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Calling without calling: Barghouti, Derrida and ‘the international day of telephones’

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on research into telecommunications in the region by Helga Tawil-Souri (2013, 2015), this essay focuses on the literary, cultural and political implications of telephony in Israel-Palestine. Analysing the telephone in Mourid Barghouti’s *I Saw Ramallah* (2000) and *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (2011), I argue that Barghouti’s memoirs of exile are structured by an impossible logic where picking up the phone means not getting through. Demonstrating the ways that the lines of communication within and between communities are crossed, complicated, and often cut entirely, I point to the ways that the oppressive religious, political and geographical boundaries are not only mirrored but also significantly extended through the telecommunications infrastructure in the occupied territories. The essay reads Barghouti alongside Jacques Derrida’s account of telephoning in Israel in ‘Avowing – The Impossible’ (1998). Suggesting new connecting lines between the texts, I examine how Israeli control of airspace, infrastructure, and cellular networks contribute to Eyal Weizman’s (2007) model of the vertical architecture of the state – how, in effect, using the telephone for both Barghouti and Derrida recalls the Blanchotian syntagma of ‘*X sans X*’: calling without calling.

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Arriving at the banks of the Jordan River and waiting for permission to cross the bridge into Palestine, Mourid Barghouti writes in *I Saw Ramallah*: ‘There is very little water under the bridge. Water without water’.¹ He says that it is ‘as though the water apologized for its presence on this boundary between two histories, two faiths, two tragedies’.² Recalling Derrida’s use of the Blanchotian syntagma of ‘*X sans X*’, which ‘is not a simple negation, nullification, or destruction, but a certain reinscription of X, a certain reversal of the movement of X that still communicates with X’, Barghouti’s memoir of exile is

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structured by this impossible logic: for the Palestinian, the river signifies water without water, but this might also be mobility without mobility, place without place, identity without identity, home without home.³ And to this list, I would like to add: calling without calling. For although Barghouti tells his friend in the memoir, “‘Today is the international day of telephones’”, the lines of communication within and between communities are crossed, corrupted, complicated, and very often cut entirely, and the religious, political and geographical boundaries within which Palestinians continue to be entrapped are not only mirrored but are also significantly extended through the telecommunications infrastructure in the Occupied Territories.⁴ This essay explores the political implications of telephony in Israel-Palestine. Drawing on the work of Mourid Barghouti and Jacques Derrida, alongside research into telecommunications in the region by Helga Tawil-Souri, it examines how Israeli control of infrastructure, cellular networks and airspace contribute to Eyal Weizman’s model of the vertical architecture of the state – how, in effect, using the telephone in Palestine often equates to calling without calling.

For the Palestinian poet in exile Mourid Barghouti, Israel ‘is a nation that sees itself as forever victorious, forever frightened, and forever in the right’.⁵ Detailing the support of Israel by the United States and Europe following the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the 1967 Six-Day War, during which a reported 300,000 Palestinians fled the West Bank, as well as ‘the secret collusion of twenty debased Arab regimes’, Barghouti notes:

It is a state that [...] has erected more than six hundred barriers and checkpoints, has built around us a wall 780 kilometers long, detains more than eleven thousand prisoners, controls all borders and crossing points leading to our country by land, sea, and air, and frames its laws with reference to a permanent philosophy that its victories do not change, a philosophy whose core is this mighty state’s fear ... of us.⁶

The “‘peace process’”, he remarks, is ‘just not working’.⁷ Echoing Barghouti’s view of the failed negotiations, Richard Falk notes that approaches to date, including the Oslo Accords set up between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1993 and 1995, ‘basically [reaffirm] the concept of partition’:

The hoped-for end result of achieving ‘peace’ is generally asserted to be two nominally sovereign states, geographic neighbors coexisting peacefully side by side. (The gross disparities between the two ‘neighbors’ in their present condition and with regard to any likely negotiated outcome has been treated by mainstream commentators in the West as unmentionable, inevitable, realistic, and intrinsic.)⁸

The imbalance of power here is remarkable, writes Falk: ‘One state, Israel, would remain a regional superpower with a formidable arsenal of nuclear

weapons; the other, Palestine, would struggle for oxygen'.⁹ Without the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and without the shared control of Jerusalem, the situation leads only to a permanent condition of subordination.

Today, the lines of communication around Palestine are more tangled than ever, with the voices of Palestinian authors often excised from public discourse due to anxieties around the charge of anti-Semitism – an anxiety that has sometimes led to the closing down of debate. My engagement with Barghouti in this essay, however, takes up a different line: rather than aligning itself with either of the opposing 'sides', it expresses a deep commitment to the necessity of speaking across cultural divides, and to the essential nature of dialogue within the process of building peace. In order to do so, it focuses on the representation of telephony in the region, and the impact of this on cross-cultural conversation between the Palestinians and the Israelis – a conversation, I hope, that might do something towards dispelling both anti-Semitic and anti-Arab stereotypes. Indeed, while scholars such as Anna Bernard, Tahia Abdel Nasser and Salam Mir turn to Barghouti's poetry and prose for a lyrical and provocative account of the Palestinian experience of exile, the relationship between his writing and telecommunications infrastructure – and in particular, the telephone system – has to date been neglected.¹⁰ In this essay, I argue for the need to read Barghouti's telephone in both political and aesthetic terms. Certainly, Barghouti's writing exposes the ways that the telephone is not only a lifeline for the Palestinian, but – embedded within Israeli infrastructure – is also hooked up with disconnection and death; his memoirs reveal the complex wiring systems that ensure the telephone's contribution to an oppressive political and military regime. Moreover, in considering telephony in Barghouti's work, this essay also aims to open up broader questions about the possibilities and limitations of the telephone and its capacity to speak across national and political divisions. It interrogates the telephone's role in our understanding of ethical networks and transnational communication, as well as energising different modes of talking and listening across cultures.

