

“Waiting is Forbidden”:  
Exile in Contemporary Palestinian-American  
Women’s Writing and Art

The Past of the Land, the Land of the Past



Fig. 1: Mona Hatoum, *Waiting is Forbidden*, 2006-2008, enamel on steel, 11-5/8 x 15-3/4 inches. Source: <http://www.artcritical.com/2009/02/20/review-panel-february-2009/mona-hatoum/>, 8 July 2013\*

Born in Lebanon from a Palestinian family and currently living in Berlin and London, Mona Hatoum has a piece of artwork on exhibit at the Contemporary Art Collection of the Brooklyn Museum in New York. It consists of a blue enamelled street sign, made in Egypt at a sign-making shop. The sign bears the Arabic script for No Loitering, which has been translated by the sign maker into Waiting is Forbidden. The slippery grounds of translation deliver here an entirely new and ambiguous meaning through the enamelled message. The artist’s roots, as well as her routes, take part in the disclosing narration that the sign bears: waiting is not allowed, movement is impelling, unavoidable, enforced. Exile is announced in a street sign thrown into the fickleness of translation.

Hatoum exposes the unexpected possibilities disclosed by semantic slippages, or what Salman Rushdie calls the ‘gains’ of translation.<sup>1</sup> In the process, however, the artist’s own positionality cannot but take issue with the ‘intimation to move’ that the sign carries. Hatoum’s Palestinian descent surfaces, revealing the labours of a lost land in the compulsion/coercion to move, and also in the anxiety propelled by a message that ‘forbids waiting’. Moving is unavoidable, and there is also no time to waste, no waiting. Interestingly, in the light of today’s movements in many Arab countries, and of the ongoing and growing occupation of Palestinian soil by Israel, the resonance that the sign’s ‘mistranslation’ carries is even stronger: time has really run out, and there can be no more waiting.

Any discourse on and around Palestine cannot avoid treading on borderlines, dispossession and exile. As Rashid Khalidi writes,

The quintessential Palestinian experience, which illustrates some of the most basic issues raised by Palestinian identity, takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint: in short, at any of those many modern barriers where identities are checked and verified. What happens to Palestinians at these crossing points brings home to them how much they share in common as a people.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie claims that “it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained”; *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism* (London: Viking, 1991), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 1.

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Indeed, the Palestinian condition can perhaps be considered as paradigmatic of the exilic discourse of identity, to the point that, as the above quote underlines, being ‘out of place’ has become a constitutive part of contemporary Palestinian identity. *Out of Place* is, of course, the title of Edward Said’s memoir (1999), in which he elaborates on the predicaments that brought him and his family to become exiles, somehow reclaiming a personal history made of an almost congenital dislocation, of always ‘being wrong’ and ‘out of place’.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Said mentions almost immediately, in the preface to the book, the importance of language and of the space in which translation places anyone caught in the borderlands of movement:

interesting for me as author was the sense I had of trying always to translate experiences that I had not only in a remote environment but also in a different language. Everyone lives life in a given language; everyone’s experiences therefore are had, absorbed and recalled in that language. The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other – to say nothing of the numerous ways in which the languages were mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other – has been a complicated task.<sup>4</sup>

Said’s reflections on the peculiarity of what might be called ‘bilingual remembrance’ are certainly common to most of today’s postcolonial writers who find themselves – by choice or otherwise – inhabiting ‘the language of the other’. What is particularly significant with regard to Said’s words is the strong sense of the ‘split’ that he underlines, both in history and in his personal story, before and after the *nakba*;<sup>5</sup> before and after exile; and before and after the English language. This view is common among writers and poets who are considered ‘classic’ in the narration of modern Palestinian identity, such as, first and foremost, Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qasim.<sup>6</sup> Darwish’s large body of work spans from the 1960s to his death in 2007 and is considered a milestone in the construction of modern Palestinian identity. He became initially famous for his peremptorily political poem *Identity Card*:

Write down!  
I am an Arab  
And my identity card number is fifty thousand  
I have eight children  
And the ninth will come after a summer  
Will you be angry?

Write down!  
I am an Arab  
Employed with fellow workers at a quarry  
I have eight children  
I get them bread  
Garments and books  
From the rocks...  
I do not supplicate charity at your doors  
Nor do I belittle myself at the footsteps of your chamber  
So will you be angry?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Out of Place. A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Nakba* means ‘catastrophe’ in Arabic; the term is used to indicate the displacement of Palestinians following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

<sup>6</sup> Tawfiq Zayyad (1929-1994) was a well-known Palestinian poet and politician, who wrote passionately about and fought for the Palestinians who remained in Israel after 1948.

