

Palestinian Orientation

What makes national meaning out of “being” Palestinian is not just the personal success of the individuals who realize this open-ended worldview. There is a much wider umbrella at work, and it is within this structure that the daily actions and reactions of individuals take on a larger collective value. It is not a national telos, or the folding in of that “Particular I” into the linear narrative of the state, but it is, similarly, how the individual knows theirs’ and others’ actions are Palestinian and acts as a gauge for personal success against the national frame. Rather than the “becoming” of state, the structure of Palestinianness is better described as a national orientation, a collective sense of possibility, of goals, and, as Sara Ahmad puts it, a way to “find our way through the world.”¹ In describing what a Palestinian orientation means in fiction, the discussion moves just as much around what is to be avoided as what is to be done. Finding a Palestinian “way through the world,” indeed, is equally about how to elude the pitfalls of being erased by other powerful national narratives as it is about forging imaginative frameworks for being and belonging.

In tracing the relationship between the agent and the nation, characters hone a perspective, an orientation that cuts through the many overlapping structures of power, allowing the individual to reach conclusions about action that will sustain their relationship to the nation in an open-ended fashion. This is, in essence, a constant refusal of closure, of assertions of telos, of predetermination and foreclosure that would delimit the practice of continuous interpretation of the ever-increasing texts of the nation. There is conceptual precedent for this idea. Mark Rifkin, for example, has deployed Sara Ahmad’s work on orientation to reframe thinking on the relationship between Indigenous communities in the United States.² Rifkin defines the differences in terms of time, as an ordering principle as we saw it in parts 1 and 2. He terms an orientation to the state a life within “settler time,” where the individual is “oriented” to the fulfillment of the (teleological) national story. For Indigenous peoples, who nonetheless reside within the state,

Rifkin looks at how communities have a differently articulated “orientation,” a different way of understanding, imagining, moving within, and creating meaning from time. This “way of being,” unlike an orientation within the state (or a becoming into the state, to use Slaughter’s terms) allows the mutual constitution of a self and community through one’s actions. Turning directly to Ahmad’s work adds nuance to the idea.

A Palestinian orientation is not a case of being oriented to a point of desire, to use Ahmad’s development of idea, but being oriented “around.” “To be oriented around something,” Ahmad reasons, “means to make that thing central, or as being at the center of one’s being or attention.”³ In this case, it is the intertextual network of texts that the Palestinian person is not only oriented “around,” but indeed within. This fits nicely with Ahmad’s description, where orientation around a thing (the intertextual network) is to “make ‘that thing’ binding, or to constitute oneself as that thing.”⁴ As indeed Palestinians, as texts within the network certainly constitute and are constituted by (by being oriented around) the intertextual network. At the same time, Palestinian orientation also operates in the negative, not by the exclusion of, say, “Orientalism” as Said articulated it and Ahmad explored, but as a sort of avoidance and critical distance. The balconic position that creates the network of Palestine’s texts carefully directs Palestinians away from structures that would co-opt them, that would orientate them away from the practice of mutual constitution of the open self and the open nation. In the literary language that emerges from Nasrallah’s works, and in Palestinian fiction more broadly, this orientation is expressed in the language of Arabic literary madness.

Madness in Arabic fiction is not the operation of a normalizing control that Foucault famously described in his *Madness and Civilization*. It not the operation of “madness” as a social phenomenon in Palestine, which at least since the nineteenth century worked in a similar exclusionary sense as that described by Foucault. As one orientalist observer described madness in Palestinian society circa 1920, madness is “anything eccentric, out of the way, contrary to custom.”⁵ Madness as the basis of a Palestinian orientation is rather based on generations of Arabic literary and folkloric depictions of “truth in madness” or “wisdom of insanity” (*junūn*),⁶ which run across Arabic (and indeed Anglo/European) literary tradition. This sort of madness allows order and power to be seen as the problem and madness as the solution. In Arabic fiction, as Rasheed El-Enany concludes, the category of madness is at once “a means of dismissing the dissenter, of disclaiming the contravener of convention and upsetter of perceived correctness,”⁷ and simultaneously “an act of self-assertion, inasmuch as it is a final rejection of the unjust norms of society, a counter disclaimer, a rejection of society’s ‘irrational’ sanity.”⁸ Whether it is because the “mad” had no legal standing in Islamic law,⁹ or because of their association with the otherworldly *jinn* (spirits), the social designation provides in literature a certain freedom from imposed logics. In Arabic

literary history, madness is also closely linked with truth seeking and indeed truth telling when faced with the problematic logics of power.¹⁰

