

**Poetry, Politics and Translation:
American Isolation & The Middle East**

a talk by Ammiel Alcalay

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE WAR ON TERROR
This talk was given on November 7, 2002 at Cornell University.

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It's a pleasure to be in a forum where one can talk about, talk across a variety of ways of thinking about things and doing things in what clearly is a kind of activist political context. So I'm very happy to be able to explore some recent work and ideas and see where it takes us. I'm going to preface my talk, which is going to be very broad and may jump from place to place - and because we're not a huge group I'd even entertain brief interruptions for clarifications, if need be, so don't feel that I'm just speaking at you. I want to start out with a couple of quotes, one being George Bush senior at his inaugural, when he said:

“The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.”

A very important statement I think. First of all, the idea of memory which I'll be coming back to, certainly in my own case, in my own work. And another quote I just saw very recently, having to do with the appointment of poet Dana Gioia to head the NEA. The *New York Times* wrote, without irony, “He is a registered Republican who voted for George W. Bush and his father before that. His poetry is not political.”

And it struck me - one can always seek proof texts, you just need to open the paper to find them. Part of what I want to talk about is how we got to a place where sentences like that can appear in the paper of record without irony. What does it mean when the “political” is only that which is not predominant?

So I want, through a very long involved story, to somehow try to take us through that question. Part of it has to do with what has

come to be called American Exceptionalism. I think that if any of you read the recent Perry Anderson piece in the *New Left Review*, you would have found an excellent, very succinct definition of American Exceptionalism. We are on a very large continent with oceans on either side, with a migrant population that doesn't have any real cultural memory rooted to the places they're in. And he laid out, actually, a very concise geographical and social /political definition which I found very useful.

In my own case, as a first generation American, I do have a certain lien on some other world, growing up with other languages and this has always been, in my own life, and in my own mind and in my own relationship to writing and to poetry and to poetics, this has always been an issue. What is it that I can recognize in a text that comes from some other part of the world that embodies some kind of collective memory, some kind of collective moment? And what is it in American texts that almost does the opposite? That almost declares its solitude. That declares its aloneness. And that's something that has been, in my own work, a very deep issue and part of the work that I've done is figuring out how to make this journey, how to bridge these gaps, how to find, in some sense, texts that have not yet been written by Americans because that moment hasn't come and introduce them into the American language in order to challenge writers to try to find those places in themselves that they haven't yet gotten to. And I think that's something that certainly has happened with some of the texts in *Keys to the Garden* and certainly with the works of Semezdin Mehmedinovic, the Bosnian poet, who I think expresses things that could certainly be expressed in this country but in many cases have not yet been expressed quite that way. I'll get to that later.

So that's one part of the story. Now, another part of the story is that there is a remarkable, remarkable divorce between the intellectual life of the United States and the intellectual life of the so-called Middle East. I mean, it is a remarkable, remarkable lack of - first of all, there's ignorance, there's a lack of any sense of empathy, solidarity, sympathy, etc. Particularly given the fact

that the intellectual class of that part of the world is, as a class, an oppressed class, a species in danger. And it's remarkable in thinking about that, when one, for instance, uses the rhetoric of human rights, and thinks about a report on human rights, one's first reaction is to be angry, shocked, etc. at the extent of the repression by the regime in question rather than to think of that as an index of the extent of resistance that is being carried out. And particularly in the Middle East, this is something that is actually quite shocking, I think, in terms of the total lack of communication, of interconnectivity between those individuals, groups, etc. in that part of the world and people here. And again, I'm referring particularly to intellectuals, writers, academics, cultural figures, and so on. So that's another thing that I want to hold in abeyance.

Two of the examples that I'm going to be looking at and thinking about have to do with the lenses, the filters through which we have seen that part of the world. The two that I want to concentrate on in a little bit of detail are Algeria and Israel - Algeria of the decolonization period in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, up until the mid-60s and its relationship to African American culture here, particularly, and a sense of internationalism that no longer really exists in that form. And Israel of the very radical shift, post June War, post 1967 in which, slowly, as we get into the late 1960s, early 1970s, practically everything that we know about the Middle East is filtered through the normative narrative of Israel and Zionism. I want to examine a little bit what the meanings of those shifts are and some of the very interesting and odd and, from this perspective, remarkable facts from that period, especially in relationship to Algeria.

