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# Country of Words: Palestinian Literature in the Digital Age of the Refugee

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## Abstract

The article reflects on how to embrace the unconventional, fragmented, scattered, transnational, exilic, and refugee elements of Palestinian Literature. Placing the refugees at the heart of the story of Palestinian literature raises serious questions about the compatibility of the national framework as the primary mode of analysis. The article explores the anatomy of Palestinian literature, including the wide array of sources, literary detective work, and expanded methodological toolbox needed to gather its fragments, and illustrates the potential of the digital sphere—drawing on the world of Digital Humanities—to house, express and visualize the data-fragments of Palestinian literature.

## Keywords

Palestinian literature – modern Arabic literature – Digital Humanities – literary history – Edward Said – Maḥmūd Darwish – Ghassān Kanafānī – Imīl Ḥabībī – Fayṣal Darrāj – Salmā Khadrāʾ Jayyūsī – databases – Optical Character Recognition (OCR)

## Introduction

The story of Palestinian literature resembles the story of its people. It is a story of an entire nation-in-exile: refugees, forced displacement, uprooting, fragmentation, statelessness, loss, trauma, tragedy, ruins, and silence. The figure of the refugee has become the most defining feature of this age, posing significant challenges to the logic of the nation-state as the default framework for

thinking about the world. The Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said in *Reflections on Exile* (2001)<sup>1</sup> called our contemporary era the “age of the refugee” in reference to the extraordinary and unprecedented number of the global population now living as displaced and stateless people. The shifting makeup of the contemporary global population, and the reality that the Palestinian refugee issue, according to Peter Gatrell in *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (2013), “remains the most intractable of all episodes of twentieth-century population displacement,”<sup>2</sup> has serious implications for the study of literature in general, and Palestinian literature in particular.

Displacement, Gatrell states, has “produced a rich cultural legacy.”<sup>3</sup> Literature, film, music, and other arts helped establish “the framework of a national culture that has ‘rootedness’ at its core and displacement as its tragic antithesis,”<sup>4</sup> Gatrell continues. To better understand how displacement can produce a culture of rootedness, it is important to place the refugee, the exile, and the dispossessed at the center of the story of Palestinian literature. The transient, itinerant, migratory, nomadic, and homeless figures at the heart of this literature will also compel us to pierce, challenge, problematize, and question the comfortable but limited horizons of national literatures. The ceaseless, often unwanted, movements and forced migrations of the refugees and exiles will also urge us to consider the resulting ripples, dispersed contexts, and fragments of that movement.

Judith Butler reflects on Said’s ideas of exile in an address she gave at the American University in Cairo in 2010 for the “Sixth Annual Edward Said Memorial Lecture,” later published as a chapter entitled “What Shall We Do Without Exile” in her book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012). Butler poses the question of how the condition of diaspora “inform[s] and disrupt[s] ideas of the nation and the national.”<sup>5</sup> While Butler is interested in what the political articulation of the national would look like if it “begins with the primary rights of the refugees,”<sup>6</sup> for the purposes of the literary interests of this article, I would like to re-phrase the question to ask: What would the history of Palestinian literature look like if we approached it from the perspective of the refugee? What constellation of refugee and exiled

1 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (London: Granta Books 2001), 173.

2 Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 137.

3 *Ibid.*, 138.

4 *Ibid.*, 139.

5 Judith Butler, “What Shall We Do Without Exile,” in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 209.

6 *Ibid.*

writers, poets, publishers, critics, readers, artists, journalists, and institutions emerge from that perspective? Unlike most other national literatures in the Arab world, the refugee is the most dominant (albeit overlooked) figure in the story of Palestinian literature. Introducing the figure of the refugee into literary analysis and literary history allows us to think about national and exilic literatures together. The refugee is inevitably linked and intricately bound to a certain nation, even if that nation did not come into existence or disappeared as a result of the colonial carving of the world, the two destructive world wars, and other forms of war and conflict in the 20th century. In that sense, the figure of the refugee is not yet a universal post-national figure, and does not, in the immediate, completely shatter the concept of a national literature, nor demand that we replace it with something entirely new. It does, however, challenge us to think about how the refugee can impact the ways we read, analyze, and understand literature, and how refugees' complex ties to various and multiple geographies can distort, problematize, and perforate conceptions of national literatures.

Two historical junctures can be highlighted to emphasize the importance of further exploring the relationship between national literature and the refugee in the Palestinian context. The first juncture, the post-Nakbah years of 1948–1994, marks the transition from a form of territorial nationalism under colonial occupation (British Mandate) to exilic nationalism after 1948 and the expulsion and dispersion of the majority of Palestinians from historic Palestine. This is the point that created the largest number of Palestinian refugees, followed by other refugee-creating moments such as the war of 1967 and the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982, among many other such moments. Although some limited forms of local nationalism existed inside historic Palestine in the post-Nakbah period, this is the juncture at which Palestine, as a country with a territorial footprint, disappeared from the maps.

The second juncture, 1994 to the present, marks the post-Oslo incomplete 'return' to a form of severely limited pseudo-territorial nationalism under Israeli colonial occupation. The Palestinian territory consists of cantonized and fragmented Palestinian Authority-controlled areas in disparate, disconnected, and small parts of the West Bank and Gaza, covering approximately 12% of historic Palestine and shrinking further due to land confiscation and the building of illegal Israeli settlements and their segregated road infrastructure. The second juncture is a regression to the pre-1948 nationalism under colonial occupation, but now with the burden of a huge refugee population, who continue to be barred from their right to return, despite numerous UN resolutions and international legislation. Thus, in the present second juncture, we see half the Palestinian people living in an extremely limited, fragmented, and impotent territorial configuration without a nation-state—an exile in the

homeland so to speak—and the second half as refugees and exiles scattered in Arab countries and around the world.

Due to these particular circumstances, the evolution of Palestinian literature is an anomaly in the broader context of an Arab world that was, in the first half of the 20th century, embarking with great optimism towards the formation of newly liberated nation-states and the building of national and cultural institutions. In contrast, Palestinian literature emerged from within a majority refugee population, without a sealed geographic territory, national institutions, or a nation-state to house, support, or nurture its development. Now, especially after the so-called Arab Spring, the Palestinian experience, coming up to more than seventy years of forced displacement, is being recalled and more forcefully called upon as a reference for trying to understand today's war-torn Arab world with its failing and faltering nation-states and massive numbers of refugees. The literary and cultural articulations of Palestinian dispossession have also seen increased international resonance in a world trying to find ways to understand the extraordinary number of refugees. The figure of the refugee allows us to acknowledge the fragmentary and scattered nature of this literature, and on that basis, encourages us to seriously engage with its lived history of transnational and exilic literary production. Placing the figure of the refugee at the forefront also challenges us to seek analytical and methodological frames that can account for this figure and the unconventional and unusual literary baggage that comes with it.

The article is divided into three sections that will explore the anatomy, archaeology, and the fragmentary nature of the story of Palestinian literature. The first section discusses questions of who writes Palestinian literature and from where this literature emerges. To do so, it highlights the need to transcend strict national identities and frameworks that limit the understanding of the lived history of Palestinian literary production, which features strong pan-Arab, transnational, and international dimensions. The second section ponders not only the literary detective work, processes of story reconstructions, but also means of expanding the methodological toolbox that are needed to bring together the scattered fragments of Palestinian literature. The final section will focus on the potentialities of the digital realm to express and visualize the multiplicities of narratives from different periods and geographical locations that make up the story of Palestinian literature.

### **Anatomy of a Dismembered Literature**

To begin exploring the nature of Palestinian literature it is important to think about its unconventional constituent parts. Basic questions present themselves:

who is a Palestinian literary figure, where are they located, and where is Palestinian literature to be found? In the immediate, one is able to discern that Palestinian literature is not simply the literature produced by Palestinians living in Palestine. As noted above, one half of the Palestinian people are refugees and exiles scattered around the world, and the other half, many of whom are also refugees and internally displaced, live in cantons under occupation or in city ghettos or villages in historic Palestine. The majority of Palestinians, both inside and outside historic Palestine, range from stateless refugees to residents or citizens of numerous other countries, holding a myriad of different types of travel documents, ID cards, residencies, asylum papers, and passports. In some cases, they hold no documents at all—no official status or identity, let alone any formal Palestinian affiliation. This complicates the question of who is a Palestinian, and by extension who writes Palestinian literature. In other words, defining who is and is not Palestinian via the legal citizenship route is not helpful for our purposes because many Palestinians can, by default, be ascribed to other countries, and others to no country at all. An illustrative example is a statement that the Palestinian poet who grew up in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria, Ghayāth al-Madhūn, made at a recent event:<sup>7</sup> “When I became Swedish, I became Palestinian.” In unpacking this statement, a long trajectory of refugee, exilic, and asylum experiences are exposed to tell a story of the paradox whereby a Palestinian refugee can only experience Palestine as a tourist carrying the passport of another country.

