“We Don’t Have Trains in Palestine”: Tracking Transportation in Kate Jessica Raphael’s Palestinian Detective Novels

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Abstract

This essay argues that two crime novels set in Palestine, Kate Jessica Raphael’s Murder Under the Bridge (2015) and Murder Under the Fig Tree (2017), utilize metaphors and descriptions of infrastructure, travel, transportation, and mobility in order to shed light on the contemporary colonial situation of Palestine. By juxtaposing Raphael’s crime writing and its attendant negotiations with the difficulties of Palestinian life and travel under Israeli occupation, these novels disrupt the kind of soothing, teleologically-minded modernity Walter Benjamin envisioned as being inherent to both train travel and reading detective novels. Raphael’s Palestinian detective novels, by prioritizing accounts of Palestinian life marked by under-investigated crime, failings of infrastructure, and travel hardships, situate both the literature and the geographical space as part of the (post)colonial tradition and thus necessary for inclusion in larger discussions of crime fiction.

The opening pages of Kate Jessica Raphael’s Murder Under the Bridge, set in Azzawiya, a town in the Palestinian West Bank, both present the reader with a crime and discuss the difficulties the main detective will face in attempting to solve it. Rania, a Palestinian detective, will have to solve the mystery of an Israeli car abandoned on a Palestinian road while she navigates Israeli roadblocks and waits around for collective taxis, negotiating spaces where she is allowed to travel with spaces where she is not. The bridge on which the car has been abandoned, we are told “was really an overpass, where the new Israeli highway ran on top of the old Palestinian road” (3), a charged geography that will lead to power struggles and transportation difficulties for Rania as she attempts to do her job. The key question at the heart of the investigation, according to Rania, is “Why would someone take a car from Israel, drive it to the edge of the West Bank, and then leave it?” (21). This question encapsulates the intricate interweaving of issues—travel and transportation, occupation, and access to space—that mark Raphael’s series of novels set in Palestine featuring Detective Rania Bakara, as well as larger issues of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

Travel and detective/crime fiction have been linked since the development of the genre in the nineteenth century. Originally paired together for commercial purposes, as these novels were sold for the purpose of leisure reading while traveling, the connection quickly developed into a thematic element. Fergus Hume’s The Mystery of a Hansom Cab (1886) was one of the first novels to explicitly use a transportation-related crime to explore deeper social and political issues, and a number of Sherlock Holmes stories soon followed suit. In the early twentieth century, Freeman Wills Crofts (a railway engineer by training) used features of railway travel in his writing, and Agatha Christie utilized trains for two of her most famous novels, The Mystery of the Blue Train (1928) and Murder on the Orient Express (1934). The way travel and trains are utilized in these novels is often straightforward: the train functions as a closed society, so the murderer must be on board, or railway timetables or receipts from trains are used as alibis or incriminating evidence. But what of detective novels where travel is not so easy? What about detective narratives
where traditional elements of travel are present, but there are additional stumbling blocks that make the forward progression of the narrative much more difficult? What about novels where the mobility of the detective is severely hampered, jarring the conventional cadence used by these and other crime writers? In a novel like this, what additional literary, cultural, and sociopolitical realities would be brought to light?

Kate Jessica Raphael’s two detective novels, *Murder Under the Bridge* (published 2015, set in 2005) and *Murder Under the Fig Tree* (published 2017, set in 2006), ask these sorts of exploratory and politically rich questions with regards to the Palestinian West Bank. The two *Murder* books feature Rania as she attempts to solve first the murder of Nadya, a Ukrainian woman found under a bridge in Rania’s Palestinian village, and then the murder of a gay Palestinian man, Daoud, in a nearby community. Both books heavily utilize descriptions and themes of travel, mobility, infrastructure, and various forms of transportation to illustrate on-the-ground realities of daily life for many Palestinians and people who choose to live in Palestine; these descriptions and metaphors disrupt the typical expectations of the plot and structure of a detective novel. Moreover, as the Palestinian people and nation are dispersed across several different non-contiguous landmasses—comprising a series of “scattered communities” (Cleary 186)—the circuitous methods of movement, cumbersome transportation options, and stop-and-go style of both the narrative and the mobility of the characters mimic, in some ways, the decentralized and noncontinuous nature of the current state of Palestine itself. I argue that attention to travel and methods of transportation in these novels turns up deep-rooted concerns of infrastructure, citizenship, layers of colonial occupation, and citizens and belonging in occupied Palestine in order to present a new form for the detective novel. In what follows, I will develop this argument by tracking Rania’s process as she solves first Nadya’s murder, then Daoud’s, paying special attention to how travel, transportation, and infrastructure are understood in the context of Azzawiya.

