

Introduction

When no straight line leads from home to birthplace to school to maturity, all events are accidents, all progress is digression, all residence is exile.

—EDWARD SAID

[There is] difficulty implicit in making one's way through a world which is jumbled in this fashion. . . . [Giving the reader] a disordered experience of geography and space and time . . . [is] . . . clearly unavoidable if the novel is to tell its story, as I fully intend that it should, in a single burst.

—GHASSAN KANAFANI, *ALL THAT'S LEFT TO YOU*

There were more books than in the school library, more books than I had seen in my life, numbered series of books . . . and between them the most surprising, Don Quixote, which I had never imagined was in two volumes!

—SALWA, IN IBRAHIM NASRALLAH'S *OLIVES OF THE STREETS*

In her Arabic teacher's home library, Salwa has a realization: a story, her story, doesn't need to be told from a "beginning" to a conclusion in one fell swoop. The epiphany happens as the young woman runs her fingers along the spines of what seem like endless rows of books—books she is surprised to find in her refugee camp near Beirut. Of the many works, Salwa is uniquely drawn to the "numbered series of books: the novels of the Hilāl publishers, Hilāl's critical editions" (a bit like the Penguin classics in English). When she sees *Don Quixote* she exclaims, "I had never imagined [it] was in two volumes (*juz'ayn*)!"¹ Salwa then takes out the middle volume of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* trilogy. She flips through its pages and reads some passages out loud. As she does so, Salwa appreciates that by dint of a series title diverse works covering diverse spaces can be harnessed to express something beyond the scope of their individual covers (or, later, borders). This encounter, for Salwa, redefines what it means not only to tell, but to have a "story"—and the realization is transformative.

Salwa is a Palestinian orphan who was subject to the sexual abuse of a political official in the refugee camp her family fled to during 1948. Her father was “martyred” in Palestine not by Zionist or Israeli forces but by her uncle. These simple facts well beyond Salwa’s control have meant her story never “fit” into the national frame. She felt she did not have the words to narrate the experience to herself, let alone others. Until the library realization Salwa had understood herself to be invisible; the sideline of a fragment who had no place in the Palestinian story. As a refugee, she understood, she was a part of a “broken” nation whose meaning was in waiting to return, or in supporting the work of the fighters in their effort to liberate Palestine. She felt, like the title of the novel she appears in, that refugees were as olives of the streets, rotting unconsumed away from the homeland. As a woman being abused by an official in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Salwa knew her story was one that none in the community wanted to exist. She was “evidence,” somehow, of an impurity of cause. When she tried to articulate the violences done to her, she felt as though her “teeth were stuck together, no, my teeth had melted, one into the other.” It was her community’s closed ears that melted her teeth. To hear about and understand the abuse she underwent was to tarnish the hope for justice that the PLO embodied. This was Beirut in the late 1970s, and all hopes were pinned on a new political movement.

In the idea of a series, Salwa could imagine herself within and alongside all the other stories of Palestine. “I want to read all of these books,” she told her teacher, as a way to rehabilitate her capacity for narrative. What she had been told, she fumed, did her no service. “They’d rather us live in fragments . . . fragments of bread, of books, of hope, of a dream—fragments of the homeland, and fragments of memory,” she told Sitt Zaynab. The “they” that had imparted the expected shape of narrative here is multiple. It includes (at least) European colonizers and an imposed teleological way of seeing;² a “developmental” trajectory that posits Palestine and Palestinian narrative as always “not yet,” somehow part of an unrealized whole;³ a Zionist narrative that literally and figuratively erases Palestinian existence;⁴ a Palestinian political apparatus that, in striving for legitimacy on a Euro-American colonial stage, amplifies existing harms;⁵ and all the individuals with power over Salwa who stand by while she suffers. As she absorbs how thinking as a series affects her own story, Salwa begins to see the implications of her fresh discovery. If her life—as an orphan, a woman, a refugee, an assault survivor, a Palestinian—is read as a series, there could be articulated “a single complete memory” of her life, of her community, of Palestine. Such an articulation, she saw, “would suffice to return it [the homeland, that which is in fragments] to us”⁶—or at least to her.

