Development Through Dispossession: Ghassān Kanafānī's *Returning to Haifa*, the World-System, and Palestinian Belonging

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Why would the Palestinians be 'valid negotiators' since they do not have a country? Why would they have a country, since theirs has been taken? They have never been given any other choice than to surrender unconditionally. They have been offered only death.
(Gilles Deleuze 1998 [1978]: 23)

Introduction

Born in 1936, in the midst of the Arab Revolt, Ghassān Kanafānī is now remembered throughout Palestine and the rest of the world for his courageous journalism and poignant fiction. His contributions to fiction and non-fiction have reached global audiences, having been translated into seventeen languages and published in more than twenty countries (*New Arab* 2019). To this day, Palestinians by and large regard Kanafānī as a national treasure and an enduring voice of their struggle for survival; and he holds this position alongside Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said. Assassinated by the Mossad in 1972 at the age of thirty-six, Kanafānī lived his entire life under the punishing structure of occupation, war, and dispossession. His life spanned from the time of the British Mandate up through the firm consolidation of Israel's apartheid regime.[1] During his time at university, he took up his vocation as a writer and began documenting the memory of Palestinian displacement. Writing in a letter to a friend at the age of twenty-three, he described much of his life as that of "a man who was on his way somewhere in search of suitable work when he died suddenly — on the road" (qtd. in Riley 2000: 1). In reacting to this letter, Karen Riley writes that "the circumstances of [Kanafānī's] life were inextricably enmeshed with the Palestinian cause. His 'work' is survival, both his own and that of his people, the Palestinians." (2000: 1). Kanafānī's commitment to survival also extends to the survival of Palestine, a place that has been at the receiving end of settler-colonial rule, dispossession, and occupation from before the time of his birth until now.

[1] B'Tselem 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021; Amnesty International 2022; ICJ 2024.

While historians most often recognize the 1947-48 *nakba* ("the catastrophe") as the formative period in shaping the Palestinian tragedy, the 1967 *naksa* ("the betrayal") arguably opened the way for resistance movements and the mass, effervescent struggle for liberation.[2] Although most in the Global North think of the latter event as the "Six-Day War" or, simply, the "Arab-Israeli War," Palestinians and Arabs remember the *naksa* as a major setback, thwarting short-lived hopes for liberation and permanently entrenching Israel's system of occupation and military rule. At the same time, the interim period between 1948 and 1967 — whereby the West Bank and Gaza were integrated into Jordan and Egypt (respectively) and turned into permanent refugee camps — gave rise to organized Palestinian resistance movements, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (the PLO), Fatah, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). This context also ushered in what Kanafānī himself theorized as Palestinian resistance *literature* (Abu-Manneh 2016: 74-5). During these years, he witnessed the larger material system that sustained Israel's occupation and perpetuated the displacement of his community: the world-system of colonial modernity. Following Mahmoud Mamdani and others, I regard colonial modernity as the worldwide formation of racial capitalism achieved through transhistorical patterns of underdevelopment, ethnic cleansing, and dispossession, prevailing from 1492 until now (Mamdani 2020: 1-4; Chakrabarty 2000: 218).[3] In the present epoch, this system is subsumed under the "logic" of global capitalism "that [holds] the world together" (Palumbo-Liu, Robbins, and Tanoukhi 2011: 2) causing "unequal exchange across the international division of labor" (ibid.: 6). This dynamic is one where "surplus-value could flow from the weaker nations (the periphery) to the core" (Wallerstein 2004: 12). The world-system produces the "dialectic of development and underdevelopment" (Jelly-Shapiro 2023: 23) that sustains the global dynamics of class rule, dispossession, and accumulation.

Throughout his university years, Kanafānī achieved his political consciousness through his exposure to anticolonial movements and socialist politics (Riley 2000: 8). Responding to a question about his own "political development" in a 1972 interview, Kanafānī noted that "there is no incident in the world that is not represented in the Palestinian tragedy. When I portray the misery of the Palestinians, I am in fact seeing the Palestinians as a symbol of misery all over the world. And you can say that Palestine

[2] The *nakba* (1947-48) refers to the initial stage of ethnic cleansing and dispossession that led to the formation of the Israeli State. The *naksa* (1967) refers to the war between Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Israel that led to Israel eventually occupying the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, and annexing the Golan Heights.

[3] Mahmoud Mamdani writes that ethnic cleansing "unites" the troubling violence of colonial modernity, especially in "the United States, which perpetrated both genocide and population transfers against American Indians; Germany, which perpetrated genocide against Jews and was in turn victimized by Allied population transfers following the Second World War; South Africa, where white settlers forced blacks into tribal homelands known as Bantustans; Sudan, where British segregated Arabs and Africans into separate homelands; and Palestine, where Zionist settlers forcibly exiled and concentrated non-Jews, an ongoing process" (2020: 4).

