

I Saw Ramallah by Mourid Barghouti

Discussion themes, associated passages, and questions for contemplation

Please note page numbers *should* roughly correspond to the page numbers of the English print edition.

The militarization of space

"I look at the body of the bridge. Will I really cross it? Will there be some last-minute problem? Will they send me back? Will they invent a procedural error?...There is no topological difference between this Jordanian land I stand on and that Palestinian land on the other side of the bridge. That, then, is the 'Occupied Territory.'" p.5

"I do not thank you, you short, unimportant bridge. You are not a sea or an ocean that we might find our excuses in your terrors. You are not a mountain range inhabited by wild beasts and fantastical monsters that we might summon our instincts to protect us from you...I do not say thank you, little bridge. Should I be ashamed in front of you? Or should you be ashamed in front of me?" p. 10

"In that room I found myself retreating to 'there'; to that hidden place inside each one of us, the place of silence and introspection. A dark, private space in which I take refuge when the outside world becomes absurd or incomprehensible." p.25

"You discover that you cannot join in the funeral, accompany him to the grave, because you have no passport, or no visa, or no residence, or because you are forbidden from entry." p.135

"Neither this ID nor even the new Palestinian passport that the Palestinian Authority has started to issue after the Oslo Agreement will solve our problems at borders. The states of the world acknowledge the Palestinian ID and the Palestinian passport on paper only. But at the borders, in airports, they tell the holder of these papers: 'You have to be pre-approved by security.' And this pre-approval we will never obtain." p.139

"He spoke about the continuous closures on the West Bank and in Gaza with a stroke of the Israeli government's pen: 'They prevent even the leadership from traveling if they wish. You think you can go to Jerusalem, or even to Gaza. They've declared them enclosed areas, and their excuse this time is the elections. They stop people praying in the Holy Place even on Fridays. Barricades and searches and computers. They send us one message, all the time and in every way: 'We are the masters here.''" p.141

Questions to consider:

- What are some similarities that you notice between current issues in the US regarding immigration and citizenship and Palestinian repatriation as described in this book?
- What are some similarities that you are aware of between borderlands (i.e. West Bank and Texas)?
- Have you experienced militarization of space? If so, what was it like? Did you realize it in that moment?
- Are there ways that you have participated in the militarization of space, in your speech, actions, or ways of thinking?

Time + temporality

"The stranger is the person who renews his Residence Permit." ... "He is the one who can not tell his story in a continuous narrative and lives hours in every moment. Every moment for him has its passing immortality." p.3

"How did we let them build all these cities? These fortresses? These barracks? Year after year?" p.33

"The window I am looking out of is some thirty years away; thirty years and nine volumes of verse. It is the distance of an eye from its tears under the willow of a distant graveyard. I look out of the window at my life, the only life that my mother gave me, at the life of those absent to the farthest point of absence. And why is it that in the window of joy I am overcome by the memory of elegies?" p.37

"Does a poet live in space or in time? Our homeland is the shape of the time we spent in it." p.41

"The Occupation forced us to remain with the old. That is its crime. It did not deprive us of the clay ovens of yesterday, but of the mystery of what we could invent tomorrow." p.69

"And dividing the memory between an old weariness and a newfound comfort was impossible... Sensations of a new beginning and of the resumption of a broken past jostled with each other. The clarity of the 'return' to the house was crowded by the uncertainty of the common future of the family and those close to it in faraway places." p.73

"My head on the pillow in Abu Hazim's house. Another home for the traveler, another pillow for the head. My relationship with place is in truth a relationship with time. I move in patches of time, some I have lost and some I possess for a while and then I lose because I am always without a place. I try to regain a personal time that has passed. Nothing that is absent ever comes back complete. Nothing is recaptured as it was. 'Ein al-Deir is not a place, it is a time. Evidence of the last rain that we can see on our shoes even though our eyes tell us it has dried. The thorns of the brambles trained our hands and our sides to bleed early when we were children returning home at sunset to our mothers. Do I want to scramble through brambles now? No, what I want is the time of scrambling." p.76

"The word 'fifty' rang in my ears like a coffee cup breaking on marble before the guest's fingers have even touched it. I feel that I have lived long and lived little. I am a child and an elderly man at the same time." p.137

Questions to consider:

- How was your experience with the way the author discusses or utilizes the concept of time in the book?
- What is the relationship between displacement and time, in your understanding or experience of it?
- Do you think colonialism (or oppression in general) distorts the oppressed's relationship to time? How about the oppressor?
- Have you contemplated how the ways in which time is measured, expected, and even enforced in our current society can be colonial and unaligned with the natural world?