Palestine and Latin America: Lina Meruane’s Volverse Palestina and Nathalie Handal’s La Estrella Invisible

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines representations of Palestine through the literary, cultural and political landscapes between the Arab world and Latin America in which Palestine has figured in new ways. It examines the connections between Palestine and Latin America, focusing on Lina Meruane’s memoir *Volverse Palestina* (Becoming Palestine, 2013), where the Chilean writer of Palestinian descent looks back at or crosses into Palestine, and the imaginative intertwinings of Bethlehem, Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the poetry of Palestinian US-based writer Nathalie Handal. Drawing on growing scholarship on literary and cultural ties between Latin America and the Arab world, this article explores the role of Palestine in Latin American literature, not only as a representation of immigrant communities and a cultural heritage, but also as part of a perception of Palestine within a broader global context.

In Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (Jabrā Ibrahīm Jabrā)’s 1987 memoir *al-Bīr al-ūlā: fuṣūl min sirah dhātiyyah* (translated by Issa J. Boullata as *The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood* [Jabra 1995]), the writer-narrator ruminates on the Arab population of Bethlehem which in the 1920s and 1930s comprised Roman Catholics and Muslims. He chronicles the Palestine of his youth, conjuring the intertwined Christian, Muslim and Jewish cultures of Bethlehem and the effects of Arab immigration to Latin America:

The severe poverty which befell Palestine toward the end of the nineteenth century caused the young men of Bethlehem to immigrate in large numbers to South and Central America (*īlā aqṭār amrikā al-janūbiyyah, wa amrikā al-wustā*). The First World War further increased the people’s poverty and misery. At the beginning of the 1920s, the effect of immigration was clearly visible in the many vacant houses and buildings whose owners had left and in the state of disrepair and neglect, which characterized hundreds of homes and surrounding fields of the town. (Jabra 1995, 47)

As the writer-narrator surveys the houses abandoned by the young men of Bethlehem who immigrated to South and Central America in search of prosperity during the economic decline of the early 1920s (Baeza 2014a, 61), he focuses attention on the historical and cultural networks between Palestine and Latin America. Jabra’s observations on the

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demographic changes of Bethlehem draw attention to routes of migration from the Ottoman Empire to the New World. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, these routes created a community of Arab immigrants in Latin America and concomitant networks of cultural exchange. At the same time, the presence of large Palestinian communities in Chile, Honduras and Argentina created historical and cultural ties with Palestine. Within such networks, Chilean writers of Palestinian descent have explored these ties more explicitly and contributed to Arab–Latin American literary and cultural flows.

In Chile, writers have revisited these networks between Palestine and Latin America, exploring the distinctly Palestinian experiences of dispossession and diaspora. The poetry of Palestinian Chilean poet Mahfud Massis evokes nostalgia for Palestine and the Arab world (El-Attar 2010, 79; 2013). Another Chilean writer of Palestinian descent, Lina Meruane, chronicles her return to Palestine in an effort to trace the origins of her surname in *Volverse Palestina* (Meruane 2014c; Becoming Palestine). Such representations of Palestine can be read through the literary, cultural and political landscapes of interconnection between the Arab world and Latin America in which Palestine has figured in new ways due to political support for the Palestinian struggle from a number of Latin American governments, historic ties between Cuba and Palestine, and a commonality between Arab and Latin American anti-imperialist movements.

Palestine plays a central role in Meruane’s memoir, where the writer looks back at or crosses into Palestine, and the imaginative intertwinnings of Bethlehem, Haiti and the Dominican Republic are explored in the poetry of Palestinian US-based poet Nathalie Handal. Meruane’s *Volverse Palestina* and Handal’s (2014) *La estrella invisible* (The Invisible Star) examine Palestine through Latin America, foregrounding Palestinian–Latin American cultural networks. The role of Palestine in *Volverse Palestina* and *La estrella invisible*, I argue, appears to be not only an extension of an immigrant community and a cultural heritage, but also part of a perception of the Palestinian struggle within a broader global context.

This article examines the hitherto understudied area of Palestinian–Latin American cultural networks. Meruane and Handal – a Chilean writer of Palestinian descent and a Palestinian poet in Latin America – underscore the connections between Palestine and Latin America through different trajectories: a Chilean writer’s return to Palestine and a Palestinian poet’s literary geography in Latin America. Both Meruane and Handal share a history of Latin American–Palestinian connections and write in Spanish, uniquely exploring these cultural ties. In a memoir and in poetry, they offer a woman’s history of these interactions, tracing Palestinian migration to Latin America, Chilean Palestinians’ return to Palestine, and the Arab diaspora in Latin America. As I argue, these Palestinian–Latin American cultural networks highlight the Palestinian diaspora in Latin America and further contribute to a growing body of hispanophone literature on Palestine.