To retrace the story of Palestinian literature, it becomes important to transcend national identities and embrace a reality of open, multiple, and hybrid identities. This means the inclusion of those who self-identify as Palestinian, regardless of their legal status. Going further, it also entails openness to including non-Palestinians who have made significant contributions to Palestinian literature, regardless of their nationality or origin. After all, a large portion of Palestinian literary production took place and continues to take place outside historic Palestine and would not have been possible without the support, contribution, and solidarity of individuals, networks, political parties, institutions, cultural organizations, and even governments that made its production possible. A visual example of a collaborative Palestinian publishing initiative is discussed in the third section of this paper alongside Figure 5.

7 Ghayāth al-Madhūn in the event “All Roads Lead to Berlin” organized by the PalREAD project in June 2020. Event link and information: [https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/palread/Events/Re-locating-the-Map\\_poetry-reading-by-Ghayath-Almadhoun.html](https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/palread/Events/Re-locating-the-Map_poetry-reading-by-Ghayath-Almadhoun.html) (accessed August 19, 2020).

Once the remits of who writes Palestinian literature are established to be all-inclusive and open, and the location from which Palestinian literature can emanate is set to be the world-at-large, two further challenges present themselves. The first of these challenges is that the main components of any national literature—the writers, readers, critics, publishers, sources, and archives—are conventionally located in one centralized national sphere. For most of Palestinian literary history, there has not been one centralized location that brings together in one national sphere all of its components. However, the desire for a nation-state, to be like everyone else, and to fit into the national model has, in many cases, clouded the ability to seriously engage with and understand the lived history and embrace the unconventional trajectories of Palestinian literature. In other words, we have not studied Palestinian literature for what it really is: a stateless literature that can itself be endowed with a refugee status and a literature written by refugees and exiles scattered across Palestine, the Arab region, and the world at large. The imposition of the national literary model on a primarily exilic and diasporic literature has therefore impacted the way we study, read, understand, and write about Palestinian literature.

With the absence of a centralized national sphere in mind, the second challenge that presents itself is the question of how to fully engage with and understand Palestinian literary dynamics on a pan-Arab, regional and transnational level. Since Palestinian literature could not, for most of its history, manifest itself on the institutionalized national level, the pan-Arab level became the primary sphere in which Palestinian literary production in Arabic could be housed. This does not exclude the fact that there were Palestinian locations, albeit disparate and disconnected, from which Palestinian literature emanated. However, the bulk of the Arabic-language Palestinian literary corpus has, for most of its history, been written and published in various locations within the Arab world. Palestinian literary scholars such as Fayṣal Darrāj and Salmā Khadrā' Jayyūsī have always insisted on the fact that Palestinian literature is part and parcel of Arabic literature. In the context of this discussion, we can push their insistence to its literal conclusion. As it stands, the complex relationship with the Arab world, and modern Arabic literature in particular, has not been fully explored and written into Palestinian literary history. In modern Arabic literary history, Palestinian literature sits side-by-side as an entry alongside other national Arabic literatures. Nowhere, however, do we get a deep sense of how the “part-and-parcel” dynamic operates in the Palestinian case. In the most literal sense, Palestinian literature has been written, published, discussed, and written about in various Arab countries. But despite its pan-Arab modes of production and dissemination, for many political and

methodological reasons, Palestinian literature cannot simply be included under the banner of another Arab country's national literature. In addition to Palestinian refugees and exiles producing literature in other Arab countries, many of those countries have, at different points, taken up the Palestinian struggle as their own national cause, generating their own sets of associated literary productions with both positive and negative results. This production highlights the often fraught and ephemeral relationships between national literatures and refugees as literary creators with multiple geographies of literary dissemination.

Studies of the literary works of canonical writers such as Ghassān Kanafānī, Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, and Imīl Ḥabībī, reveal that a virtual Palestinian national literary sphere is invoked to put these works in conversation with each other and conduct an analysis primarily on Palestine-related themes and issues. More often than not, the fact that these writers wrote from different literary and political environments in different countries—Kanafānī from Beirut, Jabrā from Baghdad, and Ḥabībī from Haifa—is rarely considered or analyzed in conjunction with the texts.<sup>8</sup> Although Kanafānī's novel *Ā'id ilā Ḥayfā* (1969) has been analyzed in relation to a myriad of different Palestinian themes and issues, such as return, revolution, armed resistance, the Jewish-Israeli Other, and so forth, analyses rarely consider the fact that Kanafānī was writing about Haifa from Beirut, the capital of the Palestinian Revolution at the time. Kanafānī's imagined Haifa, with its Beirut-infused revolutionary themes, infuriated long-term Haifa resident Imīl Ḥabībī for its factual errors, leading Ḥabībī to write a series of novels dedicated to documenting Ḥayfā's every stone, and finally, requesting that his tombstone is engraved with the phrase: "I Stayed In Haifa" in opposition to Kanafānī's fraught "return to Haifa."<sup>9</sup> To date, I have not found a record of whether Kanafānī and Ḥabībī ever met in person. They were writing and operating in very different literary and political environments. Nonetheless, reading between the lines of their literary works can help us read Kanafānī and Ḥabībī together to understand the simmering debates and contrasts generated by their different contexts and locations. A similar comment has been made about Kanafānī's *Mā tabaqqā lakum*, which is set in a refugee camp in Gaza. Literary scholars who had grown up in that camp have now highlighted another error in Kanafānī's story—the presence of the wall clock.

8 See for example: Fārūq Wādī, *Thalāth 'alāmāt fī al-rivāyah al-filasṭīniyyah: Ghassān Kanafānī, Imīl Ḥabībī, Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā* (Acre: al-Aswār lil-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 1985).

9 See: Refqa Abu-Remaileh, "The Afterlives of *Illitizam*: Emile Habibi through a Kanafaniesque Lens of Resistance Literature," in *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, eds. Friederike Pannewick and Georges Khalil (Wiesbaden: Reichert-Verlag, 2015).

According to the camp dwellers,<sup>10</sup> no wall clocks existed anywhere in the camp at that time. Kanafānī had not been to Gaza and was writing about Gaza from Beirut. On a different level, a figure like Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā played a crucial and central role in the development of the literary and artistic spheres in Baghdad, but that role, and the literary debates and discussions in Iraq, are mentioned only in passing in the analysis of his works, with Palestinian themes and issues taking precedence.<sup>11</sup>

The virtual Palestinian national literary sphere plays an important role in conducting analysis on Palestinian-specific issues. But it also unnecessarily limits the horizons of Palestinian literature to those of conventional national literatures, overlooking the deep relationships and interlinked dynamics with other Arab literary contexts. The impact of the pan-Arab dynamics of production and reception on Palestinian literature has rarely featured in the contextualization and analysis of Palestinian literary texts. In the case of a literary history where there is no one centralized national literary space, the extra-national sites and variables of Palestinian literature are too many to ignore. Without an analysis that can tackle these varying contexts of production and unhoused scattered histories with no national libraries, archives, or museums to gather them together, the study of Palestinian literature will be limited by a model that is not compatible with its reality. By squeezing Palestinian literature into the national literature mold, we lose the possibility of writing a non-linear, decentralized literary history of loss, suppression, oppression, silences, gaps, disappearances, erasures, destruction, and scattering, but we also lose the opportunity to expose connections, relationships, networks, links, and collaborations with and across different nations and geographies. Some of these links and networks are visually explored in the third section of this article.

To date, no one book tells the story of Palestinian literature from the early 20th century to the present, covering the different periods from Ottoman and Mandate Palestine, including the Mahjar and the Nahḍah, to the utter destruction and devastation of Palestinian culture in post-Nakbah Palestine, and the resulting dispersion to multiple and simultaneous geographies of literary production across the different countries and continents. Taking on such an endeavor will, in the Palestinian case, be more complicated and fraught with hurdles than for other modern Arabic national literatures. In the spirit

10 This fact was mentioned in an online panel discussion on the subject of place in the Palestinian novel, organized by the Palestinian Ministry of Culture in July 2020. Event link: [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=980058485787132&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=980058485787132&ref=watch_permalink).

11 See chapters on Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā in: Wādī, *Thalāth 'alāmāt fī al-riwāyah al-filasṭīniyyah*, and Bashir Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).



of mapping a literary history, Samia Mehrez's literary atlas of Cairo,<sup>12</sup> albeit limited to one city, is a precedent to consider. What would a multi-layered and multi-sited literary atlas of Palestinian literature look like?

Compiling a literary atlas of Palestinian literature entails building on and drawing connections between previous efforts to study and understand Palestinian literary production. It is worth taking stock of existing studies of Palestinian literature. These studies include literary histories<sup>13</sup> or single-author studies<sup>14</sup> revolving primarily around textual analysis of the works of celebrated authors, such as Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, Ghassān Kanafānī, Maḥmūd Darwīsh, Imīl Ḥabībī, and Saḥar Khalīfah; a particular period of Palestinian history (e.g. the Intifāḍah);<sup>15</sup> a specific geography (West Bank, '48, Gaza);<sup>16</sup> a certain theme;<sup>17</sup>

12 Samia Mehrez, *Literary Atlas of Cairo: One Hundred Years on the Streets of the City* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press 2010).