<sup>7</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, “Identity Card”, in John Mikhail Asfour, *When the Words Burn: An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry, 1945-1987* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1992), 214.

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Darwish's poetics grew, over the years, into a more intimate, melancholy epic of displacement, constantly facing the past of a lost land. In "The Earth is Closing in on Us", the sense of irrecoverable loss is suffocating:

The earth is closing in on us, pushing us through the last passage, and we tear off our limbs  
to pass through.  
The earth is squeezing us. I wish we were its wheat so we could die and live again. I  
wish the earth was our mother  
So she'd be kind to us. I wish we were pictures on the rocks for our dreams to carry  
As mirrors. We saw the faces of those to be killed by the last of us in the last defence  
of the soul.  
We cried over their children's feast. We saw the faces of those who'll throw our children  
Out of the windows of this last space. Our star will hang up mirrors.  
Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after the last sky?  
Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air? We will write our names with  
scarlet steam.  
We will cut off the hand of the song to be finished by our flesh.  
We will die here, here in the last passage. Here and here our blood will plant its olive tree.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Darwish, "The Earth is Closing in on Us", in Mahmoud Darwish, Adonis, Samih al-Qasim, *Victims of a Map: A Bilingual Anthology of Arabic Poetry* (London: Saqi Books, 1984), 13.

The promise of the olive tree growing out of the Palestinian blood delivers some sense of hope in the closing of the poem; yet Darwish's words are bearers of an inevitable tragedy, of an irreversibility that leaves no room for recovery. The recurrence of the word 'last' – "last passage", "last frontier", "last sky" – anchors the poem to the fear of an unspeakable death threatening Palestine. Two elements run through the entire poem: the 'earth', that appears in the title and in the first lines, immediately shown as a suffocating 'last space', and the 'us' of the title and the 'we' that appears in the rest of the poem, construing a collective first person plural, which constitutes a strong feature of Palestinian identity throughout all of Darwish's work.

Samih al-Qasim, another major contemporary Arab poet, though scarcely translated into English, also presents a fundamental poetic narration of the injustices endured by Palestinians. Qasim's poetry resonates with a much drier and more 'modern' style compared to Darwish's, but it reiterates the constant call towards a past struck by loss. The poetry of Qasim is profoundly and openly political, and, even in his more intimate verses, the sense of a regretful loss is clear:

I planted a tree  
I scorned the fruit  
I used its trunk as firewood  
I made a lute  
And played a tune  
I smashed the lute  
Lost the fruit  
Lost the tune  
I wept over the tree<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Samih al-Qasim, "Confessions at Midday", in *ibid.*, 57.

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One of Qasim's more political and best known poems, titled "Travel Tickets", looks not at the past but at a future of peace, still carrying the burden of violence and death:

On the day you kill me  
You'll find in my pocket  
Travel tickets  
To peace,  
To the fields and the rain,  
to people's conscience.  
Don't waste the tickets.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, both Darwish's and Qasim's poetic works have undergone changes in the style and, especially, in the imagery they incorporate. In particular, in the later part of his life, Darwish began to reflect on the immobility in the construction of Palestinian identity, coming to realize that he "had to defend the land of the past and the past of the land, the land of language and the language of the land",<sup>11</sup> while negotiating the conviction that history is an open space, "a scene through which peoples, civilizations and cultures could circulate freely".<sup>12</sup>

In his most recent poems, Qasim too seems to have turned to more composite and nuanced variations in both imagery and style, spanning from classical Arab to Biblical references, from ancient history to modern imagery.<sup>13</sup> The breadth of Qasim's poetics, therefore, has expanded, and now it embraces a complex discourse of dislocation and denial.