represents the whole world in my stories." (Kanafānī 2022 [1972]: n.pag.). This formative context, as he says in other parts of the interview, also produced his exposure to and eventual embrace of Marxism-Leninism. His analysis of "the Palestinian tragedy" here eventually came to inform his fiction, including *Returning to Haifa* (1969), wherein he uses storytelling as a means to reflect the world-system of power projection, capital accumulation, and economic expansion. In the pages that follow, I will underscore the global dynamics of "combined and uneven development" (Trotsky 2008 [1932]: 5; WReC 2015: 6) — a concept whose roots lie in the same Marxist-Leninist tradition that radicalized Kanafānī — to form the theoretical framework of this article. Based on this tradition, I will analyze *Returning to Haifa* alongside "literature of the modern capitalist world-system" (WReC 2015: 15), in the vein of the Warwick Research Collective. In other words, and in the spirit of Kanafānī's insistence that "there is no incident in the world that is not represented in the Palestinian tragedy" (2022 [1972]: n.pag.), I recognize his novella, *Returning to Haifa*, as a text of world literature. In this article, I will therefore argue that the narrative indexes the dynamics of the world-system, showing the causal link between global capitalist "law[s] of motion" (Marx 1990 [1867]: 92) and the local experience of displacement in Palestine; and that, through its reflections on place, home, and belonging, the text articulates and makes visible two meanings of dispossession (figurative and literal), both of which stem from the cruelty of occupation and settler-colonialism. To bring this into focus, I will first offer background on the novel itself.

Background and Summary

Taking place immediately after the 1967 war, but with continuous, interrupting recollections of the 1948 war, *Returning to Haifa* tells the story of Sa'id and Safiyah, whose expulsion to Acre, move to Ramallah, and eventual visit ("return") to Haifa twenty years later all reveal multiple intersections of dispossession, capitalist development, psychic trauma, and national fracture. When the Israeli government has temporarily reopened the passage from Ramallah to Haifa, the couple decides to visit their former house. Sa'id discloses to his wife what led him to suggest their return:

> In Jerusalem and Nablus and here the people talk every day about their visits to Jaffa, Acre, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Safad, towns in Galilee and in Muthallath. They all tell the same story. It seems that what they saw with their own eyes didn't measure up to their speculations. Most of them bring back stories of failure. Apparently, the miracle the Jews talked about was nothing but an illusion. There's a strong negative reaction in this country, exactly the opposite of what they wanted when they opened their border to us. That's why Safiyah, I expect them to rescind the order soon. So I said to myself, 'why don't we take advantage of the opportunity and go?' (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 159-60)

These stories of failure and, at the same time, Zionism's promises of "modernization" (Pappé 2022: 39) and development are all expressions of the settler-colonial regime to which the couple are subject.[4] They come back to Haifa, which, as we learn, has been overlaid with a new topography, effectively erasing any traces of its past in Palestine. In the period since the *nakba*, Sa'id and Safiyah have had to contend with two types of dispossession. The first type of dispossession is their systematic expulsion from Haifa, losing claim to their home — that is, their house as well as the circumscribed place within their country, society, and land — through Zionist settler-colonial conquest, in the manner that Khalidi (2020) characterizes it. The second type of dispossession is more figurative: They have to reconcile the assault on their sense of belonging, detached from the signifiers that connect them to home, history, family, and identity.

This cruel regime of militarized displacement and permanent dispossession shows itself notably in the tragic story of their son, Khaldun. During a dramatic and chaotic scene (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 152-56) taking place during the *nakba*, Sa'id and Safiyah leave Khaldun behind in their abandoned home in Haifa, in a stroke of desperation. Twenty years later he is completely detached from both his birth parents and his own history. He not only lives with adoptive parents, assumes a name of Hebrew origin ("Dov," meaning "bear"), and dwells in a new home, language, identity, and sense of belonging; he is also staunchly devoted to the Zionist narrative that perpetuates colonial attitudes against Palestinians and extends Israel's military rule. When he meets his parents at the end of the text, he is dressed in his military uniform and refers to his parents as being "on the other side" (ibid.: 180), re-establishing his identification with Zionism and the animosity toward Palestinians. Although Khaldun sees his parents as betrayers (and vice versa), Sa'id nevertheless tries to reconcile with Khaldun — an offer Khaldun unequivocally refuses. As Sa'id and Safiyah leave Haifa again, they resign themselves to being permanently dislodged from their first-born son and from the Haifa they once knew. As the novella comes to its end, Sa'id's final remarks to Safiyah articulate a politics of home that challenges the traditional structures of nation, filiation, and citizenship, leaving him, like many Palestinians, in a position to re-negotiate the *meaning* of home.

[4] Political Zionism is an explicitly colonial project and a modern social formation committed to state-building and indigenous, Arab displacement in Palestine (Wolfe 2006: 388-89; Mamdani 2020: 250-51; Svirsky 2023: 44-45; Greenstein 2022: 4-6; Finkelstein 2003: 12-13; Kayyali 1977: 102-4; Halbrook 1972: 88-90). Ilan Pappé writes about how Zionism extended the European colonial project: "Like Zionists who were to follow them, most Europeans settling in Palestine in the nineteenth century were more concerned about the land than about the people, and modernizing and cultivating the land could also have meant getting rid of its 'primitive' native population" (2022: 39). Jeff Halper explains Zionism's reliance on a familiar and "quintessential colonial trope" (2021: 32): "Racialized rationales justify the taking of the land. The need to 'tame the frontier' and 'make the desert bloom' is set against the barrenness caused by native 'neglect'." (ibid.: 45).

