Future Thinking:
The Utopian Function of the Creative Spirit

Bill Ashcroft*

Foreword by Hoda Elsadda**

Bill Ashcroft's keynote address "Future Thinking: The Utopian Function of the Creative Spirit," was delivered at the 11th International Symposium on Comparative Literature entitled: Creativity and Revolution, *organized by the Department of English at Cairo University in November 2012.*[1] *The title, creativity and revolution, spotlighted the historical moment, the aftermath of the wave of revolutions that swept the Arab world in 2011. It is no exaggeration to say that revolutionary fervor mixed with frustrations, disillusionment and apprehension dominated everyday discussions: revolution was in the air we breathed. The majority of participants in the symposium attempted to grapple with the earth-shaking events that overtook our lives by engaging with creative expressions about revolutions: literary narratives, poems, songs, slogans, chants, graffiti, media articles.*

Ashcroft's speech could not have been timelier and more relevant. It spoke to the pressing issue of the time, the meaning of hope and necessity of creative thinking and expressions in times of conflict and radical transformations. November 2012 was a turning point to many of us in the Arab world as dreams of freedom and social justice seemed to slip away and become visions of past desires. Ashcroft upholds the power of the imagination to envision better futures and better possibilities. He draws on Ernest Bloch's philosophy of hope, and the idea that utopianism is integral in all creative expressions, and that utopias are never experienced but are a driver of the not-yet-conscious that carries new possibilities in the future.

Ashcroft turns to Palestinian literature as a poignant expression of postcolonial utopianism that is emblematic of future thinking. He quotes Mahmoud Darwish's "another world is possible," highlights the power of Naji Al-Ali's Handala, who continues to be an icon of Palestinian resistance, and reflects on Larissa Sansour's photo project, Nation Estate, a virtual depiction of Palestine as a skyscraper where the entire Palestinian population will live due to the persistent Israeli appropriation of their land.

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[1] The keynote delivered in 2012 was as early exploration of the ideas and themes in Ashcroft's book, *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures*, published in 2017 by Routledge

Ashcroft's speech, topical and important in 2012, is even more so now in 2025. For almost two years, the world has witnessed a relentless genocidal war waged against the Palestinian population. We in the Arab world are shocked and enraged by the double standards of western media and politicians, by the weakness and complicity of Arab governments, by the failure of many colleagues in social movements and academia to speak up against the atrocities committed by the Israeli military. At the same time, our hearts are warmed by acts and expressions of solidarity from colleagues, friends and ordinary citizens from all over the world.

Hope and the promise of better futures are a much needed anti-dote to the ugliness and the brutality of the world. And change towards better futures is a creative act that begins in the imagination.

Future Thinking: The Utopian Function of the Creative Spirit
Bill Ashcroft (2014)

> *The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.*
> *(Martin Luther King)*

> *I'm a pessimist in the sense that we are approaching dangerous times. But I'm an optimist for exactly the same reason. Pessimism means things are getting messy. Optimism means these are precisely the times when change is possible.*
> *(Slavoy Žižek,* Guardian *15 June 2012).*

Creativity is important to revolution because its function is to inspire hope: hope for change, hope for freedom, hope for the future. This may not be its goal or its purpose; it may have nothing to do with the subject of the creative work but it *functions* this way because it affirms that "another world is possible." As Mahmoud Darwish says in 'State of Siege'

> Here, on the slopes facing the sunset
> And the cannon-mouth of time',
> Near orchards stripped of their shadows,
> We do what prisoners do;
> We do what the unemployed do
> We cultivate hope. (2002)

The creative cultural product is unmatched in its ability to cultivate hope because creativity itself is the act of 'stepping beyond.' As Salman Rushdie puts it: "this is how newness enters the world."

