Brexit Literature's Present Absentees:

Triangulating Brexit, Antisemitism, and the Palestinian Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses a blind spot in Brexit literary criticism: Britain's relationship to the Middle East, particularly its historic responsibility for the plight of Palestinians. Although fiction that directly engages both Brexit and Israeli-Palestinian crisis has not yet appeared, oblique connections can be illuminated. Shared conceptual fields, albeit ones only partially brought into view in contemporary British fiction, emerge from intersecting historical experiences. The article considers a range of recent literary texts, with an emphasis on *A Stranger City* (2019) by British Jewish author Linda Grant and *Fractured Destinies: A Novel* (2018) by British-Palestinian author Raba'i al-Madhoun. When viewed in a certain light, Brexit motifs of enclosure, displacement, and propinquity limn the Palestinian crisis as well as the spectre of antisemitism, revealing Britain's role in the shaping of the modern Middle East as part of contemporary British literature's political unconscious.

On Friday, January 31, 2020, Britain officially commenced withdrawal from the European Union. That week began, on Monday, January 27, with International Holocaust Remembrance Day, marking 75 years since the liberation of Auschwitz. On Tuesday, January 28, Donald Trump, flanked by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu but no invited Palestinian representative, formally announced "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People". This article explores unsounded connections in British literature between the events of that week. Critiquing citations of "9/11" as singular event, Jacques Derrida argued that:

> To mark a date in history presupposes [...] that "something" comes or happens for the first and last time, "something" that we do not yet really know how to identify, determine, recognize, or analyze but that should remain from here on in unforgettable: an ineffaceable event in the shared archive of a universal calendar, that is, a *supposedly* universal calendar… (Borradori 2003, 86, original emphasis)

The near simultaneity of "Brexit Day", Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Trump's so-called "Deal of the Century" should remind us of Britain's historic relationship to the Middle East as well as to Europe. Brexit hubris has been identified as a late convulsion of imperial nostalgia (*inter alia* Eaglestone 2018b, drawing on Gilroy 2004). Anshuman Mondal pinpoints that invoking "independence" from Europe allows Britain's colonial history to be "at once evoked and obscured" (2018, 83). Its role in the shaping of the modern Middle East has received scant attention in "BrexLit" criticism to date. However, this history, too, is immanent in fictional engagements with the 2016 referendum and its uncivil aftermath.

In order to tease out the historical connection between Britain, Israel, and Palestine specifically, we need to circle back: first to the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, made in

1917, to "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" (Thompson 2019, 72). Gardner Thompson (2019) cites a July 5, 2017 commemoration of this Declaration in the House of Lords in which "the prevailing tone [...] was one of unadulterated pride, and prejudice" (xiii–iv). A week earlier, Prime Minister Theresa May had also articulated "pride" in the Declaration in the House of Commons. Thompson reports "many expressions of loyalty to, and praise of, Israel" and "an understated anti-Arab sentiment (though for the most part the Palestinians' experience was ignored)" (xiv).

Thompson (2019) strongly qualifies the Balfour legacy. The Declaration was made, following minimal support for Zionism and low prioritisation of Palestine as imperial asset, "in a time of crisis, as a loosely worded, no cost, short-term appeal" to international Jewish communities for financial support in a war that Britain might lose (74). "World Jewry" was an arguably antisemitic projection and even American Zionism a peripheral cause (73–4). The British endorsement of the Zionist project for Palestine is "a tale not of inevitability or necessity" but rather "of coincidence and contingency", in which inhered "disregard for Arabs" as well as "anti-Semitism and nimbyism" (72, 141). In the face of expertise on the ground and the British experience in Ireland, Whitehall consolidated its Balfour commitments in a 1922 White Paper which would define the terms of the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine. Leaving aside, temporarily, the injustice done to the indigenous population, the Balfour commitment turned out to be an "act of self-defeating mischief" by the government of the day (112, 135).

This assessment of historical documentation pertaining to the Balfour Declaration precludes the possibility of reading the Holocaust, anachronistically, as a motivating British principle. The government platitudes of 2017 cited above, like the "British exceptionality" of Brexit "independence" discourse, are hypocritical. In the late 1930s, Britain partially sought

to remedy the unworkable principles of Balfour, prompting Zionist resistance to mandatory rule. While European Jews faced an increasingly existential threat, the British in Palestine were turning away Jewish refugees, a further incitement to paramilitary groups (as captured in Channel 4 television drama *The Promise*, 2011, directed by Peter Kosminsky). In 1947, Britain handed responsibility to the United Nations. In the words of Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, "the obligations undertaken to the two communities in Palestine" had proven – as they were always going to be – "irreconcilable" (Thompson 2019, 257–258).