**Historical flows**

The centrality of Palestine to the Latin American and Arab works discussed here can be traced back to a history of waves of migration to Latin American countries in the 19th century. Chile – the focus of this article – is home to the largest Palestinian diaspora made up of Arab immigrants from Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. In 2011, Chile recognized a sovereign Palestinian state (Raheb 2012, 10). In 2014, a wave of solidarity during the Israeli attack on Gaza rose up in Chile, Peru, Argentina, Colombia and Venezuela and encompassed
organizations of the Palestinian diaspora, labor unions, indigenous and black movements, and left-wing groups. A number of Latin American governments, including Chile, condemned the attack (Baeza 2014b).

Arab–Latin American contact dates back to three waves of migration from the Arab world, largely from the Levant to the Americas in the 19th and early 20th centuries: during the Ottoman Empire (1860 and 1914); during the British Mandate (1918–48); and after the founding of Israel in 1948 and the 1967 War when Palestinian refugees settled in the Americas (Civantos 2015, 294; Janini 2015). Christina Civantos notes that “in the 1860s a flow of Arab immigrants began to arrive in the Americas, where they mainly settled in the United States, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile” (2006, 6). Arabs who migrated from the Ottoman Empire to Latin America during the 19th century arrived with Ottoman passports and would become known as “Turcos” (Turks). Carol N. Fadda-Conrey (2006) points out the assimilation of Arab immigrants to Latin America: “Most often starting out as peddlers and small shop owners, many of them prospered in their adopted countries, in many cases achieving great wealth and social status, while still retaining strong ties to their mother countries” (25). The Arab diaspora played a role in the economic, political and cultural life of Brazil, Honduras, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Chile (Zabel 2006, 2).

Today large Palestinian communities exist in Chile, Honduras, Argentina and Mexico (Gonzalez 1992; Klich and Lesser 1998; Guzman-Marín and Zeraoui 2003; Lopez and Speer 2006, 117). Though perceptions of Palestine in Latin America may be construed as an effect of connections between Latin America and the Arab world within the “Third World” (Abugattas 1982, 118), these views are by no means uniform throughout Latin American countries. The political and economic influence of Palestinians (and Arabs more generally) in Latin America has also differed. For example, there are cases in which Chileans of Palestinian descent supported the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and others in which they were leading Sandanistas in Nicaragua. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) established networks in Latin America throughout the second half of the 20th century; for instance, the PLO supported the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and other revolutions in neighboring Latin American countries and established relations with leftist groups in Central America. Chilean poet Mahfud Massis co-founded the Front for the Liberation of Palestine (FRELIPA) with Fuad Habash, and the newspaper Palestina Patria Martir (Palestine, Martyr Homeland) to secure public support for Palestine in Latin America. Palestinian organizations abounded in Latin American countries and specifically Chile (Baeza 2014a, 69): the Latin American confederation of Palestinian institutions founded in 1984; the Palestinian football club, Deportivo Palestino, founded in Chile in 1920, and whose jerseys feature the historic map of Palestine; the Palestinian Club founded in 1947; the General Union of Palestinian Students in Chile (UGEP-Chile) created in the late 1980s; and the Palestinian Bethlehem 2000 Foundation founded in 2001 to support Palestine and the Arab community in Chile (Musallam 2012, 80).

Descendants of Arab immigrants in Latin America explore Palestinian roots and offer a further network of exchange between Latin America and the Arab world. Chilean writers of Palestinian descent such as Mahfud Massis and Diemla Eltit have contributed significantly to the intellectual and cultural life of Chile. Chilean film-maker Miguel Littin (2005) returned to his Palestinian origins in a feature film, La última luna (The Last Moon), and a documentary, Crónicas Palestinas (Littin 2001; Palestine Chronicles). Equally significant
are the insights they offer into the Arab presence in Latin America and the strong ties they retained with Palestinian cities.

While the comparative study of Arab and Latin American literatures is growing, many forms of literary and cultural exchange are still unknown. Christina Civantos (2006), Ette and Pannewick (2006), Wail Hassan (2012) and Alsultany and Shohat (2013) draw attention to frameworks that rework conventional Arab American comparative study by focusing on Arab–Argentinian, Arab–Latin American, Arab–Brazilian and Middle Eastern–American cultural exchange respectively. Nonetheless, other forms of Arab–Latin American cultural exchange involving writers with Palestinian roots are little known. To date, scholarship has devoted limited attention to connections between Palestine and Latin America. Cecilia Baeza (2011) explores the relationship between Palestine and Latin America by focusing on the history of the Palestinian diaspora, Arab–Palestinian associations, and solidarity with Palestine in Chile. Jessica Stites Mor (2014) examines pro-Palestine solidarity in Argentina as an example of transnational activism in the global south. She argues that solidarity with Palestine helped to shape the Argentinian Left, framing pro-Palestine campaigns within cold war anti-imperialism (194). More recently, Mor has focused on a history of “migration, cooperation, and exchange” between Latin America and the Middle East whose relations have been characterized from the mid-20th century by “an emerging consciousness of belonging to a community of the global South” (2016, 7).

