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Star-Tied Water: Tracing Life in a Colonized Palestinian Village During the Anthropocene**

ماءٌ مُتَنَجَّم: تتبُّع الحياة في قرية فلسطينية مستعمرة في زمن الأنثروبوسين

Abstract: This article traces practices that sustain the continuity of life in Palestinian villages, approaching practitioners intimately through a methodology of slowness. It examines the Anthropocene as an embodiment of accelerated time deeply intertwined with modernity, colonialism, and capitalism. It argues that resistance to this acceleration emerges through the sensory environment and the relationality between all its components, from the earth to the sky and stars, to the blood in our veins. Focusing on the practice of star-tying water, this article explores an alternative trajectory of interconnected movement between the environment and the body, allowing for contemplation of the surrounding space and the identification of practices that bridge past, present, and future.

Keywords: Palestinian Village; Slowness; Anthropocene; Colonialism; Acceleration; Sensory Environment; Star-tied Water.

الملخص: تتبَّع هذه الدراسة الممارسات التي تُحقق استمرارية الحياة في القرية الفلسطينية، من خلال الاقتراب الحميمي من الممارسين، ومنهجية البطء، حيث يجري تفكيك عصر الأنثروبوسين الذي يشكّل تجلياً لزمن التسارع الذي يركز على تمفصل «الحداثة/ الاستعمار/ الرأسمالية». وتكمن محاولة صدّ هذا التسارع في البيئة الحسّية، أي من خلال لمس العلائقية بين كل مكونات البيئة؛ بداية من الأرض، ووصولاً إلى السماء والنجوم، ومروراً بالدم في عروقنا. فالماء المتنجّم، الذي تبحث فيه هذه الدراسة، يعطينا إمكانية تتبُّع مسار آخر للحركة الرابطة بين البيئة والجسد، والتأمل في المكان كله حولنا، ورصد الممارسات التي تصل بين أزمنة الماضي والحاضر والمستقبل.

كلمات مفتاحية: القرية الفلسطينية؛ البطء؛ الأنثروبوسين؛ الاستعمار؛ التسارع؛ البيئة الحسّية؛ الماء المتنجّم.

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Introduction

In the context of colonized Palestine, environmental studies remains trapped in a paradigm of colonial “loss” – the disastrous theft of an environment – and solutions grounded in scientific studies and developmentalist approaches. These approaches, however, are part of the same epistemological framework, rooted in the coarticulation of modernity, colonialism, and capitalism,¹ which ultimately sustain and perpetuate the colonial structure.

A few historical attempts, such as the writings of Tawfiq Canaan,² have sought to explore the ancient relationship between Palestinian peasants and the environment that they inhabit, particularly the environmental signs (stars, animals, plants, rocks, water) he identifies as markers of changing weather, predictors of crop quantity and quality, or indications for the timing of ploughing or harvesting. However, these studies have often been used to frame Palestinian peasant practices as static, consigning them to the realm of “tradition” or “heritage”, thereby questioning the vitality of Palestinian villages today.

This article challenges such assumptions, arguing that Palestinian villages remain dynamic and alive. To understand the changes within these villages, the practices of Palestinian peasants, and their relationships with their environment, it is necessary to move beyond the confines of “heritage” studies, which overlook the everyday lived practices within the landscape and the ways the environment itself changes.

Therefore, this article revolves around the “sensory environment”, examining the meanings attributed to this environment as a form of local knowledge deeply embedded in daily life. This knowledge is experienced in multiple, varying, and contradictory ways, shaped by a particular temporality that interacts with colonial time on various levels. Furthermore, the article explores life as experienced through the landscape and dwelling practices within a Palestinian village under colonial rule and military occupation in the era of Anthropocene. The “environment” is thus framed as part of the local and changing sensory knowledge embedded in the practices and experiences of dwelling in the village.

Dwelling, as used in this study, extends beyond the act of living in a material space. It also encompasses the complicated interactions between people and their environment and the meanings that they ascribe to their life experiences. It involves understanding how people perceive their reality through their relationship to their environment on various levels: the material environment (the structures, materials, and landscapes that people interact with, such as homes, tools, and the natural world); practice (daily routines, rituals, and activities pursued within the dwelling space, such as cooking, farming, or simply moving through the neighbourhood or street); and meaning (rooted in the cultural, social, and subjective importance attributed to the dwelling space, based on the relationship with ancestors and land, religious beliefs, and individual memories).³

¹ The tripartite structure of modernity, colonization, and capitalism, which underpins the redefinition of the environment in the Palestinian context, is rooted in the co-articulation of progress, speed, value, consumption, violence, and attrition. These components are not discrete. This structure was built by imposing categories that legitimized a continuous, accelerating process of destruction of colonized bodies and environment.

² Tawfiq Canaan, “Folklore of the seasons in Palestine,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. 3 (1923), pp. 21-35; Tawfiq Canaan, “Plant-lore in Palestinian Superstition,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. 8 (1928), pp. 163-203. We might also add the work of the journal *al-Turāth wa-l-Mujtamaʿ* (*Heritage and Society*), founded by the Inash Alusra Association in the early 1970s, which drew heavily on Canaan’s work and published translations of many of his articles as well as other heritage and folklore pieces. See: *Inash Alusra Association*, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdnatmyz>

³ For more on the anthropological concept of dwelling, see: Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement: Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2001); Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking: In Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter (trans.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 145-161; Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

The article focuses on the different dwelling practices in a Palestinian village in the era of capitalist and colonial acceleration.⁴ It proceeds from the premise that Palestinians experience a temporality that, while slower than the rapid pace of capitalist-colonialist acceleration, is also more expansive. This temporality stretches from the stars to the earth, down into the deep waters around them and into their bodies. The article traces “lived life” in contrast to the concept of the Anthropocene, which proposes an environment doomed to decay and extinction under the weight of contemporary capitalist-colonialist discourse. It reaffirms the continuity of the past, present, and future of the Palestinian peasant and village through an approach of “slowness”, akin to Walter Benjamin’s tortoise,⁵ against the hegemonic acceleration.

