

Accumulating Meaning

The Palestine conjured in Nasrallah's two linked series is not held within a single bounded geography, so its elements cannot be structured into a linear temporal order. Time, instead, is accumulated, pulled into the national network of "texts" (individuals, collectives, locations, happenings, etc.) through the establishment of relationship (like that of *al-muthannā*). This chapter looks closely at the process of accumulation, how it functions through and alongside the idea of space as discontinuous and, perhaps most importantly, how it determines the parameters for what is included in the texts of Palestine. What, analysis asks, determines whether or not a given "text" is or is not taken as a Palestinian text? Indeed, if the space and time of the nation are—or could theoretically be—everywhere and any time, how do you know what is or is not Palestine? The principle of accumulation sets out its own parameters, based on its own tautologies and processes. In literary terms, the question is one of the coherence of elements, among them space and time. Bakhtin's notion of the literary chronotope is useful here as a way of understanding the connections that happen with accumulation. In different genres, Bakhtin wrote, "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought out, concrete whole."¹ As the Russian structuralist explained it, the basis on which these indicators fuse "determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well."² It also determines the vision of the world that this "man" walks within.

Time (and its spaces) in the Palestine Project is accumulated somewhat in the manner of Walter Benjamin's angel of history. This angel observes time and sees it as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet." In this figuration, time is imagined as a "pile of debris" and not at all an ordered unit.³ Benjamin never specified whether this pile accumulated time chronologically, so that the oldest was on the bottom and the newest on the top, but in the accumulated time of the Palestine Project, the pile has no order, and the "wreckage" is "hurled" at the pile from across space and time. Things are not so much thrown in by an invisible and external force but pulled through the

establishment of relation. Just how is the subject of the first section, “Chronotope of Accumulation,” below. The chapter’s second section looks at the angel, or, in the terms set forth in Nasrallah’s fiction, the witness—that figure who determines what is “seen,” what is accumulated in the “pile of debris” that constitutes the sum total of national texts. The final section details how the “pile”—like the Palestine Comedies series—never “ends.” With an ever-growing body of “texts,” the relationships between those texts can grow exponentially. Just as the shape and structure of the Palestine Comedies remains open, and how this totality is understood shifts depending on what that totality is; so too for interpretation and meaning-making when it comes to Palestine.

Thinking the nation as an accumulation of possible elements rather than an ordering logic is something Palestinian authors have struggled to demonstrate for generations. Ghassan Kanafani, in his 1966 *All That’s Left to You* (*Mā tabaqqā lakum*), addresses the problem of time, and the expectation that it be rendered in a way that is linear and developmental. The novella precisely “accumulates” time outside of chronology and even makes the clock a character (rather than an organizing principle). The resulting narrative, Kanafani worried, was too challenging for the reader, who expects linearity. In his introduction, Kanafani apologized for the “difficulty implicit in making one’s way through a world which is jumbled in this fashion.”⁴ Of course, the Palestine of Kanafani is only “jumbled” when one tries to see it only in linear terms. Despite concerns about readability, Kanafani pushed his readers, telling them that such a jumble, what Helga Tawil-Souri calls “a disordered experience of geography and space and time,”⁵ is “clearly unavoidable if the novel is to tell its story, as I fully intend that it should, in a single burst.”⁶ To tell Palestinian experience in a way that would not see it as “disordered” does not take a radical leap; it just requires that we read texts on their own terms.

Rather than reading Kanafani’s text as one of “fragmentation” and “conflicting lines,” as critics have generally described it,⁷ reading it on its own terms reveals a construction of national meaning as it functions for his Palestine. In the novella, a pair of siblings fight different yet connected battles simultaneously. The sister confronts Israeli occupation, Palestinian collaboration, and national/religious gender roles in the Gaza Strip. The brother struggles with family expectations, the realities of geopolitics, and the political segmentation of Palestine as he leaves Gaza to find his mother in Jordan. The two constantly push off systems that would limit them as individuals and as a family collective. In one scene the brother literally battles a clock in the desert as he fights for his life, a powerful signification of the suffocating limits imposed on the characters by external forces. Jumping between siblings, into and out of their memories, across space and time, the novella—hardly a representation of postmodern fragmentation as critics suggest—is a face-value portrayal of how Palestine happens. The only reason readers keep calling it “jumbled” is because we have not had the vocabulary to describe what it *is*, only what it is not. It is not simply a “pile” of fragments but a real-time accumulation of Palestinian texts that take on national meaning as they are added to the collection.

This chapter engages a close reading of a single text, to pull apart in minute fashion how it makes national meaning through accumulation. It turns to the first in Nasrallah's Palestine Comedies, the largely autobiographical 1996 *Birds of Caution* (*Tuyūr al-ḥadhar*) and elaborates the logic that Kanafani worried was too difficult for the casual reader. Indeed, *Birds of Caution* might be called an elaboration of Kanafani's "jumble," or his "pile of debris," and a fight against the ordering power of chronology. So while *Birds of Caution* at first glance reads as a coming-of-age novel, a bildungsroman, its operating logic is really far from linear or developmental. Instead, the novel studiously reroutes the relationship between individuals and time and lays the foundation for an idea coined here as the "chronotope of accumulation." This, perhaps, is why it was hoped for as a candidate for Palestine's national novel but was never realized as such (until and unless as part of a series.)