As an aside, now that I've mentioned it, now that I've opened up Algeria, I'll just do a tiny bit of earlier history, having to do with the relationship of the United States of the post Revolutionary period, 1780s, 1790s, to Algeria and Morocco, then called the Barbary States. You may or may not be aware of this, but Morocco was the second country to recognize the United States,

after France. But the United States did not send an envoy for a number of years to reciprocate and the Moroccans at a certain point started to get bugged about this and they began capturing some ships, taking some captives and Algeria also, at a number of points, declared war on the United States and basically this all had to do with sea rights and triangulated conflicts with France and so forth. In 1800, while there were about one million enslaved Africans in the United States, there were about 700 American captives in Algeria. The interesting thing about this is that a number of those people, upon return, wrote captivity narratives and a number of those captivity narratives were essentially abolitionist and anti-slavery tracts. Because what they were doing was comparing the conditions that they lived in under “slavery” in Algeria to the conditions that were dominant in the United States for enslaved peoples.

There’s quite a remarkable history to this, and some evidence that Frederick Douglass read, that some of those texts were published in something called “The Columbia Orator.” And just as one last aside to this, I don’t know whether you’ve ever heard or listened to an earlier version of what becomes our National Anthem by Francis Scott Key written to honor Decatur after Tripoli is vanquished in 1805. It’s quite chilling in this context, in the present context. I’ll just read you two of the last stanzas.

“In conflict resistless each toil they endur’d,
Till their foes shrunk dismay’d from the war’s desolation:
And pale beamed the Crescent, its splendor obscur’d,
By the light of the star-spangled flag of our nation,
 Where each flaming star gleam’d a meteor of war,
 And a turban’d head bowed to the terrible glare.
 Then mixt with the olive the laurel shall wave,
 And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.

Our fathers who stand on the summit of fame,
shall exultingly hear, of their sons, the proud story,
How their young bosoms glow’d with a patriot flame,

How they fought, how they fell, in the midst of their glory,
How triumphant they rode, o'er the wandering flood,
And stain'd the blue waters with infidel blood;
How mixt with the olive, the laurel did wave,
And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.”

Somewhat chilling, I think, in the present context.

Another issue overlays all of this which seems to me also relevant to the further part of the story, and that is the following: it seems to me that in the present U.S. academy, the predominance of a certain kind of French theory is also part of a story, but only a small part of the story, because, it seems to me that the way theory is being presented in the U.S. academy, under the guise of a politicization of studies, has actually depoliticized the context of that theory, much of which arises out of debates over decolonization, arises out of debates over identity, over otherness, over the body, the body literally being the body that can be tortured, and if one goes back to earlier sources, and earlier texts and looks at how these things were being discussed and being debated in the 1950s it's an intellectual history that is starting, interestingly enough, to come back, slowly. And I think a very important one. And I think that in many cases, a lot of the kind of texts people are reading are simply the wrong texts. I think that one needs to find another catalog of texts that will open up issues that are much more relevant to the political world and to political life and to the way the world has been apportioned since the Second World War.

The academic politics of it has to do with what I think of as cultural space. Cultural space can only be occupied by so much, once it's filled, it's filled, and if something is there, other things can't get in and one of the reasons for the predominance of this kind of theory is that it excludes the theoretical aspects of American poetry, of American poetics, of American writers and what it does is it relegates writing to the creative department, to the non-thinking department. And that has been tremendously

detrimental to coming to ways of defining ourselves and some of the people that I'll talk about further, particularly Charles Olson, who I'll spend a little bit of time on, presents in many ways a much more radical project of knowledge - what is the knowledge that one should know and how should one get to it - than a lot of what is being presented now as theoretically radical.

So those are the things that I'm laying out. I want to go back and do a little bit of actual tracing of some of these histories and see where the twain meets and where it separates. Out of curiosity, just in this room, how many people are familiar with or have read the work of Robert Duncan? How many people have read or are familiar with the work of Michel Foucault? I see, point proven.

In 1944, Robert Duncan wrote a text called "The Homosexual in Society" which was published in Dwight McDonald's "Politics" and at the same time that he had written that text, he had sent a long poem, I think an elegy, to the Kenyon Review, which was then edited by John Crowe Ransom, and in the interim, between the time that Ransom was supposed to answer him, Wallace Stevens had sent in "Aesthetique du Mal" and in this interlude of time, Ransom also read "The Homosexual in Society" and had a fit and wrote back to Duncan and said, "I read the poem as an advertisement for a notice of overt homosexuality and we are not in the market for literature of this type. I cannot agree with you that we should publish it...I cannot agree with your position that homosexuality is not abnormal." And basically what this did for Robert Duncan is it removed him from any possibility of entering a normative literary canon, practically still, I would think, because there is no *Collected Poems* of Robert Duncan, there is no *Collected Prose* of Robert Duncan, and so on and so forth.

