

Conflict and Transformation

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Abstract

The Twentieth Century was the most violent in history and prepared the way for the conflict with which this century has already been marked. Conflict comes in various forms but ultimately it is about power: a struggle for power or a struggle between the powerful and the powerless. The argument of this paper is that art and literature, far more than the language of politics, have the capacity to speak to power by speaking beyond it. They do this first by transformation. Resistance, as we see from the example of postcolonial literature, is most effective when it is transformative—when it takes the language of power and makes it work in the service of the powerless. But in addition, literature, through its capacity to imagine a different world, has a utopian function that conceives a world beyond conflict. This paper will focus on the phenomenon of utopian possibility, to show the function of art and literature in transforming power and imagining the future.

Keywords: postcolonialism, resistance art and literature, revolution, utopia

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.”

(Slavov Zizek, The Guardian 15 June 2012).

The twentieth century was the most violent in history and prepared the way for the conflict with which this century has already been marked. Conflict comes in various forms but it is always about power: a struggle for power or a struggle between the powerful and the powerless. Edward Said’s famous phrase ‘speaking truth to power’ addresses the second form but raises the question of whether power will listen. What language, what form of words, what discourse can speak to power? How or where is it heard? Indeed, conflict begins with the refusal to listen. My claim here is that art and literature have the capacity to speak to power by speaking beyond it. Resistance—as we can see from the example of postcolonial literatures—is most effective when it is transformative: when it takes the language of power and makes it work in the service of the powerless. Perhaps more importantly, literature, through its capacity to imagine a different world, has a utopian function that conceives a world beyond conflict. This paper will explore these ideas in two very different examples of Indigenous art: the Aboriginal painter Lin Onus and the Palestinian artist, photographer and filmmaker Larissa Sansour.

It is fanciful to think that literature will change the world. But while art and literature will not win wars, they can imagine the future. There is a well-worn phrase that encapsulates two avenues of resistance in anti-colonial struggle—“The Book or the Barricade?”—contrasting the very different effects of literary writing and political conflict. But while the capacity of literature to intervene in the operation of power might seem limited, there is a very deep and important connection between creativity and revolution. Despite the surge in various forms of fundamentalist violence and the tragically ill-conceived war in Iraq, the early years of this century have been marked by the rise of democratic revolution, conflict inspired by ordinary hope. The insistent struggle for democracy has not resulted in notable success. Whether in the

Arab Spring or the Orange revolution in the Ukraine, the process appears similar: the people mass in protest, regime-sanctioned thugs fight back but lose their nerve; the world applauds the collapse of the regime and offers to help build a democracy; the lack of democratic institutions leads to a regime as bad as the first, if the country doesn't get invaded or infiltrated by a more powerful neighbour, as in the Ukraine. This is a sobering narrative, many Springs turning to Winters, but the good news is that the revolution continues.

Creativity is important to oppressed peoples 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.¹

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” (1992, 395).

But while the creative work shows the possibility of a different world, it might not be hopeful or optimistic. Yet both utopia and dystopia share a common goal, that of critiquing the present, as Paul Ricoeur maintains when he says “All utopias finally come to grips with the problem of authority” (1986, 298). While the general tenor of utopia is that it is allied to hope, the critical feature of utopian thinking is not that it imagines perfection—a eutopia—but that it speaks to the present from a position that exists *nowhere*. Again, Paul Ricoeur:

¹ The English translation of “State of Siege” can be found online at <http://www.festivaldepoesiademedellin.org/en/Diario/04.html>. All references are to this page unless otherwise noted.

May we not say then that the imagination itself—through the utopian function—has a constitutive role in helping us rethink the nature of our social life? Is not utopia—this leap outside—the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization ‘nowhere’ work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is? (Ibid, 16)

The fact that utopia exists ‘nowhere’ is crucial in this function of rethinking, because the fantasy of an alternative society ‘nowhere’ is one of the most formidable contestations of what is (Ibid, 17). Nowhere is the only place from which ideology can be critiqued, because ideology itself is impossible to escape. This position nowhere, and thus potentially outside ideology, is crucial to art and literature.

