

Nathalie Handal's "Amrika" chooses Palestine as Poetic Centre

Katja Janßen

Abstract: "We have a country of words. Speak, speak so we may know the end of this travel" wrote the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in his exile. Since the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948, Palestinian poetry has engaged in the re-writing of the lost homeland. Performing and creating "Palestine in the poem" as an illocutionary act was a cultural strategy of resisting the hegemonic Israeli narrative of the Jewish inscription of the country. However, the new generation of Palestinian poets in diaspora, living outside of historical Palestine, are challenged differently by the Zionist solution of Israel's creation than poets living under their military occupation. Since the Palestinians became the very victim of the nationalist approach of the Jewish diaspora, the Palestinian diaspora faces the dilemma of a compulsive reproduction of racism, nationalism and essentialist discourses through their own claim for a homeland. This paper aims to illuminate the spatial strategies of Palestinian poet Nathalie Handal, who belongs to a new generation of Palestinian diaspora poets. It will analyse the spatial strategies of her volume of poetry "The Lives of Rain" (published in 2005), with emphasis on the poem "Amrika."

The Lives of Rain: an Atlas of the Palestinian Diaspora

Nathalie Handal's book "The Lives of Rain" is to be read as an atlas of the Palestinian Diaspora. The volume is divided into three parts; the first part draws a map of Palestine in a state of ongoing ethnic cleansing; of an ongoing *Nakba*.¹ In the second part it speaks from the position of the margins, from the perspective of a displaced life outside of Palestine. The third part consist of one long poem "Amrika," the poetic voyage of a diasporic lyrical "I" from Palestine to New York via France, Haiti, New England and Miami in the US, the Dominican Republic and England. Based on the volume's poetic counter-map, the paper will re-make the journey of the Palestinian diaspora to the exteriors and interiors of imperialist geographies.

In the first part of the volume the lyrical "I" travels through a lost Palestine, describing an already vanished landscape, a memorial landscape of its ancestors. Imprisoned "in between doors," it is not able to come home, but is rather reconstructing the history of Palestine, similarly to romantic poets who step over the ruins of Pompeii. The rare encounters with other Palestinians or Israelis leave the lyrical "I" with the uncertain feeling of otherness. It does not walk through busy roads, but rather steps over ruins and watches the cities collapsing and the scenery disappearing. "The land lies bleeding,"

¹ The Arabic term "Nakba," meaning catastrophe, refers to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1947-49, a historic fact which is still denied by Israeli authorities. Hence, the Nakba has become the foremost issue and topic in the Palestinian narrative and literature (see e.g. Pappe 2007).

states one poem. It is this blood, the former life and the ongoing silent massacres, that these poems located in Palestine recollect.

In the second part of "The Lives of Rain," the lyrical "I" travels through the places of its exile. In "Une Seule Nuit à Marrakech," it describes men in a coffee-shop with the verses: "Handsome gentlemen drink coffee / from small cups, an aroma mapping / their homeland" (v. 9-11). In "Orphans of Night," the lyrical "I" meets an other exile in the "Café des États-Unis" (v. 5) in Paris and walks with him the dark avenues of the city, which are "unknown in our stories" (v. 19), while carrying "my map around my neck" (v.8). In "El Almuerzo de Tía Habiba" (Aunt Habiba's lunch) the lyrical "I" visits Aunt Habiba and old friends "in Toreón, Coahuila, / a little ciudad in México" (v. 16-17) and wonders "how this people got here, / so far from the Mediterranean sea, / the desert heat" (v. 25-27). In "Blue Night" the lyrical "I" meets a woman whom it calls "la Negrita." Over a cup of tea, they come closer and discover that they share similar experiences and feelings. The "I" notices that "la Negrita" is not far "from where I stand" (v. 6). While it struggles to recall its Spanish between all the other languages of its linguistic identity, it recognizes where the centre of its geography lies:

Now, my teeth are stained, my English
 failing me, my Arabic fading
 my Spanish starting to make sense ...
 we are in a finca now-
 Perhaps we are safe,
 Perhaps we desire nothing else,
 but I can't stop bowing in prayer
 five times a day,
 My country comes to me, tells me:
 Compatriota-I will always find you
 no matter what language you are speaking. (v. 28-38)

In the diasporic world of alienation and exclusion the *finca* (country house) becomes a retreat, a space of community and solidarity between migrants. The lyrical "I," however does not forget Palestine over the finca, the safe space of the diasporic community. Both spaces, diaspora and homeland, are interdependent. The community of the two women, the Latin American and the Palestinian, is based on the shared experience of colonialism, ethnic cleansing and cultural alienation. They are both black and marginalized at the periphery of American mainstream society. Palestine remains the position from where the lyrical "I" speaks in the places of diaspora: when it meets an old Chinese man on Broadway ("The Lives of Rain") or the "Caribeño" in Central Park ("Caribe in Nueva York"), it speaks as an Other to Others. Palestine acts as the spatial position what Foucault has termed a "geohistory of otherness" (Soja

1996, 162). When the lyrical "I" suddenly sees Caribbean sugar cane and tobacco fields on boulevards in New York ("Presidente," v. 17) or wonders where it is actually located ("Baladna": "I am no longer sure what I see: / a field of olive trees, / a herd of sheep or a burning mountain" v. 7-9), then Nathalie Handal's Palestine becomes a strategic positioning, from where she overcomes the powerful relation between the centre and its periphery. Her choice of a poetic counter-geography with Palestine as centre empowers Handal as an anti-hegemonic practice of poetic space. The African American intellectual bell hooks coined the phrase "politics of location," and in "Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics" she writes:

As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, "the politics of location" necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision... For many of us, that movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination. Initially, then, it is a defiant political gesture)... For me this space of radical openness is a margin- a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a "safe" place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance. (1990, 145-149)

In her poetry, Handal creates a space of radical openness and opposes the spatial-territorial mechanisms of hegemonic power. According to the postmodern geographer Edward W. Soja, hegemonic power does not manipulate naively given differences between individuals and social groups, but rather it actively produces and reproduces difference as a key strategy to create and obtain modes of social and spatial division. "We" and "they" are dichotomously spatialised and enclosed in an imposed territoriality of apartheid, ghettos, reservations, colonies, fortresses, and other geographic barriers of the center-periphery relation (Soja 1996, 87). Those who are subjugated by these spatial-territorial mechanisms of hegemonic power, should therefore, as Soja writes, engage in a spatial resistance and create spaces of radical openness, which he calls Thirdspace:

The pathways into Thirdspace [...] lead us to the specific terrain of postmodern culture and into discussions of the new cultural politics of difference and identity that is re-awakening the contemporary world to the symbolic spaces of representation, to struggles over the right to be different, to a new politics of location and a radical spatial subjectivity and praxis that is postmodern from the start. (Soja 1996, 84)

Amrika: a Poetic Voyage at the Periphery

"Amrika" is an epos of the Palestinian Diaspora. Starting from Palestine via Marseille, Paris-Algiers, Port-au-Prince, New England, Florida, the Dominican Republic, and England to New York, it is the very

personal voyage of the Bethlehemite family of the poet herself, and it is narrated in the beginning from the perspective of a "we." The collective "we" experiences the Nakba and decades later a well-traveled lyrical "I" reaches New York, a place it "now calls home." This refugee's journey does not unfold linearly, but meanders between the borders of the metropolis and its peripheries, back and forth. The maps and places overlap and cause fractions. The title alone, the Arabic-transcribed America, emphasises the request for a re-mapping.

