

# Voices on Palestine



# VOICES ON PALESTINE

*A collection from Guernica*

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Alexandra Sophia Handal, Dream Homes Property Consultants (DHPC),  
2007-ongoing, web documentary art, [ Accessed 6 November 2023 ], View:  
<https://dreamhomespropertyconsultants.com>

# Introduction

This volume collects some of the work from Palestine published in *Guernica* since 2010, with appreciation for the writers who have risked, and continue to risk, so much to witness.

And with appreciation to the artist Alexandra Sophia Handal, whose image from her ongoing web documentary art installation, *Dream Homes Property Consultants (DHPC)*, appears on the cover.

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More work from and about Palestine can be found at [guernicamag.com](http://guernicamag.com).

—The Editors



# When You Land at Ben-Gurion Airport

ISSAM ZINEH

a convocation of desert eagles rises from your spleen,  
each one carrying a stone—this one to mark the blood  
leaving your body, your face now a milk white grotto,  
& one from the basilica in your heart destroyed, in part,  
by your own uprising, & one for the rebuilding,  
& one keystone for the door of humility that prevents  
others from entering on horseback, one from the depths  
of your bowels which are the shepherds' fields, one  
from the cave where they buried children if one could use  
*buried* here, one from the settlement, from the valley of fire,  
the souq, the emerald-domed city, for the fresh catch  
(your great grandfather's favorite), one for the sky-  
rocketing population, one for the giving & one  
for the taking away, one for each name for flock:  
a conclave, a radiance, a swim, for each name  
for flock you now know: congress, flamboyance, siege,  
sedge, scattering, for each name for flock you  
now know & use as a remembrance: an omniscience,  
a rush, a trembling, an ascension, a colony. One

for the first city to fly the flag, the world's oldest city,  
& one from the cistern, dry for millennia, now beginning to  
fill.

*for my children*

# On (a Palestinian) Home

2014

SOUSAN HAMMAD

*For victims of persecution, however, the thread of chronological time is broken, background and foreground merge, the victim's logical means of support in his existence are suspended. The experience of terror also dislocates time, that most abstract of all humanity's homes.*

—W.G. Sebald from [On the Natural History of Destruction](#)

I never got to know my grandfather until it wasn't really him. It wasn't until he was hit hard with dementia that I learned about his experiences in Palestine under the British Mandate and in Jordan after the Nakba, the war in 1948 that established the state of Israel.

As his dementia progressed, he became even less communicative—eventually he would die from the disease. But before my grandfather lapsed into total silence, my mother brought him to Houston from Jordan where she thought he could receive better treatment for his Alzheimer's. Often, we watched him relive moments that would surprise us—such as when he woke up speaking

monologues in bad Hebrew, assuming the role of an Israeli soldier. In these weekly, sometimes daily episodes, he relived his formative years in Lydd, a small town southeast of Jaffa. There were times he would hush us when we talked politics, pointing at the living room window and whispering in Arabic, “the *mukhabarat* are outside listening! They’re in the white car...”

The *mukhabarat* in Jordan are undercover spies for the King—taxi drivers, shoe shiners, nosy neighbors—and they *do* listen. Any criticism they hear of the monarchy, or anything even slightly political and related to Palestine, could result in serious punishment.

Sometimes my grandfather’s paranoia was severe, like when I awoke to find my shoes in the kitchen sink, soaked with tap water; he believed that tape recorders had been hidden in them. The saddest days were when he was truly afraid. He’d hold long conversations with himself in the mirror, mostly nonsensical because he didn’t know he was looking at his own reflection, but it was hard to imagine he could have invented any of it. “What does this man want?” he’d tap at his reflection, a shrunken man with oversized ears and thick white hair. “This is my house! Who are you?”

He recognized nobody at my mother’s house except for me, though he sometimes believed I was a younger version of his wife, a confusion that became slightly annoying. For those rare moments when he sought attention, he’d tug at my clothes like a nagging child and stare at me with his beady, black eyes, softly smiling all along. My grandmother, who at times became hostile to his condition, would laugh and sneer at him: “I never loved you! Who are you fooling?”

Despite the vortex of illusions and distractions, the one thing my grandfather never forgot was his faith. Though too fragile to pray, he remembered verses from the Qur’an



line for line. He would recite a verse, then pause to look up for acknowledgement, like children do when they first learn to read.

One of my last memories of my grandfather is from the day he went missing. He wasn't in the house or in the backyard. Not more than two hours after we realized he wasn't sitting in his customary place on the living room couch, a cop rang our doorbell: "This belong to you?" he said, holding my grandfather's arm tightly. "He was pounding at your neighbor's window. She called us sayin there was a man speakin Arabian yelling on her driveway..."

That afternoon, my grandfather had gone out to buy tomatoes. He exited the front door and made a right turn, just like he would have in Jerusalem—only turning right from our house in suburban Houston just takes you to the front lawn of another house, and a straight walk from there takes you to several front lawns of several other homes. But my grandfather didn't see a brick house with white window panels and brown shrubs dead from that year's drought. He walked like he would in the Old City, and reached what he imagined was a store in the souq that sold fruits and vegetables, and knocked, rather aggressively it seems, on our neighbor's window.

Safely back home, my grandfather was smiling mischievously, only faintly dismayed: "I just wanted tomatoes." I told my mother that I preferred him in pre-Alzheimers mode, when he'd rationalize his irrational actions with a simple "I don't remember," but I still didn't want to dissolve his made-up reality in those rare hours of liberation. His personal wants were few. I was glad for the days he happily stepped into the fantastical world of *home*.

I looked at my grandfather and explained that it was the

siesta. “Maybe that’s why the shop was closed. I’ll get your tomatoes later.”

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In October 2013, *The New Yorker* published an excerpt from the Israeli writer Avi Shavit’s book, [\*My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel\*](#). The chapter on “Lydda 1948” (or Lydd, which is the original Arabic name) chronicles the destruction of the Palestinian village my grandfather is from. Shavit, who considers himself a “Left-Zionist,” wrote: “If Zionism was to exist, Lydda could not exist. If Lydda was to exist, Zionism could not exist.”

It was at this time, in 1948, that my grandfather was expelled from Lydd, making his way to my grandmother’s family house in the Old City of Jerusalem, then under Jordanian rule. He had a new wife, no job, and no money.

Last summer, during a visit home to Texas, I asked my grandmother, now 89, to draw a map showing me how to get to her Jerusalem house. Only then, as she penciled in the Damascus Gate and various alleyways, did she explain why my mother’s family left Palestine. There was a reason, my grandmother said, that my childhood “vacations” were in Amman, and not Jerusalem. My grandmother did not censor the way she felt about my grandfather throughout their long marriage, feelings that she let surface, unabashedly, during those final years of his life. She still complains, though more empathetically, that it was his decision to leave Palestine.

And it was his decision, unlike the thousands of expelled families who did not have the privilege to choose their fate. Eight years after the Nakba, and two children in, my grandfather hardly had a suitable job. The 1950’s in Jerusalem were a challenging decade: people assumed the

situation would return to a calm, but it only got worse, and Jordan had opportunities, so like many other Palestinians, my grandfather decided the family would go to Amman—a journey they undertook on foot. Eventually my grandfather opened a small spice shop near the city's downtown market, making a measly monthly income that would still leave the family poor.

As I pieced together my grandmother's stories from that period, details would change or be left undeveloped, and new characters emerged: people, like the families who walked with them to Amman, whom I had never heard about before. But her artful storytelling wasn't new to me. My grandmother has a great talent for talking about tragedy that's not tragic but absurd—perhaps to cover up her grief. And if anyone is willing to listen, she will gather all the stories she's picked up throughout her long life—from neighbors, cousins, friends—and merge the memories of others to form a collective tale.

My favorite example is the story of her father. To strangers she says he is a hero who died fighting, killed by an Israeli soldier while protecting his home, his family. To her grandchildren she has another story: that her father was shot by his lover's husband—here she'd pause to boast about how handsome her father was and how so many women chased after him— and that her brother-in-law would later seek revenge, shooting dead the man who shot my great-grandfather. The story could be straight from one of the dubbed Turkish soap operas watched throughout the Arab world: a man is killed after getting caught in a steamy love affair by the husband of his mistress. Once, in my naïve days, I asked her why she sometimes lies about his story, so she winked at me and whispered: "If it didn't happen to me

it happened to someone else, so who cares if it's not exactly *my* story.... it still happened.”

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When my grandmother decided to take her husband back to Jordan, where he would lapse into complete silence and die one week later, she told him they were going home. My grandfather genuinely believed he was going home, but he understood home as Palestine, not Jordan. At the Houston airport, he tugged at strangers like he would tug my shirt, his neck craned to look up with those innocent eyes a person wears once the cycle of age sets back to the beginning, saying over and over, “I’m going home! I’m going back to Lydd!”

It seems altogether anticlimactic to say that my grandmother, even if she had the chance, would not want to return to her home in Jerusalem. Home, for her, is with family, regardless if it’s in Texas or Jordan, but for my grandfather the guilt was a knot in his stomach, and the decision to leave was a wound that only surfaced when he faded out of this world. Neither of my grandparents approached grief directly—in this they are like Sebald’s characters—and perhaps that is why my grandfather returned to Palestine in the end. It may not have been real, but he allowed the real and the imaginary spaces to merge—and sometimes, especially for the generation that never lived there, and who understand Palestine through its injustice and not its grief, the imaginary is what makes new spaces alive.

# Life Under Lockdown

2012

JAMAL MAHJOUB

As we pass under the “Welcome to Gaza” sign, a ripple of excitement goes through the bus and everyone grabs their telephones to record the moment. After three hours spent killing time at the Rafah Border Crossing while the Egyptian officials decided whether they would allow us through (the Egyptian Ministry of Interior didn’t grant us permission to travel to Gaza until the day before our scheduled departure) and eight hours of driving from Cairo, it feels like a victory to have made it through at all. Two writers from our group were refused entry and have had to drive back to Cairo to find the necessary papers. All of us were aware when we agreed to come that there was a strong possibility that we might not be allowed into Gaza at all. This was my third trip with PalFest, the literary roadshow that began in 2008 with a journey to the West Bank. The aim of the Palestine Literary Festival is to break the isolation of ordinary Palestinians, to make contact through cultural events, readings, recitals, and workshops.

On each occasion when I have travelled to Palestine, an

element of uncertainty has hung over the whole venture. As we travel on towards Gaza City, night falls over a landscape that appears eerily normal. And why shouldn't it? We had crossed a line in the sand. The scruffy mix of fields and gray block houses could be located anywhere in Egypt. The occasional row of date palms or narrow grove of olive trees hint at the rural idyll that foundered in the not-too-distant past. The first reminder that we are not in Egypt comes with the gas stations that are flagged early by queues of vehicles tailing back along the road, three cars wide. Since 2008 there has been an almost complete ban on fuel imports. Sporadic and unpredictable supplies explain the queues and the power cuts, some of which last up to twelve hours.

What is striking about the Gaza Strip is the lack of a visible military presence. In the West Bank at checkpoints and crossings, Israeli Defense Force soldiers in green fatigues strut about with their automatic rifles at the ready. They are young, some of them in their teens, and they sling their weapons over their shoulders like guitars as they demand papers and issue orders. At the Kalandia Crossing between Jerusalem and Ramallah in 2008, I was caught in the labyrinth of bars and turnstiles, trying to get through the metal detectors and x-ray machines. As I shuffled forward, voices yelled in Hebrew over loudspeakers. What they were yelling and to whom was unclear. I watched a middle-aged man, clearly in pain, being turned back; his wife and young daughter, who were trying to get him to a hospital for treatment, were weeping. In Hebron, the army patrols the streets in full combat gear, weighed down by helmets, body armour and radio sets, while kids on bicycles circle round them in the manner of children everywhere.

In Gaza, a narrow strip of land forty kilometers long and

on average less than a quarter of that in width, the military presence is not visible but it is there all the same. From the rooftop terrace of our hotel in Gaza City I stare at a row of harsh white spotlights far out at sea. It takes me a while to work out that these banks of lights are marker buoys. Over the years the distance a Palestinian fisherman can go in search of a decent catch has been whittled down from the twenty-nautical-mile limit established in the Oslo Accords to the three-mile limit imposed by the Israelis as of January 2009. This makes 85 percent of Gaza's waters inaccessible to local fishermen. Of the ten thousand local fishermen in 2000, there are only around 3,500 today. The lights have the effect of drawing the fish to the surface, which means that the best fishing is as close to the line as possible. It's a dangerous task. Israeli patrol ships run circles around the smaller fishing boats so as to tip them over. They regularly fire upon fishing boats with live ammunition.