Birds of Caution tells of a boy, his birth in the Duheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem (even before it was a recognized camp), his family's poverty, his betrothal as an infant, and the family's eventual move away from the 1948 armistice line to Wihdat refugee camp, constructed by UNRWA. Readers learn of the boy's education in UNRWA schools, how he learns to catch birds in the fields outside the camp and collect food rations from the refugee agencies. Structurally, the novel accumulates these many experiences, in and across their many locations. The story is not one of a boy who grew up to be a model Palestinian, or who was shaped by the historically (or politically) pivotal moments of the Palestinian past. In its accumulation of experiences (which are unconventionally but also undoubtedly Palestinian) the work deftly and delicately forges a model for Palestinian national time.

Narrated by a boy protagonist known only as *al-ṣaghīr* (the small, masc.; the small boy), *Birds of Caution* begins before the beginning, while *al-ṣaghīr* is still in his mother's womb. The narrator is a cheeky, alert, and very perceptive fetus, who tells the world as he senses it, collecting bits of information and then making meaning out of them. Importantly, he does not tell his story in retrospect but in that "single burst" that Kanafani wrote of. The protagonist's life is recorded as the fetus-toddler-boy-adolescent perceives it, with the limited and then growing awareness that comes with accumulated knowledge. Because at times information that the boy collects is not attached to any other bit of information, the work could easily be mislabeled as one of "postmodern fragments," but it is not. Each bit of information is just waiting to take on a richer meaning as the boy's perception expands. The story takes shape as an infant's perception does. Imagine, for example, how a baby begins to understand food. First, it learns about the taste, then perhaps its texture, shape, season, name, and cultural meaning. The food is not immediately known as, say, a fig, but is sweet, squishy, round, summery (or the impression of these things). Only later is it "fig." To all of these accumulated bits of information the boy narrator acts as a witness, collecting the facts and feelings of Palestinian existence and—without reference to any of the political or teleological frames available for "knowing" the nation—he creates a network of

relationships between all of his accumulated knowledge so that Palestine comes to take on meaning gradually. In other words, Palestine accumulates.

CHRONOTOPE OF ACCUMULATION

I didn't really know what the passage of time meant.

—BIRDS OF CAUTION⁸

In the nation-state, time is imagined retrospectively as happening in linear and homogeneous-empty fashion. I have imagined this as a sort of nation fish tank where a territory-shaped glass fills evenly with water, which rises in a linear fashion up the side of the tank. In *Birds of Caution*, time does not fill a tank; it does not “proceed” and order happenings within space: time accumulates. To reappropriate the words of Benjamin, in Nasrallah’s “first” of the Comedies, events and their spaces pile up as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage.”⁹ This was his description (in “On the Concepts of History”) of a tenth and final mode of time apprehension called the “angel of history.” In this model, Benjamin asks his readers to imagine time as uncontrolled by the order of a “chain of events.” In *Birds of Caution*, Nasrallah writes what this sort of accumulation looks like in narrative terms but without the sense of chaos that Benjamin’s angel seems to witness. In *Birds of Caution*, it is not chaos but simple, basic information that accumulates, and—once it has been accumulated—that information is ready to become attached to other bits of information. Within the “pile,” relationships form, creating the nature and texture—the shape—of all the accumulated elements.

The boy of *Birds of Caution* is like the angel of history, collecting memories, smells, and perceptions, making connections one by one, so what looks like a chaotic pile is for the boy (*al-ṣaghīr*) the order and story of his life. This offers a model for understanding how time works in the intertextual—the unbounded and non-sovereign—nation. “Texts” are collected only in the “order” that the boy narrator experiences them. This means events are often collected “out of order,” since he might come to know about something years after it “happened.” The same goes for experiences of space. The “texts” of the spaces that the boy lives are collected in the order that he understands them, beginning with Duheisheh camp, then Palestine, the West Bank, the Wihdat camp, and Jordan. Each begins by meaning only what *al-ṣaghīr* has experienced of them but comes to mean something different as the boy grows older and understands more of geopolitics and what different people say about their own experiences of these spaces. As he collects information, *al-ṣaghīr* makes and remakes meaning out of these texts and their relationship to each other (and other texts) as and when information appears for interpretation.

Take, for example, how *al-ṣaghīr* learns about night and day. At once the simplest and most complex of ideas, it is put together piece by piece to ultimately create a unique understanding of the passage of time. This becomes a sort of template

for how meaning unfolds in the rest of the work. In the first weeks of his life, the boy makes myriad observations—about his mother, his father, his need to eat or sleep—but the most poignant is his process of learning about what he first calls the *qaṭʿa zarqāʿ* (blue swath) above his crib. The blue swath is the sky, but as *al-ṣaghīr* understands it, it is a vibrant splash of color that only sometimes appears. When he sees it, he is happy. The first relational meaning through accumulation is made: blue swath/happy. The next happens when *al-ṣaghīr* realizes that the swath is only present when *umm al-ḍawʿ* (mother of the light, or source of the light, “the sun”) appears (23). Swath/happy/sun. An additional bit of information is stored and connected, and the idea of the sky and the sun expand toward “day.”

