

Ottmar Ette (ed.)

# Caribbean(s) on the Move – Archipiélagos literarios del Caribe

A TransArea Symposium



PETER LANG

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**Foreword:**  
**Caribbean(s) on the Move and TransArea Studies**

Space can best be defined not by looking at borders and territories but, rather, by focussing on movements of crossing and re-crossing. The conception of a given area, of course, has to include geographic and topographic information as well as the borderlines that, within different historical, political or cultural constructions, produce its image on a map or other forms of visualisation and, more yet, *create* the frameworks of its imaginary. But we can only analyze and understand an area by focussing on its mobile relationships with other areas and by trying to highlight the dynamics of transversal movements that configure a specific area by crossing it and linking it with other areas. Today, the horizons of traditional Area Studies have to be opened up by innovative TransArea Studies which generate a new vision of entangled and connected histories and multi-, inter- and transcultural developments. The vectorization of all kinds of knowledge is on the agenda: the movements of the past are still present in the movements of today.

This shift from Area Studies to TransArea Studies has been outlined and performed, over the last seven years or so, by inter- and transdisciplinary workgroups in Berlin and Brandenburg. One of the principal aims underlying the foundation of the scientific network formed by the *Forschungsverbund Lateinamerika in Berlin-Brandenburg* (ForLaBB) was to rethink Latin America from a mobile (and, if possible, ground-breaking) point of view – a «travelling perspective», if one might call it so. After revisiting the special historical relationship between Prussia and Latin America<sup>1</sup>, a number of congresses, conferences and lecture series were dedicated to analyzing the internal frameworks of relations and dynamics first «inside» Latin America<sup>2</sup>, questioning its traditional borders, limits and frontiers, and then to exploring its external relations, starting with the hemispheric constructions of the Americas on a historical, literary, political, cultural or social level<sup>3</sup>. Already at this point the Caribbean turned out to present a theoretical challenge.

A further step towards TransArea Studies has been undertaken by organizing two symposia and a lecture series at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* (Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin) and at the University of Potsdam, focussing on *Arab-Americas*, i.e. the literary interconnectedness of the American hemisphere and the Arab world<sup>4</sup>. Further ForLaBB activities and lecture series were dedicated to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wolff 2001; Carreras/Maihold 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Braig/Ette/Ingenschay/Maihold 2005; for selected proceedings in Spanish see Braig/Ette (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Birle/Braig/Ette/Ingenschay 2006; for selected proceedings in Spanish see Braig/Ette (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ette/Pannewick 2006.

the study of *AfricAmericas*<sup>5</sup>, *EuropAmericas*<sup>6</sup> and *AsiAmericas*<sup>7</sup> – the proceedings of which will be published in late 2007 and in 2008 – as well as to sports (soccer)<sup>8</sup> and new ways of understanding the circulation of knowledge<sup>9</sup>.

This shift from rather static conceptions of space towards a highly vectorized and mobile understanding of multi-relational dynamics demands, in the field of literature, the creation and critical discussion of a poetics of movement, deeply imbedded in a new definition of cultural mobility and life knowledge (*Lebenswissen*). The need to distinguish between translocal, transregional, transnational, transareal and transcontinental relations and forms of exchange<sup>10</sup> does not imply, of course, an even deeper separation between so-called «regional studies» (such as Area Studies) on the one hand and general or systematic knowledge and theory on the other. On the contrary, the dynamics of entanglements and criss-crossing underline the need to rethink «general» theory in terms of its transspatial frames. Beyond all universalistic claims, in the fields of literature, theory and science – in its broad sense, including the humanities – general theory is always linked to time, space and movement.

Organized as a TransArea Symposium at the University of Potsdam on December 21, 2006, *Caribbean(s) on the Move – Archipiélagos literarios del Caribe – Les Antilles en mouvement* was profoundly engaged in this process of opening up and transforming Area Studies by vectorizing them in the horizon of TransArea Studies. Could there be a better field for this theoretical shift than the Caribbean, one of the outstanding producers of cultural and literary theories of our time?

