

Anglo-Arab Literatures



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Coherence in a Context of Fragmentation: The Missing Letters in Adania Shibli's *Kulluna ba'id bi-dhat al-miqdar 'an al-hubb* and *We are All Equally Far from Love*



As Adania Shibli's second Arabic novel is rendered into English, edits and the removal of six love letters at the author's request see the work become as much of a translation as an "amplification." The work's project of re-imagining the nature of fragments is continued in English, harnessing the politics of moving between languages to deepen critique and ultimately using uneven cultural terrain to re-claim national space.

Fragments, the distance between them, and the question of what makes these parts cohere; this is what is at stake not only between the solitary vignettes that make up Adania Shibli's (b. 1974, Palestine) second novel, but between the text and its translation. In *Kulluna ba'id bi-dhat al-miqdar 'an al-hubb* (2004) [literally: We are all distant by the same measure from love] fragments are revealed as a problem of conceptual frame, and are shown only to remain fragments so long as the tools to see them as part of something cohesive are absent. To begin with, the eight failures of love traced in the novel stem from the disconnect between traditional concepts of love and the contemporary realities of the protagonists. Both individuals and value systems are fragmented. It is as though two value systems (or, perhaps, systems of logic) were at work, operating on different planes: love is one geography and reality another, putting the characters at a "distance" from even the idea of connection. This, of course, is the same problem set out in the translation, *We are All Equally Far from Love* (Trans. Paul Starkey, 2012). However, changes made to *We are All* link it inextricably with *Kulluna* as an amplification of the theme of the fragment, demanding an expanded toolkit to read both texts as part of a single project. Indeed, Shibli saw *We are All* as a continuation of her original project, as a chance to sharpen and hone ideas put forward. As Shibli read and edited Starkey's English translation, she said, the meaning of the text "got cleaner in both mind and language."

Fragments take on multiple and always problematic meanings within and across the two texts. The first of these problems is love, with each of the characters in the novel "equally far" from connection to others. Separation is reinforced by the very structure of the work, which breaks up its narrative into discrete sections, so each character is confined to a chapter. In separate vignettes, eight miserable stories of lonely protagonists are told. Each fails in unique ways to find love, from mothers, lovers, brothers or strangers. All end up lonely and alone in their separate chapters, with little hope for resolution. Shadowing these visible concerns are the depiction of disconnected social systems and disjointed Palestinian geopolitics, all undergirded by structures of Israeli settler colonialism and the legacy of British imperialism in the region. When reading *We are All* as an extension of this problem of the fragment, it is the conventions of translation that come into play, as well as the politics these conventions are embedded in. The decision to remove sections, to perpetuate isolation, becomes a reflection of the uneven structures that the text traverses. This "distance" was amplified as the text moved from Arabic into English. At the request of the work's author, six love letters were removed, left un-translated. They are made absent from *We are All* in what Gérard Genette would

call a process of “self-excision” (*Palimpsests*, 229), that “resumes and corrects [...] earlier works.” The result of the conversation between the texts is an “amplification” (233) of the original, which becomes a “hypotext” twice (262), once as a translation and once as the source for amplification. The missing letters – stolen from the post office by one of the protagonists and never delivered to their intended – are preserved undelivered in the pages of *Kulluna*. The translation even draws attention to the absence of the letters in the work’s paratexts. A note from Starkey alerts readers to the difference (distance) between the text/translation, over and above the changes translation entails. The problem of distance and isolation set up in the Arabic work is compounded.

To read the novel, the reader is asked to forge the necessary tools to understand the parts as whole: to re-think assumptions about distance and collective, geography and imagination. The very act of reading connects the miserable stories of the protagonists and constructs a frame of connection, making it possible to understand the works as part of a single novel (or a single project). More than this, in becoming familiar with the characters a reader can find traces of one in the story of another, and is able to again see connections where the characters cannot. Just as the solution to the isolation of protagonists in *Kulluna* was to read the vignettes not as fragments but as integral components of a larger story, so too the solution to the compounded isolation of the translation is to read it as part of a wider project that began with the Arabic work. The two works can be read as a collective piece of Anglo-Arab writing. As a term that denotes the development of meaning across and between English and Arabic contexts, read collectively, *Kulluna* and *We are All* offer insight into the intersections of translation, fluency, and intertextuality. A reading of the works within this hyphenated context gains access to the development – specifically the amplification – of meaning across contexts. To read the fragments as a single text means not only to take into consideration the different linguistic milieus, but also the historic imbalance of power that presides over their interchange. This interpretation “reads-in” the structures that created the question of fragmentation at the same time as it seeks its own radical answer.

