theory production in these two novels warrants a move to politicize Auster, rather than de-politicize Ibrahim as Ahmad might suggest. A politically oriented comparison of the treatment of conspiracy theory in these novels bares a failed conversation between the two concerning the role of the United States as an international superpower and reveals the ways in which narratives can work to erase the violence of both imperialism and resistance movements.

Chapter Two begins with a brief review of the literature on conspiracism, which as of date treats Arabic and English language conspiracism as separate phenomena. Mirroring the divide between writing on “First” and “Third World” literature, scholars such as Richard Hofstadter, Mark Fenster, and Timothy Melly attribute United States conspiracism to a

number of political economic, and social phenomena. Those writing on the Arab world, however, such as Fawwaz Traboulsi, Sadik al-‘Azm, and Matthew Gray, see conspiracy theory only as a response to political developments. Aside from drawing a false East/West dichotomy, the current approach does not sufficiently treat the places where the two trends of conspiracy theory overlap and diverge and claims to have come up with a comprehensive notion of conspiracism fall short. The one thing that these scholars appear to agree on however is the fact that conspiracism is fundamentally politically motivated, even if it ultimately deals with phenomena that are not political on the surface. Therefore, this thesis frames its analysis with the historical, economic, and political context of *al-Lajna* and *City of Glass* in Chapter Three, giving an overview of the rise of the United States as a superpower during the postwar period alongside the rise and fall of Nasirism and the liberalization of Egypt’s economy under Anwar al-Sadat. This chapter also discusses the global economic crises, primarily related to the rising price of oil during the last quarter of the twentieth century, which played a vital role in domestic issues both in the United States and Egypt, and the subsequent sense of malaise and hopelessness that culminated in US with President Jimmy Carter’s “malaise speech,” and the January 1977 food riots in Egypt. On the political level, this sentiment in the United States can be attributed to a series of failures both on the domestic and international front, and in Egypt, from the growing class divide and distrust of the political establishment in response to Sadat’s economic policies and diplomatic relations.

After Sadat’s open door policy, known as “*al-infitāh*,” Egypt felt a discernable increase in United States influence, which at the time was extending its reach around the world. There is a scholarly debate, however, over whether this reach can be described as globalization or imperialism, which the two structural conspiracy theories in the novels mirror when put in conversation, and which this thesis introduces at the end of Chapter Three and analyzes in Chapter Four. I refer to these as “structural” because they describe a

structure, rather than a group of individuals, that controls the social reality in which the characters live. The structural conspiracy theory of *al-Lajna* argues that the world is being controlled by an unspecified group of elites using the process of diversification, or “*al-tanwī’*,” in order to have their hands in as many different sectors as possible and conceal the extent of their influence. The Committee that the protagonist appears before illustrates the extent to which a group of unidentified elites has unofficial control over intellectual production in Egypt, particularly through the way they try to curtail the protagonist’s attempts to research one such elite, known only as “the Doctor” (“*al-Duktūr*”).

Diversification, then, is what accounts for the new global hierarchy, which entails the political and economic hegemony of the United States along with a few of its allies, as evinced by their weight in international political arenas such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United Nations. Thus, the unequal relationship that the protagonist of *al-Lajna* describes most closely resembles definitions of imperialism, in which one nation is under some degree of control by another—economic, political, or otherwise.

The structural conspiracy theory in *City of Glass*, on the other hand, envisions global unity as a symbiotic relationship between individuals, echoing theories of globalization that view the current phenomenon as something from which countries, for the most part, contribute to and take from in an egalitarian process. The problem that Peter Stillman Sr., the prime conspiracist of *City of Glass*, sees as the source of all contemporary ills is that language as it exists today is unable to sufficiently articulate his experience of reality. Stillman Sr. builds the narrative of his conspiracy theory off of theological interpretations of the New World, looking to the Fall of Man in *Paradise Lost* and the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel as telling the same story, equating the fall of man with the fall of a universal language. Stillman Sr. concludes that the maladies of humankind are a result of this fall, and

by virtue of the fact that only he understands this, believes that the onus is on him to create a new language and publish his findings so the world can live in prelapsarian unity once again.

Underlying Peter Stillman Sr.'s discourse, as well as the discourse of the Committee, the Doctor, and all those complicit in the protagonist's conspiracy of diversification, is the threat of—and at certain times, actual—violence, which is reflected in the absence of violence in the narratives of both novels. The conspiracy theories in these novels, in relation to the political realities within which they exist, explore the role of language in conspiracist, imperialist, and globalization discourse, as a substitute for violence as well as a tool for imperialist expansion, in that the ambiguity of language creates gaps through which one can simultaneously deny and justify violence without the victim (and in Auster's case, even the perpetrator) noticing.

After this treatment of the role of language in conspiracism, Chapter Four looks at the relationship between the role of the writer and the role of the conspiracist by examining both Ibrahim and Auster's views of the responsibility of the writer and the relationship between writer and detective within and without the novels. Taking political paradigms into consideration, this chapter finds that while Ibrahim sees an invariable connection between writer and politics, and holds the writer accountable for his work, Auster views writing as a thing in itself. While writing and politics may intersect at some points, according to Auster, the writer is ultimately not a political agent, but a conduit that accesses an ephemeral creative current when they write. Thus in this view, for a writer to function properly they cannot be held responsible for the work they produce.

Views of the writer and views of the conspiracist converge in both author's treatment of the figure of the detective. A comparison between traditional European descriptions of the detective, via Michael Holquist and Tzvetan Todorov, and the figure of *al-dhakī* (technically, one who is clever) in classical Arabic literature, finds that the differences between the

detective and *al-dhakī* account for the differences between Ibrahim and Auster's views of the role of the writer. Specifically, this comparison finds that while both narratives contain elements of the detective story, the way Ibrahim's protagonist views the role of the detective as a vigilante fighting for justice is more similar to *al-dhakī*, who has the unique ability to implement justice. Auster's detective, on the other hand, is more concerned with the act of detecting than the political implications of his findings and is more in line with the detectives in the American and European canon.

However, neither novel follows the traditional arc of detective fiction, or more specifically, Todorov's dual narratives, in which a relatively uneventful narrative in the present functions to tell the uncovering of the much more exciting narrative of the crime, which occurred in the past (91). The primary reason for this is that what the characters investigate in these novels are not crimes, but conspiracies, and thus are not limited to the past, but also exist in the present and affect the reality of the narrative of the novel and the narrative of the conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theory in *al-Lajna* then, exists for political means, whereas in *City of Glass* represents the failure of language—and thus the narrative—to accurately represent the human experience.

Chapter Six, the final chapter, is an exploration of the relationship between mental illness and conspiracism (or, more specifically, paranoia and conspiracism). Looking to Melley's observations that the concept of paranoia is based on the assumption that there is a link between knowledge and power, and that most often the paranoiac is merely someone who rejects "the normalizing ideology of the powerful" (18), this chapter finds that in *al-Lajna* the power of conspiracism is grounded in the belief that there is a relationship between power and knowledge in a Foucauldian sense, and that both the protagonist as well as the Committee use conspiracy theory as a means of obtaining more power. Accordingly, Ibrahim's novel shows how conspiracy theory can be both a form of resistance as well as a

way of maintaining the status quo; when one makes the correlation between knowledge and power, narratives have the potential to act as non-violent weapons. In *City of Glass*, however, the correlation between knowledge and power is negative, in that conspiracism is the downfall of Stillman Sr. (who ultimately commits suicide) and to a lesser extent the protagonist Daniel Quinn.

This difference in the treatment of the knowledge/power relationship accounts for different treatments of mental illness in the two novels. While accusations of delusion directed toward the protagonist are meant to be a form of coercion and intimidation, and only serve to justify the protagonist's belief in the conspiracy, the acquisition of knowledge via conspiracism imposes the appearance of mental illness on Stillman Sr. and Quinn in that it disconnects them from the paradigmatic metanarrative of the society within which they lived. Conspiracism thus has a detaching effect, which is perceived as mental illness—and consequently it appears that the reason why the protagonist of *al-Lajna* did not fall is precisely because he was already powerless in comparison to the Committee.

When compared to Freud's description of paranoia in his seminal analysis of the Schreber case, it becomes apparent that between these two novels, the Committee, along with the system that it protects, most closely resembles a case of paranoia. Yet due to their position as protectors of the dominant political narrative in addition to the transparency of the political motivations behind their conspiracy theory, Ibrahim's protagonist does not portray them as paranoid as much as power-blind. The mental state of the structural conspiracists in these novels can be more accurately described as a reaction to 'Issam Mahfuz's term "*ghurba*" in Ibrahim or Melley's "agency panic" in Auster, the difference between the two being that *ghurba* involves human actors and agency panic involves human-created systems that control humanity from beyond.

As we will see, both novels report conspiracy theory as in relation to power and reflect the ways in which conspiracy theory can be used both to deny and justify imperialism on the one hand, and the use of violence on the other. The primary difference between these novels, however, involves the humanity of the systems they describe, which significantly alters the ways the conspiracists—and the authors—approach both conspiracism and narrative production as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO

CONSPIRACY (THEORY) AND ITS VARIATIONS

In order to describe conspiracy fiction, this thesis will look to the detective story. After all, as we shall see in the fifth chapter, both novels make a connection between writer, detective, and (implicitly) conspiracist. Additionally there are a number of parallels between conspiracy and detective fiction, which the few scholars who have written on conspiracy fiction, such as Bennett Kravitz, note; one could even argue that the latter is the predecessor of the former (28). On the most basic level, conspiracy fiction is a detective story with a widened scope and stronger social and political implications. Where the detective story has a detective, conspiracy fiction has a conspiracist; where the narrative of a detective story depends on a crime (usually a murder), conspiracy fiction relies on an unexplained phenomenon that is not limited to the past; both conspiracist and detective earn their respective titles through the act of creating an evidence-based narrative in order to explain the crime or phenomenon, which may or may not be influenced by their personal biases and political leanings. The primary difference between the detective story and conspiracy fiction is that while the former is conducted with the (sometimes grudging) approbation of official organizations, conspiracy theories frequently (though not always) contradict the official narrative and are subsequently dismissed by the status quo as the works of a paranoiac.

Scholarship on conspiracy fiction is a small and relatively new subsection of the only slightly larger and older discourse on conspiracy theory. Beginning with historian Richard Hofstadter's 1964 article "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," the academic conversation on conspiracy theory, though interdisciplinary, has since been dominated by historians and political scientists with a tendency to focus on the United States. In his essay,

Hofstadter observes that while American politicians have always approached and articulated political threats with a paranoid style of rhetoric, then-contemporary right-wing politicians had taken it to an extreme. Specifically, he notes that there was a shift from pinning the blame on shadowy political organizations, such as the Illuminati or Free Masons, to naming specific public figures such as Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Dwight D. Eisenhower (82). He attributed this shift in approach to a feeling of dispossession among the political right during the early-to-mid twentieth century, as the country underwent anti-trust reforms and then later programs enacted by New Deal and continued during the postwar shift to the political left. This sense of dispossession was made even more acute, according to him, in light of the United States' ascendancy in the international political arena following the Second World War.

Hofstadter's use of the term "paranoia" highly influenced one strain of United States scholarship that often overlooks his clarification: "I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes [...] It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant" (77). As we shall see in Chapter Six, however, Freud points out that paranoiacs often appear to be completely rational except when it comes to the subject of their paranoia—perhaps these scholars' equation between "paranoia" and "paranoid style" is not unwarranted (7).

Nonetheless this strain of conspiracy scholarship is the most problematic in that scholars and commentators such as Daniel Pipes, Catherine Liu, and Steven Clarke approach conspiracism as a pathological phenomenon without much discussion of its political implications. Pipes in particular uses his writing on conspiracism to discredit and silence perspectives he disagrees with. Founder of Campus Watch, a think tank designed to intimidate academics critical of Israel, Pipes is the author of *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes Where It Came From*, "an interpretive essay, not a research study," in which he claims to develop "a unified

interpretation of conspiracism” (xii). In order to weed out theories from actual conspiracies, Pipes relies on “common sense, a distinct knowledge of history, and the distinct ability to recognize the distinct pattern of conspiracism,” essentially defining it in relation to his own political ideology (38).

Two other members of the pathological camp Liu and Clarke, treat conspiracy theory as a failed popular attempt at intellectual production. While Liu attributes conspiracism to “symptomatic over interpretation” (462), Clarke claims that conspiracy theory is the product of cognitive failure on the part of the conspiracist, which he terms a “fundamental attribution error” because of the conspiracist’s reliance on dispositional rather than situational explanations of an event. In other words, according to Clarke, conspiracists tend to single out one possible factor or explanation (out of many) as the grand cause by overestimating its importance (143-4). While Liu and Clarke, unlike Pipes, acknowledge the role that power dynamics play in conspiracy theory production, it is only to the extent that they see a connection between their observations that conspiracists generally do not come from positions of power and that they are pathologically afflicted.

Both the pathological camp and a second strain of scholarship that sees conspiracism as entirely rational fail to acknowledge the fact that conspiracy theory production is not limited to the disenfranchised, as both novels demonstrate. This second strain of scholarship is often in reaction to Hofstadter’s and Pipes’ emphasis on pathology, sometimes to a fault; after all, there *are* some cases in which conspiracy theory is a product of paranoia, just not all of them are (which, ironically, neither Hofstadter nor Pipes acknowledge as well). These academics, such as George Marcus, Floyd Rudmin, and Mark Fenster typically portray conspiracists as products of their political, economic, and social environments and often argue that in many cases conspiracism is the only rational response to these contexts.

On the one hand, Marcus attempts to bridge Hofstadter's "paranoid style" with the rational approach, arguing that the paranoid style is not a result of a distance from reality, but rather "within reason" (2): "[...] the effects of decades of paranoid policies of statecraft and governing habits of thought define a present reality for social actors in some places and situations that are far from extremist, or distortingly [sic] fundamentalist, but is quite reasonable and commonsensical" (2-3). On the other hand, Rudmin dismisses even stylistic comparisons with pathological phenomena, and puts forth that the term "naïve deconstructive history" is a more accurate description of the phenomenon. He postulates that conspiracy theory arises in the following manner: an event occurs that affects power relations in a society, after which ordinary citizens notice contradictions between their experience and the official narrative, become curious, and investigate for themselves.

Mark Fenster, one of the most renowned scholars on United States conspiracy theory, agrees with Rudmin in his book *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, to the extent that he argues conspiracy theory cannot be reduced to pathology and elaborates on the connection that Rudmin makes between conspiracy theory and power. He writes: "Conspiracy theory arises when the political is interpreted within a specific, conspiratorial narrative frame by those for whom politics is inaccessible and its meaning is impenetrable or secret" (xiii-xiv). To Fenster, "conspiracy theory is a theory of power" which views the power of ruling individuals (or systems) as controlling "all aspects of social life, politics, and economics" (xiv). What is important to conspiracists is not so much an understanding of the omnipresence of the ruling individuals or systems, which is easily discernable, as much as the fact that "the 'truth' of power—the identities and motivations of actors who actually wield power—remains hidden to the naked eye of those who dismiss or are ignorant of the conspiracist" (xiv). As a theory of power then, the political "Other" that voices conspiracism, Fenster contends, neglects to examine the ways in which individuals or

systems of power exploit “the people” and instead directs its attention, almost uncritically, towards the power structure (xvi). While these observations speak to the protagonist of *al-Lajna*, the only conspiracist that is a political “Other” of the two novels, this approach does not account for the way those in power can use conspiracy theory as a form of coercion and control, as does the novel’s eponymous Committee.

A third strain of US conspiracism scholarship attempts to avoid the rational-pathological dichotomy by approaching twentieth-century conspiracism in the United States as a product of cultural change, rather than merely a reaction to political alienation, and contains the majority of scholarship on conspiracy fiction. As a part of a larger discourse of modernity and postmodernity, these scholars most often look to Jean François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson as the theoretical basis of their work and thus any critique of this camp should be prefaced with a look at their writing on the modern and the postmodern.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard defines “modern” as “any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse [of legitimation with respect to its own status] making an explicit appeal to the grand narrative” and “postmodern” “as an incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). In other words, postmodernism entails skepticism towards narratives that claim to explain all that is. According to Lyotard, this incredulity is directed toward all metanarratives, including the grand narrative of science, which was previously seen as separate from other metanarratives (those disseminated through religious texts, for example). Yet, he points out in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*:

[...] neither modernity nor so-called post-modernity can be identified and defined as clearly circumscribed historical entities, of which the latter would always come “after” the former. Rather we have to say that the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. And not only exceed itself in that way, but to resolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability. (25)

Jameson critiques this assertion in his book *A Singular Modernity*, observing that Lyotard's definition of postmodernism is dependent on "what remain essentially modernist characteristics of the new," and pointing out that "Lyotard's theory of the end of the grand narrative is itself another grand narrative" (5). In this light, one could look at conspiracism as an attempt to subvert one grand narrative by creating another; it isn't the destruction of grand narratives as much as it its substitution.

Jameson does not quite see it this way, however. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he posits that postmodernism is "what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good" (xi) and in which aesthetic production "has become integrated into commodity production" (4). Thus linked to late capitalism, he views postmodern culture as a "global, yet American" phenomenon that is "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world" (5). In other words, Jameson views postmodern culture as existing within the framework of US-centric multinational capitalism. He thus critiques conspiracy theories in contemporary literature "in which circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by a labyrinth of conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competitive information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind" (37), calling this brand of conspiracism a "degraded attempt [...] to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world systems" (38).

This idea, that postmodern conspiracism is an attempt to reconcile the seemingly impossible amount of available information is a popular perspective in the scholarship that links conspiracism to modernity or postmodernity. Bennett Kravitz builds off of this assertion and maintains that conspiracy theory is the product of a Jamesonian attempt "[...] to imagine the totality of the late capitalist system" in addition to being "[...] a cultural construct—

stemming from the very same Western capitalist system—created both to cause and relieve the headache [of trying to imagine its totality]. Thus conspiracy [theory], despite its threatening nature, provides a rationale for the way the world is" (24).

Stef Aupers, however, criticizes Jameson's characterization of conspiracism, alongside Hofstadter's and Pipes', for their moral condemnations of conspiracy culture, which he holds "[...] *cannot and should not* play a role in the study of cultural meaning" (23). He does, however, uncritically adopt the term paranoia to describe conspiracism—but paranoia on a mass rather than individual level (23). Citing the fifties and sixties as a turning point for conspiracism, he observes that conspiracy discourse has shifted from paranoia about an exotic "Other," which functioned to establish personal and national identity to paranoia directed towards man-made institutions and modern society in and of itself, thus shifting from an external and identity-affirming discourse to one that is internal and identity-questioning (in contrast to Hofstadter's assertion that conspiracism became less about institutions and more about individuals during the McCarthy era) (24).

Steffen Hantke posits a similar trajectory for conspiracy theory discourse in which externalized fears become internalized, but dates this internalization in the United States to the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the United States as a hegemon, rather than the end of World War II and the United States' ascendancy to one of a number of global powers in international political arena (221). Instead of linking this new kind of conspiracy theory to United States counterculture with roots in the sixties, Hantke draws connections between conspiracy theory and terrorism as forms of resistance to the hubris of "American universalism" (221). It is possible that both Aupers and Hantke are partially right; the Cold War may have been the catalyst for this change in the style of conspiracy discourse and the end of the Superpower struggle, another. Both *al-Lajna*, published as a novel in 1981 (though sections of the book were published as early as 1979) and *City of Glass*, published in 1983,

take place during the transition between Cold War politics and the rise of the United States as a hegemon, and their portrayal of conspiracism lean towards Hantke, which I will examine in more detail in the next chapter.

As previously mentioned, the discourse on conspiracy fiction in the United States falls into the (post)modernist camp. Often relying on Jameson's link between postmodernism and conspiracism, scholars such as Hantke and Timothy Melley argue that conspiracy fiction itself is an attempt to understand the unfathomable forces of the growing world system. Specifically, Hantke looks to Jameson's description of conspiracy in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* "as an empirical event, a unique occurrence [...] that also must be *made* to mean its meaning: it must in short be *allegorized*" (45). Via the process of allegorization, according to Hantke, "the conspiracy novel usually supplies a reader function alongside that of the author," putting the reader into a role similar to that of a detective (230). Hantke continues: "Making the text of conspiracy mean something, therefore, becomes an object of contention and competition, a process of continuous writing and rewriting in order to establish a version of events that asserts itself as the authoritative statement capable of closing the narrative" (231).

Melley's work *The Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* is more concerned with the ways these books portray conspiracy theory, and is thus more useful to this thesis. Here, he observes that during the postwar era there was a shift towards the perception of "structural agency" in conspiracy theory (5). Melley argues that the phenomenon really stems from "a sense of *diminished human agency*, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behavior" (11). This results in what he refers to as "agency panic" or "intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control," in which individuals express nervousness about the causes of their actions and the "sense that controlling

organizations are themselves agents” with will, intent, and the capacity to carry out a plan (12).

