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Rory J. Conces
College of Arts and Sciences
University of Nebraska, USA
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8364-3903
rconces@unomaha.edu

Reading Isabella Hammad and Beyond: THE UNSAID – The Point of Recognizing Turning Points, Narratives (Stories), and Strangers

Abstract:

The essay is a reflection on Isabella Hammad's book, *Recognizing the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* (2024). The essay's approach is to follow the four themes that reflect the title and the subtitle of the book and to draw out what is unsaid from what is said by Hammad. The unsaid reflects my conceptual and historical baggage, so there is a wide assortment of theorists that I connect Hammad with, including Edward Said, Hannah Arendt, Amartya Sen, Didier Fassin, and Slavoj Žižek.

Keywords:

Palestine, narrative, stranger, recognition, turning points

> I was trained to ignore your pain
> Open your heart to
> me I trade the sun of its
> light Open your heart,
> you'll see
>
> — Peace Sword (Open Your Heart), The Flaming Lips

> We don't see things as they
> are, We see them as
> we are.
>
> — Anaïs Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur* (1961)

> We never live only by our own
> efforts, we never live only for ourselves; our most
> intimate, our most personal thinking is connected
> by a thousand links with that of the world.
>
> — Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (2002)

Isabella Hammad, a British Palestinian author, delivered the Edward W. Said Memorial Lecture at Columbia University on September 28, 2023. The text of her speech, and her thoughts on recent events in Gaza, make up the two parts of her slim (83 pp.) book, *Recognizing the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* (2024).[1] Regarding its succinctness, *Recognizing the Stranger* reminds me of other slim works, like Hanif Kureishi's *The Word and the Bomb* (2005)(100 pp.), Albert Camus's *Create Dangerously* (1958)(46 pp.), and George Orwell's *Why I Write* (1946)(120 pp.). Slim is ok. Serious works do not need to be the length of Péter Nádar's *A Book of Memories* (1986), Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962), or Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twentieth-First Century* (2014). Hammad packs a lot into her slim book; a great deal is said. The four

1) Hammad, *Recognizing the Stranger*. Hereafter cited in text as RS.

key terms that make up the title and subtitle of her book inform us of the central themes that occupy Hammad. Since I am a philosopher, writing a "review essay" of sorts, I do not intend to provide a summary of her key points. Rather, I am interested in drawing out what is unsaid to me from what is said by her. The epigram by Anaïs Nin highlights my point here, what I find unsaid stands out because of my conceptual and historical baggage. The unsaid are the connections with a web of relatable concerns, issues, and concepts. And what is relatable varies with the one who relates. The unsaid of *Recognizing the Stranger* that appears here is more about me as a reader than about Hammad as the author.[2] But Hammad provided the spark. Yet it is the reader who puts the text to good use, that is, who recognizes a point of the author's work, a point that goes beyond the work itself, a point that reverberates within oneself, setting off countless reminders, echoes, and new beginnings. In other words, it is a nudging of the text into one's own conceptual and historical landscape. This essay is one such beginning or nudging.

As the title of Hammad's book indicates, narrative is a cornerstone of her work – the second conjunct of the subtitle.[3] She rightly threads Edward Said's scholarship into her discussion, especially since part of her book comprised an Edward Said Memorial Lecture. Even before reading *Recognizing the Stranger*, I believed narratives (stories) to be valuable insofar as they contribute to intercultural education that can reengineer peoples' identities and interpersonal relationships leading to a sense of community, which in turn is integral to democracy and peace building.[4] Or as

2) But this is not the same as the replacement of the author with the reader argued by the post-structuralist Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." Without Hammad there would be no central point in this web of relatables.

3) Some philosophers have made the narrative an important part of their theorizing. For example, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur developed his own theory of narrative identity, which posits that self-identity is constructed through the stories we utter about our lives. For Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, see his three-volume work, *Time and Narrative*.

