Palestinian revolutionary politics were in part defined by the historical challenge of the refugee camps. To politically mobilize the encamped Palestinian body and become a popular mass movement, the revolution required nothing less than the transformation of the camps into the means of their own undoing. This article examines three novels of the revolutionary period (by Ghassan Kanafani, Rashad Abu Shawir, and Yayha Yakhlif) to show that Palestinian revolutionary realism both heeded this insurrectionary call and also undermined it. On the one hand, camp life is mediated as only the superficial expression of deeper political totality that lies elsewhere—in other words, only in armed struggle outside the camps can camp life be overcome—and on the other, just at the point when the camp should be overcome in the protagonist’s journey toward militancy, the very narrative drive itself stutters. Reading these novels, I argue, points us to political roads not taken, and to ways of thinking about Palestinian camp life as more than a means to another end elsewhere.

“Fugitives and Nothing More”

There is a scene in Elias Khoury’s Bab al-shams (1998) that captures something of the historical bind that Palestinian revolutionary politics faced from the start. Khoury’s novel—episodic, digressive, taxingly long, and with no real plot to speak of—is structured around the stories that the main character, Khalil, recounts night after night in a bid to wake from coma his adopted or spiritual “father,” Yunis, an aging revolutionary militant who makes up the other (silent) half of the (mono)dialogic structure. Early on in the book, Khalil recounts that when Yunis, just released from prison, first arrived to ʿAyn al-Hilwah in southern Lebanon to find people erecting tents, he flew into a rage shouting, and shooting his gun into the air. Khalil reminds him, “As they were setting up tents that wind blows through from both sides, you told them, ‘We’re not refugees. We’re fugitives and nothing more. We fight, and kill and are killed. But we’re not refugees.’ You told the people that refugee means something shameful, and that the road to all the villages of the Galilee was open.”

The fugitive, here, is the figurative inversion of the refugee. Both figures start with a constitutive movement, but where the refugee ends in the terminal limbo and stasis of a camp, the fugitive keeps moving, and moving with consequence. The fugitive returns life to action that is still consequential, if only in its illegality or transgression—a figure that kills and is killed, rather than simply subject to (equally lethal) waiting. This is why the figure of the fugitive is compelling here, its flight is a consequential action. The Arabic word Khoury chooses, farrun—from the verb farra, to flee, escape, or defect from the military—has both the illegality or trangressiveness of the term “fugitive” but even more of a connotation of kinetic, bodily motion closer to the notion of a runaway. The movement, then, is not a wandering, but a flight from the law, and in this case, back into the realm of legal consequence. In short, it is politics. What interests me here is how this politics is enabled in part by the refusal of the camp, of the tent itself. Yunis hails people as they set up the tents because he senses the implications (implications that will grow only more grave as the tents give way to concrete cinderblocks): You’re not refugees, he tells them, because the road is still open, you can still go.

When Yasir Arafat paraphrased Marx to declare, “We have nothing to lose but our tents,” the tent became synonymous with the chain, an object of ensnarement, an impediment to movement, and as such, something to be struggled against and removed. Like Marx, Arafat was determined that what we might call revolutionary consciousness begins with a self-negation. For Marx and Engels, “the practical movement” of revolution is necessary not only as the transformative reorganization of social order, but also, and necessarily, as the very “alteration of men on a mass scale.” At least at this stage in their writing (mid-1846), no revolutionary consciousness precedes revolution—it emerges immanently only in the revolution itself. If, as they had it, “only in revolution” could a revolutionary class “succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew,” then for Palestinian militancy this “muck” (in often quite literal terms) wafted squarely from what were often referred to as the “camps of despair” (mukhayyamat al-ya’s).

And yet the difference that Arafat’s paraphrase enacts is quite critical—the chains in Marx’s maxim are metaphors, the tent here is a literal, material object. This presence of the camp at the very foreground of revolutionary, anticolonial thought was not incidental; it was a historical difference bound up with the very conception of a revolutionary class. Palestinians, the discourse often went, were not a class of workers and peasants, but a class of refugees. Or, as Fatah co-founder Salah Khalaf put it in an interview with the left wing Egyptian monthly Al-tali’a, “There are classes and groups which were not known at the time of Karl Marx. Did Karl Marx discuss the question of the class of refugees that has emerged among the Palestinian people?” Even among leftist and Marxist currents of the movement, where these subject-positions, worker/refugee, overlapped, the specificity of the refugee experience always took priority in the “strategic essentialism” of national liberation. This was more than a tension between nationalist and socialist tendencies in the revolutionary movement. It was the historical challenge of launching a revolution from the camps themselves. The imperative for the movement, then, was to construct a historical subject not just from displaced and dispossessed bodies that lacked a territorial base, but also from those confined and domesticated through the camp as refugees. This required not simply burning the “muck of the ages” in the fire of movement and action; it required the very reorientation of the camp as the means to do so. Transforming the camp was the very condition...
of possibility for a political subjectivity of “the militant.” As Ghassan Kanafani asked in a 1969 al-Hadaf editorial on the eve of the Cairo Accords (that effectively handed Lebanon’s camps over to the Palestine Liberation Organization, or PLO), “Launching bases or detention camps?” (Qawa’id intilaq aw mu’askarat i’tiqal?). On this, he insisted, rested nothing less than the “the very historical and fateful existence of the revolution.”

In 1981, twelve years after Kanafani’s editorial, Arafat responded to a series of questions in the Revue d’études Palestiniennes, this journal’s now defunct sister-publication. The interview, framed by the occasion of the seventeenth anniversary of the launch of the PLO, and on the brink of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut (where the PLO was headquartered), and what arguably would later be marked as the end of the revolution itself, has a backward revisionist gaze. Where are we seventeen years on? What’s the gain? Arafat’s reply was confident: “We have turned our people from a refugee people waiting in queues for charity and alms from UNRWA into a people fighting for freedom.” This movement of people from waiting to fighting, from refugees to militants—a movement, as it was seen, back into historical time itself—had to confront and pass through the camp. Space and subject or, in language closer to that of the time, environment and self, are inextricably linked.

This article is concerned with the place of the camp in the Palestinian revolution, and in turn with the camp as a place. It argues that the Palestinian revolution, an experience that lasted roughly from 1960 to 1982, didn’t just emerge as a mass, popular movement from the refugee camps; in many respects, it emerged against the camps as well. But with no option for a final exit, the revolution faced the imperative of transforming the camps into political spaces in their own overcoming; that is, creating sites that would reverse the very confining logic of the camp form to become instead “launching bases” of popular insurrection. And so it had to produce and police its own demarcation between life and politics. Where the humanitarian-developmental regime created a space of pure administration, of work or relief-based management of life and nothing more, the revolution would do the exact opposite. The camp was to be the site of political rebirth. Among other things, it was this resistance to the domestications of the camp regime that pushed much of the liberation movement toward a kind of “pure politics”; that is, a politics of liberation-insurrection sensu stricto that often, even in its socialist and leftist variations, ended up constructing a stark, almost Arendtian distinction between the social (or life) and the political—a separation between the satisfaction of basic bodily needs and livelihoods (often bracketed under the term “livelihood matters”—qadaya ma’ishiyah) and great words and deeds (almost always referred to as “militant action”—al’amal al-fida’i). One can think of a broad set of dichotomies that undergird this revolutionary thought: inaction/life/stillness/description versus action/politics/movement/narrative. What sits between this disjuncture and what must be overcome to move from one side to the other is the camp.

