

Greg Burris. *The Palestinian idea: Film, media, and the radical imagination*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, ISBN: 978-1439916742, 2019, 298 pages.

This book explores the intersection of resistance, coloniality, and imagination in Palestine. Examining cinema as a site that articulates the cracks, fissures, and crevices of settler colonialism and its claim to universality, Burris' rich cinematic analysis investigates dominant and marginalized frames of reference. The purpose of the book is to explore alternative possibilities and readings of the Palestinian present that do not presume that the Zionist project has been completed, and how a decolonial Palestine already exists in the here and now, expressing a utopic dimension. In particular, Burris analyzes Palestinian imagination as portrayed in film based on an equity consciousness rather than as a response to oppression.

If we understand pedagogy as relational encounters that seek to alter a person's subjectivity (Gaztambide-Fernández & Arráiz Matute, 2013), then such an analysis unpacking cinema's desire to shape its audience's thinking helps us comprehend film and media as sites of (un)learning Palestine as a present, enacted reality. Work that highlights decolonial utopias in the present and resistance as emic consciousness rather than etic response to oppression is fresh on the Palestinian cinematic scholarship scene, and Burris analyses wide-ranging productions in his study. Thus, the book is innovative and timely in highlighting dominant discourses of oppression and resistance in Palestinian cinema, bringing to the fore new analytic frames and pedagogical imperatives from which to think about an under-examined point of departure: a present decolonial Palestine.

Burris begins by describing Ariel Sharon's flooding of Palestinian towns with powerful lights and his declared intention to invade the Palestinian imagination to realize Zionism's structures of power, a vivid opening context of how intimately Zionism attempts to control Palestinian life. The backbone of Burris' theoretical argument draws on both Jacques Ranciere's notion of equality as a precondition for inequality and inequality's need for violence because equality is the natural condition

of humans, as well as Cedric Robinson's theorizing on Black resistance as emerging not from white enslavement but from a Black consciousness of what it was like to be free. According to Burris's theoretical argument, Palestinian resistance is not a response to Zionism since it emerges from its own Palestinian consciousness of freedom, and an understanding of equality and the incredible violence necessary to sustain the inequality that makes the inequality untenable. Thus, Burris argues, we need to understand the long and remarkable history of Palestinian resistance not as fueled by Zionist repression.

Instead, it is a Palestinian consciousness of equality and freedom that fuels their resistance, an a priori consciousness responding to an oppressive context and the incredible Zionist force needed to sustain it. He demonstrates how such a difference in understanding resistance is not a hair-splitting triviality, but one that gives away power in understanding and representing Palestine in Zionist terms, disregarding the important daily ways in which people enact Palestine as a utopia and foreclosing a Palestinian future. To clarify, Burris describes a Palestinian utopia as something that does not require a complete annihilation of all that goes before, but a resetting of relationships brought about by a parallax shift. It is this seeing of similar relationships in different ways, these parallax shifts expressed in cinematic imagination, that is at the heart of the book's comparative study of discourses of Palestinian cinema.

Each of the films covered in the book is a creation of Palestinian directors, funded by producers of varying backgrounds. Detailed descriptions of the plots of these films give the reader a good idea of the similarities and differences in the films' conceptual underpinnings that give flesh to very different ideas of Palestinian presents and futures. Such a detailed theoretical approach towards cinema may seem frivolous in light of the daily struggle to survive in Palestine, and Burris confronts this head-on with a question that anyone thinking about Palestinian cinema cannot avoid: "Can the idea of a Palestinian cinema even be said to exist?" (p. 33). In response to this, Burris provides a much needed and nuanced cultural history of Palestinian cinema that illustrates how whom asks this question and who answers it can render almost identical questions and their answers with

diametrically opposed meanings. Burris does so by bringing statements that deny the existence of Palestinian cinema (as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Oscars, did in 2002) and Palestinian existence as a people (such as Golda Meir's infamous statement) together with statements by Palestinian filmmakers that no Palestinian cinema industry exists. While both of these camps appear to be similar denials, the Academy and Meir deny the Palestinian people a collective identity and the Palestinian filmmakers are denying a film-making industry.

Bringing these denials together and situating them from opposite ends of the Palestinian struggle—one that seeks to annihilate it, and one that emerges from it—highlights just how differing onto-epistemologies can render opposite meanings to statements that sound identical at face value. Here, Burris draws on anti-essentialist frameworks by Sigmund Freud, Judith Butler, and Edward Said, to debunk the essentialist basis of both Jews and Palestinians and destabilize identity for both groups. Burris brings together Meir's words denying Palestinian people's existence and Freud's thinking destabilizing Jewish identity:

Meir's words to a delegitimation of Palestinian claims—there is no ontological foundation to Palestinian identity, and therefore, for the Palestinian, *nothing is possible*. Freud's example, on the other hand, suggests something very different—there is no ontological foundation to Palestinian identity, and therefore, for the Palestinian, *nothing is impossible*. If the Zionist negation of Palestinian being aims to shut down possibilities, the affirmation of Palestinian nonexistence opens them up. If the first serves to denigrate indigenous cultures, customs, religions and languages of Palestine, the second seeks not to erase them from the history books but to dispute their ontological fixity. For the former, then, the Palestinian identity has no beginning, but for the latter, *it has no end* [italics in original] (p.47).