The results of the tri-lingual meeting are presented in this bi-lingual volume with contributions by international scholars specialized in different Caribbean literatures and other areas and literatures. The Caribbean is, due to its fractal structure and the continuous movements from all over the world crossing this area, particularly suitable for (and, at the same time, in need of) the development and application of TransArea Studies. The articles gathered in this volume accept the challenge of portraying the *Caribbean(s) on the Move* and of rethinking the Caribbean from the standpoint of its world-wide mobile cultural networks.

<sup>5</sup> Lectures held at Humboldt University, Free University (Institute of Latin American Studies), Ibero-American Institute at Berlin, at the University of Potsdam, as well as at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, from October 2004 to February 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Lectures held at Humboldt University, Free University (Institute of Latin American Studies), Ibero-American Institute and Ethnographic Museum at Berlin, as well as at the University of Potsdam from October 2005 to February 2006.

<sup>7</sup> A ForLaBB Symposium organized at the Ibero-American Institute at Berlin (February 9–10, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Ette/Rinke 2007.

<sup>9</sup> An interdisciplinary workshop held at the University of Potsdam under the title *Zirkulation des Wissens: Erinnerung(skulturen) und die Konfiguration Lateinamerikas* (July 17, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ette 2005, 9–26.

Concentrating on different literatures of this multilingual and transcultural area, they focus on the Caribbean from a Central American, Brazilian or U.S. perspective, while not neglecting view-points from Europe or the Arab world. The de-centralization of the Caribbean in terms of its complex connectedness with a kaleidoscope of cultures takes us from the times of the Haitian Revolution to our experience of accelerated globalizations, from Aruba, Belize or Cuba to the Lebanon, France or Nicaragua, then bringing us back to Haiti, Puerto Rico or Costa Rica. The following studies of transnational, hemispheric and transcontinental entanglements allow new mappings of this fascinating area, an area that has played a major role in the field of *mondialisation* since the first period of accelerated globalization, which ranged from the late 15<sup>th</sup> to the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.

During a cold winter day in Central Europe, the participants of this symposium tried to outline and elaborate new perspectives of TransArea Studies concerning the centre of the American hemisphere, giving way to further investigations of the AfricAmericas, EuropAmericas, AsiAmericas or ArabAmericas in the Greater Caribbean. But new challenges are ahead: How can we formulate a poetics of movement from a Caribbean outlook? And how can we rethink even European literature from the perspective of the Caribbean, seeing it as a multilingual archipelago? Does the study of Caribbean literatures enable us to implement the above-mentioned shift from Area Studies to a TransArea Studies perspective as a paradigm for understanding world literature today?

This is the right moment to give my warm thanks to all those who made this symposium at Sanssouci Campus possible. I would also like to express my gratitude to Josephine Valenza Arnold and to A. James Arnold, our DAAD visiting professor at the University of Potsdam from October to December 2006, as well as to Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger, for their help and suggestions. Special thanks go to Mark Minnes for his excellent translations, to Rosa María Sauter for correcting the Spanish texts, to Kian-Harald Karimi and Marcel Vejmelka for the careful editing of this volume. And to my Ph.D. students, for their inspiring presence and good spirits.

Ottmar Ette    Sanssouci, September 21, 2007

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**Arab-Caribbean origins: on the transareal dimension  
in Amin Maalouf's literary work  
Coming home to the familiar unknown**

*«Grâce à Dieu nous avons maintenant une maison où nous pourrions vivre ensemble  
comme tous les gens respectables au lieu de dormir au grenier comme avant...»<sup>1</sup>*

It was with these words that Gebrayel Maalouf, alias Gabriel M. Maluf, tried to persuade his brother Botros, who had remained back in the homeland, to leave the Lebanon Mountains and move to Cuba, to join his brother, who had become a successful businessman. The large house that the *émigré* had been able to build in only a couple of years of hard work, ever since he had arrived in New York in 1895 and then settled in Havana in 1898, turns into the promise of a harmonious *vivre ensemble*, aimed at attracting the one who has remained behind. Botros is urged to leave the always precarious circumstances in Lebanon for a new place, where immigrants from the Near East like his brother can quickly become *gens respectables*. But Gebrayel attempts in vain to persuade the older brother, who came to Cuba once in order to help the young social climber escape from a delicate muddle, to settle permanently on the tropical island: Botros' return to the family's village in "Mont Liban"<sup>2</sup> is for good, even though a brother in Havana had for a long time been a glimpse of hope on the horizon for Botros.<sup>3</sup> For as long as there was the house in Havana, there always was also the possibility of leaving the Old World for the New, especially in difficult times.