Literature, and specifically the Palestinian novel of this period, I argue, at once heeds this insurrectionary call and also undermines it. On the one hand, in its generic conventions, narrative structures, and symbolic formations, it mediates the camp as nothing but the superficial expression of a (deeper) political totality—one that can only be reached in consciousness-producing (and almost always masculine) turns to insurgent militancy. These are novels that, in the tradition of realism, take narration-as-explanation very seriously. On the other, the camp, even at a symbolic
level, cannot be kept on one side of the life/politics divide; it spills over constantly, appearing as an
ambivalent and indeterminate space between place and non-place, but also as a site of affection and
attachment. But more than this, the camp exerts a force on the very form of the revolutionary novel,
shaping some of its formal attributes and acting as a drag on narrative in ways that seem to impede
the plot. Just at the point where the camp should be overcome and disappear in the protagonist’s
journey toward militancy, it persists, and the narrative drive itself stutters. In other words, the
very struggle to shape national form out of a coherent narrative form of revolutionary becoming
within the novel comes up against the camp. Camp form and novel form are entangled.

Revolutionary Novelties

For the Palestinian revolution, the camps sat at the heart of its historical challenge. The very
possibility of the revolution moving past its early foco guerrilla tactics and emerging as a mass
popular movement was contingent on transforming the camps. Basim Sarhan, director of the
education program at the PLO’s Planning Committee, articulated this historical encounter,
between revolution and camp, in unequivocal terms. In 1975, he published an article in Shu’un
filastiniyya (Palestinian affairs) called, “The Palestinian Camp under the Revolution,” a
remarkable piece of autocritique from the midst of what was an ongoing political experiment.
“Armed struggle,” he wrote, “did not transform into a popular movement before the emergence of
the revolution in the camps. For the revolution was launched (intalaqat) from the camps, but it
was only with the return of the revolutionaries that the camps would be radically affected by this
revolution.”

In the political writing of the time one gets a sense of just how much the camps, particularly in
Jordan between the late 1960s and 1971, and more expansively in Lebanon between 1969 and
1982, became spaces of political and spatial experimentation, sometimes being described as
transforming into revolutionary communes. In place of the twin mechanism of state-
humanitarian administrative control, a whole ecology of associations, Sarhan said, had radically
transformed everyday life—cooperatives, training camps, youth clubs, workers’ associations and
unions, student groups, teachers’ unions, women’s associations, sharing economies, cultural
clubs. The camps, he wrote, had become an “environment of absolute freedom and popular
authority.” In place of “dependency and despair,” the revolution affects “a transformation in
the very essence of the Palestinian psyche/mentality.”

It is striking here how much this “change at the level of everyday life” is understood at a kinetic,
corporeal level; that is, how mobilization is understood in a quite literal sense, as becoming mobile or
(self)-moveable. “Tedium” (malal) and “stagnation” (rukud) are countered with a mobilization that
“took advantage of people’s energies and moved them. Everyone became busy.” The image was one
of “dense activity,” not only through training camps and revolutionary offices, Sarhan noted, but in
the daily and nightly meetings, workshops, organizational circles, popular seminars, debates,
distribution of roles, and allocation of responsibilities.

In turn, all kinds of ossified social relations (gendered, patriarchal, generational, clan-based,
and so on) were seen as having been overturned and replaced, perhaps most significantly those
between women and men, with militancy destroying conventionally gendered divisions and
“liberating women” who, “before the revolution . . . were prisoners of the home,”22 though as we will see, revolutionary thought and literature itself often slipped back into a gendering of the sphere of life/the domestic-as-feminine, and the sphere of politics/the public-as-masculine, with figures of insurgent heroism often remaining impoverishedly male.

Sarhan himself bemoaned, in strikingly self-critical terms, the incapacity of the revolution, unlike its Cuban or Algerian counterparts, to affect “intentional social change,” saying “it made no organized or directed attempt toward implanting (ghars) new social values and principles.”23 In addition to the lack of a continuous territorial base, the main reason for this failure was “the revolution’s understanding of its principal calling as a political-liberationist (siyasiya-tahrirariya) one, and in turn the orientation of most of its energies toward armed struggle and building a political base.”24 The imperative of pure insurrectional politics for a deterritorialized and dispersed body politic squeezed out the possibility of substantive “social change.”

The three novels considered here,25 Kanafani’s Umm Saad (1969),26 Rashad Abu Shawir’s al-Ushaq (1974),27 and Yayha Yakhlf’s Tuffah al-majanin (1982),28 are all self-consciously written as part of this protracted revolutionary moment. And they all, I argue, straddle—in often ambivalent ways—the divide between life and politics in the camp that Sarhan so perceptively saw as the revolution’s stumbling point. In historicist terms, these novels are all inconceivable outside the revolution’s transformation of the refugee camps. Umm Saad, writes the novelist and literary critic Radwa Ashour, “carries” the very “excitative pulse” (al-nabd al-hamasi) of the “unimaginable” achievement that was the “transformation of refugee camps into popular bases for the armed revolution.”29 What is significant about the three writers taken up here is not simply that they were all activists in revolutionary parties,30 or indeed that they all either lived or worked in the camps at some point in experiences that were often formative. All this is important. But what I want to emphasize is that they wrote from within what most agreed was a revolutionary time—a time that was the very condition of their writing. A time that was itself conceived differently, as open, futural, and transformable, and to that end carried a historical challenge—forming a subject of militancy—to which the writing of these novelists rose. I have chosen these three novels not because they stand out as brilliant pieces of writing on the Palestinian scene,31 but because they mark the expanse of this political aesthetic of writing across the most intense of decades in the revolutionary experiment; in fact, they bookmark its two historical ends (late 1960s and early 1980s). More specifically still, all three directly take up the experience of militancy, which forms the narrative journey of each story as it plays out against the camps or camp life. And all three are exemplary in their overriding concern with the treatment of consciousness. “Umm Saad,” writes Muhammad Siddiq, “embodies the clearest and most comprehensive ideological treatment of the question of political consciousness not only in Kanafani’s but perhaps in all of Palestinian fiction.”32