13 Example of literary history: Fārūq Wādī, *Thalāth 'alāmāt fī al-riwāyah al-filasṭīniyyah*.

14 Examples of studies on "major authors": Mahmoud Darwish: *Exile's Poet Critical Essays*, eds. Hala Khamis Nassar and Najat Raham (Northampton: Interlink, 2007); Anjad Mahasneh, *The Translatability of Emotiveness in Mahmoud Darwish Poetry: A New Reading* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013); Muna Abu-Eid, *Mahmoud Darwish: Literature and the Politics of Palestinian Identity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015); Muhammad Siddiq, *Man Is a Cause: Political Consciousness and the Fiction of Ghassan Kanafani* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1984); Adina Hoffman, *My Happiness Bears No Relation to Your Happiness—A Poet's Life in the Palestinian Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

15 Examples of studies on a specific period: Intifāḍah literature: Ami Elad Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1999) [Chapters 4-6].

16 Examples of studies on specific geographical areas: Manar Makhoul, *Palestinian Citizens of Israel: A History Through Fiction, 1948-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Ibrahim Taha, *The Palestinian Novel: A Communication Study* (London: Routledge, 2002); *The Book of Gaza: A City in Short Fiction*, ed. Atef Abu Saif (Manchester: Comma Press, 2014); Hanan Ashrawi, *Cotemporary Palestinian Literature Under Occupation* (Birzeit: Birzeit University Press, 1976); Atef Alshaer, *Language and National Identity in Palestine: Representations of Power and Resistance in Gaza* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture* [Chapters 1-3].

17 Examples of thematic studies: Barbara Parmenter, *Giving Voice to Stones: Place and Identity in Palestinian Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); Kamal Abdel-Malek and David C. Jacobson, *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in History and Literature* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999); Anna Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Ihab Saloul, *Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile and Binationalism: From Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt to Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish" (English version) in *Berlin: Carl Heinrich Becker Lecture der Fritz Thyssen Stiftung 2011* (Published by Europe in the Middle East—The

a genre (short story, speculative fiction, the novel),<sup>18</sup> Arab-Jewish relations,<sup>19</sup> or a particular theoretical framework and type of analysis (postcolonial, Marxist, feminist, communication studies, historical-political, socioeconomic).<sup>20</sup>

Although also focusing on major authors, the more recent works of Bashir Abu-Manneh (2016) and Ibrāhīm Ṭāha (2002) differentiate themselves in adopting an overarching theoretical framework for their textual analysis. Abu-Manneh uses a Marxist Lukácsian periodization to connect political ruptures with changes in aesthetic form focused specifically on the novel. Ṭāha uses a communications model to explore the position of the author using the author's textual manifestations to reflect on the relationship between author, reader, and extra-textual realities. Whilst Ṭāha's work is focused on textual analysis and only on works produced by the Palestinian Arab minority

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Middle East in Europe (EUME), Berlin 2012) 85-132; Drew Paul, *Israel/Palestine: Border Representations in Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

18 Examples of studies on specific genres: on the novel, see Abu Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present*; on short stories see Joseph Farag, *Politics and Palestinian Literature in Exile: Gender, Aesthetics and Resistance in the Short Story* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016); on poetry see: Khaled Furani, *Silencing the Sea: Secular Rhythms in Palestinian Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), Najat Rahman, *In the Wake of the Poetic: Palestinian Artists After Darwish* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2015); on theatre see: Hala Nassar, *Palestinian Theatre: Between Origins and Visions* (Unpublished Thesis, Freie Universität Berlin, 2001), *Stories Under Occupation and Other Plays from Palestine*, ed. Samer al-Saber and Gary M. English (New York: Seagull Books 2020), Reuven Snir, *Palestinian Theatre* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2005), Gabriel Varghese, *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), *Palestinians and Israelis in the Theatre*, ed. Dan Urian (New York: Routledge, 2006), Mus'ūd Ḥamdān, *al-Kitābah lil-ḥaqīqah: tanzīrāt wa ibd'āt 'arabiyyah ḥadīthah kathāfah naqdīyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 2017).

19 Examples of studies on Jewish-Arab, Palestinian-Israeli relations and literature: Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Runo Isaksen, *Literature and War: Conversations with Israeli and Palestinian Writers* (Northampton, MA: Oliver Branch Press, 2009); Kamal Abdel-Malek, *The Rhetoric of Violence: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Contemporary Palestinian Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Kamal Abdel-Malek and David C. Jacobson, *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in History and Literature* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999).

20 Studies with specific theoretical frameworks: Bashir Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ibrahim Taha, *The Palestinian Novel: A Communication Study* (London: Routledge, 2002); Anna Ball, *Palestinian Literature and Film in Postcolonial Feminist Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Lindsey Moore, *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations: Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine* (New York: Routledge, 2017); *Palestine +100*, ed. Basma Ghalayini (Manchester: Comma Press, 2019).

in Israel, his work on the positioning of the author is particularly beneficial to build on in developing an understanding of reading and reception in the broader Palestinian context.

In his book *Palestinian Citizens of Israel: A History Through Fiction, 1948-2010*, Manar Makhoul draws up a list of the titles of all novels written by Palestinians inside Israel between 1948 to 2010. Although the book is not a literary study and focuses only on works produced by Palestinians who had remained in their towns and villages in 1948, later becoming citizens of the new state of Israel, it is a very valuable exercise in unearthing scattered or lost material, especially on the so-called “period of silence” between 1948-1966. This period has often fallen prey to the false accusation that no noteworthy works were produced after the Nakbah. Furthermore, Makhoul’s work in conjunction with other initiatives of gathering, collecting, listing, and archiving can help to fill crucial gaps in the effort to understanding Palestinian literature simultaneously across various geographies of literary production.

There is a large corpus of Arabic-language secondary and critical sources on Palestinian literature that is very rarely consulted, referenced, and cited in English-language studies. Furthermore, studies in the disciplines of comparative or postcolonial literature tend to be conducted by scholars who may not know Arabic, and therefore do not engage with the primary nor the secondary Arabic-language sources, choosing to work with English-language translations of the original Arabic literary texts as the basis of their analysis. With this in mind, a concerted effort is needed to seriously address this disconnect, in this case between Arabic and English secondary sources, and to fill the gap by intensively engaging with Arabic-language critical sources, especially those written by Palestinian literary critics.

The work of Palestinian literary critics, such as Fayṣal Darrāj, Iḥsān ‘Abbās, ‘Ādel Ustah, Salmā Khadrā’ Jayyūsī, Ibrāhīm Muhawwī, Fakhrī Ṣāliḥ, and many others, offers a rich corpus of literary criticism to engage with. As noted previously, many of these critics tend to view Palestinian literature as part and parcel of modern Arabic literature. Although some of their works are devoted exclusively to discussing Palestinian literature, the bulk of their corpus engages more broadly with modern Arabic literature where Palestinian texts or authors feature alongside the works of other Arab authors. As a case in point, the book-length studies of one of the most prolific Palestinian literary critics, Fayṣal Darrāj, are preoccupied with exploring, interrogating, and critiquing the Arabic novel. Darrāj’s work focuses on topics such as the theory of the novel; the history of the development of the novel genre in modern Arabic literature; realism and social realism in modern Arabic literature; the role of literature and the writer in society; the relationship between politics and literature, history

and literature, the Arabic novel and the European novelistic tradition, and questions of modernity and modernism in Arabic literature.<sup>21</sup> Darrāj paid particular attention to the works of the Egyptian writers Ṭāha Ḥusayn and Nagīb Maḥfūz, the Saudi writer ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf, and the Palestinian writers Ghassān Kanafānī, Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, Saḥar Khalīfah, and Imīl Ḥabībī.

Darrāj’s work highlights that the genres, forms, and aesthetics of Palestinian literature are subject to the same set of influences, debates, and movements that contributed to the evolution of Arabic literature more broadly. In that sense, Palestinian literature, despite the particularities resulting from its refugee/diasporic condition, is very much part of the Arabic literary continuum, both medieval/classical and modern. Building on Darrāj and going further, Palestinian literature can be viewed as part of the Arab literary sphere in the most literal sense since much of Palestinian literary production, as well as reception and discussion, took place in Arab countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Kuwait, Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia, to name a few. The pan-Arab reality and the multiple sites of production, reception, and discussion of Palestinian literature is often overlooked in English-language studies on modern Arabic literature. Histories of modern Arabic literature include Palestinian literature as a national literature alongside those of other Arab countries. These studies feature genre, movement, trend and/or country-based chronological analyses with a focus on major authors and established canons, in which Palestinian literature and its authors constitute a relatively small entry.<sup>22</sup>

21 A selection of Fayṣal Darrāj’s works: *Dalālāt al-‘alāqah al-riwā’iyyah* (Damascus: Dār Kan‘ān, 1992); *Bu’s al-thaqāfah fī al-mu‘assasah al-filasṭīniyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādab, 1996); *Naẓariyyat al-riwāyah wa al-riwāyah al-‘arabiyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 1999); *Dhākirat al-maghlūbīn: al-hazīmah wa al-ṣuhyūniyyah fī al-khitāb al-thaqāfi al-filasṭīnī* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2002).