In his deployment of madness as a way out of the oppressive logic of the state, Nasrallah draws on a long history of the idea in Palestinian, and not just Arabic, fiction. From Darwish's *Diary of Ordinary Grief* (*Yawmiyyāt al-ḥuzn al-`ādī*, 1973) to the institutionalized wife in Jabra's *The Search for Walid Masoud* (*al-Baḥṭh `an Walid Mas`ūd*, 1978) to the more recent *The Mad of Bethlehem* (*Majānīn Bayt Laham*, 2013) by Usama al-Issa, perhaps the most famous call to delirium in the Palestinian corpus comes in Emile Habibi's canonical novel, *The Secret Life of Said, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist* (*al-Waqā`i` al-gharība fī ikhtifā` Sa`īd abī-al-naḥs al-mutashā`il*, 1977). In its aptly titled epilogue, "For the Sake of Truth and History," madness is proposed as the only way to access the truth of the experiences of Said. Indeed, if one did not know the context from which the narrative of Said was drawn, it might easily be read as absurd. But "illogical," as the novel's frame narrator discovers, is the only way to understand what is being communicated to him in a series of letters that make up the bulk of the narrative. The letters claim that their author, Said, had been taken to outer space by aliens. The aliens had rescued the Akka native from a life being torn apart by his efforts to simultaneously meet the expectations of the new state of Israel as a citizen and of his Palestinian friends and colleagues as a national. Not quite believing that Said has been writing from outer space, the narrator finds the postmark on the letters and travels to find their point of dispatch. This turns out to be the Akka asylum. The asylum staff, however, cannot confirm—nor can they deny—that Said had been a resident. There was once a resident there, they said, with a similar name, but he "had died about a year before."¹¹ Was Said's story then nonsense? Or was it truth that existing logics simply could not recognize as truth?

With a final interjection, Said submits a proposal to the narrator, and indeed the reader. It comes in the form of a sort of parable, which requires a little unpacking. Said tells the narrator, who is trying to find a way to verify Said's story, "Get yourself a brush and a bottomless bucket and stand next to me and do some painting."¹² The key here is "stand next to me," to simply take what Said says at his word—even if it seems illogical. Said is asking the narrator and the reader to give up on what they think is logical and to stand in the world that Said inhabits—to understand a different sort of logic. The final line of the novel thus reminds readers that understanding how a minority experience makes meaning, or is made sense of, often means letting go of the majority logic. In imaginative terms, the logic of the state must be painted over with a brush and a bottomless bucket. In keeping with the refusal of teleology, and the open-ended way of being that the idea of citizenship in Nasrallah's texts requires, the bucket is also endless, the process of painting over the logic of power an endless one. This idea is not only taken up in the works of the Palestine Project, but through their very volume is expanded on to such a degree that analysis can pull out a set of parameters, a vocabulary with which to describe and deploy this position of "madness" as a way of being a citizen.

Nowhere is the idea of madness worked out more fully in Nasrallah's oeuvre and indeed in Palestinian letters than in the first novel in the Balconies series, *Balcony of Delirium* (*Shurfat al-hadhayān*, 2004). As the introduction and elements of part 1 set out, the Balconies series kicked off a new layer of narrative for Palestine and was able—once Palestine as an intertextual network was established—to dig into what it means for Palestine to exist betwixt and between so many other nation-states. Like the Comedies, the Balconies was not initially conceived as a series, but its foundational novel, and its highly experimental prose, opened new vistas of representation. This, in the language of the text, is delirium (*hadhayān*). Delirium is developed as an aesthetic, as a way of seeing and being in the world that amounts to the infrastructure of an orientation.

The sections below draw out three central elements of delirium-as-orientation. The first is how a Palestinian orientation allows both individual and community to dissociate from but live alongside structures of power. This is the negative, or cautionary, element of the Palestinian orientation. Next are strategies for maintaining what at times characters worry is a disorientation, as well as strategies to move through the world while seeing the powerful logics that tend to order it disassembled. The final section looks at the different goals—personal and national—that emerge when living as Palestinian through this (dis)orientation. These three elements are drawn out across readings of two works, one from the Comedies and one from the Balconies, both of which were read in earlier chapters but whose readings were suspended (to use the language of suspended interpretation as it came out in *Birds of Caution*). My readings here thus begin with where we left Fouad in *Eraser Child*, the second work in the Comedies. The failures that it draws out are those that are taken up and answered in the first of the Balconies.