The historian Ilan Pappé described what is happening in Gaza as “slow-motion genocide.” In theory, the occupation ended in 2005 when twenty-one settlements were dismantled and the Israelis withdrew from the strip. Most of the buildings were demolished during the withdrawal, though some settler houses and even part of a university remain. The blockade of the Gaza Strip, though, is in its fifth year. The import and export of goods, the movement of people by air, land or sea, fuel, medicine, and water, are all severely restricted in reaction to Hamas's gaining control of the Palestine Legislative Council. Israel has been aided in this by the Egyptians who are still reluctant to be seen supporting Hamas, although this may change under the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood president.

The *New York Times* has described the blockade as amounting to “collective punishment.” Certainly it has

made life difficult for the 1.5 million people living in Gaza, 49 percent of whom are officially unemployed. According to the United Nations, living standards have dropped to 1967 levels. The irony is that the blockade has strengthened Hamas. The near complete ban on exports and the fuel shortages have led to a shrinking economy, and in turn to more revenue from clandestine trade done through tunnels running under the Egyptian border, all of which are controlled by Hamas.

I had followed the news, read about the political infighting, the consequences of the blockade, the futility of the Qassam rocket attacks, the devastating impact of Operation Cast Lead, and the assault on the Freedom Flotilla. Gaza had become synonymous with the blockade. It embodied, more than the West Bank, the idea of the world's largest open air prison. Of the lives of the people who lived there, of course, I knew very little.

The Islamic University is the best funded of the four universities in Gaza. It is also the only one that is not secular. Our first day, we are given a tour of the segregated campus, our male guides giggling as we cross into the women's section. The grounds are neatly tended and decorated with trees that stand between big, modern buildings, including a three-story library. Two of the buildings were bombed in 2009 but have been fully rebuilt. There are no signs of destruction or shortage. When I ask our guides about this I am told that they have "their own ways" of bringing in materials.

In a cramped lecture hall two other writers and I find ourselves facing a full house of mostly young women, nearly all of them wearing colorful headscarves and austere grey or black jilbabs. The fluency of English varies, and although they all display a great deal of enthusiasm about



our visit it is unclear what is expected of us. This session was originally billed as a workshop, but after a round of introductions, I see that what the students really want to do is talk.

Many of the questions directed at us convey a concern about our motives. Why have we come here? What did we expect to find? I sense some degree of distrust, even resentment. The jilbabs and the headscarves give the impression that these women live sheltered lives. In contrast, though, they speak with a frankness I admire. Many of them already write. A couple of girls come forward to read out their poems. They do not wait for permission to speak. Like students in classrooms everywhere, they want to hear how we managed to get published and how they should go about getting their stories out into the world. They are witnesses to a unique situation which lends urgency. At the end, as we are about to leave, more of them crowd around still pressing for an answer to the question, “What do I have to do to write?” I repeat the same advice I have always given in similar situations: To write, all you have to do is write and keep writing.

During the day, when the lights are gone the sea appears empty and serene. Up on the hotel terrace they are playing Vivian Beshara’s Arabic version of the title song from the film *Titanic*. Over the syrupy tune a series of cracks echo in the distance—sonic booms made by Israeli fighter jets flying overhead. In quiet moments I imagine I can hear the faint zenana or buzz of a drone high above. On a tour of the town we stop by the Al Andalus tower, a local landmark, which was hit in 2009 during Operation Cast Lead, an Israeli attack. The apartment building, one of the tallest in Gaza, was shelled from the sea by an Israeli warship. It is one of the more spectacular examples of the devastation

caused during the twenty-two-day assault. Concrete floors hang on twisted iron rods strung like a collapsing tower of cards suspended in mid-air. When I am told they are planning to restore it, I can hardly believe it.

There are other relics, flattened buildings, scattered here and there, but considering the scale of the damage (the U.N. estimates seventeen thousand buildings were partially destroyed; four thousand completely; around six hundred thousand tons of concrete rubble were removed), it is remarkable how much has been rebuilt. In Sarajevo, bullet holes and shrapnel scars were still visible on apartment buildings ten years after the end of the war, almost as if they were afraid that what they had suffered would be forgotten. Here, in Gaza, despite the lack of resources Palestinians build and rebuild, as if their existence as a people depends on the physical manifestation of their presence. To an outsider like myself they appear trapped in a hopeless cycle of repair and destruction.

The coast road to Rafah runs alongside a thin strip of sand fencing off the sea. The water, our guide tells us, is not clean enough to bathe in. The reason becomes clear at Museirat where the overpowering stench of raw sewage hits me as we drive by. Water is a serious issue in Gaza. The Coastal Aquifer is oversubscribed and not replenished sufficiently to provide clean water. The destruction of water treatment plants and the ban on the import of spare parts means that large quantities of untreated sewage are regularly released into the water system, polluting the aquifer which in turn brings health problems.

This is valuable land, rich and fertile. Gazans grow guavas, oranges, and grapes. We pass groves of palm trees, which give the name to the Deir al-Balah refugee camp. We

pass a school built by the U.N. and painted in its colors, blue and white, in an effort to protect it from air attack. There are no buses and some of the kids have to walk for thirty minutes to get to school. From time to time the Israelis open the river's floodgates to cut off the road. The same policy applies to stop Gazans visiting the West Bank and vice-versa. Within the West Bank Palestinians registered in Bethlehem, for example, are not allowed to visit Jerusalem, a distance of six miles (nine kilometers).

In Rafah we visit the Rachel Corrie Center, where activities are coordinated and medical help is provided for children. Corrie was an International Solidarity Movement activist who died in Gaza in 2003 while using her body to protect Palestinian homes from being demolished by Israeli bulldozers; she was crushed. Many kids have nowhere to go outside school. Here they have the chance to act in plays, to draw and to paint. Children with behavioral problems are identified and counseled by child psychologists.

From the Center we walk to the edge of town to see the frontier zone, marked by a tattered tent and a scruffily dressed man holding a battered Nokia and an AK47. Many of the houses along the border were destroyed by the Israelis in 2009. Some kids trail alongside us and cheerfully point out which houses have been rebuilt. To them, everything happened zamaan, as in a long time ago. Such is the memory of a young child. One day they will learn the details, but for the moment it is all just a game.

The street ends abruptly in a storm of fine sand whipped up by heavy lorries that grumble out of the dust clouds and disappear down into the streets beyond. The guard post is a shelled ruin occupied by a handful of police officers whose meal we have just disturbed. A tin bowl of beans

and a handful of round loaves lie on a bare table. There are no walls, no doors, nothing to stop the harsh wind. Some fuss is made over our cameras, which we duly put away as they speculate what to do with a group of tourists. The ground beneath our feet is honeycombed with tunnels. There are rumored to be a thousand of them, varying from 200 meters to almost a kilometer, used to bring all manner of goods in illegally from Egypt. The sheer scale is staggering.

Through the swirling dust I can make out a cluster of shelters, some the shattered ruins of bombed buildings, flattened like sandwiches. Others are flimsy constructions of iron bars and flapping canvas. A group of men go by on the trailer of an empty lorry. They wave cheerfully as they bump past then get swallowed up by the billowing sand. We have become the spectacle. Grinning phantoms emerge from the shadows. These are tunnel diggers. There is something medieval about these men, coated from head to foot in white powder that paints every eyelash and wrinkle, earlobe and hair. They stare at us as we go by.

The sand feels soft underfoot as we traipse over to a shelter where we are invited to peer down into a well of darkness. It is about four meters in diameter and twenty-four meters deep. The only way down is a seat improvised from two planks of wood looped together and winched up and down with an electric motor. It sways in the air motionless. "The power has gone," one of the men explains, without saying if there is anyone down there in the dark waiting to come up.

Some tunnels are only a meter square, while others are tall enough for people to walk in. Cars are brought through in sections, although there is one tunnel rumored to be big enough to drive straight through at twenty thousand

dollars a go. The tunnels collapse on a regular basis, which is not surprising considering the softness of the sand. According to a leaked U.S. embassy cable, the Egyptians completed a steel wall to stop the tunneling two years ago, but it seems to have had little effect. Occasionally the Egyptians are said to use poison gas to clear the tunnels. Smuggling is a risky enterprise but it is well compensated. The boys working the smaller tunnels earn a hundred dollars a day. The men operating the winches earn half of that. They bring in everything from medicine to sacks of cement. Fuel is pumped through a rubber hose.

Enormous articulated lorries lumber by, piled up high with soft drinks and snacks. Hamas earns a tax on everything that comes through. Opinion is divided about the tunnels. Many Gazans are against them because they earn money only for a small group of people on both sides of the border. And, because they can be used to smuggle weapons, the tunnels provide Israel with a perfect alibi to maintain the blockade as well as an excuse to attack at any moment.

On the way back to the hotel we stop at a square in town where a mass hunger strike is taking place in protest of the thousands of Palestinians being held without trial in Israeli jails. The square is filled with flags and banners. Voices screech from loudspeakers. Later there is a meeting about the Boycott and Divestment Society, which seeks to put pressure on Israel through an international campaign to boycott Israeli products, academic institutions and participation in sporting events. Inspired by the movement that helped end apartheid in South Africa, the BDS campaign aims to connect with ordinary people, cutting out the politicians in between.

On our last evening the closing PalFest event is shut

down by security forces. It's not clear who we have offended, but everything points to an accumulation of distrust. Gatherings in which men and women congregate in the same public space are frowned upon by Hamas. Two nights before, in what was the highlight of our roadtrip, the hugely popular and highly talented Egyptian group Eskenderella, who are traveling with us, gave a concert that was rapturously received. Eskenderella's songs of revolution have been a fixture in Cairo over the last year, providing a soundtrack to the events in Tahrir Square. The local PalFest organizers were asked to split the concert hall, men on one side, women on the other, but they refused. Many of our authors are Egyptian, and the anti-authoritarian spirit has been running high at reading events and in interviews. It is perhaps not surprising that Hamas was made uncomfortable. In any case, on that last evening on the little stage at the Qasr al-Basha cultural center, the power is suddenly cut and the mic dies. A moment later a plainclothes officer runs across to snatch a camera from a young woman. What follows is a charged confrontation with an absurdly large crowd of armed police and plain-clothed security officers. In the end we are escorted back to our bus and allowed to return to the hotel. We take as many of the audience as we can manage. Many of them are nervous about possible repercussions, especially after we depart. Security men photographed much of the audience. Back at the hotel the terrace is converted into an impromptu venue and the concert continues long into the night with poetry readings and songs.

The following day, on the road back towards the Rafah Crossing, I find myself noting down everything I can see through the windows of the bus: sheep grazing within the

walls of a house; faded murals of militants clutching guns and olive branches; plastic balls decorated like watermelons; old Turkish headstones; Barça shirts; camels; the rebuilding of bombed out bridges, broken pottery. It is an effort to understand what I have seen over the last four days, to try and hold on to it for just a little longer. When I glance at my notebook later, the letters shaky from trying to write inside a moving vehicle, it looks like the trembling ravings of a madman.

# Unfinished Balconies in the Sea

An interview with Kamal Aljafari, 2016

KAMAL ALJAFARI

In Kamal Aljafari's film *Recollection*, freedom is experienced in "the sound of the ocean...the echo you can hear outside but recorded from inside the wall. Life buried beneath, inside the sea." As the images move slowly, other times brusquely, from a silhouette to a shadow, a sliver of the port city of Jaffa to another, the sound moves us into the present unearthing a past. We begin to see the ruins as breathing bodies. We see the place Palestinians have lived in and have been exiled from. And gradually we are brought face-to-face with history, with destruction. The phantoms stare at us. The filmmaker "frees the image," an act he calls "cinematic justice."

*Recollection* is epic. In an impeccable pas de deux between what's seen and unseen, the Palestinian filmmaker creates a symphonic visual experience. He dives into the crevices of memory, inquires violence, observes stillness.

The film displays the ferocity of occupation and how it's



transfigured in Israeli culture, and in this case more specifically, the cinematic one. To make the film, Aljafari watched every Israeli film shot between the 1960s and 1990s, the majority of which excluded Palestinians. They were, as he affectingly says, “uprooted in reality and in fiction,” explaining that these films used Jaffa because it provided them with “history and narrative.” His film is a witness. In *Recollection*, he “removed the Israeli actors and gave the stage and space to the people unintentionally filmed in the background [Palestinians].” He says, “I could have worked years on it, not only because I enjoyed removing the actors but because I felt I was doing something magical, that’s only possible in cinema.” The film is visceral, and makes us question what torments a man without a country.

Aljafari was born in al-Ramla, and raised in Jaffa, where his mother is from. The city plays center stage in his three films, which have received numerous awards and accolades for their artistry. *Recollection* has garnered praise around the globe from Argentina to Torino. Film expert and Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University writes that Kamal Aljafari is a “visionary artist...the chronicler of the inchronicable.” The Argentinian film critic Luciano Monteagudo lauds: “It is very rare to find in today’s cinema a film so original in its conception, so personal in its political commitment, and so inventive in form as *Recollection*.”

