

FESTIVAL REVIEW

Freedom to Imagine Reflections on the First Palestine Writes Literature Festival

Review by Amanda Batarseh

Abstract

Originally scheduled for March 2020, the first Palestine Writes Literature Festival was held virtually in December 2020. The festival brought together authors, artists, activists, scholars, and publishers, offering a dynamic environment for attendees to reimagine the space and time of Palestine, foregrounding Palestinian presence in the past, present, and future. The festival's aim "to imagine a world we want" asserts the centrality of Palestinian political futurity – the liberation of Palestinian imagination from the confines of settler colonial space-time that presents itself as natural, neutral, and permanent. Drawing participants from across multiple regions, languages, and artistic genres, the festival disrupted the ostensible boundaries and binaries of Palestinian writing (inside/outside; Arabic/non-Arabic; literary/non-literary, etc.). The broadening of the Palestinian canon to include non-Arabic writing by exilic authors, however, also provokes the demand to protect against the potential compression of Palestinian identity into a narrative of diasporic "statelessness." In this review, Amanda Batarseh interrogates what it means for Palestine Writes to imagine Palestinian futurity when those voices doing the imagining are dispersed and subject to varying degrees of censure and threat.

Keywords

Festival; literature; futurity; space; time; imagination; temporality; virtual.

In *Al-adab al-'aja'ibi wa al-'alam al-gara'ibi*, Kamal Abu-Deeb describes the tradition of fantasy in Arabic literature as the “unbound imagination” – a space of “creative imagination in absolute freedom.”¹ Abu-Deeb’s assessment surpasses fantasy’s conventional association with a whimsical indifference for the presumed laws governing reality.



The landing page of the Festival's virtual venue (palestinewrites.vfairs.com/).

Unbound imagination, he contends, “shapes the world as it wishes, subservient only to its own desires and observing only those laws and limits from which it wishes to pull. It is a wild, free and irreverent imagination.”² While attending the first Palestine Writes Literature Festival held in December 2020, I was reminded of the unbound imagination. Co-organizer and author Susan Abulhawa stated in her opening remarks, the festival imagines “a world we want – a world that does not know racial theory, Ayn Rand, Zionism, or a white Jesus.” Abulhawa foregrounds the revolutionary significance of “creative imagination in absolute freedom” as fundamental to combating the interdependent structures of white supremacy, neoliberal capitalism, and settler colonialism.

Originally scheduled for March 2020 in New York City, the first Palestine Writes Festival was postponed during the first round of COVID-19 closures and convened in December as a virtual event. The five-day festival brought together authors, artists, activists, scholars, publishers, and booksellers, offering a dynamic space for the formal and informal exchange of ideas. Panel sessions were accompanied by lively chats on the virtual platform, allowing participants to engage both panelists and each other simultaneously. Sessions on solidarity work and Palestinian literary innovation were accompanied by story times for children, musical performances, film, and workshops on cooking and *tatriz*. The festival’s multi-dimensionality aspired both to a tradition of Palestinian resistance that celebrates life and to reflections on the collectivity of Palestinian national imagination. A liberatory imagination crystallized in the festival’s virtual, borderless world.

The transition of Palestine Writes to a virtual platform facilitated the tripling of the festival’s registrants to roughly three thousand across seventy-five countries. On the festival’s welcome page, attendees hovered outside the event’s convention center, a generically futuristic building buffering the Jerusalem skyline. In the virtual environment, and through Zoom-facilitated³ panels (recordings of which are still available online⁴), attendees were welcomed to reimagine Palestinian space and time. “We have returned to Jerusalem in this virtual space,” Abulhawa stated, “because the justice we want, and need, must start with our abilities to imagine it as individuals

and as collectives.” In a thoughtful inversion of Edward Said’s “imaginative geography” – a degenerative tool of settler colonialism that first imagines the land absent of its indigenous population and then violently enforces that “absence” – the festival’s imaginative geography was instead regenerative, premised upon Palestinian “presence” in the past, present and future.⁵

As an alternate although artificial landscape, the festival’s virtual homeland was the only place where an otherwise ordinary activity – a cultural festival – could be made available to all interested Palestinian participants on relatively equal terms. This kind of absurdity has never been lost on Palestinians. In 1974, Emile Habibi contemplated spatial alterity in Saeed’s desperate pursuit of alien deliverance, reflecting, “The moon is closer to us now than are the fig trees of our departed village.”⁶ The festival’s virtual environment (imagining future return to the “departed village”) temporarily offered Palestinian attendees respite from the settler state’s restrictions upon their movement through space and time. Participants were invited to envision a future Palestine – a time and place from which Palestinians have been systematically and violently excluded.