Umm Saad is set in a camp and revolves around the eponymous character’s conversation with the author-narrator. It follows the story of Umm Saad as her son, Saad, joins the revolutionaries and ignites the consciousness of the camp. Like Maxim Gorky’s short novel, The Mother (1906), it places an illiterate, working-class woman as the hidden protagonist. In both novels, a son joins revolutionary forces but it is the working, toiling mother who stays behind that reflects the genuine change in consciousness. The novel culminates in a large-scale mobilization of the camp’s
youth, which sees even Saad’s drunken and abusive father regain a measure of decency. *Al-‘Ushaq* takes place in the two weeks between Egypt’s decision to withdraw permission for the United Nations (UN) forces to remain stationed at Sharm al-Shaykh and the end of the 1967 war. It follows Mahmud, a young refugee in ‘Ayn al-Sultan, a camp outside Jericho, as he is released from jail, courts his beloved Nada, witnesses the debacle of the war, and begins his clandestine cell’s military operations with a raid on an Israeli patrol. *Tuffah al-majanin*, set in an urban neighborhood that is an adjacent spillover of a camp, uses a first person narrative from the perspective of a child, whose daily life—previously centered around misadventures with his friend and his father’s hapless attempts to secure a ration card from the UN agency in charge of aid to Palestinian refugees (UNRWA)—is interrupted by his militant uncle’s return from Israeli prison. This return dramatically accelerates the plot, unraveling the little stability the family had gained but restoring, albeit ambivalently, the imperative of fighting.

**Where the Concrete Is Never in the Concrete**

In these novels, the camp is the spatial form through which time itself (and time’s suspension) is organized and represented. On the one hand, the camp appears as the suspended, ahistorical present of exile. And yet, on the other, it is what is beneath the camp, the concrete political totality underpinning it, that this literature seeks to uncover. In all three novels, the lines of causality and the journey upon which the revolutionary protagonist must set out are established by the protagonists’ realization that the intolerable material conditions of camp life are determined elsewhere (in politics). The camp is the effect, not the cause of the removal from historical time.

In *al-‘Ushaq*, the camp first appears as the foil to the city that surrounds it. And not just any city but (and with apologies to Ur) the ur-city, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, Jericho. A city that is history. The camp, here, is surrounded by a sheer excess of historical and biblical significance: Moon City in ancient Canaanite (*Yareah*, meaning moon in Canaanite, and from which the Arabic *Ariha*, Jericho, is derived), the Mount of Temptation and its monastery, the architectural glory of the Umayyad-era city in Caliph Hisham’s palace. Removed from the sequential movement of historical time, the movement of the urban proper, the camp becomes a site of endless waiting. Abu Shawir’s camp dwellers are repeatedly analogized with the waiting monks on the Mount of Temptation (parallel forms of madness). Paralyzed by caution—“Time is treacherous,” Mahmud’s mother warns him—and immobilized by the camp, the refugees too enter messianic time. It is only when Mahmud and his comrades enact a break with “messianic** waiting** in the worldly action of armed struggle that the novel reaches its point of narrational synthesis, rendering the present not only intelligible, but also transformable.

As a space of terminal waiting, a space of “killing time,” the camp, almost inevitably, emerges as a prison, and camp time as prison time. Across these and other novels, the camp appears in metonymic or synecdochic relation to the prison, substituting or standing in as one part of the larger prison whole. Indeed, one of the few spaces that appears with any regularity in all the novels is the camp prison. In fact, the opening sequences of all three novels are either set in, or reference, prison and prison guards. By the 1960s, most UNRWA-run camps had dedicated police stations and jails of their own. The agency as a regulatory force depended on these sites of
coercion to substantiate its own claims as authority. But the prevalence of the prison, the dread it engenders in these novels, exceeds any descriptive mandate.

In *Umm Saad*, the correspondence between camp and prison becomes total. The story begins with Saad being imprisoned after getting caught on his way to join the resistance. His mother recounts that he was presented with a chance to be released if he pledged to the mukhtar (the village elder, Kanafani making his disdain for older, rural power structures clear) to “behave himself,” an offer Saad predictably scoffs at and returns with an insult. The author-narrator, an intellectual and writer standing in for Kanafani himself, pushes back to ask if that was the wisest choice; after all, better to be out of prison than in, no? *Umm Saad*’s irate response is first to disparage the difference: “You’re out of prison, and what do you do?” As a news broadcast filters in from a radio she’d left on all night, her resolve hardens, and finds shape in a proliferation of metaphor:

Do you think we don’t live in prison? What else do we do in the camp other than walk around in a strange prison? There are all kinds of prisons, cousin! All kinds! The camp is a prison; your house, prison; the newspaper, prison; the radio, prison; the bus and the street and people’s eyes; . . . our age, prison; and the last twenty years, prison; the mukhtar, prison . . . you talk about prisons? Your whole life has been spent in a prison . . . you delude yourself, cousin, into thinking these prison bars are flower vases. Prison, prison, prison. You yourself are prison.

The inside/outside boundaries of prison and the camp disappear altogether. The camp-as-prison, which is to say the Palestinian condition, is already in one’s head, already constitutive. To inhabit the camp is to inhabit the prison of one’s own consciousness. There is no interiority, no last bastion of freedom, outside of material structures, no neat object/subject divide that might allow for a discrete ego or self beyond historical-spatial conditions. Trembling but certain, she tells him: “Listen up, I know Saad will leave prison. The entire prison! Understand?”

But Kanafani cannot leave his narrative in this profuse flux, in this multiplicity of metaphor. He has to mediate back to the causes. From where does the prison come? To come to terms with it, with its causes and the means of its overcoming, one has to look elsewhere, beneath the surface. Beyond the thing. Or, rather into the thing, into the politics in the thing. When *Umm Saad* comes in one day to visit the narrator, he notices her dress is dirty: “I saw the strip of thick mud hanging off the side of her dress as though it were a crown of nails.” The intellectual’s romanticism transforms, even inverts, dirt into a virtue, a Christ-like majesty of sacrifice. But Kanafani is again setting up the writer (that is, himself) up only to knock him(self) down. *Umm Saad* spent the best part of the night dealing with flooding rainwater, but there is no sacrificial triumph in this. “I don’t want to die here in the mud and dirty kitchens,” she says. “You understand, cousin?” Instead, the episode reminds her of the night Saad left to join the resistance. That too was a night of heavy rain that had brought out the whole neighborhood, knee-deep in water, working as hard as they could to stop the small shelters from being washed away. But Saad just stands there, indulging in what first appears to be cynicism. “Tonight,” he says, “you’re going to be buried in mud.” When his father retorts, “What do you expect us to do? Do you think there is a spout in the sky that we can just plug?” everyone laughs, but *Umm Saad* realizes that her son is already lost deep in thought, “as though he were going to plug that very spout the next day.”
The impossibility of camp life, she now understands, is only addressed in the politics that underlies it. The surface/depth metaphor here takes direct architectural shape. Plugging the master spout is facing the totality that is colonial reality—the hidden political forces that structure the camp’s everyday experiences. The rundown houses and the overflowing pathways appear as the infrastructural or architectural problems of an impoverished habitat, but they are simply the surface manifestations of deeper political inequities. *The concrete is never in the concrete,* as it were.