22 Studies on Modern Arabic Literature: Pierre Cachia, *An Overview of Modern Arabic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1990); *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Mustafa Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992); Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books 1993); Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1997); Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage: The Development of its Genres and Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Muhsin al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and also *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel* (Leiden: Brill, 20023), and *Islam on the Street* (Lanham,: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); Denys Johnson-Davies, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006); David Tresilian, *A Brief Introduction to Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi, 2008); Paul Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

Returning to the idea of a literary atlas in seeking to draw a more nuanced, multi-layered, and multi-sited understanding of the history of Palestinian literature, it becomes clear that secondary sources on modern Arabic literature and Palestinian literature are not sufficient to fill the gaps. Support is needed from a wide array of inter-disciplinary scholarly sources including history, politics, intellectual history, refugee studies and migrant literature, film studies, art history, memory studies, diaspora studies, and reception and periodical studies. In addition, the reception and discussion of Palestinian literature, particularly in Arabic-language literary magazines, is an important site for excavation. Arabic-language literary magazines have not only been published in Arab countries but also, in different times periods, in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. This corpus of Arabic literary magazines provides a rich transnational base ripe for a multi-sited study of the reception of and discussion on Palestinian literature on multiple levels: the local, national, regional, international, global and ultimately, the universal.

Literary magazines help us track the reception, debates, and discussions on and around Palestinian literature, and they also function as primary sources—many short stories and novels were serialized in newspapers and magazines before being published as books. Going further, getting published in one of these magazines was the equivalent of “making it” in the literary field, establishing the writer’s career from then on. In addition, they highlight an important intersection between literature and journalism. Many writers and poets were themselves founders, editors or regular contributors to newspapers and magazines. And finally, they can make the link between literature and politics more apparent—many of these magazines were affiliated to specific political parties, and by extension, the writers and poets publishing in them were those who belonged to or were endorsed by the party. For example, Ghassān Kanafānī edited and wrote for *al-Hadaf* in Beirut, which was a weekly magazine of the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine). *al-Jadīd* was edited by Imīl Ḥabībī who was himself a politician and in the leadership of the Communist Party. Expanding the sources and disciplines in which research on Palestinian literature can be conducted also requires expanding the toolbox, methodologies, and approaches used. The tools of Digital Humanities (DH), for example, can play an important role in constructively tapping into, reading, and analyzing the large corpus of Arabic-language literary magazines and the huge amount of data it could potentially provide. A number of important digital initiatives have paved the way for further cross-pollination between DH and Palestinian cultural production. I will delve into digital tools further in the third section of this article.

## Archaeology of a Modern Literature

Tracing the story of Palestinian literature, despite its modernity and contemporaneity, is at times akin to carrying out archaeological work in many different sites and locations at once. Palestinian culture's history of loss, scattering, destruction, and erasure poses similar challenges to that of unearthing ruins. Unlike historians who work primarily with archival sources seeking documents with evidentiary credentials, the work of archaeologists acknowledges and places at the forefront a reality of loss, gaps, and silence, exposing the need to rely on traces, fragments, found objects, and even ghosts to reconstruct a partial story. Emblematic of the different attempts at reconstructing stories from fragments are some of the characters that have emerged from Palestinian literature itself. *Umm al-rubābīkya* (translated as the odds-and-ends woman), a character after which Imīl Ḥabībī named both a short story and a play,<sup>23</sup> is a relevant figure to recall. An old woman who stayed in Haifa after her family fled during the Nakbah of 1948, she begins to collect the remnants—which she considers the treasures—that people left behind after their forced displacement. Besides salvaging the shards of material culture, another process of gathering, this time of scraps of stories becomes necessary. The characters in Ilyās Khūrī's *Bāb al-shams* [*Gate of the Sun*] and *Awlād al-ghittū* [*Children of the Ghetto*]<sup>24</sup> trilogy try to construct and reconstruct narratives from the thousands of shattered and shredded stories left behind.

Encapsulating the process of writing about an oppressed, disappeared, or erased culture is the analogy that Maḥmūd Darwīsh draws between the Trojan and Palestinian condition. Darwīsh recalls ancient Troy, defeated by the Greeks. "I am searching for the poet from Troy. Troy hasn't told its story," Darwīsh says in an interview that appears in Jean-Luc Godard's film *Notre Musique* (2004).<sup>25</sup> He continues: "I am the son of a people that until today hasn't been recognized; I wanted to speak in the name of the absentee, who is the poet of Troy." Documenting Palestinian loss and imposed absence has challenged scholars to pursue interdisciplinary paths. For example, narrating the story of a Palestinian village lead to an ethnographic study of found objects: Susan Slyomovics

23 Imīl Ḥabībī, "Umm al-rubābīkya," in *Sudāsīyyat al-ayyām al-sittah* (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, [1969] 2006).

24 Ilyās Khūrī, *Bāb al-shams* [*Gate of the Sun*] (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1998), and *Awlād al-ghittū, ismī Ādam* [*Children of the Ghetto: My Name Is Adam*] (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2016).

25 Jean-Luc Godard, *Notre Musique* [feature film] (France/Switzerland, 80 minutes, 2004).

*Object of Memory* (1998)<sup>26</sup> focuses on the Palestinian village of 'Ayn Hūd and its later imposed Israeli reincarnation as Ein Hod. Slyomovics constructs narratives from Palestinian tangible material objects such as houses, maps, photos, and most interestingly, a genre of folk literature called 'memorial books'. The Palestinian scholar and anthropologist, Sharif Kanā'nah, directed a team of Palestinian researchers from Birzeit University to collect and compile several hundred volumes of village books, with a focus on destroyed villages such as Majdal 'Asqalān and Dīr Yāsin. Story reconstructions from other comparative contexts can also be helpful in thinking through how to piece together a fragmentary Palestinian literary history.<sup>27</sup> The scattered documents of Palestinian literature challenge scholars to think about the process of narrative and story reconstruction, especially when dealing with found objects or documents that may be located in private archives or collections and whose original owners are no longer alive or the material cannot be ascribed or verified.

What kinds of sources do we need to reconstruct the story of Palestinian literature, and where shall we dig? While the literary works and the secondary sources around them are important, a textual analysis of these works is not sufficient in understanding how the literary sphere emerged outside the context of a nation-state. As with the above examples, multi-disciplinary sources as well as studies of other areas of the world with potentially comparative experiences such as indigenous and African-American narratives can be helpful in the process of plucking out relevant concepts, elements, fragments, or details to construct a Palestinian literary history. In addition, a process of scouring autobiographies, memoirs, and biographies of important figures in the political, cultural, and intellectual realms will be essential, especially those that have documented periods for which we have scant or little information on literary and cultural life.

In the Palestinian case, to access primary, secondary, and historical sources entails digging through the national libraries and archives of others. Given there is no Palestinian national library or archive that encompasses Palestinian history since the unprecedented rupture and scattering of 1948, accessing relevant sources is a serious challenge that involves complicated logistics and overwhelming hurdles. Chasing library and archival collections related to Palestine

26 Susan Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

27 For example, Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008). Through a self-reflexive narrative, Harman documents her attempt at retracing the history of the Atlantic slave trade, beginning where the documents end, following the trails of the captives, and by extension trying to uncover her own genealogy and ancestry.

can span anything from Ottoman, colonial, and state archives to university and national libraries spread across the world. Through his work, Salīm Tamārī,<sup>28</sup> one of the preeminent historians of Palestine, uses creative methods to tackle the challenge of writing history in the absence of national archives. To write the social history of Palestine, Tamārī combines a whole range of fragmented sources, including family papers; church records; Islamic court records; municipal records; Ottoman, British, Egyptian, and Israeli archival records. To write local histories, Tamārī relies more heavily on family archives, especially photos, diaries, memoirs, unpublished material as well as oral histories. These approaches illustrate the ingenuity of scholars in the absence of conventional sources. Material contained in private archives can tell us a lot about the unusual history of circulation, dissemination, reading, and reception that has not been comprehensively documented to date. For example, a handwritten notebook I accessed in a private archive told me more than any other source about a particular period where the interplay between censorship, Israeli military orders banning books, court cases, and creative circulation methods primarily through memorization or handwritten material dominated Palestinian literary production inside Israel. Private libraries, through their contents and selection of books and material, and through annotation and dedications inside books, can also tell us about what people read, when, who they were influenced by, and who their networks were.

It is a particularly exciting time to be pursuing this type of detective literary work. In the last decade, material from the lost archives of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), especially art and film, have recently resurfaced, having been re-discovered in unlikely locations. These archives of the “Golden Age” of Palestinian cultural production in 1960s and 70s Beirut were thought to be totally destroyed or looted during the Israeli military invasion of Beirut in 1982. A number of initiatives have revolved around this newly found film material, including restoration and screening of the Palestine Film Unit films undertaken by the Palestine Film Foundation in London; films such as Mohanad Yaqubi’s *Off Frame aka Revolution until Victory* (2015);<sup>29</sup> and the artist Oraib Toukan’s work on the film reels found in the former Soviet Cultural Centre in Jordan.<sup>30</sup> In addition to work on found film material, an important initiative around the Beirut International Art Exhibition for Palestine in

28 See for example: Salim Tamari, *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

29 Mohanad Yaqubi, *Off Frame aka Revolution until Victory* [Documentary film] (Idiom Films, 80 minutes, Palestine/France/Jordan/Lebanon/USA/UK, 2015).