Now in that text, "The Homosexual in Society," there's a remarkable sentence where Duncan is writing about - again, I was looking for precedence, uses of language, where are things coming from - it's a 1944 text, and Duncan writes, he's

talking about his own very rarified, private world of a group of homosexuals and he's discussing this in relationship to Hart Crane and the fate that Hart Crane has had at the hands of critics, and Crane's own attitude toward his sexuality. Duncan writes:

“Where the Zionists of homosexuality have laid claim to a Palestine of their own, asserting in their miseries, their nationality; Crane's suffering, his rebellion, and his love are sources of poetry for him not because they are what make him different from, superior to, mankind, but because he saw in them his link with mankind; he saw in them his sharing in universal human experience.”

So at this date, he's making a distinction between a universal and a particular. And this is part of the whole story that I want to trace: how do we get from ideas of universalism, ideas of an internationalism or of possible internationalism to ideas of very narrowly construed, narrowly configured ethnic or national identities? And then, even once those expand, they still become based on that; in other words, even when you have a plurality of ethnicities or national identities, they're still based on a narrowly construed notion of what an identity is.

Now that's one part of it. The second part, it seems to me, may be of more significance, and to get to it I want to say a few things about Charles Olson, and particularly his relationship to Ezra Pound. Ezra Pound, as I'm sure you know, is really the only American that I'm aware of who was charged with treason in the Second World War. And Ezra Pound, literally, while he was being interrogated in Pisa, in May of 1945, the CIA was recruiting ex-Nazis by the truckload to engage in a variety of nefarious and not so nefarious operations in this country. But Pound was turned into an example of some kind and was put on trial and was eventually considered unfit for trial and was incarcerated in Saint Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington. While he was in Saint Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, Charles Olson, who had by then done a lot of work on Melville, still - for all intents and purposes - a yet

“undiscovered” American writer, except for the work of Raymond Weaver and a few others, preceding Olson. Charles Olson began visiting Pound at Saint Elizabeth’s Hospital and there’s a remarkable record of those visits in a book edited by Catherine Seelye, I believe. How many people have read or encountered the work of Charles Olson? Same as those who know Robert Duncan, that’s good. Olson had been quite high in the Democratic Party. At a certain point, he completely quit politics after the death of FDR, in disgust and in premonition of what was to come, in sensing, really, the Cold War. And he looked at Pound with a combination of a young writer with great admiration and somebody coming from an immigrant working class background who was disgusted with Pound’s fascism and anti-Semitism. So Olson was really trying to, in his best writings about this period and about Pound, Olson was trying to figure out how Pound approached authority, with authority. And how the real issues that should have been brought up by Pound’s trial were not even touched, were not even broached. And he wrote a text called “This is Yeats Speaking,” in which he puts himself in the voice of W.B. Yeats and he questions, he writes:

“The soul is stunned in me, O writers, readers, fighters, fearers, for another reason, that you have allowed this to happen without a trial of your own... There is a court you leave silent - history present, the issue the larger concerns of authority than a state, Heraclitus and Marx called, perhaps some consideration of descents and metamorphoses, form and the elimination of intellect... What have you to help you hold in a single thought, reality and justice?”

This, I think, is the question that Olson opens up in 1945, 1946 and essentially, also, is at the root of his definition of the postmodern. Olson is the one, in a letter to Robert Creeley, who first uses the term ‘postmodern’ in the sense that we might think of it, although as far as I know the first use of it is chronological, by Arnold Toynbee, in *A Study of History*. I don’t know why exactly, it seems like an arbitrary date, but he dates the

postmodern at 1870, I think, for some reason, I don't know the exact reference, but I remember him coming up with that. But, in Olson's case, it's a different thing, and I want to get to that but first a few other things. I think this is a very important moment, because I think it's a moment that, first of all, Pound gets the Bollingen Prize in 1949 and that prize is championed by, amongst others, John Crowe Ransom who had rejected Duncan and placed Duncan outside the pale. Here, I think you really have, very ironically, through the body of Ezra Pound, a total divorce between aesthetics, art and politics, so that the debate around whether to give Pound the prize or not is about, well, the poetry is so great, the poetry is transcendent, it goes beyond any of the politics. So the politics then becomes, curiously, expendable. It doesn't matter what his politics are and I think that's partially how we get to a sentence like the one that I led the talk off with, that "his poetry is not political."