After a few weeks *al-ṣaghīr*’s cot is moved away from the window and the *qīṭa ʿa zarqāʿ* to keep him out of the draft. The boy cries until a neighbor suggests that his mother allow him once again to “see the face of his god” (14–15)—to put him back in the sunshine, in view of the world outside. Catching this small aside, *al-ṣaghīr* becomes convinced that the sun is a god who makes the blue swath above his cot appear and then disappear. For the boy, “god” is *umm al-ḍawʿ*, that which lights up the sky so it becomes the blue swath. It is much later when his mother takes him outside that he “learned that the blue swath was so much bigger than I had imagined” (25). This is how the boy comes to understand time: the brightening and darkening of the window above his cot, observation of his own surroundings that create a perception of the world. The world of the boy is forged out of chance and dependent observations, so while he has clearly created a sense of the accumulation of days, which teach him new things that make meaning out of the world, he also insists, “I didn’t really know what the passage of time meant” (10). A pattern emerges but depends on whether he happens to see the sun, or observe the swath, or hear some new bit of information that adds to the “texts” or information being collected in his imaginative universe.

Things happen in relation to *al-ṣaghīr*, not in relation to an external point or measure. The same is true for observations of space. What matters for *al-ṣaghīr* and the chronotope of accumulation is the boy’s own relation to space, not the designation of space on a never-seen geopolitical map. What *al-ṣaghīr* knows is that when people visited to celebrate his birth “some had been big, some had been small” (23). He adds to this the supposition that perhaps “some of them had come from very faraway places” (23). It does not seem significant. However, it becomes the basis for the boy’s understanding of location-in-space. Space is relational, to the self and to the other spaces that are occupied. In the universe of *al-ṣaghīr*, what is close is big—both literally and in narrative terms. First he describes the layout of his neighborhood: “There are faraway houses, but they are small” (25). He means the houses across the valley from his own cave-home, which appear small to him and cause him to wonder whether they are built that way. He can’t decide if those who live in them are small or “perhaps they build them small like that only to sleep outside of them” (23). There are big people and small people, there is far

and near; but since far things are small, the boy concludes that small people must be from faraway places. This is how he calculates the differences between children, who he plays with and discovers the world alongside, and adults, who operate with norms and expectations different from his own. Distance, and difference, then, becomes big and small, just as time becomes light and dark.

What is critical is that space, time, and community—what they are and what they mean—are dependent on the narrator. Instead of a people conjuring a nation that can then contain and direct them as a political unit, the story of *al-ṣaghīr* presumes him to be the driving and connecting force. He accumulates knowledge and creates meaning in layers with himself at the center. This is how the novel registers no “rupture,” interruption in time, or dislocation in space when the boy and his family pick up and move from Duheisheh across the Jordan River into the Wihdat camp near Amman. Where departure from the historic land of Palestine plays a central role in national identity, the fact goes totally unmarked in *al-ṣaghīr*’s account of life. For his story, it is not the location, the route traveled to reach the new camp, or the political realities that drove the boy’s family across the river that are relevant—though these are the things that are typically nationally marked.

For *al-ṣaghīr* leaving Palestine is registered only in terms of relation to the familiar. What is recorded is that he will be reunited with his friend and betrothed, Hanun (Ḥanūn, “kindness,” but also colloquially the name for the anemone), when the family reaches Wihdat. The journey, for the boy, is thus more of a reconnection than a dislocation. Hanun’s family had gone to Wihdat after her father was killed in a border skirmish (common between 1948 and the mid-1950s in the Bethlehem area) to join her mother’s family who had fled across the river in 1948.¹⁰ Again, none of this context “matters” for the fabric of the text, and the boy only computes that she has left to a place unknown to him—outside of his universe. He asks his mother:

Is it because I made her mad that she left?
 No, they just went to Wihdat to get someone
 And will we go too?
 When our turn comes. (61)

Their “turn” was when the government in Amman, tired of the border skirmishes, finishes building New Camp, as Wihdat was first known, and enticed refugees away from the armistice line with the promise of better living conditions.¹¹ While his world, his movements, his experience of space is structured by the condition of being a refugee, it is not governed by the idea of fragmentation or loss. There are no presumed relationships to either people or place, just the desire for reunion with Hanun and perceptions of a new place once they arrive.