The two brothers, born in the 1870s as citizens of the Ottoman Empire, represent two fundamental *figures of movement* in Amin Maalouf's book *Origines*, which was published in 2004 and awarded the "Prix Méditerranée" in that same year: Gebrayel leaves his homeland, emigrates to Cuba and quickly climbs the social ladder as an entrepreneur after having founded his business called "La Verdad."<sup>4</sup> All this before he plunges to death at the wheel of his automobile, falling off a bridge on the way home at age forty-two. Botros, in turn, quickly returns home and dedicates himself completely to the task of establishing a modern school system that is not bound to certain confessions. He wins respect as an orator and poet, but is also despised as an «infidel» before dying in his homeland, caught up in a permanent fight against his village's catholic school,

<sup>1</sup> Maalouf 2004, 325.

<sup>2</sup> Maalouf 2004, 325.

<sup>3</sup> Maalouf 2004, 70.

<sup>4</sup> Maalouf 2004, 203.



which in the end keeps the upper hand. The line of a departure without return and the circle of a voyage back to one's origins, seen as two lives' courses in space, represent a historical alternative: Ever since the massacres<sup>5</sup> that took place from 1858 to 1862 and which are still present as a trauma in Lebanese history, the violent clashes, wars, civil unrests and concomitant waves of refugees and emigrants, appearing in ever new constellations, form the true life-rhythm of the country and its inhabitants.

So Amin Maalouf's text, which inserts itself into the complicated space of travel-movements between the Old and New World, could have very well been entitled "Two Brothers," hadn't this title already been chosen by the Brazilian novelist Milton Hatoum, writing in an ArabAmerican context,<sup>6</sup> for his successful novel about two brothers' rivalry for their mother's love.<sup>7</sup> The spatial-topographical and at the same time hermeneutical figures of movement, permitting us to comprehend the text and embodied by Botros and Gebrayel, are supplemented in *Origines* by a figure of movement embodied by the first-person narrator, who is searching for his own origins and roots. As a late reader of his great-uncle Gebrayel's letter, he is moved to undertake a journey to Cuba, following the traces of his ancestors.

This journey takes him to various sites which were important for Gebrayel's life in the Cuban capital, and of course it also takes him to the house about which the upwardly mobile immigrant had told his brother so proudly. This house hadn't been easy to find, almost nine decades later, in a country living under a revolution which had also lost much of its juvenile impetus. It had been transformed into a *Centro de Superación para la Cultura de la ciudad de La Habana*, which – apart from the somewhat pompous title – had revealed itself to be a simple school for music. The first-person narrator has a look around in the house of his long-dead ancestor:

D'ailleurs, quelques instants après mon arrivée, des notes se font entendre. Elles proviennent, par-delà le couloir, d'une vaste pièce dont le haut plafond et les murs sont tapissés à la fois de faïence et de stuc, avec des motifs et des inscriptions imités de ceux de l'Alhambra, notamment la devise des Nasrides, derniers rois musulmans de Grenade : *La ghaliba illa-llah*, « Pas d'autre vainqueur que Dieu ». Dans cette pièce, qui fut peut-être la salle à manger, il semble que l'influence de la fille de l'austère prédicateur n'ait pas su prévaloir; non qu'il y ait là une débauche ostentatoire, mais disons que la richesse n'y est pas demeurée timide.

Il serait toutefois injuste de ne voir en cela qu'un caprice de nouveau riche; ce n'est pas le drapeau de sa fortune que Gebrayel a déployé sur ces murs, c'est le drapeau de sa culture d'origine, de son identité; il éprouvait le besoin de pro-

<sup>5</sup> See Maalouf 2004, 82. Concerning the consequences for Lebanese literature, see Pflitsch (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Concerning this line of tradition, which so far has been mostly neglected by literary research, see Ette/Pannewick (2006).