The Zionist project in Palestine was colonialist in articulation from the late 1890s and exclusionary and exploitative in practice by the 1920s. Indeed Zionism, despite its distinctive attributes, "emerges as colonialism in one of its more unyielding forms" (Thompson 2019, 290). The ongoing settler colonial situation in Palestine/Israel is now widely acknowledged. For Paul Gilroy (2006), who dedicates *Postcolonial Melancholia* to Rachel Corrie and Thomas Hurndall (activists killed in Gaza in 2003 by the Israeli Defence Force), the global response to Israel in the twenty-first century reveals '[c]osmopolitan solidarity from below and afar' with Palestinians (89). This is spurred by several brutal wars on Gaza as well as prominent rights and justice campaigns: the Boycott Divest and Sanction (BDS) movement initiated by Palestinian civil society, but also older initiatives, including Israeli groups such as B'Tselem, Israeli Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, and Breaking the Silence, veteran Israeli Defence Force combatants against the occupation. There have also been prominent British Jewish campaigns: notably, in 2007, Independent Jewish Voices published "A Time to Speak out" with signatories such as Mike Leigh and Jacqueline Rose.

Testimonies to Palestinian besiegement, territorial fragmentation, and disenfranchisement continue to emerge despite the chilling effect of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's expansive "Working Definition of Antisemitism"

adopted in 2016, which attempts to define what can be said about Israel.[1] UK opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn's initial demurral about the IHRA definition and his purported reluctance to tackle antisemitism in the Labour party may have been factors in the 2019 electoral result that ended more than three years of Brexit prevarication.[3] Accusations of Labour antisemitism are compromised by several factors: efforts to deflect attention from the government's anti-immigration policies; amplification by supporters of Israel (Sabbagh 2018);[4] and, as a leaked internal report (April 2020) suggests, the impeding of its investigation by anti-Corbyn factions within Labour. It seems likely that antisemitism was weaponised. Nevertheless, a *perception* of Labour antisemitism informed the Brexit conversation (and endures).[5]

Guardian journalist Hadley Freeman says that she wrote *House of Glass* (2020a), the biography of her grandmother Sala Glass,

in the shadow of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election. Neither of these political shifts were about keeping out the Jews, but they were about keeping out immigrants, and the story of the Glasses was one of immigration, from Poland to France, and France to America. Alongside that, antisemitism was on the rise throughout Europe in a way I never thought I'd see in my lifetime, on both the right and the left. (2020b)

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[1] The IHRA definition begins: 'Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic', http://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism

[3] This is supported by a poll conducted by Conservative Lord Ashcroft in early 2020 but has not definitively been proven.

[4] Attempts to reduce legitimate criticism of Israel to antisemitism have historical precedence: Zionist ideologue Eyal Weizmann commented in 1921 that "Zionist ideals may have upset some Arabs and some British anti-Semites", in Thompson's (2019) view "casually conflating [...] anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism [in] a shameless rhetorical tactic that was to take root" (123).

[5] Corbyn was criticized in the mainstream press as well as prominent Jewish newspapers: Sabbagh (2018) cites examples from *The Times of Israel, The Guardian*, *The New Statesman*, and *The Independent*.

This is a telling entanglement of antisemitism with hostility toward immigration. As I show, contemporary British literature also cites the Holocaust as a template for what exclusionary Brexit policies could lead to. However, this carries a double risk: of reducing racism to antisemitism and occluding ways in which the Holocaust already prevails over Palestinian history. Teasing out these differences does not mean denying the persistence of antisemitism, sometimes under the alibi of Palestinian advocacy.[7]

Let us remember that trenchant critiques of Israeli policy and practice are expressed by British and other Jews. An editorial in *Jewish Quarterly* in the wake of the 2008-9 Israeli war on Gaza suggests that "Zionism was at one time the unifying force of Anglo Jewry and is now the most divisive" (Alderman 2009, 52), as is reflected in Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* (2010). The novel lampoons British Jews, notably Libor Sevcik, with his reverence for "Issrrae", and Sam Finkler, who publicly condemns the "Israyeli" state (putatively pronounced the Arabic way) and leads high-profile group the ASHamed Jews. This debate is refracted via luxuriously philosemitic (so appropriately monikered) Julian Treslove, who euphemistically refers to Jews as Finklers. Jacobson reserves the most excoriating criticism for anti-Zionists and exposes persistent, sometimes violent British antisemitism. However, his novel also self-satirises via moderate convert Tyler (Finkler's wife and Treslove's lover), who is tired of British Jews "endlessly falling out in public" (Jacobson 2010a, 121).