Another scholar, Samuel C. Coale, builds off Melley’s book and in part agrees that conspiracism is a product of postmodern culture, but only in the sense of a postmodern nostalgia for religious thinking rather than an attempt to understand the totality of multinational capitalism. Additionally, he draws links between United States conspiracy theory culture and a Calvinistic fear of the apocalypse, which has been a cultural current in the United States since the arrival of the puritans, and underwent a resurgence in the 1980s, particularly with fundamentalist Christian movements.

To an extent this third strand of scholarship speaks to the structural conspiracy theories in both of the novels, but only to the point that both describe a network of agents that has ultimate control over every aspect of life. As we will see, however, the primary difference between these theories concerns perceptions of human agency, and in some ways parallels a debate between globalization and imperialism. Part of the problem with scholarship on conspiracism is that it treats conspiracism in the United States and Arab world as separate phenomena, which a comparison of these novels shows is not entirely the case. Thus, the existing discourse tends to overemphasize local dimensions of conspiracism and frequently does not acknowledge inter-lingual or international trends in the phenomenon.

The previously discussed politicization of “Third World” literature extends to conspiracy theory as well. Although discourse on US and European conspiracism frequently considers its historical and political context, it also emphasizes other possible factors. Writing on the Arab world, however, is almost exclusively concerned with the political, possibly due to the lack of Arabic-language scholarship on the phenomenon. In English, the first available publication on conspiracism in the region was Daniel Pipe’s *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy*, in which he claims that because conspiracism is a “Western

phenomenon,” Arab conspiracism demonstrates a sort of intellectual dependency on the West (which he calls “humiliating”) (135). However, Pipes’ focus on antisemitic conspiracy theories at the expense of others prevents him from examining the phenomenon as a whole in the region and does not provide sufficient evidence to support this argument. Ultimately the assertions he makes about conspiracism are only relevant to a subset of conspiracy theories in the region and scholars who came after him roundly criticized *The Hidden Hand*.

Matthew Gray’s *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics* is often viewed as the main English-language alternative to Pipes, though it is not without its flaws. In his literature review, Gray points out the lack of academic research on conspiracy theories in the Arab world and therefore turns to sources about conspiracism in the United States and Europe as his theoretical basis (21). While it is true that there is little written on the subject, it also appears that Gray does not speak Arabic, as he does not list any Arabic-language sources and relies heavily on the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) for conspiracy theories. Founded by Yigal Carmon, former counter-terrorism adviser to Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Shamir and Yitzhak Rabin and IDF intelligence officer, MEMRI ostensibly aims to provide the English-speaking public with translations of “Middle Eastern” media (including Arabic, Farsi, and Hebrew articles and news clips). According to Ibrahim Hooper of the Council of American-Islamic Relations, however, “Memri’s [sic] intent is to find the worst possible quotes from the Muslim world and disseminate them as widely as possible” (Whitaker). A quick search of their Internet archives supports this suggestion and reveals that MEMRI has a tendency to choose only the most inflammatory Arab and Iranian news clips and alone should not be considered representative of the conversation on conspiracism as a whole in the Arab world.

Despite his questionable sources, Gray is one of the few scholars to take note that conspiracism performs a variety of functions and is pervasive at all levels of society:

“Conspiracism, whether in the US, the Arab world, or most other places, is simply too broad and popular a phenomenon to be rejected as fringe behavior, even if some more extreme elements of it are to be found at the margins of society” (32). Accordingly, he views conspiracy theory as “a counter-discourse, which challenges conventional or accepted explanations for events” (5) that result from “political structures, which in turn are the result of historical impacts, the effects of external dynamics, state-society relations, and political culture” (8).

While Gray primarily investigates sources of conspiracism in the Arab world, Fawwaz Traboulsi is more interested in how conspiracy theories function. Traboulsi observes that anti-Zionist conspiracy theories in particular direct attention away from US involvement in the region and therefore serve the interests of the status quo, including the policies of the State of Israel towards local and international Arab populations. Sadik J. al-‘Azm agrees with Traboulsi’s assertion in the paper “Orientalism and Conspiracy,” and adds that conspiracy theories make room for contradictory and hypocritical behavior on the level of the state; in Saudi Arabia, blaming Zionism rather than the United States for certain political activities in the region allowed them to support the latter during the cold war (16).

Like Coale, al-‘Azm speculates that conspiracism could be “a humanized and secularized version of ultimately religio-theistic ways of making sense of history and explaining the world,” citing the resemblance between conspiracy theories and religious narratives (18). He attributes this resemblance to what he calls “theological thinking,” in which one assumes that a pattern indicates there is a creator or designer behind it (18), which is “deeply ingrained in parts of the Arab social intellectual, cultural, and political conscious and unconscious” (19).

Both Traboulsi and al-‘Azm treat conspiracism in the Arab world as a part of a larger discourse on Occidentalism. In “‘Orientalizing the Orientals’ and the Other Message of

Edward Said,” Traboulsi defines Occidentalism as “a discourse nurtured by local versions of nationalism, nativism informed by ‘conspiracy theories’ and inflamed by anti-Semitic fables imported from the huge reservoir of European and American right-wing literature” (3). Thus, like Pipes, Traboulsi views conspiracism as a European import although (also like Pipes), he only looks at a few conspiracy theories concerning the establishment of the state of Israel in this paper, which are not necessarily representative of conspiracism in the Arab world as a whole. In this narrow sense, it is possible that conspiracy theories inform Occidentalist discourse, but it is possible that this is not the extent of it in the region.

al-‘Azm also traces the origins of conspiracy theory to “the West,” describing Arab conspiracists as “Orientalists in reverse.” Orientalists in reverse, according to al-‘Azm, fetishize the Arab culture and language outside of its historical, social, or economic context as much as their European and American counterparts and thereby uphold Orientalists’ characterization of the East as essentially spiritual and in opposition to “the West” (“Orientalism in Reverse” 232-5). al-‘Azm thus agrees with Traboulsi’s contention that conspiracy theory is one way in which Occidentalist discourse is expressed, citing a common conspiracist explanation for the September 11, 2001 attacks in the Arab world that fundamentally asks: “[b]ut, since when are the Arabs capable of such strategic planning, such long-term preparations, such brilliant tactics, such faultless coordination, synchronization and implementation?” (“Orientalism and Conspiracy Theory” 20).

In Arabic, writing on conspiracy theory is almost exclusively the domain of the media (though Traboulsi and al-‘Azm write in Arabic, these particular papers were written in English). The apparent lack of scholarship on this term may be due to the fact that there are a number of different terms that fall under the umbrella of “conspiracy theory” in English. Beyond this, while “conspiracy theory” technically translates to “*naḡariyyat al-mu’āmara*,”

neither *nazariyyat al-mu'āmara* nor *mu'āmara* (conspiracy) appear to carry quite the same visceral negative connotations as it does in English.

However “*al-ishā'a*,” or political rumor, in many ways resembles what we might call a conspiracy theory in English. As Benjamin William Koerber writes: “‘rumor’ is not a specific thing in the world, but a *problem* that is feared, interpreted, and combatted by groups and individuals at particular moments of social crisis, real or perceived” (6). Additionally, Egyptian Professor and novelist Yusif Zaydan suggests that what people now refer to as *mu'āmara* would have articulated with a different word in the past: “long ago Arabs did not use the term “conspiracy” [*mu'āmara*] but their lexicon included the word “*khaṭṭaṭ*” or “*takhṭīṭ*” [...]” (Suliman).

The word *mu'āmara* comes from the Arabic roots *ا-م-ر*, transliterated as “-m-r,” and can be translated either as “deliberation, council, conference” or “plot or conspiracy” (Wehr 34). “*Ishā'a*,” on the other hand, comes from the roots *ع-ي-ش*, transliterated as “sh-ī-” and can be translated, as “spreading, publication, circulation (of news); rumor; news, information” (581). *Khaṭṭaṭ* and *takhṭīṭ* (different forms of the same verb), however come from the Arabic root *خ-ط-ط*, transliterated as “kh-ṭ-ṭ,” “to draw lines; to rule (s.th); to demarcate, delineate, stake out survey (land, real estate); to lay out, map out (roads); to make or work out plans (for a project)” (233-4). Thus, the word *mu'amara* holds political implications, whereas *khaṭṭaṭ/takhṭīṭ* is more concerned with the act of drawing connections between things or building a plot (consequently, one could argue that *khaṭṭaṭ/takhṭīṭ* can be used to indicate both the conspiratorial act and conspiracism). As we will see later, Ibrahim uses the words *mu'amara* and *khiṭṭa* (to mean ‘plot’ in this case) almost interchangeably (92-3; 102). *Ishā'a*, on the other hand, is more concerned with the form of the rumor or conspiracy theory, and is not concerned with the nature of its content. Additionally, while in

English there may appear to be some overlap between the terms, in reality *mu'amara* and *ishā'a* rarely intersect in Arabic.

Nonetheless, *mu'amara* is more commonly used to refer to conspiracy than *nazariyyat al-mu'amara*, *khata'at*, or *takhṭīf* in scholarly writing. This means that there is little Arabic-language scholarship that approaches conspiracy theory as a broad phenomenon but rather a large number of publications dedicated to studying conspiracies themselves. The majority of this writing directs its attention towards conspiracies that have occurred since the twentieth century, including the Balfour declaration (such as Salah 'Isa and Jamil 'Atiyya Ibrahim's *An Instrument of Conspiracy: The Balfour Declaration*),¹ “Western,” American, or Zionist conspiracies against the Arabs (such as *The West's Conspiracy Against the Arabs: Stages of Conspiracy and Its Resistance* by Yasin Suwayd),² and the Arab Spring (*Revolution and Conspiracy: 25 January—The Beginning of the Road to Change* by Ghamri 'Atif).³ The majority of works direct their attention to the establishment and policies of the state of Israel. 'Uthman al-'Uthman's *Critique of Conspiracy Theory in the Interpretation of National and Islamic Defeats*⁴ is one of the only volumes to specifically refer to conspiracy theories. However, even this study differs from most English-language writing in that it questions the validity of particular conspiracy theories about the failure of Arab and Islamic nationalism, rather than looking at the phenomenon of conspiracism in the Arab world as a whole, al-'Uthman frames his research with the following questions:

¹ *Sakk al-Mu'amara: Wa'd Balfūr*

² *Mu'amarat al-Gharb 'ala al-'Arab: Muḥaṭṭat fī Maraḥil al-Mu'amara wa al-Muqawamatiha*

³ *al-Thawra wa al-Mu'amara: 25 Yanayir—Bidaya al-Tariq lil Taghayyur*

⁴ *Naqd Nazariyyat al-Mu'amara fi Tafsir al-Haza'im al-Qawmiyya wa al-Islamiyya*

⁵ This first section of *al-Lajna* appeared as a short story in the May 1979 issue of *Majalat al-Mu'asalat al-Jadida* of *Abn Ḥubbayr* (Munghit), published in Beirut.

⁶ *Maqam al-Ḥadīth* Constable use the word “shiny,” but as Christopher Stone points out in his

³ *al-Thawra wa al-Mu'amara: 25 Yanayir—Bidaya al-Tariq lil Taghayyur*

⁴ *Naqd Nazariyyat al-Mu'amara fi Tafsir al-Haza'im al-Qawmiyya wa al-Islamiyya*

Is it true that the failure to free Palestine was caused by a Zionist conspiracy [with the help of] its allies in London and Washington? Or is it that the reasons for the military and political defeats by the Israeli enemy are connected to the corrupt thought of Arab and Muslim youths? (7)

Thus even this book, while critical of conspiracy theories, is only a minor departure from other work exploring conspiracies in that it engages one specific instance of conspiracy theory rather than the phenomenon as a whole. The slight difference is that it dismisses conspiracy theory in favor of a culturalist explanation that echoes theories of *inḥiṭāt*, an Arab cultural decline.

As previously mentioned, while interpretations of the phenomenon vary from scholar to scholar and region to region, they are all ultimately tied to political and social developments. From the rise of the United States as a superpower and then hegemon to the Arab-Israeli conflict, conspiracy narratives in the US and the Arab world invariably comment on these transformations, whether directly or indirectly. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the historical contexts of *al-Lajna* and *City of Glass* before discussing the ways the two novels approach and report conspiracism.

CHAPTER THREE

COCA-COLA AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

“The 1970s were a decade of discontent,” a time of economic and political change (Solomon 2). Rising oil prices in the latter part of the decade lead to a global economic crisis and were a major factor in the mounting disillusionment with the political status quo. Despite the international dimension of this shift, local variations of this crisis trace their origins to in different watershed events in their national histories. Thus in the United States, roots of the shift in the seventies and eighties are said to reach back to the end of the Second World War, while Egypt traces it to the Officer’s Revolution of 1952.

According to scholars of United States history, the end of the Second World War came with a renewed wave of political liberalism in the United States, (which John Ehrman refers to as “modern liberalism”). Essentially, its proponents aimed to expand the role of the government and implement social and civil rights reforms in line with the political agenda of pre-war progressives such as the Roosevelts (24). These reforms, however, did not quite come to fruition until the sixties with the election of John F. Kennedy and the subsequent passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Great Society legislation under his successor Lyndon B. Johnson (Ehrman 26). From the perspective of the status quo, the idealism and “strong moral claims” of popular social movements of the postwar period, such as the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements, “undermined support for political gradualism and compromise.” Whatever the causes, historians tend to characterize the social condition in the United States during the late sixties and early seventies by high social and political polarization that often led to riots on campuses and urban environments and (Ehrman 26). Two political scandals of the seventies—Watergate and the conclusion of the Vietnam War—

also set an ominous tone for the decade, the first of which ended in the resignation of President Richard Nixon and the second in a hasty attempt to end an unpopular war, which many historians and political scientists frequently cite as a factor contributing to the Cambodian genocide under Pol Pot (Collins 11).

From an economic standpoint, historians point to the combined spending for Johnson's Great Society and the Vietnam War as the cause of inflation in the late sixties (Ehrman 31). Inflation continued into the early seventies, worsened by an increase in oil prices, Nixon's wage and price controls, and a rise in unemployment (Ehrman 31). Economists often refer to this economic predicament, as "stagflation," or a "combination of low-capacity operation and high unemployment coupled with rapidly rising prices," previously thought to be impossible in the market system (Collins 8). This along with a surge in international competition from Europe and East Asia put the nail in the coffin of traditional American industry—particularly the auto industry—with the increasing availability of foreign-made cars (Collins 8-9). According to Sean Wilentz, this development led a number of economists to believe that the United States' economic supremacy was on the decline (6).

On July 15, 1979, President Jimmy Carter delivered what is commonly referred to as his "malaise speech," a highly pessimistic address in which he maintained that the problems of the nation were a product of a "crisis of confidence," the "erosion of faith in the future," and a "rejection of the values of the past" (Collins 23). A volley of political crises followed the "malaise speech," most notably the Iran hostage crisis in which revolutionaries held fifty-three US Marines and embassy employees hostage for 444 days (Moffitt and Campbell 3). Additionally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 stoked fears that the USSR was attempting to gain control of oil fields in the Persian Gulf, and this in combination with the Iran Hostage Crisis made it appear that the balance of power was shifting away from the United States (Moffitt and Campbell 3).

Aside from domestic calamities and slight shifts in power throughout the seventies and eighties, the United States steadily grew to be more of an international heavyweight during the postwar period. As Samir Amin notes, the United States was the prime beneficiary of the war, which had set back contenders such as Europe, China, and Japan. Hence, it was “in a position to exert its economic hegemony, since more than half of global industrial production was concentrated in the United States, especially the technologies that would shape the development of the second half of the century” (“US Imperialism” 14). As US anti-trust laws designed to prevent the formation of monopolies were not applicable internationally, many firms found incentive to engage “in price-fixing outside of the country” and subsequently US foreign investments more than doubled in the sixties, particularly those by Chase Manhattan Bank (Allen 63). By 1974, the United States housed approximately half of the fifty largest corporations in the world; forty percent had their headquarters in Europe while the remainder were based in Japan, Brazil, and Iran (Allen 63).

The region designated by the US military as the “Middle East” was of particular strategic importance during the Cold War for both its oil wealth and geographical location in “the heart of the Old World” (Amin, “US Imperialism” 14). Later, the political vacuums left by pan-Arabism would make the region even more susceptible to foreign control (14). By the late seventies, President Carter attempted to make political and economic alliances with leaders or military groups in the region, most notably Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, who had been trying to curry the favor of the United States since the beginning of the decade.

Historians often trace Sadat’s interest in the United States to developments in Egypt that began with the 1952 Officer’s revolution. With the revolution came a period of relative optimism in Egypt; it was arguably the first time in thousands of years that the country was ruled by one of its own, Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir (Osman 43). As the new President, Nasir aimed to, among other things, end feudalism (about 0.5 percent of the Egyptian population owed

one third of the land in 1950 (Osman 45)) and resist foreign imperialism (particularly the British Empire) (Beattie 3). In addition to reforming land ownership, Nasir nationalized Egypt's major industries, which overall increased industrialization in the country (46) and expanded of the education system (4). Despite his apparent concern for the Egyptian population, however, Nasir's regime was essentially authoritarian, partially because the elites felt that the Egyptian people were not ready for democracy (Beattie 4). Throughout his rule, Nasir worked to curb oppositional political activities; after an alleged assassination attempt he outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood and sentenced a number of communists, including a young Sonallah Ibrahim, to several years in prison (Beattie 4; Ibrahim, *Notes*).

Nasir's refusal to sign an anti-Soviet agreement with the United States and subsequent patronage of Soviet arms manufacturers (Beattie 4) lead to a series of escalating spats between Egypt, the United States, and various European powers. These tensions culminated with the Tripartite attack (otherwise known as the Suez Crisis) in 1956, an attempt to assassinate Nasir and regain control of the canal after its nationalization under the Egyptian president (Beattie 5). Still, historians frequently point out that the United States viewed Nasir with grudging respect. While the United States and Britain launched so-called propaganda wars against Nasir, President Lyndon B. Johnson reportedly referred to him as an "adversary" and considered him "a serious enemy" (Osman 60).

By the mid-sixties, however, the US had cut all foreign aid to Egypt (Beattie 6). The crushing defeat of the 1967 war with Israel, referred to in Arabic as "*al-Naksa*" ("the setback"), was the death knell of Nasirism. The defeat was so demoralizing that Nasir attempted to abdicate, but changed his mind after an outpour of public support (Beattie 7). The war devastated Egypt's economy, military, and infrastructure—during the war Israel gained control of the Sinai peninsula, displacing a large population, many of whom ended up in Cairo—and to assuage the damage, the regime planted the seeds of economic liberalization

(Beattie 7-8). This defeat, one should mention, had an effect on artistic and intellectual production as well. As Ceza Qassam-Draz points out, after *al-Naksa* “Egypt went into a period of self examination and disillusionment where achievements were belittled and past forms rejected,” and in response avant-garde artists created “a forum to crystalize their anxiety, to express their anguish, to manifest their aesthetical quest for a new language and to publish their literary production” (“In Quest” 137). The forum that Draz refers to here was the journal *Gallery 68*, whose contributors were commonly referred to as “The Writers of the Sixties” and included, to some extent, Sonallah Ibrahim (137-8).

Following the death of Nasir in 1970, Sadat came to power and expanded his predecessor’s limited policy of economic liberalization. The October War of 1973 with Israel, while not a complete victory, demonstrated that Egypt was a military force to be reckoned with and many Egyptians reportedly felt that the country had regained some of its dignity after the humiliation of *al-Naksa*. Sadat used this newly found political capital “to break with Nasirism and preach a whole new political strategy to the Egyptians” (Osman 115). This political strategy was essentially “*al-infitāḥ al-iqtiṣādī*,” essentially an open door policy, in which Egypt became a contender in the global market (Osman 115). According to Raymond Hinnebusch, Sadat believe that if he opened Egypt to American investors and reintegrated the country into global capital, the United States would be more sympathetic and help negotiate their retrieval of Sinai, which they had lost in *al-Naksa* (59). Sadat had been planning for *al-infitāḥ* even before the October War, however. In the beginning of 1973 he established a relationship with David Rockefeller, the director of Chase Manhattan Bank, who granted Egypt an \$800 million loan for a pipeline project (that ultimately fell through), and encouraged Egypt to take the capitalist route (Beattie 138).

al-Infitāḥ did little for the Egyptian population as a whole, however. While many of the pre-1952 elite benefited from economic liberalization, nearly everyone else suffered

(Hinnebusch 280). Food shortages, the deterioration of public services, and inflation of about thirty percent each year plagued the majority of the population (Hinnebusch 62). A boom in luxury building intended to entice foreigners and elites drove up the costs of real estate and building materials, making rent unaffordable for the average Egyptian (Hinnebusch 271). Additionally, *al-infitāh* created incentives for government corruption, and middlemen frequently got away with marking up the prices of imports as much as one hundred percent rather than the requisite thirty (Hinnebusch 280). By the late seventies inflation was officially reported to be around thirty-five percent, but in reality it was much higher (Heikel 87).