In a historical overview of the development of Palestinian poetry over the second half of the twentieth century, Julianne Hammer synthesizes:

Poetry immediately after 1948 and before 1967 reflects the shock of the uprooting and the years of disorientation, dispersal and hopelessness. The developments after 1967, with the emergence of the Palestinian national movement and the formation of political and military resistance inside as well as outside Palestine, show a more self-confident and nationalistic tone. What remains is the longing for the homeland, its recreation, imagination, and description in Palestinian poetry as well as art.<sup>14</sup>

The longing for the homeland, the sense of mourning for the excruciating pain of dislocation and occupation, dominate the discourse on Palestine in much of the past century, as does the continuous search for history. The tension is towards a lost past that one cannot return to. What seems at work here is a 'technology of return', to use a Foucauldian term that Teresa de Lauretis uses in her theorization of the 'technologies of gender': 'return', the great, overarching theme of Palestinian (and, often, postcolonial) identity can be read not only as an intrinsic desire of the exiled but also as the product of social technologies, institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>11</sup> Darwish, "I Discovered That the Earth Was Fragile and the Sea Light", in Mahmoud Darwish with Elias Sanbar, Simone Bitton, Pierre Joris, *boundary 2*, 26.1, 99 Poets/1999: An International Poetics Symposium (Spring, 1999), 81.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Noha Radwan, Review of Al-Qasim, *Sadder than Water: New and Selected Poems* and Emil Habiby, *Saraya, the Ogre's Daughter: A Palestinian, Journal of Palestine Studies*, 36.4 (Summer 2007), 117.

<sup>14</sup> Julianna Hammer, *Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 62.

<sup>15</sup> See Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), in particular 2-3.

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This ‘technology of return’ does not leave space for the slippages of translation that Hatoum thematises in her work. The land of the past and its pain do not allow for much of the ambiguity carried by Hatoum’s sign.

## Dissemination and polyglossia

Darwish’s generation of published Palestinian intellectuals and poets is predominantly male.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, a new and groundbreaking discourse on Palestinian identity is being constructed by a generation of women writers and poets, who dwell in the ‘split’ that Said refers to, while embracing the multiple pulls of their dislocation. These authors do not record a split between, for example, Arabic and English; rather, they inhabit both, or even more languages, thus settling inside the conflagration that the concept of identity sets off. They respond to the compulsion to ‘return’ to a lost motherland, and also to the fragmentation of the soil beneath their feet, in an explosion that leaves dissemination in its wake. Contemporary Palestinian identity becomes, then, disseminated, no longer hanging in an interrupted history.

As illustrated above, Darwish does tackle, in his later production, the perils of a crystallization of history; this same road is pursued by the critical aesthetics of contemporary artists and writers of the Palestinian diaspora. On the other hand, contemporary women authors of the diaspora tend to construe multiple discourses of identity, disengaging Palestinian identity from the immobility of oppression, negation and colonization, through a dialogic interplay of identity negotiations. Indeed, while Darwish engages in the ‘mobilization’ of a Palestinian historical discourse, the contemporary poets of the Palestinian diaspora produce exactly the disengagement from what Darwish called “the land of language and the language of the land”.<sup>17</sup> The cultural and linguistic juxtaposition that makes up the poetry of the contemporary Palestinian diaspora does not, in the vein of Darwish’s or Qasim’s works, respond to the need to re-write the past. Rather, it builds a multiple present that brings a powerful interruption in the crystallized edifice of Palestine as unchanging, unmoving, and paralysed in the imposed denial of its very existence.

One prominent author of the contemporary generation of Palestinian diasporic poets is Nathalie Handal. Born in Haiti from a Palestinian family, Handal has lived in the US, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> Her work explores the construction of her own identity in connection to her Arab heritage and her Palestinian descent, while also connecting with a wider community of subaltern subjectivities. In particular, her 2005 collection of poems *The Lives of Rain* investigates the themes of exile and Palestine, marking the path of her personal identity within a multivocal and multilingual journey – one that embodies Hatoum’s invitation/coercion to move.

*The Lives of Rain* declares its theme explicitly in the opening poem, “The Doors of Exile”:

<sup>16</sup> On Palestinian women writers after 1948, and on the failure to read into the gender-specific poetics of such writers, see Dorit Gottesfeld, “Harbingers of Feminism: A New Look at the Works of Pioneering Palestinian Women Writers”, *Journal of Levantine Studies*, 1.2 (Winter 2011), 75-101.

<sup>17</sup> Darwish, “I Discovered That the Earth Was Fragile and the Sea Light”, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Handal has published four books of poetry – the most recent titled *Poet in Andalusia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012) – and several plays; she has edited the anthology *The Poetry of Arab Women* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2000) and co-edited *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).