The first part of the long poem consisting of five stanzas is subtitled "The Curfews of History" and describes the abandoned Palestinian homeland in the hour of departure. It is an image of ravage as after a battle: devastated streets, Fedayees and an old town, where people dig the ground for body parts, "for anything that was once part of them-/ arm, leg, a sliver of hair" (v. 8-9). The "we" is running in every direction, "to all the borders we can reach" (v. 11). The Nakba marks the beginning of a migrant life; however it is not a turning point, but the perpetual state of the community. The collective "we" is fleeing and refusing to flee at the same time, and is still digging up body parts, as its home disappears; buildings are built and torn down. The place is changing, the way home vanishing. While the land changes and is subjected to history, the history of the "We" remains unchanged under curfew. The verses describe a refugee's way of life as well as the ongoing politics of displacement in the occupied Palestinian territories. Since the refugees are still rushing to the borders, still more people are being displaced, their villages and houses being destroyed; the Nakba in the poem as on the ground never ends.

The second part of the poem "The Tyranny of Distance" tells in nine long stanzas the story of the crossing from Jaffa, the "city of lights," to Marseille, the "city of black-outs" (v. 4). But "where do you begin to understand the difference between Sabaah el khayr and bonjour" (v.3)? The answer is given in French: "C'est comme cela, tout change habibti" (v.5). Only their own name, their eyes and their memory remain unchanged. In the fourth stanza the lyrical "I" appears for the first time:

I sing Inshallah in French as I walk les banlieues parisiennes,
walk through Barbès, Bercy, St.Denis, Rue Bab-el-Oued
uncertain, looking for what I am most certain of- (v. 8-10)

During the first part, in the prologue of the epic narrative of the Palestinian diaspora, Palestine appears as a shadow, as a vanishing place and it is not described precisely topographically. However, it is possible to read Paris topographically and to follow the footsteps of the lyrical "I." The Boulevard Barbès is located in the northern part of the 18th arrondissement and is named after the republican and

revolutionary Amand Barbès, one of the organizers of the failed revolution of 1839 and of the revolution of 1848. Barbès is the "Algerian" or "North African" area of Paris. Also, St. Denis (in the northern suburbs of Paris) and Bercy (12th arrondissement) are Parisian places where Maghrebian Arabic is spoken and where the lyrical "I" is searching for what it is "most certain of." On its stroll through the Parisian banlieues the lyrical "I" reaches the Rue Bab-el-Oued, a street that is not to be found on a Parisian map.

Bab-el-Oued is the oldest district of Algiers near the Casbah, where in colonial times *Pied-Noirs* (French settlers) settled. During the Algerian war of independence the district of Bab-el-Oued became a bastion of the "Organisation de l'armée secrète" (OAS). In the spring of 1962 even the French occupation army had to fight against the OAS, until the French finally left the neighborhood (Stora 2001, 98). In French history, Bab-el-Oued became known as a massacre, therefore there is no place in the French capital bearing the name of the last defeat of the French colonial empire. But the lyrical "I" walks through the streets of Paris inhabited by Algerian migrants and reaches Algiers. It is the blood trail of colonialism that leads the Palestinian "I" there. The "I" is Palestinian therefore it is Algerian, indigenous, colonized, a migrant; it is the Other. From this position on the margins the lyrical "I" traces the geography of the empire and brings its maps into disorder.

The lyrical "I" walks the streets of Paris-Algiers, waits for its lover from Nazareth, to whom it will write years later a nostalgic letter remembering their lost time together in Palestine, hoping only to return in time for death.

*'Je n'ai jamais oublié
ce que tu n'as pas cessé de me dire,
la terre ne ment jamais.'* (v.33-35)

[‘I have never forgotten
that you have not stopped to tell me,
the country never lies.’]

