

“Every Wound Has a Tale”

Consciousness Against the Logic of the Prison

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How does one liberate the mind from the prison cell that is colonialism? How can we sustain the violence of the carceral while refusing to become its object? How do we stay deeper than our wounds? And what forms of critical thought, study, writing, and collective self-formation are needed to counter and defeat the prison? For Walid Daqqa, coming to terms with the Palestinian question and its freedom struggle meant facing the prison as a logic of rule. A logic that was not bound by the prison’s walls but extended deep into the social body and sought out the very collective consciousness of the colonized.

The prison looms large over Palestinian life. It’s been there from the very start of Palestine’s encounter with European colonial power—the arrival of the British Mandate in 1920 also being the arrival of the modern penal form. For the British, intent on both incubating a Zionist settler state in Palestine and undertaking the process of land dispossession and commodification themselves, the prison became an indispensable technology. In the fateful course of their colonial hold, and especially in the suppression of the Great Revolt (1936–1939), one of the largest anticolonial insurgencies the Empire faced, the British built an array of camp and prison forms that blended the penal and punitive with the exploitative and the extractive. It is these forms, from jails to prison labor camps, along with their accompanying emergency legal architecture that the Zionist state would inherit and then expand. The military government that Israel imposed on what was left of Palestine’s Indigenous population from 1948 to 1966 relied directly on the penal landscape the British left behind. And the occupation of the rest of Palestine in 1967 would only see the carceral logic expand. Indeed since 1967, over a million Palestinians—a staggering one in fifteen people—have been imprisoned by the Zionist state. Though these numbers have tended to rise during uprisings—over a hundred thousand detained during the First Intifada (1987–1993) and seventy thousand during the Second Intifada (2000–2006)—mass arrest and detention are a constant daily reality of Palestinian life under Zionism. ¹ In the simplest of terms, the Israeli state and its colonial occupation of Palestine just don’t function without the constant violence of mass arrest and confinement.

But as Daqqa—who spent the last thirty-eight years of his life in Israeli jails—demonstrated so keenly, the logic of the prison is never confined to the prison itself. No aspect of Palestinian life has been untouched by captivity and confinement. Prisons, camps, walled neighborhoods, checkpoints, seam zones, closures and sieges, Jewish-only bypass roads and military “sterile areas”—colonial Palestine is an elastic geography of fragmentation and containment. Every movement and every blockage in this geography at once conforms to and reproduces a racial hierarchy.

And yet, for Daqqa the relation between what he called “the big prison” and “the small prison” was neither merely in their overlapping spatial traits nor in their overlapping forms of violence. It was above all in “the essential similarity of the jailer’s objective in both cases”: the remaking (*siyagha*) of people in the

image of an Israeli vision by molding (*sahr*) their consciousness.² The prison as a logic of rule was about searing defeat into the very collective consciousness of its subjects, inside and outside the prison's walls. It seeks what physical interpersonal violence alone cannot reach.

For Daqqa, the epistemic and conceptual tools at our disposal when it came to the entangled questions of Palestine and the prison were inadequate. Settler colonialism didn't always cut it as a frame of thought, nor could we simply fall back on poststructuralist political theory. Though the way he leaned into continental and postmodern theory sometimes seemed to get in the way of his own theorizing, Daqqa weaved in and out of these conceptual frames in his bid to come to terms with the effects of the colonial prison as a political logic. Settler colonial power might not be able to interpellate political subjects in colonized society; it might not be capable of ideologically inducing people to see themselves in and identify with a colonial state intent on their elimination, but it can subject collectivity to shock and fragmentation in ways that render that collectivity incoherent and docile. It might not make you a subject of the state (attached, invested), but it can make you a subject/object of “the big prison” (docile, disciplined, fatalistic). In fact, it can make you prisoner and prison all at once. Or, as Nasser Abu Srouf, another Palestinian political prisoner sentenced to life without parole, has it, “In prison, you are your prison. Part of your prison is you.”³