I draw on stories from my village (al-Jarushiyya) and the practices I have observed both within and beyond my family through a slow, auto-ethnographic methodology within the contradictory context of an accelerating time, which generally ignores – or extinguishes – the daily sensory connections we experience. One of the stories I explore is my mother’s evening ritual of placing water on the windowsill to “tie” it to the stars [*tanjīm al-mayy*]; this “star-tied” water can then be used for medicinal purposes. Such practice has been characterized as one of many long-extinct “traditions”. However, I suggest that these practices differ in their temporality depending on who knows them, who lives through them, or who approaches them slowly.

“Star-tying” water is linked not only to healing but also to marital and reproductive relations that bring together an environmental as a “whole”: water, plants, stars, blood. All the stories revolve around relationships within the village, which are based, in essence, on the changes of the natural landscape brought about by the great fissure that has occurred under colonialism/capitalism. Through these stories, the study argues that, despite the pressure of accelerating time, the changing practices of dwelling sustain sensory/existential links with the lived environment in the “now”, intermingling with the hybridization imposed by material or capitalist/colonial “values”.

The Anthropocene: Epistemological Coarticulation of Modernity, Colonialism, and Capitalism

The concept of the “Anthropocene” encompasses a discourse in which environmental threats are heightened, accompanied by calculations that claim to quantify the planet’s remaining time.⁶ The term was coined by meteorologist and atmospheric chemist Paul J Crutzen, in a study titled *Human Geology*, in which he argued that humanity’s profound impact on the earth’s surface marked a rupture from the preceding Holocene era.⁷ According to Crutzen, the Anthropocene began in the 18th century with the advent of the steam engine. The term itself means “the era of humanity”, and geologists distinguish it from previous eras by examining the earth’s stratigraphy and the changes in strata that reflect the profound biological, environmental, atmospheric, tectonic, or chemical transformations occurring on or near its surface.⁸

⁴ This paper is based on capitalist-colonial acceleration in Palestine, from British colonialism to the present time. British colonialism intensified Ottoman land laws, which created five categories of land, to legally designate agricultural land, rationalize farming, and facilitate the collection of taxes without having to rely on the local customary law of the *ḥamūla* and the ties of kinship and solidarity. According to Marxist structuralism, British exploited this law to introduce capitalist production via European-Jewish capital investments, land purchases from absentee landlords, and reclassification of “dead lands” to build settlements, creating markets for their products, which destroyed local Palestinian agricultural produce value. Cash-based economies led to peasant indebtedness and wage labour, and generated surplus value for European-Jewish settlements and a capitalist mode of production. This also deepened class divisions and empowered local elites (landowners), who themselves exploited the same property law. See: Talal Asad, “Class Transformation under the Mandate,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 53 (December 1976).

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” in: Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-1940, Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (eds.) (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 2003), pp. 30-31.

⁶ Peter Brannen, “The Anthropocene is a Joke,” *The Atlantic*, 13/8/2019, accessed on 20/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2avcuyjz>

⁷ Alem Grabovac, “al-Insān am al-Ṭabī‘a: Taṣawwur al-Anthrūbūsin,” *Fikr wa-Fann*, no. 99 (2012), p. 59.

⁸ Noel Castree, “An official welcome to the Anthropocene epoch – but who gets to decide it’s here?,” *The Conversation*, 30/8/2016, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/cz9ymakw>

While Crutzen marked the beginning of the Anthropocene in the 18th century, this remains a subject of debate. Geographers Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin have suggested 1610 as the beginning of decisive man-made change, while another group of scientists argue that the Anthropocene began in 1950, coinciding with what Crutzen termed the “great acceleration” – a period marked by rapid population growth, the spread of single-use plastics, intensive fertilizer use, and the spread of nuclear radiation. Since the mid-20th century, profound transformations have reshaped the global system and patterns of human occupation, extending beyond the volatility of the modern geological age. These changes are not driven by natural disruptions but by human activity itself. Moreover, geological processes themselves are taking place at accelerating rates, with each geological era becoming shorter than that which preceded it.⁹

This article examines how the Anthropocene shapes the political and social-meaning environment when modernity, colonialism, and capitalism are co-articulated. The meaning of the “era of the human” is rooted in the Cartesian division between nature and human, and a temporal framework defined by the control of nature, particularly when modernity was implemented through the development of depletive practices toward resources on earth. The meaning also extends to the consolidation of a western colonialist discourse based on the continuous accumulation of capital at an accelerating pace. The Cartesian model reinforced teleological and instrumental logic that became a banner under the modernity/colonialism/capitalism trifecta.¹⁰ Accordingly, deconstructing the concept of “acceleration” as an *analytical* rather than simply a *descriptive* tool allows for a clearer understanding of the Anthropocene as a continuous temporality of modernity/colonialism/capitalism. Hartmut Rosa argues that rather than viewing modernity as a process of “rationalization”, it is better understood as being driven by a process of social acceleration. In this context, the crises of late modernity are regulated by the logics of “escalation” and “de-synchronization”: the idea that the future will be faster than any previous time has become axiomatic in both futurist thinking and so-called “futurology”.¹¹

The burning of fossil fuels in the late 18th-century England to generate heat, energy, and motion stands as one of the defining features of the modern world. Clean, dynamic, and accelerating modernity would have been impossible without the burning of vast quantities of fossil fuels.¹² Coal-powered steam engines produced colossal factories and cities and, through the invention of the railway, a machine dependant speed that restructured the material and social worlds.¹³ In a stark casting of speed and modernity, Paul Virilio writes in *Speed and Politics* that modernity is not an industrial revolution but a revolution of speed, in that it is based on changing the way we interact with and perceive time and space through continuous and rapid movement that leaves no room for people to tarry or to slow down without being excluded from the system.¹⁴ The concept of “speed” extends beyond the material acceleration of transport; it also encompasses the temporal acceleration of both the present and the future. This acceleration is embedded in the principle of progress in a linear temporal direction for those who own the means of this acceleration.