The eponymous difficulty with names implies the persistence of antisemitism and also illustrates that, for many, "Israel exists only poetically, in the imaginations of those who cannot adequately describe themselves without it" (Jacobson 2010b, 22). Ruth Gilbert (2013) sees *The Finkler Question* as displacing British-Jewish domestic anxieties on to Israel (92), though the risks of being overtly Jewish in Britain itself are also illustrated. Jacobson (2010b)

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[7] British charity Community Security Trust (CST) cites 1805 antisemitic incidents in 2019, including a 25% rise in violent assaults. 505 incidents referred to Israel, the Middle East, or Zionism, of which "63 directly compared or equated Israel with the Nazis" (Sherwood 2020, n.p.).

has described Israel as a figure of speech for "emotions which originate somewhere else entirely" (22) – in unresolved tensions in British Jewish identity – articulating a defining extraterritoriality in British Jewish literature (Cheyette, 1996). Such outsourcing, however, presupposes a narrow lens. Israel is not a metaphor for several generations of Palestinians whose defining experience is dislocation, not least due to toponymicide.

The Finkler Question portrays a growing crisis of multiculturalism (in which Jews have figured oddly)[8] commonly understood to have contributed to the Brexit crisis. The exclusionary, indeed racist, rhetoric of the Brexit referendum and its aftermath is historically triggering for minority communities that include British Jews. However, British "colonial remains" pertaining to Middle Eastern contexts, notably to Britain's historical relationship to Palestine/Israel, have still only partially been broached in contemporary literature.

Circling a Brexit blindspot: other Others in contemporary British literature

The British-European relationship historically operates in relation to wider geopolitical imperatives that include the need to maintain stability in, if not control over, the Middle East. The longevity of this entanglement is captured in Justin Butcher's (2018) *Walking to Jerusalem: Blisters, Hope and Other Facts on the Ground*, which reconstructs the performative activism of the "Just Walk" Butcher initiated with human rights charity Amos Trust. This involved, "in the year of Brexit" (following the referendum of 2016), "traversing the [European] continent from west to east" (Butcher 2018, 35). The long walk passes through sites that testify to the forging of European identity in relation to Jerusalem in particular, through Crusading, then colonial history. This culminated between the two world wars. Butcher observes whilst in France that, in the aftermath of the 1917 Battle of Arras, the

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[8] Due to lack of clarity about whether Jewishness is defined by religion, ethnicity, or cultural identity, and a tendency towards assimilation, the British Jewish community has "failed to get a place at the table of multiculturalism" despite "lessons its diasporic story might have a for a multicultural nation" (Kuhn-Harris and Ben Gidley 2010, 7).

British General in command – Edmund Allenby – was reassigned as leader of the Egyptian Expeditionary Forces (69-71). Allenby would lead the British takeover of Jerusalem later that year.

Introducing *Walking to Jerusalem*, Robert Cohen suggests that the Balfour Centenary was "an anniversary likely to be little remembered by the general public in the UK" but that was "hugely significant to Palestinians who date their suffering from this act of British imperial hubris" (Butcher, 2018, xiii). A touchstone is Edward Said's (1999) reference to the Palestinians as "the victims of the victims, the refugees of the refugees" (n.p.). Butcher recasts Balfour as also "precipitat[ing] a century of dispossession, conflict and suffering" (Butcher 2018, 3). The Just Walk is conceived as "penance for Britain's historic responsibility" for the violent establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, as solidarity with Palestinians for whom a right of return has since then denied, and as a call for equal rights in contemporary Palestine/Israel (3). *Walking to Jerusalem* underlines Britain's relationship to the modern Middle East, a history echoed more subtly in other literary attempts to grapple with British withdrawal from European union, as we will see.

Life writing genres are amenable to an alignment of literary and political representation due to their authenticating and witnessing strategies. However, as Gilbert (2013) points out, life writing is replete with fantasy and affect, reflecting "highly charged associations and disassociations" (85). Jacobson's *Roots Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews* (1994), for example, distinguishes between Jewish-Arab "family quarrels" and a more complex enmity towards "enemies of my soul": British critics of Israel (339). Fiction also unfolds on both explicit and less conscious relational ground, exploring and expanding collective structures of feeling and memory. "BrexLit" has thus far tended to track national complexes, including the "untimely traces" of racist and colonial history (Gardiner 2018, 110). We might expect it to project alternative alignments, whether with an idealised version

of Europe that ostensibly "translates cosmopolitanism's universal abstracts into pragmatic practices" (Shaw 2018, 16) or on a planetary scale. Kristian Shaw suggests, however, that "the first wave of post-Brexit fiction largely seems to be detailing the specific frailties and parochial trivialities of an insular and diminished small island" (28).

John Lanchester's (2019) *The Wall* provides a corrective to this insularity, also unmooring readers from relatively familiar dystopian "pleasures". In Part I, a young Defender narrates, in quotidian detail, national service on a Wall that runs the length of the North Sea, brutally dividing British subjects from "the Others". Part II reveals that Defenders are indeed the outer edge of the nation; they are expendable, marginally differentiated from Others enslaved by the state as "Help". Although the Wall turns out to be infiltrated, its (in)operative binary logic predetermines the narrator's fate: in Part III, he is cast out to sea. This novel starts to map precarious life beyond the nation-state, dwelling with fragile floating communities that offer hospitality in the most reduced of circumstances.