It might seem tempting to invest such a story with so few visible “markers” of geopolitical space or historical time with universal meaning (as opposed to national). However, in the chronotope of accumulation time and space are marked

as particular, just in a profoundly different frame. *Birds of Caution* is not a timeless or universal story disconnected from worldly place. It is particularly Palestinian, but re-plots how the nation comes to be marked. As *al-ṣaghīr* accumulates a mass of experiences, he creates a critical volume of relationships through which he can understand and interpret the world. That world is Palestine. He is a boy born in a refugee camp near Bethlehem shortly after the Nakba who is relocated to an official camp on the outskirts of Amman in the mid-1950s and who is killed shortly before Black September in the early 1970s. In political terms, *al-ṣaghīr* is marked by the aftermath of the Nakba and the rise of Palestinian resistance. What is important is that these historical “facts” tell the reader little about what matters to the boy. Nor do they decode the process by which he enters and makes sense of the world-that-is-Palestine.

Instead of historical landmarks signposting the story, it is *al-ṣaghīr*’s birth, hunger, friendships, erections, love affairs, and hobbies that create the logic of *Birds of Caution*’s narrative. *Al-ṣaghīr* creates the “knots” of narrative based on random life experience and turns these intersections into a web that far outlives the narrator. The story of *al-ṣaghīr* inverts the coming-of-age as Bakhtin described it, where “everyday and biological sequences are fused into unitary markers of the epoch.”¹² Instead, everyday and biological data are suspended in an infinite space-time and connected to other bits of data (other “texts”) when these become available. Instead of producing meaning in relation to these historical narratives by pinpointing a time and a place and a teleology, *Birds of Caution* produces meaning through the senses of the child, as he accumulates bits of information about what the world is and how it works. These bits stick together and eventually take form through his ever-widening worldview.

Linking, or perhaps explaining as a process, the way that *al-ṣaghīr* makes sense of and interprets the world is his position as witness. This is a narrative mode, a way of bringing time, place, and people together that defines as much how the boy operates within his world as how the novel presents the position of the boy. Both formulate a framework for understanding the metrics by which the “pieces” of Palestine come together in time.

PARADIGM OF WITNESS

What makes the story of the boy and his chronotope of accumulation not just “another” chronotope of specific or limited Palestinian experience is *al-ṣaghīr*’s power as witness. The act of witnessing is the tautology of Palestine’s nation form. For the nation-state the circular logic is, to use Balibar’s phrase, the “retrospective illusion” that all history has led up to a particular point in the present.¹³ For Palestine as it is imagined here, the tautology is that what is witnessed is national, and it is national because it is witnessed by a member of the nation; a member of the nation has the power to witness because they are recognized as part of the

nation. This builds from witness as in the Arabic *shahāda* and not the contemporary Western juridical or trauma-centered usages. In Arabic *shahāda* carries both literary and eschatological meanings, which are drawn on equally as the concept is developed as a national signifier in *Birds of Caution*.

Witness becomes a critical tool of perception—perception authorized by a community—that determines what might be accumulated into a collective consciousness. A socio-religio-juridical concept, from *sh-h-d*, witness means “to see” and draws not only on an Islamic juridical tradition, but customs of community making and Palestinian national symbolism. First, and foundationally, *shahāda* is a key word in the Muslim testament of faith. It defines the proclamation that ordains one a Muslim and indicates belief and submission to the religious (and juridical) system: “I testify [*a-sh-h-a-d-u*] that there is no god but god and Mohammed is his prophet.” The recitation ensures that the newly born are brought into or remain a part of a larger community—a community that is not bordered or national, which expands across time and space. It is also recited at death, to ensure that the deceased remains part of the community in the afterlife.

To make this proclamation (*yashhad*) is to enter Muslim community. Once part of this community, one can act as witness (*yushāhid*) juridically speaking to help maintain the legal bonds of that community. The word also forms the basis of *shahīd* (martyr), which in Palestinian national terms has become synonymous with anyone killed either in the service of the nation or by Israeli/Zionist forces—these conceptually becoming one and the same. Doubly marking the boy as a particularly Palestinian witness, *Birds of Caution* titles the first and last chapters “*shahāda*.” This references the recitation of the religious phrase at his birth and death, bringing *al-ṣaghīr* into community, but also calls him a witness. That the number of chapters in between are numerically marked from 46 to 1 and the two *shahāda* chapters bring the total number to the symbolic 48 reinforces the connection.¹⁴

How witness works in *Birds of Caution* is as a sort of Benjaminian angel. It is *al-ṣaghīr*’s “seeing” of a thing, his witness of it, that makes something national. But it is not necessarily his perception or how he puts meaning together at any given time that designates something as Palestinian. He is the collector, not the interpreter. Once *al-ṣaghīr* has collected various “texts,” they are left to the reader to construct meaning out of them. An example of the boy’s vision here is useful. Embroiled in his own private concerns, the boy will walk through a field and observe the buildings surrounding it, or overhear a conversation, or be upset by an encounter at his work at the Amman fruit market. These happenings and the settings they happen in are collected and sometimes become attached to other collected texts. This idea of happenings as discrete-but-connected (and collected) is reinforced by the structure of the novel.