On a purely practical level, the festival disrupted typical constraints on Palestinian movement by facilitating virtual transport across time-zones and borders. Some panels succeeded in temporarily disrupting the normative space-time of interdependent settler colonial/white-supremacist/capitalist/heteropatriarchal regimes of power. The keynote panel, “Culture, Solidarity and Internationalism,”⁷ opened with a letter from Khalida Jarrar read by daughters Yafa and Suha. A political prisoner in the Israeli Damon prison near Haifa, Jarrar’s letter bypasses the state’s militarized enclosures. Her participation in the festival virtually razes the prison walls, exposing imprisonment – the criminalization and incarceration of unwanted demographics – as a critical site of Palestinian national imagination and liberation. Even while the prison is intended to isolate and dissocialize inmates, Jarrar explains in her letter how Palestinian detainees maintain connections with each other and Palestinian society through structured learning environments, reading and writing practices, and clandestine communication within and beyond the prison walls. Both the content and physical realization of Jarrar’s letter – produced within and yet transcending the prison walls – are manifestations of prison writing’s liberational ethic. Reflecting upon the importance of reading, writing, and creativity, Jarrar expresses the capacity of the liberatory imagination to expose the fissures and frailty of carceral coloniality and to fuel resistance movements.

Jarrar’s letter was followed by a panel discussion between Angela Davis, Hanan Ashrawi, and Richard Falk, moderated by Susan Abulhawa and Bill Mullen, which placed transnational struggles in conversation. Elaborating on the centrality of prison resistance as a linchpin to transnational liberation struggles, Angela Davis noted how *Enemy of the Sun* by Palestinian poet Samih al-Qasim (1939–2014) – the first collection of Palestinian resistance literature circulated in the United States – was released by a small Black publishing house. Al-Qasim’s poem “Enemy of the Sun,” which lent its name to the anthology, was originally found in the prison cell of Black revolutionary-scholar George Jackson in 1971 (and thought originally to be penned by him) following Jackson’s assassination by prison guards. This concordance, suggested

Davis, captures the interconnections and “intimacies of our struggles.”

Another panel which placed transnational struggles in conversation – unknitting normative space and time – was “The Parallel Lives of Ghassan Kanafani and James Baldwin.”⁸ Panelists Huzama Habayeb, Rami Abu Shehab, Robin D. G. Kelley and Bill Mullen, moderated by Maha Nassar, examined the resonant lives and works of Kanafani and Baldwin whose distinct and yet parallel exiles in 1948 profoundly shaped their revolutionary politics. Kelley, in his discussion of Kanafani’s *‘A’id ila Hayfa* (Return to Haifa), located in its provocations – that “man is a cause” and “what is a homeland?” – the radical politics of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine that, while national in aim, were also profoundly embedded in transnational revolutionary movements. Kelley noted the “critical moment in the early period of the late 1960s and early 1970s when Black/Palestinian solidarity was an expression of global revolutionary insurgency.” Citing Barbara Harlow’s *After Lives*, Kelley proposed the necessity of looking back at revolutionaries like Kanafani and Baldwin to disclose how they looked ahead.

As these panels suggest, confronting the imposition of settler space and time on Palestinian reality is a key site in the resistance struggle. Kanafani addressed the importance of this confrontation in *Al-adab al-filastini al-muqawim taht al-ihlil 1948–1968* (Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine) as a tension between Palestinian retrospective and prospective vision – between looking backward and forward. As part of this discussion, Kanafani articulates a distinction between the Palestinian literature of resistance (produced in “*al-ard al-muhtalla*,” the territory of historic Palestine) and the literature of exile (produced in “*al-manfa*”) expressing a temporal divide between a literature that looks to the future and another that looks to the past. He develops this distinction in his political writings, such as “*Al-muqawama hiya al-asl*” (The Resistance is the Origin), where he warns that “the relationship uniting Palestinians has become one of exile and displacement rather than revolution.”⁹ For Kanafani, because the land is what centers Palestinian cultural, historical, individual, and communal (including national) formations, a (future) return to it and not (past) exile from it must be central to its liberation movement. As the character, Said, proclaims to his wife, Safiyya, in *‘A’id ila Hayfa*: “We were wrong when we thought the homeland was only the past . . . Homeland . . . is the future.”¹⁰