Simply by imagining the world differently the creative work shows the possibility of a different world. It might not be hopeful or optimistic; it might

be quite the opposite, describing a dystopia. But by speaking of a different world this difference is the key to the importance of art and literature in summoning forth the hope for a better world. We might object that hope is not victory, and indeed the great irony of utopianism is that it would seem that all achieved utopias quickly become dystopias. This fact underlies the considerable disparagement of utopias in the twentieth century, the most violent and disruptive in human history and from which the failed utopia of neo-liberalism still rules our world. But without hope we cannot live. In the colonial context the pre-independence utopias of soon to be liberated post-colonial nations provided a very clear focus for anti-colonial activism, but this appeared to come to an abrupt halt once the goal of that activism was reached and the sombre realities of post-independence political life began to be felt. We can no doubt see evidence of this same process in the Arab Spring. The consequences of revolution may never be quite those that we hope for, the democracy not quite the utopia we had expected. Nevertheless, the utopianism of the creative spirit continues unabated.

In his inaugural lecture in Tubingen in 1961 entitled "Can Hope be Disappointed?" Bloch's answer was that even a well-founded hope can be disappointed: otherwise it would not be hope. In fact hope never guarantees anything. It can only be daring and must point to possibilities that will in part depend on chance for their fulfilment. Hope can be frustrated and thwarted, but out of that frustration and disappointment it can learn to estimate the opposition. Hope can learn through damaging experiences, but it can never be driven off course. 'Revolution' has two meanings: it is not simply a revolt but a revolving, a spiral into the future. Seeing this, we can understand that the belief in the future doesn't stop with revolution: it remains part of the continuous spiraling of hope. Even if democracy comes, and hope, at least for some, has still been disappointed, creative work continues to spiral into the future, continues the revolution. That movement into the future must first be a movement of the imagination.

Art and literature have a particular facility for projecting into the future. For Bloch, whose magisterial *The Principle of Hope* defined the utopian as fundamental to human life, literature has a significant utopian function because its *raison d'etre* is the imaging of a different world – what he calls its *vor-schein* or "anticipatory illumination." Of course not all creative works are utopian, or even necessarily optimistic, but the anticipatory illumination is the revelation of the "possibilities for rearranging social and political relations to produce *Heimat,* Bloch's word for the *home* that we have all sensed but have never experienced or known. It is *Heimat* as utopia… that determines the truth content of a work of art" (Zipes 1989: xxxiii). *Heimat* may lie in the *future* but the promise of *heimat* transforms the present. *Heimat* suggests but is not synonymous with the nation or the democratic state, which may be the object

of revolution. As the home we have sensed but never experienced it remains a constant beacon for the spirit of liberation even after the goals of revolution appear to have been achieved.

> What is envisioned as home (*Heimat*) in childhood is in actuality the goal of the upright gait toward which human beings strive as they seek to overcome exploitation, humiliation, oppression and disillusionment. The individual cannot attain such a goal, which is only possible as a collective enterprise. Yet the measure of the individual's ethical backbone can be determined by his or her struggle to stand and walk upright and contribute to the collective goal. (Zipes 1989: xxvii)

There is something very evocative in the phrase "the upright gait" that human beings seek to overcome the present, but equally important is the collective enterprise, the sharing of the goal, which may be shared in art and literature.

Re-thinking Resistance

This linking of creativity and hope may serve to reconstitute our understanding of resistance, to think of resistance as transformation, or at least as incomplete without transformation. In the words of Darwish again

> To resist means - to be confident of the health of your heart,
> And of your balls, To be confident of your incurable malady,
> The malady of hope. ("State of Siege" 2002)

Clearly creativity is deeply involved in revolution through resistance literature. The concept of resistance literature (mugãwamah) was first applied in a description of Palestinian literature in 1966 by the Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani in his study *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. He asserts the integral relationship between armed resistance and culture, particularly through resistance literature. Such literature is seen to be an identifiable, and significant, accompaniment to the project of political, military and social striving for national liberation. Yet there is a problem with linking literature directly to revolutionary action. He makes the claim that no research into such literatures "can be complete unless the researcher is located within the resistance movement itself inside the occupied land" (Kanafani 1987: 3). This invocation of critical exclusivity and insider knowledge is familiar in post-colonial criticism, and raises similar questions about the capacity of the literature itself to communicate "outside the occupied land." For whom and to whom, we might ask, does any writer write?