Throughout this novella, the affective and psychic relationship to belonging connects to the material circumstances of dispossession and colonization, much in the way that Frantz Fanon theorized.[5] More recent critics of *Returning to Haifa* have written about the relationship to memory and trauma (Mohammad and Meryan 2020; Macaluso 2022), charting out this connection to colonial disempowerment. At the same time, the narrative, focalized in limited third-person point of view through Sa'id, makes pointed references to political forces of property, bordering, and development, raising the "all-important issue of the meaning of homeland" (Abdel-Malek 2005: 66). To effectively analyze the implications of these references and their connection to the broader Palestinian history, I will analyze the disjunctions of power and place that emerge within an apartheid regime, but also (using Immanuel Wallerstein and others) show how *Returning to Haifa* functions as a narrative expression of a world-system.

Palestine in the World-System

By now, many historians and political scientists concede the settler-colonial dynamics of Palestine (Bhandar 2018: 120; Khalidi 2020: 9-10; Pappé 2022: 32-3; Masalha 2024: 307; Englert 2022: 136-7; Wolfe 2006: 388-9), whereby the indigenous Arab population were (and still are) subject to ongoing displacement by the militarized forces of imperialism and Zionist occupation. Patrick Wolfe, in his 2006 field-defining text on settler-colonialism, writes that settler-colonial regimes — Australia, North America, South Africa, and Israel/Palestine — connect with one another through the "logic of elimination" (388).[6] Settler-colonialism "strives for the dissolution of native societies," and "erects a colonial society on the expropriated land base" (ibid.), making it "a structure" rather than "an event" (ibid.). This structure can take many discursive and ideological forms, leading settler-colonial regimes to differ in their outward expressions of power, language, and toponymy (ibid.: 389; Masalha 2024: 321). Nevertheless, the "summary liquidation of Indigenous people" (Wolfe 2006: 388), or ethnic cleansing, creates a structure that is both a "complex social formation" and a "continuity through time" (ibid.: 390). The ethnic cleansing of Palestinians that continues to this day has roots in the Long Nineteenth Century; and its distinct character involves the "effacement [and] replacement" (ibid.: 388) of Arab Palestinian memory, language, and land. Similarly, observers for nearly a half-century have referred to Israel-Palestine as an apartheid regime (Davis 1987: 48; Hirst 2003: 369; Erakat 2019: 14; Falk 2017: 155; Dugard 2019; Greilsammer 2019: 300n32), a label that international human rights organizations and independent analysis have corroborated in recent years (B'Tselem 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021; Amnesty International 2022; ICJ 2024). Yet, with

[5] "Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?'" (Fanon 1963: 250).

[6] This shared historical structure has also been the basis of solidarity for various indigenous struggles (Elia 2023: 16-41; Salaita 2016).

some exceptions (Collins 2011: 2; Malm 2021: 252), few have drawn the connection between these regimes of dispossession in Palestine and the racialized, transhistorical, and geographically expanding mechanics of capital accumulation. Understanding these mechanisms of development and how the world-system operates will also offer us clarity about the specific forces that *Returning to Haifa* depicts.

Taking cues from (among others) Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and Francis Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein famously introduces world-systems analysis in an attempt to challenge the nation-state as a main unit of reference. His analysis instead aims to recognize that the "endless accumulation of capital" can only exist within a framework "of a world economy" and that this system is made possible through a "multiplicity of states" across a core-periphery continuum (2004: 24). Karl Marx, in volume one of *Capital*, first theorized the concentration of capital and, with it, the mechanisms of "primitive accumulation" (1990 [1867]: 873). The circuit of surplus-extraction necessarily requires new sources of accumulation and, thus, the violent expropriation of territory. As a consequence, capital's "power of expansion" enables it to "augment the elements of its accumulation beyond the limits apparently fixed by its own magnitude [i.e. productive capacities]" (ibid.: 752). Therefore, capital generates an "increasing mass of wealth" by extending "the basis of production on a large scale" (ibid.: 776). In other words, the circulation of capital depends upon the expansion of investment into new markets, extending the process of accumulation spatially and geographically, and extracting surplus from a larger, differentiated supply of land and labor. Luxemburg, in modifying Marx's thesis, adds the necessity of "militarism" in the process of accumulation. Militarism accompanies "every historical phase of accumulation" as a means of conquering new markets and destroying the "social organization" of indigenous communities (Luxemburg 2003 [1951]: 434). This system, therefore, created the conditions for colonial conquest, enabling the capitalist entry into new labor and resource markets. In other words, the logic of the world-system has always directly governed the mechanisms of colonization and imperial expansion, even leveraging the same political and ideological tools throughout history.[7]

The history of Zionist settlement and occupation of Palestine has a unique position in relation to the world-system. Although the colonization of Palestine occurs in the twentieth century — arising while different European countries began to carve up former Ottoman territories after the First World War (Erakat 2019: 34-35) and preceded by a gradual settlement in the nineteenth century on the basis of Jewish national identity — we can trace the ideological roots of Zionism to precisely the moment in which, according to Wallerstein, the modern world-system develops (2004: 42). Zionism derives its ideological content from the exact context in which the concept

[7] I will elaborate on this point below, with reference to racialization and (under)development.

of sovereignty itself was bound up with Enlightenment thought and colonial exploration (Wallerstein 2004: 51; Kayyali 1977: 99; Mamdani 2020: 250-1). In fact, proto-Zionist thinkers articulated the explicit colonization of Palestine as early as Napoleon's Palestine campaign of 1799 (Pappé 2022: 5) and continued to enthusiastically utilize the language of European domination and nation-building (Halbrook 1972: 89). As a result, the ideology that emerges from the world-system produces the forces of displacement and dispossession to which Sa'id and Safiyah are subject and finds severe expression within the Zionist settler-colonial project.