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The shadows close a door  
this is loneliness:  
every time we enter a room we enter a new room  
the hours of morning growing deep into our exile  
prayers stuck in between two doors  
waiting to leave to enter  
waiting for memory to escape  
the breath of cities.<sup>19</sup>

This first poem voices the pain of exile and non-belonging, where every room is always “a new room”. In the first section of the book, Handal begins by embracing a ‘we’ that still holds on to a community unified in memory, prayers, and loneliness. It is later in the book, starting with the second section, that the poet multiplies the levels of identity construction, throwing it into the uncertainty of polyglossia and absolute translation. One prime example of this fluidity of language and identity is the poem titled “El Almuerzo de Tía Habiba”:

Half past six in the morning  
the kitchen is wide awake,  
no time for many cups of coffees  
for Tía Liliana, Tía Mercedes,  
Tía Rosette, Tía Esperanza,  
Tía Josefina, Tía Margarita,  
Tía Layla and Tío Waide  
are coming for some of Tía Habiba’s  
tomalitos, lamb, hummos, laban, and grape leaves.<sup>20</sup>

Straight from the title, in a cozy family scene, Handal introduces a plural identity: “Tía Habiba” [aunt Habiba] announces, in her very name, a threshold constantly carried within herself, calling from inside that line, separating and juxtaposing, at once, Spanish and Arabic appellations. The list of names that appears at the fourth line of the poem reiterates the threshold, as does the cohabitation of “tomalitos” and “lamb, hummos, laban, and grape leaves”. Traces of ‘elsewhere’ are scattered throughout the following lines, introducing more unexpected levels of identity translations, or simply more processes of identity negotiations:

“Dios mío niña, you are not dressed,” Juanita tells me.  
Her Indian features recite poems her ancestors tell her  
the way Tía Habiba’s deep curved eyes  
tell me about the holy land.  
“Por favor, it is not morning yet,” I respond.  
These are what my Friday mornings  
are like when I visit my relatives in Torreón, Coahuila,  
a little ciudad in México.<sup>21</sup>

The slippage of Hatoum’s enamelled, travelling message is fully incorporated in Handal’s poetics, as she disarticulates the univocality of the Palestinian discourse on the claim for negated nationhood through the deliberate choice of code-switching and

<sup>19</sup> Nathalie Handal, “The Doors of Exile”, in *The Lives of Rain* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2005), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Handal, “El Almuerzo de Tía Habiba”, in *Lives of Rain*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

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multilingualism. Samia Mehrez’s observation on ‘radical bilingualism’ seems appropriate here, and applicable to strategic multilingualism; Mehrez indicates ‘bilingualism’ as

... a space that subverts hierarchies, whether they are linguistic or cultural; where separate systems of signification and different symbolic worlds are brought together in a relation of perpetual interference, interdependence and intersignification.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Samia Mehrez, “The Subversive Poetics of Radical Bilingualism: Post-Colonial Francophone North African Literature”, in Dominick LaCapra, ed., *The Bounds of Race* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 261.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

This perpetual interfering and intersignification inevitably leads to a subversion of narrative/historical hierarchies. Palestine becomes more than the negated nation, leaking outside its walled up borders, astray from road maps and corridors. The Palestinian question shows itself loudly for what it is: the paradox of the democracy-bearing Western nations that allow and fuel the negation of another nation at its very frontiers. Handal’s polyglossia casts the Palestinian question into the world through its diaspora, bringing together what Mehrez calls “separate systems of signification and different symbolic worlds in a relation of perpetual interference”.<sup>23</sup> Palestine thus comes to be narrated in the interstice between languages, between untranslatability and absolute translation.

A similar discourse resonates in the poetics of other poets of Palestinian descent. In particular, Suheir Hammad, born in Amman from Palestinian parents, works less with polyglossia, incorporating instead the multiplicity of spoken-word poetry and performance, which is also reflected in the graphics of her poems.<sup>24</sup> Her poems are indeed written in lower-case letters, a feature which appears as an echo of the Arabic language (which has no capital letters) inside the English she (mostly) uses for her poems. Furthermore, some fragments of her poems contain Arabic words that serve to convey the distance of dispossession. The poem titled “dedication”, included in *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (2010), reads:

<sup>24</sup> Hammad was born in Jordan to Palestinian refugees. She moved to New York with her family when she was a child. Hammad performs spoken-word poetry and has published the following books of poetry: *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (New York: UpSet Press, 2010; originally published by Harlem River Press in 1996), *Breaking Poems* (New York: Cypher Books, 2008), and *Zaatar Diva* (New York: Cypher Books, 2005).

his name could've been  
ahmad                      mustafa                      jihad  
could've been  
mohammad      yousef                      hatem  
his name was hammad

standing on a mountaintop in jordan  
looking over the vast sea

saw the land his people had come from  
land of figs and olive trees  
what should've been his *phalesteen*

...

he'd prove them wrong  
his warm human blood would  
fertilize the soil of *phalesteen*

his heart transcending his body  
he vowed to return to phalesteen  
*bil rob*                      *bil dem*  
with his life                      with his blood<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Suheir Hammad, “dedication”, in *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, 21.

