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Decolonizing the Figure of the Migrant, or What Does Palestine Teach Us About the Migrant Question?

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The ongoing "migrant crisis"—the displacement of millions of persons from and across the Global South, which peaked in 2015 but began much earlier—troubles the distinction between the colonial past and the purportedly postcolonial present. For migrants are not foreigners, strangers, or unexpected guests, but the human debris of empire, simultaneously forced into movement and immobilized in transit zones at the borders of the (former) metropole. Against the dehistoricized view that prevails in both right- and left-leaning media accounts of migration, we need to insist on the *longue durée* history that produced displacement on a mass scale, from the settlement of Europeans in the colonies to the mass transfer of colonial and then postcolonial subject-citizens to Europe.

This history of displacement, in turn, requires us to revise our understanding of decolonization in the present. Decolonization, for the migrant, does not entail what Frantz Fanon termed "the substitution of one 'species' of mankind for another"—*pace* the nativist right's dystopian fantasies of "reverse colonization."[1] Rather, it necessitates a sustained critique of the conditions that produce the figure of the migrant as a foreigner/stranger.

This figure relies on a perspectival trick of historic proportions.[2] As Fanon reminds us, "in the colonies the foreigner coming from elsewhere [*l'étranger venu d'ailleurs*] imposed himself using his cannon and machines. . . . The ruling species is first and foremost the one from elsewhere [*celle qui vient d'ailleurs*], different from the indigenous population [*celle qui ne ressemble pas aux autochtones*], 'the others.'"[3] Colonization, in turn, occasioned displacement on a mass scale: the forcible relocation of expropriated peasants; the displacement of entire villages concentrated in *camps de regroupement*; the conscription of tens of thousands of colonized soldiers in the two world wars; and the massive recruitment of cheap colonial and then postcolonial labor are some of the

[1] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 1. The literature propounding the notion of "reverse colonization" is by now vast. In the French context, see Jean Raspail, *The Camp of the Saints*, trans. Norman Shapiro (New York: Scriber, 1975) and Renaud Camus, *Le grand remplacement* (Paris: Reinharc, 2011).

[2] Nearly two decades ago, Mireille Rosello reminded us that "the vision of the immigrant as guest is a metaphor that has forgotten it is a metaphor." Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 3. Today this metaphor remains ubiquitous in both nativist and liberal discourses. On the metaphor of hospitality on the left, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at our Door* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

[3] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 5. Translation modified.

most salient features of colonial governance in the 19th and 20th centuries.[4] That the conquering foreigners of old have become the natives of what Jean Genet dubbed "the 'settled' nations" sheds light on the colonial origins of what today we call *nativism*: a claim to indigeneity that began, paradoxically, in the colonies, and returns, like a boomerang, to the metropole.[5] A more politically correct equivalent for the nativist expression *Français de souche*—meaning of French (read "white") roots—*autochtone* is, let us not forget, a term that was coined at the colonial frontier to speak of *les indigènes*, the natives.

The irony of yesterday's natives becoming today's foreigners/strangers in the former metropole would not have been lost on Fanon, who already in 1961 was warning us against "the planetary violence" that threatened to stifle the hard won future of newly independent nations in the name of "pacific coexistence." Written in the context of the Cold War, Fanon's words hardly need to be updated to account for "the question of minorities" in the present context.[6] What does need to change is the critical lexicon we wield to speak of what I propose to call "the migrant question," riffing on Said's formulation in *The Question of Palestine*. The migrant question is "something to be thought through, tried out, engaged with—in short . . . a subject to be dealt with politically."[7]

The question of Palestine has much to teach us about the migrant question. Given the importance of the Palestinian refugee population in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, it should not surprise us that Palestinians make up a significant number of those displaced, *en masse*, in the wake of the US-led invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Arab uprisings of the 2010s.[8] Tragically, the refugees of Israel's 1948 and 1967 conquests have been displaced yet again, this time by wars waged against the citizen-subjects of sovereign nation-states. And yet UNWRA's numbers are misleading, as is the politically vital but ultimately dehistoricized numbers race led by the UNHRC and other humanitarian organizations. Indeed, the statistics of the ongoing refugee crisis obfuscate the *longue durée* dynamics of (post)colonial displacements—dynamics that were set in motion with the mass transfer of populations occasioned by colonial conquest.