Thus, Jews and Palestinians for Burris are not different based on some irreconcilable essence, but instead on hierarchal power relations and attempts by one group to subjugate the other.

His cultural history gives these dense and rather abstract arguments flesh and illustrates the difficult material conditions of Palestinian cinema as an industry—with filmmakers, producers, audiences and importantly, funding. This Palestinian cinema industry that is struggling to exist does not negate that Palestinianness, as an openly creative identity, is robust. Such a comparative examination of statements of identity negation are important for several reasons. Firstly, because as Burris points out, arguments around identity often occur past each other in different registers, shown in how both the Academy Awards association and Palestinian filmmakers at face value seem to agree that there is no Palestinian cinema.

Such an analysis demonstrates how anti-identity and anti-identitarian arguments are frequently conflated to the Palestinian struggle's detriment, for example, as seen in the film *Leila Khaled: Hijacker* (2006). Second, his anti-identitarian argument is important because while it is relatively easy to see how an oppressed identity is not necessarily synonymous with a liberatory political identity, scholarship on revolutionary identity often misses that identity is not static. His work here is clear in describing, discerning and explaining how no fixed Palestinian essence is a way to free it from fossilized understandings of an irretrievable past and their accompanying debates that often end up being mired in anti-identity politics. Burris' work here convinces me of the need to have more research that repeatedly articulates an anti-essentialist approach.

Burris proceeds to build on anti-essentialist ideas of Palestine by demonstrating how the idea of Palestine can be understood as plastic through cinema. By plastic, Burris is drawing on Catherine Malabou's definition of plasticity as that which can receive and give form, but also explode form. In other words, plasticity helps us to understand that processes of subject formation can be shaped by power, such as Palestinian identity responding to the Nakba; processes of subject formation can create their own form, such as the Intifada shaping Palestinian identity; but also, processes of subject formation can reject all oppressive forms, an "explosive politics of disidentity" (p.58). In unpacking subject formation in Palestinian films through these three modes of plasticity, Burris unearths how expressions of Palestinian imagination rest on concepts that reiterate, reform or blast apart internalized Zionism. For Burris, the decolonial

potential of cinema comes from shining a light on the minutiae of everyday decolonial acts that reject both oppression and resistance to oppression on terms set by the colonizer, and instead, subjects create their terms of engaging with the world. This creating of subjects' own terms in engaging with the world is Palestine as a utopia already present, rather than a foreclosed erasure by Zionism. I was struck by Burris' capacity to unpack these very different conceptual underpinnings in each film, and his approach brings to the fore the decolonial potential of film.

Subsequent chapters broadly tackle the topic of time from the alternative perspective that a utopic Palestinian future is present in the here and now. Burris brings up a question Palestinian filmmakers must contend with, "Is this the time to be talking about Palestinian cinema" (p.83) given the occupation and its brutal realities? Burris bases his refutation of this argument on responses by Mais Darwazah, a filmmaker whom Burris credits with cinema that engages a Palestinian imagination in anti-identitarian ways. Darwazah's response to this very question at one of her film's Q & A sessions described how it is at times like these that Palestinian cinema becomes essential. Burris demonstrates how the audience member and the director conceive of time in different terms: the audience member conceives of time as Newtonian linear, while Darwazah conceives of it as "subjective, something we continuously construct and experience" (p.84). Burris explains these two conceptions of time, the colonial and the decolonial, by first unpacking three ways in which time is colonized.

First, Israel objectifies the Palestinians into fossilized objects; second, it literally steals time from Palestinians through endless checkpoints and barriers; and finally, Israel colonizes Palestinian time through the trauma and psychic impact of the Nakba, which he calls Nakba time, a time that is still ongoing, linear and Zionist. Burris then juxtaposes these understandings of time in documentaries with the decolonial treatment of time in Darwazah's film *My Love Awaits Me by the Sea*. Notable is his unearthing of ways in which imagination in documentaries draws upon colonial, Zionist concepts of time, in what Burris describes as internalized Zionism.

In contrast to this, he highlights how a film like *My Love* uses the sea as a metaphor for freedom and extends it to water

in general, illuminating how freedom exists all around in bodies of water people engage with every day. Such an analysis reveals ways of focusing on Palestinian Time, time not swallowed up by the settler colonial constructs of time, “another time hidden within the recesses of the hegemonic order” (p.99). Such a Palestinian idea, born of a decolonial Palestinian imagination, explodes and rejects options offered by colonialism and opens up new possibilities for subject formation by conceiving of time differently.

