

Language, Identity, and Arab Nationalism: Case Study of Palestine

Samir I. BITAR[®]

(Department of Anthropology, University of Montana)

Abstract: *Palestine became a predominantly Arab country with a Muslim majority in the late seventh century. Known to the entire Muslim world by its Arabic name, Filastin, Palestine's physical characteristics and boundaries were consolidated in the seventh century. In the case of the Palestinian version of Arabic Nationalism, language was also crucial to the formation of a national identity. At the turn of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire and all its constituents started losing land and power, many provinces, including Palestine, were left to consider their options. Standard Arabic provides a medium of communication over the vast geographical area whose numerous and widely diverse local dialects it transcends and the Levantine Arabic spoken by Palestinians in the Diaspora gives the Palestinians in many countries a sense of identity and awareness of their common cultural heritage.*

Key Words: *Language; Identity; Arab Nationalism; Palestine*

I. Historical Background

Palestine became a predominantly Arab country with a Muslim majority in the late seventh century. Known to the entire Muslim world by its Arabic name, Filastin, Palestine's physical characteristics and boundaries were consolidated in the seventh century. Palestine

[®] Dr. Samir I. BITAR, Lecturer of Arabic Language and Cultures, Central and Southwest Asian Studies Center, Department of Anthropology, University of Montana.

was renowned for its beauty and religious significance which is clearly spelled out in passages written in Arabic during the tenth century by the Medieval Arab geographers Istakhari and Ibn Hankal. Istakhari and Ibn Hankal identify the cartographic location of the territory of "Filastin" as well as enumerate its internal coordinates via cities and landscape features:

Filastin is the westernmost of the provinces of Syria. In its greatest length from Rafh to the boundary of Al Lajjun (Legio) it would take a rider two days to travel over; and the like time to cross the province in its breadth from Yafa (Jaffa) to Riha (Jericho) Zugar (segor, Zoar) and the country of Lot's people (Diyar Kaum Lot); Al Jibal (the mountains of Edom) and Ash Sharah as far as Ailah---Al Jibal and Ash Sharah being two separate provinces, but laying contiguous one to the other---are included in Falastin, belong to its government. (Le Strange, 28)

Edward Said's text *The Question of Palestine*, tells us that Palestine has been identified as such since the end of the seventh century. Said narrates the history of the community in this way: "Palestine became a predominantly Arab and Islamic country by the end of the seventh century" (Said, p. 10). After this seventh century consolidation of community and geography into the territory of Filastin the country was recognized by "the entire Islamic world, as much for its fertility and beauty as for its religious significance" (10). Again Istakhari and Ibn Hankal are instructive here:

Filastin is watered by the rains and the dew. Its trees and its ploughed lands do not need artificial irrigation; and it is only in Nablus that you find the running waters applied to this purpose. Filastin is the most fertile of the Syrian provinces. Its capital and largest town is Ar Ramlah, but the Holy City (of Jerusalem) comes very near this last in size. In the province of Falistin, despite its small extent, there are about twenty mosques, with pulpits for the Friday prayer. (Le Strange, 28)

From 636 to 1099 the region of Palestine was part of the Arab

Caliphates, which decisively seized the area from the Byzantine Empire after the Battle of Yarmouk. From 1099-1187, European Crusaders held sway over the land. In 1270 Palestine became part of the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and remained so until the Ottoman Empire decisively defeated by the Ottoman Sultan, Selim I at the Battle of Marj Dabiq. After the end of this battle, in the year 1516, Palestine became part of the Ottoman Empire and continued, with one brief exception when it was conquered by Egypt, to be held one of its provinces until after 1917 when it was invaded and occupied by the British under the command of Field Marshal General Allenby.^①

It is necessary to provide this sketch of the history of Palestine from the seventh century until the present because the realities of Zionist colonization of the land and the Orientalist mindset of the West, the history of the people and its territory have been subject to erasure and to denial. Edward Said explores this erasure early in *The Question of Palestine*, but claims that no ideology can historically subtract the Palestinian people from history or sunder their bond to the land:

On the land called Palestine there existed a huge majority for hundreds of years a largely pastoral, a nevertheless socially, culturally, politically, economically identifiable people whose language and religion were (for a huge majority) Arabic and Islam, respectively. This people – or if one wishes to deny them any modern conception of themselves as a people, the group of people – identified itself with the land it tilled and lived on (poorly or not is irrelevant), the more so after wholly European decision was made to resettle, reconstitute, recapture the land for Jews who were brought there from elsewhere. (Said, 8)

II. Language and Arab Nationalism

In his introduction to *Arabic Sociolinguistics, Issues & Perspectives*,

^① Much of the history that will be discussed is history that I as a Palestinian, am deeply familiar with since I have been hearing and telling the stories of the people and the homeland since I was a very young child.

“Nationalism and the Arabic language: an Historical Overview,” Professor Yasir Suleiman from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, argues that language is the very “air” or “breath” of Arabic Nationalism: “The treatment of language as the core ingredient and the most prominent manifestation of nationalism is characteristic of Arabic discourse on this topic [of the importance of Arabic to Arab identity]” (3). Arab Nationalism regards language as the preeminent markers of communal cultural identity:

In spelling out the content of this position, the Arab nationalists adopt as an article of supreme faith the view that language is not just a means of communication, of conveying messages between interlocutors, but a most eloquent symbol of group identity (Edwards 1985) and one whose ultimate strength lies in its ability to provide the cultural and instrumental backbone of the group’s legitimate objective of furthering its ethnocultural self-interest. (Suleiman 3)

Suleiman discusses the conversations that took place at a 1983 symposium “Arabic Language and the Nationalist Awareness” (*al-Lugha al ‘Arabiyya wa al-Wa’y Al-Qawmi*, 1984) held in Baghdad, and identifies a metaphor that most defines the relationship between language and identity in the Arabic context: “One contributor, Muhammad Jabir al-Fayyad (ibid.), indirectly likens the function of the Arabic language in the construction of Arab nationalism to that of the air the Arabs breath or the water on which their life so crucially depends” (4).

The beginnings of modern Arab nationalism and its strong relationship to the Arabic language may date back to 1798 when the French leader Napoleon Bonaparte led an expedition to Egypt. The expedition carried with it the first Arabic printing press and the General provided the people of Egypt his first proclamation in Arabic. This historical incident, whether directly or indirectly perceived by the Arabs as an indicator to the importance of language to nationalist ideologies, planted the seed for the Arabic language to serve as a means for uniting the Arabic speaking peoples under a nationalist ideology. The emphasis on Arabic by a major European power also

emboldened Arab nationalistic thought by serving as a means of undercutting the existing relationship between the Turks and the Arabs of the Ottoman Empire: by stressing the importance of Arabic language the Napoleonic expedition also represented the Turks as the 'others'. This linguistic "othering" of the Ottoman Empire gave way in the nineteenth century to a time when many of the Balkan nations gained their independence from the Ottoman Empire, and, according to Suleiman, their success illuminated the crucial and unifying means their respective languages served in their struggle for independence and for national unity:

The import and unifying role of language as a symbol of national identity in the struggle of these nations [of the Balkans] was not lost on the Arabic-speaking elite in their efforts to promote the interests of their people whether within or outside of the Ottoman Empire. (6)

However, the main thrust of Arab nationalism came, as Suleiman points out in the early 20th century when the Arabic language was severely challenged by the oppressive Turkification policies of the Young Turks in 1908. These measures, which were considered as hostile, dictated that Turkish would be the language of instruction in all public schools in all subject areas inclusive of Arabic language teaching. This attack on the Arabic language was perceived and considered an all out attack on Arab Culture and History.

