**‘A river without water’: Hydropolitics and the River Jordan in Palestinian Literature**

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**Abstract**

In this article I examine the representation of the River Jordan and ecological crisis in recent works by two of Palestine’s best-known writers: the poem “A river dies of thirst” by Mahmoud Darwish, and Mourid Barghouti’s memoir *I Saw Ramallah* (2004). Ecocritics have paid scant attention to these writers’ works, or to Palestinian literature in general. Yet the environment is a major domain of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and ownership of the River Jordan is a key source of tension, often discussed within the framework of ”water wars”. The River Jordan is currently in a highly degraded state due to pollution and the diversion of most of its waters by Israel. I examine the ways in which Darwish and Barghouti portray the Jordan’s ecological decline as the outcome of Palestinian dispossession and Israeli occupation, suggesting that the texts form a literary counterpart to claims by Palestinian activists and solidarity groups of an “environmental Nakba” (Butmah, Peek and Scandrett 2013). In particular, I build on Tricia Cusack’s work on ‘riverscapes’ and nationalism (2010) in order to draw out the different strategies used by each writer to express the impact of the loss of the River Jordan on Palestinian communities. While Darwish emphasizes the affective and communal consequences of Israel’s exhaustion of the river, in a poem which can be read as an environmental analogue to Palestinian ‘memorial books’, Barghouti stresses the links between hydropolitics and uneven development in the present day. I conclude with a caution about Darwish and Barghouti’s shared reliance on an anthropocentric discourse of theft and ownership, which, I argue, ultimately facilitates unsustainable water use.

**Keywords**

Water, hydropolitics, Palestinian literature, natural resources, postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental humanities, nationalism, environmentalism

Since Raja Shehadeh’s *Palestinian Walks* won the Orwell Prize 2008, postcolonial scholars have turned their attention to Palestinian literary engagements with the environment (e.g. Kennedy 2012; Salmi 2012; Spencer 2010). Even if criticism has so far largely remained limited to Shehadeh’s writings, this development begins to counter the neglect of Palestinian literature within postcolonial ecocriticism (Boast 2012: 46). This itself derives from the longstanding absence of Palestine in postcolonial studies (Bernard 2013: 19–21; Williams and Ball 2014: 128), and the troubled relationship between Palestine and the postcolonial (Massad 2006; Shohat 1992). The new ecocritical scholarship on Palestine adds a crucial materialist dimension to existing work on Palestinian representations of nonhuman nature, in which it has often been treated as a political symbol (e.g. Abufarha 2008; Parmenter 1994). At the same time, the persistent focus on terrestrial features of the environment, such as soil, olive trees, and the land in this criticism has obscured the role of water in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Water is fundamentally necessary for the existence of (productive) soil, trees, and many features of the landscape considered nationally distinctive. It is also vital for human survival, and an integral element of cultural and religious practices (Strang 2004). In sidestepping Palestinian hydropolitics, literary criticism differs significantly from activism, politics, and the social sciences, in which water is a prominent topic (EWASH 2012; Graham 2011: 285; Selby 2004).