DISSOCIATING FROM STATE LOGIC; OR,
“BREAKING THE MIRROR”

It is Fouad's failures that make the call for an alternative way of existing in and navigating the world beyond the structure of states—a call for the articulation of delirium as a way of being in the world. In chapter 5, the analysis left the young man, a hapless soldier in the Arab Liberation Army and the protagonist of *Eraser Child*, alone in the hills of Jerusalem, having lost his unit and for the first time in his life being left without a commanding authority to instruct his interpretation of the world. Through his subsequent actions, and his failures, the work sets up an urgent call for delirium, which in this first instance means dissociating from structures of power and learning to see the world without them. Unaccustomed to having to think for himself, Fouad's first solution is to tune in to the radio, which he had managed to salvage from the field of battle when his ALA unit was defeated by a Zionist militia. He takes the radio and tunes in to Radio Cairo, then Radio Beirut in the hope of gaining information on where his unit might be, so he can reconnect with the battle to liberate Palestine. The news on the radio, however, is not

useful: it does not report the lost battle. Tuning in to the Cairo broadcast, Fouad is confused because the transmission “didn’t carry anything but good news” (238), with announcements of constant victory sandwiched between “songs of joy” (239) that no longer lifted his spirits. This good news did not fit with his own experience. He had expected reports of defeat because this is what had happened. The logic of this power (ALA) had no room for defeat. The dislocation between experiences and narrative is a first for the soldier; it is a crack in the vision of the world that had been presented to him, and that he had accepted.

Without any credible logic to make sense of his surroundings or orient his actions, Fouad, hilariously, follows a goat. At least, he thinks, the goat is on its way to a village where he could be directed back to his battalion. But the wandering animal is not headed back to any old village; he is returning to Deir Yasin after having fled the massacre there in April 1948. Rather than help to rejoin the inevitably successful battle for Palestine, Fouad finds only corpses. The soldier is the “first to enter Deir Yasin after the massacre” (255).¹³ He spends two days digging a mass grave and does not know what to make of it. As one of the landmark events of the Nakba, the massacre at Deir Yasin would prompt many Palestinians to preemptively leave their villages and seek safety from what were from that point understood to be vicious and advancing Zionist forces.¹⁴ Even without this retrospective view, Fouad understands the incident is serious. He “searched for a single news broadcast that was able to say the truth to the world” (253), but he found none. Even at this late point in the lost battle, he had only heard reports of the “victory of the allied Arabs in their battle that they had tackled courageously until now” (258). The frame of the ALA and assured victory in realizing a sovereign Palestine is revealed as false, but Fouad clings to it. Though reality does not match what the broadcasts say is real, Fouad will not give up on it because he has nothing else and does not know he can trust his own perceptions.

When Fouad sees an airplane fly overhead, he immediately assumes it is an enemy craft on its way to “strike the capital [Amman]” and worries for the safety of his former boss in the Sayyid al-balad. It is a UN plane, however, in a tailspin after being shot down by Zionist forces, “even though the UN flag was clearly visible” (244). Hitting a tree, two peacekeepers emerge, one dead and the other soon identified as John William, a Norwegian. At first, Fouad’s “surety was shaken with the felling of William’s aircraft, if only because it meant they [Zionist militias] had forces able to fell a plane” (248). It is William’s testimony—as a narrative of events from a different point of view—that finally makes it impossible for Fouad to continue reading the battles of the Nakba as a sure ALA victory. The contradiction between the newscasts, the realities of Deir Yasin, and the story of William present further cracks in Fouad’s stubborn insistence on following the narratives of structures of power. To help the reader see Fouad’s folly, the omniscient narrator interjects, “The news doesn’t lie, despite the fact that you saw what you saw” (267). It is at this point, with constant contradictions between what he hears and

sees, that doubt in the truth content of the ALA (as a representative of all the other structures of power that he moves through) finally sets in. Fouad starts wondering who he can trust and begins to question his faith, first in William and then in the news broadcasts, then in the ALA, and finally in “order” and logic more generally.

Eventually, Fouad lets go of these logics and demonstrates the first stage in achieving delirium. One cannot, he demonstrates, follow nondominant logics so long as they look to the structures of power for guidance. The young man leaves William, the UN peacekeeper, and sets off toward Amman alone, with no structure to fit himself or his experiences into. On his way Fouad sees his reflection in an old Roman well he comes across, a reflection he no longer recognizes because he has no logic to make sense of the “facts” that it presents him with. He has been defeated, Jerusalem has been lost, and none of the different systems that professed ultimate superiority (that he had encountered) had prevailed. Once upon a time his bushy and shining moustache meant he was a powerful and undefeatable force; his tall stature and broad shoulders were read by each of the systems that he entered as strong, a clear winner. Though he still has his height and his moustache, they no longer mean the same thing. He can no longer read these symbols into the face reflected at him in the old well; he sees an image he cannot understand, but he has begun to understand that making sense of this image will help him navigate the world around him.