Now, Olson, let me just give you a couple of things for Olson. I'll do this slightly chronologically, so I'm going to start with - again in one of these notes, following visits to Pound, Olson writes, this is 1945, he says:

"If we the people shall save ourselves from our leaders' shame, if we the people shall survive our disgust, if we the people shall end our own confusion, we must see this big war for the lie it has become. Make no mistake, it is a lie. Unwrap the charters and pacts, recognize the deals, stomach the people's hope for security, tighten the soil over the men, always little men who are dead. Call the big war what it is - a defeat for the people."

Olson was trying to look through the case of Pound to see how Pound's *mistaken* authority could be summoned as a position of authority to bring up other possibilities of the possibility of authority. And he is somebody who clearly leaves official life, somebody who had access to power, who could have made a career out of politics, who could have made a career out of Washington, etc. But he simply chose, right at the beginning of the

cold war, like, I believe, many of the other important American poets and writers, to opt out, to go underground and to work basically in isolation. None of the poets associated with this group or associated with what has come to be called the New American Poetry have really any academic affiliation professionally of any kind to speak of, until the mid-60s, and that is pretty tenuous as well, so the whole, kind of, schema of professionalization that we might be used to now was so completely alien, so completely removed from the reality of these people and Olson's attitude towards those seats of power are very clear. In his last letter to Pound in 1948, when he wrote:

“BUT you have to deal with us Olsons... your damn ancestors let us in (AND AS ABOVE I DON'T THINK THE BATHTUB WAS SO CLEAN WHEN THEY DID). We're here. And to tell you your own truth, you damn well know anglosaxonism is academicism and shrieking empire. LIFE out of Yale, CULTURE out of Princeton, and the BOMB out of Harvard.”

There's a very clear kind of agenda there. Now, two more things about Olson and then I'm going to move geographically elsewhere, but it's related. When he comes to define the postmodern, and this use of the word comes in a letter to Robert Creeley dated August 20, 1951, he writes:

“my assumption is any POST-MODERN is born with the ancient confidence that, he does belong.

So, there is nothing to be found. There is only (as Schoenberg had it, his Harmony) search) tho, I should wish to kill that word, too - there is only examination.”

Olson also writes a text called “Proprioception”, which is a term that comes up through phenomenology and through Merleau-Ponty and is a term that has a tremendous amount of significance in the debate around Algeria, in the idea of otherness; it comes

up in Frantz Fanon through different manifestations, but I'll get to that in a minute. The further thing on Olson's definition of the postmodern, which I think, again, curiously, very curiously, has resonance with, if anybody is familiar with Marshall Hodgson's definition of the technical age, both in his posthumously collected essays and in *The Venture of Islam*, where he speaks about the technical age and the idea of different velocities of technology, how that affects people. I won't go into that, but if you are at all familiar with it, you will recognize some of it in this description by Olson. He writes, actually part of this is in a letter to the anthropologist Ruth Benedict whom he had known from the Office of War Information, working under the Roosevelt administration:

“The EXPANSION of peoples, materials and sensations that the AGE OF QUANTITY involves itself in, DEMAND a heightening of that servant of clarity, the CRITICAL FUNCTION, wherever: that is, the above increases in the quantity of experience is also an increase in the sources of confusion, and so, to cut them down requires more labor than previously...that the job now, is to be at once archaic and culture-wise - that they are indivisible.”

And then, in another letter to Creeley, August, 1951, he writes,

“I am led to this notion: the post-modern world was projected by two earlier facts- a) the voyages of the 15th and 16th Century making all the earth a known quantity (thus, geographical quantity absolute); and (b) 19th Century, the machine, leading to (1) the tripling of population and (2) the same maximal as the geographic in communications systems and the reproductive ones.

In other words, that, the QUANTITATIVE, which, as I guess you know, has been the rock I have been trying to crack, is so embedded that one should not be surprised that it has forced all old functions to behave anew.”

And then in another letter to Ruth Benedict, he writes:

“It is my feeling that the record of fact is become of first importance for us lost in a sea of question...In New History, the act of the observer, if his personality is of count, is before, in the collection of the material. This is where we will cut the knot...I think if you burn the facts long and hard enough in yourself as crucible, you’ll come to the few facts that matter, and then fact can be fable again.”