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Though there appears here to be an echo of the ‘heroic’ type of early Palestinian poetry, Hammad’s code-switching generates a different kind of agency that speaks ‘to’ and ‘from’ Palestine, ‘in’ and ‘of’ an elsewhere. The Arabic words, the transliteration, and the italics underline that the real matter of this poem is distance, and that English and Arabic are articulating the dialogic terms of the poet’s contemporary Palestinian identity. Linguistic and cultural overlappings produce, once again, an engagement with multi-vocal agency. Both Handal and Hammad, then, expand and disseminate Palestinian identity through a specific and contemporary drive, which becomes a panethnic narrative of a transnational exilic condition.

This drive towards what seems a post-national character of Handal’s and Hammad’s poetry cannot, however, be taken as direct and incontestable evidence that Palestinian identity has become disengaged with the theme of the return to the negated land. Given the dramatic events of the past two decades in Gaza, in the West Bank and Israel, Julianne Hammer argues that,

while the future does not look bright for the Palestinians at home and in the diaspora, the difficult situation may breed a new generation of Palestinians who will not dissolve into post-national, postmodern identities before achieving justice and a homeland to which to return.<sup>26</sup>

The need to return strongly persists in the poetry of the Palestinian diaspora. Handal herself devotes much of her poetry to the necessity of going back, and to the longing for the land. In “Haifa, Haifa”, included in the first section of *The Lives of Rain*, she underscores the themes of leaving and returning:

We were from the East  
and then we escaped  
left the coast  
broken walls  
dusty roads  
nightmares

...

The lemon trees keep disappearing  
and the weather keeps changing,  
we keep ageing  
keep coming back  
but never on time  
to see those who keep leaving.<sup>27</sup>

The continuous and untimely return records the strain to keep a diasporic community together, when death and displacement keep intervening. However, in the same section of Handal’s collection, the poem titled “I Never Made it to Café Beirut; Nor, I Heard, Did You” brings in an interference: not only a romantic

<sup>26</sup> Hammer, *Palestinians Born in Exile*, ix. The dramatic situation in the Palestinian territories and in Israel further escalated after the publication of Hammer’s book, culminating with the war on Gaza waged by the Israeli government in 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Handal, “Haifa, Haifa”, in *Lives of Rain*, 23.



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(albeit evidently tragic) *rendez-vous* is at stake, but an unexpected symbolic world is brought into the deadliness of war-stricken borders:

You insisted, meet me at the Lebanese border.  
Told me to bring my favourite poems  
of Baudelaire and Gibran, my dreams  
wrapped in my black hair, my questions –<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Handal, “I Never Made it to Café Beirut; Nor, I Heard, Did You”, in *ibid.*, 25.

Again here, though not as strongly as in “El Almuerzo de Tía Habiba”, maps of signification are juxtaposed, and Baudelaire finds space in the terror of the Lebanese border. Though, as Hammer writes, justice and the homeland are still fundamental issues in the construction of Palestinian identity, the disrupting character of contemporary Palestinian poetry of the diaspora lies in holding within oneself the lost land throughout exile, in a sort of dissemination of Palestinian identity. It is not yet a post-national identity; rather, as already underlined, through the dissemination of the sense of injustice and exile, the Palestinian question ‘enters’ the rest of the world, becoming a critical terrain that exposes the paradoxes and the contradictions of modern nations and of their narrations.