One example of literary networks between Latin America and the Arab world appears in the role of Palestine in Latin American cultural production that focuses on forms of solidarity. Chilean writers of Palestinian origin have produced works that focus on the Arab world. Another form of cultural interaction appears in the work of Palestinian writers in Spanish that migrates between Latin America and the Arab world and reworks images of Palestine. Still another example is offered by the cultural production of Palestinian writers who make allusions to Latin American culture. Meruane’s memoir, set between Chile and Palestine, and Handal’s Spanish poetry evidence literary networks between Palestine and Latin America that can be traced back to cultural encounters and transatlantic routes.

**Arab Latin American maps**

Palestine appears in the work of Massis and Meruane as the place of origin of Arab immigrants to Latin America, but also within a struggle for Palestinian rights and an expression of solidarity. Nathalie Handal writes about the Arab diaspora in Chile, describing her own geographical attachments and the Palestinian presence:

> I've always been connected to Chile in one way or another - initially because many family members from my town of origin, Bethlehem, live in Chile, and later because the city has kept me under its spell due to its resilience, ever-changing architecture and imaginative verve. Growing up, I knew many Bethlehemite exiles and exiles from the neighboring towns of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour in Chile, and especially Santiago - my grandfather's sister being one of them. Today, the Palestinian community in Chile is the largest outside of the Arab world, estimated at half a million. (2012, n.p.)

Handal recalls strolls in Patronato, evocative of Bethlehem, and conversations with Palestinian women at the Greek Orthodox Church. Her observations recall the way that early Arab immigrants to Latin America identified with Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour; Greater Syria (*Bilād al-Shām*); Orthodox Christianity; and Arabness (Baeza 2014a). Focusing on
dispossession, immigration and assimilation, Handal highlights the ties between Palestine and Chile, explored in Meruane’s memoir. She focuses on the Palestinian diaspora, the creation of Palestinian–Chilean organizations, and the myriad economic, political and cultural contributions of Palestinians in Chile. By the 1920s, a sense of Palestinian-ness among Palestinian immigrants in Chile flourished with the founding of the football club Deportivo Palestino and Palestinian organizations in 1924–39 (Baeza 2014a, 64). The press, al-Islāḥ (Reform; 1930–42) in Chile and Rumbos (1939) in Honduras, disseminated information in Spanish about Palestine during the great Arab Revolt. The monthly magazine Al-Damir, published by the Palestinian Bethlehem 2000 Foundation founded by Chilean Palestinian businessmen in 2001, devoted its pages to the activities of the community in Latin America and the situation in Palestine (Baeza 2014a, 68).

In his Atlas of the European Novel, Franco Moretti (1990) traces a literary geography that is especially telling: “Making the connection between geography and literature explicit, then – mapping it: because a map is precisely that, a connection made visible – will allow us to see some significant relationships that have so far escaped us” (3). He goes on to detail the function of his maps: “Of maps, I mean, not as metaphors, and even less as ornaments of discourse, but as analytical tools: that dissect the text in an unusual way, bringing to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden” (3–4). Maps in Meruane’s memoir and Handal’s poetry bring to light Palestinian–Latin American connections and new trajectories: Chileans in Palestine and Palestinians in Latin America. Real historical space is distinct from the fictional one in Moretti’s literary geography. It stands for the actual places in Meruane’s memoir and Handal’s poetry. Moretti notes what literary maps allow us to see place-bound nature of literary forms: each of them with its peculiar geometry, its boundaries, its spatial taboos and favorite routes. And then, maps bring to light the internal logic of narrative: the semiotic domain around which a plot coalesces and self-organizes. (1990, 5; emphasis in original)

A Latin American literary landscape of Palestine is drawn in a chronicle of return and in poetry that maps Bethlehem through Latin America. In Volverse Palestina, Meruane crosses into the city of Beit Jala in Palestine, which her father recalls, and circles around Bethlehem, where she experiences the effects of the occupation. Literary geography traces relations to place, or travel between places (Santiago-Jaffa), holding together Meruane’s Volverse Palestina and Handal’s poetry.