Salwa’s story is, in fact, part of a series. Not only conceptually, as she begins to imagine in her teacher’s library, but in actual bookshops across the Middle East. From Jerusalem to Beirut, Amman to Kuwait, *Olives of the Streets* (*Zaytūn al-shawāri*’, 2002) sits next to (depending on stock) at least twelve other novels each emblazoned with the same series title: the Palestine Comedies (*al-Malhāt*

al-filasṭīniyya). Each novel in this series is, by and large, a standalone text. Almost no characters appear in more than one volume (with some delicious exceptions explored later). Each work is set in a different place or time, covering both the expected (Second Intifada-era Ramallah) and the unusual (the summit of Kili-manjaro) locations of Palestinian experience. Beyond this vast scope, the writing styles and techniques deployed differ vastly between novels. There is historical fiction, stream of consciousness, and the utterly experimental intermixing of genre types. In its construction and execution, the Palestine Comedies does precisely what Salwa had hoped it would: it “returns” a telling of her life within a “single complete” imaginative universe. In practice, this means the generation of a narrative of Palestine without the imposition of a trajectory or a predetermined “whole.” But the series does not achieve this vision entirely on its own.

Shortly after the fifth novel in the Palestine Comedies series was published, Nasrallah launched a second and parallel series. As chapter 1 goes on to argue, this second series is what opened a possibility for the continuation of the first, expanding the properties and parameters of Salwa’s “single complete” imaginative universe so that it was open-ended. This second series was devoted largely to explorations of the structures of state, family, and narrative (and how these structures enact administrative violence). Hinting at this alternative view that the new series offered, they came to be known collectively as the Balconies (*Shurafāt*). Each novel in this series told the story of structures that limit Palestinian life. *Balcony of Delirium* (*Shurfat al-hadhayān*, 2004) looked at the structures that war leaves behind in government administration; *Balcony of the Snow Man* (*Shurfat rajul al-thalj*, 2009) traces the generic and bureaucratic violence of a state newspaper; *Balcony of Disgrace* (*Shurfat al-‘ār*, 2010) examines the overlapping claims of authority exercised by state police, family, and class structures; and so on. From the early 2000s on, the two series grew in tandem: every year a work was published in one and then the other.

That there are thematic similarities across the series is hardly surprising given their production schedule. But what a close look shows is that they in fact—at least when it comes to thinking about the representation of Palestine as a single imaginative universe—constitute a single literary project. To differentiate this larger effort from the two individual series, it is referred to here as the Palestine Project. It is this project that *Novel Palestine* explores. In reading the two series as interconnected, the chapters in this book argue, the full scope of Salwa’s realization takes form. Where one series (the Comedies) conjures the most expansive vision of Palestine hitherto available in written form, the other (the Balconies) shows all the structures that limit—in practical terms—the imagination of Palestine in such broad scope. The work of this study is to draw out the structure and function of this “novel Palestine.” To do this, it examines closely the characters, themes, textual structures, and modes of meaning-making employed within, between, and across the works. Because the series are both open ended, this is not (nor can it be) a conclusive analysis. It is only a start. It therefore takes only the “first” nine texts

published in the two series—works published as part of the Palestine Comedies and Balconies series between 1996 and 2010. “First” is in quotation marks because the order of the works is not at all straightforward, as we will see.

In this reading of Nasrallah’s Palestine Project, analysis finds a method of telling Palestine that includes the many different trajectories and locations of Palestinian exile, displacement, and diaspora. This method can absorb, as Salwa hoped, internal Palestinian contradiction. The linked series find a way of narrating structures of violence and demonstrating their impact on the story of Palestine and Palestinians without allowing them to impose limitations on life or imaginative possibility. The works thus take on the usual suspects (colonialism, Zionism, and neo-imperialism) but also the structures of violence that more perniciously limit the expression (and indeed realization) of Palestinian life (e.g., generic structures, like the narrative conventions of the newspaper or the autobiography). These limiting structures, in the novels, are rendered as one of the myriad stories (the story of the novel, the story of the newspaper) that make up an imaginative universe of Palestine. In this way, the Palestine Project can grapple with the relationships between these structures of power and how they function to limit or shape Palestinian lives and narratives. At the same time, accounting for these limiting structures makes it possible to broaden the representation and representability of Palestinian relationships—to imagine Palestine without these imposed limits. Without the structure of colonial and generic expectations, Palestine can be told across space and time in new ways.