And I think this is remarkable stuff in its applicability to, certainly, to the present situation that we’re in, in terms of how do you categorize information, how do you deal with knowledge, how do you define knowledge, how do you find it, how do you transmit it, how do you make, as he says, “fact fable”, how do you turn it into a narrative so that it can move somewhere?

The last thing on Olson, which is quite remarkable, is that in 1951 he applied for a Fulbright to Iraq, and I’m convinced that if he had lived in a world where he could’ve gotten a Fulbright to Iraq, the cultural history of the last fifty years might have looked a little bit different. In his proposal, he writes; this is to the Fulbright committee in 1951:

“My desire is to go to IRAQ to steep myself, on the ground, in all aspects of SUMERIAN civilization (its apparent origins in the surrounding plateaus of the central valley, the valley city-sites themselves and the works of them, especially the architecture and the people’s cuneiform texts).

The point of a year of such work at the sites and in collections is a double one: (1) to lock up translations from the clay tablets, conspicuously, the poems & myths (these translations & transpositions have been in progress for four years); and (2), to fasten - by the live sense that only the factual ground gives - the text of a book, one half of which is SUMER. (The other half is the MAYA, and the intent, in putting these two civilizations and especially their arts together, is to try and make clear, by such juxtaposition, the nature of the force of ORIGINS

The further intent is that such a study throw a usable light on the present, the premise of such a study of origins being, that the present is such a time, that just now any light which can lead to a redefinition of man is a crucial necessity, that it is necessary if we are to arrive at a fresh ground for a concept of "humanism".

And then he writes, he was being followed around, by the way, by the FBI, at Black Mountain and so forth, where he was teaching at the time, and he writes, again, to Creeley:

"I imagine I did say to you that I doubted State wld take a risk on me at such outposts of the empire as Istanbul or Teheran, simply, that in such places, they can't afford more than pink-cheeked servants."

That is one part of the story - now, to get to another part of the story: I've been doing a lot of reading about Algeria of the 1950s and 60s and thinking about it in relation to political and intellectual responses by the parties with more power, i.e. the French, although in some sense this is a mistake because both the Algerians and the Vietnamese ultimately had more power, they won. But, in terms of how these things are perceived across time, I wanted to compare the responses in the seats of power, in the metropolises, to these conflicts and in relationship to what was going on, particularly in Algeria, less in Vietnam, I was more concerned with the American response in Vietnam. And a couple of things struck me. Number one, the move - particularly in the United States, in Black, African American communities - from a possibility of internationalism to the constraints of what becomes an increasingly nationalist agenda, goes hand in hand with that of many other communities in the United States. And I was looking for indexes of this, you know, sign posts, of this, obviously the Red Scare, particularly on the West Coast and the industrialization of the cities and the kind of increasing economic constraints on Black communities, had a lot to do with the ability to participate in, let's say, a trade unionism that was international in scope. Now, what you have, in some oddly ironic sense, as one of the

last gasps of a certain kind of internationalism, comes through the Black Panther Party and through its identification with liberation movements, Third World movements, African liberation and so forth and obviously with different segments of the leadership going into exile in Algeria.

And I began to look at a journal published by Abdellatif Laabi, a Moroccan poet and former political prisoner, published originally in Morocco in French and called *Souffles*, which started coming out in 1966 and came out from 1966 until 1972. In 1972 it was shut down by the authorities, about 200 people involved in it were imprisoned for long periods of time, Abdellatif himself was imprisoned for eight and a half years. The group included a very famous political prisoner, Abraham Serfaty who is a Moroccan Jew, and part of the political opposition. As I was looking through old issues of *Souffles*, I saw, in 1969, that Abraham Serfaty hosted a delegation of the Black Panther Party to Morocco and Algeria. This is at the same time that COINTELPRO was running various campaigns to represent the Black Panther Party as being anti-Semitic and this, to me, is a huge irony: this future Jewish political prisoner in Morocco is hosting the Black Panther Party at the same time that COINTELPRO's smear campaigns are running in the United States. These, I think, are very, very crucial splits and breaks but there is almost a complete lack of consciousness about them now. As I was doing more and more work on Algeria, I began to see that there was a cut-off point. If you look, from about 1956, '57, '58, '59, '60, '61, '62 up until about 1965, there's quite a bit of material that's appearing in the United States, it's being translated, primarily from French, regarding the Algerian question. I mean, there are obvious things like Albert Camus, but it goes much further. There's a book, for instance, a very important book by Henri Alleg, called *The Question*.