4) Conces, "A Sisyphean Tale"; Senehi, "Constructive Storytelling in Intercommunal Conflicts" and "Language, Culture and Conflict: Storytelling as a Life and Death Matter." In integrative philosophy (in which "using" philosophy supersedes "doing" philosophy), the philosophical and the empirical fuels the inquiry into lived moral and social/political experiences, which in this case is the Palestinian struggle for freedom by way of the work of Isabella Hammad. Philosophical theorizing can help to clarify how we understand situations that people find themselves in. "I am, less impressed with talk of solutions and favor different ways [or angles] of understanding a problem, an issue, or a situation with a particular non-philosophical goal or

noted by the Canadian scholar Jessica Senehi, who has written extensively on storytelling in peacebuilding, puts it, the efficacy of storytelling in community building is through the "social construction of identity, knowledge, memory, and emotion."[5] Yet I am under no illusion that storytelling is always beneficial in this way. "Storytelling is a process, however, that could result in the intensification and perpetuation of conflicts, particularly if various narratives, folktales, songs, and poems have been endowed with a nationalist identity that has been used to foster xenophobia and ethnic chauvinism by political leaders."[6] This is best illustrated in the Balkans by the epic songs and poems that were used to develop the Kosovo myth in the nineteenth century. Former President of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, used the myth in his attempt to promote Serbian nationalism during the 1990s.[7] Likewise, Hammad acknowledges the malevolent side of the narrative when narratives of self are connected to a nation-state, which she believes may lead to "self-centered intolerance" (RS, 56). Although I recognize the value of narratives, I do not agree with Said that narratives are sometimes an imperative in altering geo-political landscapes. Said promotes this view in his "Permission to Narrate," by (intimately) connecting the narrative with the two-state solution: "the 'idea' of a Palestinian homeland would have to be enabled by the prior acceptance of a narrative entailing a homeland."[8] As a philosopher, I am reluctant to devalue dialogue and argument as being instrumental in persuading interlocutors to adopt a position, including the two-state solution. Yet I do recognize that philosophers are easily over-convinced by the power of argument to do good. As

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purpose in mind, for example, democracy and peace building," instead of some philosophical conundrum (Conces, "Normative Ambiguity," 187, footnote 3). Perhaps it smacks of what Ludwig Wittgenstein says about the aim of philosophy in his *Philosophical Investigations*: "What is your aim in philosophy? – To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (#309). In other words, to supplant confusion with clarity. Integrative philosophy is not concerned with a question like: "What is it like to be a bat?" (Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"). However, a simple revision leads to a much more relevant question: "What is it like to be a Palestinian in Gaza?" (that is, what is it like for the Palestinian herself to be in Gaza?).

5) Senehi, "Constructive Storytelling in Intercommunal Conflicts," 103.

6) Conces, "A Sisyphean Tale," 166. In Conces, "Reconstructing Kosovo," 8, we find the layout of the triad of ontology, morality, and psychology, which makes ethno-nationalism of whatever kind toxic, regardless of the involvement of political leaders.

7) Conces, "A Sisyphean Tale," 166–67.

8) Said, "Permission to Narrate," 35.

the German philosopher Hannah Arendt so astutely pointed out in her essay "Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt," that the capability of reason has "led to very great things. It also has led to rather unpleasant things."[9] This is a gross understatement, however. Arendt insists that this capability is no guarantee against horror occurring in the world. Fine, but the reality of the situation is far worse: "All too often the arguments in favor of genocide, torture, and terror are made in the voice of reason Ordinary men can reason themselves into justifying what ought to be unthinkable."[10] The men who sat around a table at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin on January 20, 1942 went down this path in using reason to figure out an effective implementation strategy of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question. In the case of Israel today, the self-defense mantra has been continuously deployed resulting in another "catastrophic moral horror" – the genocide of the Palestinian people. I do not think this is a case of a lack of reasoning, but something that is more indicative of what the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen calls "unreason" – "relying on very primitive and very defective reasoning."[11] Fortunately, sometimes better reasoning comes along and that is "the remedy for bad reasoning."[12]

Recognizing the Stranger is about more than the fictional narratives of novels, though I do not mean to downplay them, because they can help us to imagine the world of the Other while maintaining some social distance from it. In addition to the narratives of novels, there is the lived narrative.[13] When I think of such narratives, I immediately have in mind Janine Di Giovanni's storytelling, perhaps her *Against the Stranger: Lives in Occupied Territory* (1994), and the fleshiness of a recently published collection of essays, memoir, fiction, poems, and art found in Halasa and Elgrably's *Sumūd, Essays, Memoir, Fiction, Poetry, and Art from the Markaz Review: A New*

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9) Arendt, "Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt," 443–44.

10) Berkowitz, "Introduction: Thinking in Dark Times," 5. See Frankfurt, "Taking Ourselves Seriously," 32–34, for a discussion of the unthinkable.

11) Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, xviii.

12) Ibid., 49.

