
Book Review: *The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media and the Radical Imagination*

The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media and the Radical Imagination, by Greg A. Burris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019). 251 pp.

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I still have not made my mind up yet about whether Greg Burris's *The Palestinian Idea* is a set of incredibly ambitious provocations and ideas delivered with modesty and circumspection or a series of modest reflections and observations delivered with a good deal of force and conviction. This, bear in mind, is by no means a critique. Like those glass prisms with the image that changes in accordance with the angle with which you hold it, the argument laid out in the book shifts drastically with a slight adjustment in the way one regards it. Looked at from one perspective one sees an arrangement of careful and incisive readings of the Palestinian film and media landscape, but with a mere three degree change in adjustment one beholds a series of bold, controversial, and perhaps quite necessary interventions into such questions as the nature of power, the future of solidarity, and the current dilemma of the Palestinian struggle.

This idea of a new truth or presence unfolding or revealing itself within the midst of another as a result of only the slightest shift in perspective is a notion that in many ways cuts to the core of the very Palestinian Idea that serves as the anchor and thesis of Professor Burris's book. Of the Palestinian Idea, Burris writes:

It is therefore my contention that the radicality of a piece of art, a protest image, or a film or media object consists in its ability to create a portal into the impossible and challenge the very coordinates of reality itself; it consists in its ability to magnify the fissures and hidden recesses of the social order around us and open a window into another world. This, then, is the central question with which this book seeks to grapple: in the context of Palestine, how do we catch a glimpse of this other place, this world that is concealed somewhere within our own world? To put it in philosophical terms, how does utopia erupt from dystopia, the New from the Old, and the future from the present? *Or, better yet, how does equality emerge from inequality?*" (p. 15)

It is this idea that Burris circles back to again and again throughout the book, pulling you out from within the depths of an analysis of a particular film or artefact of political media to return to an idea that suggests, in many ways, nothing less than a political meeting point between immanence and transcendence. There are many writers, particularly of political and literary theory, that Burris contends with throughout his work. Some, such as Frank Wilderson (arguably the father of the so-called Afro-pessimist movement), serve as an archetype that Burris models his thoughts and reflections against, others such as the famed Edward Said are writers that he thinks with and alongside but two in particular, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière and the African American philosopher Cedric J. Robison serve as his travelling companions throughout the text as he takes them with him in his encounter with Palestine; the people, the place, and, most importantly, the idea.

Burris's notion of the Palestinian Idea emerges from a reflection on the age-old question of the link between art and politics. Between a stultified idea of politics as existing solely "in the voting booth and on the factory floor" (p. 4) and the all too common rejoinder that "Everything is Political," Burris stakes out a third position that ultimately challenges and transcends the previous two: a work of art or an action or indeed anything at all is political only in so far as it disrupts power, as it reveals the cracks and holes in the pervading order of things. Taking his thinking from Rancière, Burris writes: "Politics is not an order but an event; it is not a field of knowledge but a hole in that field; it is not a *structure* but a *rupture*" (p. 5).

However, for Burris, these cracks in the system are not merely cracks in the foundation of power for, as he says in the above quotation, they are "windows into another world," a world that already exists inside and alongside the old world *not* something to wait for or even to aspire to but a reality

that is already around us if we would only see it. In this sense, the author usefully compares his notion of the Palestinian Idea with Edward Said's usage of the same term. For Said this term was a goal to aspire to, something that was to be achieved in the future. However, for Burris:

Conceived as a far-off goal or remote telos, the Palestinian Idea (for Said) is located in the unattainable distance, and it is not clear how we can ever bridge the temporal gap dividing these two incompatible worlds. As long as it remains focused on the future, "a program of equality," as Joan Copjec argues, "is as clearly destined to defeat as is the goal of reaching infinity starting from a finite point." (p. 17)

Following Ranciere's notion that inequality is an unnatural distortion of a natural equality and Robison's idea of the Black Radical Tradition as an ethos and reality that predates the Transatlantic Slave Trade, for Burris the Palestinian Idea is already here; it can only be located in the here and now and to confine it to the future is to simultaneously let it go. Understanding the relationship of equality to inequality, or the Black Radical Tradition to racism or finally the Palestinian Idea to Zionism is not merely an issue of chronology but is something that gets to the heart of the theoretical intervention that the author is making. As he writes:

Just as equality should not be viewed as a reaction against inequality, and just as Black radicalism should not be seen simply as a knee-jerk response to white supremacy, the Palestinian Idea should likewise not be understood only as a reaction to the brutality of the Zionist occupation. On the contrary, *the brutality of the Zionist occupation is a reaction to the Palestinian Idea.* (p. 30)