Nevertheless, by speaking of a different world, art and literature summon 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, from which the failed utopia of neo-liberal capitalism 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 Tübingen in 1961 entitled “Can Hope be Disappointed?” Ernst 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'être* is the imaging of a different world—what he calls its *Vorschein* 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 1988, 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.

But there is another way in which creative acts gesture toward the future. For, as cultural theorist Tony Bennett points out, if ‘production’ is completed only with ‘consumption’, then so far as literary texts are concerned, their production is never completed. They are endlessly *re-produced*, endlessly remade with different political consequences and effects (Bennett 1979, 136). But this is surely not only the case for literary works alone. Whenever the creative work is engaged, it is reproduced in the context of another person, place and time. Thus despite Bruno Latour’s assertion, in contrasting the created work with critique, that “[i]t is all about immanence” (2010, 181), it is on the contrary, because it is never finished, all about *imminence*. The created work remains alive and constantly on the threshold of a transformed state of being. In this way created works always offer an imminent rearrangement of social and political relations in ways that critique the present.

Resistance as Transformation

This linking of creativity and hope in *Heimat* may serve to reconstitute our understanding of resistance, to think of resistance as transformation, or at least as incomplete without transformation, because hope projects it beyond conflict. 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 political resistance through resistance literature. The concept of resistance literature (*mugāwamah*) 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* (1987). He insists on the integral relationship between armed resistance and culture, particularly through resistance literature. But in the fifty years since Kanafani wrote, and particularly with the emergence of postcolonial studies, it has become very clear that resistance is much more subtle than mere oppositionality. Colonial encounters involved a transformative resistance in which dominant technologies were appropriated for the purposes of self-representation.

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: the aesthetic takes us beyond resistance into the realm of possibility: indeed, aesthetic works dare to imagine the *impossible*. In the postcolonial context the most powerful means of overcoming the stalemate of resistance rhetoric 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.

Lin Onus

Joseph Leo Koerner claims that “by nature, violence completes itself in imagery” (2009, 42). To look is to some extent to violate. But postcolonial writers and artists, working from the in-between space of hybridization, grapple with the reality of violence and at the same time with the challenges of identity formation, and with questions of place, nation and history. Rather than completion, they 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)

This production of newness in the borderline in-between space is demonstrated powerfully by Aboriginal painter Lin Onus. His work addresses several prominent issues, including the dominance of colonial representation, the importance of place and the significance of Aboriginal history. But the key feature of his art is its insurgent hybridizing dynamic. One of the most important strategies of postcolonial transformation is the control of self-representation, and the issue of representation is absolutely central to Onus’ work, a prime example of this being found in the painting *Twice Upon a Time* (1992):



Twice Upon a Time (1992), 182 x 182 cm. © Lin Onus Estate/Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

The key feature of the painter's particular form of transformative resistance is a 'meta-representational' strategy. His representations, and particularly his representations of place, are about the *process* of representation itself. His 'seeing' of place is always an investigation of seeing, or at least a disruption of our seeing to uncover that ideology to which it is giving form. This is precisely what makes his hybridity transformative: it is multi-dimensional, operating as a constant field of interrogation. In order to take control of representation he reveals the extent to which the conventions of seeing have been naturalized.

Twice Upon a Time actually mimics a painting by H.J. Johnstone called *Evening Shadows, Backwater of the Murray South Australia* (1880).



Evening Shadows, Backwater of the Murray South Australia, H.J. Johnstone (1880).

© Art Gallery of South Australia.

Twice Upon a Time ‘writes back’ to Johnstone in a mimicry so tranquil that it seems to lack the ‘menace’ Bhabha saw central to colonial mimicry, reproducing too lovingly the conventions of colonial representation. But the meta-representational aspect of the painting provides the ‘menace’ of disruption and subversiveness. It is a critique of colonial inscription and the policies of removal and injustice that accompanied the dominance of representation.