Nature, however, has been unable to rid the world of the gasses and waste generated by this material acceleration with the same speed. This imbalance has led to what Rosa calls “desynchronization”. Whenever systems, actors, or processes are linked and one is accelerated, the other appears slow and is perceived as

⁹ Judy Wajcman & Nigel Dodd, *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Henryk Skolimowski, *Eco-Philosophy* (London: Marion Boyars, 1980); Jean-Jacques Mikhalof, “Heidegger: Mufakkir al-‘Awda ilā al-Warā’,” *al-Ittiḥād*, 6/8/2020, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdfudu9k>; Omar Mheibel, *Ishkāliyyat al-Tawāṣul fī al-Falsafa al-‘Arabiyya al-Mu‘āṣira* (Beirut: al-Dar al-Arabiyya for Science and Disagreement Publications; the Arab Cultural Centre, 2005).

¹¹ Wajcman & Dodd, p. 16.

¹² Ibid., pp. 77-78.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, Marc Polizzotti (trans.) (Los Angeles: Semiotext, 2007).

a break or an obstacle. Desynchronization, therefore, enters a state of tension,¹⁵ and almost all dimensions of what we call “environmental crises” can be interpreted as problems of desynchronization.

In this context, Jason Moore recasts the concept of the Anthropocene as the *Capitalocene* – the age of capital – since capital is the driving force behind environmental destruction, fundamentally altering the balance of the geological age.¹⁶ The principle of acceleration depends on the transformation of nature, including gas, water, oil, and, most importantly, land, into a “value”. The land is a fundamental source of capital accumulation and the backbone of capitalism. Through the development of colonial practices driven by teleological and instrumental logic, and the system of categorization of the other, natural extraction and exhaustion of societies have been accelerated ever since the 17th century.

The essence of capitalism lies in the categorization of the “other” within a racial system that deems them unqualified to assess ownership and in need of tutelage. This system legitimizes violence and permits genocide in pursuit of territorial control.¹⁷ These colonial practices developed across colonized societies, where administrative and technical mechanisms were applied to measure and privatize land, to impose a general logic of “private property”, displacing inhabitants while allowing large companies to control land and introduce a homogenous agriculture designed to serve the demands of the market.¹⁸

In Palestine, this process unfolded with the implementation of the Land Law(s) under British colonialism and the expropriation of the land in favour of Zionist settler groups. With the 1948 Nakba, this approach escalated into a project where genocide became fundamental to the expropriation of land from Palestinians.¹⁹ Here, violence is an intrinsic characteristic of this process, which accompanied the rupture between human and nature within the coarticulation of modernity, colonialism, and capitalism. However, contemporary *environmental* violence is distinct in its invisibility; it transcends across time and space. This slow violence²⁰ seeps into the earth and into bodies for its effects to become visible. In the colonized global south, where the victims are not homogenous, capitalism rests upon this violence. Crucially, slow violence does not impact all bodies or lands equally, but rather targets the land and the bodies of the colonized poor – contrary to the generalized “we” of the Anthropocene discourse.

The question of the Anthropocene arises within a broader inquiry – not solely about the environment, but about what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a “collision”: Anthropocene warming brings into view the collision – or the running up against one another – of three histories, that, from the point of view of human history, are normally assumed to be working at such different and distinct paces that they are treated as processes separate from one another for all practical purposes: the history of the Earth system; the history of life, including that of human evolution on the planet; and the more recent history of the industrial civilization (for many, capitalism). Humans now unintentionally straddle these three histories that operate on different scales and at different speeds.²¹

The language we use to speak about the climate crisis itself is confused by the problem of determining what is human and non-human in time. Through environmentalist language the climate is envisioned as a beast that suddenly gobbles up life. Through this language as well, the carbon cycle is understood as life

¹⁵ Wajeman & Dodd, pp. 61-62.

¹⁶ Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (New York: PM Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1983).

¹⁸ Tania Li Murray, “After the Land Grab: Infrastructure Violence and the Mafia System in Indonesia’s Oil Palm Plantation Zone,” *Geoforum*, vol. 96 (2018), pp. 328-337.

¹⁹ For more, see: Muhammad al-Sayyid Salah al-Din, “Mulkiyyat al-Arāḍī fī Falasṭīn fī Awākhir al-‘Ahd al-‘Uthmānī,” *Shu‘ūn Falasṭīniyya*, no. 95 (October 1979); Sabir Musa, “Nizām Mulkiyyat al-Arāḍī fī Falasṭīn 1917-1937,” *Shu‘ūn Falasṭīniyya*, no. 101 (April 1980).

²⁰ Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55, no. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 443-467.

²¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Anthropocene and the Convergence of Histories,” in: Clive Hamilton, François Gemenne & Christophe Bonneuil (eds.), *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 44-56.

consuming, while “earth” time is defined as the earth’s ability to dispose of it. François Hartog responds to this claim, arguing that the Anthropocene is the product of a presentism that elides the power of historicity: time is stopped in the present by putting the societies of the past in the service of the present moment, and as a result, our connection with the past is erased through the power of the two spectres of memory and heritage to reproduce modernist time.²²

In the Palestinian context, Ruba Salih responds to this closing sentence by referring to the political rupture between Palestinian refugee and the nature stolen from them. Political refuge created a physical and metaphysical state in linking bodies to Palestinian nature, particularly trees. Refugees sought to grow trees that reminded them of their villages, such as orange, olive, lemon, and fig trees, wherever they found space to do so in their refugee camps. These trees became a living bridge between past, present, and future. Moreover, stories of refuge always incorporate memories of trees in Palestinian villages, making them enduring markers of both loss and the ongoing hope of return.²³

There is a certain specificity to local Palestinian temporality, when compared with the global temporality of the Anthropocene. This specificity is rooted in the complexities of what Elias Khoury terms the ongoing “Nakba trajectory”,²⁴ which constitutes a continuous structure of unceasing appropriation of bodies, land, trees, and all constituents of the environment, to expand the colonial occupation and the apartheid wall.

If “Nakba Time” is particular to Palestinians, it nevertheless remains inseparable from the broader structure of global time from which the defeated, the tortured, and the Global Southerners are excluded. This raises the urgent question of liberating the present time from this comparison of a “relational history” with the Zionist enemy.²⁵ It thus becomes essential to clarify the various perspectives of another time(s), ones that diverge from the grand chronological or progressive historical trajectories.

The Sensory Environment Through a Methodology of Slowness: Attempts to Repel Acceleration

This section rebels against acceleration through a methodology of slowness which rests centrally on a sense of the “now”. Within this methodology, the body takes its time within the environment to receive and create a relationship with sensory signals – contrary to the imposed tempo of capitalist-colonialist acceleration. It does this by exploring the possibility of sustaining environmental relationality within the complexities of time and its various episodes. To think about the “now” and the space necessary to feel it, I turn to intellectual ideas that have created the possibility of seeing a gap within accelerating time through a coarticulation between present, past, and future, which allows for life satisfaction rooted in sensory experience, emotion, and the layered textures of memory, and in a practice within the act of dwelling.

One of the central ideas is Walter Benjamin’s proposition on the ability to perceive colours overlapping between past, present, and future,²⁶ and the ability to move a hand or eye slowly to feel the various temporalities. Benjamin, through his reading of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* (Angel of History),²⁷ warns that

²² François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

²³ Ruba Salih & Olaf Corry, “Displacing the Anthropocene: Colonization, Extinction and the Unruliness of Nature in Palestine,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2022), pp. 381–400.

²⁴ Elias Khoury “al-Nakba al-Mustamirra,” *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, no. 89 (Winter 2012).

²⁵ Abdulrahim al-Shaikh, “al-Zaman al-Mawqūt: Nakbat Falastīn wa-Masārāt al-Taḥrīr,” *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, no. 118 (Spring 2019).

²⁶ Howard Caygill & Alex Coles, *Introducing Walter Benjamin* (London: Icon Books, 1998).

²⁷ Paul Klee’s *Angel of History* was central to Benjamin’s article on the concept of history. See: Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Simon Fraser University*, accessed at: <https://tinyurl.com/5m3zp2d7>

we are moving forward on the timeline of modern capitalism. His contemplations on time are generally framed around the idea of “empty” or “homogenous” time,²⁸ which he suggests will drive humanity to destruction and catastrophe, because it is necessary to entrench the break with the system of eternal repetition of modernity and capitalism. He was not only warning of crisis,²⁹ but also repelling this accelerating repetition that propels us toward catastrophe. If this modern/colonial/capitalist time, which accumulates in our bodies, makes us the most important means of its survival and existence, then how can bodily movements be so different as to prevent the catastrophe, and move at a different speed from that of this catastrophe?

For Benjamin, the “now” is what links slowness to the sensory (experience). His central project thus revolves around the problematics of reading time through the historical process of modernity: “history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now”.³⁰ In other words, his critique of history and the historian centres on the acts of separation imposed on the past, present, and future. He believes that bourgeois “historicism” reduces the past to a typical, clichéd narrative of events: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger”.³¹ Benjamin argues that any approach to history should be a political intervention, a continuous activation of the past in the present through the sensory experience, through this intersection and interaction between the “then” and “now” within a visible record that forms the dialectical image.³²

Inspired by Benjamin, I view space as a trigger for remembering (deliberate memory) which emerges in the present with experience, forming a direct intersection with the past, each illuminating the other. This renders deliberate memory a historical method, one through which we can restore those whom bourgeois history – the “history of the victors” – has consigned to oblivion. It is precisely through this practice that we can begin to liberate the future from catastrophic linear time. The “now” for Benjamin differs from the presentism described in the first section of this study. What Hartog means by presentism is not the present as current moment, but rather a present intensified by the exploitation of the past, depriving us of perception – it is the product of the same forces Benjamin critiques: modernity/colonialism/capitalism.

Benjamin also conceives of the “now” as a space for sensory practice: a time in which we feel, where we perceive the details of a place, its furnishings, and the way our bodies move through it and within it. It is the time that connects slowness to sensory perception. As he puts it: “the force exerted by the country lane varies according to whether one walks along it or flies over it in an aeroplane. [...] The person in the aeroplane sees only how the lane moves through the landscape, unwinding in conformity with the laws of the surrounding terrain. Only someone walking along the lane will experience its dominion and see how, from the self-same countryside as for the flyer is simply the unfolding plain, at every turn it summons up distances, views, clearings, and outlooks”.³³ This observation highlights how we live through unexpected or undisciplined movement, and how this momentary unexpectedness can form a plurality of meanings that can only emerge through embodied experience.

This brings us to a Palestinian practice discussed by Raja Shehadeh: the *sarḥa*, a form of walking or moving on the land. The word originally referred to allowing one’s flocks or herds to roam freely, but over time, it has come to signify a form of roaming across the hills as part of one’s relationship to Palestinian land and environment. It carries a specificity related to time and intention: a person who goes on a *sarḥa*

²⁸ Wajeman & Dodd, pp. 34-36.