There's a passage in Ghassan Kanafani's 1969 novel *Umm Saad* that speaks directly to this sense of the subject-as-prison. The novel is set in an unnamed Palestinian refugee camp and follows the story of the eponymous character, Umm Saad, as her son, Saad, leaves the camps and joins the armed guerrillas of the Palestinian Revolution, thereby sparking a change first in his mother's and then the rest of the camp's consciousness. The text is structured almost entirely around the dialogic exchanges between the illiterate Umm Saad and the narrator (a skeptical intellectual standing in for Kanafani himself and who's repeatedly out-argued by Umm Saad). In one of the novel's sharpest scenes, we find out that Saad has been imprisoned on his way to joining the revolutionaries, and the narrator questions the wisdom of Saad's choices—better to be out of prison than inside, is it not? Umm Saad's response is irate but determined and collapses that inside/outside distinction entirely:

Do you think we don't live in prison? What else do we do in the camp other than walk around in a strange prison? There are all kinds of prisons, cousin! All kinds! The camp is prison; your house, prison; the newspaper, prison; the radio, prison, the bus and the street and people's eyes . . . our age, prison; and the last twenty years, prison; the *mukhtar*, prison. . . . You talk about prisons? Your whole life has been spent in a prison. . . . You delude yourself, cousin, into thinking these prison bars are flower vases. Prison, prison, prison. You yourself are prison.⁴

On first reading, the prison here appears like a master metaphor, proliferating as a name for the Palestinian condition itself. But there's another way of reading this not quite as metaphor but as Umm Saad's insight into the prison as a political logic that has come to bear on the Palestinian social body everywhere in a totalizing way—“prison, prison, prison.” But what's most devastating about Umm Saad's response is the verdict she delivers in her final sentence to the narrator-intellectual—“You yourself are prison.” The logic of the prison is already constitutive of the subject, who's not just a prisoner but a prison themselves. For Daqqa, this would be the prison cell of the colonized mind that demands, in turn, liberation not just from prison but from oneself. There is no flight from colonial structure here; there is only the struggle within and against this structure—a struggle that begins by not confusing prison bars for flower vases. The necessity of this struggle is the liberating insight that all of Kanafani's main protagonists reach one way or another. It was Daqqa's insight too.

Daqqa's praxis revolved around the refusal of the objectification of colonial carcerality. In the opening lines of his preface to *Molding Consciousness*, which we've translated and published in this special issue, he begins by writing that the hardest of human experiences is to suffer without knowing why. The task of

confronting and refusing the prison, then, begins with a questioning of causes. As prisoner you have only two choices, Daqqa tells us: “Either you give up on your subjective being and are transformed entirely into the object of your jailor, or you transform yourself into an object of study so as to redefine your suffering and its causes.”⁵ This is not about the body enduring pain, it’s about consciousness leaning into the suffering, telling its own story of the suffering, not just so you can know the prison and its instruments but so that you might confront it on your own terms. In his memoir, Abu Srour tells us the task “is a matter of pure consciousness, a matter of making the decision to define our surroundings not according to the meanings previously attached to them, but according to our own terms.”⁶ “Every wound has a tale,” you just have to get closer and embrace it; “Don’t be afraid to come closer for all pains are possible except those we don’t understand.”⁷

Again, none of this is confined to “the small prison” alone. For Daqqa, this loss of the ability to assign causality to feelings of suffering and rage had come to define the general Palestinian condition in what might be thought of as the postrevolutionary period after the defeat of the Second Intifada and the effective collapse of the Oslo “peace process.” Palestinian political society and political thought, he argued, had failed in this period in equipping people with the critical tools to read reality with any kind of certainty. They were stuck with outdated tools and inadequate frameworks that missed how much the operation of colonial power had mutated into new forms. “We resemble those who face nuclear war with a sword.”⁸ What was needed was not the glorification of the prisoners in polemical speeches but study. Clear, honest, and unwavering study. In one of the short essays printed here, Daqqa recalls avoiding saying the word *prison* when he talked with his young daughter, Milad, over the phone. He wanted “to prevent the connotations of the word *prison* from lodging in her imagination” only to later realize that Milad understood the prison long before she knew the word for it, just like Palestinian children understand the reality of walls, barriers, and checkpoints long before they know the word *occupation*.⁹ The task then is not to sanitize language, nor necessarily to invent entirely new language, but to “turn the oppressive feeling created by this reality into a force for positive action.”¹⁰