The festival’s stated aim “to imagine a world we want” asserts the centrality, then, of Palestinian political futurity – the liberation of Palestinian imagination from the confines of settler colonial space-time which presents itself as natural, neutral, and permanent. The festival’s catalogue brings together authors, artists and scholars across multiple regions, languages, and artistic genres, disrupting the ostensible boundaries and binaries of Palestinian writing (inside/outside; Arabic/non-Arabic; literary/non-literary, etc.). Through simultaneous translation into Arabic and English, from literary icons like Ibrahim Nasrallah and Mahmoud Shukair to young up-and-coming authors, from the novel to emerging genres, the festival’s plurality aspires to approximate a liberated Palestinian imaginative geography. The broadening of the Palestinian canon to include non-Arabic writing by exilic authors, for instance, resonates with the

festival's articulation of Palestine in the language of transnational struggle. A tension emerges, however, between the extended geography of Palestinian authorship and the demand to protect against potential normalization and compression of Palestinian identity into a narrative of diasporic "statelessness."

The question of who writes Palestinian literature, and for whom, is complicated by the range of intersecting geo-political and geo-historical categories under which Palestinians are subsumed. These include, but are not limited to: '48 refugee; '67 refugee; second-class citizen of the occupied '48 territory; under occupation in the West Bank, Gaza, or East Jerusalem; exile in an Arab or non-Arab majority country; first-, second-, or third-generation exile, etc. All these identities are bound to the space of Palestine and yet segregated from one another by distinct parameters on space and time. Asking "who writes and consumes Palestinian literature?" is, then, not an uncomplicated question, particularly for a population whose connection to their homeland is systematically undermined by dominant Zionist discourse and political practice. Collectively, contemporary Palestinian writing can encompass the multidimensionality of Palestinian identity. However, the dynamism promised by geographic and generational diversity is also always accompanied by its violent source – the inherited trauma of settler colonial dispossession and erasure. How Palestinians negotiate the space and time of internal and external exile remains central to their national constitution and the very challenges of imagining that nationhood. A summation of the festival's mission "to imagine a world we want," then, also provokes that question raised by Kanafani: who is the "we" doing the imagining? Even while we assert the legitimacy of collective Palestinian nationhood in the face of forced dispersal, we are compelled to address not only the diversity of Palestinian positionalities in the world, but also the disparity of their access to cultural capital resulting from this diversity. In other words, as a result of these persistent categories (inside/outside, Arabic/English, literary/non-literary, etc.), whose voices are we being permitted to hear narrate or imagine Palestine?

These fissures manifest in the level of representation afforded anglophone western-situated artists and scholars at the festival. Of course, in its planning phase, the festival was conceived pre-COVID-19 as an in-person event. Facilitating the presence of attendees in historic Palestine and the Arab world – especially for those whose access to mobility and international transit is precarious – can constitute a real barrier to participation. It is also the case, however, that with its transition to a virtual platform, the festival consciously inhabited a space of alterity bypassing traditional barriers to global Palestinian participation. Moreover, facilitating virtual participation of Palestinian panelists at in-person events now constitutes a manageable challenge. Even taking into account that the event was intended to be held in the United States, its name – Palestine Writes – brings homeland and Palestinian collectivity to the fore, ostensibly de-centering its location in the U.S. Just as Kanafani's concern for Palestinian literature produced in historic Palestine was not a critique of exilic literature, this is not an indictment of Palestinian anglophone art or its inclusion within an increasingly diverse canon of Palestinian writing and cultural production. Expanding the Palestinian

canon to reflect the diversity of its creators is fundamental to contesting the settler colonial state's intentional fragmentation of Palestinian identity – that is, the erasure of Palestine and Palestinians from space and time in large part through expulsion and physical dispersal. This concern for overrepresentation of exilic Palestinian identity – particularly of those in the United States – however, does become an invitation to further develop the festival's proposal to imagine a future Palestine and to engage the discomfort and uncertainty that this conversation requires. What does it mean to imagine a multivocal Palestine when those voices doing the imagining are dispersed, subject to varying degrees of censure, and when their access to audience (not to mention their very existence) is under constant threat? What will Palestine Writes look like next year when the barriers to in-person international gatherings have been lifted for those of us in the United States, but persist for those in historic Palestine and beyond? Increased engagement with Palestinian writers, artists, scholars, and cultural critics producing in Arabic in historic Palestine presents future opportunities to explore the vast network of Palestinian authorship and how it connects (and re-connects) *al-sha'b al-Filastini* (the Palestinian people) to *al-ard* (the [home]land).