The River Jordan is a key site of hydropolitical tension. Ownership of its water is subject to fierce contestation, to the extent that competing claims are cited as a likely cause of past and future “water wars” (Starr 1995; Bulloch and Darwish 1993). While this thesis is worth treating with caution (Selby 2004: 47–52; Zeitoun 2012: 1–7), access to the river’s water is highly unequal, such that the present situation might be described as part of an Israeli “water war” against Palestinians (Dajani 2014). Most of the river’s water is diverted by Israel, and distributed to its coast and arid south by the country’s National Water Carrier. As a result, the Jordan’s volume today is just five per cent of its historical flow (FoEME/WEDO 2014: 14). Diversion has had serious consequences. Most of the Jordan’s water is used before it reaches the West Bank, meaning that Palestinians are “effectively denied access” to it (Selby 2004: 124). The diversion of the Jordan has contributed to the rapid shrinking of the Dead Sea (de Châtel 2007: 128–9), while the river’s vastly reduced flow, along with heavy pollution, has caused its biodiversity to decrease dramatically (FoEME/WEDO 2014: 28; 53). Since 1967, the Jordan has operated as Israel’s eastern border, becoming a site at which Palestinians travellers are subjected to lengthy and often humiliating encounters with Israeli sovereignty (Weizman 2012: ch. 5). As such, the river functions in multiple ways as a reminder of Palestinian exile and dispossession.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In this article I examine two contrasting depictions of the River Jordan in contemporary works by perhaps the best-known Palestinian writers, Mahmoud Darwish and Mourid Barghouti. I discuss Darwish’s poem *Nahr emout min al-atash*, published in Arabic in 2008 and the following year in English as “A river dies of thirst” (2009: 54), and Barghouti’s memoir *Ra’ayta Ram Allah*, published in Arabic in 1997, and in English as *I Saw Ramallah* in 2000.[[2]](#endnote-2) Darwish is often described as Palestine’s national poet (Bernard and Elmarsafy 2012: 1; Khalidi 2008: 75), while Barghouti, long a highly visible figure (Bernard 2007: 665), has to some extent inherited this mantle since the death of Darwish in 2008. Darwish’s poem has attracted little critical interest, while Barghouti’s memoir has primarily been analysed as an example of the “literature of the checkpoint” (Mattar 2014; see also Bernard 2007; Havrelock 2011: 272-3). There has been scant attention to the environmental or hydropolitical dimensions of these texts or each writer’s wider work, save David Farrier’s 2012 essay on Barghouti, which I build on here. Darwish and Barghouti’s local and international reputations mean that these texts are two of the highest profile Palestinian literary engagements with hydropolitics. By focusing on their work, I aim to foreground the relevance of hydropolitics to Palestinian literature more widely.

While written in different forms, I suggest that the texts bear comparison on the basis of their common portrayal of the Jordan’s ecological decline as the outcome of Palestinian dispossession and Israeli occupation. In doing so, I draw on art historian Tricia Cusack’s work on “riverscapes” and national culture (2010). Riverscapes, as Cusack notes, invoking Zygmunt Bauman’s theorisation of liquidity, have often been incorporated into nationalist imagery, because their movement allows them to stand in “for the passage of time, for life, and for renewal” (2010: 2). They hence often serve as metaphors for “the uninterrupted ‘flow’ or ‘course’ of national history” (2010: 2). Cusack focuses on rivers in triumphalist nationalist art, but an implication of her argument is that a dried-up riverscape can figure as a metaphor of national defeat. I argue that this is a strategy employed by Darwish and Barghouti, who use representations of the shrunken Jordan to signify Palestinian national tragedy. I suggest that the texts form a literary counterpart to claims among Palestinians and solidarity groups of an “environmental Nakba” (Butmah, Peek and Scandrett 2013), in which the expulsion of the Palestinians on the creation of Israel in 1948, an event known in the Arab world as the Nakba, or Catastrophe, set in motion a parallel ecological disaster. The texts underscore the extent to which this process involves the loss and despoliation of Palestine’s water, not just, as we might expect from earlier discussions of Palestinian literature, its land. There is admittedly an element of what Jamie Linton calls “hydrological Orientalism” in the association between dry or shallow rivers and national crisis, since this seems to paint the political climate of the well-watered countries of northern Europe in a more favourable light (Linton 2010: 123; Davis and Burke 2011: 4). However, the comparatively recent drying-up of the Jordan, and its origins in Israeli policy, indicate that this does not undermine the use of Cusack’s riverscapes argument in this context.