Vocabulary of Distances

Written in Shibli’s rented flat in Jerusalem’s Old City, *Kulluna* tells of excruciating isolation, and maps a period of Palestinian social fragmentation onto the world of the heart. Eight uneven parts constitute the short 170-page novel: a brief “beginning” (*bidaya*), six chapters labelled sequentially as “measures” (*muqdar*), and a “conclusion” (*khatima*). These uneven sections – ranging from 12 to 46 pages and including diverse sources from letters to diary entries – draw out in agonizing detail the distance between their protagonists and love in what become painfully physical terms. For example, a store clerk measures his loneliness in footsteps as they thud past his last hope for a date sitting on a park bench. For a jilted man, it is the number of rings of the telephone that echo unanswered in the house of his once lover. For an invisible housewife, distance from love is calculated in the sparks of electricity she imagines between her body and the hands of her uninterested physiotherapist. Then there is the workingwoman of “the beginning” who measures her loneliness by the number of letters she sends to her beloved that go unanswered. From different angles and perspectives, the same question of love and distance is explored in each of the vignettes. Read as standalone segments, each protagonist can only be lonely, isolated, a fragment.

At the close of each “measure” there is nothing but despair. There is the sense, as the protagonist in “the beginning” puts it, that “Everything was advancing – without anything to stop it – toward death”¹ (16), the ultimate absence of connection. In the vignettes, the dysfunction of love and the isolation of individuals become palpable. A woman “twelve meters away,” who would, after a few steps, “disappear from his life shortly,” or an adult daughter who listens “From behind my closed bedroom door” to her father whisper sweet nothings to his lover over the phone. A woman, who realizes lying down “on the seat under the bright light of the hallway between the rooms” (96) that, “it was as though she did not know how to love” (94). The realization brings no catharsis, however, an in her new awareness “the silence intensified” (96). In *Kulluna*, doorways, meters of pavement, silence, and the distance between individuals give the absence of love a map-able quality. Love, like geography, is revealed as fragmented. The characters cannot see how close they are to each other, so they can only focus on the distances. As one protagonist paradoxically mentions, “it was impossible that anything could happen between the two. Though the distance between them was small” (65). For the characters, distance is not simply physical distance.

Kulluna responds directly to the political period in which it was produced. Between 2002-3 Shibli worked as a fixer for a news crew in Jerusalem. It was, as she explained, “the period of the biggest wave of reinvasions of Palestinian cities since the Oslo Agreements” (2016). Invasions meant curfews, checkpoints, and closures; this reinforced and made semi-permanent the system of checkpoints that had been put in place, executing a policy of “divide and conquer” (Dor 6) over the Palestinian people. It was also the era when Israel began constructing the separation wall. Whereas in the late 1990s there was only a handful of restricted access points within the West Bank, or between the West Bank and Gaza, or both and Jerusalem. By 2003 there were 392 obstacles preventing Palestinians from accessing other locations of Palestine. These went down to 376 by 2005, and then rose sharply to 528 the following year (OCHA 2003, 2005). A UN communication described the effects of the combined walls, checkpoints, and bureaucratic measures that reinforced them, as not only severely restricting “the daily life of Palestinian civilians” but as a total system of occupation that “would render the creation of an independent, unified Palestinian State impossible” (June 2008). Written on top of this geopolitical landscape, *Kulluna* set out to map the effects of such ghettoization in human terms. As Shibli put it, the novel was a “question of how this larger lack of love [lack of connection, of society] can materialize on a very personal level” (2016).