30 See for example: Oraib Toukan, “A lecture in three parts, in between the odd discussion,” artist website <http://oraibtoukan.com>, 2011. <http://oraibtoukan.com/printed>



1978, a touring exhibition project called “Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity, and Museums in Exile” led by curators Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri,<sup>31</sup> has located and uncovered material, photographs, and even art works believed to be lost, and also mapped and traced the international solidarity networks that connected Palestine to Chile, Nicaragua, and South Africa, and collected oral history material during the research. With the purpose of expanding the toolbox of methodologies and approaches to more fully and holistically engage with the story of Palestinian literature, the next section will delve into the potentialities that lie in the digital sphere.

### Whole-of-Fragments

Maḥmūd Darwīsh’s metaphor of Palestine as a “country of words” in practice means following in the footsteps of the refugee, retracing, collecting, and gathering scattered words-in-exile that emanated from many different places and spaces. In this way, the ‘country of words’ acts as the abstracted exilic space of language as homeland. Pushing the metaphor further, we can think of the digital sphere as the place where the fragments of the story of Palestinian literature, from different periods and geographies, can come together. The world of DH has a lot to offer in the process of telling the story of Palestinian literature. With the help of digital technology, a large number of data-fragments can be collected, processed, analyzed, and visualized. The bringing together of this data can then help us retrace the footsteps, movements, developments, networks, and trajectories of Palestinian literature and its literary figures across the Arab world, Europe, the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. With the potential of the digital sphere in mind, it is no surprise that a number of Palestinian born-digital projects have come to light in recent years. I would like to suggest that an early precedent to this oncoming digital-turn is one of Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman’s lesser-known works, a short film called *Cyber Palestine* (1999),<sup>32</sup> which re-tells the biblical story of Joseph and Mary as modern-day Palestinian refugees who have no way to return to their homeland except by attempting to access it through cyber space.

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\_matter\_files/Oraib%20Toukan%20Gardening%20a%20Pitiless%20Mountain.pdf (accessed August 18, 2020).

31 *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity, and Museums in Exile*, eds. Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

32 Elia Suleiman, *Cyber Palestine* [short film], in Bethlehem 2000 Project (Palestinian National Authority, 106 mins. Palestine, 1999).

In *Cyber Palestine*, Suleiman transposes the biblical story of Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to the modern Palestinian context. The irony at the heart of the film is that the Post-Oslo Mary and Joseph are no longer able to take the same journey, not even across the new, at the time, so-called autonomous Palestinian Authority areas in Gaza and the West Bank. Almost ten years after the film, Hamid Dabashi wrote a review in *al-Jazeera* with a title that captures the essence of the film, "Remember: Christ was a Palestinian Refugee" (2018).<sup>33</sup> In modern-day Palestine, and despite access to speedier forms of transportation, the fleeing refugees cannot even reach the city of original refuge. The film captures the impossibility of reaching Bethlehem at the turn of the millennium, and by extension, the impossible situation of being a Palestinian refugee. In the opening scene of the film, we see Joseph sitting at his computer. He is typing into a Yahoo! Search engine the words "cyber Palestine." His search yields a photo of ancient columns and the words announcing that the site is "Under Construction." While also a political commentary on the post-Oslo yet-to-be Palestinian state, *Cyber Palestine* is one of the early attempts to artistically and critically explore the connection between the virtual, refugees, and the exilic, posing the question of whether cyberspace can offer a virtual refuge for the coming together of Palestinian fragments.

In 2016, many years after Suleiman's film, the "Palestinian Revolution"<sup>34</sup> digital project was launched. The project is led by Karma Nabulsi and her team at Oxford University, and it is a bilingual research and learning resource that explores Palestinian revolutionary practice from 1948 to the siege of Beirut in 1982. The online environment features a fabulous wealth of material that has, for the first time, become digitally accessible, including oral history interviews of important Palestinian political figures that project team members conducted, recorded, and made available. Although not focused on the literary, the project nevertheless highlights the importance of individuals in telling a story that suffers from scattered sources and the need to tap into the knowledge base that resides within individuals. This project offers a clear example of the need to dig beyond the conventional sources and undertake the intellectual detective work needed to bring pieces of the literary puzzle together.

33 Hamid Dabashi, "Remember: Christ was a Palestinian Refugee," *al-Jazeera* December 25, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/remember-christ-palestinian-refugee-181224101728798.html> (accessed August 14, 2020).

34 Karma Nabulsi and Abdel Razzaq al-Takriti, *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016, <http://learn.palestine.politics.ox.ac.uk/> (accessed August 14, 2020).

More recently, the highly interactive and visual project “Palestinian Journeys”<sup>35</sup> came into being. The project is created by the Institute of Palestine Studies (IPS) in Ramallah in collaboration with the Palestinian Museum and Visualizing Palestine. The platform showcases Palestinian history and includes biographies, documents, stories, and photographs, some of which made available for the first time online. During a fieldwork trip, I visited IPS in Ramallah, hoping to dig through treasure troves of physical material and sources. I was shown a small library and told that they do not keep material on site, only commercially available titles and some references. The material, they said, is housed, catalogued, and archived at IPS in Beirut. This incident drew my attention to a paradoxical split: in Ramallah, I found the data and the virtual without the physical archive, and later, I found the archive disembodied in Beirut. This split captures what Elia Suleiman was only hinting at—the existence of a cyber Palestine even *in* Palestine, and going further, the condition of exile in the homeland. “Palestinian Journeys” now sits amidst a rich array of digital archives and projects emerging from the West Bank and Jerusalem, such as that of the Palestinian Museum’s Digital Archive<sup>36</sup> and the more grassroots digital pan-Arab social archive project called Khazā’in,<sup>37</sup> among others.

Building on projects that have provided rich and rare resources and paved the way for future research involving digital tools, I will share my experiences, challenges, and findings to date from the digital project, “PalREAD—Country of Words,”<sup>38</sup> that I am currently leading. PalREAD, funded by the European Research Council, aims to gather, under one virtual roof, the data-fragments of the story of Palestinian literature. As this is a data-gathering rather than a digitization and archival project, the first step was creating a tailor-made digital relational database that can house data specific to the Palestinian literary story. There are many hurdles in this process, one of which is the bias of digital technology towards Latin-based scripts (Left-to-Right (LTR) languages).<sup>39</sup> There

35 Palestinian Museum, Institute for Palestine Studies and Visualizing Palestine, *Palestinian Journeys*, <https://www.paljourneys.org/> (accessed August 14, 2020).

36 A Digital Archive (The Palestinian Museum) <https://palarchive.org/> (Accessed 18.08.2020).

37 Khazaaen Project: A Social Archive for the Documentation of Everyday Life <https://www.khazaaen.org/> (accessed August 18, 2020).

38 “PalREAD—Country of Words” project, hosted at the Freie Universität Berlin, <https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/palread/index.html> (accessed on August 18, 2020).

39 See for example: Simon Mahony, “Cultural Diversity and the Digital Humanities,” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11 (2018), 371-288; L. W. Cornelis van Lit, James H. Morris and Deniz Çevik, “A Digital Revival of Oriental Studies (*Le retour numérique des études orientales*),” *ILCEA: Revue de l’Institut des langues et cultures d’Europe, Amérique, Afrique, Asie et Australie*, 39 (2020), 1-14.

is however a growing movement of Right-to-Left<sup>40</sup> (RTL) languages which is drawing attention to issues facing non-Latin script languages. In the case of PalREAD, creating a database that is bi-directional and multi-lingual consisting of RTL and LTR languages, both on the data and metadata level, became necessary to bring together the global fragments of the story of Palestinian literature, even if the focus of the project is on Arabic-language literary production. Bi-directional databases are more challenging than single-language databases due to the need to make numerous editorial decisions related to the different transliteration systems used by various countries and libraries, how data objects and metadata is standardized and described, data entry in original languages and across languages, and data structuring, organization, and standardization. In other words, the process required the development of a custom data ontology specifically for Palestinian literature.

With the help of a custom data ontology to house the unconventional fragments of the story of Palestinian literature, the elements of a digital multi-layered story can begin to take shape. The digital story relies on a number of core elements for which data is being gathered: literary timelines, literary mapping, personal trajectories of literary figures, and literary networks. As no datasets exist for these core elements of the project, and Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology is not yet available with a high degree of accuracy for modern Arabic texts,<sup>41</sup> data is being gathered from scratch and manually entered into the database. As mentioned in the previous section, data is collected from a wide range of sources. Data collection methods involve library and archival research, fieldwork, interviews and oral history, and accessing private archives and collections. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss in more detail the core elements of the project and provide illustrated examples of preliminary data visualization.

How can we account for the different literary events, discussions, and productions taking place simultaneously across multiple geographies? In *After The Last Sky* (1999) Edward Said writes:

40 See for example the RTL Conference held at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) 2020, <https://dhsi.org/dhsi-2020/dhsi-2020-rtl/> (accessed August 18, 2020).

41 OCR technology as well as Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) exists with a much higher degree of accuracy for medieval/classical Arabic texts due to concerted efforts to apply machine learning processes to historical and endangered manuscripts. When it comes to modern sources there are important issues to consider such as copyright and intellectual property which can explain the legal difficulties facing projects wishing to engage with digitizing modern sources.