Israel’s occupation of Palestine (understood here as the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip) manifests itself in a variety of ways, but one of the most important and tangible in everyday life is the way Israel manipulates infrastructure as a way to control travel, living space, and daily activity. Eyal Weizman notes in *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* that “The mundane elements of planning [of space] and architecture have become tactical tools and the means of dispossession” (5); Achille Mbembe calls this and similar processes “infrastructural warfare” (29, italics original); and Omar Jabary Salamanca has coined the term “infrastructural violence” to study the mechanisms of “population management and repression as well as territorial segregation and control” in the Gaza Strip (35). Raphael’s novels, by highlighting Israeli colonialism and occupation, offer dramatic narratives that enter the scholarly conversation around occupation, infrastructure, and travel by focusing on subaltern subjects. The novels direct attention away from the more bourgeois focus of the typical “train-and-crime” narratives and novels. As Mimi Sheller notes, “Control over mobility as a form of power has deep historical roots” (14); this control, as exercised by Israel over Palestinians, speaks to power differentials and how these might be sharpened in instances surrounding a politically charged subject such as crime, especially in an occupied territory.

A quick word on the author and her subject position: Kate Jessica Raphael is a Jewish American writer with a personal history of activism in Palestine and around Palestine-related issues. The author has a close analogue in one of her characters, Chloe, a middle-aged Jewish American lesbian woman who has come from San Francisco to
participate in solidarity work in the West Bank. In the books, Chloe acts as Rania’s (at first unwanted) right-hand woman, offering support and access to areas that Rania, as a Palestinian, cannot travel or be admitted to. Though Kate Jessica Raphael is not Palestinian, Muslim, or Arab, her novels generally avoid the sort of Orientalism, exoticism, and romanticism that someone like Agatha Christie has become known for. Raphael herself says, “I do not want to appropriate the Palestinian narrative... or claim a legitimacy I do not have. I want to get people interested in what’s happening in Palestine” (qtd. in Dwight). Despite Raphael’s motives being openly political, she avoids her novels being only political propaganda by writing a gripping mystery and relying on in-depth characterizations of the individual players in the story to inject the narrative with nuance, subtlety, and the twists and turns necessary to any good detective novel. In the sections that follow, I will outline how Raphael complicates the traditional structure of a detective novel via the particular colonial and spatial logics of occupied Palestine.

_Murder Under the Bridge_, the first of the two books, begins with Rania being called into her captain’s office. Captain Mustafa informs her a car has been abandoned on top of the bridge in their village, Azzawiya. Though it may not be immediately clear to the reader why this is cause for police action, Rania soon spells it out: the car has yellow plates, marking it as Israeli, and it has been abandoned on top of the bridge, meaning that it has been abandoned in a liminal space. The bridge and the modern road are Israeli, as are most well-developed infrastructures in Israel and Palestine; however, the poorly-funded and little-maintained road that passes _underneath_ the bridge is Palestinian. From the beginning of the narrative, with the presentation of this car and the segregated roadways, we are asked to reckon with the many layers of infrastructure, transportation, and mobility in Palestine. Cars, roads, bridges, taxis, and other forms of mobility and transportation are highly charged in a space where some people (Palestinians) must have permits to go certain places (Israel); where other people (Israelis) have the economic, political, and social capital to buy cars and travel freely on buses, trains, and well-maintained roads, but where most of the population (Palestinians) are relegated to collective taxis, foot travel, and only rarely private vehicles, and even then, they are subject to stop and search at Israeli roadblocks in ways those granted the privilege of Israeli citizenship are not. These objects of transportation and mobility possess valences that go beyond their capabilities to take people from Point A to Point B. Igor Kopytoff has written, “commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing” (64); those cultural markers, in Israel/Palestine, vary wildly based on subject position, ethnicity, religion, citizenship status, and geographical residency.