Lanchester says: "One of the things about the wall in the book is that it is not a metaphor for anything else [...] We had this period when walls were coming down around the world and now, just as an empirical fact, they are springing up all over the place" (Allardice 2019, n.p.). One fact on the ground is a wall begun in 2000, variously known as the Israeli West Bank barrier, separation fence, security wall, and apartheid wall and described in al-Madhoun's (2018) *Fractured Destinies* as the 'nine-meter wall that fed on [Palestinian] land' (103), that will eventually stretch 440 miles. This wall may also inform the electrified fence erected on common land that features in Ali Smith's *Autumn*. The fence encloses "a piece of land that's got nothing on it" (Smith 2017, 55), echoing discourses about *vacuum domiciliation* exported from England to the New World from the late sixteenth century and evident in Zionist maps which "render Palestinians as absentees on the land where they lived" (Fields 2017, 14–15). Resistant villagers in *Autumn* are described as "bombarding

[the] fence with people's histories" (Smith 2017, 255), recalling uses of the West Bank Wall as canvas for written and graphic protest.

Such (non-)citations of the Israeli-Palestinian context are symptomatic. Although *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (Eaglestone 2018) emphasizes a critical humanism cognisant of histories of anti- and postcolonialism, it draws less than one might expect on Edward Said and makes only passing reference to the Middle East. Lyndsey Stonebridge (2018) cites human rights lawyer Philippe Sands's argument that the path to Brexit began with Iraq (9). She links this to increasing disillusionment with a mendacious British government, connecting the Profumo scandal of the early 1960s that forms a sub-narrative of Smith's *Autumn* to the "dodgy dossier" underpinning the allied invasion of 2003. But what of Britain's longer history of bad faith in the Middle East?[9] Ankhi Mukherjee (2018) approaches relevant ground in her analysis of Rawi Hage's (2008) *Cockroach* as an unassimilable, "underground" alternative to racist representations of dispersed populations exemplified by David Cameron's 2015 reference to "swarm[s]" of (notably Syrian) migrants coming across the Mediterranean (Mukherjee 2018, 76–77). Other Mediterranean connections could be pursued. Hage's (2006) *De Niro's Game* is also concerned with undocumented migrancy but underpinning his corpus is the Lebanese war of 1975–90, key ingredients of which were Palestinian militancy and Israeli invasion. Hage frames this as pathological, dehumanising, collective regional trauma, as do many writers from the region.

By impressionistically engaging "the greatest refugee crisis since World War II", Mukherjee (2018) risks occluding that the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 – defining modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine/Israel – set in motion crises we see in those countries today (73). Israeli historian Avi Schlaim argues:

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[9] Sands spoke about the need to leverage human rights law against Israel at the 2019 Edward Said London Lecture, "Is Justice Still Possible? Palestine, International Law, and Public Discourse".

Much of the Middle East has been living with a chronic condition for almost a century which I term the post-Ottoman syndrome. Its symptoms are turmoil, instability and a deficit of rights for the peoples of the region. A major cause is the lack of legitimacy of the new political and territorial order that emerged in the wake of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. That state system, in the lands formerly controlled by the Ottomans, was largely the creation of colonial powers and designed to serve their interests. (2015, 17)

At the heart of the Sykes-Picot and Balfour legacy is the Palestinian catastrophe (*al-nakbah*) of 1948 which produced approximately 800,000 refugees, descendants of whom still inhabit camps across the region. The contemporary Palestinian diaspora – populations that have been multiply exiled, including from Syria – tallies in the vicinity of five million people. This refugee crisis has not overtly been represented in "BrexLit" or its criticism to date.

Stranger cities: pockets, portals, and propinquities

In *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000), Linda Grant returns to Mandate Palestine as landscape on to which British "domestic anxieties and fantasies are projected" (Gilbert 2013, 81). The novel also anticipates "BrexLit" critiques of defensive nationalism, championing a heterogeneous (albeit stratified) community and mobile affinities, and critically reflecting on constructions of individual and national identity. I return to *When I Lived in Modern Times*, but first consider Grant's (2019) *A Stranger City*, set in London during the Brexit transition.

    A Stranger City is achronologically organised, formally fractured, and uses multi-perspectival, free indirect narration to represent provisionally intersecting London lives. It highlights the proleptic and analeptic potential of events – history as repetitive and

anticipatory – and privileges chance (and failed) encounters as axes of potential intervention into wider processes of inclusion and exclusion. One of its cast of minor characters is a downwardly-mobile interior designer, part-Jewish by birth, named Francesca. We are introduced to her on the Tube in July 2015 with her husband Alan, who is observing a man verbally abuse an Irishwoman named Chrissie. Later, Chrissie, a nurse, will befriend someone traumatised by the London Bridge attack of June 2017. In February 2016, Chrissie unknowingly walks past a woman, known as DB17, who drowns and is buried anonymously in the opening scene.