The internal, economic dynamics of Palestine should not be collapsed into a flat ontology in the way that bourgeois social science often characterizes the triumphs of globalization. The concept of the world-system and, indeed, world literature (controversially) presume a "singular modernity" (Jameson 2002: 12), as opposed to the "alternative modernities" (ibid.) upon which much of postcolonial theory relies. This understanding of history takes as given the fact that capitalism has totalized and universalized, but that its ongoing dispossession and accumulation have created disparities in power and development throughout much of the globe. As the Warwick Research Collective reminds us, "far from implying that modernity therefore assumes the same form everywhere, […] [m]odernity might be understood as the way in which capitalist social relations are 'lived' — different in every given instance for the simple reason that *no two social instances are the same*" (WReC 2015: 12; my emphasis). This manner of framing world literature in connection with capitalism and modernity has roots going back to Marx and Friedrich Engels (1972 [1848]: 477).[8] In more recent years, this theorization gained traction with Franco Moretti's pivotal 2000 text, "Conjectures on World Literature," wherein he develops world literature as a category that maps onto the structure of the world-system (55-56).[9] The Warwick Research Collective and others follow thereafter, conceptualizing world literature as a "term that signifies at once a cultural form and a hermeneutic orientation" (Jelly-Shapiro 2023: 2). Literary and critical texts within this framework "represent global forces and histories — capital and empire, most especially" and, simultaneously, "render the local experience or manifestation of those same forces and histories" (ibid.: 212). World Literature, therefore, "is fundamentally concerned with those forms and strategies of representation that crystallize the planetary generality and essential unevenness of the

[8] From *The Communist Manifesto*: "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature." (Marx and Engels 1972 [1848]: 477).

[9] "I will borrow this initial hypothesis from the world-system school of economic history, for which international capitalism is a system that is simultaneously one, and unequal: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality. One, and unequal: one literature (Weltliteratur, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or perhaps, better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it's profoundly unequal." (Moretti 2000: 55-6).

capitalist world-system brought into being by colonial histories" (ibid.: 208). As I will show below, the social relations that *Returning to Haifa* depicts are variously connected to colonial modernity and the world-system, but unique in how Sa'id and Safiyah live and process them. The capitalist world-system "does not smooth away but rather produces unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course" (WReC 2015: 12). The uneven structure of the world-system converging in Israel-Palestine is such that Palestinians are forced into permanent dependence upon surrounding labor markets (Taha 2024: 94; Englert and Bhattacharyya 2024: 169), while being simultaneously subject to a regime of "de-development" (Roy 1995: 117), on the one hand (especially after 1967), and "extractive inequality" (Hage 2023: 257), on the other. In more recent decades, surveillance companies, weapons developers, finance speculators, and corporations around the world have long profited from the apartheid system in the West Bank and Gaza (Barghouti 2020: 196; Ali 2024: 57-61; Powers 2024: 108-25), assuring profit-maximization at the expense of Palestinian autonomy. As Samir Amin argues, the systematic underdevelopment of the Global South and concentration of capital during the post-war era have resulted in multiple monopolies, creating the "framework within which the law of globalized value operates" (2014: 5). These combined forces have intensified the dependence and peripheralization of Palestine. The occupation, dispossession, and ethnic cleansing of Palestine therefore serve the continued expansion of the capitalist world-system.

If we recognize that these forces of development and dispossession have shaped the entire world-system and continue to find expression in the beleaguered experience of Palestine, we see that Kanafānī's insistence that "Palestine represents the whole world" (2022 [1972]: n.pag.) is no mere rhetorical flourish. Rather, it is an expression of the world-system converging in Palestine. As John Collins argues, "Palestine has been and continues to be an often prophetic index of and shaper of [globalizing] processes, a kind of monadic unit that contains important clues to a series of much broader realities" (2011: 2). In other words, Palestine's history, from the time of the *nakba* onward, reflects the same patterns of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2003: 145) that constitute the entire scope and scale of the world-economy.

Having just outlined the mechanisms and history of the world-system and considered their relationship to Palestine's history, I will now develop my engagement with *Returning to Haifa*. Much of the proceeding analysis will rely on the concepts and theories outlined in this section, drawing especially on the relationship to development and dispossession. By doing so, this conceptual framework will bolster my Marxist intervention into the extant scholarship on *Returning to Haifa*: that, by reflecting these forces of dispossession that constitute the scope and scale of the world-system, the novella exemplifies a form of world literature. In other words, because it represents the history-spanning forces of "political modernity in a colonial context" (Mamdani 2020:

250), the text produces a counter-episteme that can reveal the continuous processes of exploitation, dispossession, and class rule that are often hidden from view.

Returning to Haifa: Imperial Dispossession and Development

The text opens with Sa'id and Safiyah arriving at the outskirts of Haifa. Both of them grow increasingly tense as they enter into the city that they were driven out of twenty years prior. From here, the narrative anticipates the formal set-up for the rest of the text, with constant recollections that emerge to interrupt the story: "[H]e felt grief well up inside of him. For one moment he was tempted to turn back, and without even looking at her he knew that his wife had begun to cry silently. Then came the sound of the sea, exactly the way it used to be." (Kanafānī [1969] 2000: 149). From this moment forward, we recognize a couple increasingly having to contend with the trauma of the *nakba* and the way their memories of it cloud their return to Haifa. The burden of their memories leaves them having to take inventory of the myriad changes to themselves as well as to their country. Samar Attar shows how the city of Haifa "has specific geographical features: the mountain, the steep stairways that go down to the sea, the endless orchards, and the narrow alleys. These features remained the same as [Sa'id] had known them in the past. But the memory brings now new information about names, people, and events." (2007: 39). Street names, buildings, and natural landscape have all changed drastically over the intervening years, and Sa'id and Safiyah are desperately clinging to a past that has been stolen and overwritten.