If there’s a criticism to be made of *Molding Consciousness*, it is that Daqqa did not always walk through the door he so resolutely opened. Even as he called for rigorous study that would furnish language and theory capable of responding to the present, his own vocabulary seemed still captured in places by the conventional approaches he sought to overturn. There’s a glaring absence in the book, for example, of a theory of the colonial, settler or otherwise. In a way that marks the very Palestinian political discourse he rightly takes aim at, Daqqa relies on a notion of “occupation” (*al-ihtilal*) and “the occupier” (*al-muhtal*) that risks more obscurity than clarity. *The occupation* is of course metonymic shorthand in Arabic for a much broader image of the Zionist regime. But its centrality to our discourse is also arguably a product of the closing of the political imaginary that came with the effective acceptance of Israel in its pre-1967 borders as a given. It works to replace notions of colonization and the colonist and risks losing sight of the fact that military occupation is just a temporary means to an end for the settler state. It is a term that cannot help but index not only fragmentation but also defeat. In this sense, we can only wonder what the text would’ve looked like had Daqqa turned, for example, to theory in the anticolonial or Indigenous traditions, rather than the repertoires of continental theory in Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, and Naomi Klein that are generative but also seem something of a dead end here.

Much of these decisions were of course determined and limited by time and context. Kept in isolation for long stretches, Daqqa had only very limited access to the broader world and its literature. And he wrote, at this stage, from and of a time of abrupt change, of uprising and counterinsurgency. *Molding Consciousness* is marked by the urgency of its time: It belongs to and mediates a period in which the defeat of the Second Intifada in 2006 seemed to lay the groundwork for a transformation and capture of life in Palestine that might see the final demise of the national liberation movement. It wasn’t just the massive amount of violence unleashed by the colonial army in suppression of the uprising but the array of instruments deployed in the aftermath: financialization, marketization, mortgage schemes and consumer debt, and a new

Palestinian repressive apparatus aimed entirely at snuffing out any anticolonial organization left. The aim explicitly was to forge a different kind of legal subject with new desires and investments, with something to lose. The Israelis called it “economic peace.”¹¹ The U.S. army general tasked with purging the Palestinian security forces called it the making of “new men.”¹² Colonial settlement grew and confinement tightened, but with it came new attempts to fragment and decollectivize, and even to win over class factions and a political elite to the status quo. It’s not surprising that the uprisings and prison actions that happened in this period were largely individualized affairs, what gets called the “Knife Intifada” in 2015, in which largely individual acts of resistance occurred beyond any of the political factions, and the waves of individual hunger strikes in “the small prison” over the same period.

And yet this is a period that seems today to have irrevocably passed. Has the project of “molding consciousness” passed with it? Daqqa was aware of—indeed, he embodied—the potential failure of this project; he had spent, after all, most of his life defying the logic of the prison. In hindsight, the more totalizing aspects of Daqqa’s treatment of the surveillant and molding powers of Israeli colonial power seem if anything to be unraveling today. Not only did the Al-Aqsa Flood attack on October 7 completely overwhelm the Israeli state’s surveillance and security architecture, but Zionism’s (re)turn to genocidal exterminatory violence marks a retreat from the effort to “mold consciousness.” As Faris Giacaman says, in a contemporary reading of Daqqa, “The new objective was no longer to ‘remake,’ but to exterminate.”¹³

If there is an effort to reach consciousness, it is only through the most spectacular displays of brutal violence—displays of force, not power. This is the case for “the small prison” as much as anything else, where not only have mass arrests swelled the captive population to over twenty-one thousand in conditions of severe overcrowding but also open direct physical torture and extreme sexualized violence and abuse, including rape, have not only become routine but are openly, even proudly, flaunted by Israeli authorities. The Sde Teiman detention center in the Negev desert operates today as an effective torture camp. At least two dozen people have died in captivity since October 2023. This bears little resemblance to how Daqqa described the contemporary torture and interrogation regime, with a nod to Foucault, as not a regime of “direct tactile torture” but one whose main target was the soul and the mind, not the body.¹⁴ There’s in fact very little today that resembles the modern forms of disciplinary subject formation that might have been a partial reference point only recently.

