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Inter-textual nation: Novel paradigms of Palestinian community

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How are a people imagined as a nation? How might Palestinian fiction re-think the parameters for nation-ness?

The nation-state as the dominant model of national community—in both in literature and politics—is imagined as a sovereign and bordered space that takes on collective meaning through linear (historical) time. To be what Benedict Anderson called an 'imagined national community,' (*Imagined Communities*, 1983) then, a nation must style itself through the writing of a retrospective narrative set within a no-less retrospective understanding of its territorial borers. The nation exists as a bordered and historical entity; as a sort of fish tank, whose corners fill up with 'homogeneous empty time.'

[Diagram 1: The nation space and its liner time]

It is this model of the nation that Anderson sees imagined through fiction. 'The novel,' he wrote in *Imagined Communities*, 'is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation,' (21, 26). In the national novel, he showed, characters are imagined as connected because they inhabit the same national space in national time This way of imagining, however, comes undone in the Palestinian novel, which must imagine a nation that is neither limited nor sovereign, and which gathers myriad timelines and trajectories into a single model.

Palestinian authors, however, had been using the techniques of the novel to write their particular nation for more than a half century. So, *Novel Paradigms of Palestinian Community* read back from the novels to understand the model community being imagined. Examining the techniques used for relating individuals, locations, and periods of time (for example post-Oslo Ramallah and Civil War era camps in Lebanon, and society in the 17th century Galilee under Dhaer al-Umar, etc) to one another, analysis identified a model, the 'nation constellation,' that fit the diverse modes and means of writing Palestinian experience. This model posted a tentative answer to Edward Said's question: 'Is there any place that fits us, together with our accumulated memories and experiences?' (*After the Last Sky*, 152).

The nation constellation, crafted in Palestinian novels through diverse techniques of inter-textuality, offers a model of the nation that is multi-cited, flexible, and open-ended; a model that understands the centrality of place in the Palestinian experience without the imaginative limitations of sovereignty or linearity. For the works analyzed, the nation not as a bounded and linear concept, but conjured as a constellation, where nodes/stars are connected through imaginary processes of nation-building that creates a set of inter-linked spaces, times, and structures of power that at once challenge the singular authority of the nation-state system as a political construct, and as the basis for imagining a Palestinian national community.

[Diagram 2: Re-imagining the nation through the realities of Palestinian geography]

Responsible scholarship

Before publication of a model of Palestinian community was thinkable, results were workshopped, honed, and adjusted to include feedback and insights from Palestinian writers, readers, and critics. Preliminary findings were workshopped and presented in English and Arabic (thanks to the language training made abailable at the British Institute) during the 12 months of CBRL fellowship at three conferences, a CBRL-Ifpo joint lecture series, and through a succession of seminars at Bethlehem University. Additional material was collected and worked into the research in order to broaden project conclusions.

Research findings were first presented in Amman, with a formal lecture on the concept of 'nation constellation' and possible implications. Author Ibrahim Nasrallah (b. 1954, Wihdat, Amman), whose works form the core of the research project, was an honoured guest at the event. One of Palestine's best known contemporary writers, Nasrallah's presence was also a chance to begin a series of interviews that would feed back into the project, and form the basis for further work on the author. Informal meetings with local and international literary critics, as well as academics in and around Amman showed initial support for and interest in seeing the model published. Mapping of the literary community and responses to the project reinforced not only the legitimacy of the findings but the need for publication.

Across the Jordan River, another series of conferences public engagement continued to affirm the place for 'nation constellation' as a model for national imaginary. Presentation at the international *Benjamin in Palestine* conference (co-hosted by Birzeit University and the Sakakini Cutlural Center and live-streamed to audiences at the American Universities in Cairo and Beirut) tested the theoretical possibilities of the project. Beginning with the idea of the 'constellation,' developed by the German-Jewish writer and philosopher Walter Benjamin (b. 1892, Germany, d. 1940, Spain) looking at the complex ways it is embodied in the Palestinian context. From plot 'lines' that resemble spider webs, to sequences that eschew the linear by developing almost 3D story structures, Palestinian fiction was shown not only to imagine the nation as a constellation, but to imagine the specificities and nuances of the relationships between each of its stars. Feedback nuanced the particularly Palestinian contribution to philosophical thinking.

On giving meaning to national space without delimited territory, Nasrallah's work was explored alongside the nation's preeminent poet Mahmoud Darwish at a special panel on Palestinian Literature at the Modern Languages Association (MLA) annual conference in Austin, Texas. A paper titled "Finding Place in a Paradox: Ibrahim Nasrallah from Present Absence to Eloquent Silence" explored the relationship between space and language in Arabic literature. An in-depth look at Darwish's exploration of language as a container for historical meaning gave insights into Nasrallah's grappling with the form of the national novel as a hegemonic structure that delimits the actions and even the imagination of the individual.

This expanded the notion of 'eloquent silence,' and the frequent use of ellipses as a narrative device in Palestinian fiction. It showed how structural elements of the text are used to undermine and expose violent structures, including the structure of language itself. The simultaneous writing and undermining of writing was used as a mechanism for stories (often frame stories) and characters escape authoritarian structures. Within the notion of the nation constellation, this broadened the narrative possibilities of the 'empty' and 'silent' spaces between nodes.

Back at the Kenyon, connections with scholars in Bethlehem lead to an invitation to teach five seminars on Palestinian Literature to students enrolled in an eponymous course. Teaching with the theory of the constellation revealed its possibilities as a super-structure for diverse Palestinian texts, as well as its clarity as a concept for thinkers at all levels.

Joining and then founding an independent Arabic Literature Reading Group in Jerusalem gave a first opportunity to explain and express the full concept of the nation constellation in Arabic. This established the very basic problem of a lack of vocabulary for the expression of the idea in Arabic, and lead to a program of developing means to make the concept a 'translatable' one between and across languages. Contacts with local scholars and feedback from a presentation at the 10th annual Palestinian Literature Conference at Bethlehem University has resulted in a repository of workarounds for the expression of the theory in Arabic, but more significantly illuminated a productive gap in the field that links literary theory to translation studies. Further work will be carried out here down the road.

Work done during my time at CBRL will result in a published article, and a combined series of interviews and translation project based on conversations with Ibrahim Nasrallah. This will collectively and specifically feed into a monograph based on the initial proposed project, *Inter-textual nation: Novel paradigms of Palestinian community*. This will be the third monograph in English dedicated to Palestinian writing in its original Arabic, and the first to explore notions of Palestinian national identity through the works of Palestinian authors. The final published work will also be among a growing number to propose non-traditional solutions to the problem of the modern state based on the experience and insights of once 'peripheral' locations. It will present a Palestinian framework to challenge and change linear and bounded discourses about the national, historical, and phenomenological.

Support from CBRL not only allowed for critical language training, but time to reconnect research with the community it is based within and upon, building valuable networks, and providing invaluable insights.

Works Cited

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