Henri Alleg was a European Jew, and the editor of an Algerian daily, who was captured and tortured in 1957 in al-Biar, in one of the infamous torture chambers in Algiers and that book - the first book banned in France since the late 18th century - was

published immediately in the U.S. That was then followed by a number of books by Germaine Tillion. Germaine Tillion is 96 years old and a fascinating figure. She was an anthropologist, a student of Marcel Maus, and then she went off to do her field work in Kabylia in the Aures mountains in the 1930s. Then she joined the resistance and, as the leader of a resistance group, she was put up for the death sentence on, I think, something like five different occasions. She ended up in Ravensbruck, imprisoned, and surviving that, went on to do her doctorate under the great Orientalist Louis Massignon, known for his incredible work on al-Hallaj. Germaine Tillion is somebody who served as a liaison between Sadi Yacef who was one of the original FLN leaders and the French government, and she actually arranged several cease-fires. So, her books were coming out in English. The work of Pierre Bourdieu came out in English, on Algeria, and he did a lot of important work on Algeria. Pierre Vidal Naquet, the classicist, wrote a book called *Torture: Cancer of Democracy*, and that came out. The works of Frantz Fanon started coming out and actually *Wretched of the Earth*, which sold only 3,000 copies in France, went through five editions in the first year in English in the United States.

So those things were part of the landscape, part of intellectual discourse. A book about an Algerian prisoner, Djamila Boupacha, came out and that was co-written by Simone de Beauvoir and Gisele Halimi . Gisele Halimi is a very prominent French human rights lawyer and feminist and is a Tunisian Jew, and I found out, while I was doing some research on her, that she recently signed on to become Marwan Barghouti's lawyer, a very prominent case in Israel. In this whole scheme of things, I find it very interesting to watch the fates of different people, people who have continued to maintain certain principles or certain stands on things and people who have changed those positions.

I think for us, particularly at this moment, it's a very crucial thing to recuperate those figures who have fallen by the wayside and are not part of general intellectual discourse and to look at them

as models, as possibilities and in fact, along those lines, I was on my way up here this morning from New York and I was reading last week's *Le Monde Diplomatique* in which there was a long front page piece by Maurice Maschino about the neo-conservative tendencies amongst French intellectuals. Maurice Maschino was a draft resister to the Algerian war and ended up going into exile in Tunisia. He was one of the first people who was writing reports from Tunisia in 1956, '57 and, as he writes now, the points he takes issue with the neo-cons on, in quite a militant way, have to do with racism, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, sanctions on Iraq, all of the issues that seem to come up in one way or another amongst people who find their way into the mainstream.

So I think it's very, very crucial to think about trying to recuperate some of these moments. Archie Shepp playing at the 1969 Pan-African Festival in Algeria with thirty Tuareg musicians, way before the marketing of "World Music," a moment in which there is still some presence of the possibility of another kind of world. As we get into the late 60s you have to keep in mind that we're talking about a time when the U.S. Army was basically in open mutiny in Vietnam and if you look at facts and figures of that period they're quite shocking. In Congress, they talk about, using official Congressional figures, they talk about ten to fifteen percent of the troops using heroin. You're talking about whole units, during Moratorium Day in 1970, just going on strike, demonstrating against the war while being in the middle of it. You're talking about official documents from the Naval War College discussing the relationship of the Civil Rights movement to what's going on in the Army to what's going on in U. S. cities. A hundred and twenty-five cities have uprisings and riots. 1968, '69, '70 are very, very, very, very tumultuous years in this country. Especially after having spent so much time with friends who lived through the siege of Bosnia, I'm coming to think more and more that, sometimes, even if you live through something, you don't really understand what it was about until long afterwards.

And I think it's very, very, very important to go back to those last years in which the war in Vietnam effectively ends but soldiers are still there, '67, '68, '69 to see how people organized around them, what kinds of things were effective, how people operated and the level, it's shocking to me, the level of erosion in dissent, I mean, you're talking about, in 1969, 1970, you're talking about some 550 underground newspapers in this country with a circulation of about 5 million. A magazine like *Ramparts* had a circulation of 300,000 in 1967 and 1968. The kind of headlines coming out on some of the underground papers that were coming out are absolutely shocking in our present context. 144 underground papers on U.S. military bases, with headlines like "Don't desert, go to Vietnam and kill your commanding officer."