While the possibilities of representing Palestine across Nasrallah’s linked series are exciting, it is important to note that most are not entirely novel—either as literary innovation or analytic insight—at least not on their own. Across Palestine and literary studies, there is broad agreement that a more expansive Palestine can be imagined in a series. That the series provides a container for the representation of a more expansive idea of the nation has long been established.⁷ Scholars of postcolonialism⁸ and gender studies⁹ have for generations drawn out a language that expands and critiques mainstream national identity articulations. Palestine studies (and indeed theories of identity) has produced dozens of volumes that expand and critique the limits and meaning of Palestinian identity and representation.¹⁰ Critics and historians have also used the concepts of the modern and the postmodern to explore the possibilities and limitations of representation through different concepts of time.¹¹ Even intertextuality, the inter-referencing of one text within another and the theory around it (which is relied on heavily here), has already been identified as a mechanism for broadening an imaginative universe.¹² This existing literary and critical work does not, however, render an exploration of Nasrallah’s project unnecessary. Rather, this work provides the tools and theoretical starting points for a deeper look at how all of these elements function in concert. This critical history is, then, what makes grappling with Nasrallah’s expansive project possible.

Most of the literary themes and techniques developed across Nasrallah's two linked series can be found in other works. This is, in some ways, the point. Nasrallah is the first to draw connections between the mission of his writing and the work of his literary predecessors. Speaking to a London audience in 2012, Nasrallah said he believed his novels "could definitely have been written by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Emile Habibi, and Ghassan Kanafani,"¹³ if only these canonical figures' lives had been longer. He saw his role, he told the room, as realizing a literary project left unfinished. And in his expansive approach, this is what Nasrallah does. Where Kanafani felt he had to excuse what he was sure would be perceived as a "disordered experience of geography" in his *All That's Left to You* and Edward Said lamented that—reading Palestine within existing frames—"all progress is digression, all residence is exile," Nasrallah did not let these conventions get in the way of writing. He wrote, then he wrote about the conventions, and then he wrote some more and called it all Palestine. It is the prolificacy, expansiveness, and interlinkages embedded in Nasrallah's Palestine Project that make it so compelling to think about. More compelling—even mysterious—is why Nasrallah's work hasn't been thought about more before now. Indeed, critics have been inexplicably and often frustratingly silent on the meaning and importance of this literary project. *Novel Palestine* works to understand and then fill the gaps in the literary record.

RECEPTION

Hailed briefly as the author of *the* national epic of Palestine—that elusive masterpiece that Palestinians (and indeed the world) had been anticipating for generations¹⁴—critical interest in Nasrallah has been strangely patchy. He has been described variously as an up-and-coming Jordanian writer, put on the who's who list of Palestinian authors, noted as the most prolific Palestinian writer of all time, grumbled about for writing too much, criticized for simple language, and praised for the complexity of his narrative style. In some periods of his literary career he has been championed, while in others the critics have remained strangely silent. And while there is a sort of consensus that his two series are impressive literary endeavors, there is very little (and in the anglosphere almost nothing) exploring what they mean. So why have the Palestine Comedies and Balconies series (as series) been overlooked? Why hasn't Nasrallah—as the most critically acclaimed Palestinian writer of the past decade—been the subject of dozens of monographs? Why—when his work has been translated as much as canonical authors like Ghassan Kanafani—is he ignored in English? A brief overview of his reception across English and Arabic (with a quick reference to his translation into Italian, Danish, and Turkish) not only shows how belated a thorough exploration of his oeuvre is but also draws out some of the gaps in collected critical approaches (the blind spots of criticism around Palestinian literature), which this work also aims to address or even redress.

Part of the reason for Nasrallah's patchy reception in Arabic can be boiled down to his writing. It was different. While the language was simple, the ideas were complex, and the works never shied away from the taboo. Before the 1990s, as he first started to publish, Nasrallah was read and reviewed as either an up-and-coming or underrated author.¹⁵ Some of his early prose novels were more concept than narrative, deliciously (for some) difficult to pin down in terms of just what was happening, when, or where. This pleased some critics and annoyed others. As Faisal Darraj commented on *Just the Two of Us* (*Mujarrad 2 faqat*, 1992), the work was a "narration of ambiguity." Of the mix of simplicity and complexity, another critic wrote of *Prairies of Fever* (*Barārī al-ḥummā*, 1985) that it was "at its core an anti-modern novel that collides with the axioms of realistic literature."¹⁶ Another, more critical writer noted that Nasrallah was a commendable author not because of "his high talent and broad culture, but in his great sense of national and human responsibility."¹⁷ His topics, in other words, were important, as was what he was trying to say, but he wasn't a literary savant. Nonetheless, the more Nasrallah published, the more attention he earned. His poetry and reviews of his work appeared in literary magazines from Bahrain to Beirut, Iraq to Egypt.¹⁸