Consequently, in the fifty years since Kanafani wrote, and particularly with the emergence of postcolonial studies, it has become very clear that resistance needs to progress beyond mere oppositionality. As Coetzee's protagonist, Dawn, puts it in *Dusklands*

> The answer to a myth of force is not necessarily counterforce, for if the myth predicts counterforce, counterforce reinforces the myth. The science of mythography teaches us that a subtler counter is to subvert and revise the myth. The highest propaganda is the propagation of new mythology. (1974: 24-5)

The way in which political oppression works is to lock the oppressed into a myth of binary opposition. But this is precisely where music, art and literature demonstrate their power: they take us beyond resistance into the realm of possibility: indeed, they dare to imagine the *impossible*. In the words of Darwish:

> I believe that the unwavering commitment to resistance and defence is not some sort of nostalgia, but the saturation of the present and future with the past without which neither present nor future will come to be. (Darwish, interview, *Banipal*, Spring 1999)

Such saturation leads us to see time itself as layered – a form of spatiality. An example of this can be seen in this sculpture by Fareed Amali called Palestinian Rock, which not only appeared in the Documenta 11 exhibition but determined the floor plan. Though apparently simple it alludes to the rocks that are only weapons available to the incarcerated civilian population; it alludes to Palestinian land occupied by Israel and to the network of relationships between the occupied territories and Palestine proper. It suggests a new kind of mapping of Palestine and the occupied territories based on Deleuzian lines of flight rather than traditional cartography. The key to this piece is not mere resistance but a vision of connection: connection within and between the severed parts of Palestine. Whatever the rhetoric, whatever ways in which history conspires against liberation the image remains seared on the consciousness. The mesh that completes the rock is the image of the possible impossible. This is the concrete appearance of hope.

Utopia and Time

Such utopianism may take a long time to bear fruit. For instance Naguib Mahfouz's controversial 1959 novel *Awlad haratina* (trans. As *Children of the Alley*) while an allegory of the failures of the 1952 revolution that inaugurated

Nasserism, also, according to Ayman El-Desouky, anticipates the 'peoples' revolution of 2011. Its experimental style

> … narrativizes popular structures of consciousness of time as the sacred time of revolutionary action, and as offering the outline of a type of "knowledge" that has been hidden (not just in history but, allegorically, in the more recent and present realities of the 1950s) and that may eventually reveal the masses' role in the struggle for power. (2011: 433)

In other words the creative impetus of the novel is a projection into the future by means of a vision of the collective struggle for social justice.

In the postcolonial context the most powerful means of overcoming the stalemate of resistance rhetoric, and, incidentally, of overcoming time, was the transformation of the genres and discourses of the colonial powers in order to conceive a liberated future and to speak to the widest possible audience. There is perhaps no more striking demonstration of the power of colonized people to transform the discourses designed to oppress them than the culture which developed in the Caribbean. African slaves were unable to transport their culture or their languages with them to the plantations in any coherent way. Members of the same language group were placed with strangers on plantations either through the exigencies of the system or to prevent conspiracy. The resulting heterogeneity limited what could be shared culturally. Yet Afro-modernity took on a form generated from this heterogeneity, a dynamism adapted to the physical and social conditions with which they had to deal. In this process, both the various slave and non-slave populations absorbed aspects of the various African heritages. What developed was a culture of such creative adaptation that its transformative capacities were able to resist absorption into the dominant culture.

This powerful demonstration of agency shows how creativity can be stimulated by conflict. If we accept the definition that creativity is the result of the combination of previously unrelated areas of knowledge" (John-Steiner 1997: 186) what Arthur Koestler calls 'bisociation,' then conditions of conflict and disruption engendered by colonization have the potential to enhance creative work. Of course, all subjects of oppression might say "I would rather have freedom than creativity," but can they ever be entirely separated? How free would such freedom be? Creativity can be the most effective and subtle path to freedom because its utopian dynamic refuses to be locked in to the status quo. The postcolonial situation intensifies such conditions of change because the effect of colonial power is the *production* of hybridization (Bhabha 1994: 160). Writers writing from the in-between space of hybridization grapple at the same time with the challenges of identity

formation, and with questions of place, nation and history. These writers envision renewal out of conflict, doing what Bhabha calls 'borderline work,' where conditions of displacement and disjunction have the potential to rewrite boundaries and borders, to reconceive the future in order to re-imagine the meaning of human community. This process deploys a radically transformed sense of the relation between memory and the future