Birds of Caution is written in vignettes. Each chapter is made up of a dozen or so discrete “happenings” (vignettes), which “happen” in different places and times,

some in the past, others as memories, or in the “present” of *al-ṣaghīr*. These happenings are separated from each other—marked out as different and discrete—by an asterisk centered on the page between two blank lines (-*-). The reader hops from one vignette to another, with no smoothing out or explanation of what relates one vignette to the other—or what each might mean to *al-ṣaghīr*. There is, in other words, no larger “arc” that the vignettes are put into. Vignettes are simply collected. In any given chapter, that which is witnessed comes as it does in life—often without order or connection. For example, in chapter 38, the boy witnesses a fight between his parents. Following this happening, the story records the memory (it is unclear whose) of earlier fights. Next, in order, are presented scenes where the boy goes to the well and gets wet, then tells his mother he was at the sea; the boy asks for siblings and records a memory (it is unclear whose) of the difficulty of his mother’s conception; the boy gets dirty in the muddy streets of the camp—and it goes on. The following section has a breakdown of the events/memories/happenings that take place in a single chapter of *Birds of Caution* and presents a full analysis. These vignettes are not linked with any “and therefore” or “because”—ideas that would show that one thing happens as a consequence of another. They simply happen and are recorded: witnessed.

Witness is more than just the collection of vignettes. Once all of these “texts” are accumulated they become national knowledge. This idea again rests on the Islamic juridical concept of witness. Brinkley Messick has called the practice of witness so powerful that it holds together the Islamic world as a legal and religious community.¹⁵ In Islamic textual practice individuals sign and authenticate (witness) the transfer of knowledge from one person to another. It is this witness, Messick explains, that ensures knowledge comes from reliable sources, so that it can be trusted by the community as a basis for law and belief.¹⁶ All elements of Islamic law are determined and verified through witness, beginning with “hadiths [and continuing] to the historical links of genealogy,”¹⁷ so that narratives of the Prophet Mohamed are verified through the process of witness. As Messick reasons, it is witness that governs knowledge production within and for the immediate and imagined wider religious community. Far more than an oath, Messick writes, “witnessing pertains to the contemporary bonds of a social community,”¹⁸ linking individuals to each other, and to a history of text and knowledge. This is also where the tautology of the paradigm of witness as a national act is drawn from.

Islamic legal knowledge must be witnessed in order to constitute law (sharia) and constitutes sharia because it is witnessed. The *shahāda* serves what Messick describes as a function of “vertical . . . and multiple-node transmission.”¹⁹ The narrative assumptions that dictate the terms of a Palestinian national story in Nasrallah’s works are thus two: there is a community, and it is verified through witness. *Al-ṣaghīr* becomes a literary version of the Palestinian caricaturist Naji al-Ali’s ubiquitous Handala, the small boy marked in the corner of countless political

cartoons, his back always to the viewer, his presence an affirmation of a Palestinian looking at and claiming the world in front of him as Palestinian. This form of witness replaces historical teleology as an entry into narrative. It also allows for many and simultaneous connected but not codetermining stories to emerge. Witness accumulates not only what the boy sees, but memories and flashbacks that attend and complicate that which is experienced. These collectively tell of his life and the network of lives and patterns in which he is enmeshed. The example of *al-ṣaghīr*'s aunt is a case in point.

That the accumulated texts of *al-ṣaghīr* in fact capture the story of his aunt Maryam illustrates the power and possibility of this strategy of accumulation. A peripheral character existing mostly out of the frame of interest of the child, Maryam comes up in the daily life of *al-ṣaghīr* as well as in the memories he collects. Her life is witnessed, and in finding the connections between the vignettes that are available, a first example of accumulated meaning making emerges. When learning about his parents' marriage, for example, *al-ṣaghīr* hears that his father had first been promised to his maternal aunt, Maryam. The comment, "If your sister had accepted [my marriage proposal], the boy would have been hers" (27), illuminates for the boy why she pays so much attention to him. It is only later, though, that the boy learns why his aunt refused the union: "That fair young woman had fallen in love with an officer from the Arab Liberation Army" (29). This "fact" does not move the narrative forward, as the retold memory ends and the daily life of the boy proceeds; it is simply another happening collected in the heap. Just because the information began as an "aside," however, does not mean it is any less important than the main events in the child's life. Really, the story of the boy cannot be said to be any more "central" to the novel than the story of Maryam and her lover (or any of the myriad other texts that are collected). All unfold and overlap for the reader in open time.

The aunt and *al-ṣaghīr* grow close after his father is arrested. His mother must raise her now several children alone. Because the boy is the oldest by quite a few years, he is left to his own devices and finds his aunt as a companion. She had always looked out for *al-ṣaghīr*, and even though his mother, Aisha, later has more children, Maryam's "heart was closed to any but the boy" (57). She had understood him as the child with Ali that she would never have, a symbol of a life unled. This devotion makes Aisha nervous at times, angry even. These feelings conjure memories of the sisters' early rivalry, but the memories of rivalry also contain information about Maryam's past and the forces that kept her single. In one memory, which appears as one of hundreds of vignettes in the novel, the sisters covertly read a letter from Sulayman, a midrank corporal in the Arab Liberation Army (ALA; composed of soldiers from Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine and charged with protecting Palestine from Zionist forces) who promises Maryam that when the war for Palestine is over, they will marry.