13) When I think of narrative, I think of a story, which incorporates much of what John Paul Lederach includes in his analysis of the past: that is, recent events, lived history, remembered history, and narrative (the "formative story" of a people), which is the deepest history (Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 142). All of this is displayed in his "Doodle Five: The past that lives before us" (Ibid., 141).

Palestinian Reader (2025). When it comes to thinking about the subjective realities of narratives, *The Other* (2018), by the Polish reportage-writer Ryszard Kapuściński comes to mind. It is a book of reflections about the self and the Other, accumulated from years of his traveling the world. *The Other* is less about a specific narrative, but more about the contact with the Other, about the experience of othering. Unsurprisingly, Kapuściński sets the tone of his book by quoting the social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the opening paragraph, "to judge something, you have to be there."[14]

Hammad draws from Said's important work, "Permission to Narrate" (1984), which utilizes Hayden White's seminal work on narrative, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" (1980). As White notes, narratives (stories) are not simply lists of names of historical events (real or imaginary events) but rather involve the stitching together of these events such that they have coherent meaning, a story about the past is offered to us, "a story with well-marked beginning, middle, and end phases."[15] One might be under the impression that stories are always given to us intact. That would be misleading. As the social justice organizers Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba note: "To understand the past, we must investigate the stories we were not told, because those stories were withheld for a reason. We must search out all the pieces we weren't meant to find, the things that disrupt the narratives we've been given."[16] One fascinating insight given to us by Hammad is how she understands the middle of the narrative, what she calls a "turning point."[17] Sometimes insight is not elegant, not complex, and not difficult to understand. Sometimes an insight is about that which is

14) Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, quoted in Kapuściński, *The Other*, 1. This reminds me of what the seventeenth century French philosopher, René Descartes, wrote in Part One of *Discourse on Method*: "It is useful to know something of the manners of different nations, that we may be enabled to form a more correct judgment regarding our own, and be prevented from thinking that everything contrary to our customs is ridiculous and irrational, – a conclusion usually come to by those whose experience has been limited to their own country" (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 6). So too, answering the previously stated question: "What is it like to be a Palestinian in Gaza?" might call for us to be there in Gaza.

15) White, "The Value of Narrativity," 6.

16) Hayes and Kaba, *Let This Radicalize You*, 3.

17) Ever since first reading Hammad on turning points, I have become obsessed with searching for them. I recently purchased a book about a couple raising their gender-nonconforming son. They eventually figured out that their son's acquiring his first Barbi doll was a turning point, which they came to historically acknowledge as B.B. (Before Barbie) and A.B. (After Barbie). See Duron, *Raising My Rainbow*, 6. That is quite a well-defined turning point.

so obvious that we do not recognize it until someone draws our attention to it – like a smack to the face. For me, that someone who smacked me was Isabella Hammad. But it is also about the unsaid, what is absent from her discourse. The unsaid of Hammad's insights is what I am exposing.

But first to her insight. Hammad is on solid footing about the difficulty of "pinpointing" turning points. They are not like physical bodies set in motion, which we become aware of simply by making observations. People saw me go to the airport to board a plane as a Fulbright Scholar bound for Sarajevo in 2008. But no one, me included, at that time thought of that trip as a turning point. Surely, the same can be said of October 7, 2023, the day of the Hamas attack. The day began for many in southern Israel, and in Gaza, like any other Monday. "We cannot always know the significance of the moment *in* the moment," as Hammad writes (RS, 2). The significance of my first trip to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as that October Hamas attack, were only made clear as the weeks and months, if not years, unfolded – the value of retrospection.[18] But to leave it at that, creates space for the unsaid, for example, who retrospect's? This question harkens back to Hammad's mining of Said's "Permission to Narrate": "Facts do not speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them."[19]

Although Hammad focuses on turning points and their recognition being a retrospective affair, we must again look further for the unsaid by recalling White's reference to stories having a "well-marked beginning." Hammad's insight into the narrative is limited to turning points in her first essay, "Recognizing the Stranger," not extending further to the beginnings and the ends of narratives. It is not until her second essay, "Afterword: On Gaza," that she comes close to extending her insight. I find her

18) Hammad is not alone in acknowledging the importance of turning points. Michael Axworthy informs the reader in the "Introduction" to his *Revolutionary Iran*, xxii, that he "tended to focus on moments and episodes that have been turning-points, which have been important in determining the shape of what followed." Again, the value of retrospection! And on a more fanciful note: sometimes the significance only becomes known under extraordinary circumstances, as we find in the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, when Dr. Miles Dyson, the Cyberdyne scientist, is told what is in store for mankind, and Dyson's response is, "How were we supposed to know?" In this case, retrospection with the help of time travelling made it work.

