

**MAURICE EBILEENI, *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2022). Pp. 240. \$75.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780815637653.**

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Maurice Ebleeni's *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World* joins the now abundant but ever-growing body of scholarship examining literature composed by Arab authors in languages other than Arabic.<sup>1</sup> While, like much of this scholarship, Ebleeni's book focuses primarily on Anglophone writings, *Being There, Being Here* stands out for its inclusion of not only writing in Spanish and Hebrew but also lesser-explored Danish-language Palestinian writings. Perhaps more importantly, however, rather than approaching these works through the diffuse lens of Arab transnational cultural production, *Being There, Being Here* maintains a sharp focus on the Palestinian subjectivity of the authors and texts it analyzes, treating non-Arabophone Palestinian cultural production as an essential component and symptom of the Palestinian condition.

*Being There, Being Here* comprises five main body chapters, each of which reveal facets of the heterogeneity of Palestinian experiences since 1948 as successive generations of Palestinians have navigated dispersion, exile, statelessness, and itinerancy. Chapter 1, "Palestinian Writings in the World: A Polylingual Literary Category," establishes a framework for addressing the phenomenon of polylingual Palestinian writing by juxtaposing Palestinian Danish-language writings with Hebrew works by Palestinians. Here, Ebleeni persuasively argues that "the polylingual category shows that Palestinian literature no longer subscribes to an exclusive national mode in terms of territory and language and, as a result, suggests a space for the transnational assembling of literary texts representative of various local contexts" (46). This tension between the centripetal force of Palestinian national identity and the centrifugal force of the legacy of Zionist settler

colonialism causing the dispersal of the majority of the Palestinian population into exile and the emergence of successive generations of Palestinians in their disparate and varied exilic contexts catalyzes *Being There, Being Here's* discussion.

Chapter 2, "The Anglophone Palestinian Novel: Between Orientalism and (Trans)nationalism," addresses the more familiar terrain of Palestinian novelistic production in English. Building upon the previous chapter's framework, Ebileeni contextualizes the fraught politics of the reception of Anglophone Palestinian writings, described as caught between "orientalism and (trans)nationalism" (49). Ebileeni juxtaposes strategies employed by two Palestinian authors—Susan Abulhawa and Susan Muaddi Darraj—as they navigate this contentious terrain, concluding through incisive analysis of each author's works that "whereas Darraj specifically portrays the complex experiences of four young Arab American-born women with passing reference to historico-political events, Abulhawa anchors her characters' fates in the canonic national script, unwilling to move beyond and explore contemporary consequences of Palestinian displacement in the US context" (72–73). Given that "the ongoing displacement of Palestinians has created diverse geographical, cultural, and social settings for the proliferation of the Palestinian story on a global scale" (57), Ebileeni asks whether Palestinian authors can challenge the "'nostalgia for a static homeland' without running the risk of losing national membership?" (56). *Being There, Being Here* makes clear that Palestinian cultural producers must find a way of doing so if they are to adequately encompass the multiplicity of Palestinian experiences.

The book's third chapter, "(Tres)passings," tackles the blurring of the otherwise bold demarcation between Palestinian and Israeli identities in Palestinian literature. Drawing upon Lital Levy's work in *Poetic Trespass: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (2014), Ebileeni expands the linguistic delineation between Palestinian and Israeli identities to the imaginary through the works of Sayed Kashua and Susan Abulhawa. "Both authors," argues Ebileeni, "trigger processes of rethinking the Palestinian identity, in different contexts of displacement, by way of inventing Palestinian characters that pass as Israeli Jews" (89). This chapter decenters the usual male subjects of such studies and focuses instead on maternal subjectivity, arguing that "the figurative movement from the pain of the fertile Palestinian mother toward the desire of the childless Israeli mother demarcates the

no-man's-land of Abulhawa's and Kashua's Palestinian imaginings regarding the other" (89).

"Sexual Politics and Nationhood between Exile and the Homeland," the book's fourth chapter, carries forward the previous chapter's focus on gender implications by considering female subjectivity in Randa Jarrar's novel *Map of Home* (2008) and Maysaloun Hammoud's film *Bar Bahar (In Between)* (2017). This chapter contends that "the sexualization of the female body in fictional representations of Palestinian women unsettles conventional discourses and opens new venues for rethinking gender politics in the national framework" (105). Ebileeni deftly examines how Jarrar's and Hammoud's works challenge the patriarchal and disempowering discourses of Palestinian female chastity and passivity, and instead present confident women who are unabashed in their sexuality despite repeatedly facing stifling social sexual mores.

In a book that throughout does not hesitate to touch third rails of Palestinian political discourses, *Being There, Being Here's* final chapter, "When Exile Brings a Key: The Poetics of Palestinian 'Homecomings,'" is perhaps its most iconoclastic. Addressing the sacrosanct concept of *al-awdah* – that is, the Palestinian return to the homeland – Ebileeni foregrounds the disappointment of return that manifests in a number of Palestinian memoirs and Annemarie Jacir's film *Milh Hadha al-Bahr (Salt of This Sea)* (2008). Ebileeni's highlighting of return's disappointments should by no means be read as a repudiation of the Palestinian right of return. Rather, it challenges the presumed triumphalism occasioned by *al-awdah*, taking instead a sober look at the realities of return in light of successive generations of Palestinian displacement and the disparate conditions of Palestinian exile, asking: "In the absence of a chronotopical Palestine, where will future Palestinians return to, and for what end, when the idea of 'homeland' fails to house the notion of 'home'?" (161).

Even to broach this question about the inviolable concept of *al-awdah* and to suggest that Palestine could fall short of being a home to Palestinians is, for some, to cross a red line. *Al-awdah* is meant to be the culmination of the Palestinian liberation project wherein those Palestinians made stateless and displaced since 1948, or who remained but chafe under the overt repression and covert contradictions of becoming citizens of the state of Israel, will finally be reunited with one another and their lost Palestinian homeland to enjoy long-denied autonomy and self-determination. The conclusion of *Being There, Being Here* challenges readers to engage in a thought experiment, imagining

a reconstituted “Palestine 2048,” one century since Palestine’s loss, and how its population may look. For a book that has been so solidly grounded in texts, this conclusion, devoid of any references, may seem like a jarring departure. Throughout *Being There, Being Here*, however, Ebileeni compels his readers to address the implications of “Palestinianess” as a fundamentally decentered subjectivity. As he states in a previous chapter, “The ‘homeland’ exists now as a polyphonic possibility composed of memories and narrations in various Palestinian contexts of displacement” (153). What happens, then, when this polyphony is transposed to a centralized, autonomous Palestinian territorial base? What tensions will (re)emerge among a Palestinian body politic that had been occluded by the collective albeit disparate experience of statelessness and exile? What will hegemonic Palestinian culture look like in this imagined “Palestine 2048,” and what will be its counter-cultures? What will Palestinian literature, which has invested so much into the tropes of statelessness, exile, and the longing to return, look like once that return has been achieved? As Ebileeni concludes, “I do not consider *Being There, Being Here* as a niche study of Palestinian literature, but rather a critical attempt at exploring the manifold long-term cultural and literary consequences of the Palestinian Nakba” (172). In this pursuit, Ebileeni is immensely successful.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Waïl Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader’s Guide* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Syrine Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Nouri Gana, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Therí A. Pickens, ed., *Arab American Aesthetics: Literature, Material Culture, Film, and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Danielle Haque, *Interrogating Secularism: Race and Religion in Arab Transnational Art and Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019); Tasnim Qutait, *Nostalgia in Anglophone Arab Literature: Nationalism, Identity and Diaspora* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).