1. Calling here, calling there

In *I Saw Ramallah*, first published in English in 2000, Barghouti returns to the West Bank after thirty years in exile. In 1966, aged twenty-two and in the face of religious and political conflict, Barghouti left Ramallah and travelled to university in Cairo. Forbidden from returning to Palestine after the Six Day War in 1967, he has lived in exile ever since, with different members of his family scattered around the globe. In the memoir he recalls the summer following the 1967 conflict when the family met at the Caravan Hotel in Amman in Jordan. Multiple displacements meant that parents and siblings had travelled from many cities: 'I was working in

Kuwait. My mother and my youngest brother, 'Alaa, were in Ramallah. My father was in Amman and Majid was at the Jordanian University. Mounif was working in Qatar'.¹¹ This is symptomatic of the memoir as a whole; his narrative is a transnational one, forged of remote connections with friends and family in exile. But what holds them together, Barghouti says, is the telephone. For the *naziheen*, or displaced ones, Barghouti writes, the telephone is a life-line: 'The telephone, now that the era of letters is over, is the sacred tie between Palestinians'.¹² The significance and complexity of the telephone call – with its divided geographies and multiplying lines of communication – is evident from Barghouti's ever-expanding catalogue of people and places linked down the wires: 'Mounif is calling me in *America* from *Qatar* about Fahim's martyrdom in *Beirut* and burial in *Kuwait*, and about the necessity of informing Sitti Umm 'ata in *Deir Gahsanah* and his maternal grandmother in *Nablus* and my mother in *Jordan*'.¹³ The internationalisation of this phone is crucial; forced migration means that Barghouti must be able to make long-distance calls in order to ensure the continuation of his family and his community.

Indeed, Barghouti returns time and again in *I Saw Ramallah* to the role of the telephone in facilitating the closest familial bonds. Following his deportation from Egypt, he lives for some time in Hungary with his wife Radwa and son Tamim. But, Barghouti recalls, he and Radwa decide that Tamim should be educated in an Arab country, and as a result, mother and son return to Cairo while Mourid remains in Budapest. Family life is characterised by separation. Describing the 'dispersal of my family', he notes:

From the moment we took that decision our small family was reunited for three weeks in the winter and three months in the summer, from my deportation in 1977 until Tamim was a young man in his final year of high school.¹⁴

In his experience, the paternal bond can only operate according to the logic of the telephone: 'I had to concede that the telephone would be my permanent means of creating a relationship with a child of a few months'.¹⁵ The family's telephonic connections are extended in Barghouti's second memoir, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*. Here, when Barghouti and his son Tamim finally make it to Jerusalem together, it is to the telephone that they turn:

Tamim dashes into a telephone kiosk in the street and calls Radwa in Cairo.

'Mama, I'm in Jerusalem. I'm at the Damascus Gate. Baba and I are in Jerusalem.'

I watch Tamim in the telephone kiosk. I see him in Radwa's arms, right after she left the Dr. Gohar Maternity Hospital. She is standing on the bank of the Nile directly in front of the hospital gate in a light summer dress with a pattern of small roses, holding Tamim in her arms and looking at him.¹⁶

The phone booth links Tamim to his mother – geographically, culturally and biologically. It is worth noting that Palestinian identity is passed only via the paternal bloodline, but here, in highlighting the connection between mother and son, Barghouti sets the telephone up as an umbilical cord, operating along the maternal line.

It is this dynamic, then, that leads to Barghouti's statement: 'The Palestinian has become a telephonic person, living by the sound of voices carried to him across huge distances'.¹⁷ Eventually arriving in Ramallah, and wanting to call members of his family in Amman and Cairo, he tells his friend: "'Today is the international day of telephones'".¹⁸ Here, Barghouti clearly sets out the value of the telephone as a medium for bridging cultures and locations. But, even as he highlights its role in the global community, Barghouti at the same time challenges the telephone's capacity to facilitate communication, returning repeatedly to the difficulties of speaking across the divide. For although the telephone enables long-distance calling, Barghouti's conversations are always haunted by disconnection and death: "'So-and-so, we took her to hospital, but don't worry – it's nothing serious.'" "So-and-so has passed away, may the rest of his days be added to yours".¹⁹ As a result, Barghouti admits that the Palestinian 'loves the ringing of the telephone, yet fears it'.²⁰ Simultaneously a tool for communication and a technology of violence, and always reinforcing his separation from his family, this apparatus is, in Barghouti's words, both 'wonderful' and 'terrifying'.²¹ Rather than simply bridging distances in the text, then, the telephone also serves to expose its divisions. Insisting that 'the displaced person can never be protected from the terrorism of the telephone',²² Barghouti explains:

The telephone never stops ringing in the night of far-off countries. Someone woken from sleep picks up the receiver and hears a hesitant voice at the other end telling them of the death of a loved one or a relative or a friend or comrade in the homeland or in some other country – in Rome, Athens, Tunis, Cyprus, London, Paris, the United States, and on every bit of land we have been carried to, until death becomes like lettuce in the market, plentiful and cheap.²³

Barghouti's telephone bell rings as a death knell, playing out Avital Ronell's assertion in *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* that 'the telephone touches the state, terrorism, psychoanalysis, language theory, and a number of death-support systems'.²⁴ This means that although it facilitates connections between family members, the telephone also participates in and extends the structures of power that keep them apart.