When in his final interview Kanafani recalled working and living in the “sad and moving environment of the camp,” that left such a mark on him, he quickly added, “and it was not hard to find the political roots of this environment.” Getting to these “roots” in fiction requires a mediation, the proper revealing of the relations between appearance and essence. Umm Saad’s emerging insights play exactly this role in the text. The illiterate Umm Saad does the work of mediation that the author-narrator, and by extension Kanafani himself, as intellectual, is unable to do. Kanafani marks the political limits of writing within the writing itself. And it is precisely in the form of this text as a skewed dialogical encounter that he manifests his own (Maoist) ethic of learning from mass popular struggle.

For all these novels, the struggle against the objective conditions of life has to pass through the camp but also reach beneath it, to the politics that undergird it. In *Tuffah al-majanin,* the plot crescendos and peaks in the final pages. The father’s close friend and neighbor, Tahsil Dar, and the only person among both families with a ration card, has died. Point Four projects are gathering pace with the distinct aim of reducing the numbers of refugees on ration lists. The survey committee begins doing the rounds. The father has been picking up the uncle’s rations and now, instead of getting his own card (which, of course, never happens), he faces losing the little he gets. “Pressure. Surveys. Rumors. Fear. The Agency. The dead, dying again and again.” The committee eventually “enters the house like a yellow wind.” The family decides on a bit of simulation. The militant uncle will play the role of the older deceased man. Yakhlif takes the symbolism as far as he can. The militant has to dress in the traditional garb of the rural classes, marking himself with precisely the signs of the “regressive” semifeudal structures that the militant generation sought to overthrow. And since Tahsil Dar walked with a pronounced hunch, the symbolic humiliation of the former militant is complete; he has to literally bend his back in a prostrate position “for a fistful of flour.”

Three European UN agents and a local translator begin their questioning. The cover is quickly blown when the foreman’s wife (with whom the uncle had been conducting an affair) walks in unexpectedly. “Why are you wearing those ridiculous clothes?” she laughs out.” Rather than take the abuse now being hurled down at him by the translator, the uncle strikes back, throwing him to the floor. This return to bodily action restores the uncle’s purpose, but is already marked with its own tragic effects. He runs away, “without looking back . . . leaves us in shreds and fragments.” The boys chase him out into the open and watch him fade out of view across the mountains, until he becomes “as small as the head of a pin.” Ambivalent, yes. Perhaps even without clear closure. But still insistent on its political task. The uncle only restores a sense of self (and his standing in his nephew’s eyes) by leaving the camp and physically moving again to confront the primary political contradiction, reality itself, in militant action. He’s walking back to Palestine. “He is returning there, as birds return to a nest.”
The almost bewildering range of immediately experienced injustices and lived contradictions—material deprivation and humiliating jobs, fear and police abuses, the punitive paternalism of aid, the crumbling and decrepit housing, and so on—are mediated as but a range of instances of colonial struggle. Without a firm grasp of this reality, they are experienced as independent afflictions. To attempt to navigate this world one bit at a time (one ration card here, one evaded police encounter there) is the stuff of illusion, which Yakhfif brings to life in a literal game of make-believe and dress-up. It is from the depths of this illusion that the shattering realization and its necessary embodiment in corporeal action emerge.

Slipping in the Right Place

These, then, are novels keenly sincere in their duty to narrate. They all employ a tight narrative arc in which the experiences of the squalid conditions of camp life are mediated back into the totality of colonial/imperial order, and set the protagonist on the path of insurgent heroism. They are all solemnly self-tasked with a representational burden, with what Fredric Jameson (describing Lukácsian realism) called “the grim duty of a proper reflection of the world.” They are didactic and agitational, but never simply documentary or evidentiary. They seek not simply to describe the (subjective) conditions of life, but to explain its (objective) causes. Explanation, causality, motivation, totality—the intelligibility and transformability of the present—this is the stuff of the ordering systems of these narratives. That is, these novels are not saying “this is the way things are,” they are saying “this is the why things are the way they are and this is what you need to do about it.” This is narration that is very conscious of its task as instructive mediation.

These are novels to be used. Written for local consumption, they are locally idiomatic and accessible, in dialogue pushing formal Arabic prose as far as possible toward colloquial vernacular and common turns of phrase. They are intended to work on what all these authors would have considered the necessity of forming a new consciousness, understood as distinct from the reality it encounters. The emergence of a subject of militancy is always the crescendo of the plot, and almost always involves the rejection of existing social structures and values—religion, patriarchy, international paternalism, the social hierarchies and obscurantisms of “traditional” rural life, but especially refugeehood itself. It is in Kanafani’s literature, says Mahmoud Darwish, that we first see how “the revolt over the characteristic of refugeehood emerges as the key to the possibility of return.” If the force of realist narrative “always comes from this painful cancellation of tenaciously held illusions,” from the demystifications it affects, then these novels hold true to form. And in most cases, one might say, their aesthetics suffer accordingly: they’re often heavy-handed and sentimental, and the character development is transcendent, heroic, masculine, muscular.

Yet despite their didactic and agitational purposes, these novels employ narrative and writing techniques that run counter to their own narrative drive. They rely on free indirect discourse and streams of consciousness—what the critic and poet Ahmad Dahbur identifies disapprovingly in Abu Shawir as, “the surrender of the author in some instances to a kind of impulsive spontaneity.” They are, in places, written in grammatical moods of uncertainty, excessively symbolized, and replete with countless scenes of description that, written from the
perspective of the omniscient observer, seem to do little to move the narrative forward. In such scenes, tellingly, life and domestic things spill over or creep back into or beneath the politics, exceeding their mandate or quarantine.

In what follows I propose a counter-reading of these novels that suggests that the camp and camp life exert a force—symbolically and formally—on these novels that marks the revolution’s tension between a pure, futural politics of insurrection, and the forms of everyday life these came up against. As such, these texts gesture, however unsurely, to different configurations of camp experiences in which life and politics, and in turn, present and future, are neither opposed nor separated.