After detailing the abandoned car situation, Captain Mustafa sends Rania to the scene to keep an eye on the Israeli police force and army who have come into the village to investigate the crime. This task underscores what Rania sees as the role of the Palestinian police force: Rania articulates her understanding of the Palestinian police as being an agency tasked with “protecting the people against the occupier” (203). Because the Israeli army is in the area to investigate the abandoned car, someone must be dispatched to the scene as a protective buffer against any actions the army may take.

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1. It should be noted that this understanding of the Palestinian police force is not monolithically shared amongst the population, as the Palestinian police force has recently begun increasing its cooperation with Israeli authorities, especially in matters relating to driving; my point is that Rania believes protection of the people to be the role of the Palestinian police force, not that this is necessarily completely true.
Rania specifically has been sent because “A woman could surreptitiously gather information, while a Palestinian man moving around an army roadblock asking questions would not last long” (2). Perhaps counterintuitively, Rania initially has a bit more mobility and freedom in her space than do her male colleagues on the police force. Moreover, Rania eventually discovers that not only has a car been abandoned, a woman has been killed; the Israeli army does not see her body as it is under the bridge, in Palestine rather than in Israel, marking Rania, the female Palestinian detective, as initially having the most access to the crime scene.

Almost immediately in her investigation, however, Rania is stymied for the first time by transportation issues. This will be a recurring theme; unlike in Sherlock Holmes’s London or Agatha Christie’s imperial Europe, Palestine lacks trains or any real sort of centrally organized method of mass transportation. Trains, which were first established by colonizing Ottoman and European powers in the late nineteenth century and hugely expanded by the British during their control of Mandatory Palestine, have been largely scrubbed from the contemporary Palestinian landscape as a way of limiting transportation and connection among the dispersed Palestinian population, and have mostly been replaced by the new occupying power’s more modern and individualized technology of cars and road travel (which many Palestinians cannot afford). In other words, trains, once the symbol of colonial modernity, have been replaced by individualized transport such as cars or, in Israel itself, sleek and modern settler buses that, for a variety of spatial and access reasons, Palestinians have a great deal of difficulty using. Though trains were established first to facilitate military transport, individualized cars now accomplish many of the same goals. As Paul Cotterell has noted in his (highly sympathetic to both British and Israeli colonialism) book *The Railways of Palestine and Israel*, train service in Palestine was largely stopped after the 1967 war, when Israel gained control of railways in the West Bank and Gaza. However, and, in fact, because of this war, Israel still has trains, and rail travel in Israel is actually expanding. Trains, long associated not only with detective fiction but also with imperial powers and with modernity and mobility, as Marian Aguilar among others has pointed out, have been improved for the colonizers, but been excised for the colonized, analogous to so many other infrastructural elements in Israel and Palestine.

Because of the imbalance in transportation methods, the only way Rania can get to the bridge is a collective taxi, which is not full when she happens upon it. Because, as she notes, “It could take ten minutes or more to fill the three empty seats” (3), she is forced to pay the rest of the fares to get the driver to take her to where she needs to be. This lack of personal mobility is further highlighted when she reaches the bridge, where the Israeli army has set up a roadblock and is refusing to let anyone through. When Rania informs a soldier that the assembled Palestinians need to get through so they can get to work, the soldier shrugs nonchalantly and says that there is no point, that they won’t be able to get through before the workday is over. Immediately after his careless dismissal of the gathered Palestinians’ time and needs, he points his rifle at some young children who have gathered to throw rocks at the army. “Atah tamut hayom,” he yells at the group: “You are going to die today” (6).

This interaction underlines Joe Cleary’s point that violence in Palestine and Israel “does not end with the act of partition: violence is not incidental to but constitutive of the new state arrangements thus produced” (11). In other words, the creation of the state of Israel did not tamp down on violence, but intensified it, meaning contemporary
Palestinians’ daily lives consist not only of inconveniences, transportation problems, and limited freedom of motion, but the ever-present threat of bodily harm or death. Sari Hanafi has argued that Israel’s colonial project is “spacio-cidal,” in that it uses land grabs as a mechanism to make life unbearable for the Palestinians living on that space in the hopes the Palestinians will just give up and leave. The menace of physical violence is intrinsically linked to both this focus on getting the Palestinians to “voluntarily” go somewhere else and the control mechanisms inherent in issues of space, transportation, infrastructure, and mobility; this interlocking matrix emphasizes some of the issues that hinder Rania from doing her job as the narrative continues. Patricia Yaeger has written, “infrastructure registers in its absence as dysfunction, nonpresence, decay” (16). The nonpresence of infrastructure, or the limited and difficult options that are available to Palestinians, carry implications both for the form of the novel and for unearthing the types of day-to-day violences Palestinians must deal with under Israeli occupation.