As with all nationalisms, there are several types of Arab nationalism based on different guiding principles. Before doing more investigative work with the specifics of modern Arabic Nationalism, it is necessary to identify three types of nationalism along a historical time frame starting with the oldest being "religious" nationalism with the basic understanding that all who belong to the same religion should unite to form a political community; one example would be the Roman Empire, post-Christianity. A second type would be what was present in established regimes in Western Europe; it combined attachment to a piece of land with a shared history, a relatively defined geography yielding territorial patriotism. The third type of nationalism is linguistic in nature, and in the Arabic context is best

articulated by Albert Hourani as follows:

The third, and in the event the strongest, of the three kinds of nationalism was ethnic or linguistic, based on the idea that all who spoke the same language constituted a single nation and should form one independent political unit. For better or worse, this became the dominant political idea in the Middle East and superseded or absorbed the others; thus in the Arabic-speaking countries the assertion that all who speak Arabic formed a nation and should constitute one State or group of States proved to be the strongest political force, even if it had not yet embodied itself in a political form. But political ideas do not often exist in a pure state unmixed with others, even with their opposites: it was only rarely that the concept of Arab nationalism was stated with such force and logic as in the writings of Sati al-Husri. (341-343)

Albert Hourani further addresses the subject of Arab Nationalism and Arabic language in his famous book *Arabic Thought in the liberal age 1798-1939*, by making reference to the relationship between Nationalism and language that was clearly articulated in Sati al-Husri's writings on the topic. One of the most important theoreticians of Arab Nationalism and a Director General of Education for Faisal, Sati al-Husri wrote extensively on the topic of language and identity. According to Hourani, in theorizing the link between Arabic language and nationalism, al-Husri was not impressed with European nationalist ideas when it came to "defining a nation as any group which wills to be a nation" (313). In contrast to European ideas about will and national identity, al-Husri claimed that a nation is an entity with an objective basis which boils down to language: "The Arab nation consists of all who speak Arabic as their mother-tongue, no more, not less" (cited in Hourani, 313). Thus every one whose first language is Arabic is an Arab and a member of the Arab nation.

Al-Husri did draw, according to Suleiman, on the writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century German writers Johann Gottfried von Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte in developing his ideas on the topic of language and Nationalism. Suleiman claims that the following

characteristics apply to language in Nationalistic contexts as they are theorized by al-Husri:

1-) Language constitutes a holding tank in which a people's heritage, history, literary works, poetry, music and songs, and folklore are maintained and passed down from the older to the younger generations.

2-) Language is both the content and the medium of cultural delivery.

3-) Language maintenance in the face of adversity, challenge and exile translates into cultural development, survival, and permanence.

4-) Language is utilized to mobilize and advance political and social agendas.

5-) Language is more valuable than territory.

6-) language is the most crucial factor in ensuring cultural continuity and permanence.^①

In the case of the Palestinian version of Arabic Nationalism, language was also crucial to the formation of a national identity. At the turn of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire and all its constituents started losing land and power, many provinces, including Palestine, were left to consider their options. Wanting to remain Ottoman citizens, the aftermath of this loyalty after World War I, left the inhabitants of Palestine under British control. In the Sykes-Picot agreement, Palestine became a British mandate. In response to political pressures, Britain promised to support the establishment in Palestine of a home for the Jewish people during the creation of the Balfour Declaration. Soon after, the official language of the mandate of Palestine was changed to Hebrew. "Not surprisingly, this important change, which concerned language, so important where issues of identity and nationalism are salient, deeply disturbed the Palestinians" (Khalidi 171). It was during the period of 1917-1923 that Palestinian identity started to take shape and that "Even before the mandate for Palestine had been formally confirmed on Britain by the League of Nations in July 1922, important elements of the country's

^① See pages 13-14 in Suleiman.

Arab population had already come to identify primarily with Palestine” (Khalidi 174). These were the critical years in the appearance of Palestinian identity and its distinct differences from the larger Arab identities. Among the largest of influences on the development of a Palestinian identity separate from and Arab identity was the press. Several leading papers helped the development of ideas about identity, such as *Filastin*, *al-Karmil*, *al-Jawa'ib*, and *al-Muqtataf*.

The years between 1923 and 1948 are commonly passed by due to their lack of extreme Palestinian measures to flaunt their identity and nationalism, but this was in fact a very important time period in Palestinian history. “The growth of the educational system in Palestine, and the attendant spread of nationalist concepts through this system, greatly facilitated the politicization of the countryside, and provided a sort of conveyor belt whereby ideas we have been examining rapidly became widespread beyond the cities and the literate population in the following years” (Khalidi 173). In these years the Palestinian identity did not ‘disappear’, it in fact flourished among the people.

