

Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*: tracing memory beyond the rubble

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Abstract: This article argues that Ghassan Kanafani in his 1969 work *Returning to Haifa* portrays a new conception of home as a postcolonial site that transcends the physicality of geography to create a new collective fluid memory. Kanafani's narrative explores the chasm between the imaginary or utopian territory that exists simply in the memory of the indigenous people, and the real site which exists geographically, and how this makes ethical representation of the traumatised subject virtually impossible/an impossibility. Kanafani's allegorical journey of *Returning to Haifa* records the bruised memory of the Palestinian refugees, and reveals a desire to recreate a protean memory for this traumatised people so as to transform them from the state of victimhood to that of resistance. Hence, the three physical sites explored here: body, land and text are opened to the processes of becoming.

Keywords: Kanafani, memory, Palestinian Literature, postcolonialism, *Returning to Haifa*

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I

'It's only a search for something buried beneath the dust of memories and look what we found beneath that dust. Yet more dust.'

*Kanafani, Returning to Haifa*¹

The dilemma of representation for the Palestinian writer lies in an ongoing struggle with language in an attempt to stretch it so that it can encapsulate the essence of experiencing loss and dispossession. There is a chasm between the imaginary or utopian homeland which exists within the mind of the Palestinian subject and the real site that exists on the map. This gap creates the 'impossibility of ethical representation' for the traumatised subject, as Gayatri Spivak puts it. Spivak argues that 'ethics is the experience of the impossible'.² Yet, she goes on to explain, this does not mean that 'ethics are impossible'; rather, her statement implies that the attempt at ethical representation creates the possibilities of new meanings. These new interpretations of traumatic experience yield reflections of the 'presence of the signified' in the text (loss, trauma and home) making, in Derrida's words, 'the opposition of presence and meaning possible'.³ Hence, memory is being *deferred* in the text and representation is made partially possible in the process of writing about the corporeal experiences of the dispossessed.

Ghassan Kanafani (1936–1972) is a Palestinian writer who never detached his fiction from the harsh realities of occupation. His works crystallised out of his belief that politics and literature are inseparable, as literature is the active voice that embodies human suffering. Kanafani was born at a time of turmoil in Palestine; in the same month that 'the Arab Higher Committee was established in response to the rapidly increasing Jewish immigration, and a general Arab strike throughout Palestine was called by the committee to protest British mandatory government policies with respect to immigration'.⁴ Hence, he was engaged throughout his life in the Palestinian cause, and he dedicated his journalistic and fictional writing to conveying his Palestinian voice. Realising the influential role of Kanafani, Mossad assassinated him in Beirut in 1972.

Returning to Haifa (1969) presents issues about the return of the indigenous people to their homeland, identity crisis after displacement, the traumatic memory of the uprooted people, and the *de-territorialisation* of Palestine. The narrative is realistic, as Kanafani is influenced by his career as a journalist whose task is to unravel the truth. Kanafani consciously adopts realism, as he believes that fiction must be sufficiently authentic to portray the untold reality of the Palestinian crisis. As he says, 'I didn't choose my characters for artistic literary reasons. All of them came from the camp, not from outside of it.' 'When I review all the stories I have written about Palestine up to now', he adds, 'it seems to me that every story is tied, directly or indirectly, by a thin or strong thread, to my personal experiences in life.'⁵ Elias Khoury states that Kanafani's 'novellas had the immediacy of theatrical space – as if the writer had started at the end of the story because he was pressed for time and

lacked the patience of elaboration'.⁶ This unconventional style as used by Kanafani creates an intimacy that runs along the three axes of text, land and body, as each of them corresponds to the others through an uncanny analogy of openness and contingency. The beginning of the story which presents a married couple's return to Haifa is echoed by the ending in which return happens inside the memory, and where the subject creates a desirable land.

This fusion between the political and the aesthetic places Kanafani's work in the purview of what is called (bio)political literature, as corporeal experience is affected by politics. The ruptures in the histories of the dispossessed compel post-colonial writers to carry out a kind of literary excavation in search of lost memories. This also necessitates the exploration of innovative and preliminary modes of writing that rely heavily on the power of the imagination to fill in the gaps in the chasms of historical narrative. This literary expression requires a new critical consciousness or, in Edward Said's words, a 'permission to narrate'⁷ untold stories about/of the Homeland. Hence, the power of the imagination lies in its ability to provide new literary interpretations of (post)colonial experiences of displacement and exile.