One of the central tensions inherent in Rania’s detective work is that her mobility is extremely limited, both in terms of the infrastructure and transportation available to her, as well as the always-present simmering threat of violence. Though she can move with relative freedom within the West Bank (challenging some Western readers’ preconceptions about the role of women in Palestinian and/or Muslim society), she has a tremendously difficult time moving out of Palestine into Israel, or even into other Palestinian territories or cities, both because of legalized segregation policies and access issues, as well as the threat from the Israeli army of physical violence. Lindsey B. Green-Simms notes that “mobility is often seen as a fundamental aspect, a right even, of modern culture” (12), but that right is absent for Rania and for other Palestinians she lives, works, and relaxes among.

Israeli political scientist Neve Gordon touches on this issue of limited or impossible mobility for Palestinians in an anecdote about learning to drive in Israel and Palestine in the 1980s. He told this story to a class of undergraduates at a university in Israel: “It took me a moment before I understood why my story about a few relatively inconsequential incidents at a high school located outside Beer-Sheva had such an effect” among the class (25). “One of my anecdotes,” he continues, “was about my classmates who lived in the Jewish settlements located in the northern tip of the Sinai Peninsula.” Gordon’s classmates did not spend much time thinking about the geopolitical developments happening around them, but “a particular issue that did occupy us . . . was learning to drive,” and specifically learning to drive in the nearby Palestinian town of Rafah. “My students,” Gordon writes, “found this story incomprehensible” (26).

How could this be, Gordon wonders—a simple story about learning to drive being coded as “incomprehensible” by his students? He gradually realizes that “Within the current context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this act is unfathomable. No taxis from the Occupied Territories are allowed to enter Israel and, even if they had somehow managed to obtain an entry permit, Israeli Jews would be afraid to use them” (26). This spatial segregation, even as the two communities are occupying practically interstitial land, means that “Palestinians from the West Bank are also confined to their villages and towns; however, within this region, Jews, and particularly Jewish settlers, are allowed to travel as they please” (26). One can see, in other words, why Rania’s task as a detective would be so difficult, as she attempts to navigate spaces she is allowed to enter and spaces she is not, and she tries to arrange car, taxi, and foot transportation accordingly; in some cases, as in the bridge that goes over the road, the spaces in question literally overlap and
occupy almost the exact same location. As Henri Lefebvre puts it, “We are confronted not by one social space but by many. . . . Social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another” (86, italics original). The social space of Palestine is, as Edward Said has noted, “no ordinary piece of geography, but perhaps more drenched in religious, cultural, and political significance than any on earth” (431); space is loaded with different signifiers and meanings for those forced to traverse it in difficult and burdensome ways. Add to this observation the fact that space, as Joseph R. Farag has observed, is a particularly charged concept in Palestine due to the nature of the occupation and the Palestinians being a stateless people, and it becomes clear that space and movement through it is one of the most important elements to parse in both this country and this literature. Though Rania and the Israeli police force are investigating the same crime and ostensibly occupy the same space, they are in fact inhabiting entirely different social spaces that nevertheless “interpenetrate one another,” making it even more difficult for Rania to navigate her geography and her investigation.

The issues of racial and spatial apartheid, occupying powers, and control of an indigenous population by a group of more recent arrivals highlight the extent to which the Israel-Palestine situation is colonial, and how Raphael’s detective fiction might be understood through the lens of (post)colonialism. Anna Ball and others have argued for the inclusion of Palestine in the field of postcolonial studies, which would offer a special resonance for crime or detective fiction set in the area, as the genre “offers new and exciting insights to the cultures that produce it; its very status as popular and accessible literature means that it responds quickly to change, that it can incorporate cultural and social shifts almost immediately into its texts” (Worthington ix). Palestinian crime and detective fiction, then, can offer timely insight into the occupied space. Though, as Stephen Knight notes, the relationship between crime fiction and postcolonialism has not been simple (166), and Ed Christian points out that Israel “is in an odd situation geographically, culturally, and historically” (190), it is impossible to read the Raphael novels with any sense of the history of Palestine and not come away with the understanding that Rania, Chloe, and the rest of the cast of characters are living amongst a backdrop of a very real contemporary colonial situation.