Reception of his work (in English and Arabic) has also to a large extent been dictated by international politics. Wider recognition would come as global attention returned to Palestine amid the 1990s American-led Peace Process. This was particularly the case in English. What was available of his work in Arabic was, in the mid-1990s, rapidly sucked into a critical discourse that sought insight into contemporary Palestine and the sort of future it imagined for itself. So while *Prairies of Fever* had made something of a critical splash in Arabic for its experimental prose and risqué depiction of desire nurtured by an isolated character teaching in Saudi Arabia (and discussed as a Jordanian/Palestinian work), in English it was represented as the latest in Palestinian fiction. The work was translated in 1993,¹⁹ the same year that the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, shook hands on the White House lawn with the then Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. The world wanted to follow along, and interest in Palestinian arts proliferated. With so many of the canonical writers gone, or largely retired from writing, there was a push to introduce the world to a new generation of authors.

This era saw Nasrallah anthologized in three separate volumes, two of which published excerpts of *Prairies of Fever*.²⁰ He was also listed in a number of English-language resources detailing who to read (with the subtext: to understand Palestine at this moment of global attention).²¹ What had made a minor splash in Arabic was mobilized as part of a large wave of interest in English. On the back of this, *Just the Two of Us* was translated into English as *Inside the Night*.²² Even with two works in English translation (the same works were rendered variously in Italian, Turkish, and Danish) Nasrallah's readership internationally was small. Beyond their appearance in anthologies and on lists of what to read, the novels were reviewed only in niche Arabic literary or Middle East studies journals and

magazines.²³ Though he appeared on myriad lists of who to read, few in English picked up the work. This, it seems, speaks more to the limitations of scholarly and public discourse in the anglosphere than it does of the quality of Nasrallah's texts. This was an era when Arabic literature was expected to illustrate a point, either as a stop on the imagined (developmental) progression from oral narrative to the novel or as one of the set landmarks in the "conflict."²⁴ Nasrallah's work (at that point) did neither, so it was difficult to place on existing literary maps. After this surge of interest, Nasrallah largely disappeared from the anglosphere.

Meanwhile, in Arabic, Nasrallah kept writing. When the Palestine Comedies was inaugurated, Arab-world critics weren't sure what to make of it. Consensus seemed to be that there was something to the project, but there was no definitive sense as to what it meant.²⁵ Critics mentioned that the works all had empathetic characters,²⁶ and wove important links with the past,²⁷ but the ideas were general. Critics asked more questions of the works than they answered. In a published interview, one critic simply asked outright, "What is the theme of the Palestine Comedies? . . . [H]ow did it crystallize? What is its aim?"²⁸ Nasrallah did not—as is typical—give a direct answer, preferring to offer his readers scope for their own interpretations. "Perhaps," he told this critic of *Olives of the Streets*, "this narrative project was a direct response to the battle of Beirut."²⁹ He cites later, as a drive to write (as he would continue to do for decades),³⁰ an infamous sentiment attributed to David Ben-Gurion, often quoted as, "Their old will die, and their young will forget."³¹ The answer gives a motive for writing, but just what the series does and how it does it remain open questions.