19) Said, "Permission to Narrate," 34, quoted in RS, 29. The philosopher of science Norwood Russell Hanson is well-known for his theory-ladenness of fact and observation arguments in his *Patterns of Discovery* (1958).

second essay to be an unsurprising collection of topics related to Gaza and Palestinians, all of which are very much within the orbit of the standard critique of Israel's colonial enterprise and associated atrocities. The topics include the genocidal campaign by Israel, Israels' self-defense mantra, U.S. support of Israel's decades long attack on the Palestinian people, the International Criminal Court (ICC) finding "plausible grounds for the accusation [of genocide] and ordered interim measures to protect Palestinians in Gaza" (RS, 65–66), the colonial appetite of Israel, and the abuse of the idea of antisemitism. What was slightly surprising was her insertion of Jean Genet and Sven Lindqvist into the mix. In addition, we do find her return to turning points: "We might be in a turning point now [that is, in current Gaza]: still, we don't know in which direction we are moving. Are we seeing the beginnings of a decolonial future, or of a more complete obliteration than the Nakba of 1948?" (RS, 74).

But what about beginnings? They are uncertain as any end. I think we can defer to others to gain some understanding of them. I believe the work of the French anthropologist Didier Fassin, is a good place to begin. To jump start his discussion, Fassin cites a passage from the Palestinian American writer and poet, Hala Alyan: "'It matters where you start a narrative.'"[20] I take this to suggest a choice is involved. This insight leads Fassin into a fruitful discussion of the October 7th event. He writes:

> In fact, to start the present sequence of events on 7 October is not only to evade history, but also to confer a particular significance on the facts themselves, with two crucial implications for those who defend this ahistorical view. Firstly, the violence committed in southern Israel appears to amount to sheer savagery, as irrational as it is unpredictable, on the part of members of Hamas… . Secondly, the Israeli state is enabled to disclaim all responsibility in the genesis of the events, whether by dint of decades of oppression and suffocation of the Palestinian population, or on account of the strategy employed to boost the organization that inflicted this ordeal on it. These two logics – de-humanization and denial of responsibility – account for the brutality of the [Israeli] military response in Gaza.[21]

20) Alyan, "The Palestine Double Standard," quoted in Fassin, *Moral Abdication*, 16.

21) Fassin, *Moral Abdication*, 16–17.

Although Edward Said was not a novelist, he was no less passionate about the novel as Hammad, Said being a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University for a quadrennial. Perhaps Said is best known for his *Orientalism* (1978), a work addressing the representations of the Arab-Islamic peoples and cultures in the Middle East, and how Western representations, including those found in novels, display a Eurocentric prejudice. But Hammad is a novelist with a passion for this sort of narrative object. I believe she like Said, finds the novel as a portal through which to think about experiences other than one's own – it is part of the journey to make sense of the world. I believe it is much more than that, it is not just a matter of "making sense" (that is, understanding), but a matter of recognizing truth, and even speaking truth to power, especially in an increasingly autocratic world.[22]

In her discussion about recognizing (or realizing) the truth, Hammad introduces Aristotle and *anagnorisis*, but then quickly draws us back to Palestine, by referencing Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Returning to Haifa* (1969). I do not think that her insertion of this prominent Palestinian author was just a matter of the plot's general relevance to her work, but a matter of getting the reader to think about what some chose to not think about – the intricate Palestinian narrative of living under occupation and the desire for liberation. Sticking with the narrative theme, as Casey Plett puts it in her *On Community* (2023), "we are drawn to certain narratives – we choose certain narratives to believe. I think of the narratives we choose to pass on, and those we don't want to look at."[23] This dovetails nicely with what is called the transgenerational transmission of chosen trauma explored in the psychopolitical analysis of the American psychiatrist Vamik D. Volkan (2002). His work, which focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina, is extremely insightful and applicable to places and situations well beyond the Balkans, even to Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories. Chosen traumas are shared images of events that cause members of a large group, like an ethnic group, "to feel helpless, victimized, and humiliated by another group."[24] Group members psychologize and mythologize those events, taking the images and associated feelings of being wounded and shamed, and the various defenses that the feelings trigger from one generation to

22) Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, xvi.