Like the Italian cinema masters Pier Paolo Pasolini and Michelangelo Antonioni, Aljafari’s films challenge our perceptions, transport us to poetic realms and move us. They encompass image and sound crafted with precision. His cinematic language is one built on the alphabet of the

sea and its ruins, dream-like ricochets, where silence is storm and soliloquy. Stillness sculpts the complexities of what's split in displacement and exile, memory and the heart.

If “Jaffa is the sea,” Kamal Aljafari is its waves. I'm reminded of that when we leave Zazza, a café on Schonleinstrasse in the Kreuzberg neighborhood of Berlin, where the interview is conducted. As we walk towards a small bridge, accompanied by the metallic winter skies. Reach the frozen canal, see a few hovering birds. The sea nowhere, the sun absent. I wonder how a filmmaker deeply rooted in a Mediterranean city survives the interminable opaque clouds. When I turn to ask him, I realize wherever he is, Jaffa is present.

After seeing *Recollection*, viewers want to go back and experience the images again, walk through them, rediscover them, listen to them more judiciously, look at them more deeply, feel them more intensely. Images that amplify our sense of what it means to exist, and what it means to see and be seen.

—*Nathalie Handal for Guernica*

**Guernica:** The allegorical opening scene of your new film *Recollection*, establishes the pulse of the film. The sudden disappearance of people in motion—walking, dancing, running—ending with the shot of a young woman with a white scarf heading to the sea before she vanishes. Is disappearance an act of reemergence?

**Kamal Aljafari:** I made a trailer where I wanted to show how this film was made. After the film premiere in the Festival del film Locarno, I thought I should begin the film this way. Removing the actors and zooming in on the figures I found in the background, these ghosts, who never left. Imagine, I was watching these films and in one of

them, I saw my uncle walking in the background of a scene. I would see my uncle only from time to time because he was kept in a mental hospital. Seeing him created a moment of reemergence. It is symbolic and natural at the same time, as I only knew him as an outcast ghost. And he haphazardly appears in an Israeli film. We will never know who the young woman vanishing is.

**Guernica:** Is reality in-between what's visible and invisible?

**Aljafari:** I don't know about reality. This film shows how there is no difference between reality, fiction, and fantasy. What I found in this material is quite incredible. To have found all these characters who never existed, but were always there. It's the magic of cinema. It's beyond our control, it captures everything. The traces are everywhere, traces of the city, the people who inhabited the city, like the face that I found engraved in one of the corners of the windows. In the film, as the main character walks the city, he sees the engraved face on the stone, the first sign of life. He slowly discovers more signs, and collects everything he finds. There is an archeologist inside me.

**Guernica:** The walks are singular and collective and eventually interlace. Can you expand?

**Aljafari:** In the Israeli films, the characters walk on one street that leads to another that isn't actually adjoining. These filmmakers only cared about the textures of the old city, the photogenic quality of Jaffa. For someone who comes from and knows this place, these films do not make sense. It was important for me to have the character in my film walk and make sense of all of it, and project the place as it is, streets that lead to other streets as they are. How to make a film with all of this? Where to start? Where to walk? The character in *Recollection* arrives from the sea.

The dream of any Palestinian is to arrive from the sea and not the airport to the city, to arrive with no borders. So he arrives to the port and walks up the stairs to one neighborhood, and from there goes to Ajami then al-Manshiyya (the part in black and white). He is able to go everywhere that he isn't able to go anymore. His walk is his grandfather's, his mother's, his uncle's walk. The walk of all the phantoms he is finding.

**Guernica:** Is that why you use *I* and *him* (referring to the main character), interchangeably? It's a reflection of how the personal is collective?

**Aljafari:** The character filming is many people. The "I" is less a subject than a vehicle, he doesn't develop, he simply moves and usually on foot, slyly, frequently returning to his point of departure. The "I" is all the ghosts in the film.

**Guernica:** By preserving the mystery in the film, what are you conveying about what has been taken?

**Aljafari:** The character in the movie who films is essential to the act of reclaiming. For me it is reclaiming cinematic territory that was taken away from us. We couldn't make these films because our society was completely destroyed. What was left behind in Jaffa after 1948 was an insolated, depressed, and poor minority. My family lost all their properties. They were destroyed, bombed, or taken away. We all had to start from zero. My film is trying to correct that in a way—what I call cinematic justice—by giving me the ability to walk and make a film. The character is a photographer. He is filming in a way the Israelis hadn't filmed there because they didn't want to see Jaffa. It was meaningless to them and the films they made are the proof. All they wanted was to use Jaffa for the sake of inventing a historical narrative.

My character's position is different. He knows every

corner. Every stone has meaning to him. He sat there, his grandfather sat there. When he touches the stone with his camera, it is emotional for him. It is not a stylistic choice. His camera expresses the sentiments he has. He feels a huge responsibility. He wants to film everything nonstop.

**Guernica:** Why did you film so many close-ups of the walls?

**Aljafari:** The walls witnessed everything. They were left behind, half destroyed. But even if everyone was gone and the city was empty, the people would still be engraved on the walls.

**Guernica:** You are an inquisitor. Memory is thus far your greatest exploration. What have you discovered while meditating on memory?

**Aljafari:** I cannot separate myself from the fact that I live abroad. When I go back to Jaffa, I return to the place I'm from, searching for my memories, that of my family, and the people I love. I search for the city that doesn't belong to me anymore but that I know is mine. It's a very schizophrenic feeling. It might be that even if I didn't go abroad, I would still have made the same movies because I remember always carrying memories of the city. In my childhood, coming back from school to my family house, I saw an Israeli man erasing the name of the Palestinian family who owned the house. This remains in my mind. Every time I walk by this street, I still see traces of the name.

When I work on a film, I have no strategy, it's something that I feel in the moment, and I go with it. In *Recollection*, the character has endless memories. He is all of the people we find. And Jaffa is endless. The amount of memory and history there goes beyond any occupation. He is memory itself filming.

**Guernica:** In Federico Garcia Lorca's "Gacela of Love's Memory," he writes, "Don't carry your memory off. Leave it alone in my heart." By exploring memory, are you also trying to place it somewhere?

**Aljafari:** I collect because these places are vanishing. I know I'm the only one and last one to do this work. I have to do it. But at the same time, the images have to stay free. Aren't memories made of images? That's the power images have over us.

The image with the car: I recognize the corner where I used to sit with my grandfather. I liked to rub my back against the sandstones, typical of house corners in Jaffa. Then my mother told me that this was the car of a relative who was a taxi driver, and this relative had a brother in Lebanon. But I showed it to someone else and he told me that the blue windows are of the house of the Habash family. I realized I couldn't intervene. I had to leave it. Preserving what it was is difficult, as is not clarifying the meaning of the images for someone who is not from there. In Stockholm someone saw the film and told me, "This is a Ford Anglia," and added, "I loved that car." He had a memory with that car. It's the universality of cinema. A film does not have to be translated.

**Guernica:** *Recollection* is an emotional experience as much as it is visual and audio, was there a more important facet for you to seize? Robert Bresson said about *A Man Escaped*, that in his film "freedom is presented by the sounds of life outside." How is freedom presented in *Recollection*?

**Aljafari:** The life inside. The sound of the ocean. While recording we used special microphones that could record the sound inside the wall. It was the echo of what you could hear outside but recorded from inside the wall. We also put

microphones deep in the water and on the port, to listen to the sound there. The inside sound that we usually don't hear. It was important for me to listen to the sound of the walls, life buried beneath, inside the sea. The Israeli government and the municipality of Tel Aviv destroyed Jaffa. They threw the homes they destroyed into the sea. But every year, in the winter, when the sea rises, it throws part of these homes back on to the shore. The Tel Aviv municipality collects them, throws them back but the ruins return. Every year the sea brings them back.

We recorded at night because that's when places free themselves from the present, and its occupiers. There is a shop, which now belongs to an Israeli, but still has the name of the person who owned it, a Palestinian. At night, I'd walk by and see his name. I was interested in capturing the sound of the shop when it was alone, when it went back to being itself.

The same with recording, hearing, listening to the sound of the walls, and the sounds inside the walls. And obviously, the ocean which is the symbol of desire. It comes back. Uncontrollable. It takes over everything.

**Guernica:** Noise, music, silence—why did you include that brief conversation that poignantly ends with the question, “She lives here?” in a film without dialogue?

**Aljafari:** We recorded mostly at night but one day we walked through the city and recorded people. We were in Ajami and there was this girl, maybe eight years old, who was hanging the laundry. She was curious. Looking at us recording sound. She started playing with her balloon and kicking it towards us, trying to play with us, trying to communicate with us. We gave her the mic, and she was very happy. I asked her, “What is your name?” She said, “Yara.” I asked her, “Where do you live?” She told me,

“Nahal Oz.” I was surprised, so asked her if it was in Tel Aviv. She said, “No.” I said, “In Jaffa?” She didn’t answer. Then I asked her what she was doing here. And she said she was visiting her grandmother. I asked her grandmother’s name?” She responded, “Sumaia.” I said, “She lives here?” And she didn’t answer.

**Guernica:** Because it is impossible for her to live in Nahal Oz as it’s a settlement.

**Aljafari:** Exactly, it’s a kibbutz settlement at the border of Gaza. And besides, her name is Yara. It’s one of the most Palestinian names you can have. She couldn’t have lived there. It stays a mystery. And cinema should be mysterious.

I think in the future, I will just speak to children. They are unfiltered. She expressed everything I wanted to express and everything the character in the film is feeling. He is from this place but he is not. He is inside but he is outside. He is in Jaffa but he is not. He is visiting family but doesn’t know if they are still here.

**Guernica:** Your films are acquiescent of stillness. What is stillness to you?

**Aljafari:** It is the dream we are all in. In the film, he is walking step by step. Enjoying every moment in the space because it is impossible that he is there. Like in a dream you visit different places, move from one place to another. Which is also like memory. Different places coexist. Different times coexist.

**Guernica:** In the movie *Shi (Poetry)*, the South Korean director Chang-dong Lee dives into the spheres of memory and the importance of seeing the world deeply. Can you tell us what “seeing deeply” means to you?

**Aljafari:** It is an act of spending time – filming a place for a long time to be able to see it. Again, I think it is related to memory. You cannot remember quickly. You need to sit



and stare. That is what my camera language is doing. It is contemplating. Among the ancient Greeks, poetry was the mother of all muses. They believed memory was most closely associated to the practice of poetry. The language of the film is the only language that is possible, that of staying. When you write a poem, it is not scripted. This film was made the same way.

**Guernica:** You work with non-actors. Do you think that's a way to arrive closer to truth?

**Aljafari:** I don't think it was by choice. I found myself interested in what I found in my family house. The way my aunt was making the bed, so elegant, so original. It somehow expressed everything about her, who she is. No actor can reenact her making the bed the way she was making it. To me, that's cinema, to capture that poetry. I am not against actors. But I was interested in the give and take relationship that I found in my subjects. I could find it only with people and places that mean so much to me, who I know, who I have feelings for. It is not just acting; It's about being oneself. They are like that flower or that stone that no one paid attention to.

**Guernica:** What directions, if any, do you give your non-actors or personages?

**Aljafari:** The two rules I follow are never to ask them to do anything they don't usually do and never to tell them how to do anything. I was interested in capturing feelings and not in directing characters.

**Guernica:** How challenging was it to work with family members?

**Aljafari:** It can be difficult but also quite amazing because there is something so familiar yet new when filming them, when capturing them on camera, which is

worth it. Now when I look at the films, I look at family albums.

**Guernica:** What comes to mind when you hear: Youth, early 1980s?

**Aljafari:** One Sunday evening when I was ten or eleven, I was with my sisters watching a film at the Christian Orthodox Club Scouts near my grandmother's house, and my uncle whispered to me that it was time to go to al-Ramla, where we lived. I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay in Jaffa. The difference between the two is that my grandparents were in Jaffa. And Jaffa had this strong feeling of left over urban society that attracted me, that I felt comfortable with, that I saw my self in. I can still feel Jaffa's cosmopolitan past in the way people talk and walk, the way people live, the sea.

**Guernica:** What comes to mind when you hear: Intifada 1987?

**Aljafari:** I was in Terra Santa High School in Jaffa at the time, and watching the images on television with my family at night—Palestinians in the streets, soldiers breaking the arms of young people—made me increasingly political. Against the will of my parents, I started reading the newspaper of the communist party. My father told the old man from the neighborhood Abu Nijem (Nijm means star in Arabic, and was the name of his oldest son), who brought me the newspaper, not to bring it anymore. He paid him the yearly membership I asked for. He didn't want me involved in politics. In a way my father was right. He told me, "When I was your age, I walked ten kilometers with my friends to watch the only television in Lydd to listen to Nasser [Gamal Abdel Nasser]. But in the end, we got nothing from all of that." Of course as a young man, I felt strong. I didn't want to listen to such stories. I would go to

Nazareth to take part in demonstrations and I would come back at two in the morning and my father would not open the door for me.