Darwish and Barghouti’s texts share a common theme, connecting Israeli actions against Palestinians to environmental damage, yet their ways of doing so contrast sharply. While in some ways these differences derive from genre, they also highlight the multiple dimensions of the impact of loss of water on Palestinian communities. The texts foreground aspects of hydropolitics – place attachment, and economics – more typically seen as linked to the land, and perform complementary roles in the justice claims they imply in the present. Darwish’s text, written in his characteristic free verse, uses botanical and geographical detail to preserve a memory of the river, and record its historic role in Palestinian society. Darwish personifies the river and its source as an infant and nursing mother, and employs a violent concluding metaphor, techniques which emphasize the affective and communal consequences for Palestinians of Israel’s exhaustion and contamination of the Jordan. Barghouti, meanwhile, deploys an “existentialist materialist aesthetic” (Bernard 2007: 666) which contrasts sharply with Darwish’s nostalgic tone and transhistorical setting. His concern for the river is less about lamenting environmental harm and a lost society, and more about frustration with the uneven development of the present, brought about, significantly, by Israel’s restriction of Palestinian access to the Jordan. I conclude by reflecting on Darwish and Barghouti’s shared reliance on a discourse of theft and ownership. Such anthropocentric language poses problems for a reading of their texts which aims to see water – as, I argue, we must – as more than a mere resource for the satisfaction of human needs.

It would not be necessary for Darwish’s river to correspond to any actually-existing river in order for us to read the poem hydropolitically. Still, the river bears marked resemblances to the River Jordan. The most immediate parallel is the exhausted state of both rivers. Darwish’s river has dried up, foreshadowing the imminent demise often predicted for the Jordan (FOEME 2010: 14). Beyond this, there are further geographic and linguistic links. Darwish describes a “small river” that could be found “descending from the mountain peaks/visiting villages and tents like a charming lively guest”. This river’s small size could be said to mirror the Jordan’s historically narrow width, described, for instance, by Mark Twain, who wrote that “many streets in America are double [sic] as wide as the Jordan” (1869: 594). The mountain source of Darwish’s river corresponds to the Jordan’s headwaters in Mount Hermon and the Golan Heights (Allan 2002: 74), while its visits to many villages suggest the Jordan’s extended and meandering course, which render its length over twice the direct distance from its source to its end (Kliot 1994: 143). The rivers are also linked etymologically: the verb ‘descending’ recalls the river’s Hebrew name, *Yarden*, meaning “descender”. The use of the Arabic “*nazilan*” in the original poem, which derives from the root “n-z-l”, meaning “to descend”, indicates that this connection derives from the original poem, rather than being introduced in translation.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Through depicting the diminishing flow of the water, Darwish contrasts two distinct periods of time in the life of the river and of the community located on its banks. These are unspecified, but other lines of the poem, discussed below, indicate that they refer to pre- and post-1948. Prior to the drying-up of the river, nonhuman nature in the poem is depicted as abundant, with the river “bringing oleander trees and date palms to the valley”. The oleander trees around Palestine’s rivers, including the Jordan, are frequently mentioned in narratives by nineteenth-century European visitors to the Holy Land. James Silk Buckingham wrote that the Jordan’s banks were “so thickly wooded with oleander and plane trees”, among other plants, “that we could not perceive the water through them from above” (1822: 108-9). The oleander’s scented pink-white flowers make it a decorative plant, while date palms have historically provided a major Middle East food source and income (Chao and Krueger 2007: 1077). Darwish’s reference to the oleander and palm, with their very different connotations, suggests both aesthetic and practical contributions made by the river to village life.