It is Fouad’s new tentative belief in dissociation from structures of power that sees his ultimate fracture from existing systems. He eventually arrives back in Amman and goes to the home of his old patron, the Sayyid al-balad—the last place of safety he had known. Upon arrival, Fouad prepares an apology for having failed to bring the official’s British rifle back “victorious” (as he had promised) and for losing Palestine. By the summer of 1948, Jordan had control of only the West Bank and half of Jerusalem. The Sayyid al-balad, however, welcomes the young man home a hero, proclaiming, “If it weren’t for you, we would have lost the rest of Palestine!” (272). This last comment finally sees Fouad break with the structures that had controlled him. He could not interpret his experiences as a victory. For the moment, however, Fouad finds delirium as a negative—not yet a positive—state. It is here an absence of orientation but represents a first and necessary element of achieving something different.

Fouad’s failure to let go of ordering structures cripples him and acts as a warning to readers that another way must be found. Fouad, to further study the new reality, goes out to buy a mirror and puts it in his barracks. He looks in it day after day, examining his broad shoulders, his moustache, his uniform for work at the office of the Sayyid al-balad, and the memory of the tear he shed when leaving the village. These elements drift about him, dissociated from the structures that read him as a hero and ignored evidence otherwise. Fouad is left facing all of the different “texts” of his self but has no instructions on how to understand what they mean in relation to each other, or to the world around him. What he finds is that

the systems that gave him meaning had been “erased.” The mirror is the soldier’s attempt to reconcile his experience of the world with existing narrative structures, but at the close of the work, he remains sitting, still lost, in front of the mirror. It is not until *Balcony of Delirium* was published four years later that an answer is produced for Fouad, and a sense of how to reconcile these elements of self into an orientation and a way to move through the world emerges.

FINDING MEANING IN DELIRIUM

We saw in chapter 4 how *Balcony of Delirium* taught readers to identify and critically interpret the often-invisible texts that shape storytelling. The Balconies demonstrated a vantage of not only interpretation, but of bringing elements together to create meaning that included the reading of structures of power. This vantage transformed the story of Rashid al-Nimr, the work’s protagonist, from the strangely banal recounting of a man heading to work every day to a composite of myriad texts told from multiple perspectives. Instead of the recounting of a humdrum and unremarkable life, the story of Rashid—who had recently returned from the Gulf to an unnamed Arab city—became one of a man navigating multiple structures of power to find a way to feel “at home” in his new surroundings. In “making sense” of Rashid’s story, its elements—like those in the world of Fouad—had to first be taken apart and then, as we see here, put back together. The “logic” of reassembly is, in the language of delirium, the logic of a Palestinian orientation, a way of making sense of and moving about in a world with both dangerous and familiar texts. By resisting the pressures of conforming to any one of the systems that Rashid encounters and learning to hold off interpretation of the many different texts that make up his life, Rashid (whose name means, after all, “of sound mind”) becomes oriented to his world of texts and finds clarity. This is where we pick up his story. While we left Rashid in chapter 4 confused, very much like Fouad at the end of *Eraser Child*, Fouad has a series of dreams that helps him create and sustain an orientation through which to make sense and move within the competing and contradictory structures of power.

Both characters are left asking, if the men must enter a state of delirium to dissociate from structures that obscure meaning-making of their life elements, what happens next? Is there a way to make “sense” of delirium? A close look at one example of the interaction and interrelation of the many texts of *Delirium*—which, recalling from chapter 4, are very often visual in nature, including cinema stills, photographs, maps, and news clippings—shows how it is possible to “make sense” in a state of delirium. The technique deploys the lessons of both the balconic vantage and the open-ended paradigm of continuous witness developed in chapters 3 and 4. The example builds on analysis of Rashid’s dream sequences, which have already been identified as a particular genre of telling within Arabic literature, a

genre of truth telling, of revelation, and of finding meaning in the world that is not at first apparent. Rashid has several dreams over the course of the novel, which increase in complexity, creating a tight network of interreference and ultimately a language of interpretation—of orientation. Underscoring that what is presented is a way of seeing, the dream narratives incorporate cinematic intertextual devices. Not only do each of the series of three dreams use the language of cinema production (zoom in, pan wide, etc.), but they reproduce still images and even relay plots. This language quickly develops into a tool for orientation, showing how delirium—beyond a way of dissociating from structures of power—is also a logic of interpretation. It gives information on the ways and means of moving through the world as Palestinian and shows how information gathered through perceptive tools of the balcony forms not just a network of texts that constitute the nation, but a lens of interpretation that guides intertextual action.