Grant (2019) says that "the origins of the novel go back to 1992 when I stood at the grave of an unknown woman who had drowned herself in the Thames" and who becomes the subject of a documentary that Grant reviews for *The Times* (323). *When I Lived in Modern Times* testifies to the author's longstanding interest in anonymous, performative, and other-defined identities. But Grant chooses to update the setting in *A Stranger City*, which clearly alludes, indeed makes explicit reference to Brexit (318). The drowned woman is eventually named as Valentina Popov, a woman born just "the wrong side" of the border between Moldova and Romania: on the Russian, rather than European side (308). Popov was an "illegal" who worked as a cleaner for wealthy Russians 'unconcerned about legalities' (308).

A Stranger City is not only about emblematic strangers on the cusp of Brexit; it estranges London. Francesca and Alan move into a house in gentrifying Wall Park, "a forgotten enclave behind the railway line" and "a tiny sequin in the fabric of London" in which Dutch, Cypriot, British-Asian, and white Britons live, though this diversity decreases as the Brexit years unfold (Grant 2019, 77, 76). In one episode, Francesca is guided by two elderly neighbours to a crease within this urban fabric (219). They pass through a house that both freezes time and acts as a portal. A back room smells of bacon fat, grocery deliveries comprise "[l]uncheon meat, spam, peas, baked beans, cling peaches, condensed milk" (218),

and the front parlour contains old board games and craft items in "biscuits tins bearing the faces of the newly engaged Prince Charles and Lady Di" (219, 220). The old people describe these as "the old ways, how we used to live and what we had to make do with", even as they undercut the promise of generational identification with this version of Englishness. "There were never any Jews here", they demur; "we wouldn't have been tolerated" (220).

When Francesca exits the other side of the house, she finds five streets known as the Island, "a geographical anomaly" in which families over several generations have stabled circus animals – disconcertingly, an elephant resides in a garage – and worked as bin collectors (Grant 2019, 221). This urban oddity, invisible on Google Maps, gives on to a space in which "wetlands lay deep under the deposited rubble from thousands of bombed houses of the Blitz" (225). Looking out on a bleak vista punctuated by football posts, Francesca recalls a childhood trip to another space of exception: a concentration camp in Poland, probably Auschwitz, in which "a formless dun-coloured wilderness under a lowering sky" features "hundreds of brick structures" (226).

The unverifiable cartography of the London locale suggests an uncanny zone haunted by the future as well as the past. Francesca's musings raise possibilities akin to the secret concentration camps that feature in Russell T. Davies' (2019) BBC series *Years and Years*, which accelerates forward from 2019 to 2034. In one of *A Stranger City*'s closing scenes, Pete Dutton – who leads the DB17 investigation – rows up the Thames past prison ships that hold deportees "to be transported [...] back to chemical weapons and nerve gas and aerial bombardment" (Grant 2019, 303). "Nor was it just refugees from war zones", he thinks, "but anyone whose visa had run out or had the wrong paperwork" (303). These are portals at the service of an exclusionary state: "Next, [Pete] thought, they'll pour concrete through the Channel Tunnel" (303-304).

The scene on the Island (a metonymical designation) suggests repeatable historical precedent for a murderous extension of a logic of exclusion. Once again, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, "[t]he country was being emptied of its unwanted population" (257):

> As [Francesca] stood there, a faint hallucination rose in her mind: grey, misty, vague in form in which she saw the whitened grassland covered in temporary structures, a wooden city of sheds housing people no more solid than wraiths dressed in modern clothes, wheeling luggage, holding children, talking on phones, checking screens [...] She could see they were deportees, hemmed in on all sides awaiting arrangements for their future departure. (227)

Francesca describes the scene as a palimpsest, "a surface such as a canvas bearing the traces of many layers of record, re-inscribed over time" (227). She also compares it to a "hypnagogic image [...] rising up in the border between waking and sleep" (228). Post-memory is at stake: the cross-generational collective trauma of European Jews in the wake of the Holocaust. The spectre of antisemitism is one sign that "time was spooling backwards" (210). The point is linked, uncomfortably -- given an often hasty conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism -- to conspiracy theories about a prolonged winter, ascribed by some as "an attempt by Israeli scientist to seed clouds with rainfall to irrigate the Negev desert, permanently affecting the climate" (211).