To properly “map” the fragmentation of national space onto a larger question of love, *Kulluna* layers community/territory as a second binary onto what is early on established as a stark division between “gendered self”²/“possibility of love.” Both become separate-but-parallel geographies, revealing the impossibility of coherence between the now-opposed elements. The problem with the binary in *Kulluna* is thus one of incoherence. To create community and to exist within a national territory are not one in

1. All translations from the Arabic are my own. Page numbers, unless specified, refer to the Arabic work published by Dar al-Adab in 2004. Translations tend to the literal, offering for those who wish to compare with the translation, an additional sense of the “difference” or “distance” between the texts.

2. In this work, and the others referenced here, gender is also constructed along binary male/female lines. This binary is questioned but not reconstructed.

the same thing, just as performing the gendered self is not to create the possibility of love. Amy Zalman noted a similar issue in the now canonical *Men in the Sun* by Ghassan Kanafani (b. 1936 Akka, d. 1972 Beirut). The story of four men who leave Palestine and its camps to work in the Gulf writes the agony of when being a “man” and being a “Palestinian” are somehow *not* the same thing. As Zalman explains it, *Men in the Sun* shows what happens with “the failure of masculine and national identity to cohere” (57). For Kanafani’s refugees who sought to be men, to support their families, and support the nation ten years after the Nakba, the chain of logic that once guided them toward manhood/nationhood no longer held. For the men, “the signs of masculinity and the signs of nationalism do not all point in the same direction” (57). Where once taking care of a family meant tending the earth and providing for a community, in 1958 it meant being smuggled to the Gulf and leaving both family and homeland behind. Zalman read Kanafani’s work as a warning that “gender identity must be constructed in relation to [the changed] national identity” (53). She saw the death of the men as a sign that without this coherence of the gendered and national selves, the narrative of Palestine “implode[d] at the crossroads” (57).

In *Kulluna*, instead of a set of factors “imploding,” there is simply no possibility for a collective, as if each of the parts was at an impossible distance from the others; a distance too wide to form a whole. Gender, love, territory, and the collective are all at “a distance less than half a meter, only the door separating one from the other” (106), but a door that remains unopened. So where Palestinians – in the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip, in what became Israel in 1948, in the refugee camps across the Arab world, and in the diaspora – were all in “Palestine,” there is no operating logic that can bring them together and open the doors that separate them in either conceptual or physical terms. For *Kulluna*, the signs indicating gender and those indicating nation are no longer arrows pointing in opposite directions on the same road sign – they are the markers of what appear to the protagonists to be multiple discrete worlds. To live the gendered self and to live the nation are constructed as fragmented actions. To love meant to be excluded from the propriety of national norms, and to perform the national role meant loneliness and isolation. Neither gendered self nor national actor is able to form a collective (a connection): the protagonists experience an utter failure of coherence.

Take, for example, the protagonist in “The third measure,” met by the reader on his way to work as a grocery store clerk. The “measure” begins by announcing, “suddenly, now, at half past eight in the morning on his way to work, his eyes filled with tears. He could no longer bear it” (23). The young man is heavy with the persistent knowledge that his meagre income will not afford him a wife or a family. With no hope for a marriage and no vision for an alternative to love he is painfully lonely. The nameless protagonist spots a woman dressed in black sitting alone on a bench and is drawn toward her because she resembles a woman from his last night’s dream. The vignette opens as he sees her, his measured steps punctuated by thoughts of inadequacy. As he approaches, he laments that he “had not managed to meet the requirements for the third year at university” (73). A step later, he admits that this means “he wasn’t in such great condition” (66) for marriage, or as Starkey puts it, “he wasn’t much of a catch” (40). By the time he reaches the woman, the protagonist has described a social structure wherein he

would never be able to fulfil the role of father or husband, leaving him alone and isolated from a family disappointed in him even before he crosses her path.