[4] Patrick Chamoiseau and Achille Mbembe dial back to 1492 to include trans-Atlantic slavery in the *longue durée* history of colonial displacement erased in nativist discourses about the "hordes of migrants" at our door. Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), 85–86. My translation. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Frères migrants* (Paris: Seuil, 2017), 23.

[5] Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), 15. My understanding of nativist claims to indigeneity is indebted to the work of Mahmood Mamdani, particularly his analysis of "the [politicization] of indigeneity" in postcolonial Africa. Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 14. I discuss the colonizer's fantasy of becoming "native" in the colony in "Portrait of an Arab Jew," in *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization*, by Olivia C. Harrison (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 81–100.

[6] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 39. Translation modified.

[7] Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Press, 1992), xli.

[8] I have not been able to find a source that separately lists the number of Palestinians (refugees or occupied Palestinians) displaced since 2011. UNWRA, which keeps track of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, has estimates for those displaced within and outside of Syria. "Syria Crisis," United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinians in the Near East, accessed 7 February 2019, https://www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis. On Palestinian refugees leaving Lebanon for Europe, see "Palestinians Desperate to Flee Lebanon Refugee Camp," *Al Jazeera*, 5 April 2015, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/palestinians-desperate-flee-lebanon-refugee-camp-150330080534973.html.

This is where I find it useful to turn to what Said called "the question of Palestine," for it illuminates the paradoxical condition of the (post)colonial migrant, caught between coerced movement (exile) and enforced immobility (the camp). Notwithstanding differences in migratory experiences, Palestine is exemplary of displacement in the wake of empire:

> It is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. . .. Insofar as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.[9]

Said's relational understanding of (post)colonial displacement can be substantiated in an archive of texts that bring Palestine into a transnational history of (post)colonial migration. In my work to date, I have focused on the centrality of the Palestinian question in what Abellatif Laâbi, glossing Fanon, called "cultural decolonization" in the Maghreb, and grassroots antiracism in postcolonial France, from the migrant collectives of the Palestine committees (1970–72) to the controversial decolonial group founded in 2005, les Indigènes de la république (the Natives of the republic).[10] In recent years, Palestine has taken on central importance in contemporary representations of migration, from Ai Weiwei's 2017 documentary film *Human Flow* to Nathacha Appanah's 2016 novel *Tropique de la violence* about clandestine migrants in Mayotte, France's far-flung island outpost in the Indian Ocean.[11] These texts are, I argue, part of a corpus of works that attempt to think through decolonization on a planetary scale, breaking out of the vertical, North-South axis to attend to the points of intersection, solidarity, and friction that appear on a transcolonial map. In different ways, Kateb Yacine's 1971 dialect play *Mohamed arfad valiztek* (Mohamed pack your bags), Tahar Ben Jelloun's 1976 novel *La réclusion solitaire* or Sakinna Boukhedenna's 1987 *Journal, Nationalité: immigré(e)* invoke Palestine to reveal the transformation of the figure of the native (*l'indigène, l'autochtone*) into the migrant, and the "substitution" of the conqueror from elsewhere (the settler) into a native of the post-settler colony.[12]

Mohamed arfad valiztek premiered in Algiers in 1971 on National Emigration Day, a national holiday timed to coincide with the ten-year anniversary of the massacre of some two hundred unarmed Algerian protestors in Paris, with the aim of encouraging Algerian migrants to return home. (Ironically, when the play toured in migrant communities in France in 1972, several workers took the poster of the play for a far-right campaign to send the "Mohameds" back to Algeria.) The officials who commissioned the play for National Emigration Day must have been rather irked when they saw the play, however. Through a series of skits that portray the eponymous protagonist's misadventures in

[9] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 332.