The third part of "Amrika" leads the lyrical "I" to the place where Nathalie Handal grew up: "*Et Maintenant, Les Antilles*" (v.1). The Haiti of the poem is loud: the taxis tap-taps, the band Tabou Combo and the singer (and later Haitian President, since 2011) Sweet Mickey play in Port-au-Prince for a "dance of darkness." Haiti appears as "the Island of Boukman" (v. 7), referring to the slave who is said to have started the Haitian uprising against the French by announcing as part of a voodoo ritual that the ghosts had ordered him and his followers "to kill the whites." The uprising of the slaves led after long and bloody fights to the independence of Haiti from French rule in 1804. Haiti was the first country in the

Americas to gain independence, but it was also the first to have been colonized and its native inhabitants were nearly entirely killed. While Palestine became victim of the latest classic colonial project, Haiti has been the first. Here Columbus reached the Americas, here his brother drew the first maps of the colonial conquests, here the first abducted and enslaved West Africans arrived in the New World. From Haiti, the Spaniards conquered Mexico and Peru. In Haiti, modern colonialism destroyed for the first time an entire culture. Since independence Haiti has been forced to pay France reparations and has been held down (Girard 2005); the people in the verses to Haiti are still described as the wretched of the earth:

Ayiti cherie, plus bel Pays-
Cité Soleil, where the sun forgets
and people compete for the heavens,
with baskets on their heads
perfectly balanced
walking at all speeds
counting their steps their days,
hoping to find God
in the poor hands of another. (v. 10-18)

The verse in the Haitian Creole language promises the most beautiful country, but in the slum of the Cité Soleil in Port-au-Prince, the sun forgets to shine and the people are counting their days. The lyrical "I" leaves the island with the Creole words "tioul, zonbi, refijye, testaman, ma lé" (slave, spirit, refugee, testament, I go; v. 20) speaking the language which was created by the cultural politics of the Spanish colonizers, who had deliberately bought West Africans of different languages in order to silence and separate them, to make any resistance impossible. Their culture was destroyed, as was the culture of the native population. But it created a new language, a language that evolved from the West African Wolof, Fon and Ewe and the Native American languages Arawak and Carib.

In the fourth part "Opening" the lyrical "I" reaches the United States, which is described in strong contrast to the poverty of Haiti. In New England, the heart of the white American settler colonialism, the difference between "where we are from / and where we now live" (v. 4, 5) lies in the rain-soaked autumn leaves in the alleys. The lyrical "I," still a child, finds only later in the footsteps of its father, traces of Arabic (v. 6-10). The lyrical "I" passes the Boston baseball field "Fenway Park" without being able to make any sense of the street names surrounding it (v. 11-13). New England offers a life without misery, but in alienation:

Only the stationary I left in that apartment

remembers what I might
forget to say, but time looks different now,
it wears another hat and owns a car,
and we are comfortable in foreign tongues
but the music that continues to move us
is a melody from the east-
an opening of whispers in our shivers. (v. 16-23)

Palestine, the East, remains the space every other place is being compared to. In the fifth part, "El Color del Inmigrante" the lyrical "I" reaches a region it recognizes: Miami, where Spanish is spoken, where the immigrants play Domino and drink rum. In "Azúcars" (v. 8), the legendary Cuban singer Celia Cruz provides the "Miami beat:"

we reach the Miami beat,
Cubano dreams and South Beach,
la revolución, Azúcar,
carnivals, hurricanes and superstitions,
speak about la *tierra de Dios*
while living in a tower on Collins,
where everyone visiting
is considered suspicious
a word we know
a reality we understand-
leaving, we survive. (v. 6-16)

Miami in southern Florida next to Cuba, with its Latin American population and rhythms, is a place the "We" recognizes (v. 1). At the same time social borders define the spatial experience of the "We." While the dry land part of Miami is facing high levels of crime rates and unemployment, the rich class lives on the island of Miami Beach, in the shielded fortresses of skyscrapers on the Collins Avenue, where every visit is suspicious (v. 12-13). The "We" understands this reality of a socio-spatial segregation, still speaks of Palestine ("la tierra de Dios," v. 10) and can only survive by leaving this reality of spatial injustice (Soja 1996, 79).