The telephone's role in the economy of division is seen most explicitly when Barghouti receives a call informing him of his brother's death. In many ways, it is a case of crossed lines:

One of his friends had called from Geneva and said he had been in an accident in the Gare du Nord in Paris. I called his home and Geneva, trying to find out more. They said that he was alive and they were trying to save him. Then they said he had died. I lived in this confusion before phoning our mother in Amman. I realized they had told her only that he had been hurt in an accident. [...] I called Majid and 'Alaa in Doha. I asked them not to tell our mother about Mounif's death.²⁵

And so it continues.²⁶ Rather than conveying a message, then, news of Mounif's death reaches the family only through a process of distortion and cumulative error, similar to the game that is known as 'Chinese Whispers' in the United Kingdom and as the 'Broken Telephone' in the United States. Writing on the politics and poetics of postcolonial telecommunications, Felicia McCarren explains that the game is known in France as *téléphone arabe*: 'one gives a message to another, who transmits it to the next; along the way, the message is inevitably transformed and the last player in the group delivers, out loud, its final, funny, version'.²⁷ She goes on to point out, however, that not only does the term '*téléphone arabe*' signify the supposed 'technological naivety of the colonized', but that it also 'resonates now in western ears with the fear of communications technologies such as the cell phone being used not for nationalist, but for internationalist, terrorist ends, linked to Islamic if not "Arabic" extremism'.²⁸ For this reason, and for many others, the specific relationship between the Palestinian and the telephone, and the connection between the '*téléphone arabe*' and suspected terrorist activities, demands an ever closer ear. Thus, the telephone rings in more ways than one: it signals communication from afar, but it also highlights the distances between people; it puts them in touch, but it also echoes with the impossibility of getting the right message through.

This difficulty is taken up once again by Barghouti in *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, a title that stresses the operation of distance that structures both communication and community in the Occupied Territories. Reflecting on the ways that the telephone both crosses and extends the distances between places and people, Barghouti notes that 'One of the Occupation's cruelest crimes is the distortion of distance'.²⁹ Describing his relief at being able to re-enter Jordanian territory – 'where distances always measure the same' – he stresses that distance in Palestine is controlled by the Israeli regime, where it becomes ambiguous and subject to distortion:

This is a fact: the Occupation changes distances. It destroys them, upsets them, and plays with them as it likes. Whenever the soldiers kill someone, the customary distance between the moments of birth and death is distorted. The Occupation closes the road between two cities and makes the distance between them many times the number recorded on the maps. [...] The soldier of the Occupation stands on a piece of land he has confiscated and calls it 'here' and I, its owner, exiled to a distant country, have to call it 'there'.³⁰

This experience of space in Palestine is reiterated by Juan Goytisolo, who visited the West Bank in 2002 as part of a delegation from the International Parliament of Writers. He describes the topology of power in terms of ripping and appending:

The landscape of the West Bank and Gaza Strip has been ripped and torn like cloth made from strips of different materials. Barbed wire surrounds Israeli settlements and military posts and the areas theoretically controlled by the Palestinian Authority: it protects and excludes, unites separated zones and separates adjacent territories, weaves in between a labyrinth of islands that are mutually repelled and attracted.³¹

Goytisolo's description of the spatial ambiguities of the region recalls Michel Serres's refiguration of topology, which he presents in conversation with Bruno Latour:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant.³²

But although, on the surface, the telephone might be said to facilitate this crumpling – a call is made, two distant points are suddenly close, even superimposed – Barghouti shows us that the region's 'topological twists'³³ are only ever manipulated by the Israeli operator. Even as it has the potential to unite there and here, Barghouti reveals that the present structure of telephony in Israel ensures that people and places always remain at a distance. As the Israeli Minister of Internal Security Uzi Landau remarked in 2002: 'They are there, but we are here and there as well'.³⁴

2. Telephony and infrastructure

The potential for and the limitations of the telephone to cross distance is of course a perspective shared and questioned by many in recent years, with Marie Gillespie's research on the use of telecommunications by refugees pointing to the ways that the smartphone operates according to 'dialectical tensions between threat and resource, invisibility and exposure, and mobility and immobility'.³⁵ Thus, although we often think of telecommunications as enabling and empowering a host of players in the global community, telephoning practices remain dependent on – and in fact contribute to – imbalances in existing structures of power. McCarren points out, for example, that new developments in global telecommunications indicate 'not equal access to the same level of technology for all, but rather the continuation of a "time-lag" in the former colonies; in spite of the synchronicity and instantaneity of techno-theory, there remain

significant differences in techno-practices'.³⁶ For the Palestinian, this means that calling does not necessarily correspond to getting through.