The “SciFi Palestine”¹¹ panel – addressing the topic of Palestinian imagination and futurity – offered a unique site for meditation on these very questions. This panel brought together Ibtisam Azem, author of the novel *Sifr al-Ikhtifa'* (Al-Kamel Verlag, 2014; *The Book of Disappearance*, translated into English by Sinan Antoon in 2019) with two contributing authors from the short story collection *Palestine +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba* (Comma Press 2019), Saleem Haddad and Rawan Yaghi, moderated by Ebony Coletu. *Sifr al-Ikhtifa'* is set in Jaffa, the region from which Azem – currently residing in New York – originates. The short stories in *Palestine +100* range from explicitly Palestinian locations to the construction of unnamed worlds, while the collection's authors are globally dispersed. Haddad was born in Lebanon with Palestinian ancestry through his grandmother, and currently lives in Portugal. Yaghi was born and raised in Gaza and recently moved to the United States. Both Haddad and Yaghi composed their short stories – “Song of the Birds” and “Commonplace,” respectively – in English for *Palestine +100*, which contains a mixture of works both translated into and written in English.¹²

We might consider imaginative geography relative to the author's perception and construction of genre against a western model of “science fiction.” None of the authors seem particularly comfortable with the identification of their work as “Sci-Fi.” As Haddad notes, he was never drawn to the mainstream genre, so plainly rooted in the “violent colonial ideologies” of discovery and conquest.¹³ Haddad's comment resonates with a hesitancy expressed by Azem, noting that her novel was only categorized as science fiction upon its translation into English, ostensibly for positioning on the anglophone market. Yaghi asserts that her short story was a creative meditation on the traumatic realities of Gazan life, rather than modeling a prototypical sci-fi narrative. What is the imaginative geography and future being asserted by Palestinian authors of contemporary speculative fiction and how is this space pushing up against the tired – and yet remarkably persistent – practice of measuring global

south literatures by Western models of cultural production? Rather than asking if Palestinian compositions of imagined futures fit the demands of science fiction, it seems more appropriate to (finally) ask if this Western genre of science fiction fits the demands of Palestinian imagination. This panel de-centers the Western genre of science fiction – and their works’ readability or digestibility relative to that framing – and re-centers Palestinian writing as its own kind of methodology.

Similar tensions emerged in other panels, such as the “Graphic Novel Workshop”¹⁴ where exceptional artists, Mohammad Sabaaneh, Marguerite Dabaie, and Iasmin Omar Ata discussed their recent works. While Dabaie’s *The Hookah Girl and Other Stories* and Ata’s *Mis(h)adra* fit comfortably within the parameters of the graphic novel, Sabaaneh’s artwork is explicitly rooted in the popular Palestinian artform of political cartoons à la Naji al-Ali. The framing of this panel, then, missed an opportunity to allow its participants to consider, not how their works conformed to the parameters of the graphic novel, but rather how the variants of the graphic genres in which they work are shaped by the particular spaces they inhabit as Palestinians. Sabaaneh, who was born in Kuwait and is from Qabatya, lives in Palestine and has been imprisoned repeatedly by Israel for his work, while Dabaie and Omar live and work in the United States where they confront political and social repression of a different (although not unrelated) kind. The urge to categorize the genres of contemporary Palestinian literature into digestible units for literary consumption incites familiar anxieties – of who gets to decide the parameters of inclusion? Although the call by the festival to upend the borders confining Palestinian freedom (from those of movement to those of creation) are certainly genuine, such instances illustrate the challenges ahead in detangling ourselves from the regulatory systems of which we are all subject – that is, the distance between the desire for and realization of “imagination in absolute freedom.”