<sup>7</sup> See Hatoum (2000) and the German translation Hatoum (2002).

clamer fièrement son appartenance à la civilisation andalouse, symbole du rayonnement des siens.<sup>8</sup>

The house constructed in Amin Maalouf's *Origines* inserts itself into a long literary tradition, in which it is especially in the Caribbean archipelago that the island-house gains a special importance within a fractal geometry. This is the case insofar as the most diverse dimensions of space and time, society and politics, culture and literature intersect and increase in density.<sup>9</sup> This is also the case for the Lebanese author's Cuban island-house. For it is in the former home of the agile great-uncle and his wife Alice, who had been raised in her father Khalil's strict Presbyterian Protestantism, that the sounds of a music school in revolutionary Cuba, the artful oriental images of a Lebanese immigrant turned rich and honored and the ornamental writing displaying a saying of the Nasrids, whose defeat meant the end for the Moorish (if not for the mythical) Al Andalus, meet in dense patterns. The music, the images and the writing open up a historical and cultural, geographical and architectonical space, spanning from the late fifteenth to the end of the twentieth century. It stretches from Moorish Granada, taken by the Catholic Kings on January 6, 1492, who subsequently gave way to Christopher Columbus' persistence, up to the current situation of the island which the Genovese, ranked admiral a few months later, on October 28, 1492 declared to be the "most beautiful thing that has ever been perceived."<sup>10</sup> Up against this backdrop, it is no coincidence that Gebrayel's final resting place is no other than the *Cementerio de Colón*, the capital's monumental cemetery named after Columbus.

But there is more. It is in a directly following passage that the narrator's memory of a recent trip to the German capital is woven into the text, a journey on which the narrator visited a synagogue in Berlin, built in the second half of the nineteenth century, the architecture of which plays with elements from the Alhambra. When he asked for the reasons of the "extraordinaire ressemblance entre son architecture et celle de l'Alhambra,"<sup>11</sup> he was answered that the Jewish congregation had not only followed a fashion in architecture, but that it had sought for a "manière d'affirmer ses origines orientales."<sup>12</sup> This is how the Jewish faith also enters the equation as a third line of tradition, along with the Moorish empire of the Nasrids and the subsequent Christian domination, which in the transition from the *reconquista* to the *conquista* brought large parts of the world under its control, taking its origins on the Iberian Peninsula. Of course, the expulsion of the Jews throws a shadow over the seemingly heroic «Annus Mirabilis» of 1492. As if in a burning glass, the visit to the house in Havana brings

<sup>8</sup> Maalouf 2004, 323s.

<sup>9</sup> See also for more information Ette (2005, 142-147).

<sup>10</sup> Colón 1986, 82.

<sup>11</sup> Maalouf 2004, 324.

<sup>12</sup> Maalouf 2004, 324.



back to the present the Arabian, Christian and Jewish worlds and their concept of *vivre ensemble*, their way of living together in Nasrid Granada, while at the same time the tension between Orient and Occident is transported west, extended from the Old to the New World. For not only does Granada stand for the sudden change from European to worldwide expansion, but it also marks the beginning of ArabAmerican history.

The first-person narrator is set in this complicated structural tension as he endeavors on a trip *à la recherche du temps perdu*, as it were, which starts as a trip through the various family documents that he transported in a huge suitcase ("la malle des ancêtres"<sup>13</sup>) from Lebanon to France. This first trip quickly takes on the form of voyages to the New World, in an attempt to secure the traces of his own family history on Ellis Island in the bay of New York City and, mostly, in Cuba. Of course, a menacing feeling of getting lost in all the letters and documents has to be dealt with first: "au milieu de toutes ces vies atomisées en une poussière de mots."<sup>14</sup> The ancestors' suitcase weighs heavier than one might have thought, and it must be sifted through before the descendant can get to packing his own suitcase.