²⁹ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History.”

³⁰ Ibid., thesis XIV.

³¹ Ibid., thesis VI.

³² Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (London: Polity, 2001).

³³ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter (trans.) (London: NLB, 1979).

roams without a particular destination for several days or even weeks, unbound by the constraints of time or place, seeking nourishment for the soul and spirit. The *sarḥa* is thus a sensory experience, one shaped by the various colours and smells of the hills, which differ between day and night and across changing seasons. It is a state that requires a decision to let go so completely that Shehadeh describes as a unique Palestinian form of trance.³⁴

Shehadeh's own journey begins with *sarḥas* of this kind through the memory of his grandfather, the Judge, Saleem, who loved coming to Ramallah in the hot summers to go on *sarḥa* with his nephew, Abu Ameen, leaving behind the humid coastal city of Jaffa and the colonial administration that Saleem served but whose policies he hated.³⁵ This memory extends across multiple temporalities that Shehadeh takes up sensorially and politically, connecting past, present, and future. This brings us to Henri Bergson's idea of the senses as a memory that is not limited to the past but is linked necessarily to sense and feeling in the present through consciousness of existence. In this consciousness, there is a form of waiting through which one builds the bridge between past and future. It is memory which attempts to preserve the past – which it leans on – and anticipate the future – which it turns on. The future is only created when some part of it is prepared in the present. This process constitutes the continuity of life by connecting past, present, and future, without division.³⁶

Drawing on Bergson's "consciousness" and "waiting", we can refine our thesis by suggesting that consciousness embodies the "now", while waiting functions as a methodology of slowness. This creates a different rhythm of momentary experience that disrupts speed. However, this disruption becomes even more complex for body movement when linked to the productive and consumptive processes. This is what drew Benjamin to the figure of the *flâneur*,³⁷ a character Baudelaire used to express his hostility to the project of modernist progress.³⁸ The critical and grand observations made in the (incomplete) *Arcades Project* by Benjamin, as well as his other related writings, put us in a sensory state of awareness of the accumulated observations he recorded by activating all the senses in order to block acceleration through intimacy.³⁹ Benjamin worked these observations into his essay "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century",⁴⁰ in which he describes how historical or social time loses its meaning for the *flâneur*. He remains detached from the pressures of modernity and capitalist consumerism in the arcades of Paris. Though a product of his era, he exists outside its dominant rhythms – the productive process – or rather, defiantly slower than it. In 1840, the phenomenon of the *flâneur* who wandered the arcades of Paris, accompanied by tortoises, emerged. The tortoise, in this practice, limited the rhythm of walking within the place, as Benjamin puts it: "if they had succeeded, progress would have been forced to accommodate to this rhythm".⁴¹

The *flâneur* touches, sees, tries to experience the city, and attunes to its details, yet remains invisible at the same time.⁴² His discovery of place unfolds through an unplanned walking in urban space with no aim or destination, producing a sensory map.⁴³ In this way, the *flâneur* offers us an alternative sense of movement of a layered life, one that does not fall under the acceleration that causes change, requires consumption, or remain static like "heritage" or nostalgia. Therefore, despite the criticisms of postcolonial studies against

³⁴ Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

³⁵ Ibid., intro.

³⁶ Henri Bergson, *Collected Works* (New York: Shrine of Knowledge, 2020).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Harward Eliand & Kevin Mclaughlin (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 346.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 416-418.

⁴⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*.

⁴¹ Benjamin, "Central Park," pp. 30-31.

⁴² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 417.

⁴³ Ibid.

the *flâneur* – as a product of colonialism produced by a process of “othering” – and colonial expansion in the form of cosmopolitanism within a modern city such as Paris⁴⁴, I take the symbolic resistance of the *flâneur* who is opposed to and slower than progress and capitalist consumption, to represent what I refer to as “slowness”. This is what inspired Benjamin to adopt the *flâneur* as a dream to stop the catastrophe.

What distinguishes the *sarḥa* in the Palestinian hills for Shehadeh and the *flâneur* for Benjamin is their exploration of how the body can experience a sensory state far removed from the dichotomies of the urban and the rural, or how this sensory state comes as a romanticized vision of “nature”, rather considering it an idea that creates relationality through a rhythm of the “now”, allowing us to own this state wherever we live. Perhaps the similarity between *flâneur*’s wanderings and Shehadeh’s *sarḥas* is that the former was an attempt to alienate the ugliness of consumer cities, where bodies are transformed into commodities, while the latter considers the *sarḥa* a complex and difficult sort of training for a reclamation of the Palestinian self under Zionist colonialism, which seeks to kill off the hills and the natural landscape as Palestinian. It is therefore necessary to ask: If the “now” grants us a heightened sensory consciousness of existence, then what does the methodology of slowness reveal about the relationality of water and stars, or the perception of movement?

Stars and Water: Relationality and Temporality

The relationality of water and stars is deeply rooted in the vast, unbounded expanse of the environment, our relationship with it, and the difficulty of controlling it and regulating its rhythm. What is interesting is how we perceive this relationality and grasp this relationship between water, stars, and bodies in dwelling practices and everyday life through intimacy and slowness in the context of the Palestinian village.

For years, my mother⁴⁵ has made sure to place a bottle of water on the windowsill at night. Often, she would ask me to do it, casually reminding me to “put the water on the windowsill so it gets star-tied”. Without question, I followed her instructions, never pausing to consider the connection between her body and the “star-tied” water. Curious, I began to wonder whether my mother was alone in this practice, since it is a custom pursued in private space. Over time, I realized that many women in the village observe the same ritual, that star-tying water does not have a repetitive, daily role, but rather is connected to situations in which my mother and the women around her believe that star-tied water holds a role in healing the body.