Barghouti's telephone can be usefully read in the context of Helga Tawil-Souri's extensive research into the relationship between technology, media, territory and politics in the Middle East. Her research confirms that telephony, for the Palestinian, is a political act: 'something as benign as a telephone call – its underlying infrastructure, its political geography, and its political economy', she writes, 'is a dynamic manifestation of the tensions between Israeli practices of control and bordering on the one hand, and Palestinian attempts to mitigate or negate these on the other'.³⁷ Tawil-Souri states that rather than abolishing distance, the media infrastructure and telephone networks within Israel-Palestine 'are not in and of themselves boundless and open' but function as 'politically defined territorial spaces of control'.³⁸ Telephone wires and cellular flows are therefore as caught up in the battle for territory as bricks and mortar. Arguing that the telephone is not simply a metaphor for the conflict, but is in fact 'the conflict in material form', Tawil-Souri explores the politicisation of technology and demonstrates that, for the displaced Palestinian, keeping in touch necessarily demands crossing entrenched geographical, political, and cultural lines.³⁹

The telecommunications infrastructure in Israel and Palestine has experienced phenomenal growth over the last four decades. This growth, however, is acutely imbalanced, unfairly managed, and frequently used to meet political ends. Tawil-Souri points out that 'cellular telephones were not permitted at all, under a military rule imposed in 1989 that had also prohibited the use of telephone lines for the sending of faxes, emails, or "any form of electronic posting" from the Territories'.⁴⁰ Without access to mobile phones, Palestinians had to rely on restricted use of the land line, which was then run by the Israeli Ministry of Communications. Moreover, Bezeq, the government-owned company set up in 1984 to provide all services in the region, was heavily burdened by bureaucracy and inefficient operating systems, and because of this, Palestinian customers often had to wait years for a line to be installed. These delays meant that, as Tawil-Souri reports, in the early 1990s only two percent of Palestinians had a landline installed at home.⁴¹ Forbidden from developing their own infrastructure, the capacity for the Palestinian to make a call was determined entirely by the Israeli regime. 'Circumventing regulations on landlines', Tawil-Souri points out, was 'impossible':

if the town was not connected to the network, there was simply nothing to do about it; if the town was connected but Bezeq did not connect the household, or took ten years to do so, nothing could be done about that either.⁴²

'Telephonically', she concludes, 'Palestinians were enclavized, living under a regime that restricted access to the outside world and to each other'.⁴³

On the surface, this appeared to shift following the Oslo Accords, with the second 1995 Accord stating: 'Israel recognizes that the Palestinian side has the right to build and operate separate and independent communication systems and infrastructures including telecommunication networks'.⁴⁴ This implies that responsibility for telecommunications would be handed over to the Palestinian Authority, enabling it to establish its own infrastructure. However, there are a number of significant caveats: apparently in order to maintain standards, the 1995 agreement also states that while they are able to develop and import new telephone equipment and services, this can take place 'only when the independent Palestinian network is operational'; moreover, the annex insists that 'frequencies will be assigned upon specific requests' or 'as soon as any need arises'.⁴⁵ Thus, although Palestinians have the right to establish telecommunications, the Oslo Accords specify that Israel will continue to control the allocation of frequencies and bandwidth, and will determine when and where new infrastructure can be built. Accordingly, Palestinian networks in the first years of the twentieth-century were quickly saturated. As a result, telephone traffic was rerouted back to Israel's own networks and Palestinians were forced to subscribe to Israeli service providers against their political beliefs.

Indeed, for Barghouti, the telephone's participation in the regime is extended rather than curtailed by the development of cellular technologies. In *I Saw Ramallah*, for instance, he directly addresses the impact of the mobile phone on telecommunications within and beyond Palestine, remarking that '[t]he latest manifestation of power and status for the Arab parvenu is the mobile phone'.⁴⁶

On the West Bank and Gaza the telephone has developed into the mobile carried in the pockets of the representatives of the newborn Authority in a way that antagonizes ordinary citizens. They are antagonized even though they know that normal landlines are not available on the West Bank and Gaza and that there is a kind of necessity for the mobile.⁴⁷

But the ability to carry a mobile phone in the West Bank and Gaza is, as Barghouti remarks, at odds with the political agency of the Palestinian: 'The marks of personal power do not fit with the absence of their national power or with the power of Palestinians in general according to the strange arrangements of Oslo'.⁴⁸ This is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that, for the Palestinian, sufficient bandwidth to make a call is far from guaranteed. As Tawil-Souri explains, 'While Palestinian mobile phone users can carry their phones around with them (and thus can be considered "mobile"), how far signals reach and where the infrastructure of Palestinian cellular networks reach are territorially defined by the logic of occupation'.⁴⁹ As a result, Barghouti's telephone is caught in a double-bind: 'Especially in its dependence on Israeli infrastructure, telecommunications demonstrates [*sic*]

Oslo's core paradox: self-determination under continued occupation'.⁵⁰ Another way of putting this: calling without calling.

Although Palestinian networks are now in operation, a number of restrictions on calling remain. This is explored in Yasmin El-Rifae's recent essay 'Where does Palestine Begin?', published in *This is Not a Border*. Discussing the role of telecommunications in refiguring bordered spaces, and the development of legal Palestinian networks run by Jawwal and Wataniya in the Occupied Territories, El-Rifae writes:

We drive through Ramallah, capital of politics and finance for the would-be Palestinian state. Here you buy your Jawwal or Wataniya SIM card for use in the West Bank. Palestinian phone operators have not been allowed to provide 3G, although we hear that might change now.⁵¹

In fact, according to news reports, spectrum allocation remains a problem to this day, and although 3G service was launched in the West Bank in 2018, service in the Gaza strip at the time of writing is still forbidden.⁵² The situation is further compounded by the physical geography of the region. The hilly terrain of the West Bank results in a significantly reduced signal. As a result, El-Rifae points out, Palestinians are forced to circumvent the restrictions: 'Some people manage to buy Israeli SIM cards, either in Israeli cities or from rough neighbourhoods near the separation wall, where they are on sale along with other contraband such as drugs and weapons'.⁵³ The Israeli SIM cards – which are strictly forbidden – El-Rifae explains, 'will pick up 3G from settlement communication towers sometimes, especially in the hillier parts of Nablus and Ramallah, near land with the densest settlements'.⁵⁴ But for El-Rifae, the construction and location of these cell phone towers is symptomatic of the political climate and imbalance of power: 'If you are looking for a West Bank settlement', she writes, 'look for a tower. They go up first, poking out of the hills like flagpoles, and the settlers follow'.⁵⁵ The erection of Israeli cell phone towers, she continues, is central to the establishment of illegal settlements in Palestinian territory, revealing that rather than reflecting the political dynamic, the construction of telephone infrastructure actually *shapes* it. And this shaping reveals the three-dimensional nature of border politics in the region: this is not simply the carving up of land, but also involves the battle for air. Describing visiting the old city of Hebron, El-Rifae writes:

We look up, and Israel lives above the wire mesh which catches its rocks, its garbage, although not its urine. Israel is in the upper floors of houses taken over and occupied by settler families, or turned into watchtowers for the soldiers who protect them. Palestine on the ground floor, on the street level, and Israel between the wire mesh and the sky.⁵⁶

By inviting the reader to 'look up', El-Rifae thus introduces the politics of the sky.

3. Vertical architecture

The vertical construction of space in Palestine is played out in *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* when Barghouti recalls his journey by taxi to the border. Attempting to avoid a road block, the car is lifted by a crane over a gaping crater:

The suspended bubble of air in which we seven are swinging is now our place of exile from this earth. It is our disabled will and our attempt, in a mixture of courage and fear, to impose our will through wit and cunning. This bubble of air is the unyielding Occupation itself. It is the rootless roaming of the Palestinians through the air of others' countries. In the world's air we seek refuge from our earth. We sink into the upper spaces. We sink upward.⁵⁷

The fact that Barghouti seeks freedom in the air is troubled by the military's control of airspace in the Occupied Territories – and this includes, of course, the control of cellular flows, frequencies and bandwidths. By introducing this third dimension, both El-Rifae and Barghouti highlight the ways that the battles for territory extend above ground and into the sky – a dimension of the debate that can be read alongside Eyal Weizman's model of vertical architecture.

Weizman opens *Hollow Land* – his seminal work on the political architecture of Palestine – by recalling that 'in 1999 several settlers complained to the military of bad reception on their cellphones as they drove round a bend on the main highway, Road 60, leading from Jerusalem to the settlements in the northern West Bank'.⁵⁸ Although officially owned by local Palestinian farmers, the hilltop to which he refers was named after the Biblical town Migron and was occupied by two Israeli settlers. The cellphone provider in the area at that time agreed to erect an antenna on a hilltop overlooking the bend on the road. Weizman explains that 'according to the emergency powers invested in the Israeli military [...] the construction of a cellphone antenna could be considered a security issue, and could therefore be undertaken on private lands without obtaining the owners' consent'.⁵⁹ Thus, the Israel Electric Corporation connected the hilltop to the grid, although at the time (May 2001), delays meant that only a fake antenna was constructed. A security guard was employed to keep an eye on the fake post; his family moved with him, and then other families joined, and despite being a territory legally owned by Palestinians and overlooked by a fake antenna, Migron eventually established itself as a significant Israeli outpost. In 2011, prior to its dismantlement, it was reported to house fifty families.⁶⁰ And this is not the only outpost established around a cellphone antenna; such cellular hotspots become, Weizman writes, the 'focus of territorial intensity in the surrounding landscape': 'the energy field of the antenna was not only electromagnetic, but also political, serving as a centre for the mobilizing, channeling, coalescing and organizing of political forces and processes of various

kinds'.⁶¹ Built with the aim of influencing state planning and the 'Israeli' frontier, these outposts contribute to what Weizman refers to as the 'political plastic' of the Occupied Territories.

Weizman's *Hollow Land* is interested in reading architecture as 'a conceptual way of understanding political issues as constructed realities'.⁶² As such, Weizman points out that '[t]emporary lines of engagement, marked by makeshift boundaries, are not limited to the edges of political space but exist throughout its depth'.⁶³ Explaining that 'the separation between Israeli and Palestinian areas in the Occupied Territories was not articulated on the surface of the terrain alone', Weizman articulates a 'politics of verticality', involving the control by Israel of 'the vast water aquifer in the subterranean beneath them, as well as the militarized airspace above them'.⁶⁴ For Weizman, this 'vertical architecture' includes the Israeli control of the electromagnetic spectrum, demonstrating the ways that our understanding of territory operates in multiple dimensions, in both visible and invisible ways.

4. Connecting impossible lines

In order to think further about this invisible architecture, I'd like to suggest that the core paradox between here and there in Palestine might be read in light of Jacques Derrida's writing about the region. Of course, to bring together the work of Barghouti (a Palestinian in exile) and Derrida (a French-Algerian Jew) may appear to cross the wires. However, by arguing that there could be a connecting 'line' between these two writers, I hope to demonstrate the ways that their texts have the capacity for cross-cultural conversation. Bringing together Barghouti and Derrida, furthermore, opens up new possibilities of calling to the other, perhaps even living together, down the line.

