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*Palestine Online: Transnationalism, The Internet, and the Construction of Identity* by Miriyam Aouragh (review)

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**MIRIYAM AOURAGH, *Palestine Online: Transnationalism, The Internet, and the Construction of Identity* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012). Pp. 272. \$47.00 paper. ISBN 9781780762418.**

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Miriyam Aouragh's *Palestine Online: Transnationalism, The Internet, and the Construction of Identity* is a multi-sited ethnography that traces the emergence of Internet Communication Technologies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and in Palestinian communities in the diaspora, namely Lebanon and Jordan. Her study, across thirteen sites, is based on three phases of fieldwork conducted from 2001 to 2004 and consists of interviews, participant observation, and data gathered online. Attentive to the social, economic, and political contexts of her research locations, Aouragh provides insight into the heterogeneous experiences of her interlocutors in accessing the virtual world, while also utilizing it as a tool for social activism against a colonial project and to shape and amplify Palestinian national identity. Important to her analysis is debunking the postmodernist assertion that the significance of the nation state has been reduced, as has nationalism, in the age of new technologies and global networks. Aouragh effectively utilizes the Palestinian context to refute these claims. She points to the state-grounded forces responsible for an on-going dispossession and occupation, but also highlights the loss of Palestinian territory and statelessness in the diaspora as pivotal factors in invigorating the formation and perpetuation of Palestinian national identity offline and online.

While Aouragh's study maps the advent of new media within a colonial and diasporic context, she provides the broader historical circumstances of the Palestinian predicament, including dispossession, annexation, and resistance. Her research is embedded in the Al-Aqsa intifada that began in 2000. Unlike the first intifada (1987), this uprising coincided with the wider availability of the Internet and was a driving

force for its use (117). Aouragh documents the clamping down of movement on the ground by curfews, closures, and checkpoints during fieldwork in 2001–2002 in the OPT. As such, the Internet facilitated virtual mobilities for those Palestinians directly subjected to Israel's occupation as well as those in the diaspora. Transcending the built environment and its imposed limitations, the Internet allowed for political and social exchanges, via websites and chat forums, between those confined inside the Occupied Territories and those outside. This provided greater visibility for the on-the-ground conditions of the occupation and those living in camps in the diaspora, intervened in orientalist and Islamophobic macrodiscourses about Palestinians, and mobilized national identity and a virtual community.

Despite its possibilities, however, especially in giving voice to grassroots anticolonial movements, Aouragh rightfully disavows a utopian vision of the virtual world. She asserts, "unraveling both online and offline relations in the different fieldwork sites showed both the limit and the potential of Internet technology" (5). The social, political, and material realities of local places matter and influence virtual space access and mobility. In Chapter 2 she maps how the technical architectures to provide this access, especially in the OPT, are dependent upon Israeli IT companies and subjected to Israeli colonial logics of control and regulation (56). Thus, all Internet Communication Technologies are monitored. Control over technological infrastructures at once economically benefit Israeli companies but also allows for surveillance of the public under the premise of national security. These practices were codified in the Oslo Accords. Notwithstanding, the Internet does provide a space for activism, solidarity and connections across time and space.

This timely multisited ethnography allows readers to envision the processes and conditions on the ground that gave way to the use of the Internet in social justice movements across the Middle East. In what has been named the Arab Spring, activists and nonactivists alike, utilized the Internet to mobilize protests against civil, political, and economic injustices. Messages and images posted across various fora on social media served to inform and were pivotal in augmenting on-the-ground grassroots mobilization and also generated support from a global public. The protest events in Egypt in 2011 stand as an exemplar of this movement. More recently, however, and directly related to Aouragh's text and the Palestinian predicament, the events in Gaza in summer 2014 demonstrate how Palestine was indeed online. During Israel's seven-week incursion, Operation Protective Edge, Palestinians

and supporters posted narratives, photographs and streamed video on social media of the human and structural devastation taking place in Gaza. This not only connected Palestinians in the OPT and in the diaspora, but this virtual community reignited demands to lift Israel's blockade of Gaza and called for a just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. On Twitter, for example, #GazaUnderAttack was one of the most trending hashtags in summer 2014, where, according to Al Jazeera, in late July over 4 million twitter posts were sent out under the label.<sup>1</sup> While the onslaught was taking place on the ground, a virtual battle was occurring online to document the material effects of the crisis and tip the scales of public opinion in favor of Palestinians. This not only amplified Palestinian national identity, but also served as a mechanism for solidarity across large swaths of people witnessing the catastrophe via social media and resulted in mass protests throughout the world.