It should already have become clear: On the narrator's trip to Cuba, the most diverse travel-movements between Orient and Occident, between Old and New World, between past and present superimpose on themselves in complicated ways. Also, the narrator doesn't live in Lebanon, but in France, and he doesn't write in Arabic, but in French. The narrator undertakes a voyage – and the island of the Cuban Revolution with its vintage automobiles, its temporal immobility and its music is perfectly suited for such movements in time and space<sup>15</sup> – which can be understood as a voyage in time, as a search for the origins, maybe even better as a *return* to a place where the «I» hasn't been before. It is a homecoming to the (familiar) unknown. After the first-person narrator has spent an entire day looking for traces in Havana and still can't get to sleep despite his weariness, he sits down on the veranda with his notebook and a glass of rum. Then, in strange intensity, he hears the voices and sounds of a city that never sleeps, even at night: "Je souris et ferme les yeux. Un petit vent tiède souffle sur mes paupières moites. J'ai soudain le sentiment d'être né dans cette ville. Oui, dans cette ville aussi."<sup>16</sup>

Birth in the Old World is complemented by birth in the New World, a coming to light in the *Proche-Orient* by a similar occurrence in the *extremo Oriente*. The city of Havana offers space for an Orient within the Occident, a space which Gebrayel Maalouf had fought for and created in Cuba as Gabriel M. Maluf. The far-away unknown now also turns into a homeland, even a birthplace

<sup>13</sup> Maalouf 2004, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Maalouf 2004, 40.

<sup>15</sup> See Ette 2001a, 9-25.

<sup>16</sup> Maalouf 2004, 311.

for the descendant, even though the narrator, who follows the itineraries of his ancestors, has never been there before.

### *I'm always also the others*

Before we continue to follow these movements of travel, we must guard ourselves against a possible (and frequent) misunderstanding. It can be found in many articles on the book, but also – and this is much more important and significant – on the jacket sleeve or in press releases: It is the question of whether the «I» in *Origines* is identical with the real author Amin Maalouf. This identification (or confusion) reads as follows on the back cover of the paperback version, where there is talk about “la saga des Maalouf”:<sup>17</sup>

C'est à cette « tribu », dont il reconstitue l'histoire avec la rigueur d'un archiviste et l'empathie d'un romancier, que l'auteur du *Rocher de Tanios* (prix Goncourt 1993) rend un magnifique hommage d'amour et de fidélité. Pour l'écrivain, lui-même en exil, n'est-elle pas sa seule patrie?<sup>18</sup>

First, we should agree on the fact that by the term «author» we mean the existing writer, external to the text, who in 1993 was the first Lebanese writer to win the most renowned French literary prize, the “Prix Goncourt.” Mixing up the real author and the figure of the narrator, *internal* to the text, is without doubt a strategy used by the publisher, counting on best-selling dictional (that is, non-fictional) *authority*. Following this strategy, the «I» in the text simply is Amin Maalouf. But we should by all means refrain from coming to such a conclusion – and not just because the most diverse dictional and fictional qualities of an *archiviste* and of a *romancier* simultaneously come into play. But the publisher's strategy, easily discernible, is also a strategy used in the text insofar as a multitude of biographical elements is strewn into it, elements which readily might be attributed to an *author's* biography. They take up certain parts of this real author's life. To make this clearer, some elements of this personal history should briefly be mentioned here.

Amin Maalouf was born in Beirut in 1949 as the son of a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, a Melchite, that is, an Arabian Christian of Greco-Catholic orientation. He may be considered – as it has been made clear repeatedly – a wanderer between worlds or a nomad between cultures.<sup>19</sup> After having attended the French-language Jesuit school *Notre-Dame de Jamhour*, from which he graduated in 1966 with the French and Lebanese diploma for university studies,<sup>20</sup> and after having studied at the Beirut *Ecole Supérieure des Let-*

<sup>17</sup> Maalouf 2004, back cover 4.

<sup>18</sup> Maalouf 2004, back cover 4. The last phrase refers to a formula that is used quite frequently by Maalouf himself: see the interview by Bénichou (1997, 114-115).

<sup>19</sup> Similar expressions can be found partly also in interviews with the Lebanese author; see Barrada/Gaillard/Rochebrune (1993).