What’s in a name? Becoming Palestine

Lina Meruane (b. 1970), a descendent of Palestinian immigrants to Chile, is one of the most prominent contemporary Chilean writers. Dedicated to her father, “who refuses to return”, and her friends A and Z (Ankar and Zima) “who refuse to leave”, her memoir Volverse Palestina (Meruane 2013a) chronicles a trip she undertook to Palestine in March 2012 to trace the origins of her family name. Though she does not visit her father’s house, her trip offers insight into the little-known history of her grandparents’ immigration to Chile (Meruane 2014a). The memoir focuses on the author in Chile, her grandfather’s migration to Latin America and her own trip to Palestine.

Diasporic narratives of return – autobiographies, memoirs, novels and films – have become a feature of global Palestinian cultural production that represents a physical return to Palestine, interrogation at the Israeli border and a visceral experience of the occupation.
Some of the most prominent examples are memoirs and films by Mourid Barghouti, Ghada Karmi and Annemarie Jacir. Meruane's memoir brings a uniquely Latin American contribution to the "narrative of return" genre, featuring trends such as the return to Palestine, harassment by Israeli authorities, and the encounter with the occupation in ways that illuminate Palestinian–Chilean historical and cultural ties and highlight Latin American contributions to global literary production of Palestine. Meruane, for instance, contributes further to the genre through the form and aesthetics of her memoir. 

Volverse Palestina is both travelogue and autobiography focusing on her trip and her encounter with Palestine. Meruane notes the resurgence of the personal and political chronicle as opposed to the Latin American genre of testimony (testimonio) and memory prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. By seeking to recover lost origins – “por recuperar el origen perdido” (Meruane 2014b), she comes to understand the Palestinian struggle in her memoir.

The epigraph of the memoir reads: “It’s somehow the fate of Palestinians not to end where they started but somewhere unexpected and far away”. These words from the opening of Edward Said's (1998) In Search of Palestine, a BBC documentary about Said's return to Jerusalem, echo her grandfather’s journey and her own “return” to her grandfather’s birthplace. Meruane’s memoir is organized around three sections: family stories about immigration to Latin America in “The Agony of Things”; the contemplation of return; and her trip to Palestine.

Volverse Palestina opens with a supposed return:

Regresar. Ese es el verbo que me asalta cada vez que pienso en las posibilidad de Palestina. Me digo: no sería un volver sino apenas un visitar una tierra en la que nunca estuve, de la que no tengo ni una sola imagen propia. Lo palestino ha sido siempre para mí un rumor de fondo, un relato al que se acude para salvar un origen compartido de la extinción. No sería un regreso mio, repito. Sería un regreso prestado, en el lugar de otro. Dí mi abuelo, acaso. De mi padre. Pero mi padre no ha querido poner pie en esas tierras ocupadas. Una vez estuvo en Egipto. Desde El Cairo dirigió sus ojos ya viejos hacia el este y los sostuvo un momento en el punto lejano donde podría ubicarse Palestina. (2013b, 11)

Return. I am assaulted by that verb whenever I think about the possibility of Palestine. I tell myself: it wouldn’t really be a return, just a visit to a land I’ve never been to before, a land of which I have no images of my own. Palestine has always been a murmur in the background, a story I tell myself to rescue a shared origin from extinction. The return would not be my own, I repeat. It would be borrowed from someone else, made in someone else’s place. My grandfather’s, perhaps. Or my father’s. But my father has had no desire to set foot in the occupied territories. He has only been as far as the border. Once, from Cairo, he turned his already elderly eyes eastward and let them rest there for a moment towards Palestine.

Meruane clearly situates her memoir within the narrative of return genre, though not in the conventional sense, because she has never been to Palestine and has no memories of her own. While she undertakes a physical return to Palestine, which is a feature of the genre, she compares her encounter with Palestine to that of her father who retains memories of the homeland but could not return. Instead she characterizes her return as one borrowed from her father or made in his place. She then traces the history of her father’s near-return, to the border where he stood and turned his gaze towards Palestine. For her father, Gaza,
hemmed in and under siege, seems far removed from Egypt and his hometown Beit Jala. While the return to Palestine, the search for the ancestral home, and scenes of settlements and soldiers are common to narratives of return, her Chilean Palestinian father's near-return and her “borrowed” return offer another reworking of the genre.

To recover the story of Palestine from oblivion, as she notes in the memoir, Meruane pursues the history of her family. When she asks her aunts, the memoriuous one answers, “¿Y no lees la revista Al Damir?” (2013b, 13; Don't you read Al Damir magazine?) – the Palestinian Chilean monthly magazine published by the Palestine Bethlehem 2000 Foundation). However, the New York-based writer has no access to the Chilean Palestinian publication. Though her father settled in Chile, he retains firm ties with Beit Jala where he, like many compatriots, has contributed to the existence of a school and plaza named Chile.