The dreams that teach readers and Rashid delirium-as-action are highly intertextual. The first dream sequence comes as part of a flashback, with texts jostling upon other texts, and it is the relationship between them—determined by dissociating from existing logics—that creates its own logic of action, or orientation. The dream is signaled by the narrator, who tells readers that Rashid remembers coming home from a particularly intense day at work and decides to have a rest. The narrator goes on briefly to explain what made the day even more trying than usual. It was September 11, 2001—the day two airplanes hit the World Trade Towers in New York City. Rashid, in an unnamed city in the Arab world, had needed to process the information. On top of this news, which at first Rashid found unbelievable, it had been another frustrating day at the Government Information Office where Rashid had continued to supply misinformation to visiting journalists, though he still did not understand why. In the taxi on his way home, “moments after the start of the [news] broadcast the host announced in his deep hoarse voice that he had a correspondent on the line from New York. The news was live, and the correspondent said that a small plane had hit the World Trade Tower” (87). Rashid arrived home to watch on television and saw on repeat the second plane strike the second of the World Trade Towers. He cannot make sense of what he sees and takes a short nap to combat the overwhelming information. During the nap, he has a dream.

In his dream Rashid is a giant bird, soaring in the air (a signal for truth established in the earlier novel, *Birds of Caution*). While in flight, a feather is dislodged and floats freely for a while, until Rashid-the-dream-bird notices. Then, “before it reached its place by about a meter at the most, he [Rashid] flapped his wings, and that feather fell smoothly beside the foot of Forrest Gump, in that famous film” (88). The lines are punctuated with a still image from the film (figure 6).

The dream does not last long. Shortly after the bird decides to land, Rashid is awakened by his wife’s voice. The snippet is well worth pausing over, however.



FIGURE 6. A still from the movie *Forrest Gump*, as it appears in *Balcony of Delirium*.

Using the suspended interpretation of the child in *Birds of Caution*, analysis of the first dream provides tools for understanding the later two, and all three provide the clue to “making sense” of delirium. The interpretation of the film in the dream begins with a reading of what is in essence a recasting of the iconic opening scene of *Forrest Gump*.

The opening credits of the 1990s American classic play over a wide shot of a blue Georgia sky dotted with clouds. The shot follows the descent of a single white feather, which seems to be drifting in the wind. Critics of the film have interpreted the scene in line with one of its major themes: the question of whether the world is one ruled by destiny or chaos. Gump, the titular protagonist, brings up the question in a voice-over a few minutes into the opening credits, wondering out loud about his mother’s favorite saying, “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re going to get.” What he wonders is whether life is totally random or if there is a kind of destiny that one heads toward. He puts it succinctly near the end of the film, remarking, “I don’t know if Mamma was right or if it’s Lt. Dan, I don’t know if we each have a destiny or if we’re all just floating around accidental-like on the breeze.”¹⁵ Lt. Dan, we learn between the musings, is Gump’s commander during the US war in Vietnam. While Gump is deployed he saves the life of the lieutenant, who had been badly injured in battle. Lt. Dan returns to

the United States a paraplegic and is initially furious that his life had been saved. He tells Gump that he was meant to die. He explains that he has had a “relative die in every single war in American history” and that Gump has thwarted this larger plan. He explains, “We all have a destiny, nothing just happens, it’s all part of a plan.”¹⁶ Gump’s question is reinterpreted in *Delirium* to open a discussion about how different techniques of seeing produce different information about the same thing.

Rashid’s dream, where the feather drifts but then is pushed in a particular direction by the pulse of a bird’s wing, makes its own determination about destiny versus chaos. Though the feather ends up by Gump’s foot, in the dream Rashid himself was the bird, the entity creating the pulse of air and pushing the feather in a certain direction. It was neither destiny nor chaos that determined where the feather would land; it was Rashid who took control and guided the feather to his desired location. Rashid’s dream takes the camera of *Forrest Gump* and pans out, showing the forces that move the feather, and thus broadens one of Gump’s central questions. Rather than just destiny or chaos, *Delirium* prompts readers (and Rashid) to think about the forces behind either of these options. What, it asks, creates the framework of a perceived destiny (teleology)? What creates the idea of chaos? The question is no longer one of destiny versus chaos but who is controlling the story. The answer, for *Delirium*, is concealed forces. Narrative, the dream suggests, is no accident, nor is it the tracing of a destiny. It is the careful plotting of greater structures just outside of the frame. A Palestinian orientation begins, then, with the invocation of a wider and more critical field of vision—of understanding that controlling forces are often just out of frame and that the story is usually a lot more complicated than it seems.