[10] Abdellatif Laâbi, "Réalités et dilemmes de la culture nationale (II)," *Souffles* 6 (1967): 29.

[11] *Human Flow*, dir. Ai Weiwei (Participant Media, 2017). Nathacha Appanah, *Tropique de la violence* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

[12] Kateb Yacine, "Mohamed prends ta valise," in *Boucherie de l'espérance: oeuvres théâtrales*, ed. Zebeida Chergui (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 205–370; Tahar Ben Jelloun, *La réclusion solitaire* (Paris: Denoël, 1976). Sakinna Boukhedenna, *Journal, Nationalité: immigré(e)* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987).

Algeria and France, *Mohamed arfad valiztek* delivers a biting critique of the Algerian state's complicity in procuring cheap labor for the former metropole, and exposes the transformation of the colonized into the figure of the migrant. Central to the play's double critique of French colonialism/racism and Algerian corruption is the mobilization of Palestine in the first scene, which depicts an Algerian and a Palestinian—both named Mohamed—tilling the land under the watchful eye of a *colon*/settler. In a scene of mistaken hospitality, the settler and the colonized each attempt to invite their "guest" to stay at their house, in a satirical send-up of colonization that anticipates the contest for indigeneity in France/Israel. Welcomed as a "guest" in his own homeland, Mohamed becomes a stranger/foreigner in the country that expropriated him. In the play, colonization and the settlement of the conquered lands marks the beginning of the story of migration and exile in both Algeria and Palestine.[13]

I dub the transcolonial decolonization of the figure of the migrant that obtains in *Mohamed arfad valiztek* a form of *indigenous critique*: a critique of the conditions that have enabled "the substitution of one 'species' of man for another," whereby yesterday's foreigner becomes today's native, and yesterday's native becomes a foreigner/stranger.[14] The migrant is not an unexpected guest, but in the words of Genet "the discarded refuse of 'settled' nations."[15] The fact that Genet used this phrase to speak of the Palestinian camps in Jordan should not mislead us into thinking his comments apply only to Palestinians. As Ghassan Kanafani's 1962 novella *Men in the Sun* reminds us, the Palestinian refugee was already a migrant, shunted between forced immobility and perpetual movement.[16]

It is important to insist that the histories of displacement evoked above—expropriation and occupation, internment camps, conscription, labor migration, and the ongoing "migrant crisis"—are complex, overdetermined, and heterogeneous. To conflate them under the banner of coloniality risks grossly oversimplifying the messy realities of overlapping but distinct histories. What I seek to do, rather, is reverse the terms of the discourse of crisis that governs current representations of migration in order to shed light on the multiple histories that have produced mass displacement on a global scale. If Georges Didi-Huberman insists that "the refugees are simply *returning*," it is not because they are literally returning home, but because their presence forces us to think through the conditions of their displacement, in which we are *nolens volens* implicated.[17] To decolonize the figure of the migrant does not entail effacing the very real differences between heterogeneous experiences of displacement. On the contrary, it requires us to attend to the material, historical, and lived experiences erased in the expression *migrant crisis* to account for a human reality that escapes a strictly institutional understanding of decolonization from above. If our aim is to decolonize the figure of the migrant, this process will be as endless as Fanon's decolonization, and as urgent.

[13] For a fuller version of this argument, see Olivia C. Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb*, 41–59.

[14] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1.

[15] Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 15.

[16] Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories*, trans. Hilary Kilpatrick. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

[17] Georges Didi-Huberman and Niki Giannari, *Passer, quoiqu'il en coûte* (Paris: Minuit, 2017), 31. Original italics. My translation.