B. Language

For the famous structural linguist, Edward Sapir, language is “an essentially perfect means of expression and communication among every known people” (*Culture, Language and Personality*, 6). For Sapir, language must be understood first and foremost as a vehicle for communication. Language, however, is more than the mere communication of thought and feeling; it is the key to understanding cultures in their own idiom:

The content of every culture is expressible in its language and there are no linguistic materials whether as to content or form which is not felt to symbolize actual meanings, whatever may be the attitude of those who belong to other cultures. (6)

Language must be understood to develop over time systematically for “[n]ew cultural experiences frequently make it necessary to enlarge the resources of a language, but such enlargement is never an arbitrary addition to the materials and forms already

present . . ." (6). Sapir makes clear how important language is to the establishment and maintenance of culture itself:

The use of language in cultural accumulation and historical transmission is obvious and important. This applies not only to sophisticated ones but to primitive ones as well. A great deal of the cultural stock in trade of a primitive society is presented in a more or less well defined linguistic form. Proverbs, medicine formulae, standardized prayers, folk tales, standardized speeches, song texts, and genealogies are some of the more overt forms which language takes are culture-preserving instrument. (18)

Sapir's analysis of the relationship of language to culture is profoundly historical, and of particular importance to this study of the Levantine dialect of the Arabic language for Sapir identifies two dimensions of linguistic change: content and form. Sapir identifies historical change in this way: . . . language is not merely something that is spread out in space, as it was—a series of reflections in individual minds of one and the same timeless picture. Language moves down time in a current of its own making" (*Language*, 152). Sapir's model of linguistic change is structurally oriented with focus on both phonetic and grammatical change:

*Linguistic changes may be analyzed into phonetic changes, changes in form, and changes in vocabulary. Of these phonetic changes seem to be the most important and the most removed from direct observation. The factors which lead to these phonetic changes are probably exceedingly complex and no doubt include the operation of obscure symbolisms which define the relation of various age groups to each other. (*Language*, 29)*

As Sapir tells us, the charting of changes in vocabulary can be looked at to chart cultural and historical changes because vocabulary "is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people and changes of the meaning, loss of old words, the creation and borrowing of new ones are all dependent on the history itself" (36). The triangle of history, culture, and language is what gives rise to a sense of national

consciousness:

The important thing to hold on to is that particular language tends to become the fitting expression of self-conscious nationality and that such a group will construct for itself, in spite of all that the physical anthropologist can do, a race to which is to be attributed the mystic power of creating a language and a culture as twin expression of a self-consciousness nationality and that such a group will construct for itself, in spite of all that the physical anthropologist can do, a race to which is to be attributed the mystic power of creating a language and a culture as twin expressions of its psychic peculiarities. (39)

For the Palestinian people, the “mystic relationship” Sapir describes as functioning between language, culture, history, and national aspiration is--due to the pressure the Levantine dialect is under as a result of colonialism--very acutely felt. In the preface to his memoir *Out Of Place*, Edward Said discusses the role of language in his life and works, “Everyone lives life in a given language; everyone’s experiences therefore are had, absorbed, and recalled in that language” (xi). Said’s understanding of the relationship between language as the ground for life and its stories is the definition that this study privileges. As individuals we experience life and relate to it via the realm of language. For Said, this relationship to language is of particularly poignant and crucial importance in the Palestinian context given that the territorial foundation of Palestinian culture is absent and only language can function as the ground for the cohesion of Palestinians, both in the diaspora and in the homeland. Said talks about the “basic split” in his life as occurring around the axis of language: it is the case, for almost all Palestinians that their linguistic reality and cultural identity involves a kind of linguistic double consciousness. Said’s narration of the “basic split” of his life is instructive here:

The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other – to say nothing of the

numerous ways in which the languages were mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other has been a complicated task. This it has been difficult to explain in English the actual verbal distinctions (as well as the rich associations) that Arabic uses to differentiate between, for example, maternal and paternal uncles, but such nuances played a definite role in my early life. . . .”(xii).