> The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, re-figuring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. (Bhabha 1994: 10)

Revolution and Time

This leads me to conclude that a proper understanding of the capacity of the creative spirit to anticipate the future requires a re-thinking of the nature of time itself. We think of time as either flowing or enduring and the dismantling of this apparent dichotomy between succession and duration is important for utopian theory. The characteristic of Modernity with its concept of chronological 'empty' time, dislocated from place or human life is a sense of the separation of past, present and future. Although the present may be seen as a continuous stream of prospections becoming retrospections, the sense that the past has gone and the future is coming separates what may be called the three phases of time. Friedrich Kummel proposes that the apparent conflict between time as succession and time as duration in philosophy comes about because we forget that time has no reality apart from the medium of human experience and thought (1968: 31). "No single and final definition of time is possible… since such a concept is always conditioned by man's understanding of it" (31). Or as Mahmoud Darwish puts it, "Time is a river / blurred by the tears we gaze through."

We think of time as either flowing or enduring but Kummel makes the point that duration without succession would lose all temporal characteristics. A theory of time therefore must understand the correlation of these two principles. Duration arises only from the stream of time and only within the background of duration is our awareness of succession possible. The critical consequence of this is that

> If something is to abide, endure, then its past may never be simply 'past,' but must in some way also remain "present;" by the same token its future must already somehow be contained in its present.

> Duration is said to exist only when the "three times" (put in quotation marks when used in the sense of past, present and future) not only follow one another but are all at the same time conjointly present… the coexistence of the "times" means that a past time does not simply pass away to give way to a present time, but rather than both as *different* times may exist conjointly, even if not simultaneously. (1968: 35-36)

Now what interests me about this is that I had already made the same observation about the function of time in postcolonial literatures. One of the features of postcolonial texts, particularly those from Africa and the Caribbean is a transformed conception of time that sees it as layered and interpenetrating rather than linear. This conjoining of time in these texts is related to a radically different epistemology – a different way of knowing.

The crucial characteristic of the genre of the novel, for instance, is its engagement with time. Stories are the way in which we have a world, and the telling of stories appeals to us because they offer the progress of a world in time and thus can become narratives of temporal order. But magically, by unfolding in time they take us out of time. It may be that narrative, whose materiality is isomorphic with temporality, provides a way (though not the only way) of communicating different experiences of time. How then can the novel convey a different knowledge of time, specifically knowledge of what has been called the 'broken' time of the traumatized colonized subject? One way of doing this is through the 'circular time' developed from the forms of oral storytelling. But a more common way is to convey experience itself as a palimpsest of different phases of time and different orders of reality, as Chinua Achebe does in a scene in which elders of the tribe perform the dance of the *egwugwu* or spirit beings, an occasion in which the ontological distinction between acting and reality, the human world and the spirit world, dissolves. Exactly the same laminating of time can be seen in the Aboriginal Dreaming.

Postcolonial literatures continually affirm this sense of the future in the past and bring us back to our understanding of revolution as a revolving or spiralling into the future as well as a revolt against the failures of the past. The present is the crucial site of the continual motion by which the New comes into being. In such transformative conceptions of utopian hope, what Ernst Bloch calls the In-Front-Of-Us is always a possibility emerging from the past, not as nostalgia but as renewal. In traditional post-colonial societies the radically new is always embedded in and transformed by the past. For those Caribbean writers and artists working in the borderland of language, race, identity the past is the constant sign of the future. One of the most common, and popular, examples of this is the limbo dance, a performance of slave history, which re-enacts the crossing of the Middle Passage in a continual

reminder of memory, survival and cultural resurrection. As Kamau Brathwaite puts it:

> Limbo
> Limbo like me
> Long dark deck and the water surrounding me
> Long dark deck and the silence is over me
>
> (Brathwaite 1969: 35)

The dancer goes under the limbo stick in an almost impossible bodily position, emulating the subjection of the slave body in the journey across the Atlantic but rising triumphant on the other side. The performance of memory is a constant reminder of a future horizon, a 'return' that performs each time the 'rising' of the slave body into a future marked not only by survival but also by renewal, hybridity and hope. The dance is a metaphor of slave history that celebrates the present with the continuous re-enactment of future hope.