Darwish describes the river as a locus of village activities. It hosts “nocturnal revellers on its banks”, and provides “the milk of the clouds” for villagers and their horses to drink. The villagers’ revelry is mirrored in the personification of the river as “laughing” and having “sang”, a correspondence which draws on a longer history of imagining the sound of water and rivers as a human voice (Bachelard 1984: 189), and suggests a harmonious and intersubjective relationship between the villagers and river. The reference to “nocturnal revellers” by the river perhaps hints at a role for the Jordan in producing the villagers’ own fertility as well as that of their crops, and securing the bodily continuation of the village’s human population into the future. This recalls the place of rivers and water in fertility rituals across many cultures (Strang 2004: 85), including Palestinian (Naguib 2009: 113-4; Tamari 2009: 32). This meaning is heightened by Darwish’s reference to “milk”, a substance which Gaston Bachelard cites as a common poetic metaphor for water, ascribing its recurrence to water’s nutritive and regenerative properties (1984: 117). The depiction of the water’s capacity to nourish represents a variant on the older trope of imagining the homeland as female (Ball 2012: 20-1). A final point worth noting in the context of the river’s links to village life is the correspondence between the flow of the river and human mobility; the personified river urges, “‘water the horses/and fly to Jerusalem and Damascus’”. The possibility of this journey being undertaken with speed (“fly”) suggests a time prior to the borders, roadblocks and closures now imposed on travellers in the West Bank (Weizman 2012: 145). In providing water for horses, the river directly facilitates this mobility, while providing a metaphor for cross-border routes of travel in its own journey from Syria to Palestine.

The geographical and botanical detail in Darwish’s poem suggests a particular purpose. The poem bears similarities to the vast numbers of Palestinian “memorial books” produced in the wake of the 1948 displacement (Davis 2011; Slyomovics 1998). These collections of narratives about destroyed or unwillingly abandoned villages form part of a process of “active remembrance”, which unites Palestinians in the diaspora through reconstructing a shared history, at the same time as countering the erasures of official Israeli narratives (Slyomovics 1998: xiv, xii). In its elegy for the dried-up river, Darwish’s poem provides an account of a lost human and nonhuman world, and functions as both a document of Palestinian loss as well as what Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands calls an “archive of ecological trauma” (2010: 342). In this way, the “thirst” of the title performs a dual role, invoking not just the drying-up of the river, but the longing for a homeland of Palestinians in the diaspora. The depiction in the poem of thirst leading to death suggests an ominous aspect to this longing, if not fulfilled by return. In a reference to the original meaning of nostalgia as pathology (Boym 2001: 3-5), this “thirst” is figured as an existential threat.

Darwish uses the disruption of the poem’s cyclical structure, and personification, to emphasize the apparent tragedy and “unnaturalness” of the river’s death. The poem begins with the lines: “A river was here/and it had two banks/and a heavenly mother who nursed it on drops from the clouds”. These recur towards the end of the poem, with a small variation, in that the first two lines are compressed into the more declamatory “[i]t was a river with two banks”. What initially seems like a return is abruptly cut short, with three curt lines that announce the river’s death: “But they kidnapped its mother/so it ran short of water/and died, slowly, of thirst.” Darwish’s account of the river’s “kidnap” and death dramatizes the diversion of the Jordan’s waters by Israel, while the legal connotations of “kidnap” recalls not just the high numbers of Palestinians held by Israel in the legal limbo of administrative detention (B’Tselem 2014), but the discourse of “theft” frequently used by Palestinians and their advocates to describe Israel’s use of water that should rightfully, they claim, be theirs (for instance, Deutsch 2011: 24). In reference to Cusack, the death of Darwish’s river suggests the parallel dispersal of the Palestinians, and the end of a continuous period of national history in the land of Palestine. The interruption in the flow of the poem mirrors the interruption of the movement of the water cycle by the “kidnap”, reinforcing the sense of a forced ending of an ancient, natural, even potentially “sacred” order and balance (Tuan 1968: 122).[[4]](#endnote-4)

Perhaps the most powerful element of these final lines is Darwish personification of the river and its source as a mother and her nursing child, a technique which further underscores the “unnaturalness” of the kidnapping, and heightens its pathos. Darwish’s reference to a child is familiar from environmentalist discourse, where it features frequently in campaigns aimed at spurring action through an expected affective response, even if this technique has been critiqued by queer theorists (Seymour 2013: vii). Indeed, in its reference to breast milk, Darwish’s poem recalls one of the earliest environmentalist texts to rely on these strategies, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, in which the horror of DDT is emphasized through its capacity to be passed from mother to infant via breastfeeding (2002: 23).

