Introduction: Writing Palestine in the Present

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This Special Issue is dedicated to Palestinian women's creative and critical resistance to genocide.[1] It grapples with the challenges of representation in chronic and acute conditions of territorial dispossession, political limbo, economic siege, enclosure, cultural dismantlement, and community trauma – an ongoing Palestinian catastrophe. What can be told of the experiences of people living through a televised mass loss of life, infrastructure, and home? How can these experiences be expressed and what might they demand of different audiences? The Issue responds to a devastating present in terms both of continuity and profound rupture in the fabric of reality for Palestinians. Our specific focus is on how women, from across the fractured spaces of occupied Palestine and its various diasporas, narrate Palestinian experience through acts of witnessing, testimony, protest, resistance and creative *ṣumūd*

1 On naming the genocide in Gaza, see: Leader Maynard (2025); De Vogli *et al* (2025; 2026). Many of our contributors emphasise historical continuities in attempts to erase the Palestinians in their historic homeland that date back at least to 1948 (known as the Nakba).

(endurance).[2] In what we hope is an ethical response to an existential crisis, we bring together relatively short essays, spanning scholarly and more personal modes, in a tenuously sutured, prismatic, and polyvocal collection. We use 'suture' not to suggest healing or cohesion but, rather, to acknowledge how our contributors collectively respond to a state of emergency.

This project, which takes an unorthodox form for a scholarly journal, was conceived dialogically between Palestinian and non-Palestinian editors who work on Palestinian and wider Arab(ic) literature and culture from different locations and orientations. Shada Shahin was born and lives in Beit Jala, a small city near Bethlehem, where she works. Ruth Abou Rached has been a cross-language community worker as well as a scholar of Arabic, translation, and literary studies for many years. Lindsey Moore has longstanding scholarly commitments to Palestinian and wider regional literature, culture, and colleagues. Our collaboration unfolds across uneven temporalities and asymmetrical positions of exposure to Palestinian catastrophe and its diverse locations of displacement. These differences shape –

[2] *Ṣumūd* refers to a Palestinian ethic of steadfastness that links survival, presence, and resistance. Emerging in public discourse after the 1967 war and institutionalised in the 1970s through the PLO and civil resistance movements, *ṣumūd* initially denoted remaining on the land under occupation and refusing displacement, before developing into a broader moral and political framework that equated enduring presence with defiance (Khalili 2007; Peteet 2009). *Ṣumūd* exceeds physical endurance, functioning as a relational and psycho-political subjectivity cultivated through collective struggle and everyday practices that refuse colonial authority and sustain life, meaning, and futurity under conditions of domination (Meari 2014; Richter-Devroe 2011).

we hope for the better – both how the issue is assembled and the terms on which editorial decisions have been made. They have generated intensive discussions about how cross-language mediations are handled, experiences are framed, and proximity to an ongoing war, mediated via different languages, formats and registers, alters what it means to write, read, translate – and witness – responsibly.

In this age of online collaboration, Shahin's editorial contributions from within Palestine, specifically the Bethlehem governorate, did not impose procedural limitations so much as sharpen the ethical stakes of representation with each lexical, tonal, and framing decision. For Shahin, editorial work, as well as translation of both her interview with Ahlam Bsharat and Aya Abu Nasser's essay, occurred in close proximity to ongoing settler violence in the so-called West Bank as well as the war against compatriots in Gaza.[3] A besieged reality forecloses the distance that would allow violence to be reworked into objective scholarly engagement, if there is ever such a pristine thing.

[3] There is no uncontested toponymy in a context of settler colonialism and occupation, in which Hebraised cartography, Arabic toponymicide, and Palestinian memoricide are embedded as state-sanctioned principles. As the late poet and memoirist Mourid Barghouti puts it, 'the battle for language becomes a battle for the land' (Barghouti 2003; see also, *inter alia*, Peteet 2016; Fields 2017). The West Bank and Gaza Strip are colonial reconfigurations of what were (translated as) Eastern Palestine and Gaza District prior to 1948. For these reasons, we practice editorial fidelity to the toponymy our contributing authors elect.