So past present and future are conjoined in the creative work in a radical transformation of the reality of slave exile. The descendants of the slave labour of sugar plantations have developed a culture that draws its ontological energy from the very fact of displacement, of homelessness, heterogeneity and syncreticity. This is not revolution but transformation, but its relation to time is exactly the same as that on which revolution depends, because the revolt is also a revolving, an evolution in which past present and future are conjoined and mutually enforcing. In the case of the African novel for instance, what Emmanuel Eze sees as the 'fractured time' of colonial experience (2008) is in fact a layering of past present and future. Kummel sees this relation between past present and future as a feature of all human life so that "the openness of future and past is, in other words, the vital condition for the conduct of man's life and all his actions" (1968: 50). We make the past our own by bringing it into a free and positive relation with the present. "The natural discrepancy of future and past constitutes a productive tension, which forms the real medium for new action and new mediation" (50). In other words the tension of revolution is rendered productive by its location in a spiraling compression of time.

The contingency of the past disrupts the apparent polarity between past and future and for Ernst Bloch this disruption is absolutely necessary to understand the nature of the relationship between being and possibility. He asserts that for Plato 'Beingness' is 'Beenness' (8), and he admonishes Hegel because "What Has Been overwhelms what is approaching … the categories Future, Front, Novum" (8). The problem with the concept of Being in Hegel was that it overwhelmed *becoming* – obstructing the category of the future. It is only when the static concept of being is dispensed with that the real dimension of

hope opens (18). The core of Bloch's ontology is that 'Beingness' is 'Not-Yet-Becomeness'

> Thus the Not-Yet-Conscious in man belongs completely to the Not-Yet-Become, Not-Yet-Brought-Out, Manifested-Out in the world… From the anticipatory, therefore, knowledge is to be gained on the basis of an ontology of the Not-Yet. (13)

While utopias exist in the future, utopianism, anticipatory consciousness, is heavily invested in the present. In Bloch's re-interpretation of Marx his ontology of becoming has a political, liberatory dimension. The energy of the masses in the German (1525), French and Russian revolutions "were attracted and illuminated by a real future place: by the realm of freedom." (143) Bloch's cyclic theory is of the future in the past and this is a characteristic he allocates to Marxist philosophy itself (9).

A very clear example of this can be found in the strategic use of a postcard called "Visit Palestine." designed in 1936 by Franz Kraus.

Franz Kraus,
***Visit Palestine* (1936)**

Amer Shamali,
***Visit Palestine* (2010)**

This operates as an iconic point of connection between past present and future. The postcard identifies Palestine as a destination – an actual identifiable place in the world before the Nakba – and out of the reality of the country as a destination emerges the utopian concept of destiny. The postcard operates as a hinge between past present and future by becoming a palimpsest. The past

is present in Amer Shomali's *Visit* in which the wall testifies to the attempt by the state of Israel to not just incarcerate the Palestinians but to wall off the past.

Time, Utopia and Utopianism

The importance of a perception of time in which past present and future are conjoined or layered rather than separate and lost to each other is that it refutes one of the most trenchant critiques of utopia – its static nature. The assumption is that although utopias lie in the future, representations of them, particularly those in the transcendental utopian tradition, suggest that they cannot progress. Indeed, for Bloch there is a very important difference between utopias and utopianism. His insistence on the centrality of the utopian to human consciousness, and the magisterial way in which *The Principle of Hope* outlines the operation of *utopianism* as a fundamental feature of human life perhaps explains his central importance to utopian theory:

> Primarily, everybody lives in the future, because they strive… Function and content of hope are experienced continuously, and in times of rising societies [revolutions] they have been continuously activated and extended. (Bloch 1986, 4)

Bloch urges us to grasp the three dimensions of human temporality: he offers us a dialectical analysis of the *past* which illuminates the *present* and can direct us to a better *future.* This reformulation of time privileges the ongoing function of utopianism over abstract utopias. Bloch's major premise is the energizing of the present with the anticipation of what is to come. This is what Mahmoud Darwish sees as the *saturation* of the present and future in the past.