The contrast between earlier harmony and this violent event represents what Laurence Buell describes as a “[t]rauma of pastoral disruption” (2001, 37). This trope features frequently in environmental writing, and often, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley note, in postcolonial indictments of imperial environmental degradation (2011: 23). A particular inflection of this trope is common to Palestinian environmental narratives, as Shaul Cohen highlights

For Palestinians, the environment is a vessel for the idyll of Palestinian independence and a place that has been despoiled by Israeli (de)construction. It is also an hourglass that shows the erosion of opportunity for (re)creating a garden of Eden that Palestinian nationalism has promised will materialize upon the termination of the occupation (2011: 248-9).

While Cohen’s formulation is rather blunt, the juxtaposition of “A river dies of thirst” with the poem “The wall” (2009: 55), found on the opposite page, underscores its relevance to a reading of “A river”. In “The wall”, which addresses the topic of Israel’s separation barrier, this is described as “[a] huge metal snake”, an image which recalls the snake of the Garden of Eden, and a parallel environmental “Fall”, much like the biblical imagery Cohen also deploys. The “snake” is described in more detail as “a nightmare of cement segments reinforced with pliant metal” (55), becoming, through its composite structure of hard, man-made materials, a monstrous manifestation of an apparently alienated Israeli modernity. By depicting a flourishing environment in Palestine’s past, these poems challenge dominant Zionist narratives of having “made the desert bloom”. Instead, they imply that Israeli alterations of the landscape have caused, as mentioned in the introduction, an environmental crisis or “Nakba”, while this history of seemingly superior Palestinian environmental stewardship becomes incorporated into counter-claims of rightful Palestinian sovereignty over land and water in Israel/Palestine.

Barghouti’s memoir *I Saw Ramallah* was published at the turn of the millennium, to widespread regional and international acclaim. It has often been hailed, not unproblematically (Bernard 2007: 666), as an archetypal representation of Palestinian experience, including by Edward Said in its foreword (2004: vii). The text depicts Barghouti’s return to Israel/Palestine after an enforced thirty-year exile, and covers his visits to Ramallah, and his home village of Deir Ghassaneh. It begins with Barghouti’s entry into Palestine from Jordan via the Allenby/al-Karama crossing, where, forced to endure a lengthy wait, he looks out of the door at the river, and reflects:

I was not surprised by its narrowness: the Jordan was always a very thin river. This is how we knew it in childhood. The surprise was that after these long years it had become a river without water. Almost without water. Nature had colluded with Israel in stealing its water. It used to have a voice, now it was a silent river, a river like a parked car (2004: 5).

Barghouti and Darwish use a number of similar strategies to critique Israel’s impact on the River Jordan. The arid riverscape features again, conveying a comparable impression of national loss, disunity and tragedy to that found in “A river dies of thirst”. Barghouti’s spare tone and short, largely descriptive phrases communicate a sense of restrained outrage, much as in Darwish’s poem, particularly its concluding lines. In Barghouti’s account, the river’s “death”, if not described with the overt personification which makes such strong affective demands in Darwish’s poem, is still conveyed through the metaphor of a silenced “voice”. As in “A river dies of thirst”, this passage also juxtaposes two distinct periods, before and after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, in its timeline of the river’s environmental degradation. The rhetoric of the “theft” or “kidnap” of resources that should rightfully be Palestinian recurs here, too, in Barghouti’s description of “Nature” and Israel “stealing” the river’s water.