In *Returning to Haifa*, Kanafani writes the story of a Palestinian couple returning there after the setback of June 1967 (Naksah) for a one-day visit. They are in search of their son whom they lost during the chaos of the defeat of 1948 (Nakbah) when civilians were forced out of the city under the terror of the Haganah to other shores. As the protagonists Said and Safiyya return to Haifa, they find that, though the city still exists geographically, it has been remapped, and thus its traces of memory have been obliterated. Jewish people from around the world have migrated to Palestine and become dwellers in the evacuated homes of Palestinians.

The breaking point in this encounter for Said and Safiyya is meeting their lost son Khaldun after all these years, only to find out that he has been raised by the very family that had taken their dwelling and is serving as a soldier in the Israeli Army. Now named Dov, he renounces his Palestinian parents, collapsing the last bridge between what was once a reality and is now a delusional mirage promising the retrieval of memory. The only thing left to them, the couple realises, is the memory of loss.

Soon after Said arrives in Haifa, he is hit by disillusionment; he tells his wife: 'I know this Haifa, but it refuses to acknowledge me.'⁸ He then starts to think about the reasons why the Israelis allowed the Palestinians to go back to visit their homeland after such a long time of expulsion. Said asks Safiyya:

So now, why this? Just for our sakes alone? No! This is part of the war. They're saying to us, 'Help yourselves, look and see how much better we are than you, how much more developed. You should accept being our servants. You should admire us.' But you've seen it yourself. Nothing's changed. It was in our power to have done much better than they did.⁹

The picture now is getting less blurred; while the Palestinians have been silent for twenty years, the Israelis have been preparing their belligerent army using all the ways possible. The seemingly romantic scenario of a family adopting a child collapses as readers realise that Dov is now an Israeli soldier practising violence against the Palestinians. Hence, Said goes through moments of bitter awareness realising that he and his wife are not returning to Haifa as indigenes or as triumphant fighters. Rather, they are passive guests visiting a city which has changed the utopian garment it wore prior to the occupation and donned a new one, alien to the couple. The intensely brutal, newly made landscape engraves itself on the bodies of those who encounter it, hence it becomes impossible for Said and Safiyya to inscribe their own trace upon the land in return. Such revelation leads the couple to a moment of epiphany, as they eventually realise how detached their memory is from the real site, which is going through a radical process of change.

This moment of recognition strikes as the couple apprehend the fact that their memory of place has been severed from the present site which is undergoing processes of *de-territorialisation* and *re-territorialisation*. In *Returning to Haifa*, territory is presented as a text under erasure, constantly being wiped out and rewritten anew by the occupation. However, traces of the original remain witness to those ongoing processes of 'deterritorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation' of space.¹⁰ Hence, in its transition into the new construct, Haifa becomes a trace of the original city dwelling in the imagination of Said and Safiyya.

The silences in the text represent the gaps and reminiscences of untold stories; traces of the unrepresented or the lacuna that reflects traumatic memory. Such unsayable parts of the narrative unfold the text's failing endeavours to represent an authentic account that hovers on the edge of the impossible for the traumatised subject, whose memory for the most part is both selective and bruised. The narrator, therefore, resorts to describing the external realities of place, which unveils the unmitigated struggle of the Palestinians since the events of the Exodus in 1948 to that of 1967 when his story begins. The two realities, however, are inseparable, as the internal stands for the past while the external stands for the present. The two crises are significantly juxtaposed through Kanafani's condensed narrative of that travel across time and space, from present to past. Edward Said argues that 'Kanafani's narrative expresses instability and fluctuation – the present tense is subjected to echoes from the past, verbs of sight give way to verbs of sound or smell, and one sense interweaves with another – in an effort to defend against the harsh present and to protect some particularly cherished fragments of the past'.¹¹ This alteration between past and present divulges the traumatic memory of the Palestinians who are still searching for the true Palestine that they knew prior to the Israeli invasion. Realising that this utopian memory of the land no longer exists, Said decides towards the end of the novel to overcome the past, and focus on the future instead.