What is left is to enumerate all of his past sexual encounters. Instead of providing a refuge from loneliness, however, these memories only add up the protagonist's failures. Conjured into the vignette is a woman who, ostensibly looking for shampoo in the grocery store, solicits the protagonist. When he clumsily fails to bring her to sexual climax she interrupts the encounter and the two never see each other again. He does not have the language of sex (here as one of the languages of love) through which to communicate with a lover's body. Instead, he has the language of nation in which he tries to become the provider for a family. It is the same problem that Joseph Massad explained, "nationalist agency is constituted through gender-specific performances whose meanings are always already paired up with nationalism" (*Persistence* 49). For the protagonist it is being that ideal Palestinian that former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat described to the UN in 1974, a man who protects his family by earning for it: "the brother [who] paid for the education of his brother and sister, and took care of his parents and raised his children, but continued to dream in his heart of returning to Palestine" (qtd. in Massad, "Conceiving of the Masculine" 478). The protagonist cannot be the quintessential fighter; he cannot even be a wage earner. Being unable to perform his scripted role the young man of "The third measure" is just as cut off from an imagined national body as he is from the woman on the bench. Though treading the earth of some bit of Palestine, the fragmented structures through which that geography is read mean that nation, community, self, and love can only remain fragmented.

The impossibility of connection here realizes Massad's warning about the problems of a mutually constituting role between Palestinian masculinity and nationality: "A nationalist performance would seem to be then imbricated with masculine performances which guarantee its definitional coherence and without which it would become impossible" (*Persistence* 49). Impossible: just as the love that the protagonist in "The third measure" first felt for a young friend of the family. They had explored each other's bodies in an empty building and "he kissed her" (71). But when it came to the end of the day, they each retreat to the world of the nationally appropriate. Standing next to their families, their hands lay submissively in the hands of their parents, "and the love disappeared from their eyes" (71). In the public realm the exchange between the two is silenced. Recounting these experiences on his way to the grocery store, the protagonist is in fact measuring the gaps between his self and the masculinity formed by cultural-national terms that wants him to be a "male lover, a groom, and a defender" (Amireh 750). These norms imprison, so even though he is surrounded by women, in anguish he breathes to himself, "my god how he missed the touch of a person, and the quiet feeling of a human body in his life" (69). Not only is this isolation personal, it is also national, and in *Kulluma* the map of one hovers directly overtop of the other.

This is all brought into acute relief as the protagonist, crossing the final stretch to the shop, nears the woman in black by only a few paces. Each footstep is counted with an idea of how to approach her, as one foot hits the ground he has decided it is impossible, and as the other touches the stones another idea emerges. The actual space of the city square and the social prisons his mind stumbles against are being put in tension, with the constant question of what one element means to the other. With the vignette's tension at an electric pitch, the young man walks right past the woman in black. As he

does so, the reader can almost feel the distance. No longer decreasing, the gulf widens. The man laments:

“What’s the time?”

If only he was able to say this to her! But he could only mutter the phrase to himself, in a voice choking him with the weight of his back that watched her disappearance, that woman in black that he left sitting on the wooden bench behind him. (78)

The un-measurable gap between the protagonist and the woman is thus tallied. Not only in steps, but by demarcating the boundaries of a national and sexual self that cannot possibly cohere. Though he, a lonely Palestinian, exists within the same city square as the woman (another lonely Palestinian, we learn elsewhere), the protagonist has no language with which to speak of love to the woman he is next to. They are – like the gendered self and possibility of love – separate, fragmented.

Reading the stories of these protagonists together, however, fragmentation is seen differently. As parts of a novel, the vignettes form a collective. Even more than this, it is only with access to each of the parts that the other protagonists can in fact be detected within the structural confines of the other chapters. The woman in love with her physiotherapist dressed in black the day she professed her love. Dejected, she goes to sit on a bench in a public square to collect herself before returning home. Might this not be the woman that the store clerk desperately wishes to speak with on his way to work? The jilted lover of “The fourth measure” could easily be the ex of the woman who lets the phone ring endlessly in her apartment in “The fifth measure.” The protagonist of “the conclusion,” who confesses to writing each of the “measures,” may also be the author of “the beginning,” giving a unity to the vignettes as an expression of the despair of a single mind.

Of these faint linkages, the most obvious in *Kulluna* are six love letters. Written by the protagonist of “the beginning” the woman agonizes in her chapter over what to say to her beloved. The six letters next appear in the post office where Afaf, the protagonist of “the first measure,” is forced to work. For Afaf, the letters represent the only window to love in a miserable existence. Kept in a small tin box, the letters were physical proof of connection; they left the hands of one protagonist, landed squarely in the life of another, and were preserved within the pages of the book as irrefutable evidence that such links existed. As the first – indeed the only absolute – connection between the vignettes, it was the letters that prompted readers to wonder if – despite separation – there was some real inevitability of connection between sections (and therefore between the characters, and thus hope for love and nation).