Certainly, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that addressing the relationship between deconstruction and the question of Palestine is a complex and contentious task. Some, such as Christopher Wise, accuse Derrida of a Eurocentric and Jewish-bias, arguing that he ignores the military realities of the Israeli regime.⁶⁵ Others, however, argue for a more generous reading: Declan Wiffen, for instance, insists that the relationship between Derrida and Palestine has been neglected for far too long, and Caroline Rooney suggests that 'the Palestinians are where deconstruction could be in the future'.⁶⁶ In fact, for Derrida, 'the war for the "appropriation of Jerusalem" is today the world war. It is happening everywhere, it is the world, it is today the singular figure of its being "out of joint"'.⁶⁷ Jerusalem is, he writes in *The Gift of Death*, 'a holy place but also a place that is in dispute, radically and rabidly, fought over by all the monotheisms, by all the religions of the unique and transcendent God, of the absolute other'.⁶⁸ Asking 'Am I in Jerusalem?', Derrida shows that living in Jerusalem is not a straightforward matter:

This is a question to which one will never respond in the present tense, only in the future or in the past anterior Am I in Jerusalem or elsewhere, very far from the Holy City? Under what conditions does one find oneself in Jerusalem? Is it enough to be there physically, as one says, and to live in places that carry this name, as I am now doing? What is it to live in Jerusalem? This is not easy to decide.⁶⁹

Complicating the relations between here and there, near and far, absence and presence, past, present and future, Derrida's question 'Am I in Jerusalem?' mirrors the very same disruptive logic as the telephone. Moreover, it is to the telephone that he once again turns when offering his fullest account of his position on the question of Palestine. This is in conversation with Elisabeth Roudinesco, where he makes it clear that 'I have no particular hostility in principle toward the state of Israel, but I have almost always judged quite harshly the policies of the Israeli governments in relation to the Palestinians'.⁷⁰ What is particularly interesting here is that this acknowledgement comes in the form of a telephone call – a passage worth citing in full:

An anecdote: Some time ago, someone I didn't know called me on the telephone. From the Centre de Documentation Juive: 'My son is writing a thesis on Israel at the Sorbonne. He heard that you were in Tel Aviv two years ago and that you gave a "speech" which the Israeli press reported on. He would like to get a copy.' I didn't give a lecture a Tel Aviv, I told her; rather I spoke, in front of a large audience and as part of a discussion, about what I thought of the situation and the political stakes, and notably what I disapproved of in Israeli politics. I do so carefully, politely, I believe, but frankly and firmly. Since I had no legible trace of this improvisation, aside from a brief introduction, I told my interlocutor that if her son was interested in what I think of Israel he could find what he's looking for in certain texts of mine. In general, I added, although the conditions of the foundation of the state of Israel remain for me a tangled knot of painful questions that I could not possibly address over the phone (and even if it is considered a given that every state, that every foundation itself is founded in violence, and is by definition unable to justify itself) I have a great many reasons to believe that it is *for the best*, all things considered, and in the interests of the greatest number of people, including the Palestinians, including the other states in the region, to consider this foundation, despite its originary violence, as henceforth irreversible – on the condition that neighbourly relations be established either with a Palestinian state endowed with *all* its rights, in the fullest sense of the term, 'state' (at least insofar as anything remains of this full sense and of sovereignty in general; another very serious question I must leave aside for now while briefly relating, in an interview, a telephone interview), or, at the centre of the same 'sovereign' and binational 'state'. With a Palestinian people freed from all oppression or from all intolerable segregation. I have no particular hostility in principle toward the state of Israel, but I have almost always judged quite harshly the policies of the Israeli governments in relation to the Palestinians. I have often said so publicly, in particular in Jerusalem, for example, in a lecture I gave quite a long time ago, which was published in more than one language, during the period when one spoke of 'occupied

territories' etc. After a few more sentences along these lines, I heard on the other end of the line: 'I see. Well, that's what I suspected.'⁷¹

Notwithstanding the significance of Derrida's comments on sovereignty and state in this anecdote, it is thanks to what Martin McQuillan calls 'Derrida's unnamed telephonic interrogator' that we have his much-deferred statement on the Palestinian situation.⁷² But while commentators frequently debate Derrida's final position with respect to the conflict, they neglect to interrogate the very self-conscious role of the telephone in this exchange, and the ways in which the telephone itself might contribute to rethinking the relationship between the State of Israel and the Palestinian people.

2012 marked the publication in English of Derrida's own essay on the question of Palestine. In 'Avowing – The Impossible', Derrida argues that living together means 'being-with-oneself', with a oneself that is

shared or divided, enclosed, multiplied, or torn, open too, in any case anachronistic in its very present, at once increased and dislocated by the mourning or the promise of the other in oneself [...] an other outside of oneself in oneself.⁷³

Living together thus means being open to the other, to the other within the self, and to whatever form it may take. He goes on to include the effects of *technological* others, 'from television to Internet and cell phones, wireless communication, or satellites', all of which 'take into account what occurs [...] to that which is called the proximity of the other in the present'.⁷⁴ Multiplying, accelerating and extending the reach of communication, Derrida points to the way that such technologies

unsettle *at once* all conditions: conditions of being-together (the supposed proximity, in the same instant, in the same place and the same territory, as if the unicity of a place on earth, of a soil, were becoming more and more – as one says of a telephone and in the measure of the said telephone – *portable*) and the conditions of the living in its technological relation to the nonliving, to hetero- or homo-grafting, to prosthesis, artificial insemination, cloning, and so on.⁷⁵

All this is in operation throughout Derrida's account of Jerusalem – a Jerusalem where the conditions of being-together – living in proximity, in the same place and in the same territory, at the same time and yet also out of joint – are at once most pressing. We have seen throughout this essay that the telephone contributes to the distortion of distance in the Occupied Territories, but if the telephone has the capacity to unsettle at once all conditions – the conditions of here and there, distance and proximity, presence and absence, life and death – might it also have the potential to refigure our understanding of territory, of history, and of being (together)? Indeed, even as it plays into the topologies of power in Israel-Palestine, perhaps the telephone also has the potential to challenge this dynamic, exposing the ways in which notions of self and other are always already ruptured,

and henceforth demanding that we rethink what it means to live with the other within oneself, to be together and apart.