Finally, in 2006, a sustained academic study of the Palestine Comedies was published, titled *Narrative Universe: Readings in the Epic Narrative the Palestine Comedies by Ibrāhīm Nasrallah (Al-Kawn al-riwā'ī: Qirā'a fī al-malḥama al-riwā'iyya al-Malhāt al-ḥilāṣīniyya li Ibrāhīm Naṣrāllah)*. Its Iraqi authors identified the series as "a fictional epic composed of a network of novels."³² It remains, as of the time of publication, the only other book-length study of the series (though there are a growing number of MA and PhD theses in English and Arabic). Chapters in that study identify themes of self/other and various forms and usages of intertextuality (religious, historical) and go over the meaning of the characters' names across the volumes. This was the first sustained examination of the themes and techniques used across the literary project. Critics, however, did not continue the conversation. Nor was the idea of a narrative universe, so clearly a claim about the limits and possibilities of Palestine, taken up by either the authors or later critics. The work did, however, add to what was becoming a critical mass of interest in the Comedies. This interest seemed to feed Nasrallah's writing. After the monograph was published, between 2005 and 2006 he would publish the first of the Balconies, *Balcony of Delirium (Shurfat al-hadhayān, 2005)*, and of course *Time of White Horses (Zaman al-khuyūl al-bayḍā', 2007)*. This would be a key moment for both series, and indeed their author.

Among the Arabic reading public, it was *Time of White Horses* that established Nasrallah as a household name. The 511-page tome follows three generations of a Palestinian farming family in a small village through the Ottoman Empire, its painful “reforms,” its collapse, the arrival of the British Mandate, Jewish settlers, and finally Zionist forces. It closes as the family sits on the side of a road, their village in ruins, waiting for Red Cross trucks to take them into exile. Faisal Darraj, one of the most well-known literary critics of the Arab world, declared that Nasrallah had written *the* “tragedy of his people.”³³ The novel was acclaimed in literary columns, in magazines, and in living rooms: this was a story of the Nakba that powerfully resonated. Because much literary criticism holds the story of the Nakba as near-synonymous with the story of Palestine,³⁴ the fact that *Time of White Horses* was the sixth in a larger project of writing was almost entirely overlooked.³⁵ The work on its own—not as part of a series—was seen as *the* Palestinian story. Even when it was mentioned in connection with the Palestine Comedies, it was as the series’ crowning work. The assumption—even by its author—was that this story of the Nakba completed his effort to tell the story of Palestine.³⁶ Stoking popularity, the epic was short-listed for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2009 (then known as the Arabic Booker Prize). While it didn’t win, the recognition rocketed Nasrallah and his work into much wider circles.³⁷

Nasrallah kept writing—not only in the Palestine Comedies but also in his new and parallel series, the Balconies. The pattern of critical attention—looking at one work in depth and only generally referencing the series—continued. This can most plainly be seen in the coverage of Nasrallah’s subsequent IPAF nominations. In the award’s summary of *Lanterns of the King of Galilee* (*Qanādīl malik al-jalīl*, 2012), *Balcony of the Abyss* (*Shurfat al-hāwiya*, 2013), and *Dog War II* (*Harb al-kalb al-thāniya*, 2015)—which finally won him the award (the sixth in the Balconies and the first that didn’t include “Balcony” in the title)—no mention was made that any of the works were part of a series.³⁸ It also seemed that critics hadn’t noticed the “reopening” of the Palestine Comedies. Nasrallah had by this time retired from his day job as a journalist and devoted himself entirely to writing. The pace of publication has been steady. There are now eighteen novels across the two series, several works of poetry, an autobiography, and works of criticism. Instead of looking deeply into the ideas being generated by the ever-expanding series, critics became more critical. While many praised the expansive scope and constant innovation of the works, others—in private—complained that he writes too much, is repetitive, or has not evolved.

English criticism amplifies and exacerbates the lacuna in Arabic. If critics in the Arabic press and scholarly community were temperamental or ambivalent, in English they were all but silent. For all the attention Palestine gets in the news and the number of library shelves stuffed with histories and analyses, the most talked about Palestinian author since Mahmoud Darwish has gone largely unremarked.³⁹ By 2022, only five articles on Nasrallah’s works existed in English, three of which

focused on *Time of White Horses*.⁴⁰ He is becoming more frequently referenced in English, but again his absence in the field tells more about the field than the fiction. While today Palestinian authors are read for more than a description of a particular place or political moment, in the anglosphere discourse on Palestine is still “overdetermined” (to quote Bashir Abu-Manneh) by a very particular and limited idea of the nation.⁴¹ Because Palestine is a nation without a state, discourse prefers to see literature participating in a narrative of a “nation of fragments,”⁴² or “waiting for Godot.”⁴³ Reading Nasrallah’s work and taking seriously its claim to write the nation means leaving behind (or at least reorienting) the idea of a Palestine as waiting, in pieces. Nasrallah writes an expansive Palestine. The nation conjured across the works is not waiting to exist; it exists now, and it is united here in a single literary project.

