

THIS IS NOT AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Michelle Meagher

Griselda Pollock, *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory*, New Haven CT and London, Yale University Press, 2018, 542pp; £38, cloth.

In this hefty book of just under 550 pages, renowned feminist visual theorist and art historian Griselda Pollock analyses the major work of German Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon (b. Berlin 1917 – d. Auschwitz 1943). Produced between 1940 and 1942, when the artist was in her early twenties, exiled from Germany, and reckoning with recently divulged family secrets, Salomon's *Leben? oder Theater?* is a massive work and one that Pollock considers to be among the most important and challenging works of the twentieth century (p9). Salomon began to paint *Leben? oder Theater?* – Life? or Theatre? – shortly after her grandmother jumped from a window of an apartment in Nice, an event followed by her grandfather's revelation of the long-hidden secret of Salomon's mother's suicide. The project is comprised of 769 paintings and sixteen pages of painted text. In February 1943, Salomon appended a Postscript to her monumental work and left it for safe-keeping, along with an additional 541 works on paper, in the hands of Georges Moridis, a doctor in Nice, France. The work was passed from its original safe keeper to Ottilie Moore, an American heiress who had sheltered Salomon and her grandparents in the Côte d'Azur during the 1930s and early 1940s. Moore then gave the works to Salomon's father and stepmother. Since 1971, *Leben? oder Theater?* and its related works on paper, including many self-portraits, have been held at the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam. Charlotte Salomon did not survive to see her work displayed publicly and she did not have the opportunity to contribute to the curatorial and art historical framing of her project. At the age of twenty-six and five months pregnant, she was transported from Drancy, Paris to Auschwitz with her new husband, Alexandre Nagler, and was murdered on 10 October, 1943 in a gas chamber, one of millions of victims of Hitler's Final Solution.

Interpretation and analysis of Salomon's work cannot – and ought not – evade the facts of her untimely and brutal death. *Leben? oder Theater?* is conventionally viewed by art historians, curators, and filmmakers as a powerful personal testimony, 'the voice of a lonely but courageous woman destroyed in the Holocaust' (p.163). *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory* is committed to reorienting the project so that audiences and critics recognise that it is not a diary, but a serious and aesthetically coherent project that works through feminine despair and archives the complex feelings associated with maternal loss, exile, serial intergenerational sexual abuse, and intergenerational suicide.

The insistence that *Leben? oder Theater?* is not autobiographical is a

difficult position to take towards a work of art that is so clearly structured around the artist's life. Pollock, however, distinguishes between art as a record of a life and artmaking as a resource for making sense of the facts and feelings of one's life. For instance, she carefully draws apart Charlotte Salomon the artist who made *Leben? oder Theater?* from CS, the ethnically indeterminant and gender-neutral signature attached to every page. She distinguishes both Salomon the artist and CS the signatory from Charlotte Kann, the imagined figure whose life is explored in the work. Another strategy for pushing against the impulse to read autobiographically is Pollock's art historical method of close readings of individual pages, many of which are compilations of images indicating both the passage of time and the existential upheavals faced by the main players in *Leben? oder Theater?* Focusing on the work itself – on its sequencing, its repetitions, its silences, and its engagements with modernism – leads Pollock to assert that the project uses familial ciphers not to reveal the facts of a family drama, but to develop a sustained artistic philosophy. This philosophy is 'mediated through war-survivor and singer Amadeus Daberlohn', a figure modelled after Alfred Wolfsohn, a voice teacher known to the Salomon family and the author of a manuscript on post-traumatic survival (p366). Wolfsohn and Daberlohn's direct experience of trauma is linked to World War I trench warfare; Salomon and Charlotte Kann's experience of trauma is linked to what Pollock describes as the 'gendered everyday', and to the inescapable intergenerational trauma of incest and sexual domination.

Organised into three parts, *Leben? oder Theater?* travels through the life worlds of four related women. Though Pollock enjoins us not to collapse the figures in the work with Salomon and her relatives, it is clear that the women are modelled on the young Charlotte, her mother, her aunt, and her grandmother, all of whom, save Salomon, die of suicide. Faced with despair, Salomon's avatar Charlotte Kann considers the ethical, practical, and political question of suicide and draws on Daberlohn's Nietzschean and Orphic philosophy of life in order to choose to live; Salomon, similarly faced with these questions, chooses to paint. Art and artmaking here are not tools for story telling; they are resources for living.