This was really open and general rebellion and it's all the more shocking to encounter these kinds of things in the present context, it's almost unimaginable but extremely valuable for our understanding, to understand what dissent can mean and what assertiveness can mean and how it can be tied, how political thought, action, and what placing the body, literally, in line, can mean and how that can be tied to the imagination, to the imaginative faculties, to the creative possibilities and how constrained we are, how constrained things have become in so many ways.

A lot of it really begins with how we ourselves decide to articulate ourselves. How does one open up if you are in a space that you yourself control, whether it's an academic setting like this or whether it's some other setting one finds oneself in. How does one begin to slough off the decorum a little bit and start to open up different possibilities, think about different relationships, different contexts, and what that might mean even in a small community?

Q & A Moderated by Deborah Starr

Deborah Starr: You've certainly given us a lot to think about because what you're doing, to a great extent, is shifting the narrative of how we got to this point of conflict and that also shifts its meaning. Also, you've given us a sense of the need to recover some of these lost narratives and alternative sites of resistance as you situated them initially in contrast to privileged sites of radicalism, particularly within the academy. I would be curious to hear you articulate a little bit more why you think that Israel has become the screen through which everything Middle Eastern is filtered at this point. Although it is usually articulated through the kind of political science or international relations discourse, it seems to me there may be some connection between the kinds of attacks taking place now on alternative views of the Middle East in the U.S. academy, as represented by something like Campus Watch, and the kinds of things reflected in Olson when he spoke of "LIFE out of Yale, CULTURE out of Princeton, and the BOMB out of Harvard."

Ammiel Alcalay: Let me respond, quickly, to the question about the U.S. and Israel and that filter. From a personal point of view, I spent about eight years, off and on, living in Jerusalem and it's a place where I really learned about America because of the rapidity with which I witnessed nativity being eroded in the process of transformation as people were forced or squeezed off the land to become laborers or refugees. I grew up in New England so I grew up in and with all these place names, of peoples who are pretty much no longer there, or at least not there to the extent they might once have been. It really made me think and internalize, at a more conscious age, certain things that had been very much a part of me but the experience of Jerusalem, ironically, drove those things home for me.

Another thing is, Mahmoud Mamdani, the great Ugandan scholar, thinker and activist, recently spoke at a teach-in at CUNY, and he talked about his and the relationship of other anti-apartheid activists towards the other colonial settler states in Africa, primarily Liberia. He said that it took them a long time to realize that the returning African Americans had a civilizing mission of sorts in going to Liberia, and he was reflecting on this precisely in relation to the question you're asking regarding Israel. Beyond the kind of geo-political, military, economic and other more obvious aspects of the relationship the U.S. has to Israel, what else is there and how does that get manifested? And he began to expand on this and I thought it was a very fruitful direction to think in, because, besides the pop imagery, the settler and westward expansion and so on, and the presence of references to Native Americans in Palestinian literary discourse, for example, I think that there is more to it than that. On the political level, the relationship between U. S. foreign policy and Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is such a crucial, crucial public litmus test of what can and cannot be done, globally. I find some of the parallels to Algeria quite mortifying in the sense that, if one thinks about movements now to legalize torture in the United States, from a legal perspective, Israel is the state that we have the closest public, open relationship with and claim follows our tradition as a democratic country. This is not something the United States would have claimed in terms of its client states in Latin America, it would not have made these claims for other places in the world, but this claim is made towards Israel where torture is institutionalized policy and is essentially upheld pretty regularly in the courts. This creates very real political precedence.

On the way up here, I was reading Pierre Vidal Naquet's *Torture: Cancer of Democracy*, and it struck me that in all of the publicity, in all of the different and superb work done, both by Israeli human rights groups like Betsalem, and other, older Palestinian groups like Palestinian Human Rights Database, and others, I am as yet unaware of anything looking at this issue both conceptually and institutionally, in a larger sense, outside of the specifics of the

cases. A lot of the case by case work curiously reinforces the roles everyone is in, victim, perpetrator, state institution, and so on, and legitimizes the state as the body that can both condone and condemn. This relates to a point I brought up before: when we look at a situation using the discourse of human rights, we emphasize the repression without necessarily thinking of the amount of resistance. When people look at instances of human rights abuse and torture in Israel, they are not considering its function and structure - psychologically, socially, politically, economically - within the state itself. And I don't mean just the corrupting nature of the practices, which is how it is generally considered when considered at all, but more in the kind of terms that we might think of criminalization, imprisonment, racism, and militarization in this country, with all the economic implications. To not think about these kinds of things critically is very detrimental but it has to be taken beyond the accusatory level to try and conceptualize things in order to figure out where the right pressure points are to exert change.