The couple had met when the ALA came to protect their village but were separated when the sisters fled for safety with their parents. The letter reached her in the camp. After reading it, Maryam outwardly insists that Sulayman will come back for her, an assertion that leads to the fight between the two sisters. Aisha does not share Maryam's certainty and skeptically asks why Sulayman won't just come and marry her now, instead of pinning marital success on the success of the war. She casts the letter as so much face-saving rhetoric, saying, "Why all these words if he is so trustworthy?" (57). Maryam feigns anger with her sister but inwardly laments, "Whoever abandons the country for their own sake will not return" (59). The memory leaves the precise reasons for Sulayman's departure unknown, whether it is because he has no real interest in Palestine (or in Maryam) or because he was called into battle elsewhere. At this point the question is open: Has Maryam's happiness been sacrificed to save Palestine, or has an ALA officer used Palestine's saving as a rhetorical device to deceive her? Will he prove as untrustworthy in personal affairs as his army was in its promise to save Palestine? In the 1950s the national sentiment leaned toward the first assertion, though its shadow alternative was never far from view.

In later chapters more information is gathered about Maryam. Crucially, however (and as the next section elaborates), that information and the conclusions that one might reach from connecting the information do not negate the relevance of the conclusions reached until now. All connections between one vignette and another always remain valid. This is because there is always the expectation of the possibility of more information. Without the presumption of a "conclusion" to the story of the boy, or the story of Maryam and Sulayman (or of Amman, or of the camp, or of the boy's flirtations, or the rise of the resistance), the tidbits readers glean are presented as correct, full, and meaningful—as they are. The question of the trustworthiness of the ALA, for example, is a valid question in the ongoing story of Palestine and communicates a great deal about the concerns of refugees in the 1950s and 1960s. The condition of uncertainty communicated in Maryam's reading of the letter is a story in and of itself. If more information emerges, a new story develops that does not erase the validity of what is already known. The paradigm of witness has no expected outcome.

Where teleology creates meaning by fitting events into a predetermined conclusion (so that knowledge is verified because it fits within the trajectory tautologically, or in Julia Kristeva's terms, it explores the binaries set out at the beginning without ever collapsing them), witness's preverification comes through the idea that the community requires it. Witness is necessary for community—a requirement for entering community—and is an act that ties the individual across space and time. It makes sense of what is observed by linking these elements into that same open framework, creating relationships between information generated by the chronotope of accumulation. Witness thus makes meaning in an open-ended fashion, as the chronotope of accumulation simply continues to collect national texts.

CONTINUOUS MEANING

The generation of continuous meaning rests on the ideological possibility of—to recast the words of Kristeva—an unbounded text. This is what *Birds of Caution* is constructing. The “bounded” text that Kristeva theorizes is structured around existing “discursive binaries”²⁰—pairs of oppositions that tend to structure perceptions of life and its meaning. Kristeva points specifically to binaries that create narrative arcs (or loops), like “life-death, love-hate, fidelity-treason.”²¹ These presumed binaries, where one is encoded for in the idea of the other, for Kristeva, create narrative loops so that the story of life, for example, is told against and inside the presumption of death or, similarly, that a story of fidelity is structured by the possibility (likelihood?) of treason, and so on. In this structure-of-telling, a text in essence ends where it begins, by reaffirming the binary whose arc it follows. For example, if something ends in death, it affirms life, and also the binary life/death; if something does not end in treason, it affirms that fidelity requires its absence (or, if there is treason, that fidelity is challenged by treason—either way the binary sticks). *Birds of Caution* reorients meaning (and here specifically national meaning) away from closed binaries and teaches its readers to generate national knowledge (which is national because it is witnessed, and it is available for interpretation because it has been accumulated) outside of them. The novel is not a closed text, or a predetermined one.

Birds of Caution takes a pedagogical approach and pushes its readers into an open process of interpretation. Readers, like *al-ṣaghīr*, collect information. When there is enough information to make meaning, or create relationships between bits, readers create a sort of knowledge packet. These packets await connection to other packets, with the expectation that all will become linked through ever-widening networks of perception. For example, by the third reference to Maryam, readers start paying attention; there is meaning being generated. In noticing the repeated references, readers realize that they have been collecting information—just like the boy. Because there is no binary that predetermines relationships between parts, information collects gradually. As bits accumulate, readers must undergo a process of continuous interpretation. This at once “organizes” and creates relationships between one thing and another. Continuous/suspended meaning takes place when accumulated information creates different kinds of meaning, which is never closed or determined but instead is constantly amended as more information (from what is seen or remembered) becomes available.

To demonstrate suspended meaning, this chapter “undoes” some of the “order” falsely constructed in the two previous sections. In some ways they artificially separated elements of accumulated texts and continuous meaning-making in order to describe and explain the nation in terms that “make sense” within homogeneous and empty time. The story of Maryam and Sulayman, for example, was dug out and told chronologically, though this is not at all the way it was told. What follows is an attempt to reimmerge these two narrative “threads”—taken out of

their contexts—in the form they take in the novel. To do this in a way that is not overwhelming (as much of the book is at first reading), this section zooms in to look at a single chapter and show how meaning is constructed in a way that suspends any ultimate determination.