BRIDGING GAPS

What is not united is discourse on Palestinian fiction. Across English and Arabic, criticism has overwhelmingly focused on a canon of six authors. Known as the “Nakba generation”—born usually during the British Mandate or late Ottoman era—these men and women witnessed and in some capacity experienced the violence, displacement, and dispossession of the Nakba. Seen as the elite of Palestinian writing, Fadwa Tuqan (b. Nablus, 1917), Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (b. 1919, Bethlehem),⁴⁴ Emile Habibi (b. Haifa, 1922), Ghassan Kanafani (b. Acre, 1936), Mahmoud Darwish (b. Birwah, 1941), and Sahar Khalifeh (b. Nablus, 1941) in large part defined the role of literature in Palestinian culture and politics after the Nakba. Creating meaning out of a new set of circumstances, they set out the tropes, themes, goals, and aspirations of Palestinian writing.⁴⁵ They are retrospectively endowed with an almost mystical power of expression. As one critic put it in the 1950s, it was the responsibility of this generation to write because it was only they who could “explain to us the public what they felt of it”⁴⁶—“it” being the Nakba, and almost always also Palestine. This generation created not only the themes and tropes of Palestinian writing, but a value of aesthetics. It was the generation that took on writing the nation as an imperative, that forged the idea of the committed writer, that cemented the assumption that Palestinian writing was writing the nation (in a particular form with a particular aim).

Shifting these aesthetic values to a new generation writing under different conditions, and with a very different set of politics, has been problematic. While one critic went so far as to say that newer generations of Palestinian writers produce work of inferior quality,⁴⁷ the sentiment is only true if the critic evaluates new work by old values. When criticism does talk about contemporary Palestinian writing, it is lumped into what has been called the “age of Oslo,”⁴⁸ “after Darwish,”⁴⁹ and the post-millennium.⁵⁰ There is understood to be a fundamental break between the “Nakba generation,” and the “Post Oslo” generation. Authors like Adania Shibli

(b. 1974, Shibli-Abu Ghanam, lives between Ramallah and Berlin), Maya Abu al-Hayyat (b. 1980, Beirut; lives in Jerusalem), Mazen Maarouf (b. 1978, Beirut; lives in Iceland), Ahlam Bsharat (b. 1978, Tamun; lives in Nablus), and Majd Kayal (b. 1990, Haifa),⁵¹ offer a scathing criticism of current Palestinian leadership, a critical treatment of canonical tropes, and a reconsideration of what revolution in the Palestinian context looks like.⁵² So while the Nakba generation felt compelled but restricted by the drive to write the nation, this new generation sees the expectation of writing the nation itself as a failure. There are two different aesthetic value sets at work. They are not, however, totally exclusive. A look at Nasrallah and his work brilliantly illustrates how connected these two “generations” of writers are.

While Nasrallah is firmly excluded from the Nakba generation, he doesn’t really fall into this second camp either. Born in 1954 in Jordan’s Wihdat refugee camp, Nasrallah experienced the immediate aftermath of the Nakba but not “the war itself.”⁵³ And yet Nasrallah was raised in the wake of the catastrophe, amid the same social conditions that presented writing the national novel as a matter of urgency. He was shaped by the same forces as this earlier generation; he lived through the camps, the rise of Pan-Arabism, the rise of the Palestinian resistance, and the heyday of Palestine’s transnationalism. It is because he doesn’t really fit into either of these camps that he has been further lost in the critical literature. It is also because of this almost bridge position between categories that he challenges the very idea of a clear divide. Like Ghassan Kanafani, for example, Nasrallah was educated and later taught in United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools. Also like Kanafani (and so many other Palestinians), he would seek work in the Gulf, acquire an interest in journalism, and return to larger Palestinian population centers to pursue his career. While Kanafani began writing in the 1950s after he finished teaching, Nasrallah—born almost twenty years later—did not find the openness and exuberant possibility of revolutionary calls of 1950s Beirut but a somber and searching Amman where Palestinian political expression was still heavily limited in the long wake of the Black September crackdown in 1971. So while the trajectories are almost identical, the realities were not. Nasrallah wrote of a fundamentally different life experience, one that was built on and incorporated the paths and ideals that had been set out before him but that reflected his experience in a world that Kanafani would never see. So while his literary ambitions were forged amid the era of the canon, Nasrallah can also be said to write within the landscape that has informed a new generation of Palestinian authors that tends to expand on and even abandon the tropes and themes carved out by the canon.⁵⁴