Through a careful reorientation away from autobiographical readings, Pollock reveals *Leben? oder Theater?* to be an aesthetically coherent analytical work through which viewers, critics, and theorists can reflect on the relationships between artmaking, memory, trauma, and history (p343). The matter of memory – cultural memory, personal memory, and familial recollection – takes a central place in Pollock's book, which notably highlights the term in its title: *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory*. Also included in this monumental book is the narrative – the memory making – of its author. Throughout the text, Pollock describes the development of her own thinking about the work; she describes earlier drafts of the current book that had, ultimately, to be scrapped; she describes her own deeply personal reaction

to what she describes as the work's 'traumatic absence' – the overwhelming sense of loss experienced by Pollock and Salomon, both of whom had lost their mothers at an early age (p249). The book refuses, in this way, to place the viewer outside the text. Nowhere is this more clear than in the six page appendix titled 'A Personal History Across *Leben? oder Theater?*', which describes Pollock's ongoing intellectual exploration – beginning in the mid-1990s - of the artist and her work.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the analyst of this work is that its unique form renders it difficult to categorise. The work is, as Pollock notes on the last page of her personal history, an unusual 'thing': 'at once artwork, document, testimony, history, fiction, performance, memory book and a text registering its 'unnatural' historical moment...' (p491). Its preliminary pages include a playbill that lists its characters; it is described by Salomon as a play, and as a *singspiel* or sing-play; sections are sometimes offered as scenes and other times as chapters; viewers are encouraged to hum specific songs as they view the work. Some paintings are accompanied by transparent overlays that multiply their already dense meaning. Pollock compares the aesthetic machinery of *Leben? oder Theater?* to comic books and children's illustrations, but also frequently refers to its operatic and cinematic features. Exiled and working virtually on her own, with paper and supplies provided by Ottolie Moore, Salomon invented an inter-media aesthetic that Pollock insists 'cannot be accommodated in art historical categories' (p47). This is not to say that Salomon was unfamiliar with the major movements and artists of her time but that the scope of her project required that she develop a 'totally novel' (p370) visual language through which to communicate her specific interpretations of the world.

Readers familiar with Pollock's ground-breaking and well-respected body of work will know that she has spent over four decades challenging the conventions of art history from a feminist perspective that insists that as currently conceived and practiced, the field is unable to adequately 'address and embrace the cultural politics of difference and the differential politics of aesthetics' (p17). In *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory*, Pollock identifies *Leben? oder Theater?* as a 'clearly feminist aesthetic creation' that does not conform to existing visual styles and periodisations of art history (p44). Moreover, she argues persuasively that the categories of art history are unable to frame the central topic at hand here: sexual violence in the everyday. Certainly, the work must be viewed as a project influenced by Nazi inflected terror (p354), but Pollock offers a reading that does not allow the Event of the Holocaust to obscure the project's revelation of the Everyday domestic trauma that emerges from incest and the menace of masculine domination. The horror that structures *Leben? oder Theater?* is not the event of the Holocaust – unknown and unimaginable for the artist in the time that she was making *Leben? oder Theater?* – but the horror associated with the 'gendered everyday'.

Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory is a beautiful book, gloriously and generously illustrated in colour. It's also a theoretically savvy book that merges carefully theoretically informed cultural analysis (she draws on the work of Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, Bracha Ettinger, Adriana Cavarero, among others, with clarity and depth) with close reading of individual marks on paper and observations about the way that the works have been ordered, might otherwise have been ordered, and how they speak back, echo, or otherwise respond to one another. It is not a final statement on Salomon, or on *Leben? oder Theater?* but is instead a provocation. Pollock generously invites readers to view this work through a new lens, and in so doing, she enriches our understandings of the project, its aesthetics, its political force, its theory of memory, and its unique visual strategies (p.344). Of particular interest not only to those who want to learn more about Salomon, but also to readers with interest in Holocaust studies, feminist art history, trauma studies, critical autobiography studies, and visual culture studies, *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory* is highly recommended.

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ON SPECULATING OTHERWISE

Heejoo Park

Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2018, 248pp, US \$24.95, paperback.