Furthermore, with regards to the specific issue of the ‘post-national’ tension, which is detectable in the poetry of the contemporary Palestinian diaspora, a shift in perspective can be useful, not so much in looking at the possibility of ‘post-nationality’ but, rather, at what Keith Feldman calls a “simultaneous critique and transvaluation of the nation form”.<sup>29</sup> Feldman refers specifically to the Arab American context, in which the literary and artistic production has long been engaged in a “counternational concern ... with the establishment of the State of Israel and the present-day deferral of statehood for Palestine”.<sup>30</sup> It seems possible to detect a further development of this critique and transvaluation of the nation form, considering the contradictions implicit in the Palestinian question in relation to the claim to nationhood, and in the connections of the modern form of nation-state with the logic of imperialism, and the politics of exclusion and othering which – at least, partly – shape the very question of Palestinian statehood. From this perspective, the dissemination that the Palestinian discourse experiences in the poetics of Handal, Hammad, and others, is inscribed inside a wider set of relations of power underwriting imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. As a result, we have what can be termed, with Keith Feldman, “a theory of counternational solidarity through the transvaluation of national belonging”.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Keith Feldman, “Poetic Geographies: Interracial Insurgency in Arab American Autobiographical Spaces”, in Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, ed., *Arab Women’s Lives Retold. Exploring Identity Through Writing* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 52.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

In “Amrika”, the third part of *The Lives of Rain*, Handal clearly thematizes the dissemination of Palestinian identity in exile; the section of “Amrika”, titled “The Tyranny of Distance” reads:

From Jaffa to Marseille:  
How does one begin to understand the difference  
between *Sabah el kbayr* and *bonjour*,  
the difference between the city of lights and black-outs.

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*C'est comme cela, tout change, habibiti,*  
but our names stay the same,  
our eyes remain, our memory.

I sing Inshallah in French as I walk les banlieue Parisienne,  
walk through Barbes, Bercy, St. Denis, Rue Bad-el-Oued  
uncertain, looking for what I am most certain of.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Handal, "Amrika", in *Lives of Rain*, 58.

Handal explores Palestinian diasporic identity while conducting an introspective investigation of her own personal movements and unavoidable translations. The section of the same poem under the title "Openings" proceeds in the journey:

New England  
quiet echoes raindrops autumn leaves  
an alley of tiny butterflies  
the difference between where we are from  
and where we now live.

The years behind a broken door  
My father's grief –  
I understand nothing –  
Only later do I hear the Arabic  
in his footsteps...

I walk through Fenway Park, through  
streets with names that escape me,  
their stories of sea  
their cries for a stranger's grief.  
I understand – no one can bear partings...<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

The last section of the poem "Debke in New York"<sup>34</sup> brings the reader to New York City:

<sup>34</sup> *Debke* is an Arabic folkloric dance.

I wear my jeans, tennis shoes,  
walk Broadway, pass Columbia,  
read Said and Twain,  
wonder why we are obsessed  
with difference,  
our need to change the other?  
I wait for the noise to stop  
but it never does  
so I go to the tip of the Hudson River  
recite a verse by Ibn Arabi  
and between subway rides,  
to that place that I now call home,  
listen to Abdel Halim and Nina Simone  
hunt for the small things  
I have lost inside of myself –  
and at the corner of Bleeker and Mercer

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through a window with faded Arabic letters  
see a New York *debke*...

It is later than it was a while ago  
and I haven't moved a bit,  
my voices still breaking into tiny pieces  
when I introduce myself to someone new  
and imagine I have found my way home.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 64.

The poem and the book both end with the word 'home', being associated to imagination ("imagine I have found my way home"). This home is not imagined in a place, but in a person: "someone new". Once again, also and especially in New York, Handal is carrying within herself a non-place of belonging, or the impossibility of belonging.

### Ghurba disseminated

In *The Lives of Rain*, Handal writes of Palestinian refugees, and also of the victims of the Balkan wars, of the poor and destitute in Haiti, and of the displaced migrants in the U.S., exploring what in Arabic is called *ghurba*: the separation and estrangement from home and, at the same time, a meaningful belonging. The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic defines *ghurba* as "absence from the homeland; separation from one's native country, banishment, exile; life, or place, away from home".<sup>36</sup> The journalist Ghada Al Atrash Janbey notes that

the word *ghurba* also carries an intense feeling along with it, a melancholic feeling of longing, of nostalgia, of homesickness and separation, of a severe patriotic yearning for a place where one's heart was not only living, but also dancing to the beat of a father's or a mother's voice, to the words in grandmother's tale, to a melody from a native instrument, to the pounding of feet stamping in a group dance, to a merchant's voice shouting out the name of his merchandise in the streets of neighborhoods, or simply, to a place where one's heart danced to the silence of a homeland's soil.<sup>37</sup>