But can utopianism exist without a vision of utopia? What the Visit Palestine postcard series reveals is that *Heimat* is not Paradise. Home is not the 'non-place' – Utopia – nor is home the shimmering object in the distance. Home is the luminous possibility of the present and in this respect it is far from static, but a dynamic horizon of everyday living. Freedom, like consciousness, can never exist in the abstract, it must be realised in the terms 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. But even further than this, freedom can only exist in the act of struggle against coercion, 'freedom to' may only be realised in the struggle of 'freedom from' domination and the transformation of power. In Palestine, the utopian impulse revolves around the reality of a place – but the utopian is enacted in the engagement with power. The vision of utopia is located in the act of transformation of coercive power, a certain kind of *praxis* rather than a specific mode of representation.

Creativity and the Palestinian Revolution

What we find in Palestinian art and literature is a 'grounded' rather than transcendental utopia. It is grounded because it is located in the present as a transformative vision of the future. It is dynamic because it cannot avoid the reality of time as succession, yet the duration of the struggle connects past and future as aspects of the continuing present. Palestine cannot avoid the linking of utopianism and place. But this is not a vague utopia in the future: it is a utopianism in which past, present, and future are laminated.

Ernst Bloch makes a distinction between 'abstract utopia', or wishful thinking that is merely fantastic, and "concrete utopia," the outcome of wishful thinking passed into willful action. In the same vein, Laurence Davis contends that critics and defenders of utopia alike "have tended to conceive of utopia primarily as a transcendent and fixed "ought" opposed to the "is" of political reality and the "was" of social history," but "it may also be understood as an empirically grounded and open-ended feature of the "real world" of history and politics representing the hopes and dreams of those consigned to its margins." (2012: 127)

> Grounded utopias both emerge organically out of and contribute to the further development of, historical movements for grassroots change. As a result, they are emphatically not fantasized visions of perfection to be imposed upon an imperfect world, but an integral feature of that world representing the hopes and dreams of those consigned to its margins. (Davis 136-7)

The key to grounded utopias, as integral to the real world, and particularly to the drive for change, transformation and revolution in the colonial context, is the question of representation because, as the history of colonial domination demonstrates, the most powerful form of oppression is not military control or the carceral function of the state, but the control of representation. This is the point at which wishful thinking transfers into willful action. In Marxist thinking the power of ideology is its ability to convince the oppressed that the interests of the powerful are the interests of all. In the case of Palestine it is the power to convince the world that the desperately oppressed and downtrodden civilian population is a collection of dangerous fanatics.

Palestine may be the site of struggle but it is not the site of victory. Just as the state of Israel took shape in the capitals of Europe, just as the representation of Palestinians takes place in the Western media, so the site of transformation is the imperial centre - in this case the US. And it is not the US government but American public opinion. This is the lesson taught by post-colonial writers, that the secret of self-representation is the capture of the audience: the appropriation of English, the interpolation of the dominant discourse and the

transformation of that discourse and the site of power itself. If liberation lies in self-representation then the battlefield is nowhere near Israel – its forward lines are on American television. Just as the most powerful perpetuation of Orientalism has been in the 'coverage' of Islam in the western media, so the most strategic site for transforming the representation of the middle east in general and the Palestinians in particular is that same media, that same audience.

If the path of transformation means to take hold of representation, the purpose for doing this in the Palestinian case is to avoid the images of victimhood and tragedy that work paradoxically to produce stereotypes. In Sydney a Palestinian film festival has been occurring annually since 2008. The organisers have tried to clear a space for a representation beyond stereotype by keeping it non-political – impossible in the Palestinian situation but an important attempt to get beyond stereotype. Politics lies within every act of creation but overt politicizing can lead to the entrenchment of the images of victimhood. The film festival presented Palestine as a rich creative culture, – one that existed despite the bombs, despite the unrelenting Israeli campaign of despair – in short the sign of a national culture.