For Abou Rached and Moore, editing from the north-west of England involved a different set of responsibilities, possibilities, and constraints. One might assume that geographical distance enables a different lens. However, and as many of the essays in this collection demonstrate, residents of Palestine routinely reach imaginatively, politically, and empathetically beyond their immediate lived context, and each of the contributors to this Issue is attentive to issues of language, mediation and representation. Certainly, though, location in the global north (differently) sharpens an awareness of political and academic discursive norms in English and the (non-homogeneous) West that too often occlude the complexity of Palestinian lived experience and the validity of first-person testimony, instead privileging coherence and recognisability. 'The gesture of inclusion', argues Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, 'is not innocent, but instead often function[s] to contain our voices within a predefined space' (2014: 1). Palestinians in general, and Palestinian women in particular, are often 'denied an identity in the plural' (2). Too often, we see that a homogeneous 'Palestinian' is deemed easier to grasp than the complex and often contradictory textures of lived experience.

Reflexive attention to the geographical sites, linguistic modes, and formal structures, styles, and genres of Palestinian representation is vital because, historically, Palestinian survivors and their descendants have been perceived as less 'credible' (see Masalha 2012; Baroud 2013). More specifically, Palestinian women's testimonies, particularly when testifying to rape and violence, have been deemed 'unreliable' (Nashef 2022: 568). Mohammed El-Kurd reminds us that the politics of narration for Palestinians is still enmeshed – particularly in the mainstream media – with a 'politics of appeal' through which testimony is required to speak of 'anguished cries [that] exist outside of history and politics' and injuries 'without a culprit' (2023: 22). Palestinian 'informants', to use Gayatri Spivak's well-known formula (*inter alia* 1999), are enjoined endlessly to repeat that they are not a terrorist or supporter of terrorism

but, rather, an erudite ‘survivor’ who invites sympathy whilst ensuring the safety and comfort of her/his interlocutor. Women in Palestine, however, claim the right – in the words of activist Areen Eideh – ‘to speak, reflect and grow without having to apologise for being angry, emotional or uncertain’ (Eideh 2025: n. pag.). We honour this principle here, resisting what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls the ‘singular monolithic subject’ (1988: 61) and insisting upon a fuller range of life and emotion.

Our geographical locations, networks, and linguistic and cultural fluencies have sensitised us to how positionality conditions what writing – and rewriting, in the case of translation – aspires to do, how it circulates, and where its limits lie. Narration is repeatedly insisted upon as a mode of resistance to a long history of dispossession and erasure, as Edward Said called for in 1984 and the widespread championing of Palestinian literature on social media since October 2023 attests. However, writing cannot, in isolation, undo the structural conditions that seek to render Palestinian lives and voices disposable – that is urgent political work that lies beyond the capacity of this Issue. In emphasizing plurality and provisionality, we underscore that Palestine is both everywhere and still inadequately recognised. It is a site of necessary affiliation – to recall Said on chosen critical kinship (1983; 1994) – and a space of fragile global articulation.

The Issue brings together fourteen academics, writers, and professionals, including we three editors, with a strong but not exclusive emphasis on Palestinian voices. Our contributors predominantly identify as women and, in all cases, foreground women’s responses to violence, including mass killing, sexual violence, forced displacement, carceral control, and the cumulative and systematic destruction of Palestinian cultural, historical, and familial

memory. The Issue is grounded in feminist, activist, and gender analytic frameworks and refuses to partition intellectual labour and lived experience. It extends beyond the academy to include and address those who write, teach, organise, and mourn across institutional and non-institutional spaces. This reach is reinforced by the range of genres we bring together: short critical articles are presented alongside personal essays, testimonies, interviews, reviews, and reflections on different sorts of practice. The result is a composite intervention that resists the reduction of Palestinian women's experience to recognisable or easily consumable forms, whether in or beyond the academy.