Alan is somewhat cognisant of the philosemitic flipside of his attraction to Francesca's "sultry dark polished looks" (Grant 2019, 68). The racialisation of this desire is (knowingly) troubling, on one level, but also hints at this novel's assertion of expansive Jewishness. Francesca's grandparents are exiled *Persian* Jews, a fact that invites us to see beyond the coding of the Island scene above in relation to *European* Jewish history. Her

desire for upward mobility is influenced by the general experience of "what it felt like to be the child of an immigrant family whose only purpose was to do better than the previous generation" (28). But we also learn, specifically, that Francesca's grandparents, Younis and Amira, speak Farsi only under the "protective fleece" of night (105). Younis "could smell that life here in England was going through a process of transmutation into something different" although racism is the couple's longstanding experience: upon arrival in Britain forty years previously, they expected genteel sociability but were greeted, instead, by neighbourly "complain[ts] about the smells of our cooking" (105, 106).

Timing suggests that Younis and Amira migrate due to the 1979 revolution that established the Islamic Republic of Iran. A double unhoming precedes ethnic and religious minority status in the UK: "there was no longer a home for them in Persia and no Persia either, except in the memory of its exiles" (Grant 2019, 107). Grant critiques the convulsive exclusions that define the nation on historical cusps – Iran, Germany, Moldova, and Ireland are cited – including this (British) nation at this (Brexit) juncture. Jews in Iran are "barricaded into their synagogues" just as the lives of Middle Eastern exiles in London are "contracted down" to a "little flat [in] a sheltered housing block" (107). *A Stranger City* qualifies Zadie Smith's (2016) memories of London as a convivial "outward-looking city" (n.p.). Its specification of diverse Jewish experience, however, aligns with Grant's wider exploration of multicultural propinquity and individual self-remaking in migrant settings.

When I Lived in Modern Times follows a first-generation British Jew, Evelyn Sert, who travels from London to Palestine in the final years of the Mandate. Evelyn's facility for shapeshifting is an inherited trait: "What could an immigrant child be, except an impersonator?" (Grant 2000, 27). Palestine in the 1940s is imagined as a place where Jewish identity might cohere but which is, in reality, a society in flux in which Eastern European "ghetto" Jews (Oestjuden), Middle Eastern Jews (Mizrahim), North African Jews

(Sephardim), pioneering Jews of the first Aliyah (return), hardy *sabra* of the kibbutzim, "tough Jews" fighting the occupiers, British administrators, and Muslim and Christian Palestinians uneasily coexist (166). Evelyn is compelled by specific circumstances to assume a range of avatars: she enters Palestine as a religious pilgrim, is briefly a Kibbutz worker, passes as a gentile hairdresser, and is a reluctant spy for the Irgun. In this "raw, strained" society, she identifies most with the British "oppressive power [,] the enemy", due to an internalised, civilizational sense of modernity (106). The British, however, eventually expel her – she may be perceived as less than British but she is certainly not the right kind of (compliant) Jew in the eyes of the mandatory powers.

Grant's novel is attentive to prior affiliations which puncture an artificially created community and to its classed, linguistic, and ethnic hierarchies. *When I Lived in Modern Times* also illustrates that the promise of Balfour did not cancel out British antisemitism. Evelyn's militant lover "Johnny" summarizes British antipathy toward Jewish modernity that is widely evident in the novel: "Tel Aviv is just a city with too many Jews making a mess in their precious desert. They don't want anything here but picturesque Arabs" (Grant 2000, 157). This reminds us that the Balfour promise was consolidated despite objections by British representatives in Palestine. The pro-Israeli governmental commemoration of the Balfour centenary cited earlier (Thompson 2019) reflects a post-9/11 paradigm shift in British attitudes toward Arabs conflated with Islam.

Evelyn's naïve perspective also exposes, albeit through emphatic representational absence, the growing marginalisation of the indigenous population, "invisible men and women, [sinking] into the landscape" (Grant 2000, 46). She returns, more informed, to Israel fifty years later although, with no proof of Jewish identity, she can only get a tourist visa. Perhaps because of this lack of paper evidence, she asserts that Zionism is premised on stories, whereas for "the Arabs of Palestine" – she still stops short of saying Palestinians –

history is embedded in the land and, without that, "they're not just DPs [Displaced Persons], they're an abstract idea – a cause. That's not a human being. This is the great wrong we did them" (239). She attempts to return to the Arab neighbourhood of Manshieh in which she hid from the British as a young woman, to discover it was razed to the ground in the 1948 war. Evelyn's investments in Israel are reframed by her more mature critique of its practices of settler colonial power.