[...] there are many different kinds of Palestinian experience, which cannot all be assembled into one. [...] It is almost impossible to imagine a single narrative. [...] since the main features of our present existence are dispossession, dispersion, and yet also a kind of power incommensurate with our stateless exile, I believe that essentially unconventional, hybrid and fragmentary forms of expression should be used to represent us.<sup>42</sup>

Can digital literary timelines allow us to express and visualize the multi-layered, fragmentary, and hybrid story of Palestinian literature, as Said described it? In digital timelines for example, and through features such as filtering, one can choose to zoom in to a particular geography or time period or zoom out to see the whole-of-fragments across geographies and periods. In other words, a digital timeline allows for the possibility of what Franco Moretti calls “distant reading”<sup>43</sup> of Palestinian literature. Although digital timelines, like conventional timelines, are essentially chronological in nature, their interactive nature can nonetheless help us re-think questions related to periodization, chronology, and canon-formations. They can also help us identify gaps and silences, reveal shadow canons, expose black holes of knowledge, and challenge us to think through how to fill or address them. Furthermore, features such as data tagging allow us to follow the evolution of a certain theme or concept, for example, the development of a concept central to Palestinian literature such as “resistance literature,” over time and place. Other phenomena, such as refugee creating moments, can be traced across a timeline to better understand their impact on literary production. Digital timelines can also be useful tools for organizing the data-fragments of the story of Palestinian literature and can act as a baseline for story reconstructions and further analyses. Ultimately, a digital timeline can be the virtual stand-in for a national literary sphere where all Palestinian authors’ and poets’ works and reception can be read together in one space, regardless of period, geography or citizenship.

When it comes to mapping, further challenges present themselves in the case of Palestinian literature. Digital technology bias is not limited to language scripts but also extends to practices of cartography. We have seen in recent years the battle with Google and Facebook to show Palestinian locations on their maps. Even attempting to map literary or biographical locations in the case of Palestinian literature becomes a hugely contentious effort. How can one geo-locate villages destroyed and depopulated in 1948, unrecognized villages,

42 Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

43 Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).

refugee camps, and places that no longer exist or are excluded from mapping practices? In the digital realm, several efforts and initiatives have taken on these challenges. At the helm of digital mapping efforts is the Palestine Open Maps<sup>44</sup> project, which allows users to superimpose layers of historical maps onto contemporary maps to geo-locate and extract geo-coordinates for Palestinian places or locations, including those that have been destroyed or forcibly excluded from contemporary maps.

The groundbreaking work of Palestinian cartographer Salmān Abū-Sittah on which data for Palestine Open Maps was sourced, especially his maps and atlases and his publications for the Palestine Land Society,<sup>45</sup> have proven to be extremely valuable references. Abū-Sittah's work deals extensively with and exposes colonial interests and biases when it comes to the history of the production of maps of Palestine. In *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Gatrell describes how Palestinian refugees cling to their geographies even more strongly in their displacement, despite colonial efforts during the Mandate period to disappear Palestine from the maps as "maps and statistics formed part of this strategy to redesign Palestine, its Arab population already being written out of the picture."<sup>46</sup> Maps play an important role in Palestinian culture, including popular culture, where countless objects of paraphernalia, necklaces, T-Shirts, and so forth feature the map of historic Palestine, which are especially prevalent among Palestinian refugees and those in exile.

Colonial biases carry over into the digital realm. Abū-Sittah's work, along with Muṣṭafā Murād al-Dabbagh's multi-volume *Bilādunā Filasṭīn* (published between 1966-1975) and Walid Khalidi's *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (1992), are essential data resources for future Palestinian counter-cartography and decolonial digital mapping projects. Further digital initiatives, such as those of *Palestine Remembered*,<sup>47</sup> which is a platform for Palestinian refugees to connect and share information on their towns and villages, use crowd-sourcing as one method to provide detailed statistics, histories, images, and maps, as well as oral history testimonies through its associated *Nakba Oral History Project*,<sup>48</sup> in addition to the Israeli non-governmental organization *Zochorot*, which

44 See: Palestine Open Maps, <https://palopenmaps.org/> (accessed August 18, 2020).

45 See: Palestine Land Society, <http://www.plands.org/> (accessed August 18, 2020).

46 Gatrell, 122.

47 See: Palestine Remembered, <https://www.palestineremembered.com/> (accessed August 18, 2020).

48 See: Oral History Project, <https://www.palestineremembered.com/OralHistory/> (accessed August 18, 2020).

developed the iNakba application<sup>49</sup> and provides an important series of maps of Palestine.<sup>50</sup>

A mapping exercise was used to test a small sample of PalREAD data beginning with the research question “Where did Palestinian literary works emerge from in different periods?” [Figure 1].<sup>51</sup> Although the below figure is based on data that is still growing, and for the sake of the visualization exercise included a non-representative sample, it can still give us an insight into what becomes possible when using digital tools. Once the full dataset is in place, it can show us results, for example, that include the pre-Nakbah eras: the Ottoman, Mandate, Nahḍah, and Mahjar periods.

In addition to mapping literary production, personal trajectories of literary figures can also be ‘mapped’ in different ways: intersecting geographical trajectories of literary figures [Figure 2]; filtering for the personal trajectory of one literary figure, for example, Maḥmūd Darwīsh’s in Figure 3, and finally, a different kind of mapping that does not involve geography but combines literary outputs and biographical information with places of residence, for example in the case of the well-known Palestinian scholar and poet Salmā Khadrā’ Jayyūsī (Figure 4).

The above figures illustrate clearly the exilic dimension of Palestinian literature. Palestinians continue to be exiled and on the move. In such a context, thinking in terms of literary networks can offer a new window of analysis into the transnational story of Palestinian literature. In the Palestinian context, extensive networks of transnational and international solidarities influenced cultural and literary production. Inroads through the Communist party in Israel (made up primarily of Palestinians) and the PLO’s (via its predominant party Fatah) membership in Socialist International and other avenues that opened up the Palestinian cultural sphere to new international horizons will be explored. This is especially relevant for the period of the 1960s and 70s where Palestinians found themselves at the heart of global agitation in the context of anti-colonial struggles and national liberation and decolonization movements. As a result of this moment of global reach, there was a proliferation of Arabic-language Palestinian publishing houses, magazines, and newspapers established in places like London, Paris, and Nicosia.

Finally, through network analysis, complex webs, networks of transnational publishing, and cultural institutions and production emerge. For example, in Figure 5, the pan-Arab network of authors and illustrators who collaborated

49 See: Zochrot iNakba app: <https://zochrot.org/en/keyword/45323> (accessed August 18, 2020).

50 See: Zochrot maps: <https://zochrot.org/en/wrapper/18> (accessed August 18, 2020).

51 Visualizations were produced in collaboration with Calibro (<https://calib.ro/>).

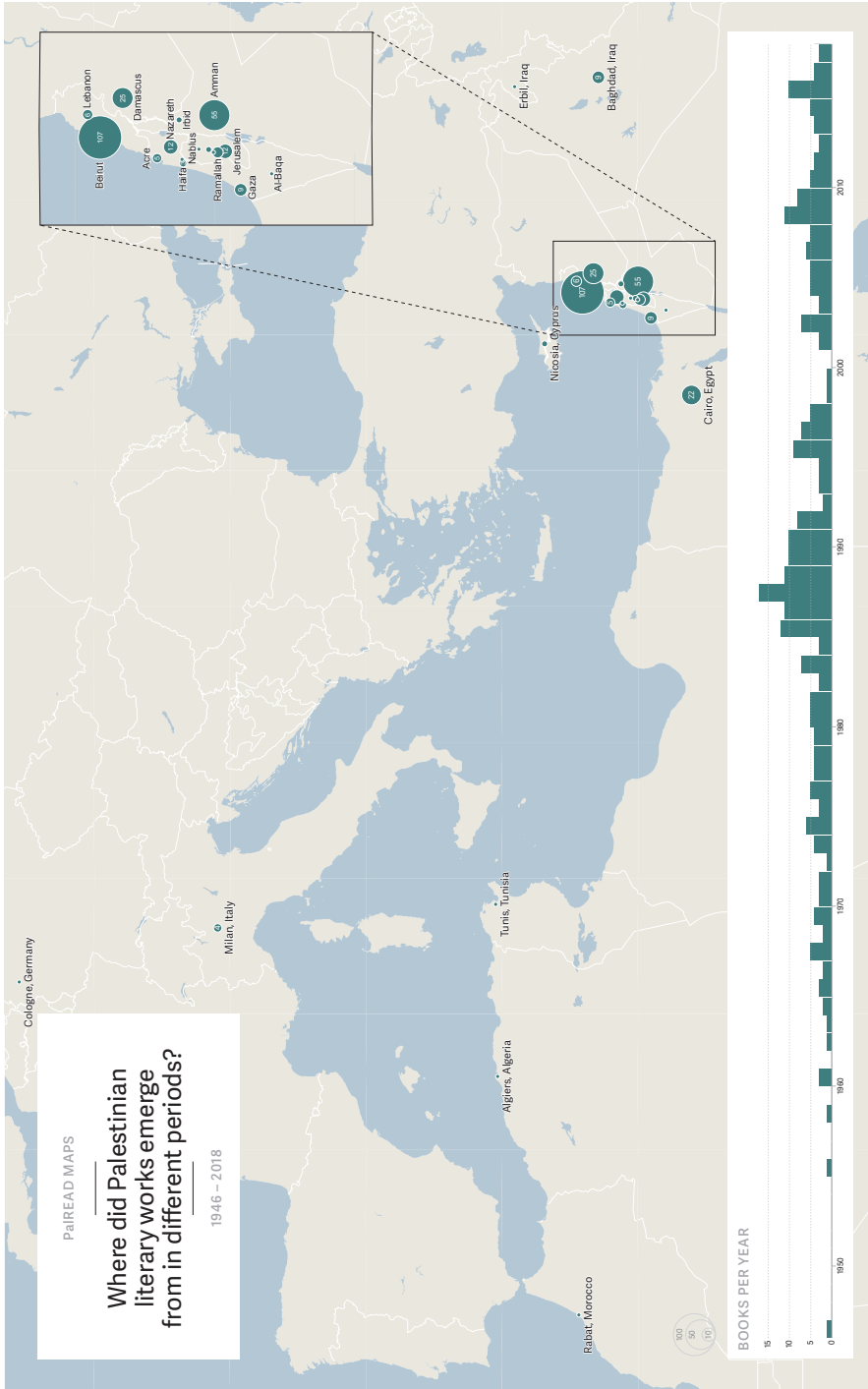


FIGURE 1 Test visualization of research question “Where did Palestinian literary works emerge from in different periods?”