We situate our feminist or *nisūwī* positionality as a creative, dynamic, transnational, cross-language engagement with a range of responses to events in Palestine at this critical moment. Using the term 'feminist' in English comes with caveats, as does the term *nisūwī* in Arabic with its diverse connotations.[4] Feminist engagements with translation have historically interrogated 'the feminine' in diverse ways: as a gender construct; a way of encapsulating women's experiences; in relation to linguistic relations of power; and as a metaphor for translation itself (Castro 2009). In contemporary decolonising and intersectional praxis, feminist engagements with cross-language mediation work to challenge 'the many different types of discriminations a person suffers, mitigating the effect of "gender" as the single identity factor' (Flotow 2012: 131). The discrimination facing Palestinian women writers is multifaceted and informed by the politics of (perceived and actual) location. Some feminist praxes have involved the discovery and recovery of marginalised creative works, genres, and

[4] The term *nisūwī* can mean 'feminine', 'womanly', 'woman-focused', 'by a woman', or 'feminist' (Wehr 1994: 1130). For more on *al-nisūwiyya* and 'feminism', see: Badran and cooke (2004); ElSadda (2013); Kamal (2016); Pratt *et al* (2025).

writers through translation (see Simon 1996). We bring works in Arabic to English-language-reading audiences, but not to suggest that Palestinian women's voices need to be 'uncovered'. Rather, we make space for our contributors collectively to recover a cross-language space of Palestinian women's written resistance to genocide – and to enjoin transnational readers to respond.

The experience of catastrophe is not new for Palestinians. Although the current scale of destruction in Gaza is unprecedented, there have been several Israeli wars on the territory this century, including 'Operation Protective Edge' in 2014. Alongside these large-scale assaults, the ongoing encroachment in the West Bank continues to extend and consolidate the conditions of occupation. Neither is the State of Israel the only antagonist: the destruction of Al-Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, one of the largest Palestinian diaspora spaces in the Arab world, by Syrian government and opposition factions from 2013 onwards testifies to the vulnerability of Palestinian communities wherever they are located.[5] What distinguishes the post-2023 phase of an ongoing Nakba (catastrophe) is, however, its horrific scale and 'live-streamed' mediations (Alshaer 2026). Moreover, the way Western governments and media tend to represent events on the ground in both Gaza and the West Bank underlines the injustices inflicted upon Palestinians at this temporal juncture. While Palestinians are not the only group to experience collective suffering or even genocide in the twenty-first century, their plight has captured the world's attention yet failed to elicit a meaningful political solution.

[5] This Issue goes to press against the backdrop of a deepening conflict inaugurated by United States and Israeli attacks on Iran and Lebanon.

We make no apologies for our focus but do not claim comprehensively to cover an authentic Palestinian reality. Our contributors evince an awareness that much remains unsaid and the perspectives of many – particularly in Gaza – cannot (perhaps ever) be known. We are faced with the prospect of the unknowable, perhaps irresolvable dimensions of writing, rewriting, translating, and reading in spaces of ir/recovery – where one attempts to recover partial, fractured, and irreal traces of something that may be irrecoverable. One example is a diary entry about genocide happening in real time, written in Arabic by Abu Nasser (and translated by Shahin) in the expectation that she will die before its publication. Another example explored by Jamil Khader is a Hebrew-language military note about the rape and murder of a Palestinian girl in 1947 that haunts the narrator of Adania Shibli's novel *Minor Detail* (2020; *Tafsīl Thānawī*, 2017). These examples are emblematic of how Palestinian memory-making emerges, provisionally and unpredictably, across time, space, more than one language, and diverse genres of writing. Carolyn Shread helpfully suggests that a feminist praxis of engagement with cross-language works that undercut, complicate, or defy definitive interpretation requires us to recognise the 'fundamental alterity' of reading and writing across cultures, geographies, and positions (2007: 218).

In this respect, it is worth underlining that our contributors synchronically bear witness to Palestine from different locations, as well as in two (or more) languages and diverse writing styles. Abu Nasser writes from and remains in what is left of Gaza. Saga Hamdan left Gaza for the UK just weeks before October 2023. While Ahlam Bsharat, Bayan Haddad, and Jumana Kaplanian write from the West Bank, Dani Abulhawa, Jamil Khader, and Lara Kilani address the homeland across different geographical and generational 'measures of distance' (Hatoum 1988). Layla AlAmmar and Hiyem Cheurfa, meanwhile, write in critical allyship from Kuwait

(and, in Cheurfa's case, Algeria). Each contributor engages in the task, in the words of Kaplanian (in this Issue), of 'showing up' regardless of who else 'turns up'. Their interventions move us beyond either/or frames of reference, such as who is 'in' or 'out' of Palestine (whether in its 1948, 1967 or its contemporary configuration), or whether writing is in Arabic, English, or, in Haddad's essay, Hebrew and Yiddish.