Humour

A crucial stage in the confirmation by the creative spirit that another world is possible, is the abolition of the fear that permeates the present. For this humour and comedy are strategic because they defamiliarise the readers' or viewers' expectations, revealing tyranny in its nakedness – something to be laughed at and scorned. This is why tyrant's are so afraid of mockery – they understand its power. The rise of social media has made humour an ever more potent weapon. An example of this is the puppet parody series *Top Goon: Diary of a Little Dictator* which caricatures Bashar Assad in a clownish figure called Beeshu. "For so long Bashar was this god-like being that you could never criticize, and it gave him power," says Jameel the series' director (Time October 8th 2012 p.42). Produced by Masasit Mati, a creative collective composed of exiled artists, activists, and actors, the series, loaded onto YouTube, has gone viral. The comments by Jameel are illuminating. Humour he says, "is the safest weapon we can use in this fight. It can topple a dictator, but it can never be used against us.

A more subtle form of humour can be seen in an ammunition box filled with stones – displayed in the Documenta 11 exhibition – the only ammunition ordinary Palestinians have against the tanks and rockets of the Israeli army. This wry allusion to the desperate state of the Palestinian apartheid and the victimization of Palestinians is a form of self deprecating humour. More poignant are the classified ads in a New York paper's lonely hearts column. The ads refer in a humorous way to the expulsion of Palestinians in the Nakba.

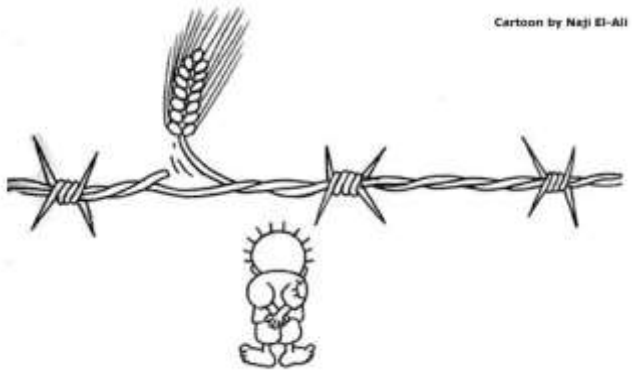
"Palestinian Semite in search of Jewish soul mate…still have house keys" or "Palestinian woman seeking sexy Jewish man for romance and marriage" play in a humorous way on the expulsion, on what Jewish historian Ilan Pape calls the ethnic cleansing carried out by the Israeli state. The question of Palestinians and Jews sharing a single state is addressed by humour, which relies for its impact on surprise, on the disruption of expectations.

Naji Al-Ali

The cartoonist Naji Al-Ali whose figure "Handala" became one of the most widely known silent witnesses of injustice shows the power of the image. Handala became the signature of Naji al-Ali's cartoons and remains an iconic symbol of Palestinian identity and defiance. He is depicted as a ten-year old boy, Al-Ali's age when he was forced to leave Palestine, and, as the artist explained, would not grow up until he was allowed to return. Handala is a witness to the corruption and brutality of the Palestinian occupation and the mendacity of Arab politicians. His hands clasped behind his back, his face turned to the events he witnesses, Handala rejects outside solutions.

The artist remarked presciently that "this being that I have invented will certainly not cease to exist after me, and perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that I will live on with him after my death". Today the website Handala.org has as its motto "Let this child return home." The impact of the image is demonstrated by his assassination in 1987 in London outside the offices of the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Quabas.* Although Mossa was clearly implicated and London headquarters closed by Margaret Thatcher, no one was charged.

Although cartoons, Al-Ali's images are rarely humorous, but are in turn cuttingly satirical, poignant, melancholic, angry, but also irrepressibly hopeful.



Such hope can also be seen in Yazan Khalili's *Colour Correction* from *The Camp Series* (2007). *The Camp* Series depicts al Am'ari refugee camp near

Ramallah. Established in 1949 to provide housing for displaced refugees the camp still exists today. Khalili colours the photo of the camp as a symbolic act, revealing the trauma of dispossession yet offering the picture of hope and possibility.

Larissa Sansour and *Nation Estate*

However there is a form of utopia that not only operates from a conjoining of past present and future, but in doing so avoids the conception of utopia as an ahistorical abstraction that is either hopelessly impractical or dangerously idealistic, or both, a position argued most forcefully by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto.* This is Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour's photo project, called *Nation Estate*, first introduced as another version of Fritz Kraus's postcard, that also becomes the key to future hope.