The second dream continues to make use of the cinematic and is titled “Zoom in . . . out” (52). With this dream we begin to see how many texts can be interpreted together by the individual so that delirium and dissociation also have the power to interpret relationships and guide action. This uses the notion of cinematic techniques, of close-ups to indicate personal emotion and wide angles to connote the movement of plot. This lesson begins by signaling that movement—of the camera, of the individual in the world—is something that produces meaning. The chapter contains the novel’s next dream sequence, which moves on to a second movie, the 1962 *Lawrence of Arabia*.¹⁷ This dream chapter is narrated as though it were film directions, describing how a camera should move to produce an effect on the viewer. The dream begins:

In the background thick smoke
 In the foreground military vehicles approach, raising dust
 From the sky, cries of victory
 But the eye could not make out the whole scene
 (It reminded him of that scene from *Lawrence of Arabia*) (57)

The chapter continues narrating part of the “when Lawrence returns from the Sahara” scene. The shots include panoramas of desert dunes, thick clouds of approaching dust that eventually cloud the once-clear vision, setting an ominous tone, reinforced by dramatic music. As it continues, readers are told when the “camera” closes in on different actors and what angle is chosen to access faces or portray feelings. Likewise, when the “camera” zooms out the screenplay describes creating a sense of wider action: “the camera moved back/or with that movement that people in the film industry call, ‘zoom out’” (63).

The action assumes two things: who/whatever is directing the lens knows simultaneously what is going on at a micro and macro level and with this knowledge chooses where to point the lens to create a particular (and predetermined) effect. The position is said in the screenplay to be “like a balcony” (62), reminding readers of the necessity of the balconic vantage when assessing a story. The camera gives a single vantage from its perch above, but the dreamer can see the camera, the balcony, and the action and put it in perspective. The balcony is also, then, able to cue readers into the existence of macro and micro devices that construct a scene, not all of which are visible or indeed represented within a narrative. The cinematic chapter ends when, suddenly, hands block the lens, ending the scene and waking Rashid from the long dream. Shaking, Rashid has a moment to reflect and realizes that the hands that had blocked the lens filming the scene of *Lawrence of Arabia* in his dream “were, oh the terror, the same as his hands” (63). The interjection of hands into the field of view, combined with the effort to describe the mechanisms of creating a scene, reminds readers that cinema, like a novel or a photograph or a history, is constructed, mastered by a set of usually invisible hands and indeed an invisible set of processes. This is the logic that operates at Rashid’s office as well, which—now that readers have the tools of seeing related in the dream narrative—is available for further interpretation. Rashid, indeed, deploys this new insight to understand his job.

After using the compass to establish west, Rashid scouts again around the building and even plans to move the office furniture around to try to gain a new perspective on the directions he has been given—to prevent journalists from looking west. Nothing reveals new information; he is left with a single text and his critical stance toward it. After his dream, Rashid has a new idea. After work one day, Rashid goes to the home of his predecessor. He had asked the question, “Why must we not let them look west?” before, but having—along with readers—learned to read the relationship between intertexts to discern meaning, he knows he must ask differently this time. He has learned that the “structure” of his workplace is the same as any other conventional text: one that is determined by an invisible set of logics, often more than one. So rather than ask the old man to narrate the reasons the rules were made, Rashid changes the rules of storytelling. He no longer asks for a beginning; in fact, he no longer asks for the story of the rules at all.

Understanding now that space and time affect both narrative and perception, Rashid asks *when* his predecessor started working at the Information Office. The old man answers, "I started working after the first Gulf War, just after the first war [the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88]" (63). Rashid continues, "And when did the decision about taking pictures get made?" The old man replies, "After the second Gulf War [1990]" (63). Put in the context of a regional conflict that peaked more than a decade before Rashid took up the post of information officer, he understands that the rule was determined and justified by a logic that no longer applied. It, like all the others, would not help make sense of the geography and logics of the space he now occupied. But at least once he understood the logics that were in operation to create the rules of the office, he could see them in their own context and remove them from his own. Only in letting go of the possibility of direct and logical relationships could any sense be made.