The Issue reflects two modes of Arabic to English translation by Shahin. The first involves translating the words of another person – in this case Abu Nasser's testimony from the Gaza genocide, which meant carrying intense pain and trauma across languages. In this case, mediating another's writing felt closer to witnessing and archiving than to a linguistic act of transfer. As Helen Dendrinou Kolias reminds us, translation is not simply the search for verbal equivalents but, instead, an act of interpretation that requires a translator to 'listen to the voice or voices within the text' and 'attest to what they hear', especially when working with fragile and/or marginal writing (1990: 219, 217). The second act of translation involved Shahin's interview in Arabic with Ahlam Bsharat, which raised questions about tone, rhythm, and cultural specificity, particularly around food, native plants, and everyday practices. Arabic terms were retained in transliteration as a way of helping a reader 'hear' as well as 'see' the fauna, foods, and practices described by Bsharat as a cultural historian, with footnotes used selectively to explain cultural and social specificities. The impulse to smooth over cultural distance was also (consciously) resisted, however, as an invitation to the reader to experience Palestine through sound, texture, and cultural references.

The overarching question that animates this Special Issue is: how can one write Palestine in the present? For us, as predominantly literary scholars, a touchstone is provided by Shibli, who suggests that 'the clarity of narration – a clear beginning, middle, and end – is not

accessible' in the Palestinian context (2024). Ongoing violence impels hesitation, circumlocution, delay, and even temporary silence. 'I have no words' has been a common response to the horrors in Gaza, although many have somehow *found* words to testify, narrate, and represent genocide. Written testimonies from inside Gaza, which have proliferated since October 2023,[6] register a level of trauma that challenges the possibility of communicability. For those outside, too, Gaza can be circled as a foundational breakdown in meaning itself, as Khader suggests in this Issue. This is not theoretical sophistry: the current war on Gaza has been the deadliest conflict in recorded history for journalists,[7] in a context where international media coverage is severely restricted and fatalities emerge as statistics via local sources whose credibility is repeatedly questioned. A strategy of scholasticide is also evident: Gaza's material educational infrastructure has been destroyed and many academics, writers, and teachers killed. Poet and academic Refaat Alareer, deliberately targeted and killed in an Israeli airstrike in northern Gaza on 6 December 2023, remains an inspiration (see Cheurfa in this Issue).

Palestinian women, in a range of forms, genres, and media, register the pressures of the present moment even whilst breathing the dust of homes reduced to rubble, tracing names erased from records, and registering lives that are ended mid-sentence. As Abu Nasser writes, in her almost unbearably moving contribution to this Issue: 'I tried to turn my pain into something concrete that could be held in the hand, into something that might, somehow, outlast us'. More widely, Palestinians register the ongoing interruption of time, life,

[6] Selective examples include: Abu Saif (2024); Alareer (2024); Abu Akleen *et al* (2025), discussed by Cheurfa in this Issue; Alaqad (2025); Alnaouq and Bailey (2026).

[7] See: https://www.un.org/unispal/document/press-briefing-irene-khan-15sep25/.

historicity, and teleology.[8] Filmmaker Larissa Sansour, for example, portrays Palestinian life in a suspended present tense (in Moore 2019). Layla Alammar, reading across fiction and film, invokes a Palestinian 'postmemorial absence, [...] when individuals feel trapped by memories of a traumatic past that prevent a meaningful present from materializing' (2021: 2). The formal effects of disrupted historicity and spatial dispersal, enclosure, and siege ripple through the modern Palestinian canon, whether in the fractured form of Hala Alyan's diaspora memoir *I'll Tell You When I'm Home* (2025) or in Susan Abulhawa's novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2006), that layers 'memories [...] continually enfolded and unfolded across generations' (Gregory Fox 2021: 135). A risk is that aspects of Palestinian suffering might become structurally illegible, even to those most affected by it (Elbaz 2023). Bashir Abu-Manneh registers the stakes succinctly – two years before the current war began – when he says: 'Colonial violence ruptures Palestinian writing' (2021: 1).