While the texts share these resemblances, Barghouti’s striking and incongruous simile “a river like a parked car” contrasts sharply with the nostalgic, pastoral tone of Darwish’s poem. This simile is key to a hydropolitical interpretation of this passage, even if this is not typically how it has been approached. In her discussion of Barghouti’s text, Bernard argues that the river and car “share immobility, but nothing else”, aligning the image with Barghouti’s wider use of “absurd” metaphors, a strategy which she describes as having “Brechtian affinities” (2007: 671). For Bernard, these seemingly incompatible word choices produce an image which is patently “artificial”, compelling the reader to reflect on the material impact of the loss of the river on the Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank (2007: 671). I agree with Bernard’s assessment of the simile’s incongruity and its effect, but would suggest that the image is not as surprising as it seems. Instead, by likening the river to a parked car, Barghouti implicitly invokes the actual parked cars queuing on both sides of the river, as Palestinians wait to cross. These are out of view in *I Saw Ramallah*, but mentioned explicitly in the book’s sequel, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (*Wulidtu Hunak, Wulidtu Huna*), published in Arabic in 2009, and English in 2011. This work also features a crossing of the Jordan, in which cars are a prominent feature: Barghouti describes “[h]undreds of human beings standing outside their cars waiting their turn” (2011: 133), adding that “[t]he rows of cars have no end” (2011: 134). As noted above, the power of rivers as national symbols derives from water’s potential to suggest the movement, and hence, continuity, of the nation through time. Movement, too, is an inherent part of the function and symbolic connotations of cars. We might suggest, then, that Barghouti’s jarring comparison of the river with a car highlights the manipulation of Palestinian time and space central to what Eyal Weizman terms Israel’s ‘architecture of occupation’ (2012), which causes Palestinians to have to wait at the border.

Drawing on Weizman and Bauman, Farrier (2012: 3) has rightly noted the ways in which Barghouti’s references to water highlight these Israeli regimes of power in the West Bank. As Farrier points out, Israelis have access to what Bauman describes as “liquid modernity”, allowing them to travel freely, while Palestinians are subject to ‘heavy modernity’, with their movement curtailed by Israel’s roadblocks and checkpoints, and, most visibly, the separation wall (2012: 3). These restrictions, imposed under the pretext of security concerns, have a major impact on the Palestinian economy, particularly in limiting Palestinian access to the Israeli labour market, which had previously provided a major source of income (Weizman 2012: 156-7). Sara Roy has described policies such as these as contributing to a process of Palestinian ‘de-development’ (Roy 1995). Less widely reported is the fact that a lack of access to reliable and affordable supplies of water also has a crippling effect on the Palestinian economy, particularly through severely curtailing the agricultural sector (Zeitoun 2012: 14; Palestine Ministry of National Economy and Applied Research Institute Jerusalem 2011: 16). As such, the image of the river as car, while initially odd, can be seen as juxtaposing two similarly stalled flows, of people and of water, in an image which illustrates and imaginatively links two forms of economic occupation.

This emphasis on the economic impacts of occupation differentiates Barghouti’s text sharply from Darwish’s, with the reference in the above passage to “Nature” being salient here. Barghouti writes that “Nature had colluded with Israel in stealing [the Jordan’s] water” (2004: 5). Collusion, or collaboration, is a practice with high stakes (B’Tselem 1994), and Barghouti’s use of personification links “Nature” to the most serious possible betrayal of the Palestinian national cause. Darwish, by contrast, presents the causes of “Nature” and the Palestinians as inherently aligned, treating environmental harm solely as the result of the expulsion of the Palestinians, in an association familiar from Palestinian literature (Bardenstein 1999: 152; Parmenter 1994: 81). While Darwish’s text performs the valuable role of illustrating the affective impact of the loss of water and its disruption of a way of life, Barghouti’s more cautious approach provides a reminder of the potential for the pastoral to give a misleading impression of history. Elsewhere in the text, Barghouti describes urban life in Ottoman Palestine, writing: “[t]he occupation has kept the Palestinian village static and turned our cities back into villages. We do not weep for the mill of the village but for the bookshop and library” (2004: 147). If Darwish’s romantic depiction of village life derives to an extent from the ways in which history tends to figure in poetry, these suggestions of a Palestinian alliance with ‘nature’ can still be dangerous. This discourse was historically used to imaginatively erase the Palestinian presence on the land prior to Jewish settlement, and justify claims that Palestine was, in the infamous Zionist slogan, a “land without a people” (Zerubavel 2008: 205). Barghouti’s text provides a counterpart to contemporary reassessments of Ottoman and Mandate Palestine by scholars such as Salim Tamari (2009) in emphasising the ways in which the loss of the river has caused the loss of an urban culture, as well as a rural one.