The growing class disparity culminated with the January 1977 food riots. In October of 1976, a representative of the IMF told the Egyptian Minister of Economics the country needed to adopt radical measures, including a reduction on subsidies for food staples such as rice and lentils (Heikel 91). On January 17th of the following year, the government announced that prices would rise on a number of essential products and in response tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets in major Egyptian cities (91). According to Mohammad Heikal, about five thousand people were arrested (109)—others report numbers less than half that amount (Beattie 210)—but regardless, most were set free before they reached trial and the sentences meted out were for the most part lenient (Baker 161). Following the riots, however, Sadat’s regime became significantly more likely to use force as a means of coercion. Shortly after, he introduced the “*Qānūn al-‘Īb*” (“the law of shame”) under which publishing or spreading news or information that might inflame public opinion, threaten social peace, or national unity was punishable by law, subjecting journalists and novelists alike to increased censorship (Heikal 110).

Despite all this, Sadat was an American media darling; he was *Time* magazine’s 1977 “Man of the Year” and was even awarded for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1978 for his participation in the US-led “peace process” (Kays 65; Farah 79). It had been clear from the

beginning, however, that United States economic aid—upon which Egypt heavily depended under Sadat—was contingent on some sort of peace agreement with Israel, and from the very beginning of *al-infitāh* policies the Egyptian President had engaged in tentative diplomatic relations with the country, with the Sinai I and II agreements after the October War (Hinnenbusch 56). However, while the United States and Europe praised his 1977 visit to Jerusalem and participation in the Camp David Accords a year later, Arab leaders overwhelmingly denounced Sadat's willingness to comply with Israel (Beattie 229). In 1978 almost all Arab states agreed to cut off economic aid to Egypt and boycott Egyptian products if Sadat reached a peace agreement with Israel. After the accords they broke off diplomatic ties with the country, moving the headquarters of the Arab League from Cairo to Tunis (230). Domestically, these developments were also met with varying levels of disapproval and opposition grew. In 1981 the regime arrested about three thousand people it suspected to be participating in opposition movements, and about a month later Sadat was assassinated by members of an Islamic fundamentalist group (Farah 79).

The United States and Egypt were often key players in the political events that contributed to the international economic crises that plagued the late seventies and early eighties—and sparked subsequent political shifts to the right. After the United States provided arms to Israel during the October War, Arab oil states first cut back production by ten percent, then placed an embargo on oil shipments to the United States, Portugal, and Holland (Collins 8). Even after the embargo was lifted, prices of oil continued to rise and by 1974 the price per barrel had increased almost fivefold (Collins 8). The Iranian revolution was another source of high oil prices, which rose from \$13 per barrel in 1978 to \$32 in the mid-eighties after the cessation of Iranian oil exports (Solomon 6). While the Iranian revolution was not directly related to US-Egyptian relations, both positioned themselves against the revolutionaries; while the rhetoric of the revolution targeted, among other things,

United States hegemony, Sadat (perhaps hoping to curry the favor of the US) granted Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi asylum in Egypt.

By the mid-eighties, “five of the G-7 nations—or what was in effect, the economic leadership of the developed world—had elected at least nominal right-wing political leaders (and in some cases, entire governments)” such as Ronald Regan, Margret Thatcher and Francois Mitterrand (Moffitt and Campbell 5; Solomon 7). This shift also occurred outside of Europe, with the 1982 election of Yasuhiro Nakasone in Japan (Moffitt and Campbell 5) and the ascendency of Deng Xiaoping in China after the 1976 death of Mao Zedong, who implemented a series of economic reforms that moved China towards a market economy (Solomon, 9). Perhaps most significantly, the early-to-mid eighties witnessed the structural shift of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, with the introduction of *glasnost* (increased political liberalism) and *perestroika* (increased economic liberalism) policies, which in retrospect many attribute to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1990 (Moffitt and Campbell 6).

3.1 *al-Lajna*

When considered within their political and economic contexts, it should be no surprise that both books grapple with this sense of social and political malaise. *al-Lajna* was written in the late seventies and part of it was published in 1979 before its full release in 1981;⁵ *City of Glass* was written a few years later, from 1981-2, and published on its own in 1983 before being released as a part of *The New York Trilogy* at the end of the decade. As we will see, the conspiracy theories in these novels in particular attempt to comprehend and rectify the social effects of these economic and political developments.

⁵ This first section of *al-Lajna* appeared as a short story in the May 1979 issue of *Majalat al-Fikr al-Mu‘asira* (*The Journal of Contemporary Thought*), published in Beirut.

Noha Radwan makes a case for including novels such *al-Lajna* as a part of “the historical archive about the discourse of Egyptian-American economic and political relationships” because it constitutes a “counter-discourse to the hegemonic narrative of Egypt’s socio-economic and political development during the last three decades” (80-1). Samia Mehrez agrees with this sentiment, writing “Ibrahim has delivered to his readers not just stories, but self-reflexive texts, unique examples of (hi)stories: stories which contain their own history as a part of their very signification and structures” (*Egyptian Writers* 40). This of course only makes sense if one views the text as primarily political, which those writing about Ibrahim do for the most part. Auster’s critics, on the other hand, typically see *City of Glass* as an almost a-political text. Placing both of these works in their historical contexts—both shared and individual—demonstrates, however, that both are historically relevant and complement each other in their depictions of the political and economic realities of the time, both locally and internationally.

al-Lajna begins when the unnamed protagonist—presumably an intellectual—arrives early for an interview with “the Committee,” for which he has spent the entire year preparing. The Committee is an international group that consists of a large number of public figures and, despite the fact that it has an undeniable amount of influence over a variety of sectors (including intellectual production), it does not officially exist. The first interview is essentially an exercise in humiliation: after forcing the protagonist to dance, members of the Committee ask prying questions about his sexual history, and have him deliver a presentation while naked. Though humiliated and nervous, the protagonist is well prepared, making the eloquent argument that Coca-Cola is the most monumental development of the twentieth century, citing its presence in almost every country around the world and ties to both local and international political developments.

The protagonist does not hear from the Committee for months after his interview however, until he receives a note asking him to prepare a second presentation on the greatest Arab luminary of the time (literally, “the most luminous contemporary Arab figure”) (*al-Lajna* 30). The protagonist decides to research a famous personality known as the Doctor (*al-Duktūr*), an ambiguously powerful figure with fingers in all sorts of sectors across the Arab world, partially drawn to a photograph in which he wears a luminous suit.⁶ However, he encounters a number of mysterious obstacles during his preliminary attempts to gather information on the Doctor (which we later learn were put in place by the Committee) and he has to resort to the archives of women’s magazines and the library at the American embassy in order to conduct his research.

He discovers that the Doctor is a member of the *nouveau riche*, the new elite that emerged after the revolution and subsequently had their hands in a variety of industries, including filmmaking, the beverage industry (local, under Nasir, then international under Sadat), and the arms trade. He at first appears to be politically schizophrenic in that his views always reflected those of the ever-changing status quo and are therefore rife with contradictions: though an arms dealer, he claims to promote peace above all else; though he ostensibly fought against the Zionists, he conducts business transactions with Israel. The protagonist also learns that the Doctor participated in and arranged a number of strategic marriages for him and his relatives that connected his family to Arab oil money. Above all else, the Doctor was “the connecting link between foreign financiers and local consumers,” (*The Committee* 50). Perhaps a nod to Sadat on Ibrahim’s part, the Doctor appears on the

⁶ Germain and Constable use the word “shiny,” but as Christopher Stone points out in his review of the translation, this does not convey the connection between the words “*alma*” (most luminous) and “*lāmi ‘a*” (luminous). As Stone notes, this connection was “no accident. Ibrāhīm wants the reader to note that when faced with the choice between a metaphoric and literal understanding of the Committee’s instructions, the narrator, by choosing for his subject a man whose suit is literally ‘luminous,’ opts for the literal” (159).

cover of *Time* magazine, which coincidentally contains the only biography on the public figure.

One day, however, the members of the Committee come to the protagonist's apartment unannounced in order to strongly recommend that he reconsider his topic, although they emphasize that he is free to research any topic he wishes. They leave one of their members behind, who he refers to as "*al-Qaṣīr*" (literally meaning "the short one," translated as "Stubby" in the English version), to stay with him until he reaches his final decision and who follows his every move, and affords the protagonist no degree of privacy. After a few sleepless nights with Stubby he realizes that the Committee member is concealing a revolver in his underwear. Suddenly cognizant to the fact that the Committee is only offering him the illusion of choice, he leaves the knife drawer ajar.

In the next scene, the protagonist appears before the Committee for a second time. The room is filled with memorial wreaths for Stubby from world leaders, all of whom are either American or in some way allied with the United States. When questioned about the death of Stubby, he does not deny his actions, but argues that he was being threatened and had no other choice. The Committee does not believe him, and accuses him of being a part of a conspiracy (*mu'āmarā*) or plot (*khiṭṭa*) based on recordings of his conversations with Stubby and they ask him to name his accomplices (*shurakā'*) (*al-Lajna* 92-4). In order to defend himself, the protagonist tries to show the Committee how the Doctor's strategy of "*al-tanwī'*" (diversification) is connected to the malaise and sense of impotence pervasive among the Egyptian people at the time. However, the Committee pays no attention to his presentation and threatens him with violence if he continues not to comply. Unsuccessful, they recommend that he consume himself (Ibrahim uses the word "*al-akl*," literally meaning "to eat"), as they are technically not able to deliver justice (*al-Lajna* 105). He leaves, buys a warm coke that was promised to be cold, and takes the bus home. On the bus he defends a

woman who was being sexually harassed by a man on the bus and the other passengers kick both men off, accusing the protagonist of being a homosexual and echoing the earlier jeers of the Committee. Slightly injured, he visits a private doctor who is of little help and charges him for services that he believes should be free. He gets into a small yet humiliating spat with the doctor over the fee and spends the next day reviewing his situation, concluding to carry out the Committee's recommendation. Hence as his final act, he makes a short speech into his tape recorder, puts on a record, and consumes himself.

3.2 *City of Glass*

Though the plots of both novels revolve around investigations, *City of Glass* begins with a far less prepared protagonist. The novel commences when Daniel Quinn, a former poet-turned-mystery novel-author writing under the pseudonym William Work, receives a series of phone calls asking for the Paul Auster of the Auster Detective agency. Eventually Quinn finds himself assuming the detective's identity and agrees to meet with the person at the end of the line, a man who suspects that someone is going to murder him called Peter Stillman Jr. He meets Stillman Jr., who delivers a cryptic speech to Quinn/Auster, which his wife Virginia later clarifies. Stillman Jr., it turns out, is the son of a wealthy intellectual and comes from a prestigious Bostonian family. His father attended Harvard University, wrote his dissertation on theological interpretations of the New World, and became a professor at Columbia University in New York. When he was two-years-old, his mother died of mysterious causes and his father took charge of his son's upbringing, locking him in a dark room for nine years during which his only human interaction involved the occasional beating. The boy was discovered after his father allegedly set fire to his work and nearly burned the house down. Peter Stillman Sr. was deemed "insane" and sent to an asylum, while the son was also sent to a hospital and taught the rules of human (read: US) society.

Virginia tells Quinn/Auster that Peter Stillman Sr. is set to be released and they are afraid that he is going to attack his son based on a letter he wrote a few years back in which he called his son a “devil boy” and promised that there would be a day of reckoning (28). Quinn/Auster agrees to take the case, takes a check as a deposit, and buys a red notebook to record his observations. He then ventures to Columbia University to read Stillman Sr.’s thesis, which compares the story of the fall of man, the Tower of Babel, and the religious imperative of early American colonist Henry Dark, who viewed the colonizers as the new “chosen people” with the destiny to build a new “Tower of Babel” in America and create a second and eternal paradise on earth. He then ventures to Grand Central Station where he comes across two identical men that fit the description of Stillman Sr., one in disarray and the other well-dressed. He decides to follow the shabby version of Stillman Sr. up to a rundown hotel on 99th Street and Broadway. For two weeks, Quinn/Auster follows Stillman Sr. as he walks around the neighborhood, and eventually, Quinn/Auster reviews his notes and discovers that Stillman Sr. had been walking in a pattern that spells out the words “TOWER OF BABEL.”

Unsure of whether or not this was intentional on the part of Stillman Sr., Quinn/Auster decides to talk to him. He introduces himself as Quinn in his first meeting with Stillman Sr. and Stillman tells him about his project to create a new language in which the signifier is able to describe the absolute essence of the signified, claiming that this dissonance, between signifier and signified, is the reason why everything is “broken” in contemporary society. Once he unveils his new language, he claims, everyone will be whole again. In the second meeting Stillman Sr. confesses that he invented Henry Dark in order to articulate certain ideas that he had which were too controversial to be said directly. According to Stillman, he chose the name because the initials H. D. could also signify Humpty Dumpty, who, as an egg, represented the potential of humanity to master their own

words, which is manifest in American's persistent desire to discover new worlds, including the moon. In the third and final meeting, Quinn/Auster introduces himself as Peter Stillman Jr. and Stillman Sr. very cryptically tells his "son," among other things, about the importance and impossibility of being honest.

Later, Quinn/Auster discovers that Stillman Sr. has checked out of the hotel. Unsure of what to do next, Quinn contacts the real Paul Auster who is also not a detective, but a writer. Auster agrees to cash Virginia's check for him and he stays for lunch, listening to Auster tell him about his latest essay on the authorship of Don Quixote in which he argues that the book was part of an elaborate experiment by Don Quixote himself in which he set out to see "to what extent would people tolerate blasphemies if it gave them amusement," ultimately finding that amusement trumped the truth of a narrative (99).

Quinn spends the next day walking the length of Manhattan and periodically trying to call Virginia Stillman without success. After he almost gives up, he decides that it was fate that made him take on this case and that he was supposed to continue with it without contacting the Stillmans. He withdraws all of his money and stakes out the Stillman's building for months, hiding in an alley across from it and sleeping in a dumpster. It is here, the narrator claims, that Quinn started to lose his grip of reality. He remains in the alley until his money runs out, at which point he decided to walk to Paul Auster's house to collect the money from Virginia Stillman's check. He calls Auster from a payphone and learns that Stillman Sr. had jumped off of the Brooklyn Bridge two and a half months ago, around the time that Quinn began to stay in the alley, and Stillman Jr. and Virginia were nowhere to be found.

Quinn decides to go back to his own apartment but finds that someone else has moved in. With nowhere else to go, he returns to Stillman Jr.'s apartment, where he stays for the remainder of the narrative and reportedly loses sense of his life outside of the room,

subsisting off of food that appears when he needs it without explanation. Here the narrative shifts from third to first person and the narrator tells the reader how their friend Paul Auster called them after coming back from a trip and informs them about the case. Together, the narrator recounts, they went to Peter Stillman's house looking for Quinn, where they discovered the red notebook. Quinn is nowhere to be found, however and it is as if he has disappeared.

3.3 Conspiracies of Diversification and Language

As works of conspiracy fiction both of these novels share common elements with detective fiction, as previously discussed in the second chapter. In short, conspiracism occurs in both of these novels when a conspiracy theorist attempts to explain a certain phenomenon (or a number of phenomena) by constructing a narrative in which actor(s) work in secret to cause that phenomenon. This narrative, the conspiracy theory, is often a metanarrative in that it postulates that there “is a global or totalizing schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience,” or in other words creates a lens through which the conspiracist views everything (Stephens and McCallum 1). Even if the conspiracy theory itself is not a metanarrative, as we will see with the Committee's conspiracy theory at the end of *al-Lajna*, it is often based in the belief in a particular metanarrative, be it historical, religious, or the like.

Although a number of conspiracy theories run through both of these novels, two dominate: that of the protagonist of *al-Lajna*, and that of Peter Stillman Sr. Alluding to Melley's argument that postwar North American conspiracy fiction is preoccupied with “structural agency,” I will refer to these as “structural” conspiracy theories due to the fact that they describe a continual structure that has some kind of influence on their experience of reality, rather than a group of people secretly planning to influence a finite number of events

that occurred in the past. These structural conspiracy theories reflect a disjunction between the protagonist's experiences and the way in which reality is or can be described. However, with the protagonist of *al-Lajna*, it is a matter of challenging the official narrative, whereas with Peter Stillman Sr., this disjunction is product of language itself. As such, neither are as concerned with the intent of the conspiring structures as a traditional conspiracy theory might be.

The conspiracy that *al-Lajna*'s protagonist depicts can be described as a "conspiracy of diversification," which he develops thorough the course of the novel. This conspiracy theory begins with his observation that Coca-Cola has an unprecedented amount of influence on the lives of people all over the world, which he links to a number of different social, economic, and political phenomena. In his first presentation to the Committee, the protagonist links Coca-Cola to a new kind of international language: "While the words used for God and love and happiness vary from one country to another and from one language to another, 'Coca-Cola' means the same thing in all places and all tongues" (19). He also draws parallels between the spread of Coca-Cola and the rise of American hegemony, along with its contradictions: "The American pharmacist Pemberton synthesized [Coca-Cola] in Atlanta, famous as the capital of Georgia, the birthplace of the American president Carter and the notorious Ku Klux Klan. This was during 1886, the very year in which the famous Statue of Liberty, that symbol of the New World, was completed" (19). By tying all of these people, places, and events together, the protagonist describes Coca-Cola as embodying some of the contradictions that exist within American society. In particular, the juxtaposition of the State of Liberty with the Ku Klux Klan shows how the United States on the one hand strives to embody the values of freedom and democracy for all, but also exists with an undercurrent of white supremacy.

Thus, the protagonist describes an alternate history in which Coke acts as a stand-in for the United States: it was Coke, not the US that emerged victorious from the Second World War; Coke, not the US, was able to infiltrate Europe under the Marshall plan (20). In this way, the protagonist draws a connection between developments in the design of the Coke bottle to US military operations. The bottle design, according to him, was a direct result of United States Imperialism in the Philippines after the Spanish-American war. According to him, “An American soldier, who, coincidentally, had the same name as the great American philosopher of the preceding century, Benjamin Franklin, saw a bottle of a carbonated beverage made from banana syrup. On returning home, he obtained bottling rights for a new product” (20). Similarly, the protagonist claims that the invention and rise in the popularity of the can is directly connected to the need to parachute Coke to the troops in Korea and later Vietnam (21). He even goes as far as to speculate that Jimmy Carter was groomed to be president of the United States by the president of Coca-Cola, concluding that Coke has “played a decisive role in the choice of our mode of life, the inclinations of our tastes, the presidents and kings of our countries, the wars we participate in, and the treaties we enter into” both within the United States, and especially abroad in a country like Egypt (22-3).

The pervasiveness of Coca-Cola and its parallels with international relations—United States hegemony in particular—is the evidence upon which the protagonist builds his theory of diversification. The Doctor, on the other hand, is representative of one of the conspiracy’s facilitators, though not quite a conspirer in the sense that he is also affected by the conspiracy, yet choosing to aid rather than resist it. Essentially, he is a middleman for the conspiracy. As ‘Issam Mahfuz observes, the Doctor is “is the embodiment of the *watani* (national) for imperial exploitation” (54), or as Muhsin al-Musawi puts it, “one in a long line of opportunists in Arabic narratives” (“Engaging Globalization” 314). One could also refer to him as a member of the “collaborating elite” or as a “native informant.” As previously

mentioned, the Doctor has his hands in a variety of industries, from the film industry, to the beverage industry, to arms production. He was also elected a Member of Parliament, had ties to “individuals holding the top positions in the justice department, the police, the army, the administration, and the world of business and finance” (53). In addition to this, he “worked energetically to import foodstuffs, cars, and airplanes,” and obtained bottling rights for Coca-Cola as soon as he could, thus benefitting greatly from *al-infitāh* (60-1; 73-4). He even had his hand in linguistic developments, according to the protagonist “coining new meanings from common words, among them the unique term ‘diversification’” (124).

Diversification, then, is the method that conspirators use to simultaneously implement and deny the existence of a conspiracy. The protagonist illustrates how the conspiracy of diversification functions by first pointing to the way Coca-Cola was able to extend its reach across the globe when it began to produce other beverages and expand “its interests to farming, peanuts, coffee, and tea” (126). He then claims that there is a similarity between this and the way that Arab leaders had changed their techniques of coercion over the recent years: “At one time all these regimes applied one unchanging means of persuasion to their people: imprisonment and torture. But diversification added other sophisticated methods, from termination to television, to parliamentary councils” (127). Diversification, according to the protagonist, also accounts for the regime’s constantly changing slogans and alliances (and perhaps the Doctor’s politics):

Due to the policy of diversification, this country’s network of alliances, which were restricted in the past to Arab peoples, were extended to now include the friendly country of Australia. Because of this policy, the Egyptians receive plenty of American, English, French, Italian, and German armaments that had long been withheld [...] (128)

He looks at the changes in the cigarette sales as an example of how diversification has affected the general population of consumers. After the market opened to foreign cigarettes under *al-infitāh*, the domestic brand, the Belmont, disappeared a number of times (130).