Another challenge is that Palestinian lives are under-represented in their individual agency yet over-represented in reductive ways. Shibli asks: 'What kind of narration is available to you sincerely [as a Palestinian writer] without you Othering yourself or your experience?' The risk is accentuated in English, in which Shibli elects not to write (2024), while others such as poet Atef AlShaer choose to use English alongside Arabic. Militating against both marginality and generalisability, Palestinian literature is now being produced and disseminated to an unprecedented degree, in several original languages that include English, and by a striking preponderance of women authors and translators (Abu-Manneh 2021: 6;

[8] A struggle with appropriate form has become increasingly visible since the Oslo Accords of 1993–95 (see Said, 1986; Bashir Abu-Manneh 2021; Parr, 2021).

Ebileeni 2022). As we write this Introduction, moreover, three Palestine-focused films by women have been nominated for Oscar awards.[9]

Ironically, Shibli gained international prominence when her award of the LiBeraturpreis was withheld at the Frankfurt Book Fair in late October 2023.[10] In Germany, critics seemed less engaged with the aesthetic merits of *Minor Detail* than with how it could be read as 'making room for anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic narratives [antiisraelische und antisemitische Narrative]' following 7 October 2023 (Otte 2023 n. pag.). Others in Germany judged the sudden connection made between the novel (first published in 2017) and the 2023 crisis not to be 'serious literary criticism' but still powerful enough to undermine both Shibli's literary talent and her clear focus upon a continuous history of colonial violence (Radische 2023 n. pag.). If Shibli's novella *Minor Detail* has become a flashpoint for censorship, silencing, and the policing of Palestinian narrative authority, we reclaim its exemplary status as a literary text that exposes and resists how regimes of representation, legitimacy, and moral authority govern which histories can be narrated, which affects are permitted, and which forms of

[9] *Palestine 1936*, directed by Annemarie Jacir (representing Palestine); *All That's Left of You*, directed by Cherien Dabis (representing Jordan); and *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, directed by Kaouther Ben Hania (representing Tunisia).

[10] See also Randa Abdel-Fattah's recent disinvitation from the Adelaide Literature Festival (2025) and its subsequent cancellation following mass boycott: https://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/news/2025/statement-15-january-2026 (accessed 31 Jan. 2026).

colonial violence must remain unintelligible. Shibli's contemporary narrator muses, in confrontation with an Israel-defined reality:

> I may get lost on the folds of a scene which fills me with a great feeling of alienation, seeing all the changes that have befallen it [...] wherever I look, all the changes constantly reassert the absence of anything Palestinian [...]
>
> After a disappearance, that's when the fly returns to hover over the painting. Little details drift along the length of the road, furtively hinting at a presence. (Shibli 2020: 79)

The contributors assembled here do not speak furtively or in oblique ways, however. They assert presence and produce snapshots of the Palestinian present for future memory. Their texts are written in real time, sometimes amidst intense violence, suffering, and silencing, recording what is known, felt, and articulated as destruction continues. Walter Benjamin described the past as something that 'attains the status of history at the moment it flashes up in a moment of danger' (1968: 62). Several contributors to this issue wrestle with the ongoing production of traumatic memories in their lived reality. Memory is enacted as a political practice 'in the moment of danger' through writing that refuses disappearance.

Writing from Gaza during repeated bombardment and displacement, Abu Nasser's testimony collapses any stable distinction between narration, witnessing, and survival. Her narrative, which records the loss of family members and home, forces readers to confront what it means

to read, publish, and analyse texts produced under conditions where writing competes directly with death and the threat of annihilation. Hamdan – now outside Gaza – describes surviving a bomb attack in Gaza prior to 2023. She expresses unapologetic anger towards the political structures and global media outlets that mediate the violence in Gaza as headlines to be digested by millions 'over a coffee or a hot chocolate'. For both writers, the registering of the present is a matter of life or death: opening one's eyes after an explosion to see, through the rubble and smoke, that what remains, is unrecognisable, or has disappeared.