<sup>20</sup> See the short biographical sketch in the interesting entry by Solon (2003, 1).

tres, associated to the University of Lyon, he worked as a journalist for the Arabic-language Lebanese newspaper *An Nahar*. This permitted the young Lebanese, working in the department of international politics, to travel extensively, most notably to India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and the Maghreb. Amin Maalouf grew up in a multi-confessional family, lived in the Christian part of Beirut and went to work in the Muslim part of the city. Between 18 and 24 he had to live through two civil wars and when, on April 13, 1975 the *Guerre du Liban*, the civil war which was to continue up until 1990 in changing constellations, broke out "pratiquement sous la fenêtre de l'appartement que j'habitais à Beyrouth,"<sup>21</sup> the by then 27 year-old Maalouf fled to Paris in June of 1976. There he continued to work as a journalist, most notably for the well-known journal *Jeune Afrique* (with interruptions from 1976 to 1985)<sup>22</sup> and then as the chief of the Paris section of *An Nahar arabe et internationale* (1979-1981). Today, Maalouf works as a writer, has been awarded many literary prizes and travels back and forth between Paris and his retired life as an author on the Ile d'Yeu, off the southern coast of Brittany.

Single fragments of this life's journey keep reappearing in Maalouf's texts as points of reference and as more or less tongue-in-cheek autobiographical markers. Already in Maalouf's first book, *Les Croisades vues par les Arabes* (1983), published when he had made a name for himself as a journalist, just like his father, he plays with the boundaries between historiographic research and literary elements and procedures. It is no coincidence that the author claims in his "Avant-propos" to have written "« le roman vrai » des croisades."<sup>23</sup> This game, involving diction and fiction, which we can also find in those texts that can easily be labeled as novels, becomes especially apparent in the texts whose genre of reference is mainly of the dictional type. This is the case for the essay *Les identités meurtrières* (1998), which in the midst of a discursive base-structure contains a multitude of narrative «cores», displaying a latently fictional, narrative and also autobiographical undercurrent. Especially with a view to this quite influential publication, which in 1999 was awarded the Charles Veillon essay prize, one might argue that *Origines* attempts to unfold in a more extensive manner the specifically narrative «cores» from the preceding book of essays. At the same time, it might be read as an attempt at putting these «cores» on stage as a carefully documented investigation of one's own history. For it is also in *Origines* that the question of living together in difference comes to the foreground, as well as the problematic of a complex identity – an "identité composite,"<sup>24</sup> as it is postulated in *Les identités meurtrières*.

<sup>21</sup> Bénichou 1997, 115.

<sup>22</sup> For this phase of his life, see the extensive interview see Barrada/Gaillard/Rochebrune (1993).

<sup>23</sup> Maalouf 1983, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Maalouf 1998, 28.

The fact that the above-quoted text from the jacket sleeve speaks of Maalouf as an author in exile, even though he has repeatedly and vehemently distanced himself from such a label,<sup>25</sup> goes to show that one should be wary of certain formulas from the paratext, given the fact that they are often dictated by the publisher's motives. The narrating voice in the first person singular creates an explicit author-figure (internal to the text) which certainly is not identical with the author who is external to the text. As in a traditional autobiography, this figure is composed of an «I» that is busy investigating itself (in analogy to the narrated «I») on the one hand, and an «I» that has an overview of the entire investigation, commenting on it (in analogy to the narrating «I»). Of course, the latter «I» knows more than the former, an advantage which dwindles down more or less continuously in the course of the text. This is how the retrospective investigation of history turns into the story, told in the mode of personal experience.

If one takes this rough sketch of the book's structure into account, then it becomes clear why we should not permit ourselves to identify either the investigating «I», or the «I» who is commenting on this investigation with the real author Amin Maalouf. A continuous movement of oscillation between diction (especially in the discursive or historiographic parts of the text) and fiction (especially in the narration and dialogues) contributes to the creation of a *frictional*<sup>26</sup> text that is not the equivalent of an objective report on facts. Maalouf's hybrid text may not, therefore, be attributed predominantly to the genre of the novel, nor to historiographic study or autobiography, nor to the family chronicle or the fictional tale of events. So, for the «I» in Maalouf's *Origines*, we can say: *Je est un autre* – a flickering, ever changing figure of movement within the architecture of a highly hybridized text.