The colonial relationship thus accentuates even further the issues inherent in transportation, mobility, and infrastructure. As Rudolf Mrázek writes in his study of the Dutch East Indies, new and easy-to-traverse roads have often acted as a clear marker of colonial authority: “The newness, the hardness and cleanness—it was the roads’ modernity. Cleanness of the roads, in this logic, was purity of times, democracy even, we might say” (8). Jennifer Hart, following Brian Larkin, writes that “the ‘immaterial experience’ [of road and infrastructural quality] is as important as the technology or infrastructure itself—a fact which both colonial and postcolonial government officials clearly understood as they sought to regulate the culture and practices that emerged around and through automobility” (8). Within the Raphael novels, there are repeated references to Citroën vehicles, which only Israelis seem to drive: Rania notes in Murder Under the Bridge that the Citroën is “one of the most common cars in Israel” (16) and Chloe estimates in the same novel that “eighty percent of the cars on Israeli roads” are Citroëns (161). Roland Barthes, writing about the Citroën in 1957, rhapsodizes about the car’s smoothness and lightness, ultimately concluding the appearance of the car on the market means we are “turning from an alchemy of speed to a relish in driving,” calling the
vehicle “the very essence of petit-bourgeois achievement” (89, 90). These infrastructural and transportation pleasures, however, are not afforded to the colonized Palestinians.

On a more theoretical level, Marian Aguilar posits that “Modernity and mobility are closely connected in a relation charged by the power of rhetoric and representation. Modernity has often been allied with mobility through representational forms—textual, spatial, and temporal” (2). Modernity and its concurrent mobility are granted to the Israelis as they drive their Citroëns on beautiful modern roads; the converse, lack of mobility and a seeming lack of access to modernity, applies to the Palestinians, further marking them as outside, other, deserving of their treatment due to their lack of modernity. All of this is to say that, to return to Kopytoff, “things,” including roads, infrastructure, and modes of transportation, are “culturally marked”—the colonizers get the pretty new roads, bridges, and cars that allow for unimpeded travel, while the colonized are relegated to older roads, shared taxis, apartheid walls, and roadblocks, all of which make mobility much more difficult and constrained.

In Murder Under the Bridge, Nadya’s body is found by a Palestinian farmer who has access to the space under the bridge; the Israeli army and police force do as well, but do not consider checking what they view as empty space for anything to do with the abandoned car. Rania, as noted, is assigned the case, and almost immediately has to spend as much time working out transportation as she does investigating. When she learns Nadya worked as a nanny in an Israeli settlement called Ariel, she “[catches] a shared taxi to Yasouf and then another to Kifl Hares, and [crosses] the highway to the long entrance to Ariel” (63). Once arrived, she knows she can’t enter without Israelis, so she hesitates, trying to figure out “if she should wait near the bus stop, or go up to the gate” (63). When the Israeli police officers arrive, it is in a car that they have been able to drive by themselves on a new and sleek modern highway. After they have taken her into the settlement and they have questioned some residents, Rania realizes that they have walked so far within the settlement that she is now so close to her village that she can almost see her house. “Two years ago,” she muses,

she could simply have walked from the gate of the settlement over the roadblock at the entrance to her village and been home in ten minutes. But now there was the Wall, and the Israeli highway was completely separate from the Palestinian roads. She would have to ride back all the way to Ariel and catch a taxi to the Qaraw blocks, cross over and catch another taxi to Mas’ha. She would arrive home too late to make Khaled’s [her son] favorite okra stew for dinner. (71)

The Israeli police force are faced with no such obstacles in their work on the case. When the team decides to interview someone close to Rania’s village, she realizes that they will beat her there, as the lead Israeli detective, Benny, “could drive straight on good roads, and she would need to take two taxis on bad ones” (72). In this instance, as in others, Rania is forced to rely on Israelis to drive her around on the good roads, and even then, she has to pray they are not stopped at roadblocks and she is not forced to show travel permits she does not have. Later in the narrative, Rania gets a ride with a young Israeli woman named Maya so that she can go interview a Palestinian man the Israeli officials have jailed on their suspicion he is involved in Nadia’s murder. When it is time to take Rania home, she attempts to cognitively map her options, thinking, “The fastest way back to Mas’ha would have been to take Road 60 south past Jenin and Nablus,
turning west at Zatara. But that road was littered with checkpoints, and she had no ID. Anyway, Maya said she didn’t want to drive through the West Bank—Palestinians might mistake them for settlers and throw stones at the car” (262). With that settled, Maya turns to take an alternate, longer route, and