It is through this star-tying practice that I began my research into environmental ontology⁴⁶ to explore the dwelling practices that the coarticulation of modernity, colonialism, and capitalism seeks to smother and separate from our bodies, preventing us from experiencing the fulfilment of the “now” and observing the details around us.

Amid the bitter journeys between checkpoints, the sight of expropriated land transformed into settlements, the relentless killing and imprisonment of Palestinian bodies, the struggle to survive in a distorted economy, the fractures of ultra-divisive political discourse, and the appropriation of basic life resources (like wells in the villages⁴⁷, I attempted to understand how the wheel of Palestinian continuity, rooted in the environment, continues to turn – through intimacy and the stories of place. A relational

⁴⁴ Jacob Edmund, “The Flâneur in Exile,” *Comparative Literature Review*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2010), pp. 376-398.

⁴⁵ My mother’s practice of “star-tying” water extends from the early 1980s to the present. She learned it from her mother and grandmother, meaning that this tradition goes back, at least, to the 1930s.

⁴⁶ This section of the study draws on my doctoral thesis, which was titled *al-Unṭūlūyya al-Bī’iyya fī Zamāniyyat al-Fallāḥ al-Falasṭīnī: Masārāt al-Ḥaraka fī al-Mu’āsh al-Yawmī*.

⁴⁷ Anas Ibrahim, “al-Sayṭara al-Isrā’īliyya ‘alā al-Miyāh... Yanābī’ al-Ḍaffa al-Gharbiyya ka-Mawāqī’ Irtikāz li-l-Mumārāsāt al-Istiyāniyya,” *MADAR*, 23/8/2021, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc24f7dk>; Taysir Jabbara, “al-Sayṭara al-Ṣuhyūniyya ‘alā al-Miyāh fī Filasṭīn,” *Reports and Follow Ups*, Palestinian Research Centre, 12 December 2022, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/eSew58ks>

ontology grounded in the land, through the intersection of the material, the spiritual, the environmental, and the cultural, produces universal knowledge inseparable from the experience of dispossession, one that challenges colonial violence that severs people from their land and erases their existence. As Winona LaDuke writes, “native communities are not in a position to compromise, because who we are is our land, our trees, and our lakes”.⁴⁸ In accordance, I present the practice of “star-tying” water as a part of a local knowledge that links the material to the spiritual via the environment.

This exploration of the environmental whole emerges in an attempt to live the relationship between past and present inherent in “star-tying” water and other customs that intertwine water and stars, passed down through my family and village. By “environmental whole”, I refer to a type of relationality that connects all living and non-living things – on and within the earth – to the sky and the vast expanse in between.

In one of our conversations about star-tying water, my mother told me that its fundamental purpose is healing. For her, this practice is not limited to water alone but to any drinking liquid that can be exposed to the stars for healing. This means that the connection between stars and water, or any other liquid, gives it a curative power that extends to the bodily healing. For example, she would also place an egg with lemon juice under the stars as a remedy for kidney stones. This power of healing is believed to not be limited to bottled water or lemon juice but also to rain, or, as peasants call it, “sky water” [*mayyit al-samā*] or “mercy water” [*mayyit al-raḥma*].

For star-tying to work, the water must be removed before being touched by the morning sun. Otherwise, it will spoil and become poisonous. When I asked my mother how she had learned this custom, she said: “by believing in God”. She then added: “Actually, I saw my mother and grandmother doing it – and I trust their experience in life”. This made me think about intimacy as a foundation of the continuity of this custom – how it has been passed down from my mother’s grandmother to my grandmother, to my mother, and now to me. My mother added: “Nowadays, people do not have wells anymore, so they ask one another about rainwater, because that has healing properties too – it comes from the hand of Our Lord”. This indicates that despite the rupture caused by the acceleration of time, attempts to modernize place and “its infrastructure of concealed sanitation”, modern political-economic theory, the water crisis, and the decline of well-digging in new houses in the village, people in Palestine still ask about and actively seek rainwater for healing. Through this question, the dialectic of continuity forms and the sensory links are established. They move to search for rainwater or star-tie water so that they can claim the agency to re-establish their links with nature, both land and sky, and with intimate stories that bring closer those who have left them. These details lead to a process of healing that extends to more than one individual body.

The relationship between water and the stars is discussed in Canaan’s project on Palestinian peasantry, where he documents numerous practices as part of his ethnological study in the first half of the 20th century. Here, I trace some of the signals of the sensory environment that Canaan sought to preserve within his collection of amulets and talisman, whose stories he recorded from their peasant owners. This collection shows his hesitancy to understand cultural meanings beyond the strictures of “scientific” orientalist power, particularly its German variant.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Winona LaDuke, *The Winona LaDuke Reader: A Collection of Essential Writings* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, Inc, 2002), p. 58.

⁴⁹ In 2023-2024, as part of its pedagogical programme, the Birzeit University Museum assembled a group of anthropologists, sociologists, and historians to re-read the works of Tawfiq Canaan – most of whose collection of amulets and charms, more than 1,400 pieces, are held by the museum. The group attempted to understand Canaan’s intellectual trajectory by linking his texts to various items from his collection. While Canaan was clearly anxious that the peasantry was dying as a result of the project of colonial-modernist advancement, his works also show a hesitancy: a contradiction between his role as a doctor and his interest in all the forms of healing that lived with the peasantry on and within their bodies, above their heads, and beneath their feet. See: “Majmū‘at Tawfiq Kan‘ān li-l-Ḥujub wa-l-Tamā‘im al-Filasṭīniyya,” *Birzeit University Museum*, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/78hhpv73>