The painting is a palimpsest in which the visual reproduction is laid over another representation of the surface of geometrically carved trees. The painting represents the contest between the power of Western ocularcentrism and the inscription of Aboriginal art upon the surface of the text of place, including the inscription on the body. The single strand of barbed wire signifies the further inscription of colonial occupation, the bounding and fencing of place as property. The fence, being barbed wire, carries the connotation of more than enclosure. It is

also a signifier of imprisonment. Unlike Johnstone's painting, *Twice Upon a Time* is uninhabited, dismantling the apparently bucolic appearance of the image with a suggestion of a sinister history. The palimpsest of the painting inscribes not only a spatial history, but also a gradation of modes of representation, modes of seeing and being in place.

The process of responding to, writing back to, H.J. Johnstone in *Twice Upon a Time* duplicates the aesthetic strategy of Onus's work. The paintings establish themselves clearly in terms of a Western aesthetic, producing an affective response that draws the viewer into a place from which the political message of meta-representation can take full effect. This is particularly evident in the painting *Barmah Forest*.



Barmah Forest (1994), 183 x 244 cm. © Lin Onus Estate / Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

From 1986 until his death in 1996, Onus made sixteen “spiritual pilgrimages” to Arnhem Land. These journeys enabled him to fill his in-between space, the space of the contemporary Aboriginal painter, with a diverse array of techniques and a diverse array of points of view

that underlie his genius for dismantling the processes of seeing.

Introduced to his own ancestral site at the Barmah Forest, Onus engages the place with the full force of his transformative and meta-representational vision. The painting is a strikingly simple subversion of the landscape techniques on which the painting itself capitalizes. Seeing itself as it is represented in the painting is a jigsaw puzzle that can be too-easily disrupted by the removal of a couple of pieces. Significantly the pieces themselves *do not fit*, suggesting that the jigsaw of visual representation is a tenuous and provisional one that overlays other forms of seeing. But the striking thing about this very large painting is the ease with which it employs a Western aesthetic while at the same moment undercutting the ocularcentrism of Western representation.

Onus engages in a transformative aesthetic that acknowledges conflict yet subtly reconfigures it by appropriating dominant art forms. One particular source of conflict is the discourse of Western history. Since there is no way of existing outside history, Lin Onus interpolates history with a characteristic mixture of humour and rage.

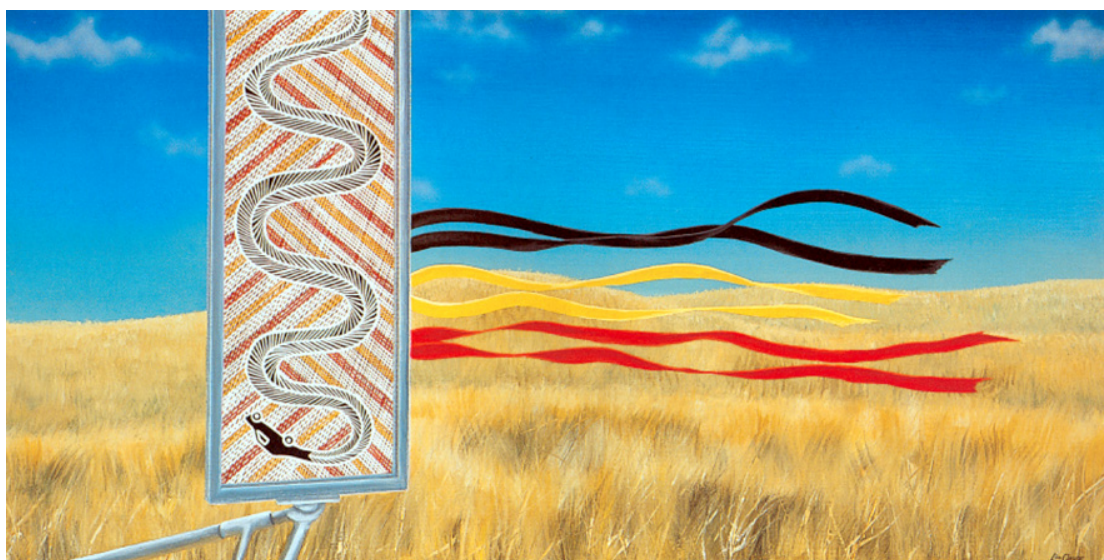


And on the Eighth Day (1992), 182 x 145 cm.