The physical landscape of Haifa dramatizes the extent of the settler-colonial project and the depth of their dispossession. Unable to contain his anger and contempt toward the Israeli occupation, Sa'id tries to steel his nerves and convey his reaction to the Haifa being shown to them:

> [H]e took control of his nerves and continued to speak to her directly.
> "They opened the border as soon as they completed the occupation, suddenly and immediately…You know the terrible thing that happened in April 1948, so now, why this? Just for our sakes alone? No! This is part of the war. They're saying to us, 'Help yourselves, look and see how much better we are than you, *how much more developed.* You should accept being our servants. You should admire us.' But you've seen it yourself. Nothing's changed. It was in our power to have done much better than they did." (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 151; my emphasis)

Sa'id is articulating a major feature of colonial subjectivity: the condescension by which they are regarded by their colonial overseers and the assumption that they would willingly acquiesce to their status as subjugated people. As Barbara Harlow writes, the "1967 War dramatically altered the historical and political disposition of the Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. They were transformed from exiles into dispossessed subjects of an occupying state and its military administration."

(1986: 6). To sustain this disposition, Israel and the occupying force imposed the full display of their institutional power upon Palestinians, projecting the fortitude of their strength and taunting the indigenous Arabs with their own dispossession.

The language of the above-cited passage is worth considering here. The phrase "how much more developed [we are]" (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 151) is a crucial and deliberate translating choice; and it expresses in many ways the laws undergirding the world-system. The term "developed" has a double meaning in relation to colonial power and domination, one with more of an economic valence, and the other that connects with colonial ideology. In its economic connotations, development refers to the (age-old) caretaking claims of colonial power, in which their pursuit of conquest is branded with the promise of modernization, industrialized labor, and a boost in productive capacities that are necessary for state-formation. Ania Loomba demonstrates the manner by which colonial power regarded indigenous land as 'waste,' and thus considered themselves to be providing a magnanimous service to the local populations by proletarianizing their people and extracting resources (1998: 126). The actual fact, however, in relation to the world-system of combined and uneven development, is that (settler-)colonialism systematically *underdevelops* indigenous territory, leaving the dispossessed in a continuous state of dependence (ibid.: 130).[10] The "we," therefore, in the phrase "how much better we are than you, how much more developed" (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 151) contains the corollary assumption that Palestinian territory had been under-utilized; but it also projects Israel's economic durability within the capitalist world-system. In order for imperial power to achieve this form of economic development, they have to also instill a racist *ideology* of underdevelopment, emphasizing their own advances in industry and production. Built into this ideology, in other words, is an assumption about indigenous Arab peoples' lack of technical acumen and ingenuity.[11] In both cases, imperial power arrives with the assumption that indigenous territories are underdeveloped and malformed, thereby regarding them as suited for settlement and accumulation. So, by demonstrating "how developed [they] are," the Israeli occupation and settlement regime relies upon the discourse and ideology of modernization to exacerbate dispossession.

As I outlined in the previous section, the expansion and consolidation of the world-system requires seeking out new territories for expropriation. Many of the same ideological tools perfected in the era of European conquest remain the same. That is, imperial power relies upon a racialized system that interpellates subjugated people (in

[10] As Sara Roy documents, at least in Gaza, prior to 1967 "underdevelopment was a characteristic feature" of its economy (1995: 117); thereafter, its economy underwent an explicit policy of de-development (ibid.).

[11] Mahmoud Mamdani also writes about the manner by which "the Arab Jew becomes the object of modernity's civilizing mission": "Mizrahim have been de-Arabized through the suppression of the Arabic language and culture in Israel" (2020: 253). See also Svirsky 2023.

this case Arabs) as inferior, indolent, and backward. In either case, as Sa'id and Safiyah witness the institutionalization of settler-colonial power and occupation, they encounter a projection of the world-system and its attending laws of dispossession.[12] The Israeli occupation that consolidated itself at the end of the 1967 *naksa* developed through dispossession; it expresses the breadth of its force by displaying changes in language, landscape, infrastructure, and architecture. The underlying system that supports this development is the attending dispossession and ethnic cleansing that Israeli forces carried out for the two preceding decades. By opening the border to Haifa and showing Sa'id and Safiyah what has become of their former home — where, for example, Arabic geographical names were replaced with Hebrew names, a bridge control tower is replaced with an Israeli military monument (Riley, translator's note in Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 189n4), and "the smell of war was still strong enough to make the city seem […] dark and excited and agitated" (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 151) — the occupiers mock Palestinians with the fullest expression of imperial dispossession and territorial unbelonging.