**Guernica:** How is the Jaffa of today different from the Jaffa of your childhood?

**Aljafari:** In a way it's worse. There were remains when I grew up. There were some ruins. But in the last fifteen years, with the gentrification project taking place in Jaffa, more has disappeared. They take old Palestinian houses, renovate them, change their identity. Sometimes it's worse to change the identity to the point where you can't recognize it anymore than to destroy the house. Gentrification, and in this case there is a political meaning to it, makes you feel not at home in your home. If I walk now in the streets where my grandparents have lived most of their lives, I feel lost and displaced. This erasure is painful. Of course, I never forget that this is where I am from.

**Guernica:** What remains intact for you?

**Aljafari:** There is a feeling. It's in the air, in the smell of the place. The wind coming from the ocean, which somehow keeps these endless memories that I am speaking about. It's the smell of people who are no longer there.

**Guernica:** What was it like growing up Palestinian in Israel? Being excluded—metaphorically, physically, emotionally—from the place you are from?

**Aljafari:** The most painful thing is that you are made to feel like an immigrant in your own country. That's the feeling I had. On one side I knew, I know, that I'm from there, but on the other hand, I didn't feel comfortable to be myself. I had to hide my identity. I had to speak a language that was not mine. I had to speak Hebrew. And as a child I was always worried to be asked my name. My name would

reveal my identity. Your existence is in question all the time. Surely, when you grow up, you resist that and say your name without being afraid. But as a child, you go to the swimming pool and are forced to pretend you are someone else to protect yourself and be like the other children. Palestinian society was completely uprooted and those of us who stayed were isolated, left alone, and had to deal with the situation, had to survive it the best way we could. When a child hides his/her identity it is an act of survival, as he/she feels discriminated against. When I went abroad, my state of mind never changed. I've always felt like an immigrant.

**Guernica:** Identity is a topic that constantly surfaces. Is identity an illusion, a boundary?

**Aljafari:** We are many things. In the case of Palestinian identity, I find it diverse and rich, and in a way unnationalistic despite all. There is something impressive about that, because this is a nation that's been under occupation, you expect them to be more nationalistic, but they are not. It's actually the occupiers who are nationalistic. I feel Palestinian identity has no borders.

**Guernica:** Departures and arrivals to and from Jaffa today—what is the journey like for you each time?

**Aljafari:** I carry an Israeli passport but I can't help feel that they might not let me in. It is very strange as I am from there. I can't help worry the moment I arrive at passport control. I never know if I will go in or not. That's the feeling I have each time. It is the mental terror we all live in generation after generation.

Now I have the image of opening the door at my grandparents' house, which is always unlocked. There is something beautiful about that feeling, that when you

arrive, you can just open the door. The last time I went, I wanted to stay.

**Guernica:** How about time—Palestinians seem to live outside of time. What do you think of what Juan Goytisolo, in the novel *Exiled From Almost Everywhere*, writes: “Everything runs its course, including time itself.”

**Aljafari:** In relation to memory, time is beyond me. That’s how the film was made, in relationship to time. Being in all *times*. That said, at this moment, Palestinians remain outsiders. Maybe now it is more comfortable to be Palestinian in some places. But coming from this unresolved cause, which probably won’t be solved in the next years, we remain outsiders. As a filmmaker, I am at the edge of time. Being at the edge is the right position in relation to these players, and from which to look at the world.

**Guernica:** You live in Germany. There is an influx of refugees including Palestinians from Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria. Many make that difficult journey across the sea. Your family stayed in Jaffa because the sea was turbulent and brought them back. What is your experience with these recent refugees?

**Aljafari:** I’ve met many of them and have listened to their stories of fleeing Yarmouk. In a way, while in Yarmouk they copied what they lost in Palestine, and lived “outside of time” in that sense. But this reproduced space, once again, was completely destroyed. Many of them lost friends, family members died at sea. They carry this feeling of being multiply dispossessed. This experience made them more Palestinian than before. It is interesting to observe how strong and preserved their Palestinian identity is, despite everything. They physically lived the experience of their grandparents who had to flee in 1948.

There is a neighborhood in Berlin—Neukölln—where the refugees go to eat because there are many Arabic restaurants. The arrival of this huge number of refugees is becoming a counterattack against the hipsters who were coming to the area. I like that. They fill the place with life. And obviously, I am happy to hear the Arabic language and walk among them.

**Guernica:** You studied theatre and wrote your thesis on Lorca's play *Blood Wedding*. Has Lorca informed you as a filmmaker?

**Aljafari:** I ended up in the theatre department by chance. Being at Hebrew University, the Israelis I met in this department were pleasant people in comparison with the Israelis who were studying history, as I had originally been studying too. In theatre, the atmosphere was freer, less tense. I discovered Lorca, and his world and metaphors were mine. In "Romance Sonámbulo," he wrote, "But now I am not I, nor is my house now my house. Let me climb up, at least, up to the high balconies." His high balconies reminded me of where I come from, a place with unfinished balconies. Lorca's emotions and metaphors spoke to me. I felt Lorca came from where I come from. And I discovered *Blood Wedding*, which is an amazing theatre piece, and the film adaption of the play by Carlos Saura, which moved me. The flamenco dancer Antonio Gades, while putting on his make up, talks to the camera about his experience living in Paris in an apartment that he later discovered was the same one his master from Spain lived in years before. The mysterious feelings the film evoked spoke to me. I remember that moment well as it was the year I saw the film *Chronicle of Disappearance* (1996) by the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, a milestone in world cinema.

**Guernica:** Is there an approach that you are interested in exploring?

**Aljafari:** I want these ghosts to reach out more, be more visible, talk, even dance. I would like to take the aesthetic and visual language I developed to another level. A film that will reach more people, and allow me to explore places I haven't before, cinematically speaking.

**Guernica:** You've also exhibited your photographs, most recently at the Beirut Art Center, and are working on a book?

**Aljafari:** I want to continue the conversation I began on screen in print. The book is an album of the city and people, a memory in images rescued from the screen of dozens of Israeli fiction films shot in Jaffa as early as the 1960s.

**Guernica:** You also lived in the US. You were the Benjamin White Whitney fellow at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute and Film Study Center in 2009-2010, and taught film at The New School in New York in 2010, before returning to Germany to become a senior lecturer and program director of the German Film And Television Academy in Berlin, 2011-2013. Can you speak about your time in New York City.

**Aljafari:** New York City is the only place I lived in where I felt I could stay. I never felt that in any other place. I always have a feeling I should move on to somewhere else. Having people like myself coming from all over the world, all having accents, makes me feel comfortable. And it's a city you feel you have been to before even when you haven't, because of cinema. Whether this feeling is true or an illusion, I don't know. But that's how I felt in NYC.

**Guernica:** Being exiled, are you rooted in the absence of place or do you carry place with you?

**Aljafari:** I carry place with me. But it's paradoxical

because there is a certain absence in it as well. Perhaps it's my autobiography, the places I came from—the unfinished second floor of my parents' house, my grandparent's house previously belonging to Palestinian Armenians, which my family was forced to live in after they lost their house in the al-Manshiyya neighborhood. There is always an absence even in the place I am carrying with me. Once, when I was a child I asked my father to take me to the house where he was born. We walked to an empty neighborhood, there was nothing where his house stood.

**Guernica:** So is memory home? Or in searching for what's lost, has cinema become home?

**Aljafari:** Cinema more and more. I realize that I can inhabit these places only in the movies I am making.

**Guernica:** At the end of *Recollection*, a certain freedom is projected, images of people. Can you speak about that scene?

**Aljafari:** I love that scene because it is so hopeful. These phantoms are walking together, hand in hand. They are singing. It is a song where they are declaring themselves. They decide to walk and sing and talk to the world. It's a final march where these ghosts are no longer ghosts.



# Umm Kulthum Singing for the Prophet

NAJWAN DARWISH AND KAREEM JAMES ABU-ZEID

*This night of mine is a black bride from the Zanj wearing necklaces  
of pearls. – Al-Ma'arri*

The Star of the East sings for the Prophet  
while I release my song,  
which rises from the deep.  
Filthy snow is piled on the sidewalks,  
and an elusive star of nativity  
keeps leading the magi astray—victims  
of their own hearts.

False star of nativity, I don't want to believe  
you're a star of death.

I release my sighs from the deep  
while the Star of the East still lifts  
the glory of her voice to the Prophet.

But this night is not my own.  
It's not a black bride from the Zanj wearing necklaces of  
pearls.  
This night of mine is a white bride, dead  
and unadorned.

## 6

# Fabric of Resistance

2016

ELIZABETH A. MCINERNY

During the First Intifada, when Israeli soldiers confiscated the flags of Palestinian women protesting in the streets, the women responded by embroidering the Palestinian flag and silhouettes of the country in endless repetition along the chests, sleeves, and back hems of their thobes. Samples of these politically charged “Intifada Dresses” are on display in Beirut, Lebanon as part of an ambitious survey featuring more than 60 embroidered items, as well as photographs, paintings, and graphic arts representing Palestinian textiles throughout history. “At the Seams: A Political History of Palestinian Embroidery,” was one of the inaugural exhibitions launching Dar el-Nimer for Arts and Culture, a venue established in a renovated 1930s building in Beirut.



Polaroid photo of Palestinian dress from the 1970s. Photo from the Inaash archive.

“At the Seams” features traditional textiles and archival photos from the early 20th century, but it breaks ground by showcasing curator Rachel Dedman’s original research to extend the survey of Palestinian embroidery beyond 1948, when the State of Israel was declared. Developed in conjunction with the principals planning the new Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, the West Bank, the show was conceived as the museum’s first “satellite” exhibition. In the midst of the entrenched, explosive Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these cultural enterprises represent a bold effort to more effectively direct the narratives about Palestinian history and society, and affirm Palestinian statehood.





***Examples of the “Intafada Dress” displayed in “At the Seams.”  
Dresses from Tiraz: Widad Kawar Home for Arab Dress.  
Photos by Tanya Traboulsi for the Palestinian Museum.***

Through her research, Dedman identified materials produced after 1948 that reference a wide range of political conflicts and cultural exchanges. The Intifada Dresses reveal elements of traditional embroidery patterns dominated by repetition of the Palestinian flag, silhouettes of the country, doves, rifles, and the al-Aqsa Mosque, among other motifs. Characterized by Dedman as “making women’s bodies powerful sites of political resistance and explicit nationalism,” these garments were also produced in solidarity by Palestinians in the diaspora in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Graphic arts from the 1970s and beyond, sourced from the Palestinian Poster Project

Archives, demonstrate how images of Palestinian embroidery were incorporated as shorthand for themes of resistance and strength – both within the Middle East and in other areas, including Cuba. Exploring contemporary, global distribution, Dedman has featured selections from the social enterprises Taita Leila (“Grandma Leila”), an online platform that sells clothes embroidered by women in the West Bank, and Ibra wa Khayt (“Needle and Thread”), a Ramallah-based business that upcycles pieces of old thobes into new skirts and pants. Contemporary Palestinian fashion designers highlighted include Sasha Nassar and Natalie Tahhan.

In 2013, when Dedman first discussed the collaboration with then-Palestinian Museum director Jack Persekian and Omar Al-Qattan, head of the Palestinian Museum Task force at Taawon-Welfare Association, the primary institution backing the museum, she says they developed an approach that encouraged risk-taking and embraced the political questions and problems inherent in assembling materials representing Palestinians’ experiences and personal stories, “because there are loads of them.” She rejected the traditional romantic, domestic frames of evaluating women’s work to consider the pieces as reflections of the changing political, socio-economic circumstances of Palestinians. Palestinian embroidery is often regarded in a vacuum, but Dedman’s research examined how it is now produced and distributed throughout the global economy, and how patterns are regularly grafted onto international fashion designs. These practices highlight what she calls the “macro question” of the exhibition: how Palestine is being “reflected, extended, and materialized in the world today.”

Most of the historical garments presented in the show

were sourced from collectors committed to documenting the artistry of the past. Others were recreated from archival photos. Distinct by region, older embroidery patterns indicate the provenance of each work. Dagmar Painter, curator for Gallery Al-Quds at the Washington, D.C.-based Jerusalem Fund, underscores the greater legacy these textiles represent. Reached by phone, she explains, “Palestinians revere this embroidery because it is a concrete expression of the place where they came from. Each piece is very specific to the particular village, the particular place where these people and their ancestors were born.” In some cases, Painter points out, the villages have since been destroyed and can no longer be found on maps. Additional examples of the works are revealed in archival photos on loan from the Palestinian Museum’s Palestinian Audio-Visual Archive project.

In a phone interview, Hanan Munayyer, a Palestinian American who immigrated to the United States in 1970, shares another perspective on why these works resonate so powerfully among Palestinians in the diaspora. “Embroidery since 1948 has been one of the prime identity themes that Palestinians hold on to,” she notes. “First of all, because textiles are very easy to move from country to country – it’s not like furniture – so everyone has some form of textile in exile or immigration. It’s a form of identity badge: a beautiful and successful example of their existence, of their culture, that had nothing to do with the misery of war and suffering.” Together with her husband, Munayyer founded the Palestinian Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. to exhibit their collection of textiles and build awareness of Palestinian culture.