The Missing Letters

In “The first measure” Afaf is sent to work in the post office the day after she quits school. Raised by a stepmother after her own biological mum walks out, the scandal of the separation and infidelity “compounded and became her [Afaf’s] whole life, turning into a scandal without end, a pile of repugnance that never stopped growing” (31). Afaf feels unwanted within the new family unit, and is constantly reminded that she is failing to live up to the standards of “daughter” for the new couple. She is miserable. Whether it is out of spite, or out of a pained longing for even a whiff of affection, when she is at work Afaf steals a series of love letters from the post. In *Kulluna* the six letters

are preserved in the confines of Afaf's "The first measure," re-printed in full for the reader. There are only six, we learn in "The beginning," because the woman who wrote them gave up on her love for the recipient. Once stymied, the love letters cease. When the love is gone, Afaf also loses interest. She forgets the letters, "gathered in the same box with [her mother's] hairpins, no longer bringing profit or love to anyone" (33). The stories of the women are thus tangibly connected.

The letters are full of reflections on love. They begin when the protagonist realizes her feelings for an acquaintance who has asked her to leave him alone. Once it dawns on her how much the act of loving brings love into her life, the protagonist cannot stop writing. She confesses in the letters: "This love has returned me to a strange relationship with myself [...] I no longer know how I would exist without you. I have forgotten" (41). The love, even though it is not reciprocated from the space of her beloved, buoys her up. She exclaims: "Oh how your existence is a thing of beauty, as I labour to carry my own being" (41). We see from the letters themselves that even unrequited love connects a person to their own self, forging a connection across the "distance" between the gendered and the national self. They are evidence of love and proof that love – when realized – can connect and make whole what were otherwise fragments. Enacting love connects the individual to the self in a way that surpasses the geography of gender norms (in the letters no one scolds the writer for her behaviour, she does not hold back for reasons of appropriateness), and reaches across the geography of fragmentation. The act of love, of imagining connection, poses the beginning of an answer. It also spurs love in other fragments.

The letters may not reach their intended but their professions of love do have an impact – at least for a while. As Afaf reflects: "These letters were not just love letters, they also opened a small door in my soul" (33). In them, Afaf sees love for the first time, and describes how love felt "like opening the tap over your head during a shower, and suddenly finding water under your feet, that got there without you feeling it or knowing when it happened. That secret moment, that is love" (35-6). An upside down moment of total consummation. This is the ultimate connection, and it is in this turning upside down that the binaries cease to be binaries and the ideas of community/territory and gendered self/love can finally exist in the same spaces. In *Kulluna*, the letters *show* how love can reverse the expected order of events. Made absent in *We are All*, the actual love (though not its effects) no longer exists within the narrative.

In a book about separation and the pain of distance, a removal of the letters exacerbates isolation. This was precisely the author's intent, explaining the decision to remove the letters Shibli said "it was more important to have these letters – which are stolen – to be an *idea* of stolen letters; letters that you can never read [...] because they did not reach their first destination they should not reach the reader" (2016). What it meant, however, was that the distances painfully communicated in the Arabic were amplified in translation, where the hints at connection are reduced to bare whispers. Furthering isolation, readers are told through paratexts that the letters are missing; love is made somehow less possible in English than in Arabic.³ Starkey's translator's note advises: "Readers with access to the Arabic original will note that the six letters referred to on p. 25 of the English translation have been omitted from the English version at the

3. The French translation has also had the letters removed.

request of the author” (147). These and other changes, he comments, mean the work “is no longer a strict translation of the original” (147). So where the Arabic uses the letters to *show* what is missing, the English deletes the letters entirely but its paratexts ensure the double absence leaves a trace. The missing letters thus come to reveal another problem pertaining to fragments.

