**Maurice Ebileeni. *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2022. Pp. xxv, 283. US $75.00 (cloth), $29.95 (paper)**

Maurice Ebileeni’s *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World* was published before the unprecedented Hamas incursion into southern Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel’s ensuing genocidal war on Gaza. However, Ebileeni’s monograph contributes to a sustained critical effort to ‘explor[e] the manifold long-term cultural and literary consequences of the Palestinian Nakba [catastrophe]’ that has unfolded since 1948 (172). As a welcome counterweight both to material devastation and to polarized views on Israel/Palestine accentuated from October 2023, this book emphasizes the ‘dynamic condition of Palestinian cultural production in the global context’ and the need for Palestinian literary scholarship to further develop as ‘a critical multifaceted space’ that accounts for here/there and inside/outside as constellations de-sedimenting ‘home’ (22, 45).

Ebileeni’s awareness of the diversity of Palestinian literature is shaped by his own ‘Palestinian predicament’ as an academic at the University of Haifa, with Israeli citizenship, who grew up in Denmark (xxii). A moving Preface charts the author’s inventory of traces, to echo Edward Said (citing Antonio Gramsci) in the Preface to *Orientalism* (2003, 25). Palestinian literature has always been (recalling Said’s 1999 memoir) ‘out of place’ and partly fashioned through geography, community, and language loss. Ebileeni hails from Tarshiha, close to the village of Fassuta memorialized in Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques* (2001; in Hebrew, 1986), that imagined Palestinanness as an ‘interlacing’ of a ‘diversity of deterritorialized experiences in the absence of a successful nation-building project’ (6). Ebileeni’s story represents one of many different and ongoing ‘itineraries of Palestinian displacement’ (171).

Palestinian writers produce ‘no single story’ and, while Arabic is the national language of Palestine, the Palestinian literary canon is polylingual (16–17). *Being There, Being Here* leans substantially towards Anglophone circulation both in terms of a writing language and in translation. It has been critically established that Palestinian writing flourishes in English due to competing ‘rhetorics of belonging’ in the Palestine/Israel context, extensive Palestinian and wider Arab diaspora, and a spike in interest in Arab literatures in English this century (Bernard, 2013; Atia and Moore, forthcoming). This book insists on the diverse social circumstances that inform a Palestinian writer’s choice of language and thematic focus, as well as the core political context of occupation, displacement, fragmentation, and enclosure. Ebileeni judiciously deploys reading knowledge across English, Arabic, Hebrew, and (to a lesser extent) Danish and Spanish. In a context-setting first chapter, he draws on a minor transnationalism paradigm (Lionnet and Shih, 2005) to focalize work ‘on the margins of Palestinian consciousness in the fluid space between the local and the global’ (46). This sets up Palestinian literary writing as a transnational mosaic of writing in multiple minor languages, allowing us to understand simultaneous centrifugal and centripetal tendencies in Palestinian identity formation and representation.

Ebileeni’s exploration of Palestinian literature along ‘local and transnational axes’ also illuminates how it ‘sets in motion polylingual processes of intertextuality’ (30). An exemplary case is US-Palestinian Susan Abulhawa’s recycling of elements of Ghassan Kanafani’s ‘Returning to Haifa’ (2000; 1969 in Arabic) in her *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), explored in Chapter Three alongside Sayed Kashua’s *Second Person Singular* (2012; 2006 in Hebrew). Ebileeni tactfully critiques Abulhawa’s seeming adherence to a fixed script of nationalist emergency that passes through ‘recognizable thematic and historic portholes’ (57). In his reading of tropes of passing in *Mornings in Jenin* and *Second Person Singular*, he also shows how Abulhawa and other authors ‘experimentally destabilize established orders of authority between Arabs and Jews in contemporary contexts of conflict’ (80). Moreover, in emphasizing ‘the passage from the pain of the fertile Palestinian woman to the desire of the childless Jewish woman’ Abulhawa borrows from Kanafani’s earlier story (89), Ebileeni suggests she continues a tradition whereby Palestinian writers foreground gaps and tensions in the prevailing national script, particularly as it pertains to women’s experiences.

There is no archetypal Palestinian woman, as we see in fiction by women of Palestinian heritage in both English and Arabic. Ebileeni analyses work by Abulhawa, Susan Muaddi Darraj, and Randa Jarrar, as well as Maysaloun Hammoud’s film *Bar Bahar* (*In Between*, 2017), across Chapters One, Two, and Three. In Chapter Four, which spans canonical and contemporary fiction and memoirs, Ebileeni foregrounds women’s embodied and sexual experiences as irreducible to an ‘androcentric national script’ and symbology (113), whilst warning against naïve invocations of an optimally inclusive future Palestine. We could potentially also add feminocentric constellations of (un)belonging in recent fiction by khulud khamis (*Haifa Fragments*, 2015), Adania Shibli (*Minor Detail*, 2017/2020), and Isabella Hammad (*Enter Ghost*, 2024)

In Chapter Five, with reference to memoirs by Fawaz Turki, Mourid Barghouti, Lina Meruane, and Annemarie Jacir’s film *Salt of this Sea* (2008), Ebileeni pursues ambivalences towards return. If Barghouti’s *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (2012; 2009 in Arabic) informs Ebileeni’s title, underpinning both is Mahmoud Darwish’s observation that ‘no-one can return to an imaginary place or to the person he once was’ (147). The extension of this thought is to ponder what, ‘[i]n the absence of a chronotopical Palestine, [...] will future generations of Palestinians return to, and for what end [...]?’ and what ‘new’ Palestine would be able to house such disparate Palestinian identities (161, 149). The author speculates on the contours, hierarchies, and character of Palestine 2048. His conclusion resonates interestingly with Comma Press’s experimental anthology *Palestine+100: A Century After the Nakba* (2019) which, although not discussed here, represents an affirmative response to Ebileeni’s query about whether Anglophone Palestinian literature can afford – given its rhetorical claim to national existence – to be experimental in style (56).

*Being There, Being Here* makes strikingly nuanced arguments in each chapter and presents a powerful case for the importance of creative imaginings of nationhood in a context of proliferating displacements. Thematic coverage of Anglophone mediation between Orientalism and nationalism (Chapter Two), (tres)passing (Chapter Three), gender and sexual politics (Chapter Four), and exile and return (Chapter Five) allows for wide-reaching analyses across a transnational, transgenerational, polylingual Palestinian corpus. Women authors and artists, not all of them cis-heterosexual, are well represented, as well. There are, inevitably, areas into which the book could expand further, including an extension of the ‘minor literature’ paradigm to experimental writers in Arabic, such as Shibli, and writing in English from other contexts, including the West Bank and Gaza. The book perpetuates a critical emphasis on narrative fiction and memoir and there is not as much attention to literary form as we find in some other places (Abu-Manneh, 2016; Farag, 2016). The priority of this book, though, is to stress multiple Palestinian realities and their polylingual expression and here it makes an incisive – and beautifully written – intervention. *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World* is essential reading both for new and seasoned readers of Palestinian, postcolonial/decolonial, and world/global literatures. Ebileeni writes with an acute awareness that life for many Palestinians in the settler colonial context of Israel/Palestine was already ‘dire’ (25) before October 2023. His book is a powerful reminder of the imaginative and critical dynamism of Palestinian creative culture in a context of narrowing political horizons and a devastating 2023/24 war on the Palestinian people.

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Bio

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