As an orientation, delirium is a tactic of reading but also a space from which individuals can separate understandings of self and perceptions of existing logics. So when Palestinian men and women face tropes of the nation, other national narratives, or structures of power that dictate how they must operate within the world (indeed, Rashid's job was still to not allow journalists to look west), individuals can see that these logics exist but understand that these logics do not define them. Delirium is a space of and for interpretation, so that individuals can choose how to act or respond to the possibilities for action represented by the many texts of Palestine. While Rashid never quite gets up the courage to do anything about his revelation, he clearly has an impact on his son, who uses the logic of delirium to arrive at different conclusions from those any of the available structures of thought would have allowed. His conclusions are, of course, shrugged off as nonsensical but in analysis can be taken up as the beginnings of a model of action-as-orientation.

NEW POSSIBILITIES

Though never taken up by Rashid, the civil servant's unnamed son offers a complete vision of the world that would allow perception and meaning making to happen outside of imposed frames. The child speaks rarely within the novel but makes his method of sense-making clear in an extended monologue. The monologue, which extends over several pages, repeats phrases from and is loosely modeled on a segment of the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's existentialist novel, *Either/Or*.¹⁸ The monologue is delivered as Rashid's son makes a plea to get a family dog, not a bird as his father prefers, because it is more traditional in their neighborhood. The plea takes the same form as Kierkegaard's chapter, "Either/Or: An Ecstatic Lecture." For the philosopher, the chapter operated as a critique of Hegel's philosophy of truth and the apparent certainty it offered.¹⁹ Kierkegaard's vignette, as scholars interpret it, "presents an inverted Hegelian dialectic,"²⁰ wherein truth can only be knowable through experience, as opposed to discernible in relation to knowledge. For Kierkegaard knowledge was a structure, not a truth.²¹

Knowledge in the monologue acts as a predetermined and teleological framework that can only ever confirm itself, so that no other way of knowing or being can be admitted. The child, following Kierkegaard, demands something different.

Kierkegaard uses basic examples to illustrate the futility of knowledge, setting out a general personal conundrum of whether or not to marry and how to trace the logic of either the yes or no position. Rashid's son takes this model of reasoning but rather than dismantling knowledge generally takes aim at a particular form of knowledge and the logic it produces—the logic of 9/11 and the “war on terror.” In his choice of examples, the boy reflects back to his father precisely the problematic logic of the “war” that had slowly pervaded the Middle East (and much of the world) amid the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (during which, we recall, the novel was written). In making his argument, the young boy ends up giving a five-page diatribe, setting up an elaborate trajectory of tragedy that he says would stem from the purchase of a bird, as opposed to the dog—or in bowing to the norms of the neighborhood and not the world of the boy. The monologue repeats the same sentence pattern, which extends and expands Kierkegaard's version. In the philosopher's version, the logic repeats thus:

If you marry, you will regret it; if you do not marry, you will also regret it; if you marry or if you do not marry, you will regret both; whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret both.²²

The child's follows a slightly different pattern:

If you buy us a bird, there will be a problem, if you don't buy us a bird, there will be two problems. (31)

Where Kierkegaard gives just three examples, the child gives a dozen, each of which lead to another set of poor choices. Repeating the formula, “If . . . [then] there will be a problem, [but] if you don't . . . [then] there will be two problems,” the boy connects events according to a logic of the politics of the war on terror in an exaggerated way. This sets up a cause-and-effect paradigm that is modeled on the “common sense” the boy perceives and is criticizing.

It is worth looking at the passage in full, though for simplicity's sake, some of the repetition has been taken out. The first sentence is quoted in its entirety, and the following sentences simply trace the logical development of the argument with the key parts underlined and ellipses for the text quoted above, which are repeated for each new proposition verbatim:

If you buy us a bird, there will be a problem, if you don't buy us a bird, there will be two problems [. . .]
 if there is a falcon in the area there are two problems, if the falcon sees the bird . . .
 if the falcon is hungry . . .
 if it comes to eat it . . .
 if we don't kill it . . .