Audience: After September 11, I saw a headline, that said "Why?" But it was rhetorical - Americans don't want to know why, and it was amazing how quickly the discussion about why disappeared, and I tend to be pretty vocal in my condemnation of U.S. policy, particularly in the Middle East, but Israelis don't ask why, I mean, a suicide bomber goes into a shopping mall or something and blows himself up, they don't ask why, they know why. So, as much as there are parallels between Israel and the United States, there are some differences and do you think, I mean, how is it that this discussion never gets going?

Ammiel Alcalay: In direct response to this, I'll read you a quote by Melani McAlister, from her book *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*. In a chapter on the Iran hostage crisis, she offers one of the best descriptions I've seen of this difference you bring up:

"Terrorism's presence on the world stage enabled a narrative

that constructed the United States as an imperiled private sphere and the Islamic Middle East as the preeminent politicized space from which terrorism affected its invasions. For more than a decade that narrative had worked to produce a type of American identity, defined by the production of individuals who were “free of politics”. Within this world of vulnerable families and lovers, terrorism threatened precisely what had to be threatened in order to establish the disinterested morality of the state’s militarized response in the international arena.”

In the Israeli case, I think there’s a different dynamic at work, and I don’t think it’s just a question of not asking why. To begin with, there’s an absolutely different level of consciousness - things that one can speak about in Israeli discourse are much harder to speak about in American discourse. There is a presence there, people understand what is at stake, whichever side of the political spectrum you may fall on. But I think that there is also a combination of cynicism, racism, and, ultimately, dehumanization there which expects “those people” to commit those kinds of acts. So that a different kind of why can be asked, or not asked, than the one not asked here.

Audience: I would like to suggest that apart from the memory of a certain tradition of internationalism which often is organized around official states or liberation movements, there is a counter memory which in fact provides perhaps the best link we have at the present moment. You seem to say that internationalism disappeared or became invisible and I think this is not quite accurate. Because, in fact, it didn’t disappear, it became invisible to certain ways of remembering. To give the example of the Black Panthers or Archie Shepp in 1969 in Algiers, when you used the phrase ‘the last gasp of internationalism,’ I don’t think you meant it but the Panthers were exhausted and other things were forming and continue: divestment and the anti-apartheid movement, committees for the Portuguese colonies, the world social forum, Jubilee 2000, and a whole range of other things happening at the unofficial level which have kept internationalism very much

alive. The task of the movement is also to recover this counter movement showing that internationalism didn't simply die out, it just took other routes which are not terribly difficult to recover.

Ammiel Alcalay: Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely, I agree absolutely, there was only so much I could get to and I think the key thing is to articulate the continuities, to find them and to articulate them and to conjoin them. You can see now, for example, a lot of material available on the Zapatistas. So, yes, thanks very much for bringing that up.

Audience: So much of our discussion, at least at the Cornell Forum, has had to do with a sense of a certain political impasse that we're at right now and the difficulty of really getting a discourse of political dissent going and I thought that what you really addressed in your remarks is the problem of our also lacking a mode of cultural criticism, a cultural kind of frame, and you really got to the very heart of it, to address how that itself might be part of the political impasse. I wondered if you might just talk a little bit more about why you were particularly interested in Charles Olson's notion of the postmodern, because I think you're suggesting an alternative conception of post-modernism which might be more politically viable than what we have now.

Ammiel Alcalay: Absolutely. I think that what we've gotten is what I would call industrialized postmodernism, where it's kind of on the assembly line. I feel that a lot of the theoretical language and the way it's taught and how it's used is really colonizing, it's a subjugation of the material that it's supposed to be examining. Olson's interest in archeology was not happenstance, it was to allow the objects to determine the theory, it was, as he said, to 'be on the ground,' to examine the stuff in its place and see what emerges from it. I find much of what we're doing now is very much the opposite and what that does is to entrench power, at various levels, disciplinary power and categories of thinking - it encloses people and encloses thought. In other words, once you sanction and legalize a certain kind of border crossing, it

domesticates the concept and precludes a truer border crossing that would really disrupt ways of thinking and approach. What you say points to a very real problem. There's some terrific political work and analysis going on, but the cultural connection is really buried much deeper and is more marginalized. It's almost as if the people who are doing politics think, well "that's later, we can't really deal with that now, this is more important." I think that's very counter-productive, because it needs to be done holistically. It needs to really move completely together.

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