Both texts provide a crucial reminder of the place of water in any account of the human and nonhuman impacts of Israeli occupation, which, they suggest, are inseparable. Still, Barghouti and Darwish’s reliance on a discourse of ownership, while emotionally compelling, remains politically troubling. As noted above, Darwish describes the river’s death as the outcome of its “kidnap”, while Barghouti describe Israel’s appropriation of the water resources of Israel/Palestine as “stealing”. This framing is repeated in Barghouti’s *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, in an account of Israel’s separation wall, which is described as “the wall of the great historic theft, the theft of more land and trees and water” (2011: 128). This vocabulary indicates an anthropocentric view of water, in which this mobile and boundary-crossing substance can be rightfully “owned”, and water’s capacity to provide for human needs is the only issue at stake. Claims of human ownership, whether exclusive or shared, neglect the extent to which other nonhuman occupants of Israel/Palestine also require water to survive. Such concerns might seem irrelevant when set against the significant health consequences of water shortages and low water quality for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (EWASH 2011), but their reproduction of the same discourse of sole, rightful ownership which has facilitated Israeli overuse and contamination of the region’s water supply should give pause for thought. This discourse perpetuates the epistemological classification of nonhuman nature as an abstract and potentially exploitable “resource”, an act which ultimately threatens to undermine the integrity of water itself by facilitating unsustainable use (Linton 2010: 150). A preferable way of writing about the River Jordan might be one which worked towards imagining what Astrida Neimanis describes as the “hydrocommons”, in which human and nonhuman animal bodies, and bodies of water, are connected through mutual dependence and vulnerability (2014: 8).

In this article I have presented a hydropolitical reading of the work of two of Palestine’s most well-known writers. While the national significance of the loss of the land of Palestine is often seen as the overriding Palestinian national tragedy, I have argued that Darwish and Barghouti’s texts illustrate the extent to which this tragedy should also be seen as involving the loss of water. The two texts present different aspects of this loss, priorities which derive to an extent from their use of different forms, and allow them to be read as part of the literature of what we might call an ‘environmental Nakba’. In “A river dies of thirst”, Darwish depicts a lost Palestinian society in which human and nonhuman nature live in joyful and nonexploitative harmony, until this is brought to an abrupt end by Israeli intervention. The geographical, botanical and social detail in the poem indicates its potential role as an ecological archive, preserving an image of a lost community and environment for the Palestinian diaspora, and putting forward an account of hydropolitics which includes its affective component. Barghouti’s description of the Jordan uses metaphorical language which is initially jarring and incongruous, but which on closer analysis foregrounds the significance of the water of the River Jordan for the Palestinian economy. In doing so, Barghouti’s text raises cautions about Darwish’s use of the pastoral mode, namely its propensity to overemphasize a Palestinian alliance with nature in potentially politically troubling ways. Finally, I have argued for a need to remain conscious of the hazards of an unsustainable anthropocentrism in articulating the clear need for a more egalitarian distribution of access rights to the waters of the River Jordan.

**Notes**

1. There is a parallel history to be written about Israeli hydrofictions of the River Jordan, which I do not address here for reasons of space. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Citations of the Barghouti are from the 2004 Bloomsbury edition. The page reference is the same for all quotes from “A river dies of thirst”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I am grateful to Dr Ziad Elmarsafy for his advice on Arabic translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a critical account of these perceptions of the hydrological cycle, see Linton (2010).

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