That the letters in fact exist, just in a language largely inaccessible to the translation’s reading public, reveals the gap between languages. Within the rubric of *Kulluna/We are All* this gap becomes a “distance” between fragments. The letters did not cross from one language to the next for the same reasons they could not pass from their writer to her beloved: because of the context of fragmentation. This extends the project’s question about the nature of “distance” and how it might be overcome. The answer once again looks to a connection between texts; this time across languages and the political contexts that divide them. This further distance creates what Edward Said describes as the “severe and unresolved tension between two worlds which [are] not only completely different, but also in conflict” – namely, the world of English and the world of Arabic (*Reflections on Exile* 8). Since both *Kulluna* and *We are All* engage in the same call for reading against fragmentation, the question of language must also be addressed. As Susan Bassnett observed, understanding a translation is as much about the structures of a dominant language or culture and its impact on the source text, as it is a question of word choice (*Constructing Cultures* 152). For *Kulluna/We are All*, this question of dominance is critical. In reading the works as a single project, the fact of cultural imperialism and the fact of colonialism must also be “read in.” In a different way here, the “distance” between the Arabic and English texts is also territorial.

In his *Culture and Imperialism* Said stressed the necessity that post-colonial works reimagine colonial territory. For Said, at the very core of imperialism was a dominant imagination that controlled and defined an indigenous location. This re-imagining was, for him, the essence of the postcolonial drive and the only way out of imperial dominance. It was also what he called “the partial tragedy of resistance [...] that it must to a certain degree recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire” (253). Since this act of reclamation is always a re-narration, Said, quoting T.S. Eliot, lamented that the postcolonial text and the colonial one were in many ways forced to write within the “same embroiled medium” (194). In *writing back* to empire Said observed the production “of what [he has] called overlapping territories” (253). This is at once imaginative and physical. Both the colonizer and the indigenous imaginations are of the same physical space, so that the actual territory becomes re-invested with indigenous imaginings. In both cases, meaning is constructed within and against colonial frames; thus, the battle over space takes place within the “same embroiled medium” (194). In the Palestinian case, however, the post-British period did not mean the end of colonialism and the start of re-inscribing meaning onto post-colonial space. Instead it marked the transition from one colonial regime to another, so that Palestinian writers would not so much have to re-inscribe space with culture, but would have to – by the time Shibli started writing – re-imagine national space within the context of severe fragmentation. What the amplification of the project set out by *Kulluna* through *We are All* achieves, in some measure, is a way to see coherence between and within what colonial forces have created – and narrated – as fragmented space.

To read the novels as a single project, what is “measured” are three sorts of distances. First, as the underlying principal of the text, the physical distance between ghettoized Palestinian towns and villages at the height of Israel’s re-occupation of the West Bank and enclosure of Gaza. On top of this is mapped the emotional distances that are compounded by policies of separation. The loneliness of each of the novel’s eight protagonists – isolated in separate chapters, unable to speak to each other – at the same time echoes the less measurable question of national culture. Within a state of fragmentation and a physical territory that only reinforces cultural separation, it becomes difficult to maintain what Said calls a resistance culture, characterized by an “insistence on the right to see the community’s history whole, coherently, integrally [...] [and to] restore the imprisoned nation to itself” (*Culture and Imperialism* 259). *Kulluna* is thus a painful call to re-think how Palestinian writing can go about re-inscribing “the meaning of space within culture,” (253) given the realities of territorial and indeed social fragmentation. The writing does this by re-investing the concept of territory with cultural meaning and making it possible to see a connected whole across what individuals can only perceive as isolation.

To amplify the story of fragments and distances through the work’s translation and transformation into English is to show that these distances are magnified when they cross into imperial cultural terrain. Distances are made wider, silences are reinforced, and the call to the reader to carry out the work of integrating the fragments is made all that much stronger. In English, there is something missing, there is a love that exists but is denied to the reader if they do not have access to the Arabic. This “distance” – which constructs Anglo-Arab as a binary (Anglo/Arab) – again parallels the one set up between the store clerk and the woman in black; barriers of language and power structures prevent the English reader from finding love just as occupation’s fragmentation of Palestine prevents the clerk. To collapse fragmentation in *Kulluna* a reader must reach across chapters and find the collective story. With *We are All*, a reader is forced to look to the Arabic for answers. This inverts the binary, collapsing the “distance” between fragments and creating a space of resistance at the intersection of English and Arabic works. Here, the reader must find a way to navigate between cultural terrains in order to combat the fragmenting force of imperialism both past and present.