Despite a shared desire for a homeland, Aouragh is careful not to homogenize Palestinian social and political experiences and positions. Separations, closures, and restrictions indeed incentivize political organizing and affective activities in cyberspace, but *Palestine Online* maps the gendered, social and economic distinctions that not only influence virtual mobilities but also shape an "anti-colonial nationalism." The Across Borders Project (ABP) as discussed in Chapter 4, launched by Birzeit University's IT department to connect and inform Palestinians in OPT and in refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, serves as an example of the impact of lived realities on virtual participation and vice versa. This project was both an offline and online initiative, where ABP centers were erected in OPT and in Jordan and Lebanon. Before the Al-Aqsa intifada, and subsequent to Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the virtual community created by the ABP and inspired by a collective narrative lead to a face-to-face meeting between refugees from the West Bank and those in Lebanon. This meeting on the border was predicated by a shared Palestinian identity cultivated in virtual space (43). With the start of the second intifada, however, the project was forced to halt other planned activities and cross-border connections between Palestinians under occupation and in the diaspora. In the Occupied Territories, the ABP suffered because of military incursions. Equipment was destroyed and enforced immobility prevented training in project hubs and curtailed the launching of new ones. ABP centers in Lebanon and Jordan were also subjected to the local structural circumstances, which compromised Internet infrastructures (i.e., electrical outages and

discriminatory policies toward Palestinians in camps). The material conditions on the ground consequently impact Palestine online. However, projects such as ABP fostered virtual political and affective connections based on anti-colonial solidarity, family reunifications, and even romantic links, undergirding community building between refugees in disparate camps in OPT and outside of it. Thus, importantly, Internet access and mobility is not positioned as a linear progress narrative since there were gains, setbacks, and divergences throughout.

Chapter 6, where the author discusses Internet Cafés (ICs), offers some of the most compelling ethnographic material in the text. This is particularly noteworthy since, as Aouragh indicates, “For Palestinians ICs were the most significant ways of entering cyberspace between 2001–2004” (182). She considers how gender, class, and local religious sensibilities influence ICs as social and political spaces, while also considering the multiple ways ICs are constructed and imagined by locals. Aouragh documents how access to and interactions within these spaces, both face-to-face and online (which were not necessarily mutually exclusive), shifted over the course of a four-year span. For instance, in the Lebanese context in 2001, mixed gender ICs were frowned upon and this was markedly different a few years later.

Attentive to how Internet Cafés are often hypermasculine spaces, she examines the agency with which women negotiate these and the strategies they deploy in specific contexts. It is evident that despite distinct narratives and positionalities, national identity is as important for Palestinian women as it is for men and was the driving force for online participation. Thus, it would have been interesting for the author to further develop her gendered analysis by delving deeper into the layered day-to-day lives of some of her subjects.

Aouragh’s book does not endeavor to be a detached account of the genesis of the Internet in a contested geopolitical space. She addresses some of the difficulties she encountered during fieldwork with closures, curfews, and travel restrictions. Not the least of which was being denied entry into Palestine for follow up research, which ultimately led her to completely restructure fieldwork. Despite not privileging her experiences, Aouragh provides important insight into the obstacles scholars face in conducting fieldwork on Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, and also points to how researchers are impacted and respond to circumstances that directly affect their interlocutors. In one account, while waiting to begin an interview in an Internet café, IDF soldiers, unprovoked, suddenly began shooting tear

gas, sound bombs, and rubber-coated bullets into the crowded streets in Ramallah, sending the masses into a panic. While some ran off, others fought back with stones. Conflicted, the author states, "One part of me wanted to run away. . . another part was appalled and wanted to join the stone throwers" (190). In this and other moments, Aouragh is unambiguous about her political positionality. This, however, does not take away from the depth and breadth of her research.

As *Palestine Online* clearly demonstrates, virtual space connects political and affective networks, but it does not replace territorial place and face-to-face connections for Palestinians. At times it can even underscore estrangement and separation. However, in the absence of territorial place, virtual communities can offer a sense of interconnectivity, balance, and normalcy when people are forced to adhere to alienating and isolating physical immobilities. The Internet also provides a space to mobilize and "humanize" Palestinians, as it did in summer 2014 during Operation Protective Edge in Gaza, and, as Aouragh shows, during the Al-Aqsa intifada, offering a counter narrative to broader, essentialist media representations and histories (168). Miriyam Aouragh's multisited ethnography not only contributes to Middle Eastern Studies, Media Studies, and Diaspora Studies, it serves as an important text for those interested in contemporary social justice movements and anticolonial struggles.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2014/07/who-winning-social-media-war-over-gaza-2014722172425666235.html>