One of Canaan's detailed works is a 1929 study on the meanings of water among Palestinians, titled "water and 'the water of life' in Palestinian beliefs", which reflects the sacrality of water across millennia, a sacrality that continues and is still practiced by Palestinians. Canaan documents various rituals relating to purity in monotheistic religions or to popular beliefs about water's supernatural powers, such as its ability to drive away the evil spirits that gather around dwellings, or the belief that the living and the dead share the water that comes from the village well (according to the story, spirits are set free every Friday to go to the well and drink from it).⁵⁰

Canaan also records the myth of the "four rivers" which connect heaven to earth, one of which is believed to flow through Jerusalem. Endowed with a sacred quality, these rivers can cure or give life to anyone who drinks from them. Even beyond the three monotheistic religions, Canaan notes that this story is similar to legends on the four rivers found in the culture of the Ancient Egyptians and the Japanese.⁵¹ He also references the belief that the power of water increases after being exposed to the stars at night, and that it is essentially used to activate healing powers. Canaan also references drinking water from the "bowl of fear" [*tāsat al-rajfa* or *tāsat al-ra'ba*]. I revisit the same ritual here, albeit in a different form, of the curing of extreme fear – another practice that illustrates the relationality between water and stars.

Growing up in our household, I often watched my father⁵² practice the custom of drinking water from the "bowl of fear". I remember drinking from it myself, and I saw him offer it to many others. The "bowl of fear" functions through a range of temporal, spiritual, collective, and environmental meanings that shape its use and significance. While it is found in Palestinian villages, it is not privately owned; rather, it belongs to the community. A single bowl would circulate among the homes of the village whenever it was needed. Moreover, its curative power was contingent upon specific conditions, most of which had to do with the stars. I heard about some of these conditions from my father, while others I learned from Canaan, who seems to have been very influenced by the "bowl of fear". He dedicated multiple studies to it, including a detailed piece titled "Arabic Magic Bowls".⁵³

Canaan says that the stories peasants tell about the "bowl of fear" are rooted in their belief that a moment of fear provides the perfect opportunity for evil spirits to enter the body, because it is at its weakest. The "bowl of fear" is thus used to expel these spirits and restore the body to health.⁵⁴ Most magical or medicinal bowls rely on the alignment of the stars (the 12 signs of the Zodiac) or certain planets and their names (the moon, the sun, Mercury). If these alignments are not literally present, the user might, for example, draw 12 circles around the bowl to symbolically represent the signs. Canaan notes that the stars hold deep significance in "Oriental life": "it is thought that everyone has a special constellation – the one that governed the month when he was born – which rules his life. The conjunction of this with other signs or planets brings him good or bad fortunes. One must always know his own stars".⁵⁵ Since precise knowledge is difficult to attain, drinking water from bowls surrounded by those stars allows an individual to absorb their power. For this reason, they are filled with clean, "pure" water, rainwater, water from the Zamzam Well in Mecca, or, in some cases, from the Nile River.

The movement of the star-tied water bowl, as well as the movement of people with it, is tied to a specific time and a specific sensory map of healing. It is always transferred between different dwellings at night. My father once told me that it can only be moved when the moon is waning, as this was when the bowl held the

⁵⁰ Canaan, p. 59.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁵² My father died in 2014 at the age of 55. He was a metalworker. From childhood, I saw him practice many forms of healing practice either at home or at my grandmother's house.

⁵³ Tawfiq Canaan, "Arabic Magic Bowls," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. 16 (1936), pp. 79-127.

⁵⁴ Tawfiq Canaan, "Tasit ar-Radifeh (Fear Cup)," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. 3 (1923), p. 130.

⁵⁵ Canaan also notes common expressions used by Palestinians to indicate that someone is unlucky: "his star is weak" [*najmuh da'if*], "his ascension is weak" [*tāl'uh da'if*]. Ibid., p. 129.

greatest energy. In contrast, when the moon is full, the light emanating from it would reduce the bowl's energy. One can imagine a map tracing the movement of people as they ask about which dwelling is hosting the bowl at the moment someone falls ill, how it travels with them, is received, used, and then passed on again under the cover of night. Through this movement, healing becomes a collective, solidaric practice.

Peasants are always careful to properly protect the bowl. For example, it is always wrapped in clean white cotton and stored in a dark place, shielded from exposure. Anyone who touches it must be clean. The individual in need keeps the bowl in their house for one, two, or three nights – sometimes slightly longer, depending on the time required for their recovery. Whoever takes the bowl must return it to the house from which they borrowed it, or else inform them that they have given it to another needy person.⁵⁶ Canaan notes that some bowls are engraved with the movements of the stars at the time of their manufacture. There are bowls, for example, that bear markings that were carved or moved “in the ascent of the Leo or the Scorpio.”⁵⁷

Through all this, we see how Palestinians perceive their environment. Even the “now” is experienced through a different temporality, one measured through the age of the stars and their movement and alternation in the sky. Water does not move on its own. It does not merely flow horizontally through bodies and across the earth, but also vertically. Indeed, it has numerous thresholds and openings along lines and arcs that form part of the network of life between elements of the environmental whole. Colonialism, in its relentless effort to remove water from Palestinians' lives, has not been able to explain the meaning of this relationality because it cannot perceive or understand it. If colonialism wants to advance, modernity/colonialism/capitalism time must kill these tricky lines that existential movement follows in accordance with various temporalities.

Through the movement of water and the stars in the process of healing, we can perceive deliberation and slowness. It is neither a rapid movement nor the time that can be regulated through acceleration. It rather has its own temporality. It is present in many dwellings and still lives in and with us. If we think once more about the footsteps of the *flâneur*, beyond the consumption and speed of the city, as well as the footsteps of Shehadeh on his Palestinian *sarḥa*, seeking environmental and familial connections in hills marred by settler-colonial practices, we discover that they are both seeking a healing of a different kind, a healing concealed in the sensory connection, in the connection of the body to the environment, without separation.