if I love it . . .
 if I get angry at it . . .
 if the anger doesn't go quickly . . .
 [I will be] hit with depression . . .
 if the depression doesn't leave quickly . . .
 I [may] try to take my life . . .
 if I go crazy . . .
 if I go totally crazy . . .
 if you take me to an institution . . .
 if I don't love the hospital . . .
 if I think about fleeing . . .
 if I try to flee . . .
 if I am able to flee . . .
 if the guards don't see me . . .
 if they don't tell the police . . .
 if I don't return home . . .
 if I don't marry well . . .
 if the police don't get me . . .
 if I go more crazy . . .
 if I'm dangerous . . .
 if they chase me . . .
 if I flee to America . . .
 if I hate America . . .
 if I curse America . . .
 if America hears me . . .
 if America gets mad . . .
 if they know who I am . . .
 if they don't forget they are mad . . .
 if we can't favor them . . .
 if they attack the country . . .
 if they launch a powerful attack . . .
 if they occupy us . . .
 if they catch me . . .
 forget the idea! . . .
 if you don't forget the idea . . .
 if you take revenge . . .
 they will kill you or not kill you . . .
 The youngest finally fell silent, and caught his breath, and then he said:
 And you want to put us in that position? Buy us a dog and leave us! (31–35)

The argument is absurd and gets more absurd as the boy imagines the reaction of “America” to being cursed if he were hypothetically to escape the asylum he could be committed to if he fell in love with the falcon that might eat the birds that his father wants to buy for the balcony. The key difference from Kierkegaard is that where the philosopher sets out a logic whereby nothing is known (all possibilities

will be regretted), the child sets out a trajectory that ends in “they [the United States] will kill you.” So for the boy whatever happens there is a threat of death (whether it transpires or not), and for the child the only reasonable solution, to end the looming possibility of death by the United States, is to stop denying him a dog. Existing logics are detrimental, he explains, and certainty about the “truth” of these logics is damaging. The boy’s monologue is a lesson in the need to overthrow certainty and follow the logic of a critical position.

Ominously, Rashid buys the birds. Readers do not hear again from the son, but information is gleaned from a fight between Rashid and his wife, who is exasperated at having to clean up the bodies of the dead birds that keep being eaten by a falcon, which litter the balcony. It is as if the boy’s predictions, the “what if’s” are being borne out. Rashid responds to his wife glibly, yet defensively, that the pile of feathers is “a long way from looking like that hill of men in the Abu Ghraib prison” (132). The remark is accompanied by what was in 2003 a ubiquitous image: a pile of naked Iraqi prisoners, with their American wardens standing over it. The men in a heap recall the heap of birds on the balcony, denuded of their feathers by the falcon who has torn them apart. The reference is a reminder to Rashid of the truth of his son’s statement: without finding the logic of their critical position, their truth is only the perpetual likelihood of death. Rashid cannot see what his son can: first, the operating logic of the time is an American “war on terror”; and second, the urgent necessity of not only understanding why one must “not look west,” but acting differently with the information.

While Rashid’s son doesn’t exactly set the parameters for action or act as a guide for a Palestinian orientation, his focus on birds brings a productive comparison. Where birds were the starting point for the son’s monologue, they are also, we recall, the driving ethos of *al-ṣaghīr* in *Birds of Caution*. Rashid’s son does not want birds since they will only be eaten, and *al-ṣaghīr* spends his time in the fields next to the Wihdat camp catching and releasing birds, “teaching them caution.”²³ For Kierkegaard, the bird represents being “set free from telluric conditions,”²⁴ and the only possibility of release from the telos of knowledge. The problem for Kierkegaard, as one critic put it, is that “decisions about what to do always concern the future,”²⁵ and predictions about what the future might hold are always already determined by the cultural expectations of social life. What Kierkegaard wanted to impress on readers is that predicting or determining action against an anticipated future is impossible, because the “future is always unknown.”²⁶ Rashid’s son asks his father to let go of predetermined ideas of the future that are rooted in an understanding of the past that is no longer relevant. This letting go is all the more urgent, in the son’s estimation, since the present dominant telos can only lead to the likelihood of death.

The children of the Palestine Project once again demand an open frame, not just of interpretation, but of orientation. This is easier said than done, as Fouad and Rashid demonstrate. As Palestine is an open collection of intertexts, it is not

a stable object or tangible thing (or even idea of a thing) that can *be* a thing that orients. Being oriented around Palestine and its network of texts means being oriented around its tools: the constant deployment of the critical lens of the balcony, constant avoidance of problematic structures, and reminder of open endings and undetermined futures. These are the elements of identity, and what ensures that the constitution of the nation is simultaneously the constitution of the self. It is the position of delirium that marries the device of dissociation with the space for interpretation and indeed allows the space for open-ended action. These collective ways of being produce the nation through refusal of closure and continuation of the identification and collection of new and old texts, as well as relationships between them. It is these actions—as exhausting and persistent as they seem—that create the larger umbrella of meaning. This constant action is the work, the state, the orientation of being Palestinian.