It might still not be clear to the reader what precisely what the Palestinian Idea is. In the first chapter after the introduction, Burris uses the theorist Catherine Malabou's tripartite notion of plasticity as the *giving of form*, *receiving of form*, and *destroying of form* (indeed this tripartite division of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis is a common theme throughout this book) as a method to help us understand better the Palestinian Idea. For Burris the *receiving of form* is the oppression itself. In the Palestinian case one could say it is the Naqba both as a historical event and as something that is ongoing and *the giving of form* is the resistance to that oppression; in the case of Palestine, Burris speaks of the *giving of form* as the Intifada. Then there is the *destruction of form*, the ability to point to another imagination, another world that renders the old divisions meaningless and shifts the terrain upon which

we construct our identities. For Burris, this destruction of form, this imagination or being that is not a reaction to Zionism but that indeed Zionism itself reacts *against* is the Palestinian Idea.

Once Burris establishes this idea the book launches forward into a series of separate case studies or meta-analyses attempting to sift out this elusive Palestinian Idea wherever it can be read. The first attempt in chapter 2 is an extremely close reading of Anne-Marie Jacir's films *Salt of this Sea* (2008) and *When I Saw You* (2012). The author gives a particularly close reading of *When I Saw You*, likening the space of the refugee camp featured in the film as equivalent to the *receiving of form* ie. the passive act of waiting which he contrasts with the fedayeen camp, in the film, as the *giving of form* ie. the act of resistance. For Burris, though both these forms fail to break out of the formal logic of the Naqba, they accept its reality as the predominant condition of their existence, and this holds true whether they accept it passively or struggle against it violently. It is only when the main character Tarek attempts to ignore the reality of the Naqba all together, successfully evades the border patrol and physically runs into the 1948 territories that the Palestinian Idea is then realized and the form that is the Naqba is undone albeit temporarily.

From there the book turns in chapter 3 to a discussion of documentary film, taking aim at the notion that documentaries in support of the Palestinian cause should primarily be about accurately reflecting the reality of the conflict as a way of counteracting Zionist propaganda. For the author this again falls into the old dynamic of linear resistance, *giving of form*, when indeed documentary can also be used to sift out possible futures, potentialities already buried in the present. The author cites Mais Darwazah's documentary *My Love Awaits Me by the Sea* (2013) as an example of such a film. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the Palestinian Idea in the context of surveillance, while chapter 5 turns to the phenomenon of mutual solidarity between the Black (African-American) and Palestinian struggles as a living example of the Palestinian Idea. For Burris, this solidarity and connection between the African American experience and the Palestinian one is not one of mere resistance to Israeli settler colonialism or American racism, but actually embodies the creation of a new configuration of internationalism with all the new horizons and possibilities that such an arrangement conjures.

There are a lot of tropes and ideological frameworks, particularly common within Anglo-American activism, that Burris tackles using the Palestinian Idea. It is not the fact that he is critiquing such frameworks that is refreshing,

as the right-wing media in much of the West is polluted with rhetoric attacking the ideological tropes of the left-wing of American academia and activist discourse, but that Burris is clearly offering up such critique from a position of solidarity with the express purpose of reaching out and *transcending* the binaries imposed by power and inequality as opposed to merely confronting them.

One of the ideas he subtly takes aim at both in his critique of Said's notion of the Palestinian Idea and his discussion of the refugee and fedayeen camp in Anne-Marie Jacir's *When I Saw You* is this multilayered notion of waiting as a narrative that is both imposed on Palestinians by the Naqba (what Burris calls Naqba time) and which is also perpetuated by them. In talking about *When I Saw You*, he describes how when the main character:

Tarek attempts to leave the fedayeen camp on the second morning, Layth (a commander) issues that same injunction that Tarek had so often heard in the refugee camp: *stanna*.¹ Here we should also recall that Tarek's training regimen with the fedayeen frequently involves a rather peculiar exercise: perpetually running in circles. Despite their optimism and bravado, the fedayeen are ultimately going nowhere, and this subtle critique is missed by the film's negative reviewers who accuse Jacir of romanticizing history. (p. 74)

Burris continues his critique, in the context of this film, and applies it to right of the return writing:

but while the dream of return appears to be a universally shared aspiration, none of these characters is able to accomplish it. Return remains an elusive impossibility, forever out of reach, and while the inhabitants of the refugee camp are waiting for official channels to arrange their return, the fedayeen are waiting for a signal from their commanders to tell them that they are finally capable of matching Israel in military might. Despite their differences, then, the refugees and the commandos have this trait in common; both groups are stuck in Jordan, and these spatial confines correspond to ideological ones. (p. 77)