Volverse Palestina focuses on multidirectional transatlantic flows, tracing Arab migration to Latin America and Meruane's return to Palestine. As her father recounts the story of his migration to Latin America, Meruane begins to search for the roots of her surname: “Empiezo por escribir la palabra Meruane” (Meruane 2013b; 14; I begin by writing the word Meruane). Her search yields an article, “Sahara in 1915”, in a British journal, conjuring a desert explorer named Meruane. An African, Meruane may have moved to Palestine but the dates don't add up: around 1915 her grandfather immigrated to Chile. Meruane suggests that her father began to look back and retrace his story to the Chilean town where he grew up and where the initials of Palestinian names are inscribed in Latin letters on shops in the square. While the first names of Arab immigrants were Latinized – the Arabic Issa becomes the Spanish Salvador, for example – her grandfather retains the family name along with ties to Palestine. Meruane thinks to herself, “Empecemos a volver” (16; Let's return) to her grandfather's house in Chile at the behest of her father, the verb “volver” echoing a “return” to the land of her ancestors. As she returns to her grandparents' house and ruminates on the legacy of Palestinians in Chile (Meruane 2013a, 30), she contemplates the possibility of return to Palestine.

Volverse Palestina offers a narrative of return in Spanish, one that carefully retraces the routes between Palestine and Latin America. It further contributes to the growing corpus on Palestine in Arabic and English, illuminating other Palestinian experiences: Palestinian migration to Latin America and the return of a Palestinian Chilean to Palestine. Recent scholarship has devoted much attention to anglophone Arab literature (Al-Maleh 2009; Hassan 2011; Salaita 2011; Fadda-Conrey 2014; Gana 2015), yet hispanophone writing has been the subject of little study. Narratives of return in English and in Spanish share similar concerns but those in Spanish also consider Palestine in light of the particularities of the Arab diaspora in Latin America and Latin American culture. While anglophone Arab literature engages orientalism in east–west encounters (Hassan 2011), hispanophone writing attends to cultural ties between Latin America and the Arab world, framing orientalism in Latin America within the history of Arab migration. Meruane's memoir traces her trip from the Andes to the Arab world. As she begins her “return” to Palestine, she dwells on the history of arduous journeys undertaken by wandering Arabs (“árabes errantes”) from Haifa to Latin America. Arabs, mostly Orthodox Christian, came to the New World carrying Ottoman passports and were labeled “turcos” (2013b, 17). They embarked on boats
that crossed the Mediterranean, passed from Rio de Janeiro to Buenos Aires and crossed the Andes on horseback or by the trans-Andean railroad, arriving in Chile in prodigious numbers and settling in the valley between the Andes. Looking back on her father’s textile store and the history of Levantine immigrants, Meruane in her memoir expresses her identification with her ancestral town (Beit Jala) and with Arabness.

Language is central to Meruane’s narrative of return, posing issues of assimilation and preservation of Arab culture in the diaspora. When her family takes walks in the old neighborhood, they converse in Spanish though traces of other tongues abound. Meruane notes that Arab immigrants eventually lost their mother tongue and added Spanish to their “porous languages” (sus lenguas porosas; 2013b, 20). Her grandfather would volunteer to write and read letters for illiterate immigrants who received letters from family members in the Levant.

Though Meruane’s trip is not a literal return, the verb “regresar” (Meruane 2013b, 27; to return) is invoked as the idea for a trip to Palestine begins to form itself. Palestine exerts a pull on her with a series of encounters with a Dominican or Equadorian taxi driver with Arab-inflected Spanish, a Palestinian from the West Bank, in her New York neighborhood. When she learns that he is from the West Bank, near Beit Jala, she asks whether he is familiar with her surname and other Palestinian Chilean (“palestino-chilenos”; 28) surnames of immigrants from the Christian cities of the West Bank. The taxi driver’s words resonate throughout the memoir: “Usted es una palestina, usted es una exiliada. ¿Usted no conoce su tierra? . . . Debería ir allá, usted” (28; You are Palestinian, you are an exile. You have never visited your homeland? . . . You should go). Meanwhile, she contemplates returning to Palestine (“Volver a Palestina”; 28) and tells herself: “Volverme Palestina. Volver” (33; emphasis added; Return to Palestine. Become it), where returning takes the form of becoming in the chronicle as the author discovers her roots. The title of the memoir is a pun on volverse (the verb volver is to return and to become), highlighting the relationship between returning and becoming in Spanish. Meruane recalls the failed return of her grandparents, her father’s refusal to return and her family’s assimilation in Chile. As she plans her trip from Santiago to Jaffa, she thinks of her travel to the Orient (“el Oriente”; 33) and the east takes another form that departs from conventional orientalist associations.