© Lin Onus Estate / Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

In *And on the Eighth Day* (1992) we find two winged Valkyries flying Botticelli-like into what is obviously an Australian landscape, carrying the toxic effects of colonization: sheep, whose cloven hoofs tore up the land; barbed wire, used to fence pastoral properties' land and keep trespassers out; the gun, used to decimate Aboriginal populations; the Bible symbolizing cultural colonization; and in a typically humorous note, a toilet cleanser, the 'toilet duck' which becomes a sacred object held aloft by the angels winging across the painting. The picture of these winged female Valkyries on the eighth day of creation is an extremely anti-imperialist painting prompted by Onus's reaction to the Republican debate and the sight of bumper stickers saying "Keep our flag forever".² It is neither the flag of Aboriginal people nor the flag of most Australians, a point that emphasizes the complexity of postcolonial discourse in a settler colony. The painting is a luminous parody of invasion.

The interpenetration of place and history is also a feature of Onus's *Road to Redfern* (1988). This painting captures a similarly utopian vision that may be seen prominently in all postcolonial literature, one that can be called 'remembering the future'.



Road to Redfern (1988), 60 x 120 cm. © Lin Onus Estate/Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

² The referendum held in 2001 on whether Australia should become a republic led to a robust and acrimonious debate in Australian political life. Although a majority favoured a republic in the period leading up to the vote, the Yes case was defeated because it advocated an appointed rather than elected President. The issue of the flag on which the Union Jack has prominent place was associated with this debate and demonstrated Australia's tenacious colonial status, one vigorously opposed by Aboriginal people.

In the rear-vision mirror of the truck, which flies the colours of the Aboriginal flag, on the way to Redfern is the image of the rainbow serpent, demonstrating the ways in which the past infuses the present to produce a hopeful future. *The Road to Redfern* is a dialectical image, which captures the unity of past and future in a mobile present. The past is apprehended in terms of the future and vice versa. It offers an image that is both a vision of the past and a utopian assurance of the future of Aboriginal identity. The painting is crucially framed by the title: the road to Redfern is the road towards a Sydney suburb that has been the centre of urban Aboriginal resistance, a modern urban sacred site. Redfern Park was the location of Prime Minister Paul Keating's historic acceptance of white responsibility for Aboriginal dispossession, an acceptance that was denied by the subsequent conservative government of John Howard. The rainbow serpent in the rear-view mirror is the sustaining metaphor for the continuation of the past in the present. The fact that the head of the serpent is a truck is a cunning metaphor for the persistence of Aboriginal identity in modernity and the importance of mobility and transformation. The image is dialectical because it resists closure.

Onus captures here the key feature of any hopeful vision of the future. The valuing of the mythic past in the Aboriginal imagination is not only an attempt to disrupt the dominance of history, but also to re-conceive a place in the present, a place transformed by the infusion of this past. This is an infusion that lies at the core of the 'bricolage' of Onus's painting. The present is the crucial site of the continual motion by which the new comes into being. In such transformative conceptions of utopian hope the future is always a possibility emerging from the past. For those societies contesting the dominance of colonial discourse, the radically new is always embedded in and transformed by the past. This is why the connection between the rainbow serpent in the rear-vision mirror and the future of Aboriginal sovereignty symbolized by Redfern are so significant. For Onus the road to the future is powered by hope.

Remembering the Future

Postcolonial literatures continually affirm this sense of the future in the past, what Edouard Glissant calls a "prophetic vision of the past" (1989, 64), 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. 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. (Interview, Banipal, Spring 1999)

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 (1986, 4, 158). 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, and 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

(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.

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 opposition but transformation, yet 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. Friedrich 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" (ibid, 50). In other words the tension of revolution is rendered productive by its location in a spiralling compression of time.

The contingency of the past disrupts the apparent polarity between past and future. 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', and he admonishes Hegel because "What Has Been overwhelms what is approaching ... the categories Future, Front, Novum" (1986, 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 (ibid, 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. (Ibid, 13)

While utopias exist in the future, utopianism, anticipatory consciousness, is heavily invested in the present.

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.



Visit Palestine, Franz Kraus (1936).

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 not just to incarcerate the Palestinians but to wall off the past.