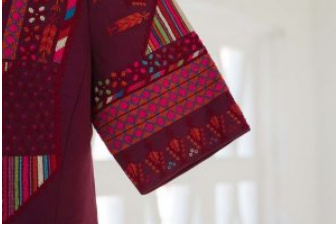


An everyday dress from the collection of Tiraz: Widad Kawar Home for Arab Dress. Photo by Tanya Traboulsi for the Palestinian Museum.

Through a collaboration with the Beirut-based Association for the Development of Palestinian Camps, a non-profit more commonly known as Inaash, works produced in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are also featured in “At the Seams.” Founded in the late 1960s, Inaash established embroidery workshops as an urgent measure to protect and extend the cultural heritage of the form and create a livelihood for families in the camps. (Currently, almost 450,000 of the Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees remain in Lebanon.) All Inaash selections included in the show were designed by Malak al-Husseini Abdulrahim, whose work is profiled in a new documentary film by Maeve Brennan commissioned for the show.



Polaroid photos from the Inaash collection reveal 1970s-era fashions that have served as inspirations.



**A dress made by Inaash in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, featured in the exhibition “At the Seams.”**

**From the collection of Malak al-Husseini Abdulrahim. Photo by**

**Tanya Traboulsi for the Palestinian Museum.**



# Grief Is Another Word For Love

2021

SISONKE MSIMANG

I am trapped in Australia. The borders are shut, which has worked well for keeping COVID-19 out, but it has also kept me in. Over the last fifteen months in sunny Perth, where I live, there have only been two cases of COVID-19 in the community. We have not worn masks, the hospitals have not been deluged, our schools have stayed open. We are in a gilded cage. A friend calls it Sun-tanamo. We both laugh when he says this, but we are not happy.

A year and a half into the pandemic, I am nostalgic for the geography of my familiar. I long for Johannesburg, the city of my heart. When I left South Africa, I expected to go back frequently. There was a daily direct flight, and my frequent visits to South Africa made living here bearable.

But I have not been home since 2019, and my children are beginning to forget how beloved they are across the ocean. I miss hearing women shout greetings across a busy street. I want to see plump brown girls in short dresses laughing

in the winter sun as they walk alongside skinny boys in grey trousers and wayward ties.

In my neighborhood here, there are only pale-faced children holding hands with their thin mothers. Australia is so orderly, so quiet. No one calls out above the roar of traffic. There are no kiosks by the side of the road, no vendors selling misshapen vegetables on the pavement.

Australia does not know what to do with chaos.

In early May, as I am trying to power through the ache of homesickness, I begin to see images of India in distress. The calamity of it is so evident; the messiness of death and dying seeps through my television screen. There are many Australians in India, many of them dual citizens who are visiting relatives. Instead of being offered expedited and safe passage home, they are told that they cannot return. The Australian government — xenophobic even in its most generous moments — bars its own citizens from entry. Australians of Indian descent are being reminded of the precarity of their belonging. This is unprecedented but unsurprising.

My children, who are now approaching adolescence, are frequently reminded that they, too, do not belong here. Their accents are as Aussie as they come, and yet their brown skin undoes their belonging, and they are treated as permanent strangers. On a regular basis they are asked, “Where are you from?” This question nudges them towards hyphenation; they fully understand this way of telling them that their accents, their mastery of swimming, their love of Tim Tams, their comfort at the beach — all of these are not enough to make them from here.

It is hard to accept that they will grow up in a place that is ambivalent about its claim on them. It is harder still for me to accept what all of this means for me. I have lost

the sense of self-determination I once had: the ability to escape, to choose where I might be and, yes, who I might be, in Nairobi or Mexico.

Here, I am a mother, a worker, a woman in sensible shoes riding the train to work. In Johannesburg I would never wear sensible shoes. Here I am bound up in mothering, tied up in working; at home I am a different, less-constrained self. There are places in the city I can go to disappear, and places I find myself in order to be seen. My children will not know this duality, and I miss that for them. This pandemic has shown us we can call only one place home, and it has chosen Australia for us.

By the middle of the month I am full of angst, bloated with the sense that we are stuck and will be for a long time to come. There is no escape from the feeling, just as there is no running away from this place. We are safe and sound and lonely, wedged between the Indian Ocean and the wide-open desert.

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I want to stay at home and wallow in my melancholy, but I can't. A dear friend is leaving for Sydney, and I want to see her before she goes. We sit in an Uyghur restaurant called Silk Road, eating cinnamon-spiced chicken with fat noodles. It is a Monday night, but the place is packed and everyone here is from somewhere else and so I feel oddly at home.

I ask her about Eid, how was it? It was heavy she tells me. Palestine. I tell her I know. I have been struggling to contain my sadness too. I am full of a strange new grief I cannot describe. Palestine is under attack and my uncle, who has been a father to me, is sick and may soon die. Even as I tell her this news from home, I rage against the

inadequacy of English. What kind of word is “uncle?” What can it say about who he is to me, to us all?

Somehow, these two sadnesses, my private sadness and this public sadness, have become entangled. I can’t figure out the connection. Why does watching the news makes me think of him, and why does thinking of him make me worry for Palestine? I am too tired to try.

My sadness gathers force. At the beginning of the pandemic my homesickness was a pebble, a small stone I carried with me throughout the day. Now, fifteen months later with no end in sight, as Australia’s borders tighten and its fear of others makes the world even smaller, my sadness grows.

Israel’s latest war against the Palestinians, who have already endured so much, has dislodged something in me. A video of a ten-year old girl speaking to a journalist has been doing the rounds on social media. The child is surrounded by rubble and perhaps she is in shock, or perhaps she is simply fluent in the language of loss, more eloquent in her outrage and befuddlement than most people ever have to be. Her name is Nadine, and I play and replay and replay the clip of her saying, “I don’t know what to do, I’m just a kid. I can’t even deal with this anymore. I just want to be a doctor or anything to help my people, but I can’t. I’m just a kid.”

I am struck by how her dreams are bound up in the needs of her people. I imagine that to be a Palestinian child is to be Palestinian first. I cannot know, of course, but it seems to me that before you are a child, you are a Palestinian, subject to all the discrimination and violations rained on your people by Israeli apartheid.

I understand her. I was ten when Soweto exploded in 1984 and we were so far away — in exile — but I, too, would

have done anything for my people. I am devastated for us. Pained by her reality and sad for the little girl I once was. I sit in front of my computer at work witnessing the shock of a freshly wounded child. Her tears trigger my own long-ago grief.

\* \* \*

My mother married a freedom fighter and gave birth to my sisters and me — three baby revolutionaries — and still she was surprised that we carried the weight of the world on our shoulders. We cared too much. Our eyes were always leaky. She worried that the brutality of the world would break us. It didn't. We have always navigated cruelty by doubling down on love. Grief is another word, of course, for love. We don't mourn those we never cared for.

In Greek mythology, when the Titans lost their battle with the Olympians, Zeus condemned Atlas to hold up the sky. It was a perverse penalty: Zeus used Atlas' greatest asset to hurt him in perpetuity. To carry the weight of the world on your shoulders is to be sentenced to hold that burden, not just for a minute or a day, but for eternity.

\* \* \*

The day after our dinner at Silk Road, my uncle dies, and I sit in bed as though I am sick, with a blanket covering my legs. The children bring me tea in bed like they do on Mother's Day, and I cry at the sweetness of it, and also, I cry because nobody knocks on my front door to offer condolences, and nobody will.

At home, in South Africa, death brings the neighbors and the house overflows and at dusk we sing until we cry, or we cry until we sing. We pray, even those of us who are godless, and we call out to our ancestors. Here, in Australia, someone could die on our road, and we might never know

it. How can mourning be a private affair when grief does not know how to stay inside?

I stay up every night for the vigil, which takes place at 6 p.m. Johannesburg time, midnight in Perth. I keep my camera off and weep freely on Zoom. The house is asleep; each new day brings school for the kids, and work for my partner, and so no one can keep me company. There is no one to wail with me.

Someone sets up a WhatsApp group called Uncle's Gallery, and people begin to post photos of our father-uncle there. I look at them religiously. Collectively they are an atlas, carried across many homes in the many countries where we lived as exiles. In each photo, he is both living and waiting.

His death reminds me of our own exiled waiting. I remember that for decades, our lives were a long-held breath until finally we made it home, at first stumbling into the country after Mandela walked free and then finally running towards our own freedom, towards elections and the collapse of apartheid.

\* \* \*

I go to a protest in support of Palestine and there is a woman holding up a massive poster that lists the names of the children who have been killed in the week since the bombs began to fall. I can't imagine how long it took her to write each name.

I stand in front of her for a long time, reading each of the names she has lovingly spelled out. Today, anyone who has been watching the news can tell you who George Floyd was, and Orlando Castille and Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin and Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor. We know about the precious Black lives lost in America's war against Black people because American Black people have insisted on it.

Protesters have chanted, “Say their names,” and we have. And even as the list grows, as new names of young people killed by police officers multiplies, we know that we have a duty of solidarity. Around the world we speak their names.

\* \* \*

Nobody talks about how Palestinians die in webs, in family groups. One death is a tragedy. What is the word you use to describe the killing of many people who are connected by blood and love? The dead cannot bury the dead. Who buries everyone when no one is left?

Dr. Ayman Abu al-Ouf was killed with twelve members of his family in Gaza. He was killed at the same time as his father and mother, his wife Reem, and their seventeen-year old son Tawfik and their twelve-year old daughter Tala.

There is a picture of Tala in an article about them. She is wearing heart-shaped sunglasses and underneath her mask you can see a smile, which reminds me of my daughter’s smile. They are the same age. I read that her brother Omar, who is fifteen, is the only member of the family who survived. The article says, “at the time of writing,” Omar is being treated for injuries and no one has told him yet that his parents are dead, and that his grandparents and siblings are dead too.

Even as I tell this story I know that the names Ayman and Tala and Tawfik are not neutral, that they are not simply names. They are Arab-sounding, and so to ask for these names to be called out in tenderness, to be invoked in empathy, is to perhaps risk the opposite. In this country there is so much hatred directed at people who look like ten-year old Nadine. I am not convinced that Australians will twist their tongues to speak the names of strangers whom they have learned to vilify, but the work of insisting must be done.



The call to say their names is, of course, only the beginning of the work ahead. I understand now that my grief is an offering, that their names are an opening prayer, a step in the long road to Palestinian freedom.

In my favorite photo of my father-uncle, he is standing underneath a sign that reads “ora et labora,” pray and work. He is smiling and serious, as he always was. I must have heard him say this a thousand times in a thousand ways as we criss-crossed the globe in search of freedom.

I am saying through my grief for my uncle who worked so hard to free South Africa, that the work of sanctions and boycotts and remembering is interconnected, but ultimately we do not want to love only the dead. To grieve is not simply sentimental; grief gives impetus to organizing, and this is how we live. I want Nadine to grow up and live in a free Palestine, and I want to dance in the streets with her when that time soon comes.

# Unsettled

An interview with Amira Hass, 2011

AMIRA HASS

*This introduction to this interview, conducted in 2011, has been condensed and edited — Eds.*

No one encouraged Amira Hass to live in Gaza; in fact, she was specifically told not to. But determined to learn about the occupation from the inside, she moved there in 1993, as a correspondent for the Israeli newspaper Haaretz; she had become familiar with the area while volunteering with a group that had her visiting Gazans to deliver money they were owed from Israeli employers who'd withheld their pay. She made a permanent home in the West Bank in 1997—the only Israeli journalist to live and work among Palestinians full-time.

Hass grew up absorbing her parent's memories of the Holocaust as her own. In *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land Under Siege*, she describes her mother's memory of people watching as she was herded to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp: "She saw a group of German women, some on foot, some on bicycles, slow down as the strange procession went by and watch with

indifferent curiosity on their faces. For me, these women became a loathsome symbol of watching from the sidelines, and from an early age I decided that my place was not with the bystanders.”

Since 1993, Hass has reported extensively on Israel’s policies in the occupied territories, exposing their devastating effects on Palestinians. But the divided Palestinian leadership has not escaped her scrutiny either, and both governments have tried to impede her reporting using various intimidation tactics. Of the ongoing fragmentation of Palestinian territory, in 2011, and the severing of Palestinian control of governing activities such as changing addresses or registering newborns, she said: “It’s not like killing, but it affects everybody. If a baby is born in Gaza and is not registered with the Israeli Ministry of the Interior, that baby does not exist, it does not count.”

Hass has also seen how effective the obfuscation around these policies can be. “I get very annoyed when my Palestinian friends complain, ‘Why didn’t they give me a permit, I am not a terrorist,’ because it is not about the person: It is about a policy that people can’t articulate because there is no discourse to explain the political intention behind it.”