Re-imagined Territory

The project developed in *Kulluna/We are All* introduces a more nuanced, current, and complicated notion of territory and domination than that which Said put forward. Indeed, in his theory of writing back Said (perhaps ironically) presupposed the existence of a territory that could be reclaimed. *Kulluna/We are All* – because of the realities of Palestine – addresses the difficulty of reimagining national space under a not-yet-post-colonial system. What is at stake is an imagined national geography that creates a place of coherence between the self and community that overcomes geographic fragmentation. It works backward toward Said’s idea of reclaiming. For Palestine, it is not once sovereignty is gained over territory that cultural terrain can be imagined; instead, it is only when cultural coherence is achieved that the terrain can be re-mapped. “Like opening the tap over your head during a shower, and suddenly finding water under your feet,” national meaning must be re-imagined so it can again be constituted through action on the ground it is enacted upon. Only in this way can the space of the nation be

re-mapped from within a newly created cultural geography. The glaring question in this equation, however, is: what is the place of the actual territory of Palestine within this imagining? How do we use analysis that comes through translation to interpret a local cultural territory?

Here, the reflections of academic, translator, and activist Samah Selim seem to provide key insight. In her writing on the act of translating “in a state of emergency” as the protests in Cairo were underway in 2011, 2012 and 2014, she observes: “The Arab revolutions crystalized this question in my mind – the question of place – when I found myself on the streets of Cairo, like thousands of others, facing gas and bullets in the name of a set of abstract ideas” (*Translating Dissent* 78). Quite literally “in place” in Cairo, and running home to translate video of protests and their violent repression, Selim was confronted with the question, “but were these ideas [of place] really so abstract?” (78). Her translation of nearly-live video with the Mosrieen Collective continued inside of Egypt and out, and as she continued the work she came to understand “in place” as more than just dodging bullets at the center of the action. As she explained, a sense of place was “being fought over here, together, in this place, on this street, where the ghosts of so many had also lived and loved and fought” (78). Place became meaningful because, in Egypt, it became a physical location where abstract notions of space and nation were being played out.

Building on this idea, actual place becomes critical when it is *created* as a location to physically determine the abstract notions of space, culture, and nation that Said writes about, and which are critical for Palestine. For *Kulluna/We are All*, space is part of what makes up the vocabulary of distance. It is transformed from the abstract notion of ghettoization or “bantustanization” (Makdisi 126) that leads to geographic separation into the emotional fragmentation of a man walking past a woman, or a girl stealing love letters out of the post. To find a way for the self to cohere with community – to find an imaginative space where ideas of place can be fought over would be to close the “distance” between characters. This would be the beginning of a coherence between the nation as a people, which could then – as a collective – re-imagine in Said’s terms the relationship between the collective and the land. To imagine “distance” transformed from miles into heartbeats, and to recognize the impossible-inevitability of connection between peoples is to find a space within which the nation can gather. It is the space of the collective – joined through a re-imagined coherence between self and community – that creates the space of resistance.

In reading *Kulluna/We are All* as part of the same project where the lessons of one are amplified through the other, what emerges is an alternative way of thinking the territory. The unification of fragments within and between texts creates a place within which resistance can be enacted, and through which contemporary colonialism may be countered. It is the space created by the reading of fragments and the act of unification this entails. In this double project this space is amplified by the work’s particular transition from Arabic into English. This again echoes Selim, who sees in the act of translating “a remarkable, almost seamless continuity between the presence of witnessing” (82-3). To tie the translation to the Arabic text not only as a hypotext of translation but also one of amplification (in Genette’s terms) means that a space of Anglo-Arab writing is able to extend and reinvigorate anti-colonial resistance in a world that is not-yet-post-colonial. This space is also able to identify new ways of creating collectives

despite the fragmenting effects of imperial and colonial powers. To engage in the battle over imagining the future of a physical place, the realities of today necessitate a new understanding of the cultural territory within which that imagining takes place. Here, it is an imagining that begins in Arabic but takes on doubled counterhegemonic potential as it is re-envisioned in English. It demands that Anglo-Arab writing become a space of resistance, and engage in the production of a cultural territory that might eventually carry out the liberatory work of a thus-far stymied postcolonial moment.

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