According to the protagonist, this switch caused mental depression, both because “foreign cigarettes sell for twice the price of the local ones” and also its addictive quality (much like Coke, as he previously mentioned (130). He continues:

Since the consumption of cigarettes in developing countries is more widespread than in other countries (the latter have forbidden advertising in order to alert their citizens to tobacco’s link with cancer and now offer a variety of pleasures as alternative), the resulting depression is deeper and harder to treat, which causes foreign drug companies to recommend higher doses of powerful antidepressants for people in developing countries.

This creates a new problem, which is addiction to these drugs. However, diversification itself offers the solution for this problem, for during the course of treatment, the doctor falls back on a continual change of medication in which the multiplicity of drugs is helpful.

To consider depression itself, it is usually equivalent to a crossroads whose branches sometimes lead to sexual impotence, religious fanaticism, apathy, slovenliness, or insanity. (129-30)

What is notable about this “conspiracy of diversification” is that while it follows a hierarchy that includes international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, or the United Nations towards the top, and middlemen such as the Doctor and the Committee members, the protagonist does not point to any one particular actor at its pinnacle. The political reality that the protagonist describes best resembles a clandestine plutocracy whose power comes from their ability to avoid detection, through the process of diversification—it is diversification that enables it to remain a conspiracy in the traditional sense of a number of people planning to act in secret against another party. However, the fact that the protagonist does not get to complete his research indicates that his conspiracy theory might be incomplete, and it is important to note that the majority of his research, as well as his observations of the Committee members themselves, points rather incriminatingly to the United States. And while the United States government is certainly involved, he hints that it is the multinational corporations that dictate the country’s political interests, rather than the other way around.

The second structural conspiracy theory, which Peter Stillman Sr. illustrates throughout the novel, can be described as the “conspiracy of language.” The theory begins with Stillman Sr.’s thesis, *The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World*, which he divides into two sections. First is “The Myth of Paradise,” in which Stillman Sr. examines the notion, common to many European explorers, that the Americas were actually paradise. He observes:

From the very beginning, [...] the discovery of the New World was the quickening impulse of utopian thought, the spark that gave hope to the perfectibility of human life—from Thomas More’s book of 1516 to Gerónimo de Mendieta’s prophecy, some years later, that America would become an ideal theocratic state, a veritable city of God. (42)

Others, however, did not agree and saw the Native populations as “savage beasts, devils in the form of men” rather than the embodiment of prelapsarian innocence (42).

Consequently, a debate raged

[...] for several hundred years, culminating on the one hand in the ‘noble savage’ of Locke and Rousseau—which laid the theoretical foundations of democracy in an independent America—and, on the other hand, in the campaign to exterminate the Indians, in the undying belief that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. (42)

The second section, “The Myth of Babel,” compares the biblical stories of the fall of man and the Tower of Babel, relying on Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as a representation of the “orthodox Puritan position” (42). First, Stillman Sr. examines the possible double meanings of some of the important words in *Paradise Lost* such as “to taste,” whose Latin equivalent meant “to taste” and “to know,” as well as the word “to cleave,” meaning both “to join together” and “to break apart,” arguing that these words have pre and postlapsarian meanings (42-3). According to Stillman Sr., “Adam’s one task in the garden was to invent language, to give each creature its name. In that state of innocence, his tongue had gone straight to the quick of the word. His words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they had revealed their essences, had literally brought them to life” (43). In the postlapsarian world,

however, “Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, records not only the fall of man, but the fall of language” (43).

When read in this way, Stillman Sr. argues, the myth of Tower of Babel tells the same story as the fall of man. To him, building the Tower was an attempt at reaching global unity; Nimrod, its architect and “the first ruler of all the world” intended for it “to be a shrine that symbolized the universality of power” (44). Thus the Tower was a challenge to God in that it united the earth in its efforts to build the towers, and (perhaps more dangerously) in a common language. The ability to build the Tower, then, put divine agency—essentially the ability to exist as a whole rather than in fragments—into humanity’s hands (44).

At the end of “The Myth of Babel,” Stillman Sr. returns to the New World in order to look at a man called Henry Dark, “an ardent Puritan” who had purportedly been Milton’s private secretary before immigrating to Boston in 1675 (45). Fifteen years later, Dark allegedly published a pamphlet called *The New Babel* in which he interprets the myth of Babel as a prophetic work, maintaining that it was the Puritan’s imperative to build paradise in America:

Unlike the other writers on the subject, Dark did not assume paradise to be a place that could be discovered. There were no maps that could lead a man to it, no instruments of navigation that could guide its man to its shores. Rather, its existence was immanent within man himself: the idea of a beyond he might someday create in here and how. For utopia was nowhere—even, as dark explained, in its “worldhood.” And if man could bring forth of this dreamed-of place, it would only be by building it with his own two hands. (46)

Based on the reading of Genesis II, in which God mandates the “westward movement of human life and civilization” from its starting point in Eden (somewhere east of Babylon), he concludes that the European settlement of the New World is “the fulfillment of ancient commandment” (47-8). “The impediment of the building of Babel, that man must fill the earth—would be eliminated,” Dark reportedly believed, going on to claim that only then

would it “be possible again for the whole earth to be of one language and one speech. And if that were to happen, paradise could not be far behind” (48). Because Babel had been built 340 years after the flood, Dark predicted the Tower would be built in 1960, 340 years after the landing of the Mayflower (the year in which Stillman Sr. first locked his son in a dark room) (48). After this new Babel is built, Dark predicted,

History would be written in reverse. What had fallen would be raised up; what had been broken would be made whole. Once completed, the Tower would be large enough to hold every inhabitant of the New World. There would be room for each person, and once he entered that room, he would forget everything he knew. After forty days and forty nights, he would emerge a new man, speaking God’s language, prepared to inhabit the second, everlasting paradise. (48-9)

Later we learn, however, that Henry Dark was never actually a person, but a character that Stillman Sr. invented because, he claims, ““I needed him, you see. I had certain ideas at the time that were too dangerous and too controversial. So I pretended they had come from someone else. It was a way of protecting myself”” (79). Quinn/Auster’s interactions with Stillman Sr. reveal that the latter is attempting to fulfill “Henry Dark’s” prophecy because he is supposedly “the only one” who understands how the world is broken and therefore has to act as a kind of savior to mankind (74-5). He explains to Quinn/Auster (emphasis mine):

“You see, the world is in fragments, sir. Not only have we lost our sense of purpose, we have lost the language whereby we can speak of it. These are no doubt spiritual matters, but they have their analogue in the material world. My brilliant stroke has been to confine myself to physical things, to the immediate and tangible [...] You see, I am in the process of inventing a new language. [...] A language that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little, these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. *And yet our words have remained the same. They have not adapted themselves to the new reality. Hence, every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent.*” (75-6)

He gives the example of the umbrella. An umbrella, according to Stillman Sr., should be a thing that performs a function, to protect someone from the rain. Language fails us, then, when we continue to call it an umbrella even after it is no longer able to protect someone

from the rain (76). Stillman Sr. believes that once he invents his new language, one which fully corresponds with reality, “great things will begin to happen. It will be the most important event in the history of mankind” (77).

Both structural conspiracy theories are invariably linked to their historical contexts, or more specifically, the pervasive sense of impotence (even if only imagined) that hung over the late seventies and early eighties in the United States and Egypt. While Ibrahim’s protagonist describes a world that is brought together and dominated by the interests of multinational corporations, carried out by middlemen, Auster’s conspiracist, Stillman Sr., sees his sense of powerlessness as indicative of a lack of unity in the world, which he claims is a product of the lack of a global language.

Conspicuously absent from Stillman Sr.’s project of global unity, however, are other nations. This absence hints at what the Committee later calls their goal to establish a United States of Earth, a unity in which the United States extends across the globe (113). It is therefore not surprising that Stillman’s theory relies on an interpretation of civilization and humanity that only acknowledges the legitimacy of Christian European civilization and its inhabitants. This, as Stillman Sr. points out at the beginning of his dissertation, is what enabled the Puritans to make the moral case in support of their interactions with the Native populations of the Americas. Furthermore, this interpretation is the foundation upon which Stillman’s theory rests. By these means, Stillman Sr. views the move towards global unity under the leadership of the United States as the only way to gain back any sort of human agency—though by human it is implied that he is primarily concerned with Americans of European descent. Conversely, the protagonist of *al-Lajna* makes clear that this shift is already happening and moreover, experiences it as one in which the majority of the world is disempowered, subject to the whims of a global hierarchy at the top of which rests American corporations. Here, both Ibrahim’s protagonist and Stillman Sr. hold the United States

accountable for this phenomenon. However, while the former speaks to the authoritarian hegemony of the phenomenon, the latter emphasizes its unifying and implicitly peace-giving qualities. Fittingly, these views reflect the economic debate over the term “globalization,” its definition, and its accuracy in describing their contemporary political realities.

CHAPTER FOUR

THAT OLD DREAM OF GLOBAL UNITY

As Muhsin al-Musawi observes, “there is a strong postcolonial drive to release literature from the limitations of specific disciplines and ideologies while opting for a better engagement with globalization in its many negative and positive facets,” particularly in modern Arabic literature (“Engaging Globalization” 305-6). As the literature on conspiracy fiction suggests, this is also partially true of writing coming from the United States and Europe with their Jamesonian attempts to grasp the totalizing systems of a worldwide capitalism. The ways in which different works of fiction grapple with these phenomena do not necessarily agree on the means of this move towards global unity, however, particularly concerning the structure’s source of power. These two novels present two different perspectives on the matter and in doing so treat the question of whether the United States plays a hegemonic imperial role as a global power, or if it too is subject to the control of a larger, ambiguous structure. In this way, *al-Lajna* and *City of Glass* engage in the imperialism-globalization debate.

4.1 Global Harmony or Imperial Hegemony?

Michael Rogin begins an essay on the political spectacle in the United States with the argument that “World War II laid the structural foundations in politics for the modern American Empire” (516). The United States accomplished this by establishing “the military industrial state as the basis for both domestic welfare and foreign policy,” drawing “the political parties together behind an interventionist, bipartisan foreign policy,” and linking “the mass public to the structures of power,” (though, he is quick to point out, mass

enthusiasm for power structures petered out during the Korean war and reached its all-time low during Vietnam) (516-7). Ideologically, he continues “World War II celebrated the undercover struggle of good against evil, and thereby prepared the way for the covert spectacle,” which aided the political effort to unify the public in support of these power structures (517). In a similar vein, V. G. Keirnan observes that in the United States after World War II “there was a streak of the old mystic faith in its special destiny, the beckoning finger of Providence, combined now with the twin themes of anti-communism and defiance of Soviet power which would take lead if America failed to do so” in US attempts to visualize its place in the international arena (205). Later he adds that “Anti-communism as an ideology was America’s substitute for the ‘civilizing mission’ of earlier imperialism,” which could be neatly imposed on the seemingly noble purpose of the defense of democracy and the human rights it entails (215).

Frank Ninkovitch, however, does not agree with Rogin and Keirnan’s terminology, and argues that the Cold War actually marked the end of United States imperialism, and rather gave rise to the phenomenon of globalization (249). Defining imperialism as existing “when an important aspect of a nation’s life is under the effective control of an outside power,” (5) Ninkovitch maintains that “Because globalization was always more a global process than an American project, a multi-lane superhighway rather than a one-way street, the American way of life was also transformed by globalization” (252). Thus, the fact that America was changed by this phenomenon indicates that the term “imperialism” is not applicable.

Stillman Sr.’s vision of the United States as a promise land with global potential speaks to these points. One could interpret his use of Henry Dark and Puritan narratives in order to describe the state of postwar United States culture as examples of Keirnan’s “mystical thinking” and perhaps draws an unconscious connection between postwar

ideology—with its human rights discourse—with earlier imperialist discourses that claimed that United States imperialism was divine will such as the manifest destiny. Furthermore, the dualism of postlapsarian language that Stillman Sr. strives to overcome in his search for totality is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than the ideology of the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, as Rogan and Keirnan note, and a factor contributing to Stillman’s conspiracist impulse. In this way, one could attribute Stillman Sr.’s failure to reach the prelapsarian whole of language—and thus the world—to his inability to entirely escape his own historical and rhetorical paradigm. Perhaps, then, his turn towards the mystical was an attempt to compensate for his inability to escape his own paradigm in that the mystical traditions within which he chose to work are concerned with accessing the universal. However, by referring to divine rather than human impulses for unity, Stillman Sr. manages to avoid pinning the responsibility of global expansion on the United States, and rather transmits it to a superstructure. Hence, Stillman paints a picture of global unity that does not implicate any particular political power and implies a certain degree of equivalence between all members of humanity, similar to Nikovitch’s description of globalization.

However, as James F. Petras and Henry Veltmeyer observe, globalization may not accurately describe the economic and political realities of the postwar period. While, as previously mentioned, globalization implies interdependence between nations, imperialism “emphasizes the domination and exploitation by imperial states and multinational corporations and banks of less-developed states and laboring classes,” and “fits the realities much better than globalization” (29-30). They attribute this imbalance of power between the United States as an imperial state and other nations such as Egypt to the fact that the latter are producing less and less raw materials for export, as well as the fact that dominant countries “wield disproportionate or decisive influence,” as we have seen with the financial and political relationship between Egypt and the United States in the previous chapter (30).

Marxist economist Samir Amin goes beyond this to argue that capitalism has been from the very beginning, “a polarizing system, that is, imperialist” (“US Imperialism” 13). “This polarization” he continues, meaning “the concurrent construction of dominant centers and dominant peripheries, and their reproduction deepening in each stage—is inherent in the process of accumulation of capital operating on a global scale” (13). In this sense, “convergence theory,” or “the notion that the market and democracy converge” is disproven by the fact that “global capitalist market relations have generated ever greater inequalities” (“Imperialism and Globalization” 15). He therefore designates these theories as “pure dogma; a theory of imaginary politics” that does not describe the realities of an existing capitalism but “an imaginary economy” (15).

He delves deeper into this idea in an article in response to Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of the Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, in which Huntington divides the world into immutable cultures that influence the trajectory of history rather than the other around. Here, Amin points out that Huntington’s theory of culturalism undermines the universalist pretensions of the global expansion of capitalism (“Imperialism and Culturalism” 7). He writes:

Imperialism and culturalism are thus always good bedfellows. The first expresses itself in the arrogant certitude that “the West” has arrived at the end of history, that the formula for managing the economy (private property, the market), political life (democracy), society (individual freedom), are *a priori* interconnected, definitive, and unsurpassable. The real contradictions that may be observed are declared to be imaginary, or are claimed to be produced by absurd resistance to submission to capitalist rationality. For all other peoples, the choice is simple: to accept this false unity of “Western values,” or to closet themselves in their own cultural specificities. If, given the polarization that “market” and imperialism must produce, the first of those two options is impossible (as is the case for most of the world), then cultural conflict will occupy the foreground. But in this conflict the dice are loaded: the “West” will always win, the other will always be beaten. This is why the Others’ culturalist option cannot only be tolerated, but even be encouraged. It only poses a threat to the victims. (7-8)

Most scholars write about *al-Lajna* in terms of globalization. al-Musawi, for example claims that throughout the novel, “the protagonist exposes and mocks the reluctance of the discourse of globalization to engage the ideological (economic and political) reasons behind any phenomenon” (309). Hoda Elsadda disagrees with al-Musawi’s use of the term globalization, but only to the extent that it ignores local agents, and therefore argues in favor of the term “glocalization.” She writes: “Ibrahim’s project is to expose the glocal hegemony of the new world order, especially its impact on the lives of the individuals. The conflict is no longer between the colonized nation-state and the colonial, but between the individual against the combined aggression of both” (126-7). However, while al-Musawi’s globalization does sufficiently describe the power relations present in *al-Lajna*, Elsadda’s glocalization appears to be oblivious to the fact that almost all instances of imperialism and colonialism depend on the aid of local elites, and that the Doctor is far from a new figure.

4.2 The Language of Covert Imperialism

Considering this, the conspiracy that Ibrahim’s protagonist describes—as well as the reality within which the novel occurs—more closely resembles imperialism than anything else, particularly Amin’s interpretation of imperialism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in his conspiracy theory of diversification, the United States (while not alone) plays a disproportionate role in the transformation of Egyptian society after *al-infitāh*. More notably, the reality in which Ibrahim’s novel exists also points to an imperialist conspiracy coming from the United States. First, there is the existence of the Committee, which by definition is a conspiratorial group in that they act in secrecy yet have a hand in all facets of Egyptian society. In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist recounts unsuccessfully attempting to research the Committee and its members before having his interview. Though he was certain that many had appeared before it, “Most denied ever having gone before the

Committee, or even denied all knowledge of its existence” and those who would admit that they had been in front of the committee gave descriptions that “were vague and contradictory” (6-7). Furthermore, while trying to research the Committee members, he “found a shroud of secrecy veiled their names and jobs. Everyone whom I asked regarded me with anxious and pitying looks” (7). And while the Committee is not officially affiliated with any nation (nothing about it is official, after all), its ties to the United States are perhaps best illustrated by the nationalities of the figures that sent the Committee condolences after Stubby’s murder:

Right in front I discovered the names of the American president Carter and his wife, the first lady, his vice president, Walter Mondale, and his national security advisor, Brzezinski. I also saw the names of his predecessor, Kissinger, and several former American presidents such as Nixon and Ford, as well as Rockefeller, Rothschild, MacNamara [sic] (president of the World Bank), the president of Coca-Cola, directors of international banks, presidents of companies that manufacture weapons, chewing gum, drugs, cigarettes, electronics, petroleum [...] (109)

While the protagonist goes on to note wreaths from other countries and corporations based outside of the United States, it is clear that the country is more invested in the wellbeing of the Committee members than the others.

Then there is the fact that the Committee attempts to thwart the protagonist’s efforts to research the Doctor, finally appearing at his apartment in an attempt to convince him to change his topic, asking somewhat cryptically: ““Didn’t you think about the significance of what you were doing and its effects?”” (69). They make an exaggerated effort to appear to be offering a choice, but the protagonist’s discovery of Stubby’s revolver, as well as their threat to use force in order to obtain a confession and the names of the protagonist’s alleged accomplices towards the end of the novel (““We are capable of undoing the knot in your tongue. Truly, due to the humanitarian principles that guide us, we are not inclined to resort to such methods, but the ends justify the means”” (132)) highlights the threat of violence underlying supposedly humanitarian discourse. This speaks to Slavoj Žižek’s writing on

violence and language. In the following passage he outlines the humanitarian view of language:

In language, instead of exerting direct violence on each other, we are meant to debate and exchange words, and such an exchange, even when it is aggressive, presupposes a minimal recognition of the other party. The entry into language and the renunciation of violence are often understood as two aspects of one and the same gesture. (60)

Hence in this view, according to Žižek, language is a substitute for violence, and when it is not, it is seen as occurring “under the influence of contingent ‘pathological circumstances’ which distort the inherent logic of symbolic communication” (61). Pathological, one might add, when committed by anyone that does not agree with the dominant discourse. After all, as the committee demonstrates, language only works as a substitution for violence as long as it can effectively coerce. Furthermore, this humanitarian view of language as a replacement for violence relies on the notion that there are inherent differences between those who follow the hegemonic discourse and those who resist it, as per Huntington’s *Clash of the Civilizations*. This understanding of language then approaches violence (implicitly meaning that committed against the hegemon) as an unchanging cultural trait of a group, and may call for the use of preemptive forces against these populations.

One could then argue that language is complicit in both structural conspiracy theories. In both theories, for instance, language plays a functional role in implementing the conspiracy, albeit to different degrees: to Stillman Sr., signifiers are the cause and cure for society’s ailments; to the protagonist of *al-Lajna* narrative and vocabulary are tools that can be used both to disguise and explain the way in which the conspiracy of diversification functions. On the political level, conspirators in Ibrahim’s novel such as the Committee members use rhetoric to mask their true intentions, as well as a means of influence, as we saw with the previous example. On the corporate level, advertisers and merchants alike use a vocabulary that does not quite correspond with their products in order to deceive consumers.

The disjunction between the merchant's lexicon and the consumer's experience is best shown when the protagonist goes to buy a bottle of Coke after his final meeting with the Committee:

I noticed [the vendor's] hand holding a bottle out toward me. I quickly intervened before he popped the cap, asking, "Is it cold?"

Looking at me disapprovingly, he said, "As ice."

I touched the bottle and found it was warm, so I said, "No, I'd like a cold one."