One way this happens is quite simply when the camp exceeds its symbolic and narrational role (abject, uninhabitable), and appears as place (a site of affective relations and belongings, a location or ground from which to think and act, an object of attachment, a site of memory, and so on). For Faisal Darraj, place in Palestinian literature never coincides with the present. Place is either fixed unto the past (paradise lost and the object of recovery) or is projected into the future (the redemptive site of return). This absence of place in text, one might argue, is but the expression of the impossibility of place in the world. “In a very literal way,” wrote Edward Said, “the Palestinian predicament since 1948 is that to be a Palestinian at all has been to live in a utopia, a non-place of some sort.” The image of the journey back into the future, to the recovery of Palestine and place-ness itself, is a movement that always begins in and passes through nondescript space, through the open, through the void of exile.

Likewise, Barbara M. Parmenter writes that landscapes of exile in Palestinian literature tend to lack the attributes of place. These landscapes—desert, city, camp—appear as voids, non-places in which the present is suspended. The desert, through which so many Palestinian literary journeys have to pass, is “a kind of anti-place,” she states. “This is a landscape shorn of all meaning yet tangibly real, unlike the abstract images of the desert in the poems.” The city of exile, likewise, is “unrelenting in its ugliness.” It lacks definition and substance, and like the desert, it “represents the antithesis of a home place.” As soon as she reaches the camp, however, Parmenter realizes the difficulty of extending her analytical framework: “The refugee camp, the most squalid of all exile environments, is also the most ambivalent.” There is a “dual quality of camp life.” A sense of place is maintained by a community living together, and yet the environment is one of squalor, harassment, misery, despair, want, and lack. The refugee camp, Parmenter concludes, is an “intermediate landscape.” It is this intermediateness, this dual quality that I think is often registered in the novels despite their plot structures and generic conventions. And it is registered precisely along the fault lines between life and politics.

In part, this occurs on a fairly straightforward symbolic plane, such as the moments in which this literature registers points of excess in the world of domestic objects themselves. In these works, we apprehend how life in and of the camps heightened the politics of the object (the object not only as a mimetic representational surface phenomenon that discloses the deeper essence, but as a mediator of political significance in its own right). In the camp, the political consequentiality of things, especially things that “exist” around the built, expands and becomes sharper—more fraught, more determining, more literary, even. Things leave “textual residues” in ways that
constantly exceed their object-ness and get entangled with subjects and their political fates. Life slips back into politics.

In *al-‘Ushaq*, it is not only in militant action but in the very work of building that some characters begin to restore a kind of historical presence. Despite the novel’s ideologically unequivocal message and plot structure, in recurring albeit incidental passages, characters begin to resist the alienation of the object-world around them by building their own houses. In one passage, Mahmud observes his comrade’s mother, Umm Hassan making mud bricks under the hot sun. The work of turning formless mud into bricks is imbued not only with an artisanal skill and solemn dignity, but even more importantly, with historical effectuality.

The text moves back and forth between Mahmud’s reflections on Umm Hassan and his recollection of a poem about the Umayyad caliph, Hisham, after his palace was destroyed. In the poem, the caliph’s mother upbraids him for crying over his destroyed palace—the material world is to be rebuilt, not cried over, she reminds him. The two maternal figures begin to converge: “What is the difference between you and the mother of that caliph? Is she from poetry and you from mud?” Mahmud asks.

The passage moves into the kind of metamorphic imagery, common in this literature, in which human bodies begin to cross the object/subject divide and merge into the mud they work with, the buildings they erect, the land on which they dwell, or the trees they plant. There is nothing, in terms of narrative, happening here for pages on end. Instead, a stream of reflections jumps from past to present, in which the confined, marked body of the refugee reappears with a malleability or plasticity, and the work of building appears like a self-making activity: “She erected [nasabat] her body [jadhi’uha] in the middle of a mud mountain.” The diction is crucial: *nasabat* implies erection of a structure, usually a form of material construction, most commonly a tent, while, *jadhi’uha*, her trunk, is a connotation of arboreal life.

The camp appears as ambivalent because it is also the product of work that has not been entirely alienated. It’s an object that domesticates, confines, even kills, but one that, through the work of building, has also, in some sense, been returned to common use and “homed.” It’s self-made and, only as such, inhabited. As metaphor or simile, the self-built world of the camp crosses or spills over into a feminine organicity of biological life (her trunk-body of mud). We see this also with Umm Saad’s hands, which are described as “the color of the land,” or, in an aural simile, clapping together as “with the sound of wood being cut.” Some of the effects are obvious; these images give the scenes a romantic gloss of an artisanal affinity with materials, the sense of dignity in work, and bring into focus the toiling female body (albeit one that keeps in place an association between the feminine and work). They also bestow a strange metamorphic capacity to the encamped human body. In this metamorphosis, work itself, and especially work with building matter, is revisualized or reconceived; it is not the mastery of engineering turning brute matter into form, but something like a continuum or flow between life process and material.

That none of this is presented as a distraction from the stuff of politics or causal structures, and that these reflections take shape around construction and housing, is not unimportant. Construction is always the production of a certain kind of fact and rationality—the built object, an object that conversely naturalizes its own presence in its very constructedness. As with any production, once the work is finished the object assumes a naturalness: it is something to keep, to valorize, to
defend. The tension here, however, is that the very “naturalness” of the camp (and its sense of presence, finality, permanence) has to be resisted even as construction reinforces it. In this sense, Abu Shawir’s use of images of construction work as self-making, even historical practice, is striking in its political-aesthetic counterintuitiveness.

To Perhaps Think of Audacity: Uncertainty and Politics

But there is also a more formalistic way of reading the camp in the novel. All three novels punctuate a narrative drive in a realist style with different modes of grammatical and textual uncertainty. The moods of uncertainty, I argue, wittingly or not, mark life in the camps as it is lived beneath metapolitics but above abject survival. They mark, albeit obscurely or even confusedly, a recognition that camp life has to be lived imperfectly, unheroically, un-resistantly, even apolitically; if only so that heroism and resistance—in short, politics—might endure.

In each of the stories, we move from camp-based scenes of description or action—a house, a group of men sitting around a table interrupted by a policeman, Umm Saad’s entrance into a scene—to either a subjunctive mood, or to qualifying phrases that destabilize what we’ve just seen. With Kanafani, it takes the form of a continuous, exaggerated use of simile. The constant use of a sentence construction that involves qualifying words, “as though” (ka’annaha), or “it seemed like” (tabdu/yabdu). Or, in other places, commentary on descriptions that start with “I imagined it as . . .” (khuyyila ilayi) working a subjective, imaginary parallel layer of thought atop the sociological or the descriptive. This not only doubles our sensory perception of the scene (by overlaying one objective-descriptive level with another, subjective-imaginary), but the technique is used so frequently and consistently that it creates a pervasive mood of hesitancy that works itself into the very sentence structure, just as the work of realist narrative seems to be doing the exact opposite.