The unprecedented growth of global financial derivatives market in the twenty-first century has led burgeoning interdisciplinary scholarship to declare that *financialised capitalism* has achieved hegemony over culture writ large and curtailed our ability to imagine beyond the spectre of *capital realism*. Cultural critic Max Haiven identifies finance as ‘capitalism’s imagination’,¹ and anthropologists Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee call derivatives ‘socially imaginary objects’.² Indeed, living with uncertainties can produce intense anxieties and fears within us. Yet, what happens to the present when we continue to develop technologies for securing the future against speculated crises? In *Migrant Futures*, Aimee Bahng *speculates* otherwise, venturing an answer to the previously posed question as a literary scholar and a fan of *speculative* fiction. Though firmly rooted in literary criticism, the book makes contributions to related fields by taking a comparative ethnic studies approach to speculative fiction as well as interweaving the emergent field of critical finance studies with feminist science studies.

In the book, Bahng presents a compelling study of the everyday realities shaped by these financial derivatives, which are legal contracts based on speculated changes in future prices. The problem is that derivatives are no longer tethered to underlying assets such as commodities, stocks, and bonds. In effect, the market deals in ‘alien currency from another time, from a time out of joint, from the future anterior’ (p1). Bahng argues that the influence of this ‘alien currency’ extends well beyond the perimeters of financial sector. Working around the clock in various time zones, financial speculators calculate the risks and probabilities of quotidian activities, realising a customised future for their clientele of global elites while preventing other undesirable futures from coming into being. If the future has already been bought and sold as the author describes, what kinds of options are left available for those who cannot afford its costs? Is it possible to develop an alternative mode of speculation?

Against this large-scale colonisation of futurity, *Migrant Futures* offers a scholarly response: the book analyses a ‘starter archive’ of counterfactual cultural productions comprised of graphic narratives, novels, and films that collectively create and sustain alternative visions of the future. Readers might wonder why *speculative fiction* has been chosen as the foil for *speculative finance*. Bahng argues that ‘capitalism’s reliance on fantastical representations of space and time is itself a kind of science fiction’ (p49).

1. Max Haiven, ‘Finance as Capital’s Imagination?’, *Social Text* 29:3(108), 2011, pp93-124.

2. Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2004, p24.

Over the course of five chapters, she addresses various forms of speculation co-opted by capitalist and neo-colonial agenda: the financial derivatives market, military securitisation, transnational surrogacy insurance, global development banking, as well as bio- and geo-engineering. What is notable is the widely divergent cultural productions Bahng selects to offer counter-speculations. For her, speculative fiction is not simply a more expansive category of science fiction. Specifically, she is invested in the types of fiction that imagines the conditions of a near-future society just like its counterpart, speculative finance. From the point-of-view of those pushed to the margins, the book boldly sets out to interrogate, decolonise, and pluralise the utopic imaginaries present in the concept of future.

Migrant Futures, therefore, provides a timely intervention to the progressivist discourse that justifies financialised capitalism's biopolitical and necropolitical governance over both human and nonhuman lives. Situating her study in the context of post-9/11 United States, Bahng acutely critiques how neoliberal discourses often obscure the ways in which values upheld as universal such as freedom, progress, and prosperity are made available for some and not others. In the era of global financial capitalism, subjects that are not legible or calculable according to its logics become vulnerable to what LiPuma and Lee call 'abstract symbolic violence' in the form of higher food and health care costs that make life unliveable.³ Yet, Bahng contends that state violence is still 'disproportionately [forced upon] black and brown, queer and trans bodies in the United State' (p4) and should not be understood as a relic of the past. She urges us to turn our attention to fictionalised but nonetheless real accounts of how sexualised and racialised subjects continue to suffer both symbolic and physical violence into the twenty-first century. Those subjects create the condition of possibility for a financialised future but are denied entry into that which they have helped build.

A decolonisation of this scale may indeed seem like an unachievable dream. Yet, Bahng suggests that there is hope: 'the future exists as absolute uncertainty, which capitalism attempts to contain through the calculation or risk, but ultimately cannot foreclose entirely' (p12). She argues that future as opposed to futurity remains the site of incommensurable heterogeneity. The central aim of her project, however, is not to give a positivist prognosis of the problem. Instead, she effectively pits the performative potential of *speculative fiction* against its formidable opponent, *speculative finance*, inciting the readers to occupy uncertain futures and hold the doors open for those who are not only kept in what Dipesh Chakrabarty has famously called 'the waiting room of history', but also presently being written out of the future.⁴ Implicit in Bahng's argument is also a recognition that a process of decolonisation requires reconceptualisation of both spatial and temporal imaginaries that are interconnected. She declares existing vocabularies for conceptualising space and time insufficient and demands that we theorise from the perspectives of the dispossessed, who exist not only at the margins of the geopolitical

3. Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2004, p26.

4. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p8.

map but also outside normative time. What emerges in the interstices are *migrant futures*, which Bahng defines as futures shaped by ‘mass migrations of the undocumented, unbanked, and state-less workers move in and out of geopolitical spaces, the nuances and histories of their displacement and precarity flattened by statistical aggregation’ (p5). This radical perspectival shift is further augmented by the expansive historical coverage of the book.

Although Bahng foregrounds an impressively wide range of critical methodologies—critical finance studies, feminist science studies, comparative ethnic studies, and gender and sexuality studies—her argument hinges on an understanding that both *speculative finance* and *speculative fiction* are narratives at their cores. According to Bahng, both ‘masked fictions’ of speculative finance and ‘apparent fictions’ (p170) of speculative fiction ‘play a significant role in materializing the present’ (p2). Therefore, the book’s strength can be found in its meticulous analyses of cultural productions that also double as survival guides for the marginalised. While novels are discussed at length, they are not privileged over other forms such as films and comics.

In earlier chapters, Bahng carefully excavates and reconnects multiple legacies of colonialisms with global capitalism through careful analyses. She highlights the often-overlooked influences of multiple empires—Spain, United States, and Japan—on Latin American nations and their current economies through her analysis of Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (Chapter 1). These legacies of colonialisms are also exposed in Alex Rivera’s independent film *Sleep Dealer* and Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (Chapter 2). Bahng emphasises how the dystopian future of both works critique the desire of the Global North to extract resources and labours from the Global South, without having the migrant bodies physically crossing the borders. Though much of the focus is on the past and the future, Bahng avoids an oversight by returning to the present. She juxtaposes Nalo Hopkinson’s novel *Midnight Robber*, which imagines an alternative to reproductive futurism, with the media coverage on transnational surrogacy market (Chapter 3). After the initial work of remapping the points of speculation, she turns her attention to *migrant futures* that emerge in the last two chapters. She debunks tales of progress and development that anticipate a futuristic ‘Asian century’ (p120) through Singaporean artist Sonny Liew’s graphic narrative, *Malinky Robot* (Chapter 4). In Liew’s vision of the future, ‘invisible’ and ‘disposable’ bodies such as a teenaged boy, Atari, and his visibly alien friend, Oliver, hustle through the dangers of neo-liberalised economy and ‘cultivat[e] bonds of affiliation that cut across conventional categories of human and nonhuman’ (p132). Even though they may not survive into adulthood, both Atari and Oliver engage in alternative practices of care and look forward into the future that might be a refuge for them. Similarly, Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* revises the techno-Orientalist tropes by exploring coalitions across species, spaces, and temporalities (Chapter 5). While Bahng admits that the archive of *migrant futures* she provides is by no means comprehensive, the ambitious

scope of the book invites artists and scholars alike to revise their notion of a static archive into a dynamic one.

To properly assess *Migrant Futures*' multifaceted contributions, it must also be located in the context of a growing body of work that brings together the concerns traditionally discussed in cultural studies with speculative fiction, some of which are André M. Carrington's *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016), Isaiah Lavender's *Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science Fiction* (2017), Mark Jerng's *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (2017), and Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis) ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018). The works mentioned above and many more that have been published within the last decade provide ample evidence against the notion that speculative and other paraliterary genres are not suitable for serious academic inquires. By offering alternative ways of reading, these scholars open a multiplicity of discourses that demonstrate how the genre of speculative fiction offer a rich and underexplored site for untangling the complexities at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability. In her epilogue, Bahng pushes this dialogue into an important direction by pressing on the question of how scholarship and community activism might coexist. One book might not be enough to incite a revolution, but it is certainly a start.

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AND THE REVERSE

Robert Spencer

Bashir Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, ISBN 978-1-107-13652-6