As a decolonial, diasporic and transnational researcher, I was greatly interested in the final chapter of the book that brings together Palestinian and Black resistance and solidarity and their histories, connections, and disjunctions. Particularly in this chapter, Burris’ history of Black-Zionist and Black-Palestinian support, as well as Palestinian appeals to Whiteness and Palestinian connections with Black Power, help explicate his earlier argument for an anti-identitarian politics. He prefaces racial debates circulating both in the Palestinian and Black communities with a critical analysis of the claims and assumptions guiding these debates. For example, before arguing that Black-Palestinian solidarity draws on the universality of Black struggle, Burris informs the readers of the dominant debates taking place with regards to Black solidarity, debates that are critical of the way that non-Black struggles appropriate Black consciousness and power for their own struggles. This chapter neither embezzles nor abandons Black scholarship, but instead, Burris thoroughly brings debates on appropriation to the fore, engaging them in conversation with each other and always with a focus on Black liberation. He draws on films once again to highlight how whiteness and Blackness are not essentialized identities but are political conditions, using George Lipsitz and Ghassan Hage’s work on whiteness, and Black liberation theologian James Cone’s articulation on Blackness. In underscoring whiteness and Blackness as political conditions, Burris illustrates that Israeli claims to whiteness and Palestinian claims to Blackness build not on essentialized understandings of Black and white, but rather whiteness as a subject position that appeals to and is invested in whiteness, and Blackness as a subject position that seeks to disrupt structures of domination.

Burris is especially careful to resist an oversimplification of debates on Black solidarity and appropriation, and draws

out how Afropessimism's claim to particularity does not occlude Blackness's engagement with other struggles, and he draws on Black revolutionaries like Malcolm X and Assata Shakur to specify how solidarity is to be understood. Rather than an equivocation of struggles, Burris reiterates their arguments that "Solidarity means transcending the plane of identities and engaging in the disruptive politics of equality" (p.149).

Throughout the book, I wondered about Burris' positionality, his reflexivity, and what brought him to this work, important discussions that are starkly absent. I was reminded of Denise Ferreira da Silva's discussion of the affectable Other and how the ethnographer researcher is able to affect but remains unaffected (da Silva, 2007). In the book, the Palestinian idea and its subjects are rendered affectable, while Burris remains opaque, his positionality absent. The absence of Burris' positionality and by extension, his relationship to this work, was not just an absence of an important part of research, but the impact of its lack extended (as positionality always does¹) into Burris' theorizing. For example, there were several phrases and instances that made me wince: "Existence is most decidedly *not* resistance" (p.52) and elsewhere, a description of how freedom fighters have internalized Zionist hierarchies.

To be sure, Burris is making the point that identity does not necessarily correspond to a political position, and qualifies such statements thoroughly. However, while I would not entirely disagree with them, they left a sour aftertaste and came across as overly academic, from a lived reality that appears to be a white male. These statements seemed to undermine not only the people whose daily reality of existence is in fact resistance and those who take up armed struggle, but his drawing on support of these statements from theorists such as feminist post-colonial scholar Chandra Mohanty seemed incongruous.

Another instance when positionality's absence is a problem is when Burris characterized some Palestinian refugees' frustration at films that do not center their suffering

¹ Linda Tuhawi Smith (2013) argues that to decolonize research, researchers must first decolonize the research relationship between them and the communities they research, see Smith, L. T. (2013). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. New York: Zed Books Ltd..

as an “obsession with oppression” (p.92), a primary frame of documentaries. Such characterizations rest on myriad Western academic privileges and there are times when scholars need to consider their citizenship, academic, class, race, gender and likely numerous other privileges before making such statements while complicit and with “their hands in cool water” as the Arabic saying goes. Note I am not arguing that these statements that I find problematic are not true or cannot be debated, but I do require that they be situated in an understanding of relationships, primarily, what is the researcher’s relationship to the research?