The word *ghurba* derives from the three roots *gha-ra-ba*, which indicate the sun setting, or something that declines. The same roots of *ghurba* make up the word for the West (*al-gharb*: the place where the sun sets) and also, meaningfully, distance, foreignness, or expulsion. The word is also used with the specific meaning of 'diaspora', as Hammer and Lindholm Schulz explain in a survey of the Arabic terms used in relation to the semantic sphere of exile and diaspora:

One ... term is '*al-shataf*', which means to be dispersed, scattered or separated. It might well be an adaptation of the English term 'diaspora', literally meaning 'to be scattered, dispersed, separated'. Clearly the Greek notion of being scattered and separated from the homeland or parent is semantically present here. The Arabic term much longer in use and more emotionally charged is '*al-ghurba*'. ... '*Manfa*' is exile in a more literal sense, as the verb '*nafa*' means 'to banish' or 'expel'. In Palestinian literature and poetry it is '*al-ghurba*', where the Palestinian is a stranger, that carries all the notions of suffering, cold, winter, estrangement and dislocation.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic (Arabic/English)*, ed. by J. Milton Cowan, 4th edition (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Ghada Al Atrash Janbey, "Meaning Within Words", *Cranbrook Daily Townsman*, May 15, 2009, <http://meaningwithinwords.com/?p=40>, 20 May 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Hammer, *Palestinians Born in Exile*, 60.

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The American-based novelist of Palestinian descent, Susan Abulhawa, titled a chapter of her 2010 novel *Mornings in Jenin*, “El Ghurba”.<sup>39</sup> The novel narrates the tragedy and the search for recovery of a Palestinian family, spanning four generations and a number of countries through which the family itself, and, collectively, the Palestinians, are scattered starting from 1948. The chapter entitled “El Ghurba” begins with Amal, the main narrator of the novel who, still a teenager, orphaned and injured in the 1967 war, moves to the United States. She recalls the estrangement in the following terms:

Feelings of inadequacy marked my first months in America. I floundered in that open-minded world, trying to fit in. But my foreignness showed in my brown skin and accent. Statelessness clung to me like a bad perfume and the airplane hijackings of the seventies trailed my Arabic surname.<sup>40</sup>

Later in the same chapter, Amal (soon to re-name herself Amy) reflects on the distance between herself and her new housemates:

The divide could not have been greater, nor could it be bridged. That’s how it was. Palestine would just rise up from my bones into the center of my new life, unannounced. In class, at a bar, strolling through the city. Without warning, the weeping willows of Rittenhouse Square would turn into Jenin’s fig trees reaching down to offer me their fruit. It was a persistent pull, living in the cells of my body, calling me to myself. Then it would slouch back into latency.<sup>41</sup>

Abulhawa brings Palestine into the fluidity of the diaspora; it is not only the past – and the land – pulling ‘back’ towards an unrecoverable life, but also the present that becomes ‘contaminated’ with the lost land. This ‘interference’ of Palestine, inside a diasporic elsewhere, echoes in Suheir Hammad’s poetry; in particular, in her poem “argela remembrance”:<sup>42</sup>

we read futures in search of our past  
in coffee grinds and tea leaves  
in upturned hands grasping  
for prayer

we are a people  
name our sons after prophets  
daughters after midwives  
eat with upturned hands  
plant plastic potted plants  
in suffocating apartments  
tiny brooklyn style  
in memory of the soil once  
laid under our nails.<sup>43</sup>

Here Palestinian identity is disseminated in a trans-national cartography in which the plants are planted in plastic pots, in tiny Brooklyn apartments. Palestine is shown to be (also) outside its land, and the soil itself is carried outside and re-narrated in

<sup>39</sup> Susan Abulhawa was born to refugees of the Six-Day War of 1967. She grew up in Kuwait, in Jordan and in occupied East Jerusalem before moving to the United States. She studied Biomedical Science at the University of South Carolina and established a career in medical science. She began writing op-ed pieces for newspapers in the US, while founding Playgrounds for Palestine, an NGO dedicated to upholding the Right to Play for Palestinian children living under occupation. *Mornings in Jenin* is her first novel, originally published in 2006 as *The Scar of David*. Abulhawa titles most of the chapters in her novel with Arabic names, all translated in subtitles; “El Ghurba” is translated as “state of being a stranger”.