Elderly Evelyn also reflects on the merits of "dirty and chaotic" Tel Aviv. In a pointed allusion to Israeli participation in the Lebanese war, she thinks: "Now that we've destroyed Beirut [Tel Aviv] is the only city on this far Mediterranean coast that can really be called the Levant, a mongrel metropolis of aliens among aliens" (Grant 2000, 254). The term "Levantine" originated in the sixteenth century to describe those who lived on the Mediterranean coast and served as intermediaries between European merchants and Ottoman subjects. It became associated, in colonial discourse, with racial impurity and threatening borderline identities and in Israel continues negatively to adhere to Arabs and "Oriental" Jews (Hochberg 2007, 46). A divergent tradition, however, to which Evelyn implicitly subscribes, deploys Levantinism as cosmopolitanism, to describe something "not exclusively eastern or western, Christian, Jewish, or Moslem [sic]" but "more like a prism whose various facets are joined by a sharp edge of differences" (Kahanoff 1951, 247). One negative characteristic of "post-Ottoman syndrome" (Schlaim 2013) is the propagation of ethnic, cultural, and religious homogeneity. Critical Levantinism is a conceptual alternative, notably to the "ethno-nationalist" politics of memory that underpins Israel's "logic of partition" (Hochberg 2007, 3, 141).

When I Lived in Modern Times suggests ways of triangulating British, Israeli, and Palestinian history and of leveraging cosmopolitan alternatives to the nation. Robert Young (2012) has suggested that postcolonial critics disinter the "diversity that preceded nation

formation", citing the Ottoman Empire as "a long-lasting system of comparative tolerance of diversity and cultural syncretism that was only destroyed by European imperial greed" (33, 34). Young urges attention to the heterogeneity "hidden beneath the surface of modern national states" as "postcolonial remains" (33, 32). In *When I Lived in Modern Times*, Evelyn's alignment with "a mongrel metropolis of aliens among aliens" (Grant 2000, 254) occludes peoples who have lived continuously in the region for millennia. However, Grant's repeated focus on diverse cities composed of pockets, portals, and provisional propinquities implies "a cultural and political stance, operating within and against the current reality of separatist homogeneous nationalism" (Hochberg 2007, 45). Her work, whether set historically or in the Brexit present, champions untidy diversity and reveals the dangers of performative national homogeneity.

Connected Histories, Reimagined Futures

What remains is to approach the nexus of Brexit, Israel, and Palestine from a British-Palestinian angle. Raba'i al-Madhoun's (2018) *Fractured Destinies* was originally published as *Masa'ir: kunshirtu al-hulukust wa-l-nakba* (2015), literally "Destinies: A Concerto of the Holocaust and the Nakba". Although published before the 2016 referendum, its 2018 translation bestows "BrexLit" *post-hoc* resonance. The novel's emphasis on (re)connection and remaining despite the historical fault line of the Holocaust/Nakba accrues meaning when read in awareness of British colonial intervention in the Middle East *and* in the context of its divisive departure from Europe.

The four "movements" of *Fractured Destinies* track, non-chronologically, a British-Palestinian couple's trip to Israel in 2012. Primary narrator, Walid Dahman, ghosted by the

author who arrives simultaneously at Tel Aviv airport,[10] returns with his wife Julie to fulfil her mother's wishes that her ashes be scattered in Acre, erstwhile Palestine. Walid is described as "a British man [...] who had sown Palestine in the cells of his body and made them into pools of mint" (al-Madhoun 2018, 14). His Muslim family fled Jaffa for Gaza in 1948 and are now scattered across the world. Julie is a British-Palestinian of mixed Christian heritage: her mother Ivana Arkadian, a Palestinian-Armenian, met her father John Littlehouse, a British medical officer, in mandatory Palestine. Ivana was expelled by her own community in 1948 for marrying "a hated British colonizer" and her parents' fled two months later: they die in camps in Lebanon during the 1975–90 war (16).

One possible model for the novel, given its original title and polyphonic style, is Joaquín Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez", intended to transport the listener to another time and place (and sampled by both Lebanese icon Fairuz and Israeli star Rita). Before they leave, Walid and Julie hear a group playing this concerto as they walk along London's South Bank, amidst "comings and goings of every kind, with men and women of different ages and nationalities sharing their happinesses and their griefs on the river's wide banks" (al-Madhoun 2018, 27). The fact that London is sketched as a hospitable, multi-ethnic alternative to Israel provokes unanticipated pathos in readers invested in British cosmopolitanism.

This novel structurally entwines histories of bicultural heritage and exile. It also explores the implications of "remaining" and complicates the notion of return. Ivana's dying wishes are "to reserve myself a place in the [Resurrection Day queue] before the heavens are filled with settlers who have forced the Palestinians out in this world and want to appropriate their places in the next" (23). Her bespoke urn is inscribed "She died here ... She died there", equating Palestinian life with terminal displacement.[11] Walid's cousin Jnin -- a writer, as will

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[10] Walid Dahman shares biographical characteristics with al-Madhoun and is also the protagonist of his *The Lady from Tel Aviv* (*al-Sayyida min Tal Abib*, 2009/2013).