The Bowl of Fear⁵⁸



Source: Tawfiq Canaan Collection, Birzeit University Museum, Palestine

⁵⁶ After my father's death, we found many medicinal implements of this kind that he used. In the storeroom, there was a contract with one of his teachers, who he had borrowed these implements from Abu al-Farhani, from Tulkarm camp. The implements were returned to him in full.

⁵⁷ Canaan, “Arabic Magic Bowls,” p. 122.

⁵⁸ The bowl, dating back to 1920, is engraved with carvings of the 12 Signs of the Zodiac. In the middle, there is a six-line imprint, two intertwined circles, and two human figures.

Conclusion, from the Beginning: Re-reading the Landscape/Village Through the Sensory Environment

Modern/colonial/capitalist time has caught Palestinian studies in an epistemological trap with respect to understanding place and its temporality. This includes Canaan's writings, which are hunted by fear of the "progress" that will kill off the peasants. Similarly, much of the scholarship on Palestine has tethered the Palestinian existence to Nakba, defeat, the destruction of villages, and the expulsion of their inhabitants. These writings often focus exclusively on what Zionist colonialism has destroyed, and in doing so, we fall into the dichotomy of defeat and victory.⁵⁹

This epistemological trap has reinforced a scholastic impulse to "save practices from oblivion", which operates on the assumption that the village has been defeated, has died, and that our remaining duty is to preserve its memory through landscape names, reducing it to nothing more than a cultural representation. In this framing, the village is transformed into a representation of something dead, whose meanings have become ossified and frozen in a sort of aspic, with no prospect for change or multiplicity of meaning. This logic extends beyond Palestine to global understandings of the environment, which has increasingly been reduced to "heritage"; a museum piece or a visual sign stored away under the pretext of safeguarding collective memory and protecting it from the future.⁶⁰ This "museumification" blinds us to the invisible normal: a life with special daily or temporal details between day and night, like windows with star-tied water and other customary tasks that form the lived continuity of places.

It is necessary to "re-read" the natural landscape through the concept of dwelling, which carries temporal meanings, particularly in relation to the continuing, non-compulsory rhythm of daily movement. This article is grounded in a subjective reflection on my life as a daughter of a Palestinian village, al-Jarushiyya. I remember waiting for my grandmother as she watered the *bayyāra* [orange grove]. In the early 1990s, the *bayyāra* was cut down due to rising water prices. Yet, it lives on in memory, as it once bore witness to my parents' wedding, where they stood embraced by the trees and the oranges they bore.

This loss of the *bayyāra* may have been the first moment that led me to search for my relationship with the changing space around me – how the rhythm of our lives shifts with the water and trees. When orange trees were replaced with olive trees, the temporality of the trees attached to the houses became linked to the olive season rather than the orange season. And just as the season changed, so too did the language of the trees and the movement of the body.

The olive season carries its own language particular to caring for the earth and the cycle of "visits" of the tree each year, which differs from that of the orange. Orange trees are watered twice a week in the summer and left alone during the winter, while olives rely exclusively on rainwater. The environmental relationship here began with my feelings of loss – as a movement – and then my feelings of a changing way of movement and of the senses with the change in the type of tree.

The entire village has thus changed – the movement of people between the trees, the vital seasons, the colour, the smells, and the expected harvest. Despite this difference, I found myself unsettled with the way many studies depicted the village as a fixed. I had seen the village changing, and with it the sensory state, with the changes of trees, the new roads, the expansion of the buildings, and the ever-growing number and diversity of stories. This is what I refer to as "re-reading" the village as a landscape through the sensory environment of dwelling.

⁵⁹ Rana Barakat, "Writing/ Righting Palestine Studies: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty and Resisting the Ghost(s) of History," *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2017), pp. 349-363.

⁶⁰ Hartog, pp. 312-314.

Tim Ingold's "dwelling perspective" is the basic precondition of existence, shaped by performance of daily activities. Living beings create and transform the environments they inhabit and change and transform along with them.⁶¹ Ingold proposes that dwelling allows us to replace the concept of "place" as a mere geographical space, a "fixed" and "horizontal" existence, with that of "variable" time. Indeed, we can go beyond this, through the relational network within the temporality of the same landscape.

Dwelling is about the intimate and continuous connections between beings and things, which form landscapes and places and bind nature and culture over time. What "dwelling" offers is an understanding of how we *repeatedly* encounter places and construct a memory and an affection for them. For this reason, dwelling is closely linked to notions of home, the local, and a deep attentiveness toward nature and the environment. Accordingly, dwelling is rooted through the act of living in a place, generating a perspective through which we can read nature, landscape, and place.⁶²

The temporal dimension is fundamental to understanding landscapes of practice. Temporality is inherent in the movement of events, rather than transcending them. Time and practice are inseparable and cannot be approached merely as history or as a series of distinct events that took place in successive periods of time. Temporality is more accurately the "continuity" of time, a process that arises alongside the activities of dwelling. It is the rhythmic resonance embedded within the diverse tasks that shape natural scenes. It is not responsibilities or duties but rather the people's attempts to carry out tasks beyond the rigid dictates of the clock. It forms "social life" and acts as its vector.

Colonialism violently fissures the temporality of the landscape, and rhythms are forcibly altered. At times, the landscape may not withstand the processes of expropriation and destruction. But the existential relationship, which comes through the relationality between all constituents of life in Palestine, means that we must resist the imposed dichotomy of defeat and victory and elevate the intimacy of our stories, our environment, and our places.

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⁶¹ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁶² Paul Cloke & Owain Jones, "Dwelling, Place, and Landscape: An Orchard in Somerset," *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2001), pp. 649-666.

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