Once Sa'id and Safiyah arrive at their old house, we are again exposed to a well-documented mechanism of dispossession carried out by Israel's occupation. After 1948, the Israeli State went through multiple stages of establishing sovereignty. The stage that directly affected Sa'id and Safiyah was the establishment of The Absentees' Property Law of 1950, defining 'absentee' so loosely as to include anyone who, during the initial ethnic cleansing of 1947-48, left their place of residence in Palestine, or who, in Israel, had temporarily resided in neighboring Arab territories. This definition, in other words, "includes almost all Palestinians, including Israeli citizens, who left their homes, as most did, even to go to a neighboring village" (Halper 2021: 73). Out of this convoluted system of law — one that just so happened to displace every property owner who was subject to Zionist ethnic cleansing precisely during this period — came the paradoxical category of "present absentees" (ibid.). Palestinians who lived through and after the *nakba* had to accept this humiliating and unsettling label, embodying the settler-colonial system of surplus population-management (Lloyd and Wolfe 2015: 110). Historically, access to homes and housing is therefore determined by one's ability to negotiate colonial conceptions of ownership and administration of land permits; for Palestinians, their relationship to property and land derives immediately from the centuries-old, imperial logic of the world-system.[13]

As they walk up to enter the house, Sa'id and Safiyah notice changes to its façade and entryway. Sa'id rushes himself and his wife quickly up to the door, lest the noticeable

[12] For extensive documentation of these "toponymic and remapping projects" (Masalha 2024: 319) as a feature of the Zionist settler-colonialism, see Masalha 2024: 307-86.

[13] Brenna Bhandar convincingly documents the historic role colonization played in shaping modern concepts of property and ownership. In Israel, courts refuse to recognize Ottoman-era title deeds in Palestine, reflecting the "blatantly ideological treatment of property law rules in the Israeli context" (2018: 111).

changes "jolt and throw them off balance" (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 161). He therefore runs past

> [T]he bell and the copper lock and the bullet holes in the wall and the electricity box and the fourth step broken in its center and the smooth carved balustrade which the palm slid over and the unyielding iron grillwork of the *masatib* and the first floor, where Mahjub es-Saadi lived, where the door was always ajar and the children always playing in front, filling the stairway with their shouts — past all of that and on to the recently painted wooden door, firmly closed. (ibid.)

This sentence anticipates the psychic trauma that I will outline in the next section, with its apparent onrush of memories that take over Sa'id's mind. Firstly, though, I briefly take note of the sentence's continuous and unbreaking style. The absence of full stops conveys the deterritorializing structure of the world-system, demonstrating the "subject and form" (WReC 2015: 15) of the novella *qua* world literature. The flowing, run-on nature of this passage stages the accelerating process whereby capital accumulation "asserts its own powers of deterritorialization, its lines of flight, its smooth spaces" (Deleuze and Guattari 2014 [1987]: 492), subsuming borders and boundaries beneath nomadic laws of expansion (Hardt and Negri 2000: 326). In this case, the narrative voice reflects the breadth of colonial modernity, a dizzying and constantly moving process of capture and expansion, without a foreseeable border or conclusion. The language, in turn, instantiates what Fredric Jameson calls a "cognitive mapping" (1981: 90) of totality, in which the ever-expanding nature of colonial modernity is apprehended at the level of style. The process of territorial expropriation requires that external forces invade and infiltrate any border surrounding indigenous land. So, a sentence that conveys a comprehensive inventory of these items of their home, but with no stops or pauses, illustrates the continuous and unyielding deterritorialization enacted through dispossession.

The items Sa'id notices also reveal a distinct relationship to home and exile. A "bell" and a "copper lock" suggest items whose activation allows entry into someone's home. Yet, when placed alongside "a bullet hole," this extra feature demonstrates the hostility that they experience if they remain. These items convey the "present absence" with which the Israeli state has defined them as people. On the one hand, having installed the bell and copper lock before they were expelled, these items suggest the capacity for Sa'id and Safiyah, in their presence, to welcome guests (who ring the bell) and keep out intruders (with the copper lock). On the other hand, Sa'id and Safiyah were coercively expelled by the bullets. A similar juxtaposition emerges with a "door" that *was* "always ajar" but is now "firmly closed," indicating simultaneously a past of open possibility and a foreclosed future. Sa'id's and Safiyah's dispossession, therefore, gives all of these defining features of their house a new meaning, connecting them to the broader system of colonial modernity.

As they finally enter their house, they meet Miriam, a Jewish refugee from Poland who, with her husband Iphrat Koshen, escaped the terrors of Nazism in World War II and found refuge in Haifa. They entered "what from then on became their house, rented from the Bureau of Absentee Property in Haifa" (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 166). Once again, the intersecting forces of imperial power and displacement come to the foreground, where Miriam and Iphrat are not present absent, so much as *absent present*: They were similarly rendered stateless exiles, whose later position as Jewish arrivals granted them property under the auspices of the Jewish Agency (ibid.: 170). The story of Miriam and Iphrat alongside that of Sa'id and Safiyah creates important parallels, indicating the continuities between fascist terror and colonial violence that Aimé Césaire famously wrote about (2000 [1955]: 36), exemplifying what he calls the "boomerang effect of colonization" (ibid.: 41). In this moment, Kanafānī "links the tragic experiences of both the European Jews and the Palestinian Arabs, evoking our sympathy for both communities" (Abdel-Malek 2005: 67). This structure allows us to realize that a "consideration of the nuanced reality of the situation" and a "safeguarding of human dignity for all" can enable us to achieve a just resolution (Abu-Manneh 2016: 88). For displaced Palestinians, European fascism and imperialism never came to an end; in fact, they have taken on the scale of a world-system. The range of forces that maintained the ethnic cleansing of Jews in Europe and Palestinians in the Middle East has extended internationally, as a function of colonial modernity, transcending any one particular state entity (Mamdani 2020: 4). In the case of both families in the text, their status as refugees persists unabated and their right to return is postponed indefinitely.