There is a rudimentary difference between the two desires of possessing and repossessing the land for both the coloniser and the colonised. The desire to reclaim the seized and usurped territories of land and body by the colonised is

disparate from the imperial desire to claim space. For the colonised, the value of space lies in the precolonial identity it compresses, and the prospects of moving beyond the colonial experience are not signs of denial but rather a subversion of it.

Through embracing their own 'inherent undecidability, vulnerability and besieged language',¹² literary texts written by Palestinian writers disrupt the dominant colonial discourse, opening new portals for other renditions of the experience to evolve. The elusive nature of Palestinian literature entails that these literary texts are about the plight of becoming. These are 'unfinished drafts on wounded and bruised historical memory'.¹³ The attempt to 'write mirrors the reflexive relationship between the three physical sites of becoming: Land, body and text, and the protean nature of all three in literary writing'.¹⁴ The protean nature of writing the Palestinian experience introduces a new type of memory, which, in spite of its being nostalgic, is a performative memory situated in the present. Such texts establish a (bio)political memory entrenched within the anguished histories of colonisation through devising alliances among characters also in the present, and moving beyond it to the future of becoming. Foucault names this kind of reflection *heterotopia*, where what is real and what unreal are bleary. Foucault argues that:

In the mirror, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there.¹⁵

The site that the couple searches for in the narrative is similar to the mirror, in the sense that the reflection is not a replica of the real. It is, rather, a site that only exists in memory, which is an inauthentic sphere, as it merges the real and the imagined; and hence, it creates *simulacra*¹⁶ that do not have an origin. This also causes Said and Safiyya to live in limbo as they see themselves neither in the present nor in the past, and neither here nor there. They, in other words, exist in a *heterotopia* that does not really exist; a virtual site created by memory.

The postcolonial space in *Returning to Haifa* is both disarranged and layered as a result of the constant process of erasure it has undergone throughout history. The new way in writing space involves eschewing the repetition of colonial notions of space as anchored and resolute in history. Space has more of a conceptual fluid meaning attached to it; it is a venue that, in Bhabha's words, 'opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity'.¹⁷ The binaries of centre and margins are superseded by a 'political object that is new, neither the one nor the other'.¹⁸ This *third zone* is a fluid site that actively cross-examines through inverted historical gaze, rather than renouncing them or ousting them with a similar hegemonic discourse.

II

'Do you know what homeland is, Safiyya? Homeland is where none of this can happen.'

*Kanafani, Returning to Haifa*¹⁹

Said and Safiyya's journey home is emblematic of the Palestinian psychological journey back to the homeland. Physical encounters in the narrative are traumatising as the couple squander two decades of their life in exile only to come back home to a space alien to their heart and memory. Utopian Palestine is now disrupted by the new site remapped by occupation. Once they enter the city of Haifa, Said's memory 'did not return to him little by little. Instead, it rained down inside his head the way a stone wall collapses, the stones piling up, one upon the another.'²⁰ A few moments later, however, Said realises that the images of place recurring in his memory are different from those that he witnesses now.

When Khaldun rejects his parents, their shock becomes the more profound as they have come with much hope that they could regain both their home and their child. Said and Safiyya feel speechless when they realise they have been dispossessed of everything. Said says desperately, 'Truly Khaldun, or Dov, or the devil if you like, doesn't know us! Do you want to know what I think? Let's get out of here and return to the past. The matter is finished. They stole him.'²¹ The utopian scene that the couple's memory develops is different from reality; it is a sort of wishful thinking. Safiyya and Said end up even more disappointed and hopeless after visiting their house. Hence, they become aware that the intention behind the Israeli decision to allow the Palestinians to visit their houses after 1967 was rather a perpetuation of torment than an act of sympathy. For Said, however, the experience makes him sadder but wiser because only then does he realise that dwelling in the past is fruitless and absurd; thus, there is an implied call in the novel for Palestinians to aim for the future rather than live in the past, and to start the journey of resistance for a future home to go back to. This new vision that the couple arrives at opens up new possibilities for the Palestinian cause outside the frame of victimhood.