—Jasmine Ramsey for *Guernica*

**Guernica:** Why do you live in the West Bank?

**Amira Hass:** If I were asked to cover Canada, would I live in Mexico?

**Guernica:** But you’re very different—

**Hass:** Why?

**Guernica:** Because no other Israeli journalist lives there.

**Hass:** So ask them why they don’t live there. Why ask me?

**Guernica:** [Laughs.]

**Hass:** Okay, this is one answer. I have different ones of

course because I am often asked about it. When I moved to Gaza in '93 I was there for two years, going a lot, staying with friends, staying in refugee camps, and I had an urge to stay longer and really feel this military occupation. What is it to wake up and have a curfew? What is it to walk in the street and stand in front of a soldier who aims a gun? I had this need to experience occupation first hand. And to know the society. Of course, it's not the same as being Palestinian. But it brought me closer.

**Guernica:** You've been there now for seventeen years, and have made a life there.

**Hass:** Yes.

**Guernica:** How often do you go to Israel to visit family?

**Hass:** It's not about [real] distances. The distance is psychological. It's social. The distance is not in kilometers. I can go to Jerusalem, I have my privileges. That's one thing you have to understand. When I lived in Gaza it was more difficult because of the closure policy, because of this restriction of movement so you had to be checked. But I have the privilege that I am not restricted. As a Jew and a journalist I have my privileges, and if one doesn't work I use the other one. Israelis are not allowed to be in Palestinian cities. But I am allowed as a journalist. I never asked permission to live there. I just moved there.

Now after seventeen years nobody can tell me it's forbidden. I have privileges even in comparison to a Palestinian Israeli because Palestinian Israelis who live permanently in Ramallah risk their status, not as citizens but as residents. They might lose their social rights if they move to Ramallah. But I won't, so I live with privileges. That notion is very difficult for me as a child who was raised in a left-wing family, a family of people who suffered discrimination as Jews abroad. The notion that I am so

privileged is disgusting. But this is what it means to live in a white society. You are white, so you are privileged.

**Guernica:** You have spent much of your life living amidst war and occupation, and your devotion to your profession has left you with little time for anything else. If you could go back to the beginning, would you have changed anything?

**Hass:** I think very seriously that I would have liked to have become a fashion writer.

**Guernica:** [Laughter.]

**Hass:** But no, of course not. I wouldn't have changed it.

**Guernica:** When did you begin to question the official Israeli narrative about the country's founding and its development?

**Hass:** Luckily I was not born in Eastern Europe, because I might have been born into the communist establishment and I'm glad I was not. But in Israel, communists were dissidents. So you grow up in an environment which is very critical of Israeli policies. So of course you had the Communist Party, and it had its closed mind. But as a child, I remember asking my parents when I was five years old, "How come if you are not Zionists, you came to the country?" I was surprised at myself that I asked this question. It means that it was always in the air. Then years later I understood it was because of the Holocaust, because they were refugees. They did not come as immigrants and, because of the illusions of the '50s and the late '40s, my mother said, "The world must be better." She could not imagine that it wouldn't be different.

They came separately. They didn't know each other, and they were sure that within five years there would be a socialist revolution in all of the area. Today we know this is as silly as [anything] one could think. But that was not the mood. And then they came and started to learn about

'48 and Nakba, though not immediately. But what I am very proud of is that both of them, like many others, were offered flats of Palestinian refugees and both of them refused to live there. They said, "We are refugees; how could we live in the homes of refugees?" So I am very relieved that they refused the beautiful Arab houses that many people would love to live in.

**Guernica:** And it was your upbringing, the fact that your mother was a communist—

**Hass:** My father was too.

**Guernica:** Your father was as well. This was what compelled you to start asking questions?

**Hass:** It's not so much questioning. You grew up in a different environment. I grew up in this. I thought most people were communist. But then I went to kindergarten, and I was singing songs against the prime minister, which I had heard at home and at the Party, and the kindergarten had to convince my parents to tell me to stop inciting the children against Ben-Gurion. So it was there. You just grew up in it.

**Guernica:** So there were many Jewish communists who went to Israel after the Holocaust. But what happened to that critical way of thinking? Did many of them come to accept the official Israeli narrative in the end?

**Hass:** Yes, I mean some still, many have, yeah. But of course there is the choice. In the end, there is a choice. It's not just because I grew up in such a family that I became so and so. In the end there is a choice. And my choice is to be against the occupation, and not only the occupation but the whole system of discrimination and dispossession. I am lucky that I can write about it, and that I can live in a way within the two communities. So sometimes it's not really a gift; sometimes it's more navigating, it's more

lonely. Sometimes it's more reassuring that I can be in the morning with Palestinians from a village that fights against the wall and some Israeli activists as well, the anarchists. And then in the evening I go and spend it with Israeli women who are in the Machsom, the grassroots movement against the checkpoints.

**Guernica:** You have a large following among Palestinian activists and those critical of Israeli policies in the occupied territories. How do average Israelis react to your work? Do you feel that you connect to them?

**Hass:** I had a lecture at Middlebury called "Translating Occupation to the Occupier." I think it says it all. I think most Israelis prefer not to know. So for them, texts about the occupation are like something that's been written in a foreign language that they can't understand. If they want, you can translate it to them. But it is their choice. In general, though, I think Israelis don't want to know. Very few do. Basically, I write to the converted.

**Guernica:** In Gaza, how did Hamas treat you when you lived there?

**Hass:** When I lived in Gaza between 1993 and 1997, Hamas was not yet in power, and I used to meet quite a few Hamas activists and people, just members or supporters, and it was no problem. Then Israel stopped allowing Israeli journalists to enter Gaza after December 2006. At first there were reasons; there was a wave of kidnappings in Gaza. But these were mostly sponsored by people who were close to Fatah. That was the year the Israeli soldier Gilad Shilat had been kidnapped, so we were not allowed in. The first month after the Hamas victory I was allowed in. I had some interviews, and it was normal, and they knew me. But then after it was forbidden I came by boat to Gaza in

November 2008, and after three weeks Hamas kicked me out.

**Guernica:** November 2008 was just before—

**Hass:** One month before the onslaught, the Israeli attack. I had intended to be there until January 2009, so if they hadn't kicked me out I would have been there. Imagine.

**Guernica:** Why did Hamas kick you out?

**Hass:** They cannot stand free media. They said it was a danger to my life, but Arafat used the same protest when his people tried to kick me out of Gaza and then Ramallah. But with Arafat I had Fatah people who came and told him, "You are nuts, you cannot kick her out." But with Hamas it didn't work. There were some Hamas people, friends of mine who tried to dissuade them from this decision, and it didn't work.

**Guernica:** Hamas was acting just like the Israeli government in trying to keep you out of Gaza.

**Hass:** There was one prominent former Hamas member who fell out of grace because he was critical of the military trend within Hamas. But in the early '90s he was a leader. He told them, "You just kicked her out because you don't want your shameful things to be known," or something like that. I cannot forgive them for this. They knew I wanted to stay until January. Of course no one knew about the Israeli attack, and I'm sure I would have been frightened to death if I was there during it. But it was very important for me to be there. Really, I cannot forgive them.

**Guernica:** Mads Gilbert, the Norwegian doctor who was one of only two non-Arab doctors there during the attack, had footage and horror stories of his experiences working with Palestinian doctors in Al-Shifa Hospital. He had not seen it personally. But the issue around the use of white



phosphorous by the Israelis during the attack made it into a leading medical journal.

**Hass:** The phosphorus was used after [Mads Gilbert and his colleague] left. The white phosphorus was used after they started the land invasion. I remember because I was talking to my friends, and they were fleeing from their homes and were saying, “We don’t understand, there is some strange fire, some strange chemical clouds that ignite and then you pour water to quiet the fire and the opposite happens.” I remember very well that it was on the 4th or 5th of January, so it was after they left.

**Guernica:** Do you think your parents would have stayed in Israel if they were alive today?

**Hass:** They were too old to leave. But, actually, my mother tried to undo her immigration. She lived ten years on her own in France when she was around seventy. But it was too difficult. She was too alone. She was not healthy. I think she had to admit that it’s easier to be near her daughter.

**Guernica:** And you were very close with your parents?

**Hass:** With the children of Holocaust survivors, there is always a very close relationship. You grow with the sense that you are parenting your parents and—with this kind of responsibility to protect them. That’s what makes the children of Holocaust survivors strange.

**Guernica:** Do you find the Israeli press are critical on the Palestinian issue?

**Hass:** No, it’s not critical. There is Haaretz, but other papers will not provide a clear picture of the issues.

**Guernica:** Do other Israeli journalists go into the occupied territories?

**Hass:** Yes, that’s not the question. Many Israelis can get to know what’s really happening. I mean, you have soldiers

who go and see things. It's not like France and Algiers. It's in your backyard. It's much more about willingness, indecision, the inability, or exposure. There is a decision not to be exposed. People can live like five minutes away from it all.

**Guernica:** For people who don't live there, the short distances between those who live with occupation and dispossession and those who don't can be easily overlooked.

**Hass:** But tell me, how many people beyond the activist community think about the aboriginals here in Canada? Many people just won't connect the social problems with the history of dispossession of the aboriginals. There is one problem with pro-Palestinian activists in Europe and the U.S., with the way they portray Israel as though it were an island of evil in an ocean of goodwill. Unfortunately, we are not. This world is not made of benign, progressive states with Israel as the one exception.

**Guernica:** You had expressed prior to this interview that you don't want to talk about how you think things are going to play out.

**Hass:** I am a very conservative journalist and prefer to write about what happened, and not what will happen. I think these questions about what will happen are questions for activists and about the agency of people in the course of events. This is not a question for a journalist, but for activists. And we've seen it with the Arab Spring that people have a say. People have shown that they intend to have a say. Palestinians have done this several times; they're just not listened to.

**Guernica:** But from your constant monitoring of events on the ground, can you tell me what direction things seem to be going in?

**Hass:** The ingredients for another Palestinian uprising are always there because as long as there is so much violence it is bound to explode. How, I cannot tell. But people will not accept it forever. Will Hamas use it in one way? Will Fatah use it in another way? Will there be a new generation that demands no Fatah, no Hamas? I cannot tell. Also, you had in the summer a very interesting and in some ways inspiring social movement for change. I know there is a lot of cynicism about this movement. But in a very short time tens of thousands of young people focused their criticism not on marginal issues, but on neoliberalism, on super-capitalism, on the privatization of the state. Matters of principle. Of course, I say that they did not develop the understanding that occupation is a huge wrong that is connected to Israel and its regime. But on the other hand, I know that Israelis profit from the occupation. So why would they see that occupation is wrong? Still, things happen in a way that surprises. That's why I'm reluctant to predict. You cannot predict. We are seeing that some patterns of the past twenty, thirty years are being broken. Now what is our way to deepen the cracks? I always talk about the cracks. The cracks are very healthy.

**Guernica:** Do you plan on writing about Israel-Palestine for the rest of your life?

**Hass:** Not much remains of it, I'm fifty-five.

**Guernica:** You have at least another forty years!

**Hass:** Sure! I don't know. The sense of failure is very strong.

**Guernica:** Your own sense of failure?

**Hass:** Not personal, but what are you writing for? I mean, when you write about these things, it's not about career, or about the salary; you want to have an impact. And you see how futile the writing is. I envy lawyers. There

is always the sense of, what am I doing this for. And then you know, I cannot leave it. I cannot allow myself to stop writing about it.

# One Hour of a Sleepless Night in Gaza

2014

MONA ABU SHAREKH

*July 25*

At the beginning of Israel's current offensive against Gaza I decided to start a diary, believing that words could make a difference. Then, after the Shajayya massacre, I stopped writing, and indeed talking, altogether. The images of dead women and children lying in streets broke my heart. Thousands of families fleeing from their homes. The corpses of their dead relatives simply abandoned—their ties to the living not strong enough to keep them there, and risk their lives a second longer. These images shocked me into silence, for several days. I was dumbstruck. The holiest of all questions is all I ask: Why?

I am staying in a safe place—in the middle of Gaza. “Safe” here means that only ten or so houses in the neighbourhood have been hit by F-16s so far. One of them was on my street, and two other houses nearby; the local mosque and the national bank were also attacked. Despite

the incessant sound of the bombs, the constant shaking of the earth with every blast, nothing makes me feel that death is close to my baby boy and me more than the smell last night of gas.

There is no light. Power was cut here several days ago. I have heard no news. I am keeping this as my laptop battery is running low. If I get to send this it means the power must have come back on, at some point. I haven't slept a single night since the beginning of the offensive. All day I pace around the middle my room; I don't feel well. I can hardly breathe, in fact. I think that I have something wrong with my lungs. Suddenly, after hours of hearing nothing, my sister calls me. In an instant I'm horrified to see her name on the phone's screen. Why is she calling now? It has to be bad news!