In addition to new architectures and new geographies of imperial, class rule, *Returning to Haifa* also incorporates the psychic alienation that arises from dispossession and colonization. The next section will therefore go deeper into how dispossession shatters Sa'id's and Safiyah's sense of historicity but also forecloses their hopes for a return.

***Returning to Haifa*: Psychic Dispossession and Development**

During the drive from Ramallah to Haifa, Sa'id and Safiyah have to contend with the memories they try to repress, especially the guilt of abandoning Khaldun twenty years ago. Throughout their trip, they occupy their minds in reminiscences of the past, allowing themselves to call up memories from their time in Haifa:

> All along the way he talked and talked and talked. He spoke to his wife about everything — about the war and about the defeat, about the Mandelbaum Gate, demolished by bulldozers. And about the enemy, who reached the river, then the canal, then the edge of Damascus in a matter of hours… His wife spoke of many other matters. Throughout the journey neither of them stopped talking. Now, as they reached the entrance to Haifa, they both fell silent. At that moment they both realized that they had not spoken a word about the matter which had brought them there. (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 149-50)

That final sentence foreshadows and, indeed, articulates the effort they have taken to repress their memory and cope with the disconnection from Khaldun. As readers, we eventually receive a detailed recollection of the fateful moment in which Sa'id and Safiyah had no choice but to leave their son behind, knowing that returning home, while the paramilitary Haganah surrounded all parts of Haifa, would have put all three of them in danger. Nevertheless, the narrative dramatizes the need to repress this past and cope with their alienation. Despite their "return to Haifa," the text subverts their "rhetorical elegiac attempt to recuperate the past" (Harlow 1986: 17). That is, through the narrative's constant interrupting structure and the incessant return of repressed memories, the story in fact avoids and temporarily defers the return to the source of their pain. Although Safiyah is particularly given over to sometimes crying "audibly" (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 161), she more often does so "silently" (ibid.: 149; 152). She, like other characters in the book, retains experiences of her past that are "incommunicable until the resolution of the lingering psychological impediments" (Macaluso 2022: 35). Her silence, therefore, is either an effort to repress her tortured anguish or a symptom of it. Either way, it emerges as an *affective* means of avoidance, sublimating her confrontation with loss and disassociating from her present.[14]

The meeting with Khaldun at the end of the novella reveals several layers of affective and psychic dispossession. The items Sa'id notices in his former (now Miriam's) home are slowly absorbed into his psyche, and he describes the experience as akin to "someone recovering from a long period of unconsciousness" (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 162). Throughout the rest of the text, Sa'id cannot take his gaze off the peacock feathers in a wooden vase that stands in the center of the room. An item he left behind in 1948, Sa'id remembers it having seven feathers instead of the five remaining and being housed in a glass vase instead of a wooden one. Although the reason for the two missing feathers is obvious — "Dov[/Khaldun] played with them as a child and lost them" (ibid.: 165) — Sa'id cannot let go of what they seem to signify for his connection to home and his past. Pasquale Macaluso writes about the peacock feathers' significance in relation to Palestinian identity and Sa'id's capacity to orient himself:

> Peacock feathers signify knowledge and pride in many cultures and are an ornament still displayed in the 'nostalgia corners' of the houses of some Palestinian citizens of Israel … While nobody else notices them, Saʿīd looks at the feathers several times; in return, they offer him direction when he loses orientation, or punctuate his progress in awareness, or reinvigorate him and regulate his response to Dov. (Macaluso 2022: 43)

Another way to frame Macaluso's convincing analysis would be to say that, for Sa'id, it instills momentary *possession* over his own faculties and his sense of presence. That is,

[14] On the patriarchal dynamics and gender politics within the novella's point of view and narrative structure, see Kolers and Omer-Sherman 2024: 13-14.

to be *in possession* over his emotions denotes having executive control over the intensity of them and how they show themselves. For the moment, having an item upon which he can fix his stare, while Dov or Miriam are talking, enables Sa'id to return from the state of being dispossessed (from his sense of self) into one of having momentary stability and propriety. The peacock feathers are therefore the only means of possession when Sa'id and Safiyah are otherwise undergoing a loss of belonging, stability, and connectedness.