This question also leads to the next issue I had with the book, a wider problematic of Global North, Western white academics theorizing Global South, non-Western Others, even if their arguments are well-founded and true. As a feminist and critical race qualitative researcher who uses Turtle Island critical Indigenous and land-based onto-epistemologies in my work, I was disappointed by Burris’ lack of deep engagement with Palestinian theorists beyond Said² and his over-engagement with European thinkers. It is true that there is no limit with whom scholars can engage with to more deeply understand structures of domination in Palestine (and Burris is rightly careful to ensure that both Robinson and Ranciere have demonstrated pro-Palestinian stances). However, there is a noticeable lack of Palestinian scholarship with which Burris robustly engages his work, outside of the endnotes. The book overly relies on mainly European philosophers as the primary interlocutors through which we understand social, cultural, political, and historical processes of subject formation, but we must also recognize that this Euro-centric theorizing is not divorced from Euro-conceptions of truth, reality, modernity,

² Furthermore, Edward Said’s work has been developed and extended by several excellent theorists, for example, Abu El-Haj, N. (2005). Edward Said and the political present. *American Ethnologist*, 32(4), 538-555, and Yegenoglu, M. (1998). *Colonial fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

coloniality and how they construct the Human³. Knowledge production is not devoid of the dynamics of coloniality and modernity and relying heavily on theorists from the colonial center (largely French, no less) to think through problems affecting the periphery colonized Arabs is prosaic to the point of being an academic trope.

Burris' over-reliance on Western theorizing crowded out Palestinian and Global South ways of understanding resistance, more nuanced frameworks that allow for spaces of ambiguity⁴. Such understandings do not presume an invincible structure of domination, as well as engage non-European and non-white onto-epistemological worldviews. Engaging with Palestinian onto-epistemologies is not as difficult as it might seem. Literary works by Mourid Barghouti, Ghassan Kanafani, Radwa Ashour, and Taha Mohammed Ali have all been translated into English and all articulate what Burris admiringly describes as the "power of the everyday" in the Black Radical tradition. Burris tantalizingly gestures towards Palestinian theorists and concepts like Rosemary Sayigh's "village consciousness", illustrating that there are indeed onto-epistemologies of Palestine that are not wholly nihilistic, straight-laced militant, nor an eternal waiting for Godot, as Burris implies, but such references do not get more than a passing mention.

In this sense, the setup for Burris' argument that Palestine has not been imagined outside of complete oppression is a bit of a straw man. If we are to decenter colonial Zionism in a colonized Palestinian imagination as Burris argues, then maybe less attention to white colonial thought – which is constantly being revised as it fails to account for many things – would be in

3 The foundational work for understanding the link between modernity, coloniality and the Human is that of Sylvia Wynter, see Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument. *CR: The new centennial review*, 3(3), 257-337.

4 New and exciting scholarship unpacks resistance, persistence, and ambiguity in Middle Eastern societies on their own terms. For example, Siavesh Rokhni, for example, eschews a Marxian resistance/oppression binary and prefers to unpack ambiguity and persistence in how Iranian cultural producers negotiate structures of domination through persistence, Rokni, S. (2018). *Ambiguities in the Music industry in Iran*, Unpublished manuscript.

order. A focus on the ‘power of the everyday’, so different from grand and abstracted French philosophizing, would help shift a knowledge production dynamic from one where Palestinian, Black and knowledge from colonized populations is marginalized and subsumed to European thinkers.

I found that discussions of Gramscian ideas of hegemony, Foucauldian expositions of power and Ranciere’s thoughts on equality in inequality (discussions that take up much of chapter 5), and how they do not adequately explain what we see in Palestine, take up too much space, time and energy from the reader to no serious effect. In other words, so what? The focus on these theorists by Burris’ parallels his own argument: that the Palestinian radical imagination purposely ignores and circumvents the seeming hegemony of colonization. Surely academics can do no less. If theorizing Palestine is to avoid becoming academic fodder and be genuinely useful, a potentially more worthwhile starting point would be scholarship not so far removed from Palestinian worldviews, rather than Eurocentric scholarship that, as Burris illustrates, often falls short in some regard.

Notwithstanding, Burris’ book initiates a robust dialogue on radical imagination and the decolonial role of cinema in support of struggles of liberation in a field that has often been characterized by appeals to whiteness and war images. Particularly in chapter 6 on Palestinian and Black resistance, the book provides a model of inquiry that challenges colonial relations, foregrounding difficult questions of solidarity, appropriation, and political action. In doing so, Burris provides a comprehensive exploration of the pedagogical role that film and media can play in disrupting the political imagination that Israel and Sharon try to hegemonize. By unearthing processes of subject formation across a large corpus of Palestinian films, Burris’ is well positioned to deliver a compelling series of nuanced qualifications through which the Palestinian imagination expresses itself in cinematic encounters.

His findings critically highlight the conceptual challenges and pitfalls of dominant discourses sustained by film as important sites of (un)learning as he unpacks discourses even those who are engaged in the struggle for Palestine can sometimes get mired in. Further research might attempt to

flesh out and engage Sayigh's village consciousness and other emic onto-epistemologies, and examine the role that class plays in the radical imagination. This book is relevant to the scholarly and activist inquiries of undergraduate and graduate students and scholars engaged across the disciplines of media, visual anthropology, cinema studies, public pedagogy, cultural studies, Arab studies, and American studies. The findings are of interest to filmmakers, but also to educators, activists, and media influencers.

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