But there is another dimension to the plurality of figures hidden behind the singular «I». We have already learned that the «I» does not attribute itself to a singular birthplace. The complicated construction of identity going along with this clearly relies on the idea that a person's *life* does not start with the individual's birth, but that it is of a *transgenerational* make-up. This view is brought forward time and again in Maalouf's texts. Not only can this be proved by looking at his dictional texts (mostly the essays, articles and interviews with this Lebanese-born author), but it appears most clearly in his novels. This is the case in the 1996 novel *Les Echelles du Levant*.<sup>27</sup> The novel is set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and goes back and forth between the Near East and France. So, in a conversation between the protagonist and the narrator-figure, in which, on the level of the narrative frame, the question of the most pertinent entry into the «life-story» is discussed, we read:

<sup>25</sup> See Sassine (1999, 29s.), and in more detail Ette (in print).

<sup>26</sup> For the concept of friction, see Ette (1998, 308-312).

<sup>27</sup> See Maalouf 1996.

- De quoi voudriez-vous que nous parlions en premier ? demanda-t-il.  
 — Le plus simple serait de commencer par le commencement. Votre naissance...  
 Il déambula deux bonnes minutes en silence. Puis répondit par une question.  
 — Êtes-vous certain que la vie d'un homme commence à la naissance?<sup>28</sup>

The further course of the novel unfolds the Lebanese-born narrator's idea that his life has begun long before his birth, before his conception. "Ma vie a commencé, dit-il, un demi-siècle avant ma naissance, dans une chambre que je n'ai jamais visitée, sur les rives du Bosphore."<sup>29</sup> The transgenerational dimension of life from the very start always refers us to preceding births, to spaces that have been ventured through before, to a seemingly prenatal life, which sets in long before the first scream of new-born life – and in *Les Echelles du Levant* it is no coincidence that this scream is prompted by the sight of the dead father.

*Origines* also abruptly sets in with the painful realization that the much revered father<sup>30</sup> is dead. As a journalist and writer, he had a double fatherly role – this also is a recurring motif in Maalouf's writing. It is from this death – from these deaths – that the life of narrator and protagonist arises. A life spent searching for the lost origin (because nobody ever cared to ask for it), trying to open the path to an open and self-determined future by multiplying these origins (*origines*). So in this frictional text by Amin Maalouf, the «I» is not just somebody else (*un autre*) in relation to the real author, but also in the sense that in the midst of his own life, behind his birth, always other lives, other births are discernible. These births the «I» must come to terms with if it wants to understand its many faces and its *figural* dimension.<sup>31</sup> For «I» am not only an other: I'm also always the others. And this includes the fact, especially in *Origines*, that the location, the expansive dimension of spatial overlaps and intersections, is also implied:  *Ici est un autre*.

### Ways of knowledge

D'autres que moi auraient parlé de « racines »... Ce n'est pas mon vocabulaire. Je n'aime pas le mot « racines », et l'image encore moins. Les racines s'enfouissent dans le sol, se contorsionnent dans la boue, s'épanouissent dans les ténèbres [...]. Les arbres doivent se résigner, ils ont besoin de leurs racines; les hommes pas. Nous respirons la lumière, nous convoitons le ciel, et quand nous nous enfonçons dans la terre, c'est pour pourrir. La sève du sol natal ne remonte pas par nos pieds vers la tête, nos pieds ne servent qu'à marcher. Pour nous, seules importent les routes. [...] Comme nous, elles ont une origine. Origine illusoire, puisqu'une route n'a jamais de véritable commencement; avant

<sup>28</sup> Maalouf 1996, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Maalouf 1996, 23. In many novels, other texts and interviews, Constantinople represents something like the mythical point of reference with a mesmerizing effect on everybody.

<sup>30</sup> Maalouf 2004, 501.

<sup>31</sup> See in this context Auerbach (1967, 55-93).