I can't help but relax as she tells me that an Israel airplane has dropped poison gas all over my neighborhood. How am I supposed to feel? Happy because everyone is still alive for now, or sad because I am one step closer to death, along with all my relatives?

This is just one hour in the middle of one night in Gaza. I've stopped being afraid of dying by rocket attack; a friend of mine told me that you don't hear, see, or feel the rocket that kills you. But with gas, it's different. You hear death whispering harsh words in your ears, and you can't do anything but listen.

# Radical Surgeon of My Own Life

JESSICA ABUGHATTAS

*after Joan Didion*

To wait for something to open, that's optimism.

In my private medical-free meadow

mystery seedlings emerge in clumps.

I'm the doctor, experimenting with living things.

I shouldn't smoke, but I do as I till around  
the lime tree, wave hello to the neighbors.

Don't they know this is what grief looks like.  
Some tip their hats or smile.

Sorry to smoke around your children, ma'am,  
but you wandered into my garden. Dead

-heading the rose — I cut.

I cut by mistake; I say "sorry babe."

Sorry babe, didn't mean to cut you.

How does one cut into a person?

Put them to sleep and slice them open.

We trust in medicine, the mechanics of humans  
may even be sociopathic. They look things up  
in a medical dictionary before they take my call.

“There is nothing the matter with you,” they lie, or  
“You need a new liver, we can’t say when.”

I know a doctor who lives on my street.

One sign in front of his house says “a hero lives here.”

The other: “under camera surveillance at all times.”

I look directly into the doctor’s camera

when I steal Greenovia clippings.

A jogging housewife disapproves

but it does the plant good.

Don’t think, just cut.

The doctor and the director want to earn a living.

I want to be perfect in my aloneness

waiting for answers in a thicket of weeds.

I mistook solitude for punishment.

It was purgatory.

So, wheel me into the surgical theater.

Let the fun begin.



# Girls on Ice

fiction

ALIA YUNIS

I was in the bathroom stall at the Armenian chicken place in Anaheim when I overheard Sarah say to her even more annoying friend Abeer at the mirror, where they were both putting on gobs of makeup, “I’m just going to kill myself, habibti, if I don’t make the triple axel at the championships next month.”

“Yeah,” I thought, “I’m going to kill myself if I don’t lose twenty-seven pounds next month, you straight-haired, straight-nosed, shallow bitch.”

Of course, I didn’t lose any weight. I even gained a couple of pounds because I became a vegetarian to save the animals and started eating a lot of hummus and pumpkin seeds. But Sarah killed herself. Which didn’t make sense because she landed that triple axel perfectly. Twice. And won the championship.

She won in grand style. From the LA Times to all the local TV shows and trendy blogs, she was touted out as the first Arab-American-Palestinian-Muslim-Southern Californian-vegan-left-handed champion skater. I understood where

all the Middle East and Southern California labeling was coming from, sometimes with exclamation marks after them—there wasn't a whole lot of ice in either place, and there was no time in Palestine for figure skating, and so many other more logical ways to spend your time in Southern California. And I know Sarah hadn't eaten meat or dairy since seventh grade. However, I'm not sure that Sarah was really left-handed. That was probably a story my aunt made up so she wouldn't be shamed by having a daughter who always stuck out the wrong hand to shake hands.

But you couldn't tell which hand Sarah favored when she waved at bystanders from all the parade floats she was asked to be on, usually wearing a rhinestone tiara, usually speaking on behalf of an organization that helps sick or poor kids and sponsored her last competition. She looked like another perfect young, beautiful, talented, primed-for-TV, all-American girl, which, trust me, is nothing newsworthy in Orange County.

Things changed when the journalists, via touting from all those useless Islamic and Arab civic organizations, discovered her Muslim defect. They loved it. That made her a big underdog story. In return for all the media coverage, she smiled for the cameras when TV reporters asked her questions like, "So is there a particular kind of freedom you feel on the ice as a Muslim female?"

Yesterday, she became the first Muslim-Palestinian-Arab-Southern California-vegan-left-handed champion skater to kill herself. That was the flaw mother lode, which was why there were many news trucks outside our house.

Inside our house, at Sarah's condolences, things like the dishonor, the sorrow, the sin of suicide were all being whispered while my other cousins and I went around

serving people Diet Coke and apricot juice. No one was talking about her success on the ice.

I offered Ramzi's mom the lone mango juice on my tray. She wore a hijab and had thought Sarah should, too, if she were going to keep dating her son, who was going to Princeton in the fall to be an engineer.

My father had called earlier and said Ramzi was at the men's condolences, which my uncle in Garden Grove was hosting. "How is Ramzi doing?" I asked his mom.

"Why?" she said, afraid. I couldn't tell if she meant why was I asking about Ramzi (I think she was worried of someone else in Sarah's family wanting to date her son, especially another one who didn't wear a hijab and was kind of fat for a vegetarian) or if she was asking the big why—the "Why had Sarah killed herself?" why.

"She's dead because she knew she and Ramzi would be apart soon, and she couldn't bear the thought of him meeting someone else," I felt like saying. I was just making this up from a Russian novel we were reading at school. I wanted to be able to say something aloud that would make sense, even if it weren't the real why. But Ramzi's mom scampered away before I could give her an answer.

"She was probably slipped those pills by a Muslim hater," I heard one mom tell my mom between two kisses on the cheeks. My mom was crying so much her eyes were shrunk all beady and bloodshot like a pistachio. I hadn't known she felt that much for Sarah.

"Thank you," my mom said to her because there was delusional comfort in knowing Sarah hadn't done this on purpose. "I'll tell my sister you said so."

I went to the bathroom. It was locked so I waited my turn until Ramzi's mom came out. She jumped back, like I had said boo.

“I hope it was clean enough for you,” I offered. “I scrubbed it myself this morning. My mom made me. With bleach.”

She squeezed herself past my twenty-seven extra pounds, and I went into the bathroom. There was a silver soap dish filled with seashells on the counter from when we all went to San Diego last year for another cousin’s wedding, months before Sarah became the first Muslim-Palestinian-Arab-Southern California-vegan-left-handed champion skater. Until almost dawn that night, Sarah was dancing and laughing along with everyone else. Except for one moment. I was hunkered down in a corner so no one could see me downing the half-finished beer my uncle had left at his table when I saw Sarah suddenly stop dancing, just like that—just stood there quietly, face blank, not feeling the rhythm of the music. Then Ramzi tapped her on the shoulder and she turned to him and smiled and started dancing again, like a wind-up ballerina does when you open a music box. Until today, I’d almost thought I’d imagined it all.

“Instead of killing herself for nothing, she should have gone to Palestine and killed herself for something,” I heard a woman waiting her turn say on the other side of the bathroom door.

Palestine. It always comes back to Palestine in our family. That lady on the other side of the door wasn’t being mean and nasty on purpose. Palestine was what had given the past three generations of our family its breath. But somehow it had failed Sarah because she didn’t have any breath now.

I wish Sarah had said, in that bathroom at the Armenian chicken place, “I’ll just kill myself, *habibti*, if I can’t do something to help Palestine.” Palestine always needed help,

so living to help it could keep you alive forever. That would have been better than any old triple axel, at least that's what our grandfather, who spent more than half his life in an Israeli prison, would have said.

But maybe Palestine could drown you in its sorrow? What if it were Palestine that had made her stop dancing that night in San Diego? Palestine was at least a more noble excuse than my Russian novel explanation.

Sarah and I were born in the same year and we had had almost nothing else in common since then, aside from our relatives and Palestine. But she had never held that against me, like I had held it against her. See, she was nice, on top of it all. That simple, dull word "nice." I wish I hadn't thrown away the gift certificate for the facial she'd gotten me last Christmas after I told her it must be nice to have such a dewy complexion. But I'm glad I'd lied and told her on my birthday, when she got me another one, that I'd used it. She said she could tell, which was obviously an untruth that I wished I'd responded to more gracefully. Maybe by giving her a gift certificate for a foot massage in return, which I'm sure skaters could always use.

Who knows? Then she and I could have become better friends, and she would have whispered to me the reason she had stopped dancing that night, and I would have told her it—whatever it was—would be all right. Then we could have gone on with life and saved Palestine together. We could have spent the rest of our lives trying, at least.

I flushed the toilet again so no one would hear me cry.

# The Five-Star Occupation

2011

NAOMI ZEVELOFF

To make the ten mile trip from Jerusalem into Ramallah, the de facto capital of the Palestinian West Bank, one must pass through Qalandia checkpoint, a forbidding concrete apparatus with a tall gray watchtower—the very embodiment of Michel Foucault’s Panopticon—from which an Israeli soldier peers down on Palestinians as they come and go. The checkpoint is flanked on either side by Israel’s security wall, meant to deter Palestinian suicide bombers from crossing into Israel. The wall looks like the sound barriers that border American highways; in portions it is topped by looping concertina wire and painted with political graffiti—images of the late Palestinian founding father Yasser Arafat and his jailed comrade Marwan Barghouti.

On the other side of the checkpoint, in Ramallah, the rumble of jackhammers and bulldozers fills the air. Every block in Ramallah seems to be under renovation, as if the city’s 40 thousand inhabitants decided to rebuild the city at once, rising collectively from the ashes of the second

intifada to erect a new façade. Ramallah's half-built edifices are easy to confuse with the battle-torn structures of the past; those crumbled buildings sprout tubes of bent rebar and seem to populate the city in equal volume.

Downtown, Ramallah is bustling. The city's commercial and geographical center is shaped like a starfish, with five arteries meeting at Al Manara square, a plaza surrounded by four concrete lions, each said to represent one of the families who originally settled the city. Every day, the city's population more than doubles in size; villagers from the surrounding area arrive to buy and sell goods. Fruit and vegetable vendors—mostly young men from northern Palestine—hawk Israeli carrots, dates, tangerines, and eggplants. Coffee sellers with red fezzes on their heads pour Arabic coffee from elaborate silver vessels. Teenage girls peruse shop windows. Money-changers shift eagerly outside of a juice bar, and buses and shared taxi cabs roll in and out of the central station.

Across town, in the city's diplomatic district, is Ramallah's first five-star hotel, the \$42.6 million Mövenpick Hotel Ramallah, which opened less than two years ago. Operated by a Swiss company with outposts in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, the Mövenpick is meant to look like the ancient walled city of Jerusalem, with a cylindrical white stone turret topped by ornamental notches. The hotel hosts some of Ramallah's high profile businessmen, like the CEO of Wataniya Mobile, a Qatari-funded telecommunications company that recently opened shop in Palestine.

Nearby are Palestine's first Curves, an American-brand fitness center for women, its first bowling alley, and its first sushi restaurant, all inside the Caesar Hotel. The owner, Jamal Nimer, is also financing the construction of

Ramallah's tallest building, a twenty-five-story Days Inn. Just north of the city is one of Palestine's major investments. The Palestine Investment Fund—the government's sovereign wealth fund—recently broke ground on the \$400 million Eرسال Center, slated to hold another five-star hotel, several high-end condominiums, a shopping center, two banks, and Palestine's first national park. "The Eرسال Center," Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is quoted as saying in the project's brochure, "is a beacon of economic revival in Palestine."

The city's last economic surge occurred in 1993 when the Oslo Accords galvanized Palestinian state building efforts. What is different about today's rush of economic activity—which began around 2008 and has intensified since, and which I witnessed first hand when I visited a year and a half ago—is that it is occurring independently of any political agreement with Israel for Palestinian independence. Ramallah is a cosmopolitan city, in an entity without borders or currency, a burgeoning metropolis adrift in the murkiest of political waters.

There is no simple explanation for Ramallah's economic crescendo; Palestinian economists, businessmen, and commentators speculate that many factors are at play. First and foremost, Israel has eased restrictions on the movement of people and goods throughout the West Bank by lifting checkpoints and roadblocks. A pledged \$7.4 billion uptick in foreign aid spurred the Palestinian government to spend on a series of ambitious infrastructure projects, helmed by the internationally popular Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. Reforms in the Palestinian banking sector freed up capital for small business loans. And relative political calm encouraged private investment. The international press called the



resulting phenomenon—a proliferation of luxury cars, condominiums, new businesses, pre-planned neighborhoods, and the creation of two new private equity funds—the “Ramallah boom.”

Both Fayyad and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have made Palestinian revival a major facet of their national plans, calling economic growth a prerequisite to Palestinian statehood. But the growth has yet to spread beyond Ramallah. Even in the city, the plan has only mixed support.

Some Palestinians see the boom as a perversion of the Palestinian independence movement, an indication that the government has given up its political program in favor of meaningless economic reforms. Forty-four years into the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with a peace plan nowhere in sight, the Ramallah boom looks more like an attempt to placate a battle-worn Palestinian populace than to prepare for its independence. “It is a five-star occupation,” a skeptical Palestinian businessman named Sam Bahour told me. “It gives the impression to the outside world that everything is OK in Palestine.”

