Forum

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Enlarging "Palestine"

To the Editor:

"More than half the world is still 'Palestine' . . . oppressed, hidden, and subaltern," I once wrote in a different context (*Hidden Histories: Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean* [Pluto, 2010; print; 10–11]). I was therefore gratified to read "Cross-Colonial Poetics: *Souffles-Anfas* and the Figure of Palestine," Olivia C. Harrison's article on Palestine as a metaphor for political and aesthetic resistance in 1960s and 1970s Maghrebi literature (128.2 [2013]: 353–69). Harrison's interpretations elicit additional observations, and suggestions for extending and updating the meanings of "Palestine."

On "acculturation and linguistic assimilation," the article draws parallels between French in Maghreb and Hebrew in Palestine as "hegemonic language[s]" (363). It seems necessary to make more distinctions between the two contexts in discussing "deculturation" and "cultural annihilation" (361) and to clarify what "Israeli efforts at acculturation" were supposed to be (363). Contrary to other colonial projects that exploited resources and imposed language, religion, and cultural values on the oppressed, Zionism aims to control the land but remove the native population, insinuating itself as a native culture instead. Hebraizing Palestine necessitated the ungrateful takeover of the landscape and aspects of heritage accumulated by the Palestinian population over many millennia—to fashion a veneer of nativity while expunging Palestinian continuity. The master plan to replace "Palestine" by "Israel" was implemented by expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and destruction or depopulation of more than 450 villages in 1947–49 (Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* [Inst. for Palestine Studies, 1992; print]; Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* [Oneworld, 2006; print]), and by policies de-

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signed to diminish any remaining "demographic threat" and to expand colonies. The Arab map was converted to a Hebrew map, mostly by translating indigenous names into Hebrew or inventing phonological or other "distortions of Arabic names" (Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* [U of California P, 2000; print; 19; see also, e.g., 19–23, 35, 38–39]). In a little-known appropriation, Arabic, the live storehouse of ancient regional languages, was employed "to supplement the deficiencies of the Hebrew language," according to committee records cited in Joshua Blau's *The Renaissance of Modern Hebrew and Modern Standard Arabic* (U of California P, 1981; print; 32–33). (On appropriation and toponyms, see chs. 7 and 10 in my *Hidden Histories*.)

Reviving Hebrew differs from the hegemonic spread of French, English, and Spanish. Palestine endured layers of colonization: in ancient periods, then under Ottoman, later British (leaving English as postcolonial legacy), and now Israeli control. The isolated minority remaining in Israel learned the enforced new colonizer's language under duress, to cope with martial rule and discriminatory structures. Mahmoud Darwīsh knew Hebrew as the language not only of some early friends but also of those who destroyed his ancestral village, of the police, judges, and jailers. His departure from classical poetic form came well after his exile in 1970 (though when I met him in Ramallah in 1996, he still considered himself in exile). That Palestinian poetry should be written in Arabic is hardly surprising, and it is uncertain how specifically it was, as Harrison maintains, "a vanguard . . . simultaneously political and aesthetic," "effectively decolonizing Palestinian culture" (364, 363) when, first, so many self-colonizing elements remain and, second, the revolutionary qualities she ascribes to such poetry apply both to Palestinian writers unexposed to Hebrew and to Arab poets and writers in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and other countries who suffered state repression and for whom Palestine was and is the most fundamental issue.

Strangely, Albert Memmi is mentioned as a "mentor" of Abdelkebir Khatibi (354), and one who "famously prophesied the death of francophone Maghrebi literature" (359). True, his early work reflects identity conflicts, and his 1957 *Portrait du colonisé* (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*) is part of (post)colonial discourse. But he did an about-face after getting a teaching post and French citizenship. In 2004 he produced *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, a work inconsistent with his previous ideas, as critics have observed, imbued with the air of Islamophobia and fear of immigrants that pervades the voices of those in power. Memmi regresses: he blames those who live the unwieldy confusions left by colonization. He attacks everything that is Arab and denies that Israel is a colonial state. Memmi belittles Iraqis for lamenting heritage destruction and museum looting following the United States' invasion, repeating a Zionist myth about all Arabs as nomads from the peninsula unrelated to their ancient civilizations: "In what sense . . . are Chaldea and Sumer part of Arab memory, a people who, at the time, existed as no more than a handful of tribes in the Arabian peninsula?" (U of Minnesota P, 2006; print; 24–25, 95–96). To echo Frantz Fanon, "All such remarks are reminiscent in their aggressiveness of those so often heard coming from the settler's lips" (*The Wretched of the Earth*; trans. Constance Farrington [Grove, 1963; print; 161]).