23) Plett, *On Community*, 40.

24) Volkan, "Bosnia-Herzegovina," 86.

another. Volkan focuses on the chosen trauma of the defeat of the Serb Prince Lazar by the armies of the Ottoman Empire at the Battle of Kosovo on June 28, 1389 and its reactivation 600 years later with the rise to power by the Serb nationalist Slobodan Milošević. This psychologizing and mythologizing has far reaching consequences. As Volkan notes, a "group draws the shared image of the traumatic event into its very identity."[25] When it comes to the plight of the Palestinian people, it is their narrative of occupation, the trauma of the Nakba 1948 (or the Nakba 1948-present), and human desire for liberation that typically gets short shrift in the West, being crowded out by the self-defense mantra of the dominants no matter the country of origin. This is displayed in the shrinking political and cultural space in the United States, though there is increasing pushback. Then, there is the transgenerational transmission of the existential crisis made real by the Holocaust, which now has been refreshed by the 2023 Hamas attack. The need for the self-defense mantra is, thus, further immortalized in the eyes of many. And the defense includes attacking all who are thought to pose an existential threat to the Zionist project, including Ghassan Kanafani.

Ghassan Kanafani, was not simply an author like Hammad, but he became a spokesman for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a secular Palestinian Marxist-Leninist organization founded by George Habash. No doubt, Kanafani's association with the PFLP, and his literary fame, ultimately led to his car bomb assassination in Beirut at the hands of the Mossad in 1972.[26] His assassination was not only a retaliatory attack on the PFLP, but also an attack on (or an erasing of) Palestinian culture[27] – kill the Palestinian intellectual who uses his ball-point pen to spread resistance to the occupation. Perhaps this was an attempt to bury "the fundamental problem … [of] how to reconcile one's identity and the actualities of one's own culture, society, and history to the reality of other identities, cultures, and people."[28] Those who desire to erase or cleanse want to make certain that hearts are not open to others by sustaining oppression and violence at all costs.

25) Ibid.

26) Bano, "Ghassan Kanafani."

27) See Gould, *Erasing Palestine*, 29–44. Kanafani's masterpiece *Return to Haifa* (2018) continues to be read, much to the consternation of Israeli state officials. See Di Cintio, *Pay No Heed to the Rockets*, 20–26.

28) Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 94.

Education, that is, both formal and informal "training," is crucial in this regard, which is alluded to by the Flaming Lips in their song "Peace Sword," when we hear, "I was trained to ignore your pain."[29]

Returning to the subtitle of *Recognizing the Stranger*. Given the first conjunct of the subtitle of her book – "On Palestine," the highlighted recognitions or realizations of this work are laser focused on – Palestine and the Palestinians. This is no surprise, given her own words: "I have so far in my writing life been writing mostly about Palestine" (RS, 10). This is also reflected in the many fascinating and insightful stories found in *Recognizing the Stranger*. She recalls the experiences of some international writers at the Palestinian Festival of Literature. As she tells it, it is a powerful story of a transformative experience. The catalyst of their transformation was their immersion in the Palestinian life world. The writers being up close to everyday Palestinian life is identified by Hammad as the stimulus for their transformation. As a result, as Hammad writes, "they seemed genuinely changed by the experience" (RS, 21). But what sort of change had taken place? It is unclear. Was it that they came to recognize "a Palestinian is a human being, just like him or her" (RS, 25). However, their interest in making the trip in the first place might suggest that the visitors had reached that recognition prior to traveling to the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In other words, they were already a member of the choir.[30] If so, perhaps the change consisted of a first-hand reaffirmation of that prior recognition. Either way, the change might have been evidenced by causal remarks the visitors made in Hammad's presence like, for example, "I have walked through a door and it has locked behind me" (RS, 21), as well as by showing an interest in visiting specific places and talking with certain

29) This song was included in the film *Ender's Game*, which is in part about xenocide. The recognition of unknowingly having committed xenocide comes when Ender Wiggin asks, "what do you mean we won?" and he is told the truth. The film ends with Ender attempting to save the last vestige of the alien race, known as the Formics. Speaking of education, Wind, in *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom*, offers a provocative expose on how the Israeli academy servs as a key node in the web of oppression against Palestinians. Just another part of the settler colonial project of Israel.