If anything, the conjuncture today marks the failure of carceral violence in molding the consciousness of Palestinians. In fact, the genocidal frenzy that has gripped Israeli society and that seems to be so plainly visible to everyone except Israelis reminds us of something else we’ve long known: Every settler colony starts by imprisoning itself in the first place. Houria Bouteldja calls Israel the “open-air prison” that white Europe “gifted” its Jews.¹⁵ The prison might be a name for Israel’s logic of power, but it’s also a name for Israel itself. In other words, there’s a bigger prison outside “the big prison.” A bigger prison that the colonized have long seen and long refused:

From the narrow window of my small cell,
I see trees that are smiling at me
And rooftops crowded with my family.
And windows weeping and praying for me.
From the narrow window of my small cell—
I can see your big cell!
—Samih al-Qasim, “End of a Talk with a Jailer”¹⁶

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Notes

1. United Nations Human Rights Council, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967, Francesca Albanese,” A/HRC/53/59, June 9, 2023.
2. Walid Daqqa, *Sahr al-Wa'i: Aw fi l'adit Ta'rif al-Ta'dhib* [Molding consciousness, or the redefinition of torture] (Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2010), 21. The term *molding consciousness* (*sahr al-wa'i*) was taken by Daqqa from an Israeli politician and former army chief of staff, Moshe Ya'alon, who used it repeatedly to emphasize what the military government had to aspire to in quashing the popular Palestinian uprising that was the Second Intifada (2000–2005). Daqqa renders the verb in Arabic as *sahr* (meaning “to melt or fuse”), which, like *sagha* (meaning “to shape or forge,” historically in reference to coin making), comes from tactile practices of metalworks in which mineral elements are brought together and forged in fire and labor to make new compounds.
3. Nasser Abu Srou, *The Tale of a Wall: Reflections of the Meaning of Hope and Freedom*, trans. Luke Leafgreen (Other Press, 2024), 134.
4. Ghassan Kanafani, *Umm Saad*, in *Ghassan Kanafani al-Athar al-Kamila: al-Mujalad al-Awal: al-Riwayat* [The complete works: Volume one: Novels] (Musasat al-Abhath al-'Arabiya, 2010), 255.
5. Daqqa, *Sahr al-Wa'i*, 19.
6. Abu Srou, *Tale of a Wall*, 130.
7. Abu Srou, *Tale of a Wall*, 134.
8. Daqqa, *Sahr al-Wa'i*, 23.
9. Walid Daqqa, “A Place Without a Door,” trans. Dalia Taha, reprinted in this issue.
10. Daqqa, “Place Without a Door.”
11. Jessica Whyte, “Financial War and Economic Peace in Israel-Palestine,” Law and Political Economy Project, May 6, 2024, <https://lpeproject.org/blog/financial-war-and-economic-peace-in-israel-palestine/>.
12. Bob Dreyfus, “US General Builds a Palestinian Army,” *Nation*, May 11, 2009, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/us-general-builds-palestinian-army/>.
13. Faris Giacaman, “The Palestine Walid Saw, from the Little Prison to the Big Prison,” *Mondoweiss*, April 10, 2024, <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/04/the-palestine-walid-saw-from-the-little-prison-to-the-big-prison/>.
14. Daqqa, *Sahr al-Wa'i*, 21.
15. Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*, trans. Rachel Valinsky (Semiotext(e), 2017), 69.
16. Samih al-Qasim, “End of a Talk with a Jailer,” trans. Nazih Kassis, in *Sadder than Water: New & Selected Poems* (Ibis Editions, 2006), 5.