As the text comes to its end, Sa'id and Safiyah's emotional instabilities are contrasted with the self-possessed manner in which Dov/Khaldun carries himself. Dressed in military uniform and commanding the space through pacing and motion, he symbolizes the projection of power over Palestinian life and exile. Even further, his continuous anger and dismissiveness toward his birth-parents, while certainly understandable, indicates nevertheless a power he upholds in establishing his own belonging and place. Even after he learned three years prior that Miriam and Iphrat were not his biological parents, "it didn't change anything. No, nothing changed, that's certain. After all, in the final analysis, man is a cause." (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 181). This revelation, in other words, did not change whether he felt at home in Israel and with his adoptive parents. This final declaration from Dov/Khaldun has been the subject of some debate and controversy over the years (Siddiq 1984: 62; Mohammad and Meryan 2020: 73; Macaluso 2022: 48). In terms of its connection to dispossession and in the dialectical power-relation between Zionism and Palestinian oppression exemplified in the dialogue between Sa'id and Dov, this phrase indicates that being a "cause" means that man has the ability to set his own circumstances in motion — a cause, not an effect. Within a world-system of "unequal exchange" (Palumbo-Liu, Robbins, and Tanoukhi 2011: 6), such a statement aligns easily with someone who acts in the service of a military power and class rule, believing that he has control over the circumstances in which he is enmeshed. The statement is, therefore, a declaration of power; his position as someone who *does* belong and feels a sense of connection allows him to embody agency and dominion. Sa'id reveals that he recognizes the phrase, "man is a cause"; and the implication emerges that he may have heard it from his other son, Khalid, about whom we otherwise know little. At this moment, Sa'id comes to realize the demand for humanity that animates the *fedayeen* resistance movements in which Khalid is involved — something Sa'id had previously condemned (Kanafānī 2000 [1969]: 182). At this point, he concedes that, perhaps, man *could be* a cause but realizes that this claim to agency and power is better placed within global anti-imperial resistance against the world-system.

Throughout *Returning to Haifa*, both Sa'id and Safiyah are subject to affective and psychic forces of alienation. They are deprived of belonging in their own home and dis-connected from their son who, it seems, disconnected from them emotionally long before they arrived to re-establish a relationship. Accepting defeat, Sa'id finally asks

Safiyah a rhetorical question about the nature of homeland: "What is a homeland? Is it these two chairs that remained in this room for twenty years? The table? Peacock feathers? […] What is a homeland? Khaldun? Our illusions about him? Fathers? Their sons? What is a homeland?" […] I'm only asking." (ibid.: 184). This moment reflects a renewed politics of home, especially in light of the world-system's deterritorializing power. It leads us to recognize a desire that those among the dispossessed have to re-define and re-develop what it means to have a homeland when the traditional connections to and signifiers of identity and nation are taken away. Sa'id and Safiyah are forever among the dispossessed, in the sense of being expelled from their homes, and also of being deprived of their affective relations to belonging. Nevertheless, they can accept that their life is now its own cause, invented on terms that undermine the norms of state-power and nation-building, but also those which are built upon the normativity of family and parenthood.

Conclusion

The events depicted in *Returning to Haifa* are among several stages of dispossession that define the Palestinian tragedy, from the time of the British Mandate until the present day. The cyclical nature of settler-colonialism and ethnic cleansing became most visible for scholars and observers in the midst of the 2023-2025 genocide in Gaza (Albanese 2024a), given that both its intentions and actions advance the "logic of elimination" that carries through the structure of Zionist settler-colonialism (Albanese 2024b; Wolfe 2006: 388).[15] The roots of this moment are located in the continuous and ongoing dispossession of the Palestinian people and in the "century of war on Palestine" (Khalidi 2020: 237) that has punctuated its modern history. When Palestine's history is properly understood under the framework of settler-colonialism and a world-system of dispossession, we can recognize that all forms of imperial power connect, and they continue to converge in Palestine. The unique experiences through which this world-system of coloniality is lived — including its relentless destruction of autonomy, home, and indigenous memory — are made available to us through world literature.

In a 1978 article, titled "The Troublemakers" (which I quote as an epigraph), Deleuze writes prophetically about what would become a defining feature of Palestine's

[15] United Nations Special Rapporteur to the Occupied Territories of Palestine, Francesca Albanese, writes: "The violence that Israel has unleashed against the Palestinians post-7 October is not happening in a vacuum, but is part of a long-term intentional, systematic, State-organized forced displacement and replacement of the Palestinians." (2024b: n.pag.). Therefore, she adds, this genocide "is part of a century-long project of eliminatory settler-colonialism in Palestine, a stain on the international system and humanity, which must be ended, investigated and prosecuted" (ibid.). While many are keen to focus upon the orchestrated attacks of 7 October 2023 carried out by Hamas and Islamic Jihad as an escalation that justifies Israel's violence, this comports neither with history nor with international law. By maintaining an illegal occupation since 1967, Israel abnegates protection against insurgent violence and exacerbates the risk of violence against its own citizens. As such, its claims to self-defense remain unfounded and unlawful (Albanese 2024b).

history. Especially after the failures at Oslo (Said 2001: 25), they are a people who "have never been given any other choice than to surrender unconditionally. They have been offered only death" (Deleuze 1998 [1978]: 23). At the time he wrote this article, Deleuze was among the few in his generation to recognize something that has now become a banality: that Palestinians are subject to the same forces of displacement that indigenous people throughout the globe have been enduring for centuries (Deleuze and Sanbar 1998 [1982]: 26). Understanding the interrelation between imperialism, settler-colonialism, Zionism, and the world-system helps to illuminate the forces that shape the Palestinian struggle for liberation. Dispossession and ethnic cleansing are part of the world-system's laws of accumulation and expansion, further destabilizing the autonomy of indigenous people whose homes and homelands are destroyed through the perpetual violence of colonial modernity. Yet, unfortunately, without a proper appraisal of this history by the intellectual class of the Global North, the people of Gaza and Palestine experience a grievous martyrdom while the entire world watches.[16] They are begging for a home and to have their humanity recognized.

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[16] On the use of the term martyrdom in relation to Palestinian history, see Whitehead and Abufarha 2008; for its references within Palestinian literature, see Abu-Manneh 2016: 64-5.

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