While making his displeasure to me clear, he held out the bottle toward the crowd. I reached out and rummaged among the bottles. I discovered that not only were most of them warm, but there was no sign of ice in the water. [...] I watched them drink the magic liquid. They touched the bottles as though to assure themselves of their ability to distinguish hot and cold. Then, resigned, they swallowed the contents to the last drop and paid the price the vendor had demanded. He had doubled the listed price on the pretext of the imaginary ice. He scowled and everyone paid it submissively. (135)

Here it is clear that the public, along with the protagonist, is aware that they are being duped, but feel that they have no choice but to go along with the obvious contradiction between what is being said and their experience as a consumer. Despite this obvious disjuncture, the vendor (like the Committee) only becomes angry when his authority is challenged; any suggestion of the quite noticeable contradictions between the vendor's vocabulary and the consumer's experience falls on deaf ears—he does not even deny it.

The Committee acts similarly throughout the novel. Rather than responding to his presentation on Coca-Cola, they ask the protagonist to prepare a second, which he believes is rather abnormal. When he chooses to research a narrative that poses an existential threat to the system that the Committee serves to protect, they collude to threaten him with violence, which he only discovers when a revolver falls out of Stubby's underwear while using the bathroom. The conspicuous absence of any description of Stubby's murder indicates that even the protagonist is not immune to (c)omitting violence when it works in his favor. One could read this, in addition to the nonchalance with which the protagonist treats the act, as an indication that the protagonist considers violence against the Committee, an organization backed by the most powerful militaries in the world, as legitimate and in this sense, not really

violence. He tells the reader: “From the beginning I hadn’t denied anything or tried to justify the act. On the other hand, I felt no regret since I was convinced that what had happened was inevitable” (116). By calling it “inevitable,” he transfers the blame for the murder from himself to the Committee, which resembles Stillman Sr.’s appeal to higher powers in order to disguise the violent implications in his call for unity.

The difference between the protagonist’s and the Committee’s omissions of violence in their narratives is that the threat of violence is the subtext of the Committee’s rhetoric; it is only when the protagonist ignores this subtext (perhaps naively, perhaps by choice) that they explicitly threaten him. In fact, the methods the Committee uses to intimidate the protagonist are almost entirely verbal, with the exception of the homosexuality test. Furthermore, during his last meeting with the Committee, the protagonist observes that many of the people who had been wearing military uniforms are dressed as civilians and vice versa, using the language of uniforms as an unspoken threat (111). The punishment the Committee gives the protagonist also comes under the guise of suggestion, which uses the illusion of choice to place the onus on the condemned to carry it out on their own and transfers responsibility. The power of the Committee is so strong and pervasive that they never have to commit violence themselves; their words are essentially the act.

Another reading of the protagonist’s decision to consume himself goes beyond this and argues that the protagonist’s acts of violence are acts of resistance. Rather than submitting to the Committee’s request to stop his research on the Doctor, the protagonist sees no choice but to eliminate the threat to his pursuit of truth. Once it becomes clear that he would not be able to live in a world without a Committee monitoring his actions, he chooses to leave it by consuming himself, thus appropriating the Committee’s punishment for his benefit. Before he takes his first bite, he makes the following speech to a tape recorder:

“I have committed—from the beginning—unpardonable errors. I shouldn’t have stood before you, but against you. Every noble effort on this earth should be at eliminating you.

“Let me add quickly that I am not so naïve as to imagine that were this achieved, the matter would end there. By the very nature of things, a new Committee would take your place. No matter the beauty of its plans or the perfection of its goals, corruption would soon set in. Even if it started out as a symbol, it would become an obstacle, and sooner or later it in turn would have to be eliminated.

“From my investigation of history and cases similar to mine, I perceive that via this very process—an ongoing process of change and transformation—your group will gradually lose what authority it has, while the power of those like me to confront and resist will grow.

“However, unfortunately, I won’t be there when that takes place because fate has allotted me, a fate deriving on the one hand from my ambitions, which exceed my potential, and my quixotic search for knowledge, and on the other hand, from my entanglement in a reckless but inevitable attempt to challenge your Committee at an unsuitable time and place. But what alleviates my sorrow is my confidence in what will eventually happen, for this is the logic of history and the nature of life.”
(156-7)

Here it becomes clear that what he means by “inevitable” and “fate” are not so much something mandated by something beyond him as an individual, but by a strong moral code. It is his belief in his own humanity and his commitment to the search for underlying truths that fated him to kill Stubby, and fated him to consume himself. In the end, the protagonist of *al-Lajna* is an optimist, and a patient one too in that he believes that the goodness of humanity (“the logic of history and the nature of life”) will one day prevail and the imperial conspiracy will fail.

Regardless of the protagonist’s intentions at the end, this novel illustrates the different methods of coercion that agents of hegemonic structures may use, including conspracism. After ignoring the protagonist’s first presentation and offering him another chance, they essentially accuse him of being paranoid, all but calling him a conspiracist. While describing a rough version of his theory of the connections between the Doctor, Coca-Cola, and mental disorders among the Egyptian population he elicits the following response from Stubby: “I

see you're chasing a mirage, imagining something that doesn't exist, for how does an ordinary study like the one you're doing lead up to all these matters?" (95).

After they fail to shake him by questioning his sanity, the Committee finally accuses the protagonist of being a conspirator, countering conspiracy theory with conspiracy theory: one Committee member argues that he used the assignment “as a pretext for prying into the Doctor's past,” and the fact that he refused to stop his study despite their warnings “confirms that we are facing a great conspiracy. For some time its threads have been woven very skillfully and maliciously. The attack on the deceased's life is nothing but another thread in the tapestry” (119) At the beginning of their last meeting with the protagonist, the chairman of the Committee delivers the following eulogy for Stubby:

“The possibility of fulfilling the dreams of mankind and putting to an end all of the dangers that threatened the human race is unfolding. They had arisen in the '50s, but were buried in the '60s and early '70s and due to our colleague's [Stubby's] role are springing up again.

“Here we refer to that old dream of global unity or a United States of the Earth, in which all of the inhabitants of the planet would be incorporated into a homogenous state fostering prosperity and attempting to provide a better life [...]

“From the beginning the Committee has put itself at the service of revolutionary objectives, ethical principles, and religious values. Its members have supported everything that would strengthen basic freedoms and expand the democratic process.

“Naturally, we aroused the animosity of evil and destructive elements, which did their utmost to resist us. In this connection, let me draw your attention to the carefully manufactured uproar over the methods we use in our work and to the charges, sometimes of sadism and sometimes of demagoguery, that are liberally levied against us. [...]

“Your duty might seem clear because the criminal stands before you and admits to the heinous crime, but nevertheless, there's more than meets the eye, and your job is to get to the bottom of it.” (113-5)

The irony here is that both conspiracy theories target what they perceive to be “evil and unjust elements,” though the protagonist is careful not to use those words when addressing the Committee. Furthermore, in its commitment to “democratic values” while also enforcing the free market, the Committee appears to subscribe to convergence theory, which as previously noted, Amin all but calls a conspiracy theory, and which is also not a reflection of

the reality that the protagonist experiences—especially since the Committee, as an unelected body, exercises far too much control for anyone to claim that they aim to promote democracy.

Over all however, this conspiracy theory more closely resembles those mentioned by Fawaz Traboulsi and Sadik al-‘Azm in that it works to uphold the status quo rather than to challenge it, as the protagonist’s theory does. Unlike the conspiracy theories that Traboulsi and al-‘Azm discuss, however, the Committee’s is intentionally a conspiracy theory. Based on the Committee’s extensive surveillance capabilities, it is unlikely that the Committee would be unaware of the protagonist’s conspiracy against the them, or his accomplices, and it appears that here conspiracy theory functions primarily as a means of coercion, in line with the humanitarian view of language. Beyond this, the eulogy exhibits the ways in which powers create narratives after the fact in order to justify their violence, which Stillman Sr. echoes in his thesis.

Or rather, the way the existence of other people is either obscured or completely ignored in order to fit with the metanarrative that they subscribe to—in the case of the Puritans, a particular religious metanarrative—and beyond this, allow them to become a colonial power. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Stillman Sr.’s theory contains no mention of violence against the Native populations in the Americas, nor does he appear to consider the violent implications of the continued American desire to find new worlds, a sort of imperial impulse since this desire entails an aspiration to control both its land and its residents. This is best shown in a conversation with Quinn/Auster (in which Quinn/Auster introduces himself as Henry Dark), in which the following exchange occurs beginning with Stillman Sr. (emphasis mine):

“I admit things have not worked out too well yet. But there is still hope. *Americans have never lost their desire to discover new worlds.* Do you remember what happened in 1969?”

“I remember many things. What do you have in mind?”

“Men walked on the moon. Think of that, dear sir. Men walked on the moon!”

“Yes, I remember. According to the President, it was the greatest event since creation.”

“He was right. The only intelligent thing the man ever said.” (81-2)

Stillman Sr.’s choice of the moon as the next venue for American expansion is particularly significant because it is uninhabited, and thus much less controversial than a geographical region with an already-thriving population. As an aside, it is important to note that the moon landing is also a popular source of conspiracy theories, many of which argue that the government staged the spectacle in order to intimidate the Soviet Union. While these theories may not be relevant to that of Stillman Sr., Cold War dynamics certainly are. As part of the arms race, the moon landing—whether real or fabricated—functioned as a substitute for a physical act of violence, in a conflict characterized by its supposed ability to transcend violence. One could argue that “the Cold War” is a misnomer, however, given the two Superpowers’ involvement in other international conflicts, whether through replenishing arms supplies or economic aid. As we saw in the previous chapter the Soviet Union and the United States were particularly involved in Israeli altercations with Arab states, which were arguably escalated by the Superpowers’ involvement and could even be considered proxy wars. In this way, “the Cold War” is a term that only acknowledges violence committed against international heavy weights—those who influence Ibrahim’s Committee, perhaps.

The absence of violence in both the Committee and Stillman Sr.’s conspiracy theories demonstrate that the denial of complicity in any act of violence is necessary when justifying one’s role as an imperial power. The Committee goes even further than Stillman Sr. in that they deny that they have any relation to an imperial power to begin with. However, the tendency of Stillman Sr. to treat United States imperialism as a future objective, rather than a project that is already being carried out, misses the fact that a global language exists, as we see in the world of *al-Lajna*. First and most obvious are the product names, such as Coca-

Cola and Samsonite (his briefcase is not merely a briefcase, but a Samsonite briefcase). Another instance involves the failure of Nasirism. Prior to the era of the Committee, as previously mentioned, there was a move towards Arab unity, but when that failed with the fall of Nasirism—another unity—according to the protagonist arose: “That unity, for which the Doctor deserves all the credit, is the unity of foreign commodities used by everyone,” which is indicated by the fact that people across the globe will understand you if you ask for a Coke (71). Then are conspiracy’s middlemen, such as the Doctor, who transformed their native languages in order to fit the changing reality (or, as the protagonist suggests, to change reality). The protagonist finds evidence of this in

“[...] the disappearance of specific words and the appearance of new ones, some of them unique, unprecedented forms, such as ‘pilfer’ [*tahlīb*] and ‘pretend not to hear,’ [*taṭnīsh*] whereas others, such as ‘diversification’ [*al-tanwī*] and ‘naturalization’ [*al-taṭbī*], and ‘activization’ [*al-taḥrīk*] are newly created and derivations of familiar words.” (*al-Lajna*, 59; *The Committee*, 73)

As al-Musawi points out, these linguistic developments are all a part of diversification, in that this lexical shift functions to “invent ‘consumer traditions’” and attempts to create a diverse variety of global consumer identities in order to build more markets (“Engaging Globalization” 320-1). Furthermore, these terms are indicative of the development of an international corporate vocabulary, which have easily-translatable equivalents in a variety of languages.

Despite these international linguistic developments there remains a difference between these and Stillman Sr.’s platonic vision of a prelapsarian language. While prelapsarian language entails complete correspondence between signifier and signified, these lexical developments work in the opposite fashion. Both protagonists are then spurred by a crisis in communication, which Stillman Sr. is so preoccupied with on a theoretical level that his is unable to see the political dimensions of this project. Violence to Stillman Sr. is then

much more subtle, similar to what Žižek describes as the “violence of language” when he suggests:

[...] there is something violent in the very symbolization of a thing, which equals its mortification. This violence operates at multiple levels. Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it. When we name gold “gold,” we violently extract a metal from its natural texture, investing into our dreams of wealth, power, spiritual purity, and so on, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the immediate reality of gold. (61)

In the end, both structural conspiracy theories stem from similar symptoms. While Ibrahim’s protagonist points to “the spread of maladies of mental depression, sexual impotence, apathy, religious fanaticism” (95), Stillman Sr. chose New York to conduct his research on his Tower of Babel project “because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts” (77). To both authors of the structural conspiracy theories in these books, language plays a functional role in implementing the conspiracy, whether through the construction of narratives or use of words that do not correspond with the conspiracist’s perception of reality. In this way, these two conspiracy theories are attempts to correct this crisis of communication. However, both run into obstacles that make it impossible for them to implement any kind of change, be it a hegemonic power in the case of Ibrahim’s protagonist, or the inability to escape one’s own political paradigm as with Stillman Sr. So, while both conspiracists disappear at the end, they do for different reasons; Ibrahim’s protagonist consumes himself as an act of defiance, while Stillman Sr.’s death appears to be an act of resignation to the fact that he will never be able to complete his project of global unity. The contrast between these two motives can be further explained by looking at how the two authors view the role of the writer, the detective, and ultimately the conspiracist.

CHAPTER FIVE CONSPIRACIST AS WRITER, *DHAKĪ*, OR DETECTIVE

Just as elements of detective fiction were useful in defining conspiracy literature in the second chapter, the figure of the detective—and its relationship to the writer—is similarly useful in exploring the figure of the conspiracist as reported in these two novels. After all, one of the traits that detectives and the conspiracists share is that both work to create narratives in order explain an event or phenomenon that has already happened (and sometimes in the case of the conspiracist, continues to happen) and in this sense both are writers. Consequently, this chapter aims to explore the way Auster and Ibrahim depict the methods and aims of conspiracists by putting them in dialogue with the detective, as well as the Arabic literary figure *al-dhakī*, and how these relate to their perceptions of the role of the writer. It finds that although Ibrahim's protagonist expresses a preference for socially accountable conspiracists, Auster's characters are more interested in conspiracism for conspiracism's sake. Tellingly, these portrayals of the role of the conspiracist reflect Ibrahim's and Auster's personal takes on the social responsibility of the writer.

5.1 The Role of the Writer

In their portrayals of the crises of communication that we discussed in the last chapter, both novels work to question the ability of a writer to produce an objective narrative. More so, they question both the ability of an objective narrative (should it even exist) to communicate this objectivity to its readers, as well as the ability of a reader to discern between objective and subjective narratives. In many ways, both works make the case that fiction can be a more complete representation of a social environment than any objective accounts precisely because it does not have any pretenses of objective truth. Thus both

Auster and Ibrahim take on a Benjaminian role of author-as-producer in that the contents of these two books report more than they exist as aesthetic works. Of course, both of these novels were written under different political circumstances that in turn influenced the way each approach the role of the writer and the role of fiction. While Auster was interested in exploring a metaphysical search for truth in *City of Glass*, Ibrahim, as we saw in the last section, was writing with the threat of censorship under Sadat's *Qānūn al-ʿĪb* and was hence concerned with more concrete goals.

It is widely accepted that Ibrahim and Auster both insert themselves into their writing. Scholars consider *al-Lajna*, for example, to be in part a reaction to Ibrahim's encounter with the Egyptian Ministry of Culture after publishing his first novel *Tilk al-Ra'īha* (translated as either *That Smell* or *The Smell of It*), which "was confiscated in Egypt in 1966, the first since the July Revolution" (Mahfuz 50). During this encounter, a body of officials that bears a striking resemblance the Committee "incriminated the text's language, politics, and ethics and ultimately transformed the impotence of the protagonist in the narrative onto the author himself" (Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers* 123). Impotence perhaps combined with humiliation, a theme that Ibrahim explores in his novel. In *al-Lajna*, the Committee first humiliates the protagonist when one of the members asks him to "speak up:" "I complied with his request and began the answer I had already prepared. Needless to say, I forgot a large part of it, as I nervously struggle to speak their language without serious grammatical mistakes" (10). After the Committee requests that he dance, they inquire about his alleged impotence, referring to a report they have from a woman he was unable perform to perform with (13-15). However, the Committee goes beyond this to imply that he is homosexual in a scene that resembles Raed Rafei's description of receiving a homosexuality test in Lebanon in his piece "Untitled Dialogue #1" that appeared in the first edition of *Makhzin*, in which he is told to "bend and push" (11):

Stubby, motivated by malice, saved me from answering. Unable to control himself, he shouted, “Maybe he’s impotent.”

But the Blond didn’t share his opinion. He leaned over to the chairman’s ear and said, “He’s probably...”

I didn’t hear the rest of the sentence, but I had no difficulty guessing.

The Blond motioned for me to come forward until I stood before him. Then he ordered me to take off my pants, so I did. I laid them over the back of an empty seat, then stood before the Committee in my boxer shorts, socks, and shoes.

They kept looking at me as though waiting for something. I pointed to my underwear, “These too?”

The Blond nodded. I removed my shorts and put them on top of my trousers. Meanwhile, their eyes settled attentively on my naked parts.

Next the Blond asked me to turn my back. Then he ordered me to bend over. I felt his hand on my naked buttocks. He ordered me to cough. At that moment I felt a finger inside my body.

After he withdrew his finger, I straightened up and faced them again. I saw this blond man look at the chairman and say triumphantly, “Didn’t I tell you?”

The old man smiled for the first time. (15-16)

That the accusation of homosexuality is meant to humiliate particularly underscores the hetero-patriarchal nature of the hierarchy within which the Committee functions. Although one may point out that the presence of women on the Committee might indicate that the power structure is gender neutral, their membership is more indicative of their willingness to participate in and promote the political, economic, and social structures more than it denotes equal opportunity to power within these structures. After all, as the narrator comments: “Notwithstanding the Committee’s importance and its extensive influence, some, including me, consider membership in it evidence of withering talent and complete failure” (12). In fact, protagonist only refers to one female member of the Committee, using the term *al-‘ānis*, which roughly translates to “the old maid,” thereby defining her in terms of her relation to men, and to an extent making her appear more masculine. Beyond this, all other Committee members important enough to mention are male, as is the Doctor, as well as all of the political and corporate figureheads that he mentions. As mentioned in the introduction, both of these books report conspiracy theory from the male perspective and in *al-Lajna* women only serve to emphasize the powerlessness of the protagonist via emasculation. While Melley

observes that in United States culture during the postwar era, “frequently represents social control as *feminizing* forces, domesticating powers that violate the borders of the autonomous self” (32), the resemblance between this and the use of gender in this novel indicates that this attitude may extend to other patriarchal societies. The protagonist is impotent, possibly homosexual, forced to do his research on the Doctor in women’s magazines, reads erotica (more popular among women) rather than looking at pornographic images. Perhaps most tellingly, he mistakes Stubby’s revolver for his genitals. He observes when recounting how he discovered that Stubby was carrying a revolver:

I understood—and my heart beat violently—the secret of the bulge I had previously noticed between his thighs. This meant that I hadn’t been dreaming this morning when I imagined something firm bumping my thigh. I almost smiled when I saw that out of fear I had reversed the well-known Freudian axiom in which a gun is a symbol for the penis. (103-4)

Not surprisingly, the theme of humiliation appears throughout Ibrahim’s interviews and non-fiction pieces. He famously rejected several awards for this very reason: “I refused an invitation to visit the US in the 1980s because the American ambassador had insulted the president and I felt this was a humiliation” (Rakha and Ibrahim). He also rejected the Arab Novel Award in 2003, presented by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, and in doing so delivered a biting speech in which he criticized the state of Egyptian cultural production and foreign policy, concluding that he could not accept the prize ““for it was awarded by a government that, in my opinion, lacks the credibility to bestow it”” (Creswell 71). Between *al-Lajna* and his behavior as a writer, Ibrahim makes the case that the only way to avoid humiliation as a writer in Egypt is to never compromise one’s values, which is particularly evident in the speech the protagonist makes at the end of the novel that we explored in the previous chapter (“I have committed—from the beginning—unpardonable errors. I shouldn’t have stood before you, but against you. Every noble effort on this earth should be at eliminating you” (156)).

It is also important to remember that this book was written when *al-Naksa* was still a fresh memory, though perhaps not as fresh as it had been in 1973. Even after the redeeming quality of 1973, the 1967 war had still changed the nature of international relations for Arab leaders and introduced them to global politics where “the super powers that control peace and war, the economy, and the world” had even more control than they previously had (Madi, 7). As previously mentioned, the 1967 defeat was the catalyst for *al-infītāh*, which Ibrahim clearly views as a sort of downfall, a humiliation on top of a humiliation and Ibrahim’s novel was accordingly very much a critique of Sadat’s economic policy as a response to defeat; the protagonist, unlike Egypt’s leaders and members of the new elite such as the Doctor, would rather not exist in a world in which he is politically and artistically impotent than work within the system that silences him.