Nasrallah embodies the key elements of both “generations,” as indeed his works draw on the themes, modes, voices, and character types from both and everything in between.⁵⁵ This is not only why Nasrallah typically hasn’t been read by critics, but, this project argues, precisely why the time is overdue for an accounting of his works. In reading texts that challenge existing critical frameworks, new and more finely tuned approaches can be generated, ones that stymie attempts to neatly

periodize Palestinian writing into so many “befores” and “afters.” To achieve this breakdown, my analysis makes frequent reference to the writers Nasrallah claims as his predecessors, as well as authors who have been taken up into the critical discourse since.

WHAT READING NASRALLAH GETS US

Reading Nasrallah’s linked series gives us more than an alternative framework for the evaluation of a Palestinian literary corpus and a reevaluation of existing discursive silos in the field of Palestinian literature. Thematic, structural, and close readings of the Palestine Project reveal a vision of Palestine whose underlying grammar, symbols, and function have not hitherto been fleshed out. This is not the nation in waiting, or the nation of fragments. The imaginative universe that the Palestine Project conjures a unique set of foundational assumptions about the relationship between people, place, and time. Many of the novels actively work to teach their readers to “see” Palestine with the tools generated by the works. Some of this work happens within a single novel, some across one or two different series. The Palestine that the works render may be utterly different from existing models of the nation-state (so often the frame for reading and indeed writing), but this nation is far from unrecognizable. In fact, the Palestine of Nasrallah’s novels brings the bits of Palestine—like Salwa’s—that are known, experienced, but not acknowledged into the same conceptual frame as the tropes, stereotypes, and assumptions so often brought to readings of Palestine.

The Palestine conjured in Nasrallah’s fiction holds space for the whole of an estimated population of ten million worldwide.⁵⁶ It accounts for their shifting locations that only begin with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Palestinians of Israel,⁵⁷ and those in the remaining fifty-nine official refugee camps “outside” the area of Mandate Palestine in today’s Jordan, Lebanon,⁵⁸ and Syria,⁵⁹ as well as the long lives lived in exile and the diaspora. Beyond these “typical” locations of Palestinian life, the Palestine Project reckons with the nonrefugee populations who “remained” in their cities and villages after 1948 and 1967, which often became unrecognizable, and those who left, returned, and left again, or took paths less traveled, to places not generally registered as locations of Palestinian experience. The linked series incorporate changes to the dominant figurations of Palestine, so that Palestine is at once what it was before 1967, 1948, 1936, and 1914 and what it was after. The works do this by developing an extensive symbolic and structural vocabulary, worked through within and across texts of both projects. This vocabulary draws extensively on existing innovations in Palestinian literature but also trends in Palestinian and international political discourse. It takes up notions of resistance and revolution, transnationalism and solidarity, and weaves these concepts into a fleshed-out structure of telling that overcomes so many of the limitations placed on the imagination and representation of Palestine.

To best draw out these parts and components, analysis is divided into three sections. The first is dedicated to ways that the linked series create relationships: between texts within a series, across series, and with other works in the Palestinian and world literary spheres. These relationships and connections are housed under the umbrella term “Intertextuality,” which broadly speaking here means “all that puts one text in relation to another.” Chapters in this first part tap into both structuralist and Arabic literary terminology to show how conceptual links between texts create a vocabulary for the imagination of Palestinian history and geography. Chapter 1 digs into the series as a conceptual vessel that flips the notion of a “nation of fragments” on its head. It uses multilingual intertextuality theory to understand the nature of the relationship between texts (and indeed the nature and limits of the text). Chapter 2 goes deeper and explores three ways that the various parts of Palestine can be related: it does this using the symbolism of the twin and the Arabic grammatical principle of the dual (*al-muthannā*). These set out a type that allows multiple bodies to be at once distinct and connected outside of linear and developmental space or time.