[11] Although uncited, the quotation echoes Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti's 2011 memoir *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (*Walidtu hunak, walidtu huna*, 2009).

become significant -- is a Palestinian born in Ramla (now Israel) who refuses to leave Jaffa. Her husband Basim, a Palestinian from Bethlehem (in the West Bank), has no employment or social security rights in Israel – their story reveals the fatuity of the category "Israeli Arab" as well as the divide between "1948ers" (Israeli-resident Palestinians) and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

The category of the "present absentee", peculiar to Israeli law, refers to internally displaced peoples (IDPs) and their descendants who still live within Israel/Palestine; it relates to property acquisition laws that made the existence of an Israeli state viable (see Ch. 1 of Erekat 2019). Walid's family home is inhabited by the descendants of Yemini Jews who occupied it in the 1950s. Julie attempts to return Ivana's ashes to a house requisitioned for a Jewish family, originally Holocaust refugees. As local guide Fatima puts it: "Your mother died in London a stranger from Acre? Well, just look at us here, strangers and refugees in our own country" (al-Madhoun 2018, 8). Partial returns show that national identity, citizenship, and residency are precariously articulated. These categories are rigidly separated for Basim who defines himself as "a virtual citizen", even "absent absentee" (91). They have also come apart for vulnerable British residents: recall the "unknown woman" of *A Stranger City* (2019, 323) and the Windrush scandal that broke in 2018.

Al-Madhoun's novel is centrally concerned with the politics of historiography that define insiders and outsiders. When Walid visits Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, outside Jerusalem, his response to the Hall of Names is affective and haunting:

I studied the names, and examined the features of the victims – who continued to scrutinize me as I looked at their faces – and tried to gauge their feelings at the moment the pictures had been taken. Moments that would no longer be there for people who had

been reduced to skeletons or whose corpses had disappeared entirely. I lifted my head to follow the names upward until my gaze reached the hall's circular extremity, open to the sky. (al-Madhoun 2018, 230)

The implications of the scene then change:

I felt like the faces of thousands of Palestinians – some of whom I knew, but most of whom I did not – gazed down on me. They were pushing and shoving, as if they wanted to come down into the halls of the museum, spread through them, and take their places as victims. (230)

Walid "cried for those who were crowded together in the sky, looking for a place to assemble their names" (231). He takes a cable car to the Zikhron ha-Filastinim or Museum of Palestinian Memories, named in Hebrew but flying the Palestinian national flag (234). This impossible *lieu de mémoire* is the centrepiece of an alternate reality in which the 1993 Oslo Accords created a "homeland for everyone" (234). It is built on the site of Deir Yassin, site of a 1948 massacre disavowed by Israelis for whom everything before Independence is "a void" (235). At Deir Yassin today, one really sees only "forests and a distant settlement" (239).

Al-Madhoun's novel is a testament to this occluded tragedy, refracted through a draft novel that Walid is reading: Jnin's story of her uncle The Remainer -- a freighted term in the post-Brexit reading context. Walid recalls that The Remainer, his father, would travel every Friday to the Deir Yassin ruins "until he had written the names of more than a hundred and sixty victims, each name on a piece of stone, which still exist in the form of a small pyramid near the cypress tree" (al-Madhoun 2018, 239). The use of *mise-en-abyme* suggests literature's capacity both to retain history and to transcend it because Jnin's novel is given

two endings. In her manuscript *Filastini Tays* ("A Stubborn Palestinian"), The Remainer carries placards of peace in Arabic and Hebrew to a Jaffa square, sings the Internationale, and is mortally wounded by the security forces. However, in the final scene of *Fractured Destinies*, Walid emerges as the author to directly address the reader:

> [in *Filastini Tays*] Mahmoud Dahman died, the man who was my father and who played his own part in this novel [*Fractured Destinies*,] the stubbornest Palestinian in the book [...] But The Remainer didn't actually die. I rebelled against my closing scene of the novel you have read, a probable scene of death, in the light of the rise to power of the Israeli right. (250)

Al-Madhoun's emphasis on enlaced histories rejects an ethno-nationalist version of the state, exemplified by the "Basic Law", adopted in 2018, that defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. The novel's ethical humanism similarly strikes a chord, particularly in translation, with the Brexit dispensation.

Literature "is able to articulate the powerful effects of [the] past whilst also drawing on the complexities of the present" because it can "stand at a slight distance from polemic" and transmit "subtle emotional complexities" (Gilbert 2013, 3, 88). While British Jewish history "produces a rich generative tension that is not always easy to digest" (10), *Fractured Destinies* invites capacious Palestinian identifications. This article calls for a more consistent triangulation between British, Jewish, and Palestinian reckonings with history. As I finish writing it, BBC Radio 4 is airing a serialised version of Colum McCann's (2020) *Apeirogon*. An apeirogon – a shape with an infinite number of sides – is an apt figure for the ways in which creative literature performatively complicates ways in which we "mark a date in

history" (Derrida in Borradori 2003, 86), whether this is Britain's exit from Europe or the events almost simultaneously commemorated in January 2020.

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