C. Dialect

What is a dialect? There are several factors that distinguish “dialect” from “language” and vice versa. To begin with, in distinguishing between the two, one can talk about size: language is greater in size than dialect, since a given language contains more than one of its dialects; moreover, a language will actually contain all the dialects that stem from it as the standard that holds all the terms in all of its dialects. Another factor that, according to R.A. Hudson in *Sociolinguistics*, distinguishes language from dialect is a matter of status, clout, and application. Standard English, for instance, is more prestigious than Yorkshire English, Indian English, etc. because it is used in formal writing whereas the other varieties are not used in formal writing and are mainly spoken. This emphasis on whether a linguistic variation (dialect) is written or not is clearly a factual distinguishing feature between “language” and a “dialect” since it is itself a reflection of the cultural context: “Whether some variety is called a language or a dialect depends on how much prestige one *thinks* it has, and for most people this is a clear-cut matter”(Hudson,32, emphasis mine). This notion of perception as conditioning social attitudes toward language and dialect is particularly true when it comes to Arabic language and Arabic dialects to the extent that Arabic is described as diglossic, a term defined by Charles Ferguson in 1959 as follows:

Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier

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period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation. (qtd. in Hudson, 55)

Arab children grow up speaking a dialect of the Arabic language spoken in their community of birth. They are taught Standard Arabic in schools in the same fashion that foreign languages are taught to children in other societies around the world, with the exception, of course, that they already have familiarity with the sounds of the language. Arabic is both an Asian and an African language. It is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world. There are twenty-two Arab countries, so Arab children grow up speaking a modern dialect of Arabic native to their country and learn “Fusha” which is standard Arabic, the accepted standard for all official and written material. The Levantine dialect of Arabic spoken by Palestinians unites them just as in the case of the written Arabic language which continues, as it has done throughout centuries of the past, to ensure the linguistic unity of the Arab world. Standard Arabic provides a medium of communication over the vast geographical area whose numerous and widely diverse local dialects it transcends and the Levantine Arabic spoken by Palestinians in the Diaspora gives the Palestinians in many countries a sense of identity and awareness of their common cultural heritage.

III. Research, Sample Results, and Reflection

A. Research

In 2008-2009, the author conducted a research project to shed light on the story of the Palestinian people through the lens of language. The study attempted to chronicle the geographical, cultural, economic and spiritual trends amongst Palestinians by studying their use of language and, further, studying how their Levantine dialect plays a role in maintaining cultural heritage and identity in the Palestinian Diaspora. This dialect is central to the cultural history and identity of

Palestinian people and their history and society. My proposed objective at the time that I initiated my research was to survey thirty five to forty Palestinians. In the final analysis thirty nine respondents participated in the internet-based semi-structured interview. The participants were located utilizing the snowball sampling method. The initial contacts with the respondents to the semi-structured interview were made with the help of family, friends and colleagues in Palestine and the Diaspora. My instrument of data collection was a semi-structured interview, which can be found online at <http://www.umt.edu/cswa/arabic/bitars/>. The internet is a perfect venue for the semi-structured interview in the case of the Palestinian diaspora because of the vast distances that the diaspora covers.

B. Sample Results

The semi-structured interview asked the respondents to reply to two questions concerning the role of the Levantine dialect of Arabic in the maintenance of Palestinian cultural heritage and as an affirmation of culture. Respondents were asked two questions

10 -) On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "low" and 5 is "high," how would you rate how you feel about the Palestinian dialect as an affirmation of identity?

11 -) On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is "low" and 5 is "high," how would you rate the importance of the Palestinian dialect in maintaining cultural heritage?

The answers to question ten regarding Palestinian dialect, as an affirmation of identity, had twenty eight out of the thirty nine subjects identifying the language as being important at the level of 5 on the scale. Six respondents rated the language at 4 on the Likert scale used, while four respondents identified the language as being at a level three, with only one respondent indicating that the language was of the lowest importance on the Likert scale as an affirmation of identity. On the basis of the overwhelming percentage of respondents identifying language as very important to the affirmation of cultural identity it becomes very clear, at the level of the everyday lives of the respondents (not just in theory) how important language is to their sense of identity. Additionally, respondents similarly identify the

importance of dialect in the maintenance of “cultural heritage.” Both of these terms—identity and cultural heritage—are an important part of the rhetoric that the respondents use in responding narratively to questions eight, fourteen and nineteen.