Chapter 38 finds the boy almost a teenager. The “real time” events of the chapter take place around 1970, understood from the context. Vignettes portray high tensions between Palestinians in the camps and a Jordanian government keen to exercise sovereignty in the wake of the 1967 defeat. At this point Israel had occupied the West Bank, and Palestinians were increasingly organizing, frustrated at what all saw as a failure of Arab unity to prevent the seizure of more Palestinian land (and dashing further hopes for a return of Palestine to Palestinians). It is in this context that the boy ventures farther from the camp, taking on work in the fruit market of Amman, and that we once again encounter the story of Maryam and Sulayman. The chapter is segmented into thirteen vignettes. Running through an entire chapter, moving from one vignette to another and building meaning, readers develop skills of suspended interpretation.

Titled just with the number, “38,” the chapter opens with a short description of the first winter that *al-ṣaghīr* spends in the Wihdat camp. The poetic protagonist relates his new world: “The cement cans spread out in the distance without an end in sight. . . . A game of repetition in small rooms, in narrow alleyways” (80). This description is followed, after the separating asterisk, by a second scene, describing a domestic space where the boy sparks an argument between his aunt and mother. The short scene is reproduced here in its entirety, to give a sense of the pace of the work.

-*-

He asked her: All the other kids have brothers, how come I don't have one?

She cried.

He forgot his question for a long time, until it returned again.

He screamed: Why don't I have a brother?

She cried.

His father's aunt said: You want a brother?

He said: Yes.

She said: We will marry your father.

You mean to a woman not my mother?

Ah.

So he screamed: I'll break her head with a rock if she comes.

The mother rejoiced. The aunt fumed. The father saw the whole scene and stayed silent, the father who had waited to be given a boy so he could name him Gamāl.

-*-(83)

The vignette begins and ends without references to the preceding or following scenes and is demarcated with the asterisk set between two dashes. The only tem-

poral indicator is the absence of siblings for *al-ṣaghīr*, who arrive when he is of school age, and the political reference to Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian president and leader of the Pan-Arab movement from the mid-1950s to his death in 1970. After the close of the vignette, the chapter continues with another eleven scenes. These are summarized below. A scan of the vignettes shows each as seemingly unrelated to the next. How does the reader “make sense” of these events? A few options emerge.

CHAPTER 38 AND ITS SUBSECTIONS/VIGNETTES (PP. 80–93)

1. First winter in Wihdat. The houses and conditions are described. The boy wants to go out of the tent, but his mother doesn't want him to. He goes.
2. The boy asks for a brother, then is shocked when a relative suggests marrying his father to another woman.
3. Women fetching water from a well, doing their laundry. They are watched by the boy, who comes home wet and tells his mother he was [impossibly] at the sea.
4. Begins “Aisha didn't have a house,” revealing the young woman waiting for Ali to arrive for the wedding ceremony. While waiting, Maryam is happy for Aisha. This happiness makes her “heart ache.” A flashback to Maryam reading a letter from Sulayman. Second flashback to first meeting of Maryam and Sulayman as she goes to the well to fetch water. Maryam's reflections indicate they have had intercourse. Sulayman's vision of Maryam narrated. Concludes with Maryam refusing to answer question of flashback: Aisha, “Did he kiss you?” We know Sulayman is a corporal in the ALA.
5. Preparations for Aisha's wedding. Ali's aunts criticize Aisha's body. Maryam calls the judgement of women against women “evil.” Maryam wonders where Sulayman is.
6. Sulayman sees Maryam from his guard post. He goes to find her. Finds her at the well, describes her beauty. Thinks about her for three nights. Masturbates while on guard duty.
7. The wedding. Ali shows Aisha their new “house in a cave on a hill.” Halima, Aisha's new stepmother, demands that everyone but the bride and groom sleep outside of the cave on the wedding night.
8. Story of how Halima got married to Ali's father. His mother had died, and exactly thirty-nine days after he asked to marry the ugliest woman in the village so his children would be looked after. Umm Thurayya, Ali's aunt (who we elsewhere learn wanted to marry her daughter to Ali, who was also the midwife for the boy. All of her children die except a sickly Thurayya) blames their too hasty marriage for the soon to follow death of her infant son, saying it jinxed him [she was upset that Ali would not take her daughter as a second wife].
9. Pastoral vignette on how life in the cave on the hill proceeds.
10. Begins: “The war didn't forget anyone, they were set upon by the liberation army, which could not even liberate itself.” Narrator says: “This broke Abu Ali.” Marital discord between Halima and Abu Ali [Ali's father].
11. More marital problems. Abu Ali threatens Halima.

12. Umm Thurayya tells Halima not to blame Abu Ali.
13. Ali and Aisha bring mattresses up to the cave to try to better the conditions there. Concludes: they were “still hoping to make a life there.”