Playing on the British use of the term 'estate' for tower block housing, Sansour depicts a virtual Palestinian homeland in the form of a skyscraper dwarfing the 'real' Palestine outside. The artist explains that:

> With brutal Israeli settlement expansion in Palestine and a peace process in tatters, it seems quite straightforward that any final border agreement will leave Palestinians with hardly any land for a state. The idea of 'Nation Estate' is that should any future Palestinian state hope to house the entire population, one would have to think vertically. And hence the idea of a single skyscraper with whole cities on each floor came about. As the piece looks now, it is a photo project revealing everyday situations from this building. The nation state reduced to a building simply became the 'Nation Estate' — a single block of forced migrants. Its subtitle, 'Living the High Life,' expands on the irony.
> (Interview with *Islam Sci-Fi* (May 11). http://islamscifi.com/islam-scifi-interview-of-larissa/ 2012)

Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate* (2011)

This project stirred controversy when after being short-listed for the prestigious Musée de 'Elysée art prize in Switzerland, the major sponsor, Lacoste requested that the works be removed from the competition for being 'too pro-Palestinian'. After the ensuing international scandal the Museum cancelled the prize and broke off partnership with Lacoste. Political censorship is always a good indicator of the effectiveness of a work and it is most interesting that the political implications of an upbeat and humorous utopianism were seen by the sponsors of the Musee de l'Elysée art prize to be so dangerous.

Crucially, from our perspective *Nation Estate* plays on the idea of place that remains critical to any colonized perception of the future. But it is a conception of place that operates within a layered conception of time in which past, present and future conjoin as the essential feature of revolutionary hope. Her re-working of the Fritz Kraus postcard displays what Edouard Glissant calls a *prophetic vision of the past*. In doing this Sansour's utopia avoids the trap of transcendental abstraction or hopeless impracticality that might come from being quarantined in the future.

Laurence Davis says of grounded utopias that

> Part and parcel of dynamic and open-ended processes of struggle, and grounded in immediate everyday needs, such utopias challenge dominant conceptions of reality not by measuring them against the transcendental ethical standard of a fixed vision of an ideal society, but by opening a utopian space for thinking, feeling, debating and cultivating the possibility of historically rooted (and thus historically contingent) alternative social relations. (2012: 136-7)

I would contend that although whimsical, Larissa Sansour's utopia is such an integral feature of the Palestinian world, "representing the hopes and dreams of those consigned to its margins," grounded in the reality of the erosion of Palestine as a place. Whether in the lobby or watering an olive tree or getting out of the life at level 3 to Jerusalem *Nation Estate* is a grounded utopia because it is the utopia of the single state.

Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate* (2012)

Ironically the impossibility of a single state becomes more possible with each Israeli settlement. When there is no land left for Palestinians there will be no option but to incorporate Palestinians. Sansour's urban utopia, the vertical state, is the metaphor for a different, but possible way of inhabiting Palestine.

We can test the grounded nature of *Nation Estate* by comparing it to another of Sansour's pieces: the short film called *Space Exodus* which shows a Palestinian female astronaut planting a Palestinian flag on the moon. This not "grounded," in the way that *Nation Estate* is grounded in the reality of Palestinian dispossession and renewal of the past, yet neither is it utopia. *Space Exodus* is a representation of what appears to be the impossible. But it demonstrates precisely how the utopianism of art and literature work. By the very act of representing the impossible, the work clears a space for the imagination. It may be improbable but the very production of the film contests its impossibility.

The creative works we see here are not involved in revolution in the way we normally expect revolution to occur, or in the way, for instance, Kanafani sees resistance literature operating. But they are revolutionary in their capacity to collapse time, to fuse past present and future into the image that spirals into the future. There are different forms of revolution but all must reject the stereotype of victimhood. These works are revolutionary in their disruption of stereotype, their rejection of fear, their undercutting of expectation. Ultimately they demonstrate the utopian power of art and literature because they affirm that a different world is possible. Creative works confirm a fundamental truth of revolution: that no future is achieved unless it is first imagined.

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