The novel, then for Ibrahim, resembles a sort of covert journalism, in which he both reports his experiences with censorship and comments on the relationship between the writer and the authorities, whoever they may be. He often recounts in interviews and essays that he made his entry into writing through political activism (“Tajribati al-Riwa’iyya,” 292). During his youth, Ibrahim spent five and a half years in prison for supposedly conspiring to overthrow the Nasir regime (Golla and Ibrahim; Rakha and Ibrahim), “And by the time I came out the idea of becoming a writer had taken a hold on me” (Rakha and Ibrahim). He was not the only one writing in prison however, and in fact a number of the prisoners worked together to obtain writing materials and books, even setting up a small publishing operation using “discarded boxes from food stuff” as covers (Golla and Ibrahim).

His first book, *Yawmiyyat al-Wahat (Notes From The Oasis Prison)*, is primarily an exploration of what it means to be a writer, both in general and particularly in Egypt. On the one hand, he discusses the creative process, which is to some extent universal and resembles Auster’s relationship with the craft, in which the writer acts as a conduit that channels some

enigmatic force. On the other hand, there is the responsibility of the writer, which in Ibrahim's mind is contingent on his or her political environment. In April 1962 he writes: "Here is the artist's role in Egypt today. Not to write something merely enjoyable for its aesthetic value. Not simply to lose oneself in philosophical and intellectual issues. Not to live captive to one's individual experience, which could lead to loneliness or to feelings of alienations and absurdity" (*Notes* 79-80). Instead, an Egyptian writer "must work actively and with others. He must dive into the depths of the people and the depths of the individual. He must reveal the way forward, he must choose the direction and change the direction" (80). In a 2003 interview, Ibrahim explained: "Because writing involves the attempt to bring together every aspect of reality, and Arab reality necessarily involves a complex relation with political power," adding that had he lived in France or Sweden, he might have chosen to write science fiction instead (Rakha and Ibrahim). However, in the Egyptian context, "The writer is responsible for every word he writes" (Ibrahim, *Notes* 80).

This view of the Egyptian writer as a political figure was not entirely unique to Ibrahim at that time in Egypt, though he is exceptional in his determination to avoid hypocrisy at almost any cost both in his life and his work. As Muhammad Siddiq points out, under the circumstances of mid-twentieth century Egyptian writers "the novel acquires transgressive, and, potentially subversive powers" (5). Samia Mehrez points out that the protagonist's challenge to the dominant historical narrative when he creates his own through his research on the Doctor demonstrates: "the position that literary works—as a narrative on the margin—may come to occupy in relation to the dominant record; a position that may become threatening, even subversive" (*Egyptian Writers* 50).

Here one should note that the novel is a relatively new literary form in the Arab world "with no previous or inherited traditions in the legacy of Arabic literature" (al-'Id 7). What Stefen G. Meyers calls "the experimental Arabic novel," which he argues includes Ibrahim's

work, emerged in Egypt and the Levant in the 1960s as a way of “confronting the effects of the 1952 revolution,” and was stylistically influenced by French existentialism (15). In Ibrahim’s case, however, this sparse style was probably more influenced by Ernest Hemingway than Albert Camus (*Notes* 80, 88-9, 103, 105). As many scholars point out, the novel emerged in Arabic as a tool of reform; early pioneers of modern Arabic prose such as Ahmad Faris Shidyaq and Butrus al-Bustani saw a revival of Arabic-language literature as a part of a larger nationalist movement. Though their views on the reformation of the Arabic language differed, with Shidyaq arguing that it should be simplified and al-Bustani aiming for a more traditionally correct language, both fundamentally agreed in the necessity of linguistic and literary reform as a means for political change (Patel 510).

Some scholars such as Shukri ‘Aziz Madi and Muhammad al-Sayyid Isma’il observe that fiction now plays the role that poetry used to perform in contemporary Arab society (7; 5). Ibrahim comments on this transition to new narrative forms: “Our reality has changed in bewildering fashion; it’s no longer possible to represent this reality using old methods. The development of this art form cannot happen in Egypt as it happened in Europe. We need a true leap forward” (*Notes* 100). What Ibrahim is interested in, then, is the potential of the novel as a form, more than its history. While he is clearly more influenced by European novelists than Arab pioneers of the form (the only Arab novelists he mentions in *Yawmiyyat* is Najib Mahfuz) his aim was always to make this new form apply to his context, which happened to be in Arabic.

The political nature of the transition between narrative forms is not unique to the Arab world. Although Isma’il argues that today the political novel is primarily the domain of the “Third World,” whose literary production is to an extent under the control of foreign hegemony (“haymana”), the political dimensions of writing coming from the centers of hegemonic powers should not be ignored (105). Moreover, as Madi points out, schools of

Western literature were formed by political (as well as economic) changes: “The Romantic school was a result of the industrial revolution, just as World War I brought about surrealism, and existentialism appeared as another cry of protest against the society of World War II, which was more intense than the first, and more damaging” (21).

Nonetheless, nothing in Auster’s interviews, essays, or fiction would indicate that he is aware of this direct connection between social, economic, or political change and developments in the craft of writing. For Auster, writing was a far less dangerous endeavor, which perhaps is what allowed both his and his critics’ attempts to imagine a separation between fiction and politics. Accordingly, while Auster did sometimes use his role as a writer in order to engage in politics he kept it separate from his literary works. The essay collection *Why Write* contains a few of Auster’s attempts to dabble in politics, including “A Prayer for Salman Rushdie,” which he wrote after Ayatollah Khomeini called for Rushdie’s death in response to the novel *Satanic Verses*, forcing the writer to go into hiding. Commenting on the life of a writer in this context, Auster observes:

It is a strange way to live one’s life, and only a person who had no choice would choose it as a calling. It is too arduous, too underpaid, too full of disappointments to be fit for anyone else. Talents vary, ambitions vary, but any writer worth his salt will tell you the same thing: To write a work of fiction, one must be free to say what one has to say. I have exercised that freedom with every word I have written—and so has Salman Rushdie. That is what makes us brothers, and that’s why his predicament is also mine.
(52)

Here, Auster describes writers as having no choice over what they do as a profession or the work they produce. According to this logic, then, writers cannot be held entirely responsible for the content of their novels on a socio-political level (and particularly the political level)—in sharp contrast to Ibrahim. Consequently, Auster appears both baffled and outraged at the idea of the political interpretation of fiction.

The essay “Why Write” perhaps best illustrates his approach to the role of the writer and his or her writing. Here, Auster tells a series of incomplete vignettes that he was unable

to finish because he did not take note of what happened. The piece ends with the story of how he met his hero baseball player Willie Mays but was unable to get his autograph because he forgot to bring a pencil with him. He concludes (emphasis mine): “If nothing else, the years have taught me this: if there’s a pencil in your pocket, there’s *a good chance* that one day you’ll feel tempted to start using it. As I like to tell my children, that’s how I became a writer” (25). Writing, to Auster, is almost an act of chance, or fate even, as much as it was chance that brought Quinn to the Stillmans and Paul Auster and his red notebook, divorced from the political.

Like Ibrahim, Auster also injects parts of his personal life into his fiction, in particular *City of Glass*, in this case even using it as a prompt. In an essay he recounts a series of phone calls he received in 1980 asking for the “Pinkerton Detective Agency,” which he used as the starting point for the book (*The Red Notebook* 36). To Auster, the phone calls represented a missed opportunity, which he explored in *City of Glass*:

Most of all, I wanted to remain faithful to my original impulse. Unless I stuck to the spirit of what had really happened, I felt there wouldn’t have been any purpose to writing the book. That meant implicating myself in the action of the story (or at least someone who resembled me, who bore my name), and it also meant writing about detectives who were not detectives, about impersonations, about mysteries that cannot be solved. For better or worse, I felt I had no choice. (37)

It is for this reason, according to Auster, that he appears as both the name of a mysterious (possibly non-existent) detective agency, and as himself, a writer married to a woman who shares a name with his real-life wife Siri. In an interview, he describes the book as “an homage to my wife. It’s a kind of fictitious subterranean autobiography, an attempt to imagine what my life would have been like if I hadn’t met her,” citing that as the reason “why I had to appear in the book as myself, but at the same time Auster is also Quinn, but in a different universe...” (104). This interpretation of the novel, could account for the hyper-masculine character of the novel. Unlike the characters in *al-Lajna*, the male characters in

City of Glass are anything but impotent. However, the few women who do appear in this novel only exist in terms of their relationships to the men, who play far more important roles. For one, they are all wives (even if Virginia Stillman does not technically play the role of the wife but married her husband in order to continue taking care of him as his speech therapist). The wives of Stillman Sr. and Paul Auster the character only appear in order to move the plot along (the former's death allowed Stillman to have complete control over his son) or flesh out the characters of their husbands (as in Auster the character's case). Quinn only mentions his late wife in order to explain his present social situation—as someone who has experienced profound loss—and we know nothing about her aside from the fact that she is no longer living. Even Quinn/Auster's brief infatuation with Virginia Stillman is tangential and is more of an indication of his masculinity than anything else.

Although he injects himself into his works—or perhaps because of it—writing, to Auster, is ultimately about accessing something that is beyond himself; after all, he felt he “had no choice” in writing *City of Glass*. He reiterates this point in a 1987 interview with Joseph Mallia in which he claims that his books “impose themselves on him” and that he has little choice in the matter: “the only thing that really matters,” he continues “is saying the thing that has to be said” (*The Red Notebook* 104).

Here we have two different views on the function and responsibility of the writer. To Ibrahim, writing is less of a divine mandate and more of a social activity; to Auster it seems that the only political activity of the writer should involve keeping writing and politics separate as much as possible. While Ibrahim accordingly takes responsibility for the political consequences of his writing, Auster seems all but unaware that there are any in his work. These two different views of writing are even better defined in the way these authors portray the role of the writer and that of the detective in these two novels.

5.2 *al-Dhakī* and the Detective

The lineage of detective fiction is muddled to say the least. English-language detective fiction, which scholars in the United States and Europe claim to be the original detective fiction, appeared in the 19th century, just after the figure of the detective. After all, as Michael Holquist points out “you cannot have detective fiction before you have detectives,” at least not in the literal sense (139). While this may technically be correct, there are narratives in both the medieval Arabic and Chinese literary traditions that contain all of the characteristics of detective fiction, except, of course for the character of the detective who works in coordination with an urban police department (Malti-Douglas 81). In its simplest form, the detective story contains three elements: the crime (usually a murder), the detective, its detection, and the criminal (usually a murderer) (Malti-Douglas 61). Beyond this, Tzvetan Todorov points out that the structural basis of detective fiction is a dual narrative:

This novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. In their purest form, these two stories have no point in common [...] The first story, that of crime, ends before the second begins. But what happens in the second? Not much. The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them: a rule of the genre postulates the detective’s immunity. (91)

According to these criteria, Fedwa Malti-Douglas argues in her paper “The Classical Arab Detective,” the figure of the detective overlaps with the figure of *al-dhakī* in classical Arabic literature. Specifically, Malti-Douglas cites the characters of ninth century Caliph al-Mu‘tadid bil-Lah and his sidekick Ibn Hamdun, judge Iyas ibn Mu’awiya, and ‘Abbasid caliph al-Mansur, who all appear in Ibn al-Jawzi’s twelfth-century volume *Akhbar al-Adhkiya’* (*Stories of al-Adhkiya’*). A *dhakī* or group of *adhkiyā’* are defined by their *dhakā’* “whose basic meaning is fullness or completion, can best be rendered in this context as acumen, intelligence, or cleverness” (62). The point of these narratives is to illustrate how these characters possess *dhakā’* through their actions, though of course this narrative form is

not limited to al *adhkiyā*’ but rather a subgenre of anecdotal narratives in which the character is born from a particular characteristic that they possess, rather than the other way around (62). Essentially, all of the characters in *Akhbar al-Adhkiya*’ are a function of *dhakī*.

This parallels Michael Holquist’s description of the classical detective and his relationship to the detective story. The magic of the form, according to Holquist, is “the power of reason, *mind*, if you will. It is not, as is so often said, the character of great detectives which accounts for their popularity. [...] Take Sherlock Holmes, for example. He does not really *exist* when he is not on a case” (142). Both protagonists fit this characteristic of the detective in that the reader only interacts with them while they’re on the case. Months pass in a mere few sentences while *al-Lajna*’s protagonist waits to hear back from the Committee after his first interview, for example. Similarly, the action in *City of Glass* only relates to Quinn’s mysterious case.

We also know very limited information about both protagonists’ pasts. We only know, for example, that the protagonist of *al-Lajna* may have been in jail at some point in time: when asked where he had been during “that” year, unsure of which year the Committee member was referring to, the protagonist carefully formulates an answer “that did not deviate from the truth from telling too much, but was still not comprehensive,” answering “In jail” (14). Similarly, we only know that Quinn used to be a poet and lost his wife and son at some point in the past. Although both of these experiences appear to affect the characters on a personal level, they only function in the two narratives as context for the narrative’s present, which is far more important. Beyond this, when the characters are no longer able to function as detectives—when Quinn is no longer able to write after the Stillman family disappears and when the protagonist of *al-Lajna* no longer has the platform to present his research on the doctor—both characters disappear from the worlds of the novels. In this way, the two detective/writer characters only exist as long as they are detectives or writers.

The way in which both novels use names also reflects the importance of the function of characters above all else. In *al-Lajna*, characters are either referred according to their physical characteristics (Stubby, for example) or their function (the Doctor; the Chairman or *al-Ra'īs* of the Committee). The protagonist, however, does not have a name, since the novel is told in the first person, and only appears as “I,” which could be read as the function of the narrator as well as the function of the protagonist.

In *City of Glass*, characters change names when they shift to different occupations or functions. The most extreme example of this is Peter Stillman Jr., who assumes multiple identities during the convoluted speech he delivers to Quinn/Auster during their first encounter. Throughout his monologue, he refers to himself as Peter Stillman, Mr. Sad, Peter Rabbit, claiming that ““ In the winter I am Mr. White, in the summer I am Mr. Green” (17-8), and finally, Peter Nobody (19). He recounts how, after being locked in a dark room with no communication with the outside world, he had to be taught that he was Peter Stillman: ““For a long time I wore dark glasses. I was twelve. Or so they say. Little by little, they taught me how to be Peter Stillman. They said: you are Peter Stillman. [...] Peter Stillman, you are a human being, they said. It is good to believe what doctors say”” (17). He also has trouble distinguishing between the first and the third person, as if the idea of the individual was foreign to him: ““He ate with his hands. Excuse me. I mean Peter did. And if I am Peter, so much the better. This is to say, so much the worse. Excuse me. I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. Thank you”” (16).

Stillman’s identity crisis also manifests itself in his movements. As Quinn observes (through the voice of the narrator):

It seemed to Quinn that Stillman’s body had not been used for a long time and that all its functions had been relearned, so that motion had become a conscious process, each movement broken down into its component submovements, with the result that all flow and spontaneity had been lost. It was like a marionette trying to walk without strings. (15)

Quinn undergoes a similar identity crisis. At the very beginning of the novel the reader learns that he had been a poet, publishing work under his own name (Daniel Quinn) but for an unexplained reason stopped writing poetry and told his friends and agents that he had stopped writing altogether. In secret, he made his living writing mystery fiction under the name of William Wilson (referring to Edgar Allen Poe's story of that title, in which Wilson has a long and ultimately murderous relationship with his doppelgänger). Writing under the pseudonym, Quinn felt relinquished of all responsibility from the work that he produces: "William Wilson, after all, was an invention, and even though he had been born within Quinn himself, he now led an independent life. Quinn treated him with deference, at times even admiration, but he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man" (5). This of course echoes Auster's notion of the writer as a conduit for a universal narrative with infinite articulations, whose individual existence is consequently irrelevant. On the other hand, Quinn strongly identifies with the hero of Wilson's novels, Max Work, much in the way Paul Auster identifies with his characters or even inserts elements of his personal life into the narrative: "His private-eye narrator, Max work, had solved an elaborate series of crimes, and suffered through a number of beatings and escapes, and Quinn was feeling somewhat exhausted by his efforts" (6). The narrator describes the relationship between Quinn, Wilson, and Work:

In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two. If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass himself into Work. And little by little, Work had become a presence in Quinn's life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude. (6)

Quinn has a similar relationship to Paul Auster the detective, which proves to be more dangerous because he had to play out this false identity in life, rather than in writing. After assuming the Auster identity, Quinn acts as though he has no control over his actions, just

like Stillman; he “finds” himself doing things like getting dressed “in a kind of trance” (15).

This is perhaps because:

Auster was no more than a name to him, a husk without content. To be Auster meant being a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts. And if there were no thoughts available to him, if his own inner life had been made inaccessible, then there was no place for him to retreat to. As Auster he could not summon up any memories or fears, any dreams or joys, for all these things, as they pertained to Auster, were blank to him. He consequently had to remain solely on his own surface, looking outward for sustenance. (61)

From this it is clear that to Quinn, taking on the Auster, Max Work, and William Wilson identities allows him to escape his past and works as a sort of coping mechanism for the mysterious traumas he endured that resulted in the loss of his wife and his son. His first piece of writing in the red notebook as the detective Paul Auster reads:

And then, most important of all: to remember who I am. To remember who I am supposed to be. I do not think this is a game. On the other hand, nothing is clear. For example: who are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? I have no answer. All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name. (40)

In a way, applying fiction to real life (rather than the other way around) was Quinn’s fatal mistake, a mistake that we also find in the story that Paul Auster the character tells of the authorship of *Don Quixote*, which is essentially a literary conspiracy theory. Auster bases his theory on the fact that Cervantes tried to convince the reader that he wasn’t the author of the book, but rather oversaw the translation of the original Arabic text by a man named Cid Hamete Benegeli (96). After considering all of the possibilities of authorship, he concludes that not only was *Don Quixote* the author, but that “*Don Quixote*, in my view, was not really mad. In fact, he orchestrated the whole thing himself” (98). Auster claims that he did this because:

“He wanted to test the gullibility of his fellow men. Would it be possible, he wondered, to stand up before the world and with the utmost conviction spew out lies and nonsense? [...] In other words, to what extent would people tolerate blasphemies if they gave them amusement? The answer is

obvious, isn't it? To any extent. For the proof is that we still read the book. It remains highly amusing to us. And that's finally all anyone wants out of a book—to be amused.” (98-9)

Taking this theory further, Don Quixote would have had to take on the identity of a “madman” for an extended period of time, at which point, if he followed the same trajectory of Quinn, he would have become “mad” himself—not because of the madness of particular identity that he took on, but that he took on a different one at all. However, Don Quixote does not change his name in this theory, so perhaps he was able to absorb both of them at the same time. Or perhaps as a writer he was already “mad.”

Ibrahim's protagonist, by contrast, does what he can in order to preserve his identity, which as a researcher and intellectual resembles that of the detective. He overcomes all odds to tell a narrative that has very significant implications for not only the other characters in the novel, but also its readers. His speech at the end can be read as an affirmation for literature to convey truth, contrary to Auster the character's conclusion that entertainment trumps all. Thus Ibrahim uses the detective figure in his novel to articulate the social and political importance of creating new narratives, while Auster primarily highlights the ways in which literature affects readers on an individual basis.

Another difference between the detective figures in these two novels and their relationship to writing is illustrated by the difference between the detective and *al-dhakī*. As Malti-Douglas points out, what al-Mu'tadid bil-Lah, Iyas ibn Mu'awiya, and al-Mansur have in common is their ability to implement justice, something not found in the English-language detective novel: “Indeed, in Ibn al-Jawzi's *Adhkiya*, there are few narratives that can be construed as detective stories, and which are associated with other rulers” (71). In this sense, the figure of *al-dhakī* is both detective and judge: “He is the detective and the law enforcer at one and the same time. In the Western equivalent, the classical detective type, the detective is set off against the police or the legal establishment” (81).

The protagonist of *al-Lajna* touches on this topic during his criticism of Agatha Christie. While staying at the protagonist's apartment, Stubby comments on the absence of Agatha Christie novels in the protagonist's collection of detective stories. The protagonist replies:

"I only like certain kinds of detective stories: those based on action. The ones I like best have a hero who pursues criminals and gangsters and suffers every hardship in the process. Most of the time he protects the weak or defenseless from society and the dominant classes."

"You're a real humanitarian," he said derisively.