Question eight asks “Do you love your dialect?” To which the answer was exclusively “Yes, I love my dialect.” Question nine follows this up by asking “In what ways do you value your Palestinian-Levantine dialect?”

All of the following quotes answered question nine from the interview; in what ways do you value your Palestinian-Levantine dialect? This was preceded by the question that asked whether the informants love their Palestinian dialect and they all answered, yes I love my dialect.

“It emphasizes the relation between me and my original land, Palestine. My Palestinian dialect is a part of my identity as a Palestinian.” “For me, the dialect I have is my Arab-identity.” “Reflects ethnic identity.” “Palestinian dialect is an important part of my identity and reminds me of family and friends back home.” “My identity, but I will substitute by Fusha whenever I can.” “It is my identity among my Arab friends.” “It ascertain my identity, easy to use and understand, part of being myself.” “It is one of the key links with my birth place and my ethnic origin.” “It is who I am and proud of it.” “When I speak another it does not feel the same.” “My Dads, mother and grandfathers.” “Because it reminds me of home and family.” “It is what I grew up with and relate to.” “I am proud of my heritage.” “It is part of my roots.” “Because it is the dialect I was born to use and utilize fluently.” “It is mine, my identity, my culture...It is what is left of Palestine.” “It is my ancestor’s dialect.” “The way my family talks.” “It is the way my parents speak.” “It is the way I was brought up.” “This is how I was brought up to communicate with the world.” “It is beautiful. It represents my homeland. It is feminine.” “I am used to it and it is clear, although some words sound rough.” “Because I can express myself better and I am understood better in a Palestinian audience.” “It is easily understood.” “Family communicates better.” “I find it to be very

expressive (of course to people who would understand its idioms).” “I find it to be clear and akin to classical Arabic.” “I enjoy being able to converse with people in Palestinian dialect, but also Arabic in general.”

Again this is another inquiry that resulted in more prolific responses that basically revolve around heritage and identity, the main themes throughout my writing and the two areas of concern in my overarching question driving my research. The third group of responses quoted above interestingly enough addresses another aspect of Arabic language and its dialects. The informants collectively asserted that the Palestinian dialect is closest to Fusha (Modern/Standard /Classical Arabic) and is the most widely and easily understood by all Arabs. This is a common position that Arabs express when it comes to their relative dialects verses Fusha.

C. Reflection

Almost daily in the news the public hears words like suicide bombing, retaliation, Intifada, occupation, settlements, violence, and death in Israel. The media evades the history of the land and the development of Palestinian and Israeli identity and nationalism. What is not acknowledged is that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an identity conflict. Much of Palestinians’ identity today is directly linked to the occupation of their land and the establishment of the Jewish nation-state of Israel. Currently the Arab-Israeli conflict seems gloomy, but one can only hope for change and progress, or else we would be left to believe there will never be a solution and an end to the violence. The author finds that when politicians and scholars attempt to devise peace accords, measures, and ‘roadmaps,’ they forget what’s happening on the ground. Everything is in theory, but not everything works in theory; it’s accomplishing and implementing a plan that is necessary for success and peace. On a personal note, I believe the end to violence and the roadmap to peace is through love, not treaties, boundaries, walls and barriers. Many theorists suggest the two-state solution. I believe the two-state solution is no solution; rather allow Palestinian and Israeli children to grow up together and learn to love

one another. I see no progress in furthering separation of the Jewish and Arab populations of Palestine/Israel. The separation of these cultures is what creates an environment in which hate is accepted. The people of Palestine/Israel grow up less than a few miles away from each other only to eventually live and die without ever knowing one another. If you don't know anything about your neighbor, if they are not wholly human to you, it is easy to allow them to suffer, it is easy to kill their brethren, and it is easy to allow them to die. For me, one independent state, renamed neither Palestine nor Israel, controlled jointly through democratic means with no such notion as first or second class citizen, occupation, or checkpoints is the only means through which peace can be achieved. Once these people can be allowed to live together, they will soon see each other as humans, and as equals. This may seem far-fetched, but at this point any solution is equally utopian.

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