In his *Marxism and Form* Fredric Jameson reminds us of the ‘forgotten truism’ that literary forms ‘are inherently dependent for their existence on possibilities in their content, or in other words on the structure of the social experience which they use as raw material and from which they spring as artefacts’.¹ Thus Jameson spells out the axiomatic claim of all Marxist literary criticism. Its aim, as Jameson puts it, should be ‘to regain, on the occasion of a given work of art, this ultimate reality to which it corresponds’ (p354). This does not mean of course that the literary work is merely a window on the world. What it means is that social experience, as Jameson says, is structured and therefore contradictory, that it is rife with contradictions and possibilities and that one of the purposes of the novel form, indeed one of the main reasons we find novels so compelling and instructive, is that novels mediate social experience and give it an identifiable shape that we can scrutinise and evaluate. Bashir Abu-Manneh’s exceptionally shrewd and knowledgeable study of the Palestinian novel from the *Nakbah* of 1948 to the Palestinians’ current regrettable state of political fragmentation is guided by this conviction that the narrative content and especially the form of the novel provide an unusually lucid articulation of the, to put it mildly, fluctuating fortunes of the Palestinian revolution. This is Marxist criticism, which one is pleased to see is accompanied by none of the caginess or defensiveness with which Marxist criticism is usually announced by scholars working in the mostly un-Marxist field of postcolonial criticism.

1. Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p352.

The novel is the dominant Arab and certainly the dominant Palestinian literary form of the last century, according to Abu-Manneh. His study focuses on what he sees as the four representative figures of the Palestinian novel in Arabic: the Baghdad-exiled Jaba Ibrahim Jabra, the Beirut-exiled Ghassan Kanafani, the Haifa-based Emile Habiby and the Nablus-based Sahar Khalifeh. In different ways their texts dramatise, at the obvious level of narrative content but often much more powerfully at the micro-levels of imagery, structure, plot and narrative style, an unfinished struggle between emancipation and authoritarian restoration. They speak compellingly of the universal appeal of, but also the repeated setbacks endured by, what Edward Said once called the ‘Palestinian idea’, that is, of a humanist vision of emancipation that eschews social, ethnic and geographical division. More generally, these works articulate the soundly defeated and half-forgotten but possibly now re-emerging vision of the Arab revolution itself. This

2. Quoted in Abu-Manneh, p146.

comprehensive vision of anti-colonial liberation was crushed in the 1970s and 1980s by the combined weights of military defeat, dictatorship, Islamism and the alliances with the United States of ruling classes in Egypt and the oil states. Telling of conquest, dispossession, exile and frustrated revolts, Palestinian fiction is mainly a chronicle of defeat. But Abu-Manneh also returns time and again to the high-water mark of Palestinian liberation, the period between 1967 and 1973 when the Palestinians were, in Jean Genet's rousing phrase from *Prisoner of Love* (1986), his memoir of his months spent in the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan in 1970, 'dangerous for a thousandth of a second'.² So the dialectic of history and aesthetic form brings into focus another dialectic at work in Palestinian and Arab history over the last century and therefore in the novels themselves, a dialectic between restoration and revolt, between defeat and emancipation or between dispossession and (to use the term employed by Jameson and by the Frankfurt School Marxist critic Theodor Adorno to whom Jameson and Abu-Manneh are both indebted), utopia.

Adorno and the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács (a more important presence than Adorno in Arab literary criticism) have usually been seen as antagonists, not least by themselves. One is reputed to be the advocate of the indirect political illuminations of high modernism and the other a promoter of classical realism and thus modernism's implacable foe. *The Palestinian Novel* makes use of them both. In Jabra's *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960), for example, the individual becomes an agent of collective transformation in an epoch of hope and possibility. Jabra's is a realist undertaking, Abu-Manneh shows, in Lukács's strict sense of the term, exploring the relationship between intellectuals and popular struggle, dramatising larger antagonisms and identifying the forces capable of overturning the social world. So too is Kanafani's minatory *Men in the Sun* (1963). Though *Men in the Sun* is ostensibly a very different novel, its *tour d'horizon* of Palestinian inertia and desperation in the era of the oil boom, as well as its unforgettable central image of the three Palestinian workers perishing meekly in a sweltering water tank as they wait to be smuggled over the Kuwaiti border, amount to an exhaustive, enraging and ultimately politically galvanising indictment of Arab impotence and nostalgia. This is the era of realism allied with rebellion. By the time of 1970's *Return to Haifa* the emergence of the Palestinian resistance movements finds its echo in Kanafani's unflinching exposure of Palestinian realities and in his work's militant advocacy of armed struggle and universalist ideals of emancipation. The same goes for the working-class radicalism of Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (1976), or her feminist *Sunflower* (1980), both of which are novels committed to the detailed exposure of an oppressive but also contradictory social order and to its transformation by revolutionary praxis.