Sipping my coffee, I said, "Not at all. Indeed, some people might think I'd regressed to adolescence. Others might consider it merely evidence of the child within every person. But I believe there's more to it than that. Our fascination with this kind of story express an inability to act when necessary and goes hand in and with the natural, rightful desire of every person for evil to be punished and good to triumph." (97-8)

Whether or not Ibrahim was aware of the figure *al-dhakī*, his description of the ideal detective as a vigilante who "protects the weak," and detective story as one in which evil is punished and good triumphs more closely resembles the Arabic literary figure than its European and US counterpart. He later elaborates:

"Perhaps you've noticed my collection of stories by the Belgian writer Georges Simenon. I am truly a devotee of him and his hero, Inspector Maigret. Although his stories are not 'action oriented,' being closer to true mystery stories, they nevertheless surpass Agatha Christie's in that they are distinctive for their psychological depth and sociological dimension. They substantiate the fact that most of an ordinary man's contradictory attitudes are stored up in the unconscious. At a certain point in this accumulation, something occurs, like the straw that broke the camel's back, and the man acts completely out of character with everything he has done. A peaceful man who has never committed a single violent act is capable of perpetrating the most heinous crime of premeditated murder." (100)

Though this is before the protagonist discovers the revolver, this passage preemptively justifies Stubby's murder by drawing a connection between Stubby and the criminal in the detective novel, and between the protagonist and the detective. In addition to their parallels to later events, the protagonist's description of the ideal detective resembles how he acts as a

researcher, particularly in terms of his findings' implications for "society and the dominant classes."

Quinn/Auster's simulation of a detective character is decidedly different. Rather than acting out of a sense of justice, a sense of curiosity is his primary motivator, much like in the case of Sherlock Holmes. Consequently the process of solving the case is much more important than its outcome, so much so in fact, that when the case suddenly disappears, Quinn/Auster is not even bothered. In fact, by the end of the novel:

He regretted having wasted so many pages at the beginning of the red notebook, and in fact, felt sorry that he had bothered to write about the Stillman case at all. For the case was far behind him now. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and how he had crossed it, and its meaning had been lost. Quinn no longer had any interest in himself. He wrote about the stars, the earth, his hope for mankind. He felt that his words had been severed from him, that now they were a part of a world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower. They no longer had anything to do with him. (128)

Much of the scholarly writing on *City of Glass* describes the novel in relation to detective fiction, though none can agree exactly how. Michael Holquist calls it "meta-detective fiction;" Steven E. Alford uses the term "metaphysical (read Postmodernist) detective fiction;" Dennis Barone, "historical metafiction;" Madeline Sorapure, "meta-anti-detective fiction." The year after its publication, *City of Glass* was nominated for the Edgar Award for "best mystery of the year" (Russel 71). To Auster, however, detective fiction was only a vehicle for *City of Glass*, much like the Stillman case was only a vehicle for Quinn as a writer. Auster remarks: "Of course I used certain elements of detective fiction. [...] But I felt I was using those elements for such different ends, for things that had so little to do with detective stories, and I was somewhat disappointed by my emphasis on them" (*Red Notebook* 109). Auster describes the figure of the detective as "the seeker of truth, the problem-solver, the one who tries to figure things out," a description that could also be applied to both the writer and the conspiracist (109). Here Auster is referring to Quinn, the author-detective, but

this description could just as easily apply to Peter Stillman Sr. and Paul Auster the character. After all, as Auster points out, “We’re surrounded by things we don’t understand, by mysteries, and in the books there are people who suddenly come face to face with them” (109).

What Auster is describing is somewhere between writer and detective. At the very beginning the narrator describes Quinn’s view of the role of the detective from the perspective of an author of mystery novels:

The detective is one who looks, who listens, who moves through his morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all of these things together. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world through the detective’s eyes, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time. He has become awake to the things around him, as if, because of the attentiveness he now brings to them they might carry a meaning other than the simple fact of their existence. Private eye. The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter ‘i,’ standing for ‘investigator,’ it was ‘I’ in the upper case, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time, it was also the physical eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him. (8)

When playing the role of detective Paul Auster, Quinn is not a detective, but a writer-detective. In fact, the bulk of Quinn/Auster’s detective work involved writing observations in a notebook and learning how to walk while writing at the same time (62). Quinn’s conflation between the investigator, the self, and the eye of a writer attempting to interpret the world demonstrates that to the characters in *City of Glass*, writing is a creative act. Just as Quinn ceases to exist after his notebook ends, at least as far as the narrative is concerned, Peter Stillman attempts to create the Tower of Babel by writing TOWER OF BABEL on the streets of Manhattan’s Upper West Side while searching for objects to name (66-71). Similarly, Stillman Sr. is not just a conspiracist, but a writer-conspiracist, in that the act of the conspiricism is directly linked to his scholarly production.

Going back to Todorov's dual narratives, both *al-Lajna* and *City of Glass* do not quite fit the traditional form of the detective story in the sense that neither crime happened in the past. Rather, the crimes are continual, discovered as they happen or even, with the case of Quinn/Auster and the Stillman Jr. case, exist as a future possibility. Both are attempts to solve a mystery that is ultimately unsolvable, at least not by an individual. Rather than building a new tower of Babel, Stillman Sr. commits suicide, and we do not know if Quinn was successful in his attempts to protect Stillman Jr. Beyond this, the crimes are not technically crimes, but conspiracies. The protagonist of *al-Lajna* unveils the conspiracy between multinational corporations and international elites—not to mention the conspiracy of the committee, which does not officially exist. Virginia and Stillman Jr. *suspect* that Peter Stillman Sr. is *conspiring* to kill his son based on a letter written a few years ago. Stillman Sr.'s theory, that the failure of language to accurately depict reality can be construed as a theological conspiracy in which God himself conspires to punish humanity after the fall of Man, which is only revealed through religious texts to those who would be promised redemption anyway by virtue of their belief. Even Paul Auster the character's theory of Don Quixote, which is commonly viewed as the first work of fiction, claims that the genre began with a conspiracy in which Don Quixote took on multiple identities and pretended to be mad in order to conduct a social experiment.

Yet, the detective figures are not necessarily conspiracists, as we see with Quinn. While he is involved in a number of conspiracies, as a writer he is only a witness to conspiracism, and interacts with them without comment. One could speculate that Stillman Sr., as a conspiracist, represents what may become of a writer when they take fiction too seriously, when it becomes a part of their political reality. The conspiracist then is a perversion of a writer in Auster, what happens to the writer after they go off the edge and

descend into mental illness and then suicide when the writer realizes that they cannot live inside of the world they create using words.

The differences between Auster's and Ibrahim's views of the role of the writer and their work are reflected in their treatment of the detective and the conspiracist in these two novels. While Ibrahim's political context highly influenced his notion of the writer as fundamentally a political character, Auster's have allowed him to experience writing for writing's sake and create a perhaps artificial distance between the author and the political implications of their work. Thus, while as a detective figure the protagonist of Ibrahim's novel creates his conspiracy theory as a means to seek justice, speaking to the figure of *al-dhaki*, the detective figures in Auster are content with creating the narrative for the sake of creating a narrative—conspiracist or otherwise. Conspiracy theory in Auster's novel, then, is the product of an attempt to articulate reality and the failures of conspiracy theories can be attributed to the failures of language, and subsequently narratives, to convey the human experience. Regardless of motive, formulating a conspiracy theory that counters the dominant narrative—even slightly, as in *City of Glass*—can have consequences for the conspiracist, as we will see in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

PARANOIA, *GHURBA*, AND AGENCY PANIC

As Timothy Melley points out in *The Empire of Conspiracy*, paranoia is a common theme in conspiracy literature. “After all,” he writes, “paranoia is an interpretive disorder that revolves around questions of control and manipulation,” two major themes in postwar United States conspiracy fiction (16). However, the diagnosis of paranoia is not always a reflection of the mental state of the supposed paranoiac and often speaks to the relationship between the latter and the status quo, which is the case in both *al-Lajna* and *City of Glass*. Subsequently, this chapter will argue that the mental states of the structural conspiracists in these novels are better described with the terms “*ghurba*” and “agency panic,” which go beyond paranoia to speak to a larger social context.

6.1 The Schreber Case

Psychology appeared as a field of study at different times in European and Arab history; while the discipline became popular in Europe after industrialization, Arab psychology traces its roots to Hellenistic philosophical traditions (Ahmed 127-8). Historically renowned scholars such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina), al-Ghazzali, and Ibn Khaldun for example observed both the ways in which psychological conditions developed and how they could be cured—Avicenna is sometimes considered to be a father of the field. As Ramadan A. Ahmed points out, “The first mental hospital in the Arab world was established in Damascus during the 8th century soon to be followed by others in Baghdad and Cairo” (127). In contrast, European society did not begin to construct asylums until after the rise of industrialism because, according to Michel Foucault, “capitalist industrial society could not tolerate the

existence of groups of vagabonds” and subsequently “hospitals were set in place: (1) to confine those who were unable to work for physical reasons; (2) to confine those who could not work for nonphysical reasons” (“Madness and Society” 375-6).

However, at the time of the writing of *al-Lajna*, a new wave of psychology drawing from the European tradition swept the Arab world. According to Muhammad Ahmad al-Nablusi, the first Arabic-language books of this new form of psychology appeared in 1952. Midway through the decade, Dr. Muhammad ‘Uthman Najati took the post as a professor of psychology at the International University in Egypt, but his position was terminated during the Suez crisis (5). According to al-Nablusi, these developments transpired alongside calls from intellectuals to establish a new Arab psychology, mainly motivated by an impulse to counter the rise of nativist religious movements such as Salafism (5).

As such, Ibrahim’s writing on psychology rarely refers to Arabic scholarship. In *Yawmiyyat*, in which he discusses psychology a handful of times, he only mentions Mustafa Sweif’s book *The Psychological Bases of Artistic Creativity*, for example—and even then, he does not discuss Sweif’s theories as much as what Sweif has to say about European psychologists, particularly Freud (*Notes* 83-4). Despite the Freud’s problematic classifications of “primitive” peoples, women, neurotic individuals, and children as in close relation to one another (which would include the Egyptian population as a whole), Ibrahim was clearly highly influenced by the man (Greedharry 1). So too were scholars of conspiracy literature, including Melley and Svetlana Boym, whose interpretations of paranoia depend heavily on Freud’s description of paranoia in his analysis of the Schreber, which we will discuss later in the chapter.

Daniel Paul Schreber, a high court judge in Leipzig, was born in 1842 the son of “a well-known doctor and pedagogue” (Gottlieb 427). His father was particularly infamous for penning rather harsh child-rearing manuals that “urged a systematic regimen designed to

produce healthy and obedient children through exercise and discipline” that were highly influential in Germany into the twentieth century; up until the 1930s, German children were often threatened with the “Schreber ‘*Geradehalter*,’ a contraption of boards and straps” if they did not sit up straight (Gottlieb 427). His older brother Gustav later went on to commit suicide and he himself was famously institutionalized (Gottlieb 428).

In 1903 Schreber published a memoir cataloguing his experience with psychosis called *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken (Memoirs of My Nervous Illness)*, which provoked a great deal of interest among psychologists at the time (Freud 3). He suffered two bouts of illness, one that doctors diagnosed as hypochondria and another that Freud refers to as “Dementia Paranoides.” In his second illness, Schreber’s hypochondria entailed sensory delusions that caused him to believe he was dead, then suffering from the plague, and being tortured for “holy purposes” (6). Freud writes, “The delusions gradually assumed a mythical, religious character, as he maintained direct relations with God, was a plaything of the devils, saw ‘miraculous apparitions,’ heard ‘holy music,’ and finally even believed he must be in another world” (6). Throughout this bout, however, he appeared to remain perfectly rational and his knowledge of subjects beyond his condition remained as they had been before his illness (7).

Ultimately, Schreber came to believe that God had called upon him to restore harmony to the world by transforming himself into a woman. It was not so much that he wanted to become a woman as he felt it was “imperative, grounded in the World Order, which he could ill escape, even if he would personally much rather have remained in his honorable masculine state of life” (9). Schreber used the symptoms he experienced as a hypochondriac in order to justify his delusion, and even came up with a theory of the relationship between humans and God, in which humans can only interact with God after their death (which he felt he had undergone) (13).

Quinn's belief that he is fated to follow the Stillman case resembles Schreber's conviction that his becoming a woman is "grounded in the World Order" in that neither believes that they have agency over their actions. However, the Committee members' and the Stillman Sr.'s theories that it is their imperative to save the world are closer to Schreber's "Redeemer fantasy" (10-12). The Committee reveals this world-saving mission during Stubby's eulogy, during which the Chairman describes "the possibility of fulfilling the dreams of mankind," which he claims are "global unity or the United States of the Earth in which all of the inhabitants of the planet would be incorporated into a homogenous state fostering prosperity and attempting to provide a better life" (113). Based on their conception of the United States of Earth as a universal dream, the Committee concludes that it is their moral imperative to fulfill it. Subsequently, they perceive their actions as in the service of "revolutionary objectives, ethical principles, and religious values," strengthening "basic freedoms" and expanding "the democratic process" (115). In the same vein, they categorize any opposition to achieving this dream of the United States of Earth as "evil and destructive elements" (115). The Committee derives this belief from their faith in the metanarrative of (European) civilization, which holds that as the arbiter of good and fairness they are destined to become a global power—the metanarrative upon which Stillman Sr.'s theory also relies as well.

As we have seen, Stillman Sr.'s redeemer fantasy is not concerned with transforming politics or society, but language. As the first person to diagnose the problem and come up with a solution, he concludes that it is his duty to put the world back together: "“You see, no one has understood what I have understood. I'm the first. I'm the only one. It puts a great burden of responsibility on me.” [...] ‘You see, the world is in fragments, sir. And it's my job to put it back together again’” (74-5). Beyond this, both conceive even God as being subject to the rules of the system that controls the universe. As Freud observes, Schreber makes the

distinction between God (ostensibly the creator) and the World Order, which he believes is ultimately more powerful than God: “On the whole, though, the illness is conceived of as struggle of Schreber the man against God, where the weak human prevails because he has the World Order on his side” (18). Stillman Sr. similarly believes that he can overpower God by changing an all-powerful system—language. The distinction between God as a creator and an omnipotent system resembles Auster’s sense of the role of the writer in which the creator is only responsible for the act of creation—they have no control (and thus responsibility) over their creations afterward.

Common to all three of these examples is that all involve individuals who come from positions of power. As a judge, Schreber had the jurisdiction to mete out justice. The Committee, while not an official body, was also able to impose their visions of justice, although they do not carry out the sentences themselves. As a professor at Columbia University, Stillman Sr. had a hand in influencing the official historical narrative, particularly through his dissertation, which was later published as a book. In all three cases, the redeemer fantasy is the source of downfall, which we have already discussed in terms of Stillman Sr. and Quinn, but is the case with the Committee in that they failed to coerce the protagonist into following or believing in their (Eurocentric) civilizational metanarrative. However, the redeemer fantasy alone, according to Freud, does not constitute paranoia.

Another element of Schreber’s paranoia that Freud observes is the splitting of figures. At first, Schreber simply regarded his doctor as his doctor but as the delusion progressed he came to think of him as having two distinct identities: doctor and God. Freud writes, “Such splitting is absolutely characteristic of paranoia. As hysteria condenses, so paranoia splits. Or rather, paranoia causes the condensations and identifications that have been undertaken in the conscious fantasy to devolve once more” (38). As we saw with the Committee member’s redeemer fantasy, their faith in their metanarrative of European civilization caused them to

divide the world into those who were on their side (the good) and those who were against them (the evil), which in Freud's reading constitutes an element of paranoia. However, split identities are not always an indicator of paranoia in these two novels. Towards the end of *al-Lajna*, the protagonist notices that the Committee members he had previously thought to be members of the military were dressed as civilians and the other way around:

Formerly, I had believed that the Committee was a combination of civilians and officers. But, as I had seen today, the change in dress shook this belief to its foundations. It could only mean one of two things: the Committee consists entirely of officers, some of whom wear civilian clothes, or it consists of civilians, some of whom sometimes wear military uniforms. (111)

This split in identity does not speak to the paranoia of the committee members, nor of the protagonist; one could read this split of the ways in which the Committee have transcended the military-civilian split by acting as both, just as they have transcended the concept of the state by existing as an unofficial international group with clandestine ties to the United States. In fact, the fact that they hold two identities is not so much a split as an indicator of their overarching control, their ability to hold multiple identities even though they are one person—just as the Doctor has his hands in multiple industries via the process of diversification.

In a similar light, Quinn's multiple identities are not necessarily an indication of paranoia either. At least Auster did not intend it that way. The split was meant more to represent multiple possibilities, and the superlative role of chance in our lives. In an interview, Auster discusses the novel as dealing with:

[...] the question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are. The whole process that Quinn undergoes in that book [...] is one of stripping away to some barer condition in which we have to face up to who we are. Or who we aren't. It finally comes to the same thing. (*The Red Notebook* 109)

This interpretation reads Quinn's taking on of multiple identities as a way of accessing the essence of himself—eventually they become meaningless, revealing his core.

In another interview, Auster claims that he used *City of Glass* to explore “the line between madness and creativity, [...] the line between the real and the imaginary,” asking “is Quinn crazy to do what he does or not?” (109). From this perspective, one could read the shabby/dapper versions of Stillman Srs. that Quinn/Auster observes at the Grand Central terminal not as a paranoid splitting of a personality—who Quinn knows virtually nothing about had has no reason to split in to in the Schreberian sense—but as the representation of a fork in the road of the narrative, underscoring the role that chance plays in the novel. According to Freud’s description, Quinn would have had to have been intimately familiar with Stillman Sr. to the point that he came to embody an archetypal figure whose characteristics exist apart from him as an individual for this to apply.

According to Freud, the Schreber’s paranoid splitting of personalities was triggered by the fact that he viewed his doctor as a sort of father figure (as Sue Gottlieb points out, his father was a physician). After all, he argues, in ancient societies the distance between paternal figures and God, whether father or some other figure of authority, was much smaller than it is today (39-40). He writes: “The boy’s infantile attitude towards his father is perfectly familiar to us; it contains the same combination of reverential subordination and rebellious resistance that we found in Schreber’s relationship to his God and so acts as the unmistakable, faithfully replicated model for the latter” (40).

Both books contain father figures that in some ways play the role of a deity, but neither are as glorified quite as much as Schreber glorifies his father. In *al-Lajna* the primary father figure is the Doctor, who as a public figure and middleman for *al-infītāḥ* has an unprecedented amount of influence over Egyptians’ lives. By portraying himself as a father, the Doctor is able to account for the fact that his “hand in shaping the present and future” did not come by any popular means, and is thus somewhat authoritarian (though, as previously mentioned, he was elected to parliament at some point) (40). He also connects his role as an

actual father to his political position by making strategic marriages between his children and other members of the elite, thus literally and figuratively extending the reaches of his fatherhood (50). However, that the protagonist uncovers the Doctor's pervasiveness should not be read as his deification; after all, the Doctor only one element of the much larger phenomenon that he describes.

On the other hand Stillman Sr., the father figure in *City of Glass*, is not as much a father-deity as a man who made a failed attempt to achieve that status by creating a situation in which his son might grow up speaking prelapsarian language—essentially an attempt to foil God's decree that humanity shall live outside of paradise. However, his failure to do so is evinced in Peter Stillman Jr.'s inability to effectively communicate or even take care of himself—hence Stillman Sr.'s letter to his son in which he calls him a “devil boy,” i.e. someone who has fallen from Eden, like Adam, and speaks the language of the world today (29). However, the only person who sees Stillman Sr. as this kind of father figure is himself—thus his redeemer fantasy—and it is more likely for this reason more than anything else that he is judged “insane” and sent to an asylum.

In the end, none of the characters in either of these books appear to fully qualify as paranoid, at least not in the Freudian sense—though the Committee members ironically come the closest. This combined with the fact that “paranoia” is so frequently used to describe conspiracy theory begs the question: to what extent can the diagnosis of paranoia tell us anything about the alleged paranoiac?

5.2 The Knowledge/Power Premise

According to Melley, paranoia is “a condition in which one has delusions of grandeur or an unfounded feeling of persecution, or both,” which is best understood in opposition (or abnormal) to “an interpretive community” (16-7). In conspiracy fiction, he argues, “paranoia

is driven by a sense that knowledge and power are inextricably linked and that to be ‘paranoid’ may only be to reject the normalizing ideology of the powerful” (18). Svetlana Boym, however, views paranoia in a much less flattering light. While she emphasizes its rational qualities, she ultimately maintains that this rationality only “makes sense within a closed system that is based on a delusionary premise” (99). According to Boym then, paranoia is less about a rupture in the relationship between the paranoiac and his or her community, but a cognitive misfiring that occurs within the paranoiac themselves; essentially, the scope of paranoia is much smaller.

Here, Melley’s interpretation of paranoia speaks more to the characters in *al-Lajna* than those of *City of Glass*. While knowledge is the path to agency and dignity to the protagonist of the former, it is the downfall of the characters in the latter who are overwhelmed with information and ultimately lose control of their sense of individuality through its pursuit. In fact, the entirety of *al-Lajna* depends on the premise that knowledge and power are linked; if they were not, then the Committee would not be monitoring intellectual production in the first place. The Committee is also noticeably threatened by the protagonist’s findings, to the extent that they go out of their way to thwart his efforts; they remove all articles that might be relevant to him from newspaper archives and restrict his access to the library—they even go as far as to visit his apartment and try to psychologically intimidate him by taking away his privacy. After being unable to sleep next to Stubby, the protagonist as the narrator recounts the following scene:

We stood together in front of the mirror over the sink. I raised my red, watery eyes. They met his, which were full of vitality and energy, as though he had enjoyed a full night’s sleep. A steady gaze met mine, which I was at a loss to explain since he was walleyed. The razor shook in my hand, nicking me under the chin. (90)

Here it is clear that Stubby’s presence in the protagonist’s home is meant to exaggerate the already sizable power imbalance, to threaten and intimidate the protagonist into “choosing”

the right course of research. His presence also physically hinders the protagonist from continuing his research by depriving him of sleep and heightening his anxiety and shows the extent to which the threat of violence is a part of not only the Committee members' rhetoric, but even their body language.