With Yakhlif, the narrator, recounting parts of his childhood and memories of his father, destabilizes clear memories, “sharp moments,” with rhetorical doubt. In one scene, police march his father’s friend and neighbor out of the house, and the narrator recalls his father immobilized by fear, unable to act: “My father was exhausted. Even now after all these long years, I remember that sharp moment. My father narrowed down to the capacity of waiting. He stood to walk into the room as though he were walking on a knife blade. Perchance he was thinking of adventure, perchance he was thinking of boldness.” The sentence construction “Perhaps he was . . .” (rubbama kan) or “Perchance he was . . .” (la’alahu kan) is repeated throughout the novel, and each time is uttered by the narrator despite the clear sense that his father is either unwilling or unable to act on his thoughts, and despite the fact that he had already been, in this scene and in the entire novel, “narrowed down” to nothing but waiting. And yet this sentence construction comes to finish a chain of recollection again and again, as if there is a necessity—grammatical and political—to suspend judgment and even clarity, and to entertain doubt.

The scene is repeated when the police again summon his father’s friend, Tahsil Dar, for another beating at the local station. The men are meekly silent and passive, with “fear squirming across their faces like a fish.” Again, the narrator’s father is left alone, in apparent silence. “Perhaps he was talking to himself,” the narrator says, “perhaps he was thinking about audacity . . .” To perhaps think about audacity, or boldness, or adventure, is not quite an oxymoronic construction, but it is
somewhat counterintuitive; it introduces uncertainty, hesitancy, and thought into what otherwise might be considered the stuff of conviction, immediacy, and action.

How does one explain the textual work of this uncertainty in the frame of a political-revolutionary aesthetic of realism? It makes little sense as a narrational or plot device. Instead, I would argue, that it is the textual registering of precisely the camp’s constitutive tension between life and politics. It is not simply that Palestinian refugees navigate a political world defined by its uncertainty—that even at the height of their insurgent powers they were still hostage to the whims and machinations of others, and always unsympathetic others. It is also that camp life is itself defined by punctures and interruptions in everyday life that, and this is the key, both demand and exceed any simple mediation back to political structure. The police beatings present in each of these novels are, as the protagonists well know, a symptom of their stateless and encamped condition—a condition that can only ever be overcome through militant politics. And yet at the level of the everyday, they become just an ordinary part of camp life that cannot be simply mediated back to the politics of resistance, but must be silently endured, survived, avoided, outwitted, and so on. The “perhaps thinking of audacity” becomes the prevarication or hesitancy necessary for both life and politics in the camp; to “perhaps think of audacity” is as much to consider it as it is to think better of it—in fact, it is to do both at precisely the same time.

It should be clear that I don’t have in mind the steadfastness (sumud) so often celebrated in representations of popular Palestinian politics. Sumud is still a figuration entirely captured by a heroic will to endure and persist (when outright resistance is not possible). Instead, at play here is a simultaneous duality: the ordinary, unheroic—even evasive—non-normative daily life that exists alongside, and as the necessary scaffolding of, the heroism. That is what constitutes the hidden content of the moods of hesitancy or uncertainty in the texts, and it becomes explicit at the end of Yakhli’i’s novel: as the militant uncle restores/recovers some pride/dignity in violent action, the father, despite his humiliation and demonstrable cowardice, simultaneously continues “with self-sufficiency and pride, to overcome misery with the power of life.” Conversely, given the entire plot, both politics and life briefly establish a kind of parity, and parity as power.

The Camp at the Limits of Militancy

What these novels index, then, to speak briefly to the theme of this special journal issue, are the shadow spaces and times of the Palestinian camps—the mundane, the unheroic, the everyday, the built, in short, life—that exceed the terms of national-liberationist frames, but are arguably the very conditions of possibility for politics. These novels are narratives of revolutionary armed struggle, and yet, in their treatment of camps and camp life, they cannot but reach past the spectacularness of insurrection and intensity of events to grapple with the everyday and ordinary experiences, the minor keys of life, and the shadows that were just as much a part of struggle.

I have argued that we can approach these constitutive, and perhaps historically unavoidable, tensions in Palestinian revolutionary politics by appreciating how images of camp life are entangled with these texts in noninstrumental ways—in ways that exceed both the discursive frame of liberation politics and the plot imperatives of the narratives themselves—in other words, how built and literary forms intersect. This is not a question of context, it is a question of moving...
away from a strict language-world binary to think about how something like a spatial/material object affects literary text in ways not confined to symbolism. Form is one word for thinking about precisely that.

The inability to achieve a bounded wholeness in these texts is, I think, but the expression of the inability to achieve a bounded wholeness in the very form the text is performatively inciting: the nation form. In other words, the fragmentation of these novels is, in one sense, the formal indexing of the fragmentation of the Palestinian body politic. A fragmentation both consolidated and contested in camp form. Both spatial forms—nation and novel—come up against the camp. The camp form is, of course, necessarily bounded—defined, one might say, by its very boundedness—but what it binds are only the fragments of a dispersed potential political community. In its very boundedness it reaffirms the impossibility of a bounded Palestinian national whole. There was no political unity, no bounded territory, no whole nation, or contiguous political community that might function as the conceit and precondition of a whole novel. That fiction existed neither on paper nor beyond it. And so any homology, any easy ideological fit between literary and national space, was impossible.

At the same time, it was this boundedness and the fact that camps could be communes of a kind, experimental, and crucially, somewhat insulated zones of political work and organization that afforded, to use Caroline Levine’s useful term, this literature a set of possibilities, horizons, and even language. Not only the shared life experiences and idiomatic registers, but, just as critically, the material infrastructures and support systems that this literature relied on were preserved only in the exceptional, extraterritorial, and excluded character of camp form.

If, as the Invisible Committee, in their book-length homage to the returning imaginary of the commune, write: that to inhabit a communal space is always to write each other, to tell one’s story from a grounded place (an association we can still hear in the word geography), then, here the camp was both this territorial-communal grounded place from which to tell the story, and also the very object that stood in the way of that story’s culmination. This is not to suggest a direct correspondence between aesthetic and political forms. Rather, I am arguing that the relation between camp form and the Palestinian revolutionary novel form was determinant, even if it was conflictive and tense. These writers tried very hard to etch out a closed ideological whole from the camp experience, but the very restrictions of the camp itself did not allow for neat narratives, tidy wholes, and sequential conclusions. It did afford them, however, a common experience and a preserved identity nonetheless. Form, Levine argues, always indicates an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping. And if we follow Rancière, as Levine invites us to, and think of politics as always a matter of distribution and arrangement, of imposing and enforcing boundaries, and temporal patterned hierarchies, then there is no politics without form.

Palestinian revolutionary politics was, in some senses, an attempt to grapple with a series of interconnected forms: the camp, the nation, and insofar as it was a medium of politics, the novel. The content of the revolutionary politics was often malleable and transferable; ideologies—Left and Right, secular and religious—came and went and most adapted and molded to the formal reality of the camps and the formal imperative of the nation. Indeed,
it remains striking how change in both the camp and the subject is understood through a concept of form or shape—\textit{tahawul} in Arabic, the movement from one condition to another or the assumption of a different shape, and best translated as \textit{transformation} in English.