There is something to be said about this critique not so much in the vulgar (and ridiculous) sense that the Palestinians could return to Palestine if they only transcended their own conceptual horizons, but that much of the Palestinian movement, since the First Intifada, has been stuck in a perpetual

1. *Stanna* is in Arabic word that means 'wait' in English.

waiting process wherein calls for social justice within Palestinian society and calls for some measure of egalitarianism for Palestinian refugees, within the Arab countries in which they reside, is endlessly deferred to the day when the right of return is realized. This right of return, in turn, is then often imagined less as a tangible reality but more as a simple winding back of the clock to 1948. In this sense much official Palestinian discourse and certainly Arab state discourse, removes agency from the hands of Palestinian society, and Arab society at large, instead placing the fate of the Palestinians largely in the hands of fate. This critique of the idea of waiting also animates Burris's departure from Edward Said's notion of the Palestinian Idea as something that exists only to be potentially actualized at some point in the future.

Burris's critique of the totalizing nature of Foucauldian discourses of power is also notable. Ideas of power relations as being totalistic structures wholly deterministic of both group and individual identity (whether or not this is a correct reading of Foucault) have become highly prevalent within the American activist sphere. Burris accomplishes his critique here not only by invoking Rancière's notion of equality pre-existing inequality but also by citing Freud's writing of *Moses and Monotheism* which alleged that Moses, the ancient founder of Judaism, was actually Egyptian as opposed to Hebrew. For Burris, Freud publishing such a work alleging that one of the symbolic fathers of Judaism was effectively not a Jew at precisely the same time as European anti-Semitism was fast approaching its zenith was, in and of itself, a radically political act.

He usefully compares what he sees as Freud's response to anti-Semitism with Zionism's. As Burris puts it:

Freud's endeavor was radically subversive in that he sought not merely to reverse anti-Semitism's terms but to annihilate them. The State of Israel, on the other hand, has attempted to stabilize Jewish identity as a birthright and to locate it within fixed and stable boundaries. (p. 45)

In this sense Freud's response to anti-Semitism is a Jewish example of the Palestinian Idea. It is an opening up of the terms and possibilities of what it means to be Jewish as a response to the identarian grounds upon which anti-Semitism is constructed. It reimagines Jewish identity as something that is impermanent, flexible and permeable; all of which are ideas that find a true resonance in historic and contemporary Jewish diasporic identity. Zionism which answers European nationalist anti-Semitism *on its own terms*, unable to imagine Jews existing outside anti-Semitism, seeks the only remedy it can

offer; a form of Jewish nationalism, and one that, as luck would have it, can only be achieved as the result of a long and ongoing process of ethnic cleansing and settler-colonialism.

It is along similar lines that Burris offers a trenchant critique of the common term “ally” featured prominently today in American activist discourse. For Burris the term ally creates a kind of hierarchy within the politics of coalition building and for him coalition building is not only about fighting power but constructing a better world based on precisely the ideas, values, and modes of life that power seeks to negate. For that grand task the author seeks to counteract allyship with solidarity and the mere ally with the much more powerful comrade, implying of course that we all have some skin in the game of creating a better world.

A tangible example of the necessity of such a critique can be seen in the American so-called anti-imperialist left’s muted reaction to the Arab Spring. Much of the American left coming out of both the anti-Iraq war movement and the Palestine Solidarity movement found it very hard to stake a position of solidarity with the uprisings going on in 2011, particularly in Syria and Libya, precisely because they did not feel comfortable as Americans (often White Americans) staking out any position other than that of being the eternal critique of America and its political allies. As a result, they were hesitant to offer solidarity towards those in the Middle East attempting to transform their societies instead perpetually looking to sniff out America’s role in the situation, whether or not this was even relevant, so they could then take the countervailing position. This, to me, was a perfect example of the shortcomings of allyship in the face of a situation of regional revolution; a situation that clearly called for transnational political solidarity and indeed comradeship. This being said, one could still certainly say that there is a place for “allyship” as distinct from “solidarity” but Burris’s reassertion and reframing of comradeship and comradeship as the building blocks of internationalism is certainly a welcome intervention.