Jumana Kaplanian's reflective essay shifts the focus from the immediate violence in Palestine to its psychic aftermath, yet the structures of occupation remain present. Written from Bethlehem and shaped by her position as both a mother and a psychotherapist, Kaplanian's essay refuses to separate clinical practice and lived experience, revealing how military occupation saturates both dimensions of her life. Dani Abulhawa comparably calls into questions any categorical division of artist, historian, and audience through her embodied praxis. In *Saltwater Crossing* (2025), Abulhawa invokes a woman whose ancestors were displaced in 1948. Abulhawa shows that Palestinian historical experience – when not censored by British institutions – can provoke restorative memory-making for a range of audiences. Abulhawa cites the concept of *mujāwarah*; that is, small groups of people coming together, without hierarchy or formality, to learn from one other – an apt description of her own practice (in, for example, performing *Voices of Resistance*, discussed by Cheurfa) and something this Issue aspires to more generally.

In his reading of *Minor Detail*, Khader confronts the limits of representation under ongoing settler colonial violence. He illustrates that Shibli's 'anti-pornographic' and transhistorical,

yet partial, retrieval of sexual violence refuses both archival closure and a liberal humanist demand for legibility, leaving in place that which cannot morally or narratively be resolved. Lara Kilani similarly turns to refusal, but at the level of voice, lived experience, and political imagination. Moving between poetic witnessing, critical theory, and autobiographical testimony, Kilani examines how Palestinian women are repeatedly rendered as symbols; however, recalcitrance emerges as a response grounded in dignity and self-assertion. A refusal of straightforward Palestinian representation is not offered by either Khader and Kilani as an acceptance of limitations; on the contrary, both counter attempts by colonial and neo-imperialist systems to stifle voice, crush hope, and erase memory.

The politics of reading and listening to the voices of others is another shared concern. Autobiographical specialist Cheurfa queries, in her reading of four Gazan women's diaries published in English (two of them in translation) as *Voices of Resistance: Diaries of a Genocide* (2025): is it ethical to read published accounts of day-to-day survival in Gaza when their writers may not be living at the time of publication? How can we keep alive both the voices of the dead (such as Alareer) and the living? Bayan Haddad asks what it means to listen to 'unexpected others' expressing solidarity with Gaza, through an analysis of the music album *Lider mit Palestine: New Yiddish Songs of Grief, Fury and Love* (Dobkin, Waletzky and Frey 2025). Haddad 'listens' to the ways by which Jewish mourning is 're-sung' towards Palestinian liberation in an act of lateral translingual solidarity that seeks to 'accompany' but not to appropriate Palestinian experience, in simultaneous awareness of the limited audience for this solidarity work.

Two of the contributions take the form of dialogical interviews. AlAmmar's interview with Azem considers *The Book of Disappearance* (2019; *Sifr al-ikhtifā', riwāyah*, 2014), in the context of a continuous attempted erasure of Palestinians across the historic homeland. This conversation between two women writers illuminates the challenges of creating 'new frame[s]' for reality in which matriarchal characters – and others – are unofficial historians who preserve what official archives exclude or try to erase. If *The Book of Disappearance* metafictionally embeds a struggle over who owns the narrative, it also insists upon Palestinian memory as an axis of resistance.

The conversation between Bsharat and Shahin similarly insists upon resistance, which Bsharat defines as tangible solidarity in the register of everyday cultural life and the sensory domain. By centring taste as a living archive, she reframes food as knowledge. Bsharat refutes writing under occupation as (merely) a portent of survival or moral testimony. She insists upon writing as also pleasure and imagination, even amidst hunger and fear, refusing a humanitarian gaze that fixates upon suffering. In Bsharat's words, 'a writer passes through life whatever the condition of the places in which the writer lives'. Her commitment to writing freely and unapologetically reimagines Palestine as a place of future possibilities.

It seems appropriate to end our Introduction on such a note. Palestine inspires us to begin again, as 'a first step in the intentional production of meaning' (Said 1985: 5). It remains only for us to thank the editors of *Women: A Cultural Review*, for making space for one of the most urgent issues of our day, and especially our contributors for rising with alacrity, creativity, care, and courage to the challenges of writing Palestine in the present.

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