Others disagree. Palestine Investment Fund CEO Mohammad Mustafa sees the Ramallah boom as an example of Palestinian economic prowess under the constraints of the Israeli occupation. Since the Israeli government controls Palestinian borders, airspace, and water, Ramallah’s new façade is a taste of what the Palestinians might do if they could grow their economy unencumbered. “If the occupations goes away, we can do anything,” Mustafa said. “We can be like Dubai, like New York, like Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, or like Istanbul.”

Jihad Al Wazir, head of the Palestinian central bank,

shares this more optimistic view. “To be a Palestinian is to be like Sisyphus,” he said. “You push the stone to the top of the mountain and it goes back down. Up and down and up and down. Now we are very close to the top. Will the Israelis allow us to have a state and put the boulder on top or will they let it roll back down?”

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Long before Ramallah became “the first Palestinian metropolis,” as Birzeit University sociologist Lisa Taraki calls it, the city was a small, inconsequential village, battered about by the historical winds that shaped the Holy Land.

Ramallah was permanently settled by a pair of brothers named Rashed and Sabra Haddadeen, sometime in the sixteenth century. The two were Christian landowners; they fled their home in Transjordan after a bloody feud with a powerful Muslim leader. They arrived in Palestine and set up an encampment on a hill—Ramallah. Rashed eventually returned to Transjordan, but his five sons stayed, making up the city’s five original families.

Over the next several hundred years, Ramallah’s population grew. A group of Quakers visiting from Britain opened two schools in Ramallah—one for girls and one for boys—establishing the city as an academic hub in greater Palestine. In the early twentieth century, the region came under British control. In the 1940s, Ramallah became home to Palestinian refugees who fled what is now Israel in the war for a Jewish state.

In 1967, Israel wrested control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from Jordan and Egypt, integrated Palestinian workers into the Israeli economy, flooded the Palestinian market with Israeli goods, and planted Israeli settlements in the territories. Twenty years later, Ramallah

residents—along with scores of others across the Palestinian territories—rose up against the Israeli occupation. The first intifada lasted six years and left nearly 200 Israelis dead, more than one thousand Palestinians dead, and many more Palestinians imprisoned.

But the first intifada also gave way to the event that would change life in Ramallah forever: a peace agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The 1993 Oslo Accords were meant to create a framework for a Palestinian state that would finally put an end to the longstanding conflict with Israel. The Oslo Accords provided some degree of economic freedom to the Palestinian government—allowing it to create a monetary authority and to impose taxes on its citizens—but Israel maintained control over the borders, collecting taxes on items headed to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The agreement required Israel to distribute these revenues to the Palestinian government, but it withheld them when politically expedient.

Still, Palestinians living abroad—many of whom made good money in America—saw the Oslo Accords as an opportunity to return to the territories and build their state. Ramallah was one of the few areas where Palestinians could build without Israeli permission. And build, they did. Downtown Ramallah bloomed with restaurants and shops. Palestinians established the first telecommunications company, Paltel, which today employs some three thousand people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The first Palestinian radio and TV stations began broadcasting there. Ramallah embodied the dream of statehood, Palestine's first cosmopolitan city, its first taste of normal life after years of ambiguity and violence.

But the dream imploded seven years after the Oslo

Accords. Disillusionment with the slow-moving peace process—and the murder of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the hands of a right-wing extremist—led to the second intifada, a wave of Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel's major cities.

The Israeli military retaliated with raids and curfews. In the West Bank in 2002 there was a hundred-day curfew, punctuated by daily reprieves during which Palestinians could shop for groceries or run other errands. Economic activity in Ramallah largely stopped. The Israeli military tore through the city in its search for Palestinian militants, leaving a trail of utter devastation in its wake: bashed windows, cracked doors, toppled chairs, and bullet-ridden walls.

The fact that Ramallah rose so rapidly only to be torn down within a matter of months had a disquieting effect on the city's residents. Many people in Ramallah see the city's current economic spurt as ephemeral in nature; to live a prosperous life in Ramallah is to be in constant fear of what might be lost. "Israel can turn this boom into misery in twenty-four hours," Dr. Samir Abdullah, an economist with the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute, told me. Today, the possibility of economic renewal under Israeli occupation inspires a mix of reactions in Ramallah's residents: guilt for leading a better life than those outside the city, denial that the growth exists, and even fear that it is part of some vast conspiracy to keep the Palestinians quiet. "We feel like there is a plan to bring money into Palestine," Nada Ennab, a twenty-one-year-old cashier at a Ramallah coffee shop told me. With their new-found wealth, she feared, "people will start neglecting the political issues."

The second intifada forced Palestinians to probe their

feelings about economic growth under occupation. But it also—counter-intuitively—planted the seeds for the Ramallah boom. As Israel closed off the West Bank border in an effort to deter suicide bombers, East Jerusalem—once a vibrant market for Palestinian goods—became isolated from other Palestinian cities. According to a 2010 report in the *Jerusalem Post*, more than a hundred Palestinian businesses relocated from East Jerusalem to Ramallah. Many Palestinian aid organizations based in Jerusalem engaged in a similar migration. And individuals who had once commuted from Gaza to Ramallah for work ended up relocating their families to Ramallah when the Israeli closures made the trek impossible. Ramallah was expanding in spite of its wounds.

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Sam Bahour moved to Ramallah in 1994 with the flood of expats who came back in the wake of the Oslo Accords. Born in Ohio, Bahour was instrumental in bringing the first telecommunications company, PalTel, and the first chain of Western style grocery stores, Bravo, to the West Bank. But he soured on the idea of development as the years dragged on and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict grew ever more intractable. He likes to tell his personal story of trying to obtain Palestinian citizenship—he spent his first fifteen years in Palestine with a tourist visa that forced him to leave and come back every three months—as an example of the way that Israel controls the day to day lives of Palestinians, even wealthy ones like himself. Everything seems fine in Ramallah, Bahour once told me, but consider the fact that no one in the city can go to the beach for a vacation without getting permission.

In Bahour's eyes, the Ramallah boom should be considered nothing more than a flurry of "economic

activity”—not to be confused with real economic development—a series of projects to increase employment in the region and keep Palestinian youth from leaving to seek better lives overseas. For him, it’s not a state building effort, and it has nothing to do with the peace process. Before we met in Ramallah, I asked him on the telephone about Bravo, which had recently opened its tenth supermarket in Nablus, a town north of Ramallah. “How is this news?” Bahour asked me, his voice elevating. “There is this artificial pumping up of every small economic activity here, so that the opening up of a supermarket becomes a major news story.”

Nonetheless, when I arrived in Ramallah in December 2010, I asked Bahour to take me to the first Bravo store one afternoon. The grocery store is located inside of the Plaza Shopping Center, a mall on the outskirts of the city. Bahour had a hand in the construction of the mall and later managed it for the Arab-Palestinian Shopping Centers Company, a subsidiary of one of Palestine’s largest investment groups.

Bahour, who is in his late forties, is a very tall man with a closely cropped ring of hair around his bald head. Unlike most businessmen in Ramallah, he dresses casually in slacks and a button-down shirt, a leather jacket zipped over his imposing belly. Bahour ushered me inside the mall and told me to look at the ceiling, a series of curved metal planks that looked like the roof of a barn. When Bahour bought the roof from Jordan, he asked the company that sold it to him to send along a team of engineers to assemble it; this was the first time such a ceiling had been used in a commercial, rather than an industrial, setting. “After the intifada, the Israelis refused to give the Jordanian installers visas, so the product reached us and no one knew how to

install it.” The Jordanians faxed directions to Bahour’s engineers in Ramallah, guiding them over the phone. The mall was finally completed in 2003.

Then Bahour brought me into Bravo. “For you and I, this is not going to be a groundbreaking experience,” he said as we walked into the brightly lit store. He was right. The shop looked like any other grocery store I had been to in America and like several I had seen in Israel—wide aisles for carts, produce displays lining the periphery, and a separate small bakery. “When I came in 1994, the traditional way of shopping in Palestine was to go to multiple stores,” he said. “You go to a butcher, you go to a chicken store, you go to the nuts store, you go to the roaster.” But he figured that the burgeoning expat community that had returned with Oslo would appreciate this one-stop-shop and its curious Western particularities, like frozen food.

Bahour showed me around Bravo, and he pointed to a shelf of Palestinian products—mainly olive oil and olives in small, nondescript jars. Before he opened the store, a group of activists contacted Bahour and implored him to carry exclusively Palestinian products. “They said, ‘Listen, you are building a landmark economic project and you can take a stand by refusing to hold any Israeli products, period,’” he recalled. “Remember, this was the intifada and things were tense. We had already decided not to hold settlement products. But as long as the market as a whole is trading in Israeli products, we thought we would not be able to stay in business if we didn’t have Israeli products.”

Bahour deliberately placed Palestinian products next to similar Israeli ones so that the customer could choose between the two. Bahour pointed to a package of frozen peas and carrots from Israel, wrapped in a shiny plastic bag with bright Hebrew lettering. Next to it was the Palestinian

equivalent, a sad looking transparent pouch of frost-bitten vegetables with washed-out Arabic writing. “It is good for me that Palestinian suppliers see their products next to more mature products so they can develop quicker,” he said. “You can see that some of them have a way to go.”

On opening day, the mall was so crowded that Bahour rented out an additional parking lot to accommodate all of the visitors. At first, it seemed that Bahour had done the impossible—here was a success story in the midst of the second intifada. But the project was not immune to the violence that engulfed Ramallah in that period. At one point, Israeli soldiers used the grocery store as a detention center for suspected Palestinian militants.

Bahour told me that soldiers rifled through his home on two occasions. During the intifada, it was common for Israeli soldiers to set up temporary bases in homes throughout different neighborhoods. Some soldiers used the homes of people who were out of town, but other times they asked the families to remain cordoned in a single room for the duration of their stay. Bahour said that his neighbor’s home was picked as an outpost for a week, and so the soldiers searched his house—once early in the morning and once at night—to make sure the block was free of fighters. Sometimes the soldiers cleaned up after themselves when the surveillance period was over, but others left Palestinian homes in disarray. Bahour said that one friend—another high profile businessman—found a smear of human feces when he opened the lid of his copy machine.

Bahour originally planned to replicate the Plaza mall in every governorate in the West Bank. But the Arab-Palestinian Shopping Centers Company halted the project



at the height of the intifada. Disgusted, Bahour left the company.

“I wasn’t going to wait until the political crisis ended.” When the company resumed construction, it placed several freestanding grocery stores around the West Bank. The reproduction of a full mall would have been too risky.

“I will always remember when we first opened,” he said. “A traditionally dressed woman came and thanked me and said, ‘The reason I like it is, when I bring my kids, here I feel normal.’ What we were trying to do is bring some sense of normalcy to a beaten and battered people. That makes me feel very proud. But is the establishment of a grocery store a big step forward for our state? I don’t think it is. A big step forward would be to have a port at our sea in Gaza, to have our own airport, to have control of our borders, to have the ability to freely trade. Those are the tools for state building.”

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Bahour told me that I had to leave Ramallah in order to understand the reality of the Palestinian economy. So one Friday morning in January 2011, I hopped into a *servees*—the Palestinian term for a shared taxi—and made my way to a city called Jenin in the northern West Bank.

Jenin is home to one of the region’s largest refugee camps, a city in and of itself of ten thousand people, mostly individuals whose families fled Haifa after the 1948 War. The refugee camp is known in greater Palestine as the “martyr’s capital” because during the second intifada, it produced more than two dozen suicide bombers.

Jenin was eerily quiet when I arrived. I suspected that this was because it was Friday, the Muslim day of rest. Bahour was right—the city looked nothing like Ramallah. Or, better yet, it looked like Ramallah would if it were completely stripped of these years of development. Here

were the same crumbling grayish brown buildings, the same haphazard streets, and a rickety bus station connecting Jenin to the greater West Bank. Jenin is the same size as Ramallah—it has around 39 thousand people—but it boasts none of the hotels, fitness centers, or shimmering office buildings that mark Ramallah as a commercial center.

I took a taxi into Jenin's refugee camp, which is administered by the United Nations, and walked around. The streets were nearly empty but for a few old men shuffling around in slippers, one of them missing an eye. I could hear the voices of children from inside some of the dilapidated gray homes; there were posters of child martyrs everywhere.

I walked to the Freedom Theater, a small community theater founded by a film actor named Juliano Mer-Khamis to provide a creative outlet for the camp's youth. The son of a Palestinian father and a Jewish Israeli mother, Mer-Khamis lived in the camp with his pregnant wife and their child.

I knocked on the theater's door and Mer-Khamis invited me in for lunch with his students, who were in the midst of rehearsing for *Alice in Wonderland*. A handsome, gray-haired man with a booming voice, Mer-Khamis dominated the room like a taskmaster, ordering the students to bring out plates of pita and hummus and clean them up just as quickly. I sat down with him and told him that I was visiting from Ramallