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Nation, Village, Cave: A Spatial Reading of 1948 in Three Novels of Anton Shammas, Emile Habiby, and Elias Khoury

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ABSTRACT

Though written decades apart and in two different languages (Arabic and Hebrew), Emile Habiby's The Pessoptimist, Anton Shammas's Arabesques, and Elias Khoury's Gate of the Sun are interrelated novels in a broader literary dialogue about 1948 and its aftermath for Palestinians. The novels' respective narratives map the Palestinian experience onto spaces both larger and smaller than that of the nation, crossing borders between Lebanon, the Galilee, and the West Bank yet ultimately locating the heart of each story in a highly symbolic space: the cave. In the three novels, the cave becomes an alternative Palestinian space or "underground homeland" that may represent the lost Palestine of the past, the hope for a better future, or knowledge of the self. It is also used to portray intergenerational tensions in the Palestinian story. Collapsing time and space, reality and fantasy, the cave functions as a spatial expression of post-1948 Palestinian subjectivity.

Keywords: caves, Emile Habiby, Anton Shammas, Elias Khoury, Palestinian novel, 1948

Though written decades apart and in two different languages (namely, Arabic and Hebrew), Emile Habiby's *The Strange Facts in the Disappearance of Sa'id the Unlucky Pessoptimist* (1974), Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* (1986) and his Hebrew translations of Habiby's work, and Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (1998)¹ are interrelated

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participants in the broader literary dialogue on post-1948 Palestinian identity. The three novels are thematically connected, depicting the massive rupture of the Nakba and the residual threads of continuity with the Palestinian past that their characters maintain under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Moreover, these three novels engage themes of collective memory and storytelling through narratives that self-consciously destabilize the relationship between narration and truth and between history and memory. Finally, all three are transnational novels in the sense that they transgress borders between Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. They do so both within their narratives and in their extranarrative lives as social texts: through the personal relationships of their respective authors and through their histories of translation.

Although all three novels can be read as expressions of Palestinian experience, this experience is situated not within a geographic or symbolic space that conforms either to pre-1948 Palestine or to post-1948 Israel but rather within spaces both larger and smaller. Their narratives traverse the Galilee, Lebanon, and the West Bank through familial and social networks that persist across what are now firmly closed geopolitical borders, thereby mapping the post-Nakba Palestinian experience onto pre-Nakba space and time. By insisting on the integrity of this pre-1948 social geography, the novels subvert the dominant representation of space in Israeli literature. Yet at the same time, they also transpose the experience of Palestine *inward*, mapping it onto a completely different, more internal kind of space. As one of the characters in *Arabesques* muses: “*Rahat Phalasteen*. Palestine is lost and will never return.”² The loss in question refers not only to a society or a way of life but to the quite literal loss of Palestinian villages, hundreds of which were destroyed by Israeli forces during and after the war. Indeed, for the majority of Palestinians before 1948, the primary node of social identification was not the nation, an abstract notion of little immediate relevance, but their village—a point illustrated throughout Khoury’s *Gate of the Sun*.

In the three novels, as we zoom inward from the wider geography of Palestinian experience spanning the Galilee and Lebanon into the interior space of the village, we find that each narrative focuses on an even more intimate, internal spatiality: that of the cave. Indeed, the eponymous *Bab al-Shams* (Gate of the Sun) is the name given by the novel’s hero to the cave he imagines is his true “home.” Alternately a site of hidden “treasure,” a locus of collective memory, and a refuge from the harsh realities of post-1948 Palestinian existence, the cave in these novels is transformed into an alternative Palestinian space.

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As a symbol, it may represent the lost Palestine, the promise of a better future, or true knowledge of the self. Following feminist critic Luce Irigaray's reading of Plato's cave as an allegory for the womb, we can also consider how the three authors mobilize the cave to portray the Palestinian experience as a multigenerational story, one with Oedipal dimensions.³

Caves have a rich history in literature and philosophy and in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystical traditions, offering numerous intertextual possibilities. For example, "The Cave" is the title of *Surat al-kahf*, chapter 18 of the Koran, which contains the parable of *Ashab al-kahf*, the Companions of the Cave. Other famous examples include the caves in Plato's *Symposium* and in Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. In *Arabesques*, Shammas invokes the famous caves of *The Thousand and One Nights* through references to hidden treasure and to the magic word that opens the cave.⁴ The geography of historical Palestine is dotted with caves, many of them man-made shelters that date back to antiquity.⁵ In contemporary Hebrew literature, caves appear in David Grossman's *Hiyukh ha-gedi* (The Smile of the Lamb, 1982)⁶ and Meir Shalev's *Roman Rusi* (Russian Romance, 1988; published in English as *The Blue Mountain*),⁷ and in Avot Yeshurun's 1952 poem "Pesah 'al kukhim" (Passover on Caves).⁸ Whereas Grossman's novel depicts, in orientalist fashion, a half-blind, demented Arab hunchback living in a cave in the West Bank, Yeshurun's iconoclastic poem ties the cave to the suppressed Palestinian presence within Israel.⁹ Despite their different political valences, however, both works present the figure of the Palestinian Arab as a "native" of the Palestinian landscape, represented metonymically by the cave. Each in its own way thus essentializes the figure of the Palestinian as Other in part by associating him with the otherworldliness of the cave. In contrast, the three novels use the cave not as a marker of Palestinian autochthony, which they hardly need to prove, but as a multidimensional spatiality that is at once psychological, political, and historical in nature.

Gate of the Sun, written in Arabic, is fundamentally a book about the 1948 war, recounting Palestinian refugees' memories of expulsion from their homes. *The Pessoptimist* and *Arabesques* deal with the Nakba more subtly. As two novels that serve multiple reading publics, they have received divergent interpretations. *Arabesques* (originally written in highly acclaimed Hebrew) and *The Pessoptimist* (originally published in Arabic and disseminated widely in Israel via a Hebrew translation by Anton Shammas) have generally been read by Israeli critics as antihegemonic Israeli texts.¹⁰ Yet *The Pessoptimist* is first and foremost a major work in the modern Arabic literary canon,¹¹ whereas

Arabesques is viewed by some as a Palestinian novel in Hebrew¹² and has been included in courses on Arabic literature in American universities. These two novels thus enjoy a dual status as Israeli novels and (albeit in different ways) as Palestinian novels; both are in dialogue with Palestinian oral culture and collective memory, and Habiby makes extensive use of the vast Arabic literary heritage. As such, they present literary critics with a particularly compelling opportunity to reconsider the utility of national language as the primary hallmark of novelistic identity.

A dark, tragicomic narrative focused on the vexed life of Palestinians in Israel, Habiby's *The Pessoptimist* begins with the immediate aftermath of the Nakba. Early in the novel, the hapless narrator Sa'id seeks refuge in a mosque courtyard along with a large crowd of Palestinian refugees from throughout the devastated Galilee. When they hear that Sa'id has just stolen back across the border from Lebanon, they bombard him with questions about the fate of their fellow villagers-cum-refugees:

"We're from Kwaykaat. They demolished it and evicted everyone. Did you meet anyone from Kwaykaat?"

. . . I answered that I had met no one from Kwaykaat.

"I am from al-Manshiyya. There's not a stone left standing there except the tombs. Did you meet anyone from al-Manshiyya?"

"No."

"We are from Amqa. They plowed all its houses under and spilled its oil onto the ground. Did you meet anyone from Amqa?"

"No."

"We over here are from Berwah. They forced us out and obliterated it. Did you meet anyone from Berwah?"

"I did see one woman from there hiding with her child among the sesame stalks."

I heard many voices trying to guess who this woman was, and they enumerated more than twenty mothers. Finally one old man shouted: "That's enough. She is Mother Berwah. Stop guessing. God is her only refuge and ours."

And they did stop guessing. But soon voices erupted again, persisting in drawing out their relationships to their villages, all of which I understood to have been razed by the army:

"We are from Ruwais." "We are from al-Hadatha." "We are from el-Damun."

"We are from Mazraa." "We are from Shaab." "We are from Miy'ar."

"We are from Waarat el-Sarris." "We are from al-Zeeb." "We are from el-Bassa."

"We are from el-Kabri." "We are from Iqrit." "We are from Kufr Bir'im."

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"We are from Dair el-Qasi." "We are from Saasaa." "We are from al-Ghabsiye."

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"We are from Suhmata." "We are from al-Safsaf." "We are from Kufr Inan."¹³

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The relentless outpouring of the names of destroyed villages directly anticipates *Gate of the Sun*, which presents a litany of stories about Galilean villages destroyed by Israeli forces. As *The Pessoptimist* was the first literary work to present a Palestinian view of 1948 to an Israeli audience, it may seem surprising that it was absorbed into Israeli culture and did not generate substantial opposition or controversy—it even earned Habiby the Israel Prize for Arabic Literature in 1992. Israeli critics at the time downplayed the novel's trenchant criticism of Zionism by whitewashing its political critique and co-opting it under the banner of liberal humanism; critics read the book without actually seeing (or at least, acknowledging) the Nakba in it.¹⁴ This would no doubt be a very different matter in today's more acrimonious political climate. At the same time, however, the strong public opposition the book would probably face if published today indicates the heightened awareness of the Nakba in post–Oslo Accords Israeli society.

The novel's narrative features two caves: the seaside catacombs of 'Akka (Acre), where Sa'id hides out with space aliens, and the cave grotto on the shore of the destroyed coastal village of Tantura. The latter plays a pivotal role in the novel. For Sa'id *the Pessoptimist*, Tantura is embodied in the form of the girl he loves, whom he knows only as "al-Tanturiyya" (the girl from Tantura). Eventually Sa'id marries the Tanturiyya, whose real name is Baqiyya (fittingly, "she who remains"). On their wedding night, Baqiyya shares her secret: in a cave beneath the sea, just off the shore of Tantura, there is an iron chest full of gold and family jewels—an inheritance hidden by her father for a time of need.¹⁵ She asks Sa'id to retrieve the chest and rescue them from a life of poverty. Deciding that retrieving the chest would most likely be interpreted as a subversive political act, the fearful and cowardly Sa'id keeps the treasure a secret, even from their only son, Walaa. Yet at the same time he is irresistibly drawn to it and expresses his epiphany that "every one of you [Palestinians] must have an iron chest in your own Tanturah, where your father hid his treasure of gold! When I realized that through this treasure I had become one of you . . . a great burden was lifted from my mind."¹⁶ Thus the treasure becomes a thinly veiled metaphor for Palestine, and the search for the hidden treasure makes Sa'id *the Pessoptimist* part of the Palestinian collectivity. Torn between fear and desire, he spends the subsequent years in fruitless search for the treasure: "I

would dive as deep as I could down into a dark cave under the rocks, in the place Baqiyya had described to me. But I found nothing except fish that flitted away and seaweed sticking to the rocks. *I never dared venture far into the cave.*¹⁷

Their son Walaa grows up and, unbeknownst to his parents, joins the *fidayin* (guerrillas; sing., *fida'i*). Then in 1966, one year before the June 1967 war, armed soldiers burst into Sa'id's office, and Sa'id's boss, the so-called "Big Man" of the Secret Service, rages at Sa'id, informing him that Walaa, along with two schoolmates, has retrieved a strongbox filled with gold from a cave just off Tantura. The boys used the gold to buy weapons and were intercepted en route to Lebanon. Ambushed in his hideout, Walaa resolves to die as a martyr rather than surrender. Sa'id and Baqiyya arrive at the scene to dissuade him, but in the end mother and son disappear into the sea together. Sa'id tells us he believes that they have gone back to the cave together to die there.¹⁸

In Rachel Brenner's reading, the treasure, "hidden by the fathers of the defeated generation," is a "metaphor for lost independence, national pride, and tradition. The search for the treasure gives Sa'id the illusion of a national sense of belonging, thus alleviating the ethical predicament incurred by his double life as an informer."¹⁹ Building on Brenner's reading, we find that it is Walaa the *fida'i*, not Sa'id the collaborator, who has the courage to venture deep within the cave and retrieve the treasure. Yet as a result, Walaa loses his life. The treasure in the cave, at first a symbol of continuity with the past and hope for the future, is transformed into weaponry; *the cave becomes a crypt*.

Habiby's last novel, *Saraya bint al-ghul* (Saraya, the Ogre's Daughter, 1991), contains a long intertext on Plato's cave.²⁰ While visiting a friend in Greece, the narrator looks over a copy of Plato's *Republic*. The friends discuss the famous passage from book 7 concerning prisoners chained in darkness in the underground cave, which concludes that were they to "lay hands on a man who tried to undo their chains and lead them up to the light," then "[c]ertainly they would kill him."²¹ The narrator connects the parable of the cave to his own search for Saraya (echoing Sa'id's search for Yu'ad, the lost beloved of his youth, in *The Pessoptimist*): "[H]e had been destined, from the beginning, to meet someone who would try to push him up a steep and rugged ascent toward the light of the sun."²² Curiously, reading *The Pessoptimist* against the allegory of Plato's cave can bring us to the opposite conclusion: in this case, the cave seems freer than the outside world.²³ In his final dialogue with his father, Walaa presents his choice as liberation from a suffocating life of fear, enforced silence, and servitude.²⁴ Surrounded by the army, he chooses not to surrender; his final retreat into the cave is thus also

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his ultimate rejection of the compromised terms of existence offered by the state and modeled by his father. In psychoanalytical terms, the scene recalls the cave-womb connection, as Walaa retreats back into the dark, closed space, accompanied by his mother, escaping the brutality of the outside world.

Arabesques follows *The Pessoptimist* in that its engagement with 1948 is concerned less with the traumatic events of the war than with its long and complex aftermath, particularly as experienced by those Palestinians who remained in the State of Israel. However, in contrast to Habiby, Shammas also looks back in time from 1948 to the days of the 1936 Arab Revolt. Although Shammas's labyrinthine novel has been the subject of extensive study and commentary, Israeli criticism has devoted scant attention to the sections dealing directly with the Arab Revolt and the Nakba. Instead (perhaps not surprisingly), Israeli critics have elaborated on the interaction of the Palestinian Arab narrator with Jewish Israeli characters—namely, on his adversarial relationship with the writer Yehoshua Bar-On and on his failed love affair with a married Jewish woman—and on the novel's intertextual engagement with the Hebrew literary canon.²⁵ Yet both the 1936 rebellion and the 1948 war figure centrally in the book, with several chapters devoted to the Nakba and its aftermath in the villagers' lives; these appear in the sections of the novel designated "The Tale" (as opposed to "The Teller"). The novel revisits the Nakba from the perspective of the extended Shammas family—with many twists and turns involving multiple and partial versions of other characters' stories, linked both back in time to the 1936 revolt and forward in time to the story's present, the 1980s. Although the narrator's village of Fassuta surrenders to the Haganah and is spared, the novel touches on the plight of refugees from surrounding villages; indeed, the narrator becomes preoccupied with the whereabouts and fate of a number of displaced figures from the past.²⁶

If Fassuta stands at the symbolic center of the narrative, at the literal center of Fassuta is an underground cave over which the village is built. This cave represents the Fassutans' foundation and collective memory. On a personal level, it also holds the secret knowledge the narrator Anton seeks. The cave is often mentioned in conjunction with al-Rasid,²⁷ a fabled rooster that plays a mysterious but significant role in the lives of the Fassutans. As the stuff of both village legend and collective memory, the cave and the rooster al-Rasid become a leitmotiv of the book.²⁸ They are so entrenched within the narrative consciousness that they are invoked even as metaphor: "Abu Shacker returned to the village after being held for a week. His lips were

sealed like the mouth of the cave that the *djinnis* had sealed and put under the guard of Ar-Rasad”;²⁹ and “I’m on my way to feel with my own inquisitive hands the stalactites of doubt that I had forbidden myself to touch.”³⁰ In such phrases, the cave is used to describe different states of mind associated with trauma or repression.

In fact, some years before the publication of *Arabesques*, Shammās had invoked both a cave and a rooster in his gripping poem “Dyokan” (Portrait). The poem describes the experience of assimilation into the language of the Other in intensely visceral, corporeal terms as a kind of violent invasion of the body.³¹ Although it never explicitly mentions a cave, the poem invokes the cave’s attributes—the blue light, language “seeping” and words “dripping” like water, even “stalagmites” (*zekifei hoshekh*, literally, “dripstones of darkness”). Through an unusual word (*haludaot* [sores]) and references to water and carob, it also alludes to the talmudic story of Rabbi Shimeon Bar Yohai, who hid with his son Rabbi Eleazar in a cave for 13 years to escape a Roman death decree.³² In the poem, the intimated cave is a hermetic site of isolation and loneliness, of sores and pain; in the novel, by contrast, the cave is unmistakably linked to both collective memory and personal identity.

One of the novel’s pivotal scenes takes place atop the cave, as the narrator Anton relates: “It was my uncle Yusef who first told me about my name, as I stood on the boulder in the center of the *duwara*, the garden behind his house, and watched him prune the grapevine. According to legend, this boulder covers one of the entrances to the enormous cave beneath the center of the village.”³³ There the uncle tells Anton that he is named for a cousin who disappeared in infancy and is presumed either to have died or to have been adopted by a wealthy Lebanese family. Thus Anton is told about his name and its place in the family history—in other words, given the core of his identity—while standing on a boulder above the cave.³⁴

The rooster al-Rasid and the cave are strongly associated with the collective memory and indeed the collective identity of Fassuta during important moments in history. The cave is where the villagers once hid in fear of the sectarian strife that ravaged nearby Lebanon in the nineteenth century. The cave and the rooster return to the fore in the narrative’s portrayal of the 1936 Arab Revolt and the events of 1948. During the 1948 war, the rooster’s disappearance from the collective memory of the villagers is perceived as a bad omen, almost a moral failing:

Two weeks earlier Israeli planes had dropped bombs on Tarsheeha, just to the south of Fassuta. . . . The inhabitants of Fassuta withdrew into

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their houses, or sought shelter in the church or in the caves scattered around the village. They had no fear—or hope—of encountering the legendary Ar-Rasad guarding the entrance to one of the caves, for the figure of Ar-Rasad had vanished from their memory in those days. The only roosters that were seen in the village walked about in a fearful state and would flee for their lives at the sound of the dull explosions that shook the ground under their claws.³⁵

Throughout the sections on the war, the villagers of Fassuta are portrayed as submissive, in contrast to the villagers of the nearby Deir el-Kasi, who both participate in the Arab Revolt and join the Arab Liberation Army; the Fassutans are like the fearful village roosters, as opposed to the fearsome al-Rasid. The cave and the rooster reappear in other sections surrounding the war, especially chapter 6, which details the village's defeat and surrender, and chapter 8, which focuses on the narrator's father.

In a later section about the days of the Arab Revolt, we meet a young teacher from Bethlehem who becomes obsessed with finding the entrance to the cave. A Fassutan named Abu Shakir volunteers to guide him:

He would lead him to presumed entrances to the cave and spend moonlit nights with him awaiting the appearance of Ar-Rasad. . . . But the days went by and Ar-Rasad did not appear and the entrances to the cave did not respond to the magic words that they took from ancient texts and whispered at the sealed rocks. . . . Thus they came to perceive the Arab rebels as the enemy of Ar-Rasad, who was wary of them and did not show the tip of his tail in fear they would attempt to take control of his treasures by force.³⁶

If by 1948 the Fassutan villagers have betrayed their past by forgetting about al-Rasid, here, in 1936, the magic rooster signals the schism between the Fassutans and the Arab rebels (construed by some as a Christian-Muslim tension). Other references to the rooster appear unexpectedly and seemingly arbitrarily.³⁷

At the novel's close, the narrator returns to the formative moment when, standing over the cave, he is given the secret of his identity. He thinks to himself: "So here I am standing at the entrance of the cave. . . . There is someone else, whose name is the same as yours, and half your identity is in his hands, half an amulet, which, if joined with the half the family holds, *will open the door of the cave for you so you can reach the golden treasure.*"³⁸ But slightly later, he confesses that he could not "rescue [Uncle Yusef] from the maze of his stories," that the tale

alone could not “restore the earth pulled from under our feet,” that to open the cave he would need the “complete Word.” Ultimately, he returns to the point whence he started: “So here I am back at the entrance again, a mute turtledove instead of the crowing rooster.”³⁹ This passage brings us back to Shammas’s poem “Portrait,” in which the speaker is trapped in muteness and paralysis, unable either to speak or to move. At this point in the novel, the narrator contrasts his own impotence and helplessness with the masculine potency of the crowing, virile rooster.

In the narrator’s personal cosmology, the cave contains the “arabesque”: the secret of his own identity and the truth behind his family’s story. The cave is sealed shut and is guarded by the mysterious rooster, who in turn awaits the magic word that will prompt him to open it. But the loss of the narrator’s namesake, the first Anton, like the loss of Palestine—“the earth pulled from under our feet”—proves irreversible. The “tale” cannot correct it. The last chapter brings us to a memorial service marking 40 days since the death of Uncle Yusef, Anton’s last remaining link to the past. At the service, Uncle Yusef’s daughter mentions that her son (symbolically also named Yusef) will be building a house on the duwara, requiring demolition of the boulder over the cave. The book ends with the demolition scene, punctuated by a single crimson feather drifting down in circles to the newly exposed earth.⁴⁰ The destruction of the boulder that had sealed the cave and the single crimson feather floating down from above are a coda to the death of Uncle Yusef. Together, they signal a generational shift and the end of the village’s old ways. Al-Rasid is indeed banished to the depths of legend, and who in the next generation will bother to remember him?

Elias Khoury, author of *Gate of the Sun* (1998), is a Lebanese writer with an abiding involvement in the Palestinian cause. The novel’s many narrative threads are based on extensive field research he undertook in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The book recounts the destruction of Galilean villages in 1948, as narrated by a Palestinian nurse tending to an aged, comatose fida’i in a camp hospital in 1990s Beirut; yet it is focused less on the events themselves than on their afterlives in memory. The story, which is over five hundred pages long, is threaded with a near-obsessive, metareflective questioning of history, memory, truth, and writing. All told, the novel suggests that the “real” Palestine is perpetuated through the multiple, fallible, but ultimately irreplaceable stories and memories of those who were present in 1948, imparting an enhanced urgency to their recording.

Although the 2002 Hebrew translation of *Gate of the Sun* was not as widely circulated in Israel as that of *The Pessoptimist*, it was reviewed

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and well received by Israeli critics.⁴¹ Khoury has said that in writing *Gate of the Sun*, he was influenced by S. Yizhar's seminal "Hirbet Hiz'ah," a controversial 1949 Hebrew novella detailing the expulsion of Palestinian villagers by Israeli forces.⁴² Khoury oversaw the first Arabic translation of "Hirbet Hiz'ah" in the late 1970s in Beirut, which he published in the magazine *Shu'un Falastiniyya*, a magazine about Palestinian affairs. He professes that the story was very important to him, and not simply as an admission of guilt by an Israeli author. In his reading, it is "a play of mirrors" in which Yizhar uses the Palestinians as a reflection of the new Israelis—a theme that becomes central to his own novel.⁴³

The eponymous Bab al-Shams or Gate of the Sun refers to a complex of caves dug out of the rock above the Galilean village of Deir al-Asad, where the protagonist, Yunis, a Palestinian fida'i based in Lebanon, hides when he steals across the border to visit his wife Nahila, who has remained in the Galilee. This novel takes the village-cave connection one degree further, as Bab al-Shams is not a cave inside a village, but, at least metaphorically speaking, a village inside a cave. The site of Yunis and Nahila's intimate encounters, it is both the place where their children are conceived and the only place where they can speak freely. Years after their juvenile marriage, Yunis "remarries" Nahila in the cave;⁴⁴ later in life, in one of their final meetings, Nahila tells him that she too fell in love with him "in that place you called Bab al-Shams."⁴⁵ Other scenes of their passion are recalled there by the narrator, Khalil.⁴⁶ Though in this sense it is a place of liberation (personal, political, and sexual), at times the cave is also a kind of prison for Yunis. Although we readers are privy to relatively few scenes within the cave, Khalil refers frequently to Yunis's long history of visits there. At one point Khalil recalls how Yunis had hidden in the cave for five months, subsisting on wild herbs gathered at night and dirty water drunk from an irrigation ditch, then muses: "You became like a vegetable."⁴⁷ He then compares the story of Yunis sleeping in the cave to Yunis's current comatose state.⁴⁸

Another important character in the novel, Umm Hassan, casts doubt upon Yunis's version of the story as related by Khalil, saying that no one dared enter the caves, which were rumored to be haunted.⁴⁹ Her own doubts, in turn, lead Khalil to question the reality of Bab al-Shams. At the same time, however, Khalil's stream of consciousness takes us back into Yunis's perspective, which rejects the terms of refugee life in favor of a self-made "reality" of his own:

Umm Hassan said the Deir al-Assad cave was uninhabitable, so where's the Bab al-Shams you spoke about? Where is that village that stretches through interlinked caves, "a village that's bigger, I swear, than Ain al-Zaitoun," as you used to say? "I proposed, 'Come on, let's look for caves in Galilee and bring back the refugees. A cave is better than a tent, or a house of corrugated iron, or banana leaf walls. But they didn't agree. Members of the Organization said it was a pipe dream. An entire people can't live in caves. . . . I arranged my cave for myself and by myself and lived in it."⁵⁰

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Here Yunis proposes the cave as a "solution" to the refugee problem, both a substitute for the camps and a means of return. Even if on a larger scale this solution is impossible, he insists on realizing it himself. On a symbolic level at least, the cave becomes his own means of return, his own private Palestine.

The identification of Bab al-Shams with Palestine is reiterated throughout the text. In another scene, Khalil remembers Yunis as a young commander training the fidayin in Lebanon:

In the office at the boys' camp, you'd stand spinning and spinning the globe and then would order it to stop. When the little ball stopped turning, you'd extend a finger and say, "That's Acre. Here's Tyre. The plain runs to here, and these are the villages of the Acre District. Here's Ain al-Zaitoun, and Deir al-Assad, and al-Birwa, and there's al-Ghabsiyyeh, and al-Kabri, and here's Tarshiha, and there's Bab al-Shams. We, kids, are from Ain al-Zaitoun. Ain al-Zaitoun is a little place, and the mountain surrounds it and protects it. Ain al-Zaitoun is the most beautiful village, but they destroyed it in '48. They bulldozed it after blowing up the houses, so we left it for Deir al-Assad. But me, I founded a village in a place no one knows, a village in the rocks where the sun enters and sleeps."⁵¹

The theme of recreating historic Palestine by naming its lost villages plays out throughout the novel and echoes the scene from *The Pessimist* in which the refugees beg Sa'id for news of their destroyed villages. But here, Yunis's naming of the villages ends not with death and defeat but with the declaration of a new "village in the rocks." The imaginary village of Bab al-Shams is a metonym for the "real" Palestine, the Palestine that was destroyed by Israel but lives on in the collective Palestinian memory; in this case, the cave actually supplants the village as the locus of Palestinian identity. Khalil articulates this synecdochal relationship: "No one knew your secret or penetrated Bab al-Shams, which you made into a house, a village, a country."⁵² Toward the end of the novel, Nahila briefly awakens from her deathbed to tell her son Salem the secret of the cave, asking him

to close it up: “We cannot let the Israelis in there; it’s the only liberated plot of Palestinian land”; Salem later reports that “they’d gone and closed up the country [*al-balad*].”⁵³ As both “the only liberated plot of Palestinian land” and as “al-balad,” the cave-cum-village of Bab al-Shams exemplifies Bakhtin’s “chronotope”; both Palestinian space and Palestinian time, it exists outside the space taken over by Israel and outside the history taken over by the conflict.⁵⁴ But with the death of the 1948 generation, Bab al-Shams will cease to exist as a symbolic Palestinian village or country. The members of the next generation dismantle al-balad and seal the cave, putting its history behind them.

The cave in *The Pessoptimist*, *Arabesques*, and *Gate of the Sun* functions as an alternative spatiality representing both the Palestine-that-no-longer-is and the Palestine-that-is-not-yet. The transformation of the cave into a national-personal space is catalyzed by the Nakba and the loss of the original homeland. The cave comes to represent a kind of “underground homeland” (in both the literal and figurative senses of “underground”) that, even as it is situated within Israeli territory, remains outside Israeli control. Because the cave collapses time and space, reality and fantasy, it can function at once as territory and as memory, as homeland, hideout, and domicile. In this way it is the spatial expression of refugee subjectivity. Although the space of the cave is connected principally to the idea of the past, in the three novels it also represents an intergenerational tension between the desire to preserve the past and the desire to free oneself from it. Finally, if the cave is a womb, then it is also a space of potential.

Indeed, in each novel, the fate of the cave says something about the future of Palestine. In *The Pessoptimist*, the cave offers both a link to the pre-1948 past and the hope for a better future. That the son dies along with his mother suggests a pessimistic view of a Palestinian future without continuity or succession. In *Arabesques*, the cave holds the secret to the narrator’s identity. The rooster represents the villagers’ collective identity; when they forget him, they lose power over their own fates. But the rooster never appears, and the entrance to the cave is never found. Though the next generation destroys the boulder over the cave, it also builds the foundation for a new home on the ruins—a note of measured optimism. In *Gate of the Sun*, the cave exists as a secret “village” within and through Yunis and Nahila’s imagination and volition. With their death, the symbolic village as well as the “real Palestine” it represents are forsaken. The sons of the next generation seal up the cave—an ambivalent action that lies somewhere between preservation and surrender of the past. In all

three works, then, the cave becomes a place of fantasy, memory, shelter, and loss, one that contains and protects the fragile history and memory of pre-1948 Palestine, much as the novels do themselves. Reading these three novels through the prism of 1948, one might see them as complementary pieces of a collective, multilingual, and transnational Palestinian story that is at once about a lost world and about what it means to recreate a world in words.

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Notes

My thanks to the participants in the conference “History and Responsibility: Hebrew Literature and 1948” for comments on the paper I presented there; to Shira Stav and Chana Morgenstern for comments on an earlier draft; and to Sean McIntyre for editing assistance.

- 1 Emile Habiby, *al-Waqa'i' al-ghariba fi ikhtifa' Sa'id abi al-Nahs al-Mutasha'il: Qissa* (Jerusalem, 1977); Anton Shammas, *'Arabeskot* (Tel Aviv, 1986); Elias Khoury, *Bab al-shams* (Beirut, 1998).
- 2 Anton Shammas, *Arabesques: A Novel*, trans. Vivian Eden (New York, 1989), 220; Heb., *'Arabeskot*, 198.
- 3 See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn., 1979), 93.
- 4 Shammas, *Arabesques*, 72; Heb., *'Arabeskot*, 64. Habiby also mentions *The Thousand and One Nights*; see Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, trans. Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick, 2nd ed. (New York, 2002 [1985]), 98; Arab., *al-Waqa'i' al-ghariba*, 136.
- 5 Eli Ashkenazi, “Discovering Ancient Galilee’s Hidden Shelters,” *Haaretz*, July 30, 2007, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/discovering-ancient-galilee-s-hidden-shelters-1.226489>.
- 6 David Grossman, *Hiyukh ha-gedi* (Tel Aviv, 1983); Eng. trans., *The Smile of the Lamb*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg (New York, 1983).
- 7 Meir Shalev, *Roman Rusi* (Tel Aviv: 1988); Eng. trans., *The Blue Mountain*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York, 1991).
- 8 Avot Yeshurun, *Re'em* (Tel Aviv, 1960). The poem was originally published in *Haaretz* in 1952.
- 9 See Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Palo Alto, 2003), 141–80.
- 10 On *Arabesques*, see Rachel Feldhay Brenner, “In Search of Identity: The Israeli Arab Artist in Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques*,” *PMLA* 108, no. 3 (1993): 431–45; idem, *Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture* (Madison, Wis., 2003); Shai Ginsburg, “The Rock of

- Our Very Existence': Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* and the Rhetoric of Hebrew Literature," *Comparative Literature* 58, no. 3 (2006): 187–204; Hannan Hever, "Hebrew in an Israeli Arab Hand: Six Miniatures on Anton Shammas's *Arabesques*," in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd (New York, 1991), 264–93; Gil Zehava Hochberg, "'The Dispossession of Hebrew': Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* and the Cultural Space of Language," in *Crisis and Memory: The Representation of Space in Modern Levantine Narrative*, ed. Ken Seigneurie (Weisbaden, 2003), 51–66; idem, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton, 2007); Michael Gluzman, "The Politics of Intertextuality in Anton Shammas's *Arabesques*," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3, no. 3 (2004): 319–35; Reuven Snir, "Hebrew as the Language of Grace: Arab-Palestinian Writers in Hebrew," *Prooftexts* 15 (1995): 163–83; and Christian Szyska, "Geographies of the Self: Text and Space in Anton Shammas's *Arabesques*," http://www.ibn-rushd.org/forum/szyska.htm#_ednref1. On Habiby, see Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded*, and Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse* (New York, 2002), 205–32.
- 11 It was originally published serially in *al-Jadid* and was first published in full in Arabic in 1974; the Hebrew translation (by Anton Shammas) was published in 1984.
 - 12 See esp. Muhammad Siddiq, "al-Kitaba bi-'l 'Ibriyya al-fusha: Taqaddum riwayat 'Arabisk wa-hiwar ma' Antun Shammas," *Alif* 20 (2000): 155–67. As Ami Elad-Bouskila points out, most Arabic-language criticism of the novel (Siddiq's being an exception) was based on the French translation; see Ami Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture* (London, 1990), 51. Examples include Yumna al-'Id, *Tiqniyyat al-sard al-riva'i fi daw' al-manhaj al-bunyawi* (Beirut, 1990), and idem, "Arabesques," *al-Karmel* 35 (1990): 83–84.
 - 13 Habiby, *Pessoptimist*, 21–22; Arab., *al-Waqa'i' al-ghariba*, 21–23.
 - 14 Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded*, 128–29, and Lital Levy, "Exchanging Words: Thematizations of Translation in Arabic Writing from Israel," in "The Literary Issue: Comparative (Post) Colonialisms," ed. Wa'il S. Hassan and Rebecca Saunders, special issue, *Comparative Studies of South Africa, Asia, and the Middle East* 23, nos. 1–2 (2003): 106–27.
 - 15 Habiby, *Pessoptimist*, 88; Arab., *al-Waqa'i' al-ghariba*, 123–24.
 - 16 Habiby, *Pessoptimist*, 89; Arab., *al-Waqa'i' al-ghariba*, 124.
 - 17 Habiby, *Pessoptimist*, 98, my emphasis; Arab., *al-Waqa'i' al-ghariba*, 135.
 - 18 Habiby, *Pessoptimist*, 113; Arab., *al-Waqa'i' al-ghariba*, 157.
 - 19 Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded*, 163.
 - 20 Emile Habiby, *Saraya, The Ogre's Daughter: A Palestinian Fairy Tale*, trans. Peter Theroux (Jerusalem, 2006); originally published in Arabic as *Saraya bint al-ghul: Khurrafiyya* (Haifa, 1991).
 - 21 Habiby, *Saraya, The Ogre's Daughter*, 175; Arab., *Saraya bint al-ghul*, 148.
 - 22 Habiby, *Saraya, The Ogre's Daughter*, 176; Arab., *Saraya bint al-ghul*, 149.
 - 23 See also Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded*, 119.

- 24 Habiby, *Pessoptimist*, 108–13; Arab., *al-Waqa'i' al-ghariba*, 148–56.
- 25 See, for example, Brenner, “In Search of Identity”; Yael S. Feldman, “Postcolonial Memory, Postmodern Intertextuality: Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques* Revisited,” *PMLA* 114 (1999): 373–89; Ginsburg, “Rock of Our Very Existence”; Gluzman, “Politics of Intertextuality”; Hever, “Hebrew in an Israeli-Arab Hand”; and Hochberg, “Dispossession of Hebrew.”
- 26 Shammas, *Arabesques*, 118, 154–56; Heb., ‘*Arabeskot*, 107, 138–39.
- 27 It is incorrectly transliterated in the English translation as *ar-Rasad* but is probably *al-Rasid*, “the watchman.”
- 28 See, for instance, Shammas, *Arabesques*, 13–14, 38, 117, 186, 187, 192, 195, 228, 263.
- 29 Shammas, *Arabesques*, 127; Heb., ‘*Arabeskot*, 114.
- 30 Shammas, *Arabesques*, 239; Heb., ‘*Arabeskot*, 214.
- 31 Anton Shammas, *Shirah tse'irah: Antologiyah*, ed. Hannah Ya'oz, Ya'akov Beser, and Itamar Ya'oz-Keset (Tel Aviv, 1980), 258–59, my translation. For the text of the poem in English as well as an extended reading, see Lital Levy, “Self-Portraits of the Other: Toward a Palestinian Poetics of Hebrew Verse,” in *Transforming Loss into Beauty: Essays in Honor of Magda al-Nowaihi*, ed. Marle Hammond and Dana Sajdi (Cairo, 2008), 343–402.
- 32 See *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, parashah gimel. Translation from Jacob Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta, Ga., 1989), 88. Haludaot, from the root *h-l-d* connoting decay or decline, is an Aramaic-Hebrew hybrid, as is common in the language of the Talmud and Midrash. In the context of the Midrash, it connotes sores or lesions. The term occurs only once throughout the entire Jewish corpus, in this particular midrash.
- 33 Shammas, *Arabesques*, 13; Heb., ‘*Arabeskot*, 17.
- 34 Emphasizing the boulder rather than the cave, Shai Ginsburg gives this passage a slightly different reading: “Rather than a foundation stone that affirmed Anton’s identity, the boulder became a point of departure for a tortuous search both for his lost cousin and for his own identity as an Israeli, a Palestinian-Arab, a Christian, and a storyteller (not necessarily in that order);” see Ginsburg, “Rock of Our Very Existence,” 187. Ginsburg’s reading focuses on symbol and irony in the novel in part by following this trope: “the boulder not only marks Anton’s division between the world of experience and the world of fiction and language, but also lies at the foundation of the narrator’s repeated failures to define his identity, his own treasure cave” (192).
- 35 Shammas, *Arabesques*, 116–17; Heb., ‘*Arabeskot*, 105–6.
- 36 Shammas, *Arabesques*, 192; Heb., ‘*Arabeskot*, 174.
- 37 For instance, Anton leafs through a book of poems by a fellow writer in his program at Iowa and offhandedly remarks, “One is called ‘Rooster’: He is the universal male / from blood red comb to bragging tail . . . / He shouts, he rides them, bites their necks: Now meet your dear friend—rooster sex” (Shammas, *Arabesques*, 173; Heb., ‘*Arabeskot*, 157). In the Hebrew, there immediately follows an unexplained and