Given the hesitancy raised by Azem, Haddad, and Yaghi regarding the categorization of their works as science fiction – a genre that freely exploits, as Anishinaabe First Nations scholar, Grace Dillon writes, the “theme of conquest, otherwise known as ‘discovery’” – they were compelled to consider if and how to re-imagine this literary space as one of resistance and liberation.¹⁵ This is perhaps the most difficult question to grapple with for Palestinians imagining futurity. Must Palestinian futurity be utopian in order to be liberational? If so, that would seem to severely limit the contributions of these three authors and also much of Palestinian writing. Narrative content may inspire hope; however, processes, projects, and modes of being can also inspire hope. We can, for instance, locate hope in futurity as a decolonial tool – in its assertion of the right to imagine, the right to agency over one’s space and time. As Basma Ghalayini, editor of *Palestine +100* stated recently, what she found most hopeful about the collection, even given the prevalence of dystopian landscapes “was that the writers actually wrote these stories and ventured out of their comfort zones to display the Palestinian cause in that specific context.”¹⁶ Ghalayini’s focus on the authors, rather than the written product in isolation, illustrates the space-time of Palestinian futurity, positioning itself always external to the text and within the world it aspires to inhabit. In this sense, futurity is a conduit for the “creative

imagination in absolute freedom,” and generative space for Palestinians to confront the challenges of imagining a Palestinian future, unrestricted by the imprisonment of a lost past. The homeland is, after all, the future.

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Endnotes

- 1 “Al-khayal al-mubdi‘ al-mubtakir alathi yajub al-wujud bi-ihsas mutlaq bil-huriyat al-mutlaqa,” Kamal Abu-Deeb, “Al-adab al-‘aja’ibi wa al-‘alam al-ghara’ibi” in *The Imagination Unbound: Al-Adab al-‘Aja’ibi and the Literature of the Fantastic* (London: Saqi, 2007), 4.
- 2 “Ya’jan al-‘alam kama yasha’, wa yasugh ma yasha’ ghayr khadi’ ila li-shahawatihi wa li-mutatallabatih al-khasa wa li-ma yakhtar huwa an yarsumahu min qawanin wa hudud. Innahu al-khayal jamihan, taliqan, muntqa,” Abu-Deeb, *The Imagination Unbound*.
- 3 The festival’s organizers addressed the censorship by Zoom of an October 2020 event hosted by San Francisco State University of Leila Khaled (and the cancellations of subsequent events that had been planned to address the private company’s ability to censor public speech as a gross infringement of academic freedom), in opening remarks citing the continued practice of Palestinian censorship and their regrettable inability to switch from the Zoom platform at such a late date.
- 4 Palestine Writes Literature Festival, August 2020, online at www.facebook.com/PalestineWrites/videos (accessed 25 August 2021).
- 5 Edward Said, “Invention, Memory, and Place,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 181.
- 6 “*wa al-qamar asbaha aqrab ‘alayna min tinatina al-qamra’ fi qaryatina al-thakla,*” Emile Habibi, *Al-waqa’i’ al-ghariba li ikhtifa’ sa’id abi al-nahs al-mutasha’il* (Dar al-Shuruq lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi’, 2012), 11; Emile Habibi, *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Pessoptimist*, trans. Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Trevor Le Gassick (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003), 4.
- 7 “Culture, Solidarity and Internationalism,” Palestine Writes Literature Festival, December 2020, online at fb.watch/7vN9Zd1uNJ/ (accessed 25 August 2021).
- 8 “The Parallel Lives of Ghassan Kanafani and James Baldwin,” Palestine Writes Literature Festival, December 2020, online at fb.watch/7vNfWbsjcW/ (accessed 25 August 2021).
- 9 Ghassan Kanafani, *Al-dirasat al-siyasiyya al-mujallad al-khamis* [Political Studies, vol.5] (Cyprus: Dar Manshurat al-Rimal, 2015), 483.
- 10 “*akhta’ana hina ‘i’tabarna anna al-watan huwa al-madi faqat ... fa al-watan ... huwa al-mustaqbal,*” Ghassan Kanafani, *‘A’id ila Hayfa* [Return to Haifa] (Cyprus: Dar Manshurat al-Rimal, 2013), 77.
- 11 “SciFi Palestine,” Palestine Writes Literature Festival, December 2020, online at fb.watch/7vNmER-d8e/ (accessed 25 August 2021).
- 12 This is an assumption made on my part, since only some of the stories in the collection indicate a translator. I have assumed those that were not written originally in English, or were translated into English, by the author.
- 13 “Radical Imagining: Afro, Indigenous & Palestinian Futurisms,” DC Palestinian Film and Art Festival, October 2020, online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpaCogzt9YA (accessed 16 August 2021).
- 14 “Graphic Novel Workshop,” Palestine Writes Literature Festival, December 2020, online at fb.watch/7vNssUDfq0/ (accessed 25 August 2021).
- 15 Grace L. Dillon, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 5.
- 16 “Radical Imagining: Afro, Indigenous & Palestinian Futurisms.”