The explication of 'homeland' is convoluted, since it carries connotations that are not bound to topography and space, such as feelings of longing, love and loss. *Sumud* (persistence/endurance), for example, has become the main wellspring of incentive for Palestinians whether living within the occupied territories or in the diaspora. Fawaz Turki states that '[L]and-landhood . . . had both stylized and given the Palestinians their graphic, acoustic, and tactile, as well as symbolic, linguistic, cultural, and social mechanisms of communication with the universe. The memory of it would take as many generations to dispel as it had taken to create.'²² Such tangled components give rise to a postcolonial Palestinian dialogue whose connotations go beyond culmination towards a mode of openness, not only in respect of the working of memory, but also the very meaning of homeland.

The narrative raises the question of 'what is homeland?', an elusive question that haunts the reader with its deferred answer. Said asks in the novel:

What is a homeland? Is it these two chairs that remained in this room for twenty years? The table? Peacock feathers? The picture of Jerusalem on the wall? The copper lock? The oak tree? The balcony? What is a homeland? Khaldun? Our illusions of him? Fathers? Their sons? What is a homeland? Is it the picture of his brother hanging on the wall? I'm only asking.²³

Homeland, thus, is a very complicated idea to define. Said realises that it is not restricted to external objects and belongings, such as pictures on the walls, furniture, houses and so on; it is not families and children either. He eventually concludes that 'homeland is where none of this can happen'.²⁴

The colonial forces have often measured their power by the immensity of the lands they managed to seize and by their ability to subdue those lands under their control. A colonial space is a highly territorialised and mapped space, as opposed to the elusive nomadic space which defines the indigenous people. Homi Bhabha argues that the colonial discourse's 'predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for a "subject people" through the production of knowledge in terms of which surveillance is exercised'.²⁵ Consequently, discrimination was part of the Israeli colonial project because of its need for fixed mapped space.

In the narrative, this spate of perceptions of homeland is never realised until the couple moves from the virtual space of the memory to the actual geographical space. Therefore, this part of the narrative is epiphanic, as Said starts searching for further meanings of Palestine, realising that the spatial geographical boundaries are fixed, unlike the open, contingent meanings that the Palestinians need to create. Thus, as the colonial powers declare themselves entitled to write space, Said introduces a counter-discourse of re-territorialisation within the narrative.

But whereas Khaldun represents a major axis on which the novel turns, in the playing out of this narrative, there is another indicated. For Said and Safiyya have another son, Khalid; he is not there with them but has joined the Fedayeen, a potential enemy of Khaldun/Dov. And so Said reflects:

What's Palestine with respect to Khalid? He doesn't know the vase or the picture or the stairs or Hilisa or Khaldun. And yet for him, Palestine is something worthy of a man bearing arms for, dying for. For us, for you and me, it's only a search for something buried beneath the dust of memories. And look what we found beneath that dust. Yet more dust. We were mistaken when we thought the homeland was only the past. For Khalid, the homeland is the future.²⁶

Here Said becomes more conscious of the status quo, which causes him to shift attention from the idealistic mental image of homeland to the realistic one.

Khaldun, thus, becomes part of the past that he wants to reach beyond, and Khalid is the future that Palestinians need nowadays in their resistance even though Khalid is absent from the geographical Palestine while Khaldun is physically present. Elias Khoury argues that:

It is no accident that Edward Said titled his memoir *Out of Place*, for those three words encapsulate the polarity of home and exile that is at the heart of the Palestinian experience. Exile shapes the notion of the absent place – Palestine – whether in the imagination, the choice of words, or the will to freedom. And in the context of the Nakba, to endure is to recreate the possibilities of life and formulate the meaning of death, such that it becomes part of life instead of its antithesis.²⁷

Only now does Said realise that Khalid's death is not a closure; it rather creates new possibilities of life, for he is the phoenix that generates renewed meanings of what homeland is, regardless of his physical absence from the land. According to Barbara Harlow, Kanafani's narrative offers 'a critical reintegration of the past at the same time as opening up interpretive possibilities affecting the historical determinations of the future'.²⁸ This is obvious when Said prays in the end that Khalid 'will have gone [to join the revolutionists] – while we [Said and Safiyya] were away',²⁹ though he refused at the beginning of the novel to let him go. Returning to Haifa is a turning point in Said's and Safiyya's life. They can envision now the futility of merely excavating beneath the rubble of the past, and the denial of existing reality after the usurpation of the place by the Israelis.