<sup>40</sup> Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 169.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>42</sup> “Argela” is used to indicate the water-pipe commonly smoked in the Middle East. The opening lines of the poem read: “smoking the water pipe / pass the argela / head tipped down / to my father...”, (“argela remembrance”, in *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, 38).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

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new communal locations of identity. As Carol Fadda-Conrey observes,

Hammad grounds the autobiography of a Palestinian American community within a very tactile and tangible exilic setting, which in its every aspect becomes the antithesis of a lost Palestine that permeates the poem but is never named or described. ... The positive cohesiveness of the 'we', however, is outweighed by the shock of dispossession....<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Carol Fadda-Conrey, "Weaving Poetic Autobiographies", in Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, ed., *Arab Women's Lives Retold. Exploring Identity through Writing* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 170.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>46</sup> Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin*, 175.

Furthermore, the soil in the "plastic potted plants" becomes "a synecdoche of Palestinian tilled farmland".<sup>45</sup> *Ghurba* – foreignness, belonging, and un-belonging – appears in scattered instances in the poetics of the contemporary Palestinian diaspora, unexpectedly rising up, as Abulhawa writes, "from the bones".<sup>46</sup> Both through the use of polyglossia and the continuous interference of different and overlapping systems of signification, poets such as Handal and Hammad expand the concept of *ghurba* beyond the paradoxical borders of the 'non-nation' of Palestine to a cosmopolitan community of voices encompassing at once estrangement, foreignness and belonging.

The authors of the latest generation of the Palestinian diaspora here analysed are women. Explorations of exile and diaspora abound in male authors as well; however, the poetics of dismemberment, dissemination, and linguistic juxtaposition in relation to the tropes of 'home' and 'belonging' gain a theoretically relevant significance precisely because they are addressed mainly by women artists. This may be perhaps linked to the persistent and (trans-)cultural construction of womanhood as intrinsically symbolizing the home, possibly the homeland, the fertile land bearing progeny.



Fig. 2: Mai Ghoussoub and Souheil Sleiman, *Displaces* (details), 1998, photograph taken from Fran Lloyd, ed., *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present* (London: Women's Art Library, 2002)



Fig. 3: Mai Ghoussoub and Souheil Sleiman, *Displaces* (details), 1998, photograph taken from Fran Lloyd, ed., *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present* (London: Women's Art Library, 2002)

The 1998 installation exhibited at the Shoreditch Town Hall in London by Mai Ghoussoub and Souheil Sleiman entitled *Displaces* already addressed the construction of home and belonging, literally de-constructing the structure of homeliness: three rooms were filled with plaster objects (normally used to build houses), which were piled and scattered on the floor.<sup>47</sup>

In Shaheen Merali's words, the installation could be described as "an evocation of the experience of unbelonging".<sup>48</sup> The three rooms, full of 'pieces' of a house, described and, at the same time, displaced the vision of 'home' as belonging, commonality and rooted identity. The construction material was not assembled in an intelligible form, thus articulating a resistance to definitions and, at the same time, a disorientation in the face of complete fragmentation and dispersion. Linking the themes of home and domesticity to womanhood and to its construction in terms of "symbolic keeper of the home, or the domestic space", Ghoussoub's and Sleiman's work could be read as a resistance to definitions of domesticity and also to the discourse of womanhood in relation to the home/land, both within the Arab-Muslim world and in the West. According to Fran Lloyd, the three rooms "both contain and challenge assumptions about what signifies home or belonging and resist any fixing of identity by gender, race or sexuality".<sup>49</sup> The plaster fragments of home, scattered in Ghoussoub's and Sleiman's work of art, spell out the disorientation of un-belonging. Each plaster piece is a letter of an alphabet that finds no linearity, no familiar sequence of symbols, to narrate the scattering of exile. There is only the imperative of uprootedness: the home is in pieces, moving is necessary, *waiting is forbidden*.

<sup>47</sup> Mai Ghoussoub was born in Beirut in 1952 and died in London in 2007; she was a writer, an artist, a human rights activist, and the co-founder of "Saqi" bookshop and publishing company. Her books include *Leaving Beirut: Women and the Wars Within* (London: Saqi, 2001) and (co-edited with Emma Sinclair-Webb) *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2006). Souheil Sleiman is a London-based Lebanese artist; his works have been exhibited in Europe and the Arab world, and consist of socially and politically informed sculptures and installations.

<sup>48</sup> Shaheen Merali, "The Topology of Unbelonging", in *Displaces*, 10-20 July, 1997, exhibition leaflet, unpaginated.

<sup>49</sup> Fran Lloyd, *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present* (London: Women's Art Library, 2002), 180-181.