30) I have long been mindful of this issue, having raised it regarding the work of the Nansen Dialogue Centre in Sarajevo, Bosnia: were the invited participants of a 4-day workshop at a resort on Mount Bjelašnica in 2001 already sold on the Nansen vision of peace and democracy building? It was my impression from being at the workshop that there were no self-proclaimed ethno-nationalists in the participant pool. Being part of the choir in the Palestine episode would have made that trip more like a Birthright Israel experience and less like a trip sponsored by the Palestinian American Research Center (PARC).

people. They experienced an "aha moment"! It was not about being persuaded through dialogue, or some sort of sophisticated philosophical argument (or by watching PBS Frontline documentaries) but witnessing firsthand the everyday oppression and repression experienced by Palestinians. This harkens back to Kapuściński. Perhaps it was "being there" that allowed a witnessing that facilitated one's ownership of a "narrative to absorb, sustain, and circulate" facts, which do not speak for themselves (RS, 29). It was one of those infrequent sudden moments of recognition. Perhaps humanity became the narrative, one that was not reliant on others shifting the facts for them. Hammad claims that "the idea that Jewish Israelis at large might be persuaded through dialogue to see Palestinians as human is … absurd" (RS, 28). (As a philosopher, who is interested in peace and democracy building, I question this claim. I also believe that David Livingstone Smith's *On Inhumanity* [2010] would offer a great deal of push-back.)[31] Hammad's claim might be related to another claim of hers: "that received ideas or ideas from childhood can be hard to untie, even when faced with evidence of our senses" (RS, 44). (I do not dispute this claim; I find it reasonable.)[32] If one's received ideas include that the Jewish homeland is Palestine and that Palestinian Arabs pose a demographic threat to the Israeli state (the protector of the homeland), then the sort

31) I have written elsewhere that "we should not delude ourselves into thinking that learning more about our enemy or our adversary will always lead to more pleasant relations. It may result in the exact opposite; our worst fears about the other may be confirmed: 'My neighbor is a terrorist!'" (Conces, "A Physicalist Theory of Managing Impediments," 16, footnote 14).

32) A dialogue found in Peter Maass's *Love Thy Neighbor: A Story of War*, a book about the Bosnian conflict, illustrates this difficulty. The dialogue is between Maass and Vera Milanović, a Bosnian Serb who lived in a village that included many Bosniaks, that is, Bosnian Muslims. See Conces, "Epistemical and Ethical Troubles," 36–38, for a detailed epistemic analysis of this situation. The issue comes down to a breakdown in her commonplace self-restraints on reasoning. Vera simply watched the arrest of her Bosniak neighbors, who, according to Vera, "were always very good. They were very nice people." Vera displayed no moral outrage at what she saw being done to her "very good" and "very nice" neighbors (Maass, *Love Thy Neighbor*, 14). Why? Those facts were trumped by the pronouncements made by the Bosnian Serb military, who claimed to have uncovered some plans by the Bosniaks to do harm to the Serb population and, most importantly, those claims were announced on the radio. Vera asked, "Why would the radio lie?" (Ibid.). She never questioned the veracity of the claims and whether the authorities had their own agenda against the Bosniaks. All of that went unchallenged by Vera. The radio was selected as her supreme epistemic authority. To be honest, when a person's favored beliefs and way of life are being threatened by war, it is understandable why institutions that support all that would be deemed trustworthy. It takes a great degree of moral courage to be a morally conscientious agent in dark times.

of transformative experience had by the international writers, who arrived in Palestine (assuming) without those received ideas and "with the desire to learn" (RS, 21), might *be* difficult to replicate for many Jewish Israelis.[33] Hammad is spot on in her contention that "recognition is a kind of knowing that should incur the responsibility to act for it to have any value beyond personal epiphanies" (RS, 50). In the case of conflictual realities, like those found in The Occupied Palestinian Territories, it is important to move beyond "personal epiphanies." Hammad is no stranger to this, she writes: "In real life, shifts in collective understanding are necessary for major changes to occur [like Palestinian statehood], but on the human, individual scale, they are humbling and existentially disturbing. Such shifts also do not usually come without a fight: not everyone can be unpersuaded of their worldview through argument and appeal, or through narrative" (RS, 48).