The third and final section of the chronicle focuses on Palestine, “Palestina en partes” (Palestine in parts). While Meruane occasionally refers to orientalist imagery of the Arab immigrant, she elaborates the Palestine–Chile connection within a history of Arab migration to Latin America and her growing sense of Palestinian-ness. In this section, she makes a central comparison between the Chilean dictatorship and the Israeli authorities. When she sets foot in Palestine, she compares the Israeli security forces to the undercover police (los tiras) of the Chilean dictatorship: they sport the same dark glasses with wire frames and military haircut, and look stiff. Meruane recounts her encounter with the settler colonial state and harassment by Israeli officials at the airport in Spanish in ways that echo the practices of the Chilean dictatorship so familiar to Chileans. When the Israeli official scans her passport and mutters “Chile”, she reads his thoughts in the furrows on his brow: “ese país de palestinos” (Meruane 2013b, 40; that country of Palestinians). Throughout her interrogation, she is certain that she becomes more Palestinian than she has ever been in Chile when, on occasion, she is called a Turk (“turca”; 43) and has to defend Palestinianness (la palestinidad). Her sense of otherness grows at airports where she undergoes security checks
and her insulin pump provokes suspicion. In this section, the Palestinian–Latin American connection emerges not only as her heritage, but also through solidarity with Palestine.

In Jaffa, Meruane embarks on a tour of cities that offer her a sense of the reality of the occupied territories rather than the lost homeland of her ancestors. Her encounter with Zima, the Muslim wife of her Jewish writer friend, Ankar, who lives inside Israel, helps her understand the fractures within the occupied territories – between refugees and residents of the territories and residents of Israel – and the importance of return (Meruane 2014a). Ankar takes her to the port in Jaffa comprising impoverished displaced Arabs, once prosperous Catholic and Muslim merchants, and now fashionable among the Jewish bourgeoisie and left-leaning intellectuals. In Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, her purse is routinely searched and she has to pass through metal detectors at the bus station. She notes the constant military presence, drawing comparisons to Chile: “Es aún más densa aquí que en los tiempos de la dictadura chilena: nuestros milicos iban armados hasta los dientes pero no se mezclaban con los ciudadanos” (Meruane 2013b, 49; It is even more dense here than in the time of the Chilean dictatorship: our soldiers were armed to the teeth but did not mingle with the citizens). Uniformed Israeli soldiers – unarmed or carrying machine guns – climbing into Tel Aviv buses (with Meruane and Zima) and holding coffee and cakes in paper cups are ubiquitous. The explicit comparisons between Israel and the Chilean dictatorship underscore the pervasive effects of the occupation of Palestine and her Palestinian-Chilean narrative of return.

Meruane’s trip does not unearth what she sought. When she goes to meet a distant relative, Maryam Abu Awad, in Chile Square (Mīdān al-Chīlī – so named for the support of Chilean-born Palestinians) in Beit Jala, she poses the question she has mulled over for months about the name they share, wondering if there is any Saharan connection or an Arabic translation; if Meruane was Maruan or Maruani, altered in the precarious migration process of the early 20th century (2013b, 51–52). Maryam makes a shattering statement: she is a Saba: “tu apellido no es meruane” (51; your name is not Meruane). The effect of her pronouncement has important implications for Meruane, whose thoughts echo her existential angst: if she is not a Meruane, she notes, then Maryam is not her relative, but even worse: “si nosotros no somos Meruane, entonces, quién soy yo” (52; if we are not Meruanes, then who am I?). Meruane is not able to ascertain her real surname because all migration requires cultural translation whereby names are phonetically passed from one alphabet to another, rewritten and reinvented. This is important given that the names of some Palestinian families began to disappear from the local registers in cities such as Bethlehem as a result of waves of migration to the Americas (Musallam 2012, 19).

Meruane goes further on to Jerusalem, tracing her own map. Checkpoints, settlements and walls limit the mobility of Palestinians. In Jerusalem, she is delighted by the four quarters of the old city with Jewish, Armenian, Christian and Muslim markets. She scans a map and looks for coordinates: “Nuestro mapa está lleno de interrupciones” (2013b, 56; Our map is full of interruptions). She takes notes, records what she sees, and observes: “Tuve que volver al mapa muchas veces” (56; I had to return to the map many times). Her map is fraught with walls, barriers, settlements and traces of villages; a pattern of annexation, separation and discrimination that does not emerge without her experience of the parts of Palestine she enters. In many ways, this is a failed return to her origins: her father’s house in Beit Jala is missing from the memoir, nor does she have an opportunity to learn about the school named Chile (Meruane, 2014b). What this literary geography tells us instead
is the experience of Palestinians in places on the map that are separated by checkpoints, barriers and walls.

In the section “Volverse” (becoming or returning), Meruane’s writing becomes a form of commitment along with a return to her Palestinian heritage. She ends her journey at the desolate port, weighed down by the solitude of a bar in Jaffa. She does not know if she has returned, or if she can ever fully return. Having retraced her grandfather’s route, she returns to New York for the memoir’s ending. The word “volverse” in the title (translated as “becoming”) is telling in that it is not a real return but rather implies a conversion, a change, a discovery, and solidarity with Palestine. The memoir’s title in Spanish is also a pun on becoming Palestine and Palestinian (“Palestina” is also the feminine form of “Palestinian”), bringing together her identification and her heritage.

The chronicle (crónica) originally appeared in an anthology, Mujeres que viajan solas (Women travelling alone), published in Chile in 2012. In 2014, Meruane published a fuller edition comprising Volverse Palestina, a chronicle of her return to the occupied territories, and “Volvemos Otros” (Becoming Others), an essay on the writings of Edward Said, Amos Oz, David Grossman, Susan Sontag and Mario Vargas Llosa. The Penguin Random House edition is still an opened-ended story because the author feels that she can never complete the chronicle (personal communication, September 9, 2015). The cover of this edition features a veiled woman, who evokes Zima, an exemplar of the Muslim Palestinian woman with whom Meruane forms a special friendship in the memoir. Meruane (2013b, 30) returns to certain images of the Chilean dictatorship in Volverse Palestina. In both editions, lines in the section detailing Meruane’s plans to travel from Santiago to Jaffa (30–33) are marked in black, making these images “visually” (personal communication, January 8, 2016) explicit. As Meruane notes, she sought to recreate the appearance of “declassified materials” so well known in Chile where text is blacked out or deleted (personal communication, January 8, 2016); her memoir transposes declassified but censored documents from post-Pinochet Chile to occupied Palestine, bringing the history of the Chilean dictatorship as a point of comparison to her encounter with settler colonialism in Palestine.

Palestinians in Latin America

In her poetry, Nathalie Handal (b. 1969) evokes her Palestinian heritage and constant movement between Latin America, Europe, the United States and Palestine. Like Meruane, she traces the historical ties between Palestine and Latin America in Spanish, but she further evokes the Arab diaspora throughout the Latin American continent. Arab poets from Palestine have engaged Arab–Latin American cultural interactions, infusing Arabic poetry with Latin American iconography. Mahmoud Darwish, for instance, makes reference to Pablo Neruda in his poem, “In Pablo Neruda’s Home on the Pacific” and Mourid Barghouti alludes to Neruda in his memoirs (see Darwish 2007; Abdel Nasser 2014). Handal elaborates these literary allusions further by creating a Latin American literary geography of the Arab diaspora in her poetry.

In the summer of 2014, during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, Handal returned to Bethlehem to meet writers and theater directors for a project on a Palestinian ancestral village in Jerusalem. Handal notes the topography created by the Barrier, roadblocks, permits, military zones and settlements: “checkpoints, the Green Line, Areas A, B, and C” (2015a). Later, in 2015, she visited the old city where she passed through ateliers, stone
houses and narrow alleyways: “in these hoshs [courtyards in traditional Palestinian homes where extended family meet], in these hundred stairs of the old city, under these arches” in Bethlehem now surrounded by the separation wall (Handal 2015a).

Her most recent poetry collection La estrella invisible (Handal 2014) explores evocations of Bethlehem in the world of exiles displaced along many geographical spaces. The poems in the Spanish collection are characterized by a Latin American geography, interwoven with her Arab heritage. Looking at cultural traces of the Arab diaspora in Latin American locales, Handal’s geography is largely different from Meruane’s. Her collection is organized around sections devoted to cities spanning Latin America and the Arab world: “Una Ciudad: Belén” (A city: Bethlehem); “Ciudades: La estrella en Latinoamérica” (Cities: The star in Latin America); and “La Ciudad De Las Cruces” (The city of crosses). In the first section, “A City: Bethlehem”, the importance of names, invoked in Meruane’s memoir, recurs:

Hay hombres que murieron
con el nombre equivocado,
otros que inventan,
olvidan, o dudan de sus nombres,
conozco cada sílaba de mi nombre
en árabe,
cada palabra me orienta en el camino (Handal 2014, 8–9)

(There are men who die
with the wrong name,
others who invent,
forget, or doubt their names,
I know every syllable of my name
in Arabic,
every word is a direction)

Her poem “Talhamiyeh” (Arabic for Bethlehemite) reinforces the speaker’s origins: “oí – y es lo que sé – / que soy árabe” (12–13; I heard – but this I know – / I’m an Arab).

The second section traces an Arab presence among Central and Latin American countries marked by the numbers (0–9) in Arabic: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela. Drawing on Arabic words and an extended family network in Latin America, her poetry infuses Latin American geography with Arab culture. In a poem in the section devoted to Mexico, the speaker describes an encounter with her uncle Alfredo Talamas in Moneterry, where they translate the lines of a ranchera song into Arabic. Her poem “Juan Rulfo, Los Espíritus, Los Árabes Y La Casa” (Juan Rulfo, the ghosts, the arabs and the house) sets a scene of the ghosts of uncles folding maps, listening to Arabic Radio, “cuando empezó a sonar Abdel Halim” (Handal 2014, 88; as Abdel Halim [the legendary Egyptian singer] came on) and “los árabes mejicanos” (the Mexican Arabs; 88) arrive. Fusing Mexican writer and Arab song, the speaker ends on a note of uncertainty deepened by nostalgia:

pero quién sabe si ni tan siquiera estábamos allí,
si la casa existió alguna vez,
si Juan escribió
su libro mientras cantábamos en español
con acento árabe (89)

(but who knows if we were even there,
if the house ever existed,
if Juan wrote
his book while we were singing in Spanish with Arabic accents)

Other poems such as “Teqoa to Damascus to Rio” and “Barrio Patronato” focus on the arrival of Arab immigrants from Palestinian towns (Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour) to Brazil and Chile, respectively. Such poems cross the borders between Latin America and the Arab world, focusing on cultural exchange: “Cantamos a Víctor Jara y a Umm Kulthum” (Handal 2014, 118; We sang Víctor Jara [revered Chilean singer] and Umm Kalthoum [iconic Egyptian singer in the Arab world]). Arab immigrants dream of Jericho and Galilee in Chile; and a poem features film-maker Miguel Littín, a Chilean of Palestinian origin (119). Tracing the arrival of Arab immigrants in Puerto Rico and Brazil, “Barrio Patronato” ends with an emphasis on Palestinianness:

Entre Sagrado Corazón
y Río de Janeiro
se lo contamos a los que acaban de llegar:
porque no ha terminado,
porque no hemos visto el mar
que nos dio nuestro nombre,
porque el silencio es necesario para rezar,
porque llegará la celebración, pongase esta voz alrededor del cuello,
hecho en Palestina
(120–121; emphasis in original)

(Between Sagrado Corazón
and Rio de Janeiro
we tell those who just arrived:
because it is not over,
because we haven't seen the sea
that gave us our name,
because silence is necessary to pray
because celebration will come,
wear this voice around your neck,
hecho en Palestina [made in Palestine])

Poems such as “Kilyoum” (“every day” in Arabic), dedicated to the Handals in Lima, map the Arab diaspora in Peru. “El Cristo Blanco de Cuzco” (The white Christ of Cuzco) focuses on a statue that was a gift from Palestinian exiles in 1945 to pay tribute to the city’s generosity and hospitality (Handal 2014, 140). Another poem, “Turka” (The Turk), plays upon the reference to Arabs in Latin America to counter orientalist imagery. Like her ancestors who were translators, the speaker translates her origins – Bethlehem, not the Orient, or the Ottoman Empire – thus asserting her Palestinian heritage in Latin America. Handal’s deep attachment to Chile, mentioned above and reinforced in her words “I never leave Santiago” (Handal 2012), extends to a constellation of Latin American countries in La estrella invisible. Like Meruane, she revisits the history of Palestinians in Latin America but concentrates on the Arab diaspora from Brazil to Chile. Central to her poetry are the strong ties that Arabs in Latin America retained with Palestine. Her poetry offers an inverted image of Meruane’s memoir, tracing the trajectory from Palestine to Latin America.

The literary production of Chilean and Palestinian writers examines Palestine through an exploration of historical routes and cultural ties between Latin America and the Arab world. Meruane and Handal create further connections between Arab and Latin American
literature through works that translate Palestine in Latin America. In *Volverse Palestina*, Palestine is a real place, experienced in all its complexity; in Handal’s poetry, Palestine is imaginatively intertwined with the spaces of Arab exiles in Latin American countries. While Meruane’s memoir expresses her strong sentiments and solidarity, Handal’s poetry is steeped in the Arab diaspora’s nostalgia in Latin America. Drawing on Palestine to create a Palestinian Latin American literary geography, these writers contribute to the connections between Latin America and the Arab world.

Notes

1. Alsultany and Shohat (2013) extend these frameworks to include cultural flows between the Middle East, including Iran and Turkey, and North and South America.
2. Another writer is Palestinian Bolivian novelist Rodrigo Hasbún, featured in *Granta* (Hasbún 2010). For new Palestinian writing, see Handal (2015b).
3. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from *Volverse Palestina* (2013b) are my own.

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