As a series of theoretical interventions into questions of solidarity and the construction of new horizons of potentiality within movement-building this book stakes out some interesting ground and makes some useful suggestions. Simultaneously in terms of film or media critique *The Palestinian Idea* contains highly original symbolic readings of the work of Anne-Marie Jacir, a warranted critique of the overemphasis on realism within Palestinian activist documentary and an extensive profile of the recent wave of African American Palestine solidarity movements. It is in the space between both

these modes, one of critique the other of theory, wherein the book falters slightly. In attempting to prove, or even in some ways to illustrate, his notion of the Palestinian Idea, the author ends up allowing his Palestinian Idea to look more fleeting and transient than actually need be.

This is very clear, for example, when Burris connects his Palestinian Idea to his critique or analysis of *When I Saw You*. As was mentioned, in this film Burris locates the Palestinian Idea, the *destruction of form*, in the moment when Tarek, having memorized the movement of Israeli patrol vehicles along the Palestinian border, decides not to wait anymore and simply runs into the occupied territories. The author locating the actualization of the Palestinian Idea in this film using this particular scene is very telling. The fact that the act is one taken almost spontaneously by an individual, applies only to that individual, and the fact that we don't know whether or not the results are long-lasting (i.e., we don't know whether Tarek is eventually caught and sent back or not) illustrates perfectly the elusive nature of the Palestinian Idea. Again, as a piece of film analysis, Burris's writing is both discerning and imaginative and the Palestinian Idea remains a very seductive proposition but in the way the author ties them together something is indeed lost.

Indeed, in presenting the book first and foremost as an exposition of a certain theoretical notion or concept, that is, the Palestinian Idea, the author can also be rightly taken to task for not broadening the frame of his analysis to incorporate the political imagination(s) that became enshrined in certain movements that indeed dared to imagine new political horizons beyond mere opposition to Zionism. Whether we are talking about the far-left internationalisms of the 1970s that placed the Palestinian cause within a broader framework of global revolution or the political imagination of Islamist movements which carry in their discourse a certain renunciation of the political sphere altogether, Burris does himself a disservice by relegating his exposition of the Palestinian Idea exclusively to the realm of film and media critique

Furthermore, unlike the case of Freud and his reassertion of diasporic Jewish identity in the face of European anti-Semitism, it is unclear precisely what distinguishes the Palestinian Idea from a similar framework that could be adopted within the context of any other anti-oppression struggle. Looking at other movements and historical trajectories could have indeed been a fruitful diversion in the way of conducting a more rigorous study of what actually happens when national movements falter, how new imaginations become

possible and then finally how those imaginations can both simultaneously point towards new potentialities as well as new chasms of desperation.

Burris's notion of the Palestinian Idea reminds me of the Lakota ghost dance especially as it is described in Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's seminal work *An Indigenous People's History of United States* (2014). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, particularly after the military defeat of the Lakota peoples in what is today North and South Dakota, a dance, which is said to have begun amongst the Paiute people of Nevada, came to be taken up by Native tribes across the United States. The dance appeared so intense and threatening that it became a perceived security concern for the parts of the US military who were posted near various American Indian reservations in the Great Plains. In fact, it was supposedly as a response to a performance of the Ghost Dance that US troops opened fire on Lakota civilians in Pine Ridge, setting off the infamous Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. As Dunbar-Ortiz (2014, p. 85) herself writes:

Disarmed, held in concentration camps, their children taken away, half starved, the indigenous peoples of the west found a form of resistance that spread like wild-fire in all directions [. . .] pilgrims journeyed to hear his message and receive directions on how to perform the ghost dance, which promised to restore the indigenous world as it was before colonialism, making the invaders disappear and the buffalo return.

What are we to make of such an act? Is it a final act of desperation—a maniac last-ditch attempt to escape from the truth—or is it, rather, the assertion of a new way of regarding reality itself, a collective practice of imagination apparently so powerful and intimidating to the forces of US colonialism that US soldiers opened fire on the Lakota people as they were performing it? Burris leaves us with this uncomfortable question in regard to the positioning and potentiality of the Palestinian Idea that he describes. That being said, an uncomfortable question is not necessarily a barren one. On the contrary, at this moment it is incumbent upon those of us who have followed and who have been invested in the question of Palestine to ask such uncomfortable questions and Burris's book allows us to do that. Greg Burris's *The Palestinian Idea* lights several torches and throws them to the ground illuminating new conceptual paths forward. We can critique the light they cast as being insufficient, we can see several contradictory paths forward where the author may have intended consistency, but we cannot fault him for throwing down the gauntlet. In the end Burris has written two fine books

in the place of one: an excellent collection of film and media analysis on the one hand and a book of timely political–theoretical interventions on the other. The fact that his combination of the two was not perhaps as successful as it could have been should not in any way detract from his achievement here.

REFERENCE

Dunbar-Ortiz, R. 2014. *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*. Beacon.