As Hammad sees it, recognition is not confined to narrative dynamics or to the life of individuals, she wisely draws our attention to the political in terms of sovereignty and rights that the Palestinian people require. Of course, even recognition in this context can go awry, as in the case of the Oslo Accords, which "led to an entrenchment of Israeli occupation" (RS, 50). The Accords recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people without the recognition of Palestinian statehood. It was a recognition without the much needed "economic and political redistribution" (RS, 49). Yet, Hammad is somewhat optimistic.[34]

It is almost to the end of the first essay that Hammad goes full tilt to connect the final piece of the title – the stranger. As the title of her work indicates, Hammad is interested in recognizing the stranger. But who is the stranger? What constitutes strangeness? Her discussion of the stranger is largely confined to the last few pages of the essay

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33) We must not forget that there are Jewish Israelis who do understand the plight of the Palestinian people and who do push back on the Israeli state. Ethnic groups are not monolithic. And we ought not to forget that the individuals in those groups are rational, moral agents, as well as emotive beings, who I believe would like to be decent human beings. Apparently, Israeli army authorities are scrambling to explain away the increase in active and inactive duty soldiers committing suicide (Levinson, "As Mental Health Crises Deepen"). Perhaps this uptick is another sign that some are finding it difficult to be decent as they erase a people. It may be too much too bear. This may also be reflected in the increasing numbers of Israelis refusing to serve in the military.

34) The second essay ends on a note of optimism: "One day this war will stop, and those of us who remain will return and rebuild, and live again in these houses" (RS, 80).

by way of an uncomfortable digression to Said on Freud. This digression introduces the idea that "we do not understand in our own selves" (RS, 54). There is alterity and strangeness about ourselves. Another one of her stories figures into this discussion. She recalls the story of a fellow named Daniel, who was an Israeli soldier and ordered to shoot anyone in the leg who came too close to the fence. One day a man ventured too close. Instead of shooting the man, Daniel "put down his gun and fled" (RS, 27). Hammad initially notes that the question that perplexed Daniel was whether "human beings could ever act as individuals, and not on behalf of groups" (RS, 26). She revises the question at the end of her essay by replacing "act" with "think" (RS, 56–57). For those who work in philosophy of action (from Aristotle and Descartes to Davidson and Bratman), the distinction between "acting" and "thinking" is a central topic of investigation, which will not be explored here. The question, no matter which version (act or think), exemplifies how we can "betray" our group allegiance to go solo. In a sense, we can become a stranger. I believe the story of Daniel is about someone undergoing the transformative experience that Hammad connects with strangeness. He no longer felt at home as a soldier, hence the fleeing. Perhaps he did what Hammad claims "we must eventually be ready to shape-shift, to be decentered, when the light of an other appears on the horizon in the project of human freedom, which remains undone" (RS, 56). This is one of the more obtuse passages in *Recognizing the Stranger.*

In most of my work on peace and democracy building, I emphasize what Hammad describes as "recognizing the stranger as familiar" (Ibid.). Creating unity or solidarity through shared narratives or identities (that is, a unified pluralism). However, I acknowledge the reversal, recognizing the familiar as stranger (Ibid.), though I do not think it is a matter of having to choose one over the other.

My introduction to this reversal was through the work of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, particularly his essay "The 'Terrorist Threat',"[35] in which he demystifies the notion of "way of life." For him, a way of life is "embodied in a thick network of everyday practices: how we eat and drink, sing, make love, how we relate to authorities… . We 'are' our way of life, it is our second nature, which is why direct 'education' is not able to change it."[36] Žižek believes change to our way of life can only come

35) Žižek, "The 'Terrorist Threat'," 174–75.

36) Ibid., 174.

through the sort of transformative experience like that of Hammad's visitors – an "aha" moment. According to Žižek, it is a "deep existential experience by means of which it all of a sudden strikes us how stupidly meaningless and arbitrary our customs and rituals are."[37] Zizek continues:

> The point is thus not to recognize ourselves in strangers, not to gloat in the comforting falsity that "they are like us," but to recognize a stranger in ourselves – therein resides the innermost dimension of European modernity. Communitarianism is not enough: a recognition that we are all, each in our own way, weird lunatics provides the only hope for tolerable co-existence of different ways of life.[38]

In conclusion, with the Victor Serge epigram in mind, I was drawn to read *Recognizing the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* and to write this essay because of the interconnectedness of who I am and how I tend to think about the four terms that comprise the title and subtitle of her book. Agree or disagree with her and/or me, it does not matter. What matters is for you to begin to think about that which was unthought by you. Far be it for me to try to induce an epiphany in someone.

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37) Ibid. This reminds me of Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1949) and the realization of contingency.

38) Ibid.

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