As they sped down the highway, Rania found herself wishing she could prolong the trip. Israel was a small country, but it felt limitless to her. As she thought of crossing the Green Line [that separates Israel and the Palestinian Territories], she felt the world contracting around her, like an oppressive blanket. (262)

Though Maya and Rania ostensibly live in much the same space, as do Rania and the Israeli policemen she visits Ariel with, the colonized/colonizer power imbalance makes it so that Rania does not have access to freedom and mobility in the same way as Israelis do, even as she performs the same job as them. She is operating with an entirely different set of social referents, rules, and regulations. “How many maps,” asks Henri Lefebvre, “in the descriptive or geographical sense, might be needed to deal exhaustively with a given space, to code and decode all its meanings and contents? It is doubtful whether a finite answer can ever be given in answer to this sort of question” (85). Especially in a highly charged social and physical space like Israel and Palestine, all actors on the landscape must carry vastly different cognitive and physical maps around with them as they attempt to move through space to work or live their daily lives. This requires much contortionism on the part of Rania and her Palestinian detective counterparts: though she finally solves the case of Nadya’s murder, she must rely in large part upon friendly Israelis and her friend Chloe, who can access certain spaces she cannot and can transport her to places she needs to be. Even though Rania is the one who ultimately closes the case, she is reliant on Israelis to provide her with transportation to the final, climactic scene, and she must use her knowledge of Israeli streets to gain access to a privileged space: she hitchs a ride with Israeli strangers, pretending to be an Arab Jew, and tells a guard at a roadblock that she is visiting cousins who live on “Herzl Street . . . near Weizmann,” information she is able to give only because she knows “every town in Israel has streets named Herzl and Weizmann, for the founders of their state” (302). She wonders, too, if the people who picked her up “could have named even one man her people would name streets after” (302), pointing again to the imbalanced power dynamics inherent to any colonial situation.

Access and mobility achieved, Rania is able to confront Nadya’s murderers and help save the life of her friend, Chloe, at the same time and as part of the same case. Chloe has her own struggles with mobility and access, though in a far different way from Rania. While Rania’s difficulties center around physical transport and movement, such as not being able to enter certain parts of Israel, travel on Israeli roads, or access certain forms of transportation like the settler buses, Chloe is shut off not from physical areas, but from cultural and emotional spaces. Due to her religion and nationality, she has no problem entering buildings, cities, and spaces from which Rania is forbidden; though she notes she “always felt a little guilty when she crossed the checkpoint into Jerusalem, knowing that her friends in the West Bank could not do so except at great risk” (214), she does it anyway for professional and personal reasons, taking settler Egged buses for the ease and convenience, even as it makes her “uneasy” (238).
While Chloe goes on these evidence-gathering trips for Rania or to run errands for her Palestinian neighbors, she sometimes also stays in Israel for a few days so she can let her guard down around her sexuality. Chloe is gay, something she has to keep strictly hidden while in Palestine but that she can be freer with in Israel; despite noting Israel has relatively lax attitudes regarding sexuality, Raphael never engages in the sort of “pinkwashing” often used to defend Israel against its more conservative Arab neighbors. Instead, Israel is presented as a place where Chloe is uneasy but that she can travel to with ease; in fact, though she is deported back to the United States at the end of Murder Under the Bridge, she notes at the start of Murder Under the Fig Tree that, “Even now, despite all that had happened, if she told the immigration officer she wanted to immigrate to Israel—to ‘make Aliyah’—they would whisk her off to a special area reserved for Jews ‘returning’ and help her sign up for government-paid Hebrew classes” (2). Once back and settled in Palestine, Chloe starts to drive a Palestinian acquaintance, Reem, to cancer treatments because Chloe can get a permit to drive and the Palestinian woman cannot (86). The nonchalance with which Chloe can travel to and within Israel is unthinkable for Rania and her neighbors.