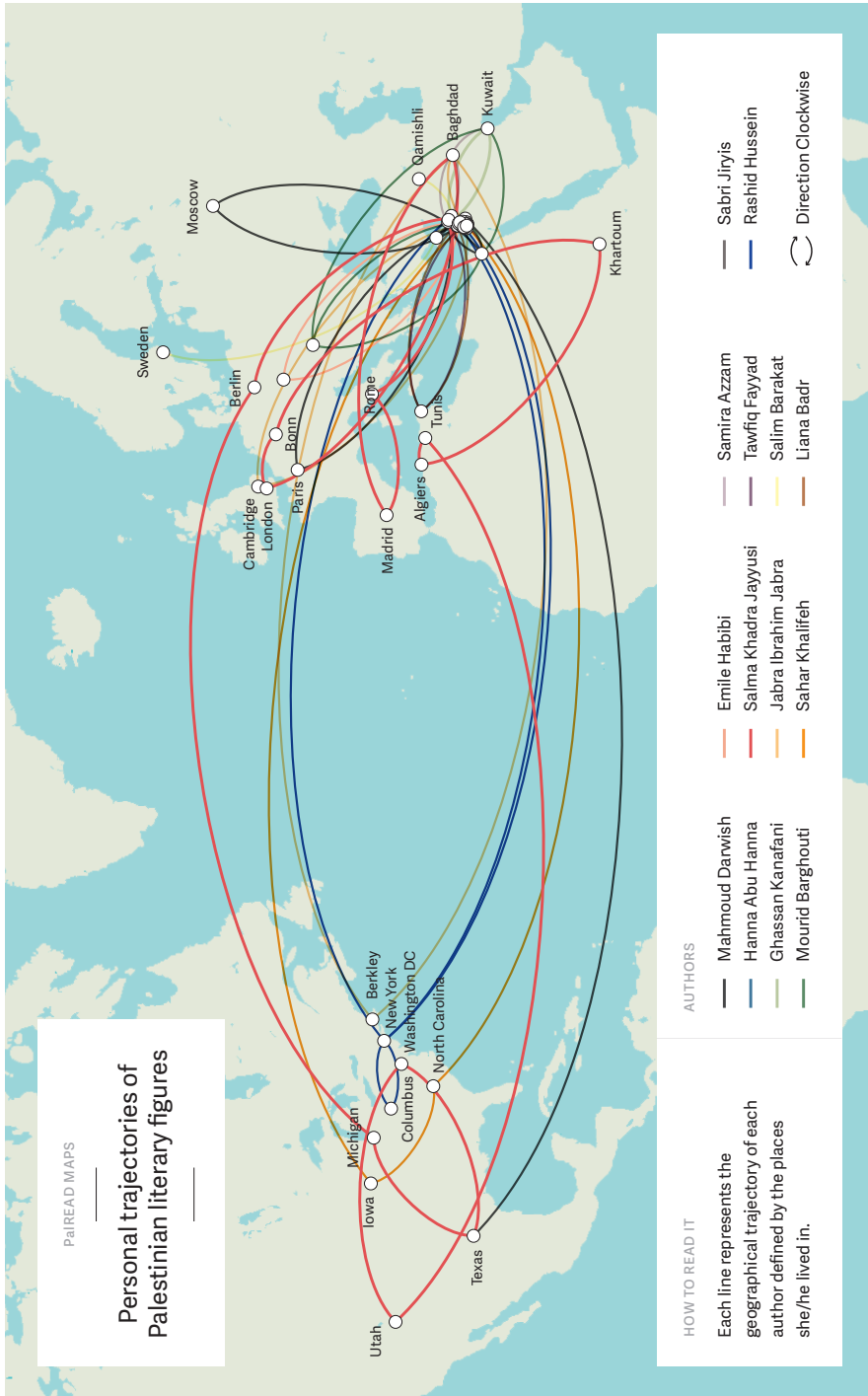


FIGURE 2 Trajectories of Palestinian literary figures

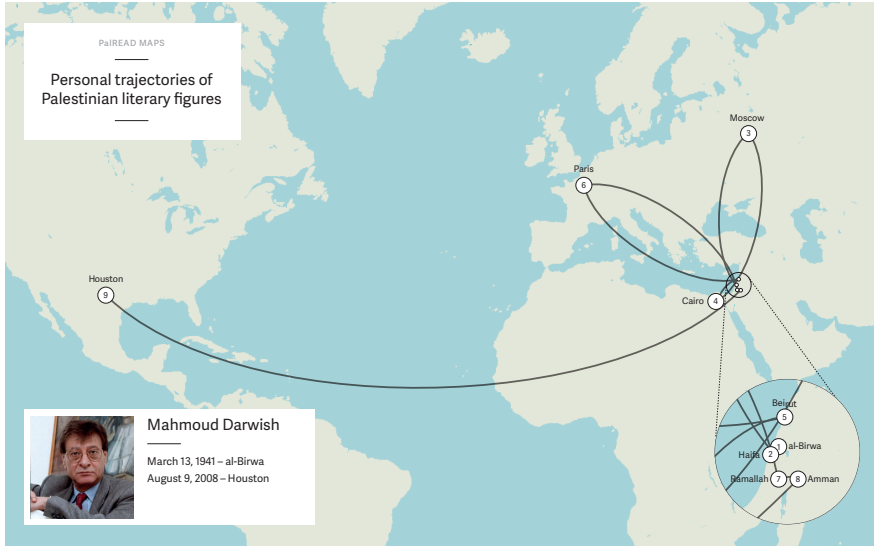


FIGURE 3 Personal trajectory of Maḥmūd Darwish

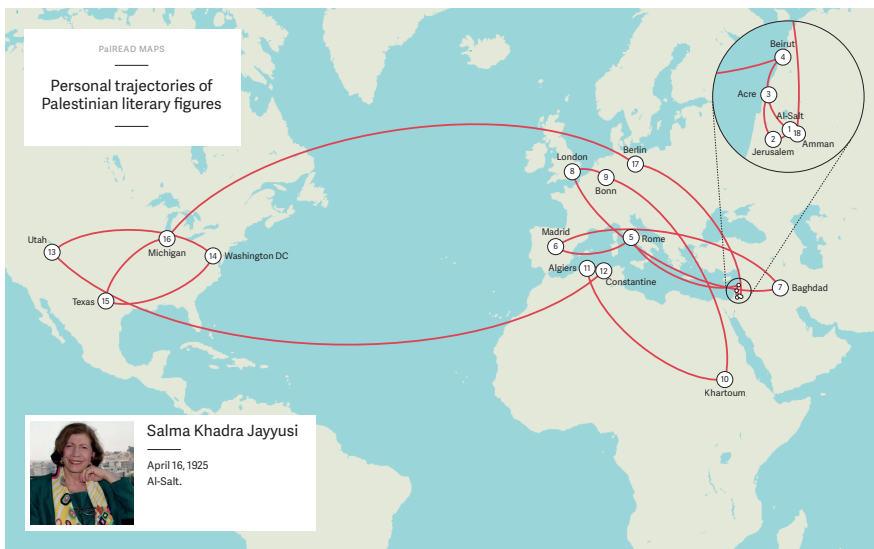


FIGURE 4 “Mapping” Salmā Khadrā Jajyūsī’s life and works

on the publications of *Dār al-fatā al-‘arabī*, an important publisher of children’s literature set up by the PLO and ran between 1974-1994 first in Beirut then in Cairo. The visualization shows the close-knit relationship that existed between art and literature during that period, showcasing the interconnections between