For Lukács, of course, it was the defeat of the 1848 revolutions and the subsequent entrenchment of an alienating and antagonistic bourgeois social order in Europe that led ultimately to what he saw as modernism's

loss of political and aesthetic nerve, its retreat into inwardness and formal obscurity. Abu-Manneh sees the modernist moment in Palestinian fiction rather differently, not as an abdication of ethical or political responsibility by Palestinian writers but as a result of aesthetic form's necessary fidelity to historical experience. This time it is Adorno who provides the best model for thinking through the dialectical ways in which Palestinian writers have registered the succession of defeats instigated by the crushing of Palestinian armed resistance in Jordan in 1970, continuing with the final rout of the PLO in Lebanon in 1982, the fizzling out of the first Intifada, the PLO's decision to accept crumbs from Israel's table at Oslo and the subsequent fragmentation of Palestinian resistance. I say dialectical because Adorno's readings of, say, Beckett's drama or the music of the Second Viennese School, like Abu-Manneh's careful accounts of Khalifeh's pensive intifada novel *Gate of the Courtyard* (1990) and Jabra and Abdelrahman Munif's metafictional *World without Maps* (1982), are sensitive enough to hear notes of protest in cries of despair, to see revelations of conflict and oppression in awkward or dissonant forms and pleas for the necessity of emancipatory praxis in hard-headed encounters with states of disintegration and incoherence. Palestinian modernism both 'registers and resists the disintegration of praxis' (p137).

These categories, realism and modernism, are helpful ways of making sense of the multiplicity of Palestinian fiction, its changing modes and its various responses to the emergence, defeat and partial recrudescence of the grand narrative of Palestinian liberation. But they do not represent separate phases so much as two tendencies in the Palestinian emancipatory project and therefore in the Palestinian novel: defeat and liberation. One might argue, though Abu-Manneh does not quite, that the prospect of liberation is always kept open by the novel form, which by definition avoids certainty and completion. 'To speak of authority in narrative prose fiction', to quote Edward Said's invaluable dictum from his *Beginnings*, 'is also inevitably to speak of the molestations that accompany it'.³ The authority of narrators is invariably beset by their manifest partiality while the authority of characters is assailed by the events of the narrative plus the voices of other characters. The authority of the novelist, meanwhile, is always hedged by the imaginary nature of the world she or he conjures for us. Novels contest ruling dogmas and they historicise seemingly unalterable conditions of stagnation and defeat. It is in the nature of the novel to begin and to begin again and it is in the nature of the Palestinian novel to show how a noble struggle for equality and recognition that has been repeatedly thwarted by its enemies and betrayed by the cynicism and expediency of its own leaders keeps breaking out anew. Said saw the Oslo Accords as 'an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles'.⁴ This was not a peace between equals, Said argued, but an abject capitulation by a weakened and demoralised liberation movement, one that was prepared to swap its historic role as the voice and instrument of its people's aspirations for the terribly meagre prize of the PLO's 'recognition' and its

3. Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, London, Granta, 1997, p84.

4. Edward W. Said, *Peace and its Discontents: Gaza-Jericho, 1993-1995*, London: Vintage, 1995, p5.

right to administer on Israel's behalf the shrivelled and beleaguered patches of Palestinian territory. There was no recognition by the Accords of Palestinian sovereignty and self-determination, no appreciation of a shared history of suffering and no acknowledgement of shared rights or shared obligations under international law. The fate of Palestinian refugees was disregarded. No mention was made of the systematic de-development over decades of Palestinian social and economic life. Little wonder that every single 'peace' initiative has since foundered on the intransigence of Israel and its cynical tolerance of a status quo that allows the Palestinians to be endlessly squeezed, fragmented, hemmed in and superintended, supervised by relief agencies and timeserving leaders and periodically disciplined by military force.

So what finally is the 'social experience' that provides the 'raw material' for the Palestinian novel? Defeat would be one word, possibility another. What Palestinian fiction attests to, even in the midst of dire setbacks and capitulations, of fragmentation and the substitution of narrowly religious and nationalist goals for universal visions, is the continuing possibility of transformation. Abu-Manneh concludes that 'a new emergence of revolutionary praxis will come to mediate a new form of novel' (p168). Is the reverse also true? Can the form of the novel point us in the direction of revolutionary praxis?

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MYTH AND THE REAL

Rob Lapsley

Oliver Harris, *Lacan's Return to Antiquity: Between Nature and the Gods*, London and New York, Routledge, 2017, 213 pp; £34.99 paperback.