III

'Identity is the offspring of birth, But, eventually, it is the invention of its subject, not the heritage of the past.'

Mahmoud Darwish, 'Exile IV/Contrapuntalism: To Edward Said'³⁰

Identity and belonging are essential concerns in *Returning to Haifa*. The character of Khaldun raises questions about what constructs identity: the past, the present or the future. Khaldun chooses the parents who adopt him and prefers them over his biological ones. This is unexpected for Safiyya and Said who are trapped in their nostalgic thoughts. Reality is shocking for the couple because Khaldun's mentality is totally different from what they expected it to be. He is not only an Israeli citizen now; he has also joined the army and is fighting against the Palestinians who are, for him, the 'Other'. Khaldun points out:

I didn't know that Miriam and Iphrat weren't my parents until about three or four years ago. From the time I was small I was a Jew . . . I went to Jewish school, I studied Hebrew, I go to Temple, I eat kosher food . . . When they told me I

wasn't their own child, it didn't change anything. Even when they told me – later on – that my original parents were Arabs, it didn't change anything. No, nothing changed, that's certain. After all, in the final analysis, man is a cause.³¹

Khaldun is told the story from one perspective. His memory, therefore, has been shaped differently, which leads him to accuse his biological parents of weakness since for him it does not seem plausible for parents to leave their infant and their country without fighting. Khaldun's words lead to Said's awakening, as he realises that resistance is the only solution for the crisis. The phrase 'man is a cause' stops Said and urges him to reconsider his thoughts about identity and belonging. Khaldun says sharply:

You're all weak! Weak! You're bound by heavy chains of backwardness and paralysis! Don't tell me you spent twenty years crying! Tears won't bring back the missing or the lost. Tears won't work miracles! All the tears in the world won't carry a small boat holding two parents searching for their lost child. So you spent twenty years crying. That's what you tell me now? Is this your dull, worn-out weapon?³²

Khaldun here does not only address Said and Safiyya, but all of the Arab World, as he becomes the mouthpiece of the Palestinian intellectual who condemns the constant complaining about the loss of Palestine without taking serious action to liberate it.

The fact that Khaldun's words transcend the narrative to embrace the Palestinian cause at large reveals how politics and fiction are intertwined, and that the changes of perception concerning an understanding of what a nation is will, inevitably, be reflected textually. The new meaning created by the colonial enterprise contradicts the anti-colonial values of postcolonial writers. This meaning perceives the colonised space as a site re-ordered by the hegemonic colonial authority which strives to define a territory to keep it under its control. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (1991) discusses such a reciprocal relation between literature and politics.³³ Anderson states that this relation is reflexive, as any change in the meaning of nationalism will be mirrored in literature. Anderson's argument highlights the fact that literature contributes to the making of a nation. From this standpoint, we argue that Kanafani displaces the locus of attention from a nationalistic discourse to a post-identity stance, in which subjects shape their own identities instead of receiving them readymade from the colonisers. That is to say that the narrative conceives identity as an extension of the body, the text and the land, which are sites of becoming as we argued previously, and not political essences that are already fixed.

Literary texts like Kanafani's hold a promise in that they attempt to construct a different discourse with a new (bio)political memory that can replace the collective consciousness formed by the occupation. This newly constructed collective

memory affords new interpretations to the colonial subject as well as of national identity. Harlow argues that:

The Palestinian writer is himself engaged in the historical project of writing large that same intimate story. The complementary and coordinating narratives thus produced contribute to the historical record and enter into the very events and significant moments of the life of the Palestinian people: flight (*hurub*), exile (*ghurbah*), resistance (*muawamah*), steadfastness (*sumud*), and ultimately the awaited, anticipated, but interminably deferred, return (*awdah*) to Palestine. The terms and the terminus do not coincide.³⁴