The sixth part of Handal's epic narration of the Palestinian migration, "Another Sun" leads "us" back to Hispaniola, the "isla dulce" (v. 3), this time to the Dominican Republic:

Too many highways,
we head south
Santo Domingo- isla dulce,
listen to Bachata, Juan Luí Guerra,
speak about Sosa, El Camino Real,
las calles en la Zona Colonial (v. 1-6)

The well-known Latin American sounds welcome the Palestinian community in the Caribbean. The “We” talks about the “Camino Real” (“Royal Road”), which are to be found throughout the former Spanish colonies. In particular, “la Zona Colonial” functions as a reminiscence of the colonial past of the island similar to the reference to the colonial fortress of Bab-el-Oued in the verses to Paris-Algiers. Founded as Ciudad Colonial in 1598 by the cartographer Bartholomeo Columbus it was here that the genocide of the indigenous population, the Nakba of the Americas, was planned and organized.

The capital Santo Domingo is not only haunted by the past, but still embodies spatial-territorial boundaries and barriers:

and behind *edificios* and *torres*
are *barrios*, a world of *blakao*, *apagón*
stillness splitting, portraits of a daily war,
the stains of ashes, of dust between lips. (v. 15-18)

Behind the buildings (“edificios”) and towers (“torres”) ghettos (“barrios”) are hidden; it is a world of blackouts (“blakao, apagón”) and of daily wars. The past and future tense of the verb is unknown to the people, whose life stands still (v. 12). Again, as in the first verses on the Nakba, there is no history in space. The colonial rule has systematically destroyed the history and cultural identity of the people in San Domingo as well as the identity of the Palestinian “We.” which leaves “mosquitos and mamajuana [...] as if we can remember our past,/ think of our future as if it is sure to come” (v. 19, 24-25).

The seventh part, “Incantations” leads the lyrical “I” to “Shakespeare’s country” (v. 3). However, it has different poets than Shakespeare in mind while walking through London’s Paddington. Similar to the Boulevard Barbès, Edgware Road is an Arab street in London; the edges of the colonial empire in its metropolis. Here “Yeats and Beckett [are] smoking sheesha” (v. 6). Yeats and Beckett, two poets who have nothing in common - Yeats wrote poetry full of mystical symbolism and Beckett committed himself to a strict realism- except that both were Irish poets living in the diaspora. They both came from a British colony, the first British colony, and were living in the metropolis of the British Empire. In Handal’s poem Yeats and Beckett smoke sheesha on an Arab street of London and become themselves Palestinians - as the lyrical “I” became black, Latin American or Haitian. Edgware Road becomes a place of solidarity between diasporic migrants.

The eighth and final part of the long poem, “Debke in New York” ends with the promise of arriving:

I wear my jeans, tennis shoes,
 walk Broadway, pass Columbia,
 read Said and Twain,
 wonder why we are obsessed
 with difference,
 our need to change the other?
 I wait for the noise to stop
 but it never does
 so I go to the tip of the Hudson River
 recite a verse by Ibn Arabi
 and in between subway rides,
 to that place I now call home,
 listen to Abdel Halim and Nina Simone (v. 10-22)

Nathalie Handal takes the right to be different (Said and Twain, Abdel Halim Hafez and Nina Simone). She ends her diasporic Palestinian journey, that lead her between the interiors and exteriors of imperialist geography, in a space of radical openness in which territorial and cultural boundaries between the center and its margins dissolve into a possible home.

Nathalie Handal is neither engaged critically on the Zionist/ Israeli narration of landscape nor in the construction of a counter-space in the tradition of the Palestinian narrative. Her "Palestinianess" does not emerge from an essentialist reproduction of colonial nationalism, on the contrary it allows her to oppose binary identity politics and spatial injustice. Nathalie Handal chooses Palestine as a spatial strategy of "Othering." Speaking from the margins, her poetry disrupts the spaces of the cultural politics of difference by re-organizing and overlapping places of the metropolis and the periphery. The volume of poetry "The Lives of Rain" travels the peripheries of imperialist geography; it draws a map of resistance and creates an open space of anti-colonial solidarity.

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