And yet, for all the insistence on the need for transformation, for a new subjectivity of militancy, the Palestinian revolution remained open to the criticism that it failed to achieve a genuine popular mobilization. It was too hierarchical, too masculine, too bourgeois, too instrumental, too insurrectionary, too vanguardist, too spectacular. In the camps, the argument went, the revolution saw nothing but the abject ground for the foot soldiers it needed to hide its own inadequacies. And so it failed to transform the camps into self-organized, popular forms of life that might sustain a revolution beyond an insurrectionary guerrilla war.

These are no doubt debatable criticisms, but what remains unsaid is how different revolutionary effects might have emerged had the camps been approached not only as the means to something else, but as ends in their own right. That is, and this is exactly what the novels register, can the camps be both the means of their own overcoming and also lived places in their own right? Not just the sites of vertically organized insurrection, but popular, inhabited worlds of living and doing politics otherwise? The enduring value of this literature is that it gestures, however obliquely, to ways of living and producing space differently, in which the camp would not be only the means to another end (elsewhere) but also the demonstration of its own idea of life and of that life’s inseparable politics.

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\textbf{ENDNOTES}

1 Elias Khoury, \textit{Bab al-shams} (Beirut: DAR al-Adab, 1998), p. 20. I have stuck with the term “fugitive” for \textit{farrun} that Humphrey Davies used in his 2006 translation, \textit{Gate of the Sun} (New York: Picador), because it captures the tension I’m interested in here: fugitives move and move with consequence, refugees are beached, encamped, and immobile, fugitives violate the law, refugees are external to it—two distinct relations to time and politics. All translations from the novels and political journals are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

2 A little earlier in the passage, Khoury also uses the colloquial form \textit{farari}; both terms \textit{farari} or \textit{farrun} might involve a sense of shame or cowardice, an escaping or fleeing of the scene, which might be better captured in translation as runaway, but it is explicit that refugeehood is here the shameful subject-position. In this sense, Khoury, through Yunis, might be revising conventional Arab and Palestinian perceptions of aspects of the Nakba; moving, even fleeing to escape danger, is not shameful, but rather, stopping movement and accepting encampment in exile, should be the actual source of shame.

3 Of course the name Khoury chose for his protagonist, Yunis—the Arabic and Qur’anic equivalent of the biblical Jonah or Yunan—is telling. Yunis lived inside the belly of the beast (whale) without being digested by it, entering and exiting unscathed.


6 Marx and Engels, \textit{The German Ideology}. 
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9 A tension that if not as old as the career of revolution itself, though certainly around since Marx's writing on the 1848 revolutions. Yet, one, it should be added, that seems to have been “resolved” in the anti-imperialist and postcolonial world in which, as Benedict Anderson pointed out in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1991), the national form became so dominant that all socialist revolutions were at once national.


11 The word intilāq connotes both the start—or beginning—of something and the physical launching of a body or object into space in a projective or eruptive motion. It also shares the same root verb, t-l-q (talaqa), as the word used for the firing of a bullet (atlaqa), certainly not coincidentally, since it points to the old connection between weapons and speed. That the article would also use the term “revolutionary bases” (gawā'īd al-thawra) synonymously with “launching bases” is telling, of course; revolution here is the very propulsive, kinetic force of insurrection.

12 An English translation was subsequently published by JPS, see Yasser Arafat, “A Discussion with Yasser Arafat,” JPS 11, no. 2 (1982): p. 6, emphasis added.

13 It should be noted that by “the camp,” I mean the generic and conceptual understanding of Palestinian refugee camps, which can often be removed from the thing/entity itself. That is, the camp as a singular political concept that appears in political thought or literature, over and above the sociological or actual diversity and multiplicity of camps in the plural.

14 Notwithstanding the very different notions of action at play here. For Arendt, action or vita activa is, of course, a deliberative activity, the free exchange of opinion between equals acting in unison that is politics. It is very far from, in fact the opposite of, the “militant action” I’m referring to here—violence for Arendt being the stuff of powerlessness and unpredictability, and entirely exterior to politics. This action is closer to a Fanonian immediacy of bodily force in struggle that rises above speech.

15 Foco (from the Spanish word for “focus”) guerrilla models of revolution are based on the principle of armed struggle led by a vanguard of small units that strike military targets and retreat to less controlled rural areas (the Cuban Revolution would become something of the historical example for this model). Arguably, the Palestinian armed factions followed this model in the early and mid-1960s, before switching to a strategy of popular mass mobilization—a switch that figures like Sarhan insist was premised on the transformation of the camps.


17 The various factions of the PLO had begun the large-scale mobilization of Jordan’s camps after the 1968 Battle of Karameh catapulted them into a strong, if hardly unassailable, position. The experiment in Jordan was put to a brutal end in 1971 when the Jordanian army pushed the guerrillas out of the country entirely in the events known as Black September. The movement effectively relocated to Lebanon where the 1969 Cairo Accords had put the PLO practically in charge of the country’s camps, a period of intense transformation and mobilization that was brought to yet another brutal end with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It is worth noting that the PLO’s mobilization of the camps built on the work started by pan-Arab nationalist groups, in particular the Arab Nationalist Movement, which had been agitating and mobilizing in Palestinian camps across the region as early as the 1950s.