In *Lacan's Return to Antiquity: Between Nature and the Gods*, Oliver Harris's declared purpose is to explore how the literature and philosophy of antiquity figures and operates in the work of Lacan. To this end, he examines how Greek and Roman myths function in Lacan's teaching, and explicates Lacan's engagement with Athenian philosophy. He concludes with a consideration of Lacan's readings of Sophoclean drama and Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

Harris' key insight is that Lacan is invariably creative. He realises that Lacan always 'goes against the grain' (p186) and makes something new of every topic and figure under consideration. But this is not to say that Lacan appropriates them for his own purposes. On the contrary, each becomes what Deleuze termed an intercessor or 'mediator', that is, a figure enabling Lacan to think what he could not otherwise think.¹ Plato, as Harris astutely perceives, is a signal example. In the seminar on the transference, a new comedic Plato emerges – most prominently in the *Symposium*. With this Plato, Harris argues Lacan's seminars themselves appear in a new light. They are not merely as aporetic as some of the dialogues but, like the *Symposium*, comic in ways which, at once, put any apparent doctrines in question and open up new pathways. Despite the exchanges and debates with interlocutors, Lacan's seminars are not dialogues, but they are polyvocal. At different times Lacan speaks as a master, a hysteric, a university professor and an analyst. Perspicaciously, Harris develops this commonplace, by suggesting that Lacan's speech proceeds 'diagonal' (p42) to the aforementioned discourses to enigmatic effect. The result is a self-deconstruction which goes far beyond a philosophical demonstration of groundlessness. '[T]he *multiple* Platos and Socrates' are made new and different by multiple Lacans in literary forms which 'allow instruction through impossibility' (p42).

Lacan famously observed that, when Plato encountered difficulties, he had recourse to myth and, following Badiou, Harris argues that Lacan similarly turned to myth in analogous situations.² Harris's principal contribution to the issues in this area is to emphasise the pragmatic dimension: '[m]yth is doing something' (p79); myths are 'productive' (p79); they respond to problems 'resistant to a logical solution' (p80). Developing Darian Leader's important work on this topic,³ Harris underlines the indebtedness of Lacan's line of thought to Lévi-Strauss's structuralist thesis that the meaning and function of myth is located not in any individual proposition but in 'the composition of its parts' (p80). The sense generated by a myth is not incarnated in a single

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* (trans) Martin Joughin, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p125.

2. Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (trans) Steven Corcoran, London, Continuum, 2008, pp233-234.

3. Darian Leader, *Lacan's Myths* in Jean-Michel Rabate (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp35-49.

4. Slavoj Žižek,
*Absolute Recoil:
Towards a New
Foundation of
Historical Materialism*,
London, Verso,
2014, p358.

5. Jacques Lacan,
*The Four Fundamental
Concepts of
Psychoanalysis*, (trans)
Alan Sheridan,
Harmondsworth,
Penguin, 1979,
pp197-198.

6. Jacques Lacan,
*The Four Fundamental
Concepts of
Psychoanalysis*, (trans)
Alan Sheridan,
Harmondsworth,
Penguin, 1979, p26.

proposition but in the spaces between permutations and variations. Harris's inspired choice of a Lacanian myth is the *lamella*, where Lacan is at his most polyvalent. It is possible – and in particular circumstances it may be useful, as Žižek has done,⁴ to turn the notion into a thesis. But, as Harris highlights, more is going on in Lacan's constructions for 'the *lamella's* role shifts line by line' (p76). At one moment it is an organ 'whose characteristic is not to exist', at another it is a 'pure life instinct...that has need of no organ'.⁵

Harris's own contribution on this topic is to underline the synchronic dimension. He tellingly cites Lévi-Strauss's claim that myth is part of mankind's 'conspiracy against time' (p97) and that it offers 'something better than time regained', namely 'time abolished' (p97). One might feel that the failure to explore the tension between the synchronic and the diachronic more extensively is an opportunity missed. After all, no analyst was more concerned with the effects which temporalisations could produce – recall the furore over the notorious short sessions in which patients, no longer guaranteed the 'standard' fifty minutes, did not know if their session would end after an hour or seconds. However, that would be another book.