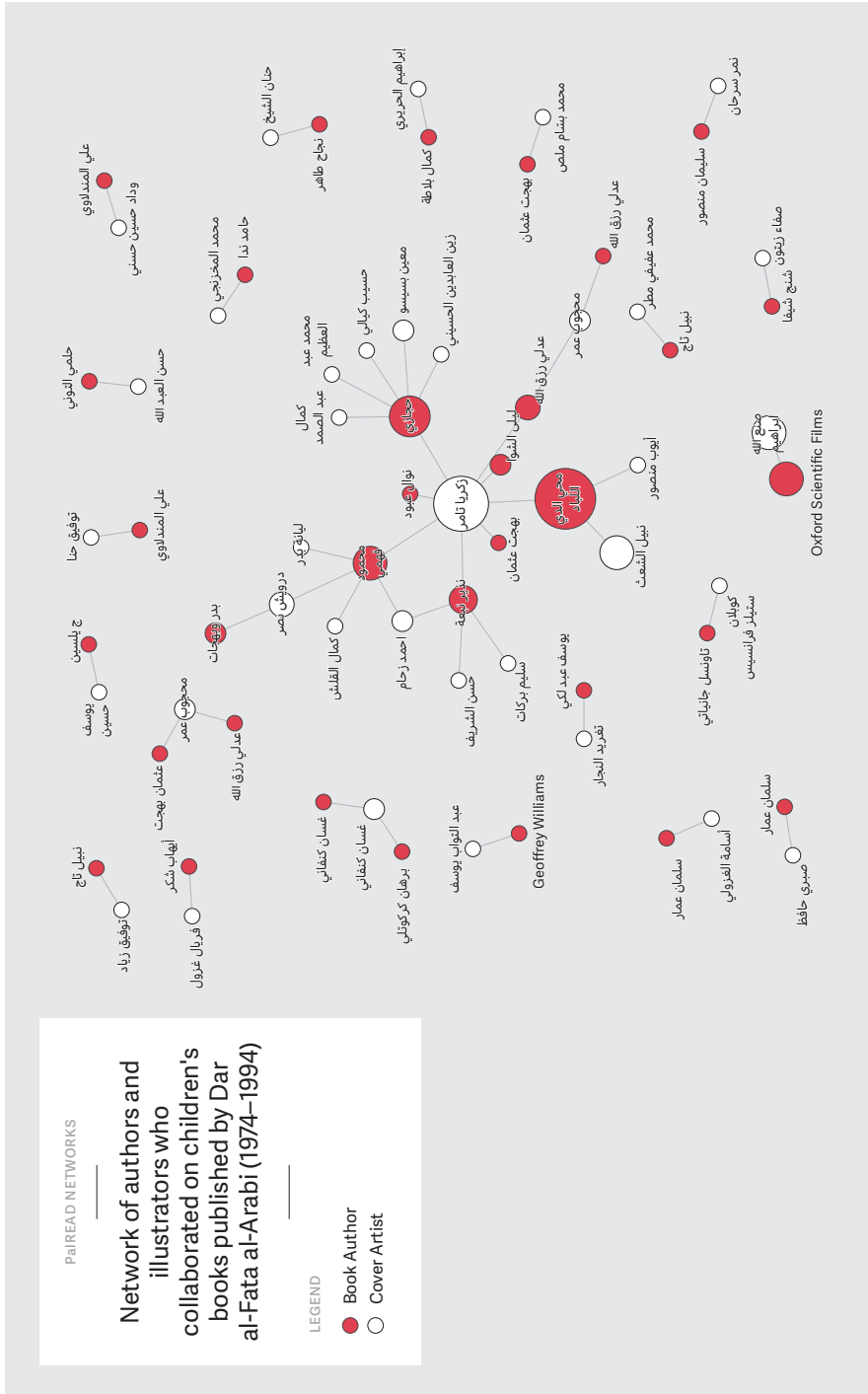


FIGURE 5 Authors & illustrators of the PLO's Dar al-fatā al-ʿarabi publishing house

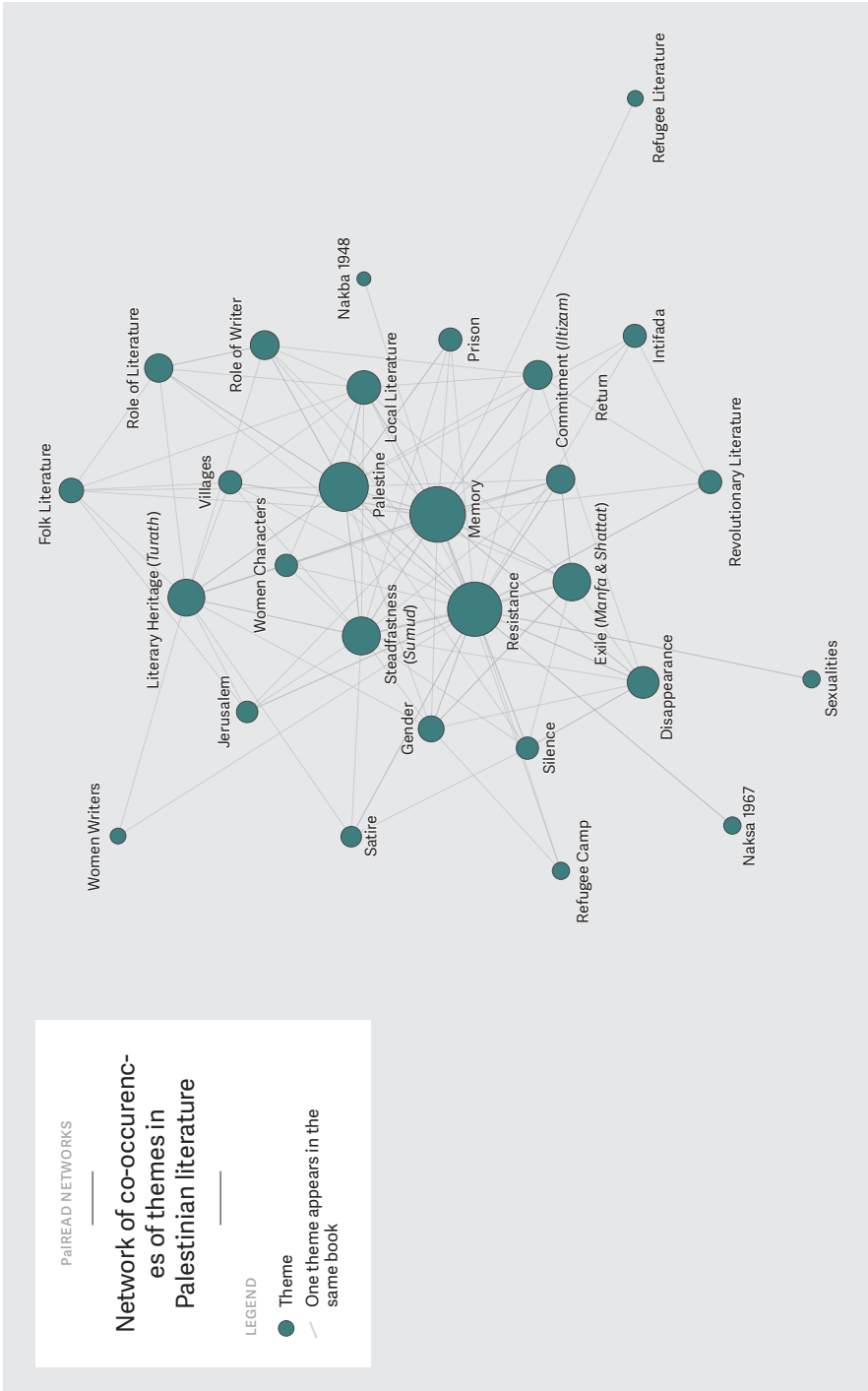


FIGURE 6 Network of co-occurrence of themes in Palestinian literature

Palestinian and Arab writers and artists. Networks and network analysis can be of different types and on different levels. Figure 6 shows a thematic network based on non-representative data, illustrating the links between a small sample of themes of Palestinian literary works.

### Conclusion

The article explores a “what if?” question. What if we place the refugee at the center of the story of Palestinian literature? What would the history of that literature look like if we were to follow the footsteps of Palestinian refugees and exiles? While Palestinian refugees have been extensively written about as subjects of humanitarian crises, rarely have they been acknowledged as important literary and cultural creators. As an anomaly in its circumstances of decentralized development, publishing, and reception, it becomes important to seriously engage with Palestinian literature not simply as a national literature but a literature-of-a-nation that for most of its history was subjected to a mode of exilic non-territorial nationalism. While not rejecting the national literary model outright, the refugee figure that haunts Palestinian literature encourages us to think together national and exilic literatures. The question of what we lose when we restrict Palestinian literature to the limited horizons of national literature is discussed in terms of how it impacts the way we study, read, and understand Palestinian literary history. To expand the horizons of analysis and understanding, the necessity of opening up new methodological toolboxes and accessing multi-disciplinary sources from both institutional collections as well as private archives across a multiplicity of venues and locations was put forward. In the absence of a centralized territorial national literary sphere, the “country of words,” it is proposed, has the potential of coming together in the digital realm. Data-fragments of Palestinian literature can be expressed together as a digital-whole with the help of DH tools such as timelines, maps, and network graphs. Palestinian born-digital projects, especially those emerging from refugees and exilic communities, and more recently from the West Bank, are charting new digital paths of inquiry; making new virtual connections possible, and ultimately, drawing interesting links between the exilic and the virtual as a space of coming together.