As the scenes unfold, readers must continually carry out microanalyses to identify the connections between the accumulated parts. Sometimes no connections can be made. Both the character of Umm Thurayya and the specter of war are given no background context and had not appeared in earlier chapters. Umm Thurayya is in fact not formally introduced until the next chapter, so her comments here hang in the narrative, awaiting a formal relationship with another piece of information that will help readers understand one part of the relationship with the boy. We have no idea what Umm Thurayya and the specter of war have to do with the boy or why they matter in his world. But because they are witnessed, we know that they must. At first disorienting, the writing style forces readers to seek connections beyond a contained space, or linear/developmental time. Instead, the focus shifts to relationships between individuals, to small communities that take shape, or to locations/events that are brought to life.

Thinking about the chapter in nonlinear terms and disassociating the parts from their page order reveal four main themes: the developing relationship of Maryam and Sulayman, the story of the marriage of Aisha and Ali (the boy's mother and father), the story of the relationship of Halima and Abu Ali (the boy's grandparents), and the story of the war. The relationships figure in almost all the sections of the chapter, intersecting and overlapping. Other relationships emerge in the theme of weddings and romantic and familial love relationships, as well as the relationships between alternating characters in each of the pairs. For example, a section detailing interactions between Halima and Umm Thurayya develop their relationship, which connects subpairs to each of the main story lines. The same is true for interactions between *al-ṣaghīr* and Umm Thurayya (his father's aunt), who tells the boy that his father should marry again so that he can have a brother. This not only reveals an otherwise unnarrated backstory of the pressures on the relationships between the boy's parents, but also some of the social tensions that exist within the camp. Suspended interpretation pulls vignettes together by diverse and overlapping means: by theme, by recurring characters, by location of action. The result is an interlinked network forged with and through each vignette as it is read.

Though another theme may belabor the point, that is rather the point. There are so many ways to make meaning out of the vignettes that all different methods come to exist simultaneously. This includes broad themes such as gender and the social roles of women. More than in any other chapter, in 38 we get a real sense of the diversity of roles that women play both supporting and critiquing each other. It is under this theme that the story of Maryam and her once-lover takes another leap in meaning. In what is otherwise a vignette about marriage, love, family, and

the nascent political activity of the camp boys, Maryam the childless matriarch finds information that changes the interpretation of her love for Sulayman. It is the late 1960s, judging by the age of *al-ṣaghīr* and the tense political climate of the camp. The boys of Wihdat have gotten into trouble with the Jordanian authorities, and Maryam marches down to the local police station to sort out the trouble and bring the boys home. When she steps into the building and finds the officer in charge, she is shocked. It is Sulayman. He has been down the road from her for decades while she “waits” for him to fulfill his promise to save Palestine and marry her. Though this was true from the start, it only became part of the Palestinian story when it was witnessed.

The encounter, and the “knot” it creates in the narrative web, pulls the story of Maryam and Sulayman across the Jordan River, where it was left spatially, and through memory where it existed through flashbacks, into the present. The story of waiting and anger take a quick turn, as Maryam shouts to her once beloved:

For twenty years I looked for you, and waited for you and you were under my feet right here? For twenty years I rotted here—she beat her chest—I rotted here like all of those other people rotted and more. . . . [Y]our name wasn’t the only lie, your entire being was a lie, it was on me to understand that a long time ago. (317)

What was once a subplot becomes a powerful symbol for life as a Palestinian refugee. Developed over 38 chapters, the sense of loss and betrayal is shared between reader and Maryam, who have come to know the woman as one comes to know anyone: through periodic episodes that tell a dozen different stories. Accumulating and assimilating this new information creates a differently shaped Palestinian narrative, but it is not closed. It remains to be seen what she will do now that her personal story (and the national story) has changed shape.

As a microcosm of what *Birds of Caution* makes possible, the story of Maryam is just like the stories that emerge from all of the other characters that appear in the novel, including the story of the boy. The themes and subthemes that develop in the course of their lives often continue well beyond their presence in the text, so that a sense of social structure, place, displacement, love, and growth all develop in conversation with each other. This is all possible because of the structure of the work and its chronotope of accumulation. Rather than being stymied by what Elias Khoury called the “struggle between presence and interpretation that never stopped since 1948,”²² *Birds of Caution* crafts a structure of meaning-making (of “interpretation”) that does not rely on “presence.” This fosters “incomplete” national interpretation since new information will certainly come to light later—in later chapters, later flashbacks, and later texts.

So far, then, the Palestine that emerges in Nasrallah’s texts is one of many linked parts. The parts can be imagined as complete and discrete (yet connected) elements of a larger whole through the notion of the series. These linkages, through the notion of *al-muthannā*, can forge bonds between people and locations, giving

texture and substance to the meaning of connection between the many texts in a series. All of these elements produce a unique national chronotope, where space, time, and people are united through the paradigm of witness. Witness collects the elements of the nation, and the open-endedness of the idea of the series (and indeed *al-muthannā*) sets the scene for an accumulated meaning-making, created as it happens across the many times and spaces of Palestinian experience, including across the field of memory. Of course, Palestine has been forged by more than its own people, places, and times. Other external structures have had powerful and devastating impacts. It is to these that the next section turns.