Narratives like Kanafani's, therefore, create new identities through keeping the memory in a protean state. Such texts occupy a 'third space' as Homi Bhabha puts it; a 'becoming' in a Deleuzian sense. Hence, the text becomes a 'rhizome', to use Deleuze's and Guattari's term, suggesting that '[a] line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination – it has only a middle'.³⁵ Writing makes the historical experience an intimate one as the narrative reworks reminiscences of crucial moments in the lives of the Palestinian people. Such terms, however, never reach a closure since they are in a constant state of flux in the memory of the Palestinians.

In the attempt at locating the postcolonial within the colonial space, the postcolonial writer launches a performative political act from the peripheries of history. This new space provides the postcolonial writer with the capacity to develop a unique critical view on the world. The periphery from which the postcolonial writer speaks enables a process of metamorphosis, a radical shift from the state of victimhood to that of resistance and the interrogation of history.

Thus, the colonial preoccupation with organised territories produced a site of resistance specific to the postcolonial plurality. A new space of the *marvellous real*, of *imagined communities*: fragmented, multicultural and 'untranslatable'. This liminal space, according to Bhabha's theory, is 'neither a beginning nor an end' and may produce endless possibilities, a confused discourse, rather than a unified, totalising one.³⁶

IV

'It seems now that to have a past is valuable and necessary but that the past is not a simple and static thing to be discovered but something to be "remade".'

*Richard Allen and Harish Trivedi*³⁷

The evocative experience of exile and return that Kanafani's protagonists go through in *Returning to Haifa* has raised their consciousness regarding the perception of the subject and the land as protean rather than as essential entities. This deviation from the mainstream understanding of collective memory as a

nostalgic sphere is, thus, altered of necessity towards reshaping Palestinian memory to absorb infinite potential meanings that open the Palestinian cause to a desirable future of resistance rather than passivity. Elias Khoury confirms that:

Palestinians talk a great deal about memory but are unable to give it new form, not because they lack imagination, but because their experience of reality is trapped within. The Nakba is neither over nor complete, and writing is like a small death; it is akin to partaking of death. That is why the writer becomes part of the vast expanse of suffering that surrounds Palestine, and prolongs its history beyond what the pen can sustain.³⁸

Returning to Haifa is an attempt to give the Palestinian memory a new form of resistance rather than stressing a memory that languishes in the darkness of nostalgia. The story of the returning couple rewrites the catastrophe of the Nakbah that paralysed the Palestinians to expand the suffering to the upcoming generations who have never been to the land of Palestine, but are still part of its memory. This reminds us of Toni Morrison's concept of 'rememory' in her canonical novel *Beloved* (1987), where she stresses that although memory cannot be obliterated, it does not have to stop traumatised subjects, but should, rather, urge them to start new phases in their lives. In Morrison's novel, the protagonist Sethe says: 'If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.'³⁹ The difference between the case in Morrison's novel and Palestinians' cause, however, is that the Nakbah is not over, yet 'rememory' in Kanafani's narrative could take another dimension which is the shift from a passive nostalgic state to an active rebellious one. The other additional predicament that Said and Safiyya face is that their house has not been burnt and lost, but rather claimed by other people who impersonate the Palestinians' identities and memories.

Thus, Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* records the bruised memory of the Palestinian refugees. Kanafani portrays the suffering of those displaced people who still feel a sense of belonging to their homeland and are anticipating their return one day. The narrative, however, reveals that the actual return shatters the utopian memory of the indigenous uprooted people, and reminds them of the cruelty of occupation, which can come to an end, as the narrative suggests, only through revolting against oppression. On the other hand, in Kanafani's narrative, postcolonial desires recreate a collective memory for the traumatised people; a memory that is in process, as it transforms people from a state of victimhood to that of active resistance. Hence, such (post)colonial writings are *sites of becomings* that are not fixed to a meaning restricted by the traumatic memory of the past. Such texts are highly intricate as they amalgamate the past, present and the future to *reproduce* memories rather than *fixate* those memories. Thus, the three physical sites of body, land and text remain in the process of becoming.

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