Despite her ability to move freely, Chloe’s Arabic is good but not great, which limits her understanding of conversations conducted entirely in Arabic (Murder Under the Bridge 33); her status as a foreigner also frequently marks her as able to be relied upon for favors while not being inducted into inner circles. Chloe’s lack of access to sectors of Palestinian society is stressed further in the second book, which is set in 2006 after Hamas has taken power in Palestine. With the government changeover has come a heightened religiosity and concurrent suspicion of Jews; Chloe notes that she can’t attend her girlfriend, Tina’s, lesbian support group because she isn’t Palestinian, nor will Tina allow her to write an article about the group (179-81). This stings a bit as she feels left out of this part of Tina’s life, and she is similarly uneasy when she enters Reem’s home and notices a framed picture of Khaled Mashal, the leader of Hamas, where once a picture of the more secular Yasser Arafat had hung (197-98). Though she is able to be friends with Reem and enter her house, Chloe is aware that were she to let Reem know she was Jewish and gay (or either one individually), this privilege would likely disappear.

The second Raphael book, Murder Under the Fig Tree, plays on many of the same concerns as Murder Under the Bridge, with the added dimension of LGBT issues in a government and environment that has shifted rightwards. Daoud, as a young, gay Palestinian man and drag queen performer at clubs in Israel, wants to seek asylum in Israel (216), a country more welcoming of his sexuality but far less of his religion and ethnicity. This tension, as well as the interplay between secular and religious Palestinian sectors, is the driving concern of the second novel. Murder Under the Fig Tree is still concerned with transportation and mobility, though in a way that recreates rather than re-envisions the same issues in the first novel. For example, when Chloe lands back in Israel and Tina picks her up from the airport, Chloe mentally maps the route to the West Bank, keeping in mind who can and will travel where: “They could negotiate with the [taxi] driver to take them close to Damascus Gate, where they could get a car to Ramallah, or they could off-board here and look for a cheaper Arab taxi to go the last three-quarter mile” (12). Before his death, Daoud stands at the checkpoint that separates Jerusalem and Ramallah, noting that “to his left, people moved easily, returning from Jerusalem to Ramallah without interference” while “to his right, cars stretched as far back as he could
see, two abreast, with more arriving all the time” (19). Rania, while trying to take a settler bus, is anxious because she has “seen plenty of them [bus drivers] simply sit and refuse to drive on” (104) when a Palestinian boards the bus, and new checkpoints mean a journey that would have taken ten minutes in the past now necessitates “half an hour’s walk, and a wait for a servees [collective taxi] which took the settler road” (220). As spending a great deal of time on this novel would largely repeat my analysis of *Murder Under the Bridge*, I have chosen instead to briefly sketch *Murder Under the Fig Tree*’s new contributions, specifically those to do with issues of secularism and sexuality.

Though Daoud’s family attempts to paint him as a martyr, slain by the Israeli army, Rania is not satisfied with this explanation and labors (correctly) to prove Daoud was killed because he was gay. This necessitates several trips into Israel to visit gay clubs and bars with predictably complicated planning and results. The Azzawiya community at large is troubled by Rania’s line of inquiry, mostly because Daoud’s family and friends wish to sweep the issue of Daoud’s sexuality under the rug, and the resulting investigation leads to tension with Rania’s family, coworkers, and friends. Chloe, with the distanced view of an outsider, tells Tina,

> The Israelis want as much division in Palestinian communities as possible right now. Benny [an Israeli policeman] knew Rania wouldn’t stop searching for the truth even when it was clear that everyone would prefer it to remain hidden. I think he hoped she would reveal the truth and that would intensify the conflict between the Islamist and secular factions [of Palestinian society]. (343)

Dividing and conquering is an old colonial tactic, but by the end of the book, it does not appear to have succeeded, even in a society that has slanted rightward and taken a more hardline view towards sexual minorities than in the first novel. Rania, as in *Murder Under the Bridge*, is able to work around the colonial roadblocks set in her way to solve the mystery, and the aggrieved parties agree to work out the harm done via a *sulha* agreement, a traditional form of mediation. Chloe, despite some ups and downs with Tina and some difficulties re-entering Palestinian society, eventually reconciles and settles back into the rhythms of life in Palestine. Though neither character’s path to the end of the narrative and mystery is as smooth as it would have been for non-colonized or non-foreign detectives, the bumps and hiccups in the road make the reader all the more aware of the daily indignities of life suffered under occupation.

