NARRATIVE URGENCIES
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My time at the Wissenschaftskolleg allowed me to bring my book, *From Baltimore to Beirut: On the Question of Palestine*, to near completion. This book traces the trajectory of Naim Cotran, a Palestinian man who was at once a colonial officer and a colonized subject, a slaveholder and a refugee. Originally inspired by family papers I found six months after the publication in 2016 of my first book, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine*, this book moves through my great-grandfather's experiences in Palestine, Baltimore, Sudan, and Lebanon. Following Naim as an ancestral teacher, I explore his trajectory as a medical doctor and his experiences of mobility and immobility, placing the question of Palestine in a global history of race, capital, slavery, and dispossession. Naim's papers eerily brought to life the accountants and colonial officials, the banks and business firms, and the experience of class and dispossession that I had documented in *Men of Capital*.

Naim Cotran (ca. 1877–1961) was born in the northern coastal city of Acre, Palestine, at that time under Ottoman rule. He began his education at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut. In 1899, he traveled to Baltimore to continue his medical training at the University of Maryland. Naim returned to Palestine to become one of Acre's first registered medical doctors. During World War I, he served as a medical official in Omdurman, Sudan with the Anglo-Egyptian Army. On his return to Palestine, then under British rule (1918–1948), his in-laws gifted Naim an enslaved woman named Sa'da. Naim and his young wife Aniseh manumitted Sa'da; she lived and died with them as their domestic servant. Eight miles northeast of Acre, in a village called Nahr al-Nabi'a, Naim owned about twenty hectares of land. During the war of 1948, his children and grandchildren took refuge in Lebanon and Egypt. Naim and Aniseh stayed on the land, in an attempt to hold on to Palestine's shrinking remains. They lost that battle in 1951 and became refugees who lived the last years of their lives in Lebanon.

Naim would do more than resuscitate the people and structures I had studied. He imparted lessons on the inextricability of subjectivity and historical narration. He was the very "man of capital" that I had spent a decade researching. He deepened my thinking about these elite men. For example, his court records and correspondence reveal how Palestinian families sorted out shifting meanings of law, debt, and property, quite apart from Zionist settlement and British colonialism. Naim showed me new ways to understand state formation. His petitions and correspondence reveal how an infant Israel used the mundane mechanisms of bureaucracy to shape state power. Naim was, if nothing else, a committed bureaucrat. However, his linguistic and procedural fluency in Ottoman and British bureaucracy would not guard him against the formidable structure of Israeli laws and regulations that rendered him immobile and ultimately "absent."

Naim's narrations, as well as his silences, invited me to move beyond the geographic and conceptual borders to which my first book was confined. He repeatedly invoked his status as a wealthy, educated, medical doctor to try to guard himself against dispossession. This vulnerable but determined figure was the same man who, four decades earlier, had posed for a photograph in Omdurman, sitting cross-legged and authoritative, donning the signature pith helmet of the British imperial official. Two Sudanese men stood dutifully at his side. That young man with his elaborate moustache and his colonial affect could not have imagined that the British officials he emulated would be the source of his own dispossession. It was not simply the British or later the Israelis who held tightly to a civilizational logic. Naim too believed himself to be culturally and racially superior. That

logic would eventually shatter in the wake of dispossession. But how did it initially take shape and what can it teach us?

Naim's status as a member of the Palestinian elite was the source of a bureaucratic letter-writing practice that allowed me to discover and recover his history. But what did these family papers and in turn my recovery of the history they narrated erase? After all, the silences of the papers Naim and later Lamia preserved are bottomless. Sa'da does not appear in the records; she has no voice.

Aniseh's voice is faint, filtered through Naim's mediation. Naim's life in Baltimore and Sudan are nowhere to be found. These silences are an irresistible invitation to explore an international life that reveals otherwise foreclosed spaces, times, and historical possibilities. Following this familial trajectory across Baltimore, Omdurman, Acre, and Beirut, I also made new significant progress on my third book project: *Kantousha and the Pox* draws on clinical notes, colonial records, municipal papers, and United Nations reports. Inspired by a smallpox outbreak in 1903 in Omdurman, Sudan, it narrates histories of outbreaks from the perspective of patient zero. Because a sixteen-year-old Sudanese girl named Kantousha got smallpox, parts of her life and world became visible: a freshwater well, the red- and white-lined bell tents of a smallpox camp, a lemonade factory, and creeks and rivers marking one neighborhood from the next. *Kantousha and the Pox* seeks to understand, to travel, and to commit to memory the spaces, places, and stories that outbreaks of smallpox, malaria, and typhoid make visible and obfuscate.

The Fellow cohort at the Wiko across disciplinary and intellectual formations inspired me to explore, transcend, and challenge the divides between storytelling, history writing, and narration. In Colloquia, writing groups, panels, and roundtables, we collectively explored history writing as a place to exit predetermined outcomes, the relationship between subjectivity and historiography, memory as a mode of survival, and how formations of concepts are products of imaginative labor.

I am a product and a scholar of the Nakba, the ongoing condition of the denial of Palestinian peoplehood and political rights. In 2024/2025, to be nestled in a forest surrounded by a lake was a gift for nine months. Grunewald was a refuge, a place that offered respite and community in a global time of emergency and genocide. The Wissenschaftskolleg was a space to learn, to think, and to create. The nine months here taught me to reside in the present, to practice vigilance, and to bridge the multiple realities that we are touched by.

Today, the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip reside between the loss of breath and the imperative to narrate. They teach us to listen to ordinary people narrating extraordinary

things. Telling our stories is a way of living despite catastrophe, of perceiving the world and reckoning with it. Storytelling is an act that intervenes in the world. Through storytelling, we can work to exceed exclusion from the human, to hold tightly to our visions of the possible, and to shape and reshape life—even amidst the certainty of death. In these ruins of general catastrophe, we can find arenas of shared possibility across difference.