25 I treat all three texts here as novels. It might be argued that *Umm Saad* and *Tuffah al-majanin* should be classified as novellas, given their length (though the former is almost always grouped as a novel in Kanafani’s complete works volumes). But I see little at stake in these distinctions here, and questions of genre, where relevant, come to the fore around the formal qualities of the texts as realist accounts of their historical conditions.
30 All the novelists considered here were PLO members, and belonged to one of the parties. Yakhlif was the secretary general of the PLO’s Union of Writers and Journalists in the 1980s, and would eventually become the Palestinian Authority’s minister of culture from 2003 to 2006. Abu Shawir was the deputy editor of *Al-katib al-filastini* (The Palestinian writer), a journal published by the Union of Writers and Journalists. Both were members of Fatah (The National Movement for the Liberation of Palestine), the largest party in the PLO. Kanafani, a somewhat different kettle of fish, belonged to the Marxist-Leninist PFLP and was editor of its weekly, *al-Hadaf*, from 1969 until his untimely death in 1972. Yakhlif and Abu Shawir were considered bureaucrats and party men through and through, and their literature was criticized on those grounds. On Kanafani, admittedly in a league of his own, the consensus is that he was able to write outside the bureaucratic controls and imperatives of party politics—a propagandist without ever doing propaganda, as some had it.
31 There are better written novels, probably even by these novelists themselves—*Umm Saad*, some insist, is Kanafani at his least compelling.
33 Neither Kanafani nor Yakhlif provide any place names or actual geographies in the texts, underlining the genericity and singularity of Palestinian experiences of camp life and displacement.
34 It needs noting that there are some substantive stylistic differences between these novels. Kanafani, in contrast to others, is writing at this stage in a much sparser, almost ascetic, prose that eschews any kind of flourish, repetitiveness, or verbosity in dialogue. Yakhlif, writing at a slightly later juncture, and tellingly with a style that moves toward a kind of magical realism, begins to register the fading gloss of revolution. Yakhlif’s novel is not yet defeatist by any means, but something is already jaded, disenchanted, even a little cynical. Scenes are muted, food is slowly eaten in silence, and the militant uncle’s return—broken, disheveled, forced into menial labor paving roads that literally stains and tars him—brings no clear line of flight, even if it does confirm the need to keep fighting. In one scene, written with an irreverent humor almost entirely absent from the other novels, children run down a street heartily repeating revolutionary slogans. “Down with colonialism!” they all shout, before one turns to ask his friend, “And, what is colonialism?” (p. 25).
36 Kanafani, *Umm Saad*, p. 255.
37 Kanafani, *Umm Saad*, p. 255.
38 Kanafani, *Umm Saad*, p. 256.
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39 Kanafani, *Umm Saad*, p. 270.
40 Kanafani, *Umm Saad*, p. 271.
41 Kanafani, *Umm Saad*, p. 272.
42 Kanafani, *Umm Saad*, p. 272.
44 These terms are of course borrowed from Lukács’ defense of classical realism. For his 1938 critique of expressionism and response to Bloch, see Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Theodore W. Adorno et al. (New York: Verso, 2002). For a more elaborate account of his views on the stakes of realism, including his instructive comparison of horse race scenes from Zola and Tolstoy, see Lukács’ essay “Narrate or Describe?” in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* (New York: Merlin Press, 1970).
45 Tahsil Dar means “the lever”; the character is so named since, despite his current destitution, he was a former tax collector for Ottoman authorities in Palestine.
46 “Point Four projects” was shorthand for the various projects of technical assistance undertaken by the U.S. government in “developing countries” after Harry S. Truman’s 1949 Point Four speech (a speech taken by some to mark the birth of twentieth-century paradigms of “development”). See David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). For Palestinian refugees/exiles (and the sense which Yakhlif is pointing to) “Point Four projects” were synonymous with resettlement schemes disguised as development.
49 Yakhlif, *Tuffah al-majanin*, p. 89.
52 Yakhlif, *Tuffah al-majanin*, p. 98.
54 Mahmoud Darwish, “’Urs al-dam al-filastini” [The palestinian blood wedding] *Shu’un filastiniyya* no. 12 (1972): 6. It is also worth noting that Kanafani was well versed in the debates around the political and aesthetic stakes of realism and its emphasis on consciousness, and had himself written a positive review of Lukács’ literary theory.
56 Though, if we follow Jameson, this fragmentary textuality and persistent melancholia might be as much a mark of their “realism” as anything else. For Jameson, realism is not a description exactly, nor strictly a genre, but a set of antinomies—to both show and tell, describe and narrate, to have both a sense of irrevocable destiny and an eternal present of consciousness; in other words, “a compromise, an uncertain attempt to do two things at once” (Ben Parker, “The Moments of Realism,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 28 July 2015). The play of oppositions, Jameson tells us, is at work within realism itself (and not externally with some other kind of discourse, say modernism); what we call realism is nothing but a consequence of the tension between two terms. Realism, then, was dissolving the minute it began emerging. What I’m calling the Palestinian revolutionary novel was a literary form that, with influences from socialist realism, reproduced some of the tensions and stakes of the realist novel after its time, but in ways that had much more to do with its own political predicaments than anything internal to the form or genre itself. Whether we can call them a type of social realism (a realism after realism) is a moot point. And though there were marked similarities between the
literary debates that raged in the Arab world in the 1950s and ‘60s, and those that animated Left literary debates in 1930s Europe (see Bashir Abu-Manneh, “Palestinian Trajectories: Novel and Politics since 1948,” Modern Language Quarterly 75, no. 4 (2014): pp. 511–39, the fact remains that any direct mapping of these novels back onto the terms of European literary history, let alone the fierce debates of German Marxist literary theory, makes little sense.

Ahmad Dahbur, “Al-‘ushaq: Rashad Abu Shawir,” Shu‘un filastiniyya, no. 72 (November 1977): p. 239. To his credit, Dahbur is also highly critical of elements of sexism and crude masculinity in certain passages in Abu Shawir’s text (for example, when describing the hasty and cowardly retreat of the much hated Jordanian police from the camp in the 1967 war, Abu Shawir’s protagonist notes that they remembered that “government is a feminine word”—in Arabic the noun hukuma takes feminine form). Somewhat disappointingly, however, Dahbur himself ends up putting this down to “Eastern residues” in Abu Shawir’s work.


Parmenter, Giving Voice to Stones, p. 56.

Parmenter, Giving Voice to Stones, p. 58.

Parmenter, Giving Voice to Stones, p. 63.

Parmenter, Giving Voice to Stones, p. 63.

Parmenter, Giving Voice to Stones, p. 65.

Parmenter, Giving Voice to Stones, p. 65. In Umm Saad, for example, city life outside the camp is always more fraught and crushing. The inside/outside binary of city and camp is almost inverted—it is the camp that appears as community, and the city as space of alienation. In one scene Umm Saad looks out at “the clamorous, crowded, heaping city in the distance . . . through the dust of a sad evening” (Kanafani, Umm Saad, p. 219).


It is noteworthy that in Arabic the word ‘amal refers to both work and action.

Abu Shawir, al-‘Ushaq, p. 56.

Kanafani, Umm Saad, p. 278.

Kanafani, Umm Saad, p. 335.

Yakhlf, Tuffah al-majainin, p. 27, emphasis added.

I have translated la'tala as “perchance” to emphasize (without fully conveying) the sense of wishful sentiment the word has (which rubbama does not). This semantic difference notwithstanding, both words function to introduce uncertainty and hesitancy into the narrative.

Yakhlf, Tuffah al-majainin, p. 45.

Yakhlf, Tuffah al-majainin, p. 45.

Yakhlf, Tuffah al-majainin, p. 99, emphasis added.


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80 Levine, *Forms*, p. 3.

81 In his somewhat tautological reading of aesthetics and politics, Rancière proposes the now well-trodden notion of a “distribution of sensibility” (*partage du sensible*) to propose an understanding of aesthetics as, “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.” See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2014), p. 13. Both key terms are doubled—*partage* as sharing and partition, and *sense* as that which is sensory and that which is made to make sense.