To get out of this "intractable" situation (Harrison 366), we need to go beyond regional applications and binaries, to expand Palestine's meaning by adopting "methodologies" for "decolonizing the mind" of Israelis, Palestinians, and people East and West, to borrow from titles by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (*Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* [Zed, 1999; print]) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (*Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* [East African Educ., 1986; print]). With the changed character of the struggle, Israeli extremism on the rise, and the Palestinian Authority a postcolonial regime in the midst of colonization, alternative strategies must "bypass . . . traditional modes of thinking," as Harrison suggests in quoting Fanon and Maghrebi writers (361). In its unraveling, the "impossible

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metaphor" of Palestine, beyond merely "utopia" or "topos" in past struggles (365), can function more than ever as a universal epistemic figure.

"Holy Land" Palestine is central to Western religious belief and the colonizer's claims system. Palestine has been the object and model of colonial projects—the Crusades, conquest of the Americas (as conquest of Canaan, the new promised land), South African apartheid, and Zionist ideology of "return" to "the land of ancestors." Israel's creation was facilitated by Western and Jewish assumptions about narratives that, though shown to be fictional, legendary, or copied myths, still entangle people as justifications or profitable investments. Most historians and archaeologists today (including some Israelis) no longer practice "biblical archaeology" or give any credence to stories like Exodus, conquest of Canaan, or Kingdom of David. Conversely, Palestinians as Muslims and Christians follow a shared religious tradition and so, in unfortunate self-colonization, accept as sacred the stories that cause their dispossession.

Yet Palestine is more than exile, dispossession, and yearning: it promises the prospect of uncovering particular workings of power, of expanded human consciousness, a new mental landscape. By relying on new knowledge and translating discoveries to heal a damaged legacy, the West might recognize how its politics has been shaped by self-interested preconception, Jews recover positive inclusive traditions, and Palestinians heal themselves of self-destructive (post)colonial ailments. To free habits of the mind can be challenging, however, though liberating.

Basem L. Ra'ad
Al-Quds University

Reply:

I am grateful to Basem L. Ra'ad for his pertinent comments on "Cross-Colonial Poetics: *Souffles-Anfas* and the Figure of Palestine," which give me the opportunity to clarify what I am now calling "transcolonial identification" with Palestine: transnational forms of solidarity that are based on an understanding of Palestine as the product of a long and unfinished colonial history. In the longer project from which my article is excerpted, I analyze the work of Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian writers and intellectuals who have mobilized Palestine in order to critique French and Zionist/Israeli colonial discourses, often drawing unexpected parallels between them—despite the important historical differences emphasized by Ra'ad. For Abdellatif Laâbi, a cofounder and co–editor in chief of the Moroccan journals *Souffles* and *Anfas* (1966–71) as well as the first translator of Palestinian poetry in the Maghreb, Palestine epitomized the colonial experience of deculturation, by which indigenous languages and cultural forms were supplanted by those of the colonizer. Because France practiced the art of assimilation (a euphemism for deculturation) more extensively than Great Britain and applied it more forcefully in the Maghreb, and especially Algeria, than in its Levantine protectorates (Syria and Lebanon), Maghrebi poets were particularly well positioned to understand and translate what, following Ghassan Kanafani and Frantz Fanon, Laâbi dubbed Palestinian combat poetry (*La poésie palestinienne de combat* [Atlantes, 1970; print]). To take another example, the Algerian writer Kateb Yacine and his popular theater troupe staged plays that compared Algerian migrant workers to Palestinian colonial subjects to shore up the parallels between, on the one hand, French colonial assimilationist policies ("Algeria is France," as the famous phrase had it) and discourses of postcolonial hospitality (in which France played the role of "host" to its former colonial subjects—see Mireille Rosello's *Postcolonial Hospitality* [Stanford UP, 2001; print]) and, on the other, Zionist discourses of separation opposing Jews and Arabs. Kateb's play *Mohamed prends ta valise* (1971; "Mohamed, Take Your Suitcase") reveals that the French myth of assimilation elides the differential processes

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