In *Murder Under the Bridge*, Rania reads her son, Khalid, a children’s book called *The Little Red Train*. Khalid tells his mother that he would like to go on a train, and Rania responds, “We don’t have them in Palestine. A long time ago, we did, but no more. They have them in Jordan. Some day soon, maybe we can go there on a holiday” (297). The

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2 To get around these transportation issues, Daoud regularly performs sexual favors for border guards to get into Israel and perform as a drag queen, demonstrating the way Raphael links travel and LGBT issues in this novel.

3 She knows, however, that she cannot let on about this to the Israeli police, as “It would give them too much ammunition to make this an honor killing or a religious cleansing” (226), continuing to emphasize the power Israel holds over Palestine.

4 For the curious (spoiler alert!), the brother of Daoud’s partner killed Daoud due to fears Daoud was leading the brother into sin, adding to Raphael’s portrayal of the additional oppressions faced by the LGBT community in Palestine.
differences in colonial histories are striking; the Ottomans, British, and French were famous for instituting railway travel in their colonies (mostly for military and trade purposes), which is why Palestine had trains “a long time ago,” but the newer colonial power has chosen to make mobility more, not less, difficult, underscoring the segregationist and occupationist character of the Israeli regime.

The disjuncture between Palestine and Israel is made even clearer just a page later, when Rania calls an Israeli acquaintance and asks if he is on the train: the mere possibility that he could be on a train, in Israel, is revealing of his privilege. The simple pleasures and conveniences like train travel that are available to colonial powers in Israel are not an option for Rania or her fellow Palestinians. The twinned pleasures of train travel and the predictably rhythmic detective novel are not available in Palestine: rather, we have the gap in infrastructure available to the colonized and the colonizer, the resulting herky-jerky detective novel that proceeds at the pace the colonizers will let it proceed, and the continual reminder that life in Palestine is, as Chloe puts it, becoming accustomed to having your movements “confined . . . to ever-tinier enclaves” (Murder Under the Fig Tree 44). Or, as Rania’s husband Bassam puts it, “there is no justice in this land” (327).

Raphael writes in her afterword to Murder Under the Fig Tree, “This [book] is a snapshot in time, set in the spring of 2006. Much has changed in Palestine since this period, much of it for the worse and most of it driven by Israeli actions and policies (more walls, more killings, more collective punishment, more economic devastation)” (349). The lives of Palestinians, never easy, have become significantly harder with the further limiting of access to infrastructure, movement, and transportation. Patricia Yaeger, in theorizing infrastructure’s presence and absence in literature, asks, “What is it like to be stuck, night and day, dreaming of infrastructure?” (15). The answer to that question might be found in Palestine, and in Rania’s desperate mapping of her space as she tries to do her job in Murder Under the Bridge:

“I can be there in three hours,” she said, praying that was true. It would be if the roads were open. If there were roadblocks, it would take much much longer, and she could be stuck in the south overnight. In that case, she would have to go to Bethlehem to spend the night with her parents. Only after she hung up did she remember that she did not have her ID. The roads around Jerusalem were littered with checkpoints. She would need a lot of luck to avoid them. (178)

Though Rania does have a lot of luck in this particular situation, in many others she does not, leading to the kind of occupational and transportation-related difficulties discussed throughout this article. In Palestine and in Raphael’s novels, “dreaming of infrastructure” and dreaming of freedom, mobility, full citizenship, a life free from the oppressions of colonialism and occupation, and the ability to fully perform a job and to solve a crime are concepts that are intrinsically, inherently linked.

As noted earlier, the themes of trains and transportation in crime writing are nearly as old as the genre itself. These tropes, however, are typically used for bourgeois characters or in conservative settings, such as Agatha Christie’s imperial and wealthy travelers in Murder on the Orient Express (1934) or, more recently, the well-to-do suburbs of Paula Hawkins’s bestseller The Girl on the Train (2015). However, the lack of trains in Raphael’s novels about Palestine is noteworthy for its very absence; for an audience conditioned to read about trains in crime writing, the conspicuous lack of them
and the consistent references to the difficulty of travel and mobility in the West Bank help to throw the spatiality of colonial occupation into high relief for the reader. By reading into the lack, considering why trains were present “a long time ago,” but they are “no more,” readers can unpeel the layers of colonial history in Palestine.
Works Cited