Visit Palestine, Amer Shamali (2010).

Time, Utopia and Utopianism

We think of time as either flowing or enduring. 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: past, present and future. 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.” (Ibid, 31.) Or as Mahmoud Darwish puts it, “Time is a river / blurred by the tears we gaze through.”

Kummel makes the point that duration without succession would lose all temporal characteristics:

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. (1968, 35)

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 concrete over abstract utopias. Bloch makes a distinction between ‘abstract utopia’, or wishful thinking that is merely fantastic, and ‘concrete utopia’, the outcome of wishful thinking passed into wilful action. 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.

What the *Visit Palestine* postcard series reveals is that *Heimat* is not Paradise. *Heimat* 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.

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. (Ibid, 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 wilful 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

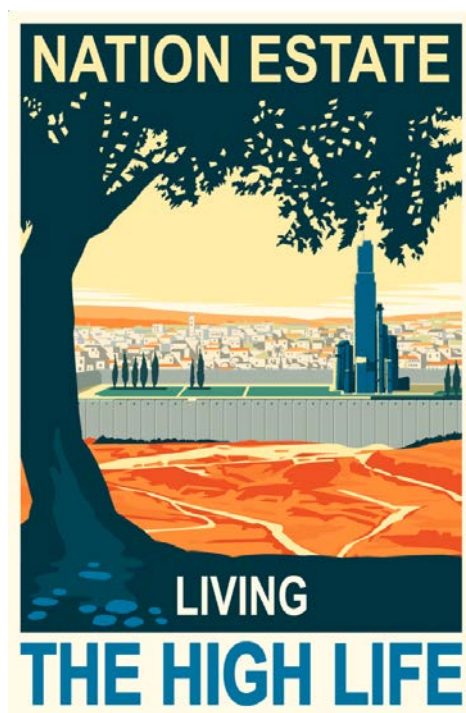
representation of the Middle East in general and the Palestinians in particular is that same media, that same audience. That this has not occurred has become tragically obvious as the US continues to support the Israeli army and its horrific attacks on Palestinian people in Gaza, while Hamas appears unable or unwilling to extricate itself from the image of violent opposition in which it has been cast.

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 (and to avoid military responses that lead to the slaughter of Palestinians). In Sydney a Palestinian film festival has been occurring annually since 2008. The organizers 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 has 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.

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, which 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 nation state reduced to a building has simply become the 'Nation Estate'—a single block of forced migrants. Its subtitle, 'Living the High Life', expands on the irony.



Nation Estate, Larissa Sansour (2011).

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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.

Nation Estate consists of a number of photos of different floors of a single building representing Palestine. The lobby indicates various floors with no distinction between Israel and Palestine:



‘Lobby’, *Nation Estate*, Larissa Sansour (2012).

© Larissa Sansour, with permission.

Watering an olive tree on another floor is an activity that can be carried out anywhere in this single nation state:



‘Olive Tree’, *Nation Estate*, Larissa Sansour (2012).

© Larissa Sansour, with permission.

While Jerusalem is simply one floor of the building among others rather than the focus of ongoing conflict:



‘Jerusalem’, *Nation Estate*, Larissa Sansour (2012).

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The utopian function of this series is to ground the possibility of a single state in an imaginative space beyond conflict, something that the opponents of her work did not realize.

The reaction to this humorous depiction of the nation state was unexpected controversy. After they were shortlisted for the prestigious Musée de l'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 Musée de l'Elysée art prize to be so dangerous.

The project's depiction of a single high-rise nation clearly meets the requirements of a grounded utopia—challenging dominant conceptions of reality, and “opening a utopian space for thinking, feeling, debating and cultivating the possibility of historically rooted (and thus historically contingent) alternative social relations” (Davis 2012, 136–7). I would contend that, although whimsical, Larissa Sansour's utopia offers a possible picture 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, watering an olive tree or getting out of the lift at level 3, Jerusalem, *Nation Estate* is a grounded utopia because it is the utopia of the single state.

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.



Space Exodus, Larissa Sansour. © Larissa Sansour, with permission.

This is 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 conflict 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 transformative 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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