Chapter 3 moves on to look at how the works of the Palestine Project create relationships between time and space in the absence of the linear model. It uses the idea of the chronotope (or how space and time cohere in narrative) and coins the “chronotope of accumulation,” which determines what can be included in the vast network of the nation. Rather than collect the individuals and happenings that occur within a given demarcated zone and/or particular historical trajectory, spaces and events in Nasrallah’s Palestine are Palestinian because they have been witnessed as such. This idea draws on the Palestinian and Islamic sense of witnesses as *sh-h-d* so that Palestinians simply witness a time or a space or a community as Palestinian, and it becomes a part of the collected texts/elements of the nation.

Part 2 goes on to read how Nasrallah’s texts understand and account for the existence of this Palestine-as-network in a world that has done and continues to do violence to Palestinians; a world that is both practically and ideologically hostile to Palestine as an entity. Chapter 4 looks at the Balconies series and shows how the idea offers quite literally a new “vantage” for narrative. The balconic vantage—as a location at once inside and out—acknowledges and makes room for how embedded representations of Palestine and Palestinians are in systems that are both violent and oppressive. Palestine and Palestinians, after all, exist in a network of states, their governments, and their economies. The balcony as a position of narrative acknowledges that not only do Palestinians live across and between so many other structures of power, but Palestinian political discourse and even the genre of the novel as a mode of telling are all indelibly linked to colonial-era assumptions about the nature of the nation. What were once invisible structures of power that delimited and curtailed representations of Palestinian life, and life itself, become visible from this balconic position. Chapter 5 shows how these structures of power

are rendered in Nasrallah's Palestine as so many other texts in a series. In this vision of Palestine, power is accounted for as just another "text" in the network of representation. What these first two parts of analysis ultimately show is a representation of Palestine where existing structures of power no longer act as the operating logic. Power structures become only part of the story and are subsumed within the powerful imaginative system of the network. Here places and times are related outside of ideas and ideals of boundedness and sovereignty, and Palestinian experiences outside of the mainstream become speakable and hearable.

What remains is the people—the characters and communities who move through this reimagined geography. Part 3 therefore turns to the configuration of the person in Nasrallah's linked series. Chapter 6 looks at the series' use and adaptation of existing tropes of Palestinianness. Challenged and problematized from the moment of their inception, the character of the fighter, the hero-poet, and the mother-of-the-martyr are still present within the Palestine Project but no longer define the limits of the individual. One by one the models are shown to be problematic because they see the individual as only one thing. The successful man was a fighter whose personal and national realization could come only in the liberation of the homeland. The successful woman was a mother who supported the success of her sons. Not only is the citizen of Nasrallah's Palestine open-ended and multirelational (like the nation itself), but their success is defined in the refusal of imposed limitations. The tropes persist (in Nasrallah's work and elsewhere), analysis suggests, because they can be mobilized to push against some of the violences done to Palestinians and therefore keep imposed limitations to life and community at bay. The tropes do not, however, any longer constitute the limits of the person. Exploring the implications for this, readings find a fundamental conceptual shift in the relationship between the individual and the nation. This is no longer tied to relationships of before and after, any singular point of origin or perceived destination. The individual does not "become" Palestinian in the linear developmental sense but "accumulates" meaning and in doing so keeps the network of the nation open.

Chapter 7 explores how in a world of limitations successful characters of the Palestine Project navigate the structures that impose harm. Using Sarah Ahmed's notion of orientation to read Nasrallah's *Balcony of Delirium*, "delirium" is advanced as a method of action. In delirium, the individual gains the balconic vantage and dissociates from imposed narratives; navigating through them but refusing their limits. The work of being Palestinian, for the two series, is navigating existing structures (playing by some rules, evading others) so that the drive for open interpretation is sustained. The ideal Palestinian in the Palestine Project is one who can see and interpret structures of limitation but understand that they can live and create meaning outside of them. Chapter 8 looks to the characters of Nasrallah's texts that best managed this practice of delirium. The notion of the citizen writer (distinctly not the hero-poet) emerges as an ideal model. This ideal

citizen, analysis draws out, actively and continuously engages in the writing and imagining of their community, taking in new parts that have either been neglected or that have newly appeared. This citizen must—in a network of ever-proliferating parts—constantly reinterpret meaning as new additions/editions accumulate, and constantly push against limiting frames.