Chapter four considers 'the role of tragedy in the work of Freud and Lacan, with regards to the light it throws on the relationship between psychoanalysis, fate and free will' (p126). The stakes here could hardly be higher, for at issue is the very possibility of psychoanalysis: the question is whether, as the cure requires, we can 'free ourselves from forces that determine us?' (p126) On the one hand, psychoanalysis holds that subjects are impelled by unconscious desires and imprisoned in structures of which they are unaware and on the other that analysands, at the conclusion of the treatment, can break with the past and take a new path. Are we free or the victims of a tragic fate? Harris approaches the topic through Lacan's reading of *Antigone* as being between two deaths, namely symbolic death – figured here in the form of funeral rites – and physical extinction. He usefully situates this difference within the fundamental split which is a recurrent point of reference in Lacan's teaching, namely that between the biological real of the body and the symbolic order which assigns a 'name, an identity' (p147) where neither term exists in itself outside imaginisations or theoretical abstraction. To the extent that there is a ground, it is this difference which registers as an endless series of unresolvable problems. The paradox is that this is, in Derridean parlance, our chance. Characteristically, Derrida missed this proximity. In a passage cited by Harris, he claims that psychoanalysis leaves nothing to chance (p117). As Harris's discussion of the polyperspectivism of tragic form, the existence of tyche and the work of the clinamen shows, it is clear that Derrida, as always, travesties Lacan. For the Lacan of *Seminar XI*, 'It is always a question of the subject qua indeterminate'.⁶ Hence Harris enjoins: 'Don't fall for Fate as absolute' (p156). Since the play of differences exceeds all systems and structures, the novel is possible. As the treatment presupposes and attests a subject can, like Oedipus at Colonus, begin anew. Contra Derrida, on Lacan's account: 'no

dice-throw in the signifier will ever abolish chance'.⁷

If none of Derrida's criticisms of Lacan hold water there are plenty which do. This brings us to the final chapter where Harris explores the role of Ovidian tales – most importantly those concerning Tiresias, Diana and Actaeon, Daphne and Apollo and the dismemberment of Pentheus by 'the female followers of Bacchus (Dionysus)' (p65) – in Lacan's teaching on *jouissance* and particularly feminine *jouissance*. Plainly Lacan's enterprise in this regard is both risky and dangerous. It appears that (male-authored) psychoanalysis 'can't win once, like Tiresias, it begins to speculate about gendered pleasure' (p164). A male thinker, venturing into this area, should, at the least, 'tread carefully' and 'Lacan doesn't' (p165). Predictably, many of the results, even when the humour is taken into account, can only be viewed as deplorable and ideologically pernicious. However, in light of Harris's reading, it is equally apparent that a dismissal of the entirety of Lacan's work on these topics as merely another rehearsal of 'the patriarchal assumptions of psychoanalysis' (p168) would be to miss several opportunities. Specifically, to think the ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes which inhabit so many identifications, desires and modes of *jouissance*. While the 'content' of these identifications, desires and modes of *jouissance* may not accord with Lacan's descriptions, his thinking of their forms is of continuing value. Adapting Deleuzian concepts: if there is (re)territorialisation on sexist fantasies and misogynistic stereotypes there are also deterritorialisations and lines of flight worth exploring. While not employing this terminology, Harris undertakes precisely this exploration in his consideration of how Lacan used myths to think the complexities of, for example, those modalities of *jouissance* which are experienced as '*extimate*' - that is, as 'foreign' and 'threatening' intrusions causing a 'disordering of subject and other' (p169). Harris's insight is that Ovidian metamorphosis in this context is polyvalent. For example, it can occur when a mortal is ravaged or assaulted by the *jouissance* of the Other (figured as a god) but that equally it can be triggered when plenitude is achieved, for that entails a petrification which even gods do not escape (p192). In light of this Harris persuasively contends that consideration of phenomena 'of dispossession can lead to more than just misogyny' (p171). That said, the problems associated with Lacan's vocabulary persist. As Harris concludes, while Lacan may avow anti-essentialism and insist on 'the absence of innate sexuation' (p189), his 'stubborn adherence to the poles of masculine and feminine in his terminology' and the 'non-negotiable centrality of the phallus' (p196) to his theorisation frequently denies him a hearing in these and many other areas.

It has been a pleasure to review this book. Harris's elucidation of the relationship of Lacan's teaching to the culture of antiquity is admirable and I learned a great deal. I would recommend it to all readers of Lacan whether newcomers or veterans. My sole serious criticism is that there is a disconcerting number of errors in the references with regard to page numbers. Hopefully,

7. Jacques Lacan cited in Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, (trans) Steven Corcoran, London, Continuum, 2008, p202.

in the second edition – to which I very much look forward – these will be corrected.

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