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- unattributed passage from Willa Cather's *My Antonia*; apparently we are meant to understand that the poem triggers a recollection of this passage in Anton's mind.
- 38 Shammass, *Arabesques*, 227; Heb., 'Arabeskot, 203; emphasis added.
- 39 Shammass, *Arabesques*, 228–29; Heb., 'Arabeskot, 203–4.
- 40 Shammass, *Arabesques*, 263; Heb., 'Arabeskot, 238.
- 41 Shammass edited the novel's Hebrew translation and also translated a dramatic adaptation of *Gate of the Sun* that was performed in Israel in 2000. See Elias Khoury, *Bab al-shams*, trans. Moshe Hakham (Tel Aviv, 2002).
- 42 S. Yizhar, *Sipur Hirbet Hiz'ah* (Tel Aviv, 2006). The book's title is the name of the Arab village; the transliteration of the Hebrew does not reflect Arabic pronunciation. Transliterated directly from the Arabic, it would read Khirbet Khiz'e.
- 43 Rachel Donadio, "Cultural Crossroads of the Levant," *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, June 29, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/29/books/review/Donadio-t.html?_r=1&8bu&emc=bub1&oref=slogin. See also Elias Khoury, "The Mirror: Imagining Justice in Palestine," *Boston Review*, July-Aug. 2008, pp. 35–37, where he discusses "mirroring" in relation to both Yizhar and Shammass: "Anton Shammass formulated the central problem in his novel *Arabesques*, where he describes an Israeli writer aiming to create a fictional portrait of 'the typical Arab.' . . . By imagining the other as a projection of the self, the representation of others transcends mere recognition and anchors itself in a kind of mirroring" (36).
- 44 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, trans. Humphrey Davies (New York, 2006), 85; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 87.
- 45 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 400; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 396.
- 46 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 387–88; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 383–84; see also Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 408; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 403.
- 47 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 131; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 130–31.
- 48 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 135–36; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 135–36.
- 49 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 379; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 375.
- 50 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 383–84; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 379.
- 51 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 19; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 24. See also "village of caves"; Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 30 (Arab., *magharatak-qaryatak*; Khoury, *Bab al-shams*, 35).
- 52 "La ahad araf sirrak, aw dakhil bab al-shams allati sana'taha baytan wa-qaryatan wa-baladan"; Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 380; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 375.
- 53 Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, 514–15; Arab., *Bab al-shams*, 509–10.
- 54 Bakhtin defines the chronotope as "the intrinsic interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature"; Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tex., 1981), 84. The cave, in this sense, compresses the temporal experience of Palestine and spatializes it.

Correction

[149]

The print version of Lital Levy, “Nation, Village, Cave: A Spatial Reading of 1948 in Three Novels of Anton Shammas, Emile Habiby, and Elias Khoury,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 18, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2012): 10–26, erroneously appeared without endnote references 1 and 3–9 on pages 10–12 of the text. The corrected paragraphs are printed below. We sincerely regret the error.

Though written decades apart and in two different languages (namely, Arabic and Hebrew), Emile Habiby’s *The Strange Facts in the Disappearance of Sa’id the Unlucky Pessoptimist* (1974), Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques* (1986) and his Hebrew translations of Habiby’s work, and Elias Khoury’s *Gate of the Sun* (1998)¹ are interrelated participants in the broader literary dialogue on post-1948 Palestinian identity. The three novels are thematically connected, depicting the massive rupture of the Nakba and the residual threads of continuity with the Palestinian past that their characters maintain under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Moreover, these three novels engage themes of collective memory and storytelling through narratives that self-consciously destabilize the relationship between narration and truth and between history and memory. Finally, all three are transnational novels in the sense that they transgress borders between Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. They do so both within their narratives and in their extranarrative lives as social texts: through the personal relationships of their respective authors and through their histories of translation.

...

In the three novels, as we zoom inward from the wider geography of Palestinian experience spanning the Galilee and Lebanon into the interior space of the village, we find that each narrative focuses on an even more intimate, internal spatiality: that of the cave. Indeed, the eponymous *Bab al-Shams* (Gate of the Sun) is the name given by the novel’s hero to the cave he imagines is his true “home.” Alternately a site of hidden “treasure,” a locus of collective memory, and a refuge from the harsh realities of post-1948 Palestinian existence, the cave in these novels is transformed into an alternative Palestinian space. As a symbol, it may represent the lost Palestine, the promise of a better future, or true knowledge of the self. Following feminist critic Luce Irigaray’s reading of Plato’s cave as an allegory for the womb, we

can also consider how the three authors mobilize the cave to portray the Palestinian experience as a multigenerational story, one with Oedipal dimensions.³

Caves have a rich history in literature and philosophy and in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystical traditions, offering numerous intertextual possibilities. For example, “The Cave” is the title of *Surat al-kahf*, chapter 18 of the Koran, which contains the parable of *Ashab al-kahf*, the Companions of the Cave. Other famous examples include the caves in Plato’s *Symposium* and in Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. In *Arabesques*, Shammas invokes the famous caves of *The Thousand and One Nights* through references to hidden treasure and to the magic word that opens the cave.⁴ The geography of historical Palestine is dotted with caves, many of them man-made shelters that date back to antiquity.⁵ In contemporary Hebrew literature, caves appear in David Grossman’s *Hiyukh ha-gedi* (The Smile of the Lamb, 1982)⁶ and Meir Shalev’s *Roman Rusi* (Russian Romance, 1988; published in English as *The Blue Mountain*),⁷ and in Avot Yeshurun’s 1952 poem “Pesah ‘al kukhim” (Passover on Caves).⁸ Whereas Grossman’s novel depicts, in orientalist fashion, a half-blind, demented Arab hunchback living in a cave in the West Bank, Yeshurun’s iconoclastic poem ties the cave to the suppressed Palestinian presence within Israel.⁹ Despite their different political valences, however, both works present the figure of the Palestinian Arab as a “native” of the Palestinian landscape, represented metonymically by the cave. Each in its own way thus essentializes the figure of the Palestinian as Other in part by associating him with the otherworldliness of the cave. In contrast, the three novels use the cave not as a marker of Palestinian autochthony, which they hardly need to prove, but as a multidimensional spatiality that is at once psychological, political, and historical in nature.