Derrida returns to the telephone later in 'Avowing – The Impossible', describing his first visit to Jerusalem in 1982. Michal Govrin, an Israeli friend, takes him to the cemetery at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. They enter the Hevra Kadisha, which is, Derrida explains, 'the institution responsible for the difficult administration of the famous cemetery: allocation of plots, decisions as to the "concessions," transport of bodies, often costly operations, from distant countries, and most often the United States, and so on'.⁷⁶ Although this is, he says, 'before the cell phone', Derrida is struck by the telecommunication devices that facilitate these negotiations: '[the men] display a feverish activity around walkie-talkies, telephones, and computers that ostensibly link them to all the places in the world from which one begs them, at any cost, for a place in the cemetery'.⁷⁷ It is in the context of this cemetery, and considering the decisions about burial made by the men who work in its office, that Derrida asks: 'What does "living together" mean when the most urgent thing is to choose, while living and in the first place, a last place, an apparently irreplaceable place ... ?'⁷⁸ Explaining that even before the mobile phone, all these 'little prosthetic machines', as he calls them, make 'all these here-nows infinitely proximate and substitutable', the political situation that keeps Palestinians out of their homeland means that

New York could appear closer than Gaza (with or without airport), and I could have the feeling of being closer to some other at the other end of the world than to some neighbor, some friend from West Jerusalem or East Jerusalem.⁷⁹

Derrida continues: 'To ask oneself then, on a cell phone, whether Jerusalem is in Jerusalem, is perhaps no longer to trust, like others in older times, the distinction between earthly Jerusalem and heavenly Jerusalem'.⁸⁰ Extending the conversation beyond the living, Derrida's spectral telephone not only disrupts the relationship between Palestine and Israel, but also ruptures the distinctions between living and dying, then and now, there and here, together and apart.

Indeed, Govrin reveals in a later tribute to Derrida the ongoing impact of the telephone on his relationship with Jerusalem. After the initial visit in 1982, there were four subsequent visits, and

[f]ollowing the visits there were books, letters, and phone calls arriving, from Paris to Jerusalem. In our telephone conversations during the short time of peace and many periods of tension and war, always, at a certain point in the conversation, a change in his voice would occur and with it the question: 'How is Jerusalem?'⁸¹

Derrida's contact with Israel is always, in one sense or another, mediated via the telephone. Govrin goes on:

In phone calls to Jerusalem at the time of the first Intifada, at the time of the Gulf War, in the years of the terrorist attacks of the Second Intifada. Always, at a certain point in our conversation the sigh ‘Ahh, Jerusalem’ was uttered, and in it distance and closeness, criticism and worry, ‘the escape from ...’ and ‘drawing close to’ were all interwoven [...]. In the coming years, again, as they always did in periods of political violence and terror, anxious phone calls reached Jerusalem from Paris with nearness and distance intertwined.⁸²

Referring again and again to both the spatial and the temporal ambiguities of the region, Govrin demonstrates the ways that, for Derrida, distance and closeness to and from Jerusalem are dissolved, both through and on the telephone. Moreover, in conversation with Derrida, she shows that this is a call that resonates here and there, then and now, and always, of course, in the future to come and beyond the grave.

Notwithstanding their enormous differences, both Barghouti and Derrida, therefore, use the telephone to draw attention to the proximity within the distance, to the other within the self, and to the there within the here. And although these two writers are, in many respects, very far apart, they are at the same time remarkably close for the way that they both play out the paradoxical force of the telephone in order to overturn our commonly held assumptions about who, what, and how we call. This is not to diminish the complexity of the situation, nor is it an attempt reduce the history of the region to a single telephone conversation. But nevertheless, reading the telephone in Barghouti and Derrida does open up new possibilities for talking and listening. For, even as their tele-technological writings repeatedly tap into the syntagmatic logic imposed on Palestine – the fact of calling without calling – the conversation between the texts also suggests the value of a telephonic relation between self and other – the possibility, perhaps, of living with ‘the other in oneself [...] an other outside of oneself in oneself’.⁸³ Thus, I’d like to conclude with the necessary but impossible suggestion that there is a connecting ‘line’ between these two writers – a line that opens up the possibility that their texts might be calling to each other and, in so doing, renegotiating the limits of the exchange. Moreover, in opening up the lines between Barghouti and Derrida, I propose that a rethinking of the telephone and the structures of power that determine its usage might also ignite new conversations about our capacity to use teletechnologies for talking and listening across different cultures and different times.⁸⁴

Notes

1. Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah* [2000], trans. Ahdaf Soueif (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 11.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

3. John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 100. See, for example, Derrida's use of 'suspending without suspending', in Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 288.
4. Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, p. 126.
5. Mourid Barghouti, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* [2009], trans. Humphrey Davies (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 33.
6. Barghouti, *I Was Born There*, p. 33.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
8. Richard Falk, 'How to Live Together Well: Interrogating the Israel/Palestine Conflict', in Elisabeth Weber (ed.), *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace* (Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 275–92 (pp. 276–7).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
10. See, for example: Anna Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 67–88; Tahia Abdel Nasser, 'Between Exile and Elegy, Palestine and Egypt: Mourid Barghouti's Poetry and Memoirs', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 45.2/3 (2014), pp. 244–64; Salam Mir, 'Mourid Barghouti: The Blessings of Exile', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 37.4 (2015), pp. 311–33.
11. Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, p. 24.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 133, 129.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
16. Barghouti, *I Was Born There*, p. 68.
17. Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, p. 126.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
24. Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 3.
25. Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, p. 164.
26. Operating a spectral switchboard, Barghouti's family is haunted by the call of death in the night: 'At one-thirty in the morning Mounif's voice came to me across the phone – my father had died' (Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, p. 135). In an uncanny scene of repetition, this thanatographical call is repeated seven years later, on 8 November 1993, while he lunches with Radwa and Tamim in Cairo:

I went to answer. My younger brother 'Alaa's voice, speaking from Doha. His weeping voice said a few words I do not remember. A coldness ran through my shoulders. I do not remember what I said. What I remember clearly is that Radwa jumped out of her seat, her face pale, asking what had happened. I said: 'Mounif is dead. Dead.' (Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, p. 164)

27. Felicia McCarren, 'Téléphone Arabe: From Child's Play to Terrorism – The Poetics and Politics of Postcolonial Telecommunication', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 44.3 (2008), pp. 289–305 (p. 289).
28. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
29. Barghouti, *I Was Born There*, p. 79.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.
31. Juan Goytisolo, 'From Netanya to Ramallah', *Palestinian Notebooks: First Notebook*, trans. Peter Bush, available at: <http://www.mafhoum.com/press3/92Ca11.htm> [accessed 6 June 2020], cited in Derek Gregory, 'Palestine and the "War on Terror"', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24.1 (2004), pp. 183–95 (p. 188).
32. Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 60.
33. John Allen, 'Topological Twists: Power's Shifting Geographies', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 1.3 (2011), pp. 283–98 (p. 284).
34. Foundation for Middle East Peace, 'Sharon's New Map', *Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories*, 12.3 (2002), pp. 1–6 (p. 6), cited in Gregory, 'Palestine and the "War on Terror"', p. 188.
35. Marie Gillespie, Souad Osseiran and Margie Cheesman, 'Syrian Refugees and the Digital Passage to Europe: Smartphone Infrastructure and Affordances', *Social Media and Society*, 4.1 (2018), pp. 1–12 (p. 10).
36. McCarren 'Téléphone Arabe', p. 289.
37. Helga Tawil-Souri, 'Cellular Borders: Dis/Connecting Phone Calls in Israel-Palestine', in Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (eds), *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 157–80 (p. 157).
38. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
43. Helga Tawil-Souri, 'Networking Palestine: The Development and Limitations of Television and Telecommunications since 1993', in Petter Bauck and Mohammed Omer (eds), *The Oslo Accords 1993–2013: A Critical Assessment* (American University in Cairo Press, 2013), pp. 217–29 (p. 223).
44. Oslo 2, annex III, cited in Tawil-Souri, 'Cellular Borders', pp. 163–4.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
46. Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, p. 110.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
49. Tawil-Souri, 'Cellular Borders', p. 176.
50. Tawil-Souri, 'Networking Palestine', p. 225.
51. Yasmin El-Rifae, 'Where Does Palestine Begin?', in Ahdaf Soueif and Omar Robert Hamilton (eds), *This Is Not A Border: Reportage and Reflection from the Palestine Festival of Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 11–15 (p. 12).
52. Ali Sawafta, 'Palestinians Get 3G Mobile Services in West Bank', *Reuters* (24 January 2018), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/israel-palestinians->

telecom/palestinians-get-3g-mobile-services-in-west-bank-idUSL8N1PJ3FW
[accessed 6 June 2020].

53. El-Rifae, 'Where Does Palestine Begin?', p. 12.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Barghouti, *I Was Born There*, p. 19.
58. Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 1.
59. Ibid., p. 2.
60. Chaim Levinson, 'Israel's Supreme Court Orders State to Dismantle Largest West Bank Outpost', *Haaretz* (2 August 2011), available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5039235> [accessed 6 June 2020].
61. Weizman, *Hollow Land*, p. 2.
62. Ibid., p. 6.
63. Ibid., p. 4.
64. Ibid., p. 12.
65. Christopher Wise, 'Deconstruction and Zionism: Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx"', *Diacritics*, 31.1 (2001), pp. 55–72.
66. Declan Wiffen, *Deconstruction and the Question of Palestine: bearing witness to the undeniable* [PhD thesis] (University of Kent, 2014), p. 7; Caroline Rooney 'Derrida and Said: Ships That Pass in the Night', in R. Ghosh (ed.), *Edward Said and the Literary, Social and Political World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 36–52 (p. 49).
67. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 58.
68. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 69–70.
69. Jacques Derrida, 'Am I in Jerusalem?', in Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida (eds), *Counterpath: Traveling with Jacques Derrida*, trans. David Wills (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 120–1 (p. 121).
70. Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow ... : A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 118.
71. Ibid., pp. 118–19.
72. Martin McQuillan, 'Clarity and Doubt: Derrida among the Palestinians', *Paraglyph*, 39.2 (2016), pp. 220–37 (p. 225).
73. Jacques Derrida, 'Avowing – The Impossible: "Returns," Repentance, and Reconciliation: A Lesson' [1998], in Elisabeth Weber (ed.), *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace*, trans. Gil Anidjar (Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 18–41 (p. 20).
74. Ibid., p. 21.
75. Ibid., p. 31.
76. Ibid., p. 40.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
81. Michal Govrin, 'From Jerusalem to Jerusalem – A Dedication', in Elisabeth Weber (ed.), *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and*

Peace, trans. Atar Hadari (Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 259–274 (p. 261).

82. *Ibid.*, p. 267, 272.

83. Derrida, 'Avowing – The Impossible', p. 20.

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