One can also read the Committee's efforts to humiliate the protagonist in the beginning as an effort to exaggerate the already large power imbalance between the Committee and the protagonist. In fact, the Committee's request for the protagonist to strip, and subsequent humiliations resemble intimidation methods the US Army used in Abu Ghraib in which prisoners were undressed and then subjected to sexual humiliation—especially acts simulating homosexuality (Hersh). Stubby's presence in the protagonist's apartment extends this sexual humiliation to other bodily functions; the protagonist describes the following scene:

I didn't grasp the situation completely until I had to take a leak. I left the kitchen and retraced my steps back along the hall toward the bathroom, which was next to the bedroom. I had no sooner gone into the bathroom and turned to close the door than I found that he had followed me and pushed the door all the way open. He stood in the doorway, near me, until I'd finished my business. (80)

Later, when attending to another bodily function, Stubby insists on being present, asking: "If you must wave other people's dirty laundry in public, can you expect to wash your own in private?" (92).

The protagonist, however, is able to reduce this imbalance through the acquisition of knowledge. While the Committee's efforts to intimidate the protagonist clearly demonstrate that they perceive his research as a threat to the hegemon they work to protect, the protagonist does not explicitly comment on this. He does however mention multiple times how research has given him a renewed sense of purpose. He observes:

Actually, a change had come over me in the last months. Formerly I had been bored with everything. My presentation to the Committee and the pursuit of any opportunity that would promote my talents was only an

attempt to renew my interest in life. However, the research on the doctor soon engrossed me so much so that I began to dread death and pray that God might avert traffic accidents and heart attacks until I finished it. (57)

And then later:

My devotion to the Doctor amazed me. It was as though his personality had bewitched me, or as though my existence had become linked to his. Bringing all my thoughts to bear, I saw that I finally found a meaning in life. It had grown out of the cryptic phenomena which had discouraged me during my research, and out of the strange information I had collected. All my gleanings made it easy for me to perceive many things I had not understood before. I wasn't prepared to give up and return to that aching emptiness in which I had been living. Would a drowning man let go of a life preserver? (83)

To the protagonist, researching the Doctor and making connections—conspiracism—is empowering because not only does it give him a sense of purpose, but a sense of control of his environment. Conspiracy theory to the protagonist, then, is a means of control, a way of increasing his sense of power as an individual. This suggests Foucault's remarks on the relationship between power and discourse, in which he maintains that in any society (emphasis mine):

[...] there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. *We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.* (Power/Knowledge 93)

It is in this sense that the protagonist's conspiracism, as the production of discourse in opposition to the hegemonic narrative, is a direct challenge to the Committee's power and in this sense a tangible threat. In this way, *al-Lajna* is almost a preemptive answer to Edward Said's question of how one speaks truth to power (Said). The protagonist's sense of empowerment, however, later modulates from counter-narrative production to physical violence when he murders Stubby. While describing the thought process he underwent before

killing Stubby, the narrator recalls: “I thought back over where my life had been heading before the Committee interviewed me and how I suffered humiliation at its ‘hand.’ However, I didn’t forget that the assigned research had given some meaning to my life after a long spell of hopelessness” (105).

Stubby’s murder in a sense justifies the Committee’s fear of the protagonist’s research on the Doctor, not so much in terms of the information that he uncovers, but in terms of the empowering effect that leaving the dominant narrative and constructing his own had on the protagonist. After all, the information the protagonist compiled was readily available to the public. His ability to avoid the Committee’s roadblocks only solidified his conviction that his research served as a purpose—a cure even—for the impotence he felt at the beginning of the novel, and thus justified acts of violence. In this way, he transforms Stubby into just another roadblock to avoid at all costs, dehumanizing him enough to murder without remorse. One could argue then that here *al-Lajna* transitively connects knowledge to violence via power in that by empowering him, knowledge enables the protagonist to commit a violent act. However, the fact that the Committee members are able to avoid committing violence themselves demonstrates that power can at a certain point be able to transcend violence by subsisting off of its looming threat.

Though the premise of *al-Lajna* relies on a correlation between knowledge and power, that alone does not necessarily make the novel or any of its characters paranoid. And while the difference between the protagonist and the Committee’s grand narratives may make the protagonist appear to be paranoid, the events of the novel prove that his apparent paranoia is not only justified, but a source of power. What this demonstrates is that accusations of delusion can function to disempower. In fact, we can find instances of this in both novels. As we have already seen, both the protagonist of *al-Lajna* and Stillman Sr. are both accused having some form of mental instability; while in *al-Lajna*, Stubby tells the protagonist that he

is delusional (“imagining something that doesn’t exist” (95)) after he mentions that he is on the brink of understanding the relationship between a number of “miscellaneous phenomena,” all but calling him paranoid (94-5), in *City of Glass*, Stillman Sr. is sent to an asylum for years after authorities discover that he has locked his son in a dark room for nine years. In both cases, the accusations mental illness are attempts to discourage the two characters from deviating from social norms and take away their credibility. Stubby’s accusation of delusion is a thinly veiled attempt to override the protagonist’s carefully constructed argument.

What this reveals is the inadequacy of argument alone to counter power. More essential is a compelling narrative, which is also what Auster the character concludes at the end of his theory on Don Quixote: ““And that’s finally all anyone wants out of a book—to be amused”” (99). What *al-Lajna* demonstrates, then, is that power is not only linked to knowledge, but the ability to supersede knowledge; accusations of paranoia, coming from a powerful enough source will trump any argument. The protagonist of *al-Lajna*, never doubting the veracity of his findings and his only figurative weapon against the accusations of delusion or paranoia is his conspiracy theory. Which, of course the Committee attempts as a last resort to counter with a conspiracy theory of its own.

Though *City of Glass* also relies on the knowledge-power correlation to an extent, there is no obvious power imbalance in the novel—at least not between the main characters. In fact, they all sit at the top of both the local and international social hierarchy in that they are middle and upper class American men of ostensibly Northern European origin. Notably, none of the characters feel as though they are under the control of another human being, or even an organization of human beings (save for Peter Stillman Jr. perhaps, who first was under the control of his father, then the doctors, and then his wife). The primary conspiracist in the novel, Stillman Sr., hails from an old and powerful family in Boston. As Virginia

Stillman tells Quinn/Auster: “[The Stillmans] were several governors back in the nineteenth century, a number of episcopal bishops, ambassadors, a Harvard president. At the same time, the family made a great deal of money in textiles, shipping and God knows what else” (25). Stillman himself “went to Harvard, like everyone else in the family” and then had a successful academic career at Columbia University, one of the top schools in the United States (25-6). Money, then, “was not an object” and allowed Stillman Sr. to quit his job in order to take over his child’s upbringing and, as some reportedly speculated, get away with murdering his wife (26).

In Stillman Sr.’s case, then, conspiracism was the source of his downfall, even if it, in the form of his thesis, afforded him a not-insubstantial amount of power in the beginning by helping him get a job at Columbia. The unshakable belief in his theory, however, is what also moved him to lock his son in a dark room for nine years “with no human contact except an occasional beating” (27). The only way the authorities were able to curtail Stillman Sr.’s actions was by declaring him “insane” after they discovered his son when his house caught fire (27). The version of Peter Stillman that Quinn/Auster follows when he emerges appears to be powerless, even over his own appearance or movements:

His hair was white, and it lay on his head uncombed, sticking up here in tufts. He was tall, thin, without a question past sixty, somewhat stooped. Inappropriately for the season, he wore a brown overcoat that had gone to seed, and he shuffled slightly as he walked. The expression on his face seemed placid, midway between a daze and thoughtfulness. He did not look at the things around him, nor did they seem to interest him. He had one piece of luggage, a once beautiful but now battered leather suitcase with a strap around it. Once or twice as he walked up the ramp he put the suitcase down and rested for a moment. He seemed to be moving with effort, a bit thrown by the crowd, uncertain whether to keep up with it or let the others pass him by. (55)

Quinn/Auster then follows him to a shabby hotel on 99th Street, or as Quinn/Auster describes it “a small fleabag hotel for down-and-outs” which, according to Quinn, is frequented by “winos and vagabonds” (57). While tailing Stillman Sr. he observes the old man collecting

pieces of trash off of the street, occasionally bumping into other pedestrians and finally learns that Stillman had committed suicide by jumping from the Brooklyn Bridge (59-60; 120).

Stillman Sr.'s downward social trajectory indicates that conspiracism has the opposite effect on him as it does on Ibrahim's protagonist—rather than gaining power by engaging in conspiracism he loses it. What is notable about his theory is that it is not in direct opposition to the dominant narrative—and in fact uses the dominant narrative in order to support its claims—but a slight deviation, an uncanny version. Stillman therefore is not a threat, but “insane” in that his theory is, to use Melley's term, “abnormal” (rather than threatening) to the interpretive community in which he lives. Thus, the “insanity” of Stillman Sr. (and to a certain extent Quinn) more closely resembles Boym's description of paranoia, in that it is ultimately based on his individual, irrational belief in an inhuman system with ultimate control, a belief that has no social implications other than for the conspiracist and those immediately involved in his life.

Quinn also undergoes a similar transformation and takes a dive from being a middle-class writer at the beginning of the book to a homeless man towards the end. While staking Virginia and Stillman Jr.'s apartment building for a period of time, he loses his own place and discovers that he has taken on the physical characteristics of what he calls “a bum:”

He had been too busy with his job to think about himself, and it was as though the question of his appearance had ceased to exist. Now, as he looked at himself in the shop mirror, he was neither shocked nor disappointed [...] The transformation in his appearance had been so drastic that he could not help but be fascinated by it. He had turned into a bum. His clothes were discolored, disheveled, debauched by filth. His face was covered by a thick black beard with tiny flecks of gray in it. His hair was long and tangled, matted into tufts behind his ears, and crawling down in curls almost to his shoulders. (117)

The primary catalyst of this transformation occurs when Quinn suddenly came to believe that something that resembles “fate” that had guided all of his decisions, that mandated he stay on the case:

Was “fate” really the word he wanted to use? It seemed like such a ponderous and old-fashioned choice. And yet, as he probed more deeply, he discovered that it was precisely what he meant to say. Or, if not precisely, it came closer than any other term he could think of. Fate in the sense of what was, of what happened to be. It was something like the word “it” in the phrase “it is raining,” or “it is night.” What “it” referred to Quinn had never known. A generalized condition of things as they were perhaps, the state of is-ness that was the ground on which the happenings of the world took place.

It was fate then. Whenever he thought of it, however much he might want to be different, there was nothing he could do about it. He said yes to a proposition, and now he was powerless to undo that yes. That meant only one thing: he had to go through with it. There could be no two answers. It was either this or that. And so it was, whether he liked it or not. (108-9)

While not quite a conspiracy theory, Quinn’s sudden belief that he is being controlled by an indescribable force is symptomatic of what Melley refers to as “agency panic,” rather than paranoia alone, as we will see in the next section.

5.2 *Ghurba* and Agency Panic

If Freud’s paranoia is insufficient to describe the conspiracists in these books, then what is? ‘Issam Mahfuz uses the term “*ghurba*,” rather than paranoia, to describe the protagonist’s sense of social reality in *al-Lajna*, which translates to something neighboring on alienation or a sense of unfamiliarity and foreignness. A sense of *ghurba* is not necessarily new, according to Mahfuz; while *ghurba* used to be describe as a feeling of alienation and “inability to face the power of nature” in pre-modern culture, the *ghurba* of Ibrahim’s protagonist is a result of “his feeling of paralysis or inability in the face of the power of hostile humanity” (51-2). Mahfuz writes, “In the shadow of *ghurba*, daily life runs in an environment of anxiety and fear of impending disaster” which accounts for his exaggerated (almost allegorical) descriptions of reality; his humiliating first interview with the Committee; Stubby’s absurd imposition; that he is condemned to consume himself” (52).

Melley’s “agency panic,” which qualifies the term paranoia rather than wholly rejecting it, also conveys a sense of helplessness. More specifically, it conveys an “intense

anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control—the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been ‘constructed’ by powerful external agents” (Melley, 12). According to Melley, agency panic is a reaction to postmodernism, or more specifically, the postmodern idea of world systems and mass social control which conspiracists view “as forms of individual persecution” and being willfully malevolent (15). Melley writes, “If agency panic is an attempt to conserve the integrity of the liberal, rational self, then its widespread appearance in postwar culture must be understood partly as a response to discourses that have articulated new ideas about subjectivity” (37).

The primary difference between *ghurba* and agency panic is one of human versus superhuman agents. While contemporary *ghurba* is a result of human, rather than natural hostilities, the opposite is true of agency panic. What is terrifying in agency panic, in fact, is the lack of human agents. This difference, to a certain extent, plays out between the two novels. While both Ibrahim’s protagonist and Stillman Sr. are the authors of conspiracy theories that detail structures, Ibrahim’s structure is populated with human agents. On an individual level, the humiliation, the anxiety, and the helplessness that he experiences is all in direct relation to identifiable human beings, whether the Committee, the Doctor, or even his landlord with the building’s illegal lack of elevator and tap water at night in his apartment building (63; 85). On the group level, the protagonist argues that the state of society can be linked to the actions of particular individuals and groups of people.

On the other hand, *City of Glass* is noticeably devoid of human agents—both on the individual and group level. Quinn, taking on a series of identities, becomes an agent of his current occupation rather than his function being a product of his “self.” One could argue that Stillman Sr.’s conspiracism stems from the powerlessness—or lack of agency—he felt when language was inadequate to express his experience with reality. The broken people that Stillman Sr. describe as being particularly common in New York are broken in the sense that

they also lack this ability to identify themselves and are unable to recognize the particular essence that makes them an individual. The forces that have caused these changes are mysterious and undefined—Stillman Sr. is only able to explain it by using religious narratives and invoking the term “God.” Ironically, his idea of wholeness works both on the individual and group level. The Tower of Babel that he describes, after all, has rooms that people enter—alone—in order to learn the universal language. The prelapsarian language is one, then, that is untarnished by human interaction and in this way it appears that Stillman Sr. aims to join the world through isolation. Or perhaps, what Stillman Sr. is really trying to achieve is a secure belief in his uniqueness as an individual.

The way both Auster and Ibrahim report conspiracism in these two novels is contingent on a correlation between knowledge and power—whether positive, as is the case in Ibrahim’s case, or negative, as in Auster. Without this correlation, the power of the narrative, and thus the conspiracy theory is lost. Furthermore, as these two novels report, accusations of mental illness, including paranoia, only work as a form of disempowerment, a way of silencing an argument. What we can conclude from this is that both novels show that conspiracism is the cause of a power shift, either up or down, depending on one’s relationship to the dominant forces of the society within which one lives.

Therefore, while the conspiracists do exhibit some of the symptoms of paranoia according to Freud, the hegemonic power as represented by the Committee and its elites comes the closest to being what Freud would consider paranoid. A more accurate description of the conspiracist’s state can be found in Mahfuz’s *ghurba* and Melley’s agency panic, the difference being, as is the difference between the two structural conspiracies in the novels, that *ghurba* ultimately holds human agents accountable, while the agency panic looks to non-human systems in a US postmodern fashion.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

As this thesis has shown, Ibrahim's protagonist and Stillman Sr. use conspiracism as a way to cope with the pervasive sense of impotence that hung over the late seventies and early eighties across the globe, including the United States and Egypt. Where Ibrahim cites "the spread of maladies and mental depression" (95), Stillman Sr. mentions the "the brokenness" of New York as the main motivators for their conspiracy theory (77). In this sense, the production of conspiracy narratives is a form of activism, a way of diagnosing the ailment before attempting to find the cure.

The diagnosis, however, is where the two diverge. Although both see a crisis of communication, be it the official narrative's failure to reflect Ibrahim's protagonist's experiences or the failure of the signifier to wholly represent the signified, they do not agree on the nature of the problem. What we find is that the notion of systematic control is not unique to the United States, as writing on conspiracy literature suggests. What is different between the systems portrayed by these two conspiracists is the nature of the system, or more specifically, the perception of human accountability. While Ibrahim's protagonist describes a hierarchical system with roots in United States corporate culture that is controlled by human agents, Stillman Sr. uses theological language to describe a human-made system—language—that has in the end become the agent that controls every aspect of our lives. In other words, where Ibrahim's protagonist sees a system populated by humans, Stillman Sr. sees a system constructed by humans. In this light, the structural conspiracy theory in *al-Lajna* is concerned with imperialism, in which a country controls another country—*ghurba*, and in *City of Glass*, with a fear of human creations becoming autonomous and omnipresent—agency panic.

Stillman Sr.'s findings work to unify humanity in victimhood and falsely perceive a sense that there is equality across the globe, which he then uses to justify US moves to control more territories—even the moon. This resembles the way the Committee uses the European metanarrative of civilization, which correlates the notions of freedom and democracy with free market capitalism in order to justify United States imperial control of countries such as Egypt and ironically discourage moves toward democracy. In this sense, both Stillman Sr. and the Committee are both conspiracists and conspirers in that they both perceive the presence of a universal evil that they alone can cure—the conspiracy theory—and conclude that it is imperative to cure it by unifying the world—the conspiracy. What differs between the two is that while Stillman Sr. does not hold humans accountable for his perception of the international conspiracy, the Committee does. Thus, it appears that whereas Stillman Sr. is completely unaware of the violent implications of his project of global unity, the Committee and the hegemonic forces it represents knows exactly what it is doing.

The Committee and the forces it represents therefore must remain in control of the dominant political narrative in order to remain anonymous—an invisible hand so to speak. It is for this reason that they are so concerned with the protagonist's research on the Doctor, which if made public could reveal and subsequently challenge their authority. Consequently, the protagonist's conspiracism is a form of resistance in which he creates an alternate narrative that better reflects his experiences—one that includes the Committee and acknowledges the widespread influence of middlemen such as the Doctor. While all evidence in the book—narrated by the protagonist, however—serves to support his conspiracy theory, he, like Stillman Sr. and the Committee members, uses this narrative in order to justify an act of violence.

As we have seen, both authors' views of the roles of the writer and the detective inform the way they portray conspiracism in both novels. Not surprisingly, Ibrahim has made

it clear on multiple occasions that he considers the role of the Egyptian novelist as essentially political and as a political figure, the writer must be held accountable for his work. Auster, on the other hand, argues that writing and politics should be kept separate and makes the case that authors should not be held accountable for the political content of what they produce, citing the freedom of speech. Ibrahim, of course, is not against free speech, but rather acknowledges the real-life implications of a narrative, even a work of fiction. In a sense, it seems that Auster—both in real life and as a character in *City of Glass*—has lost faith in the transformative potential of a work of fiction on the political level.

Both, however, recognize the ability of a work of fiction to access some sort of truth that is impossible in a supposedly objective narrative. As both demonstrate through their portrayals of conspiracism, argument is an insufficient tool to challenge power on its own, be it human or inhuman. The failure of the Committee to silence the protagonist without the threat of violence particularly speaks to this point. So does the protagonist's disappearance at the end; both of the forces that they opposed remained intact, despite their efforts. Stillman Sr.'s suicide similarly reflects the failure of argument to provide him a workable solution to what he perceived as the source of the world's ills.

The impact of the novel, as well as the impact of the conspiracy theory, is contingent on the correlation between knowledge and power, as is the case in both books. Based on this premise, accusations of insanity or paranoia reveal more about the challenge that conspiracy narratives pose to those in power than the mental state of the conspiracist. The term *ghurba*, which in its modern sense describes the inability to counter human power, is thus more descriptive of the emotional state of the protagonist of *al-Lajna* and agency panic, the fear of losing one's individual autonomy to a super-human structure, to describe the emotional state of Stillman Sr. and to an extent Quinn.

These novels report conspiracy theory as a way of inciting change and confirm the political implications of conspiracism—whether or not the conspiracist (or even the author of the novel) is aware. Whether in opposition or support of the dominant narrative, these conspiracy theories serve to justify the conspiracists’ political motives and in doing so, justify any means the conspiracists might use in reaction to the theory. Beyond conspiracism, a comparison between the political realities of these two novels reveals that in the end, what presents itself as a discourse between different powers—particularly when there is an imbalance between the two—is really a form of competitive narrative production. Similarly, these conspiracy theories, though they speak to similar phenomena, are not in conversation with one another but form narrative layers. What we have in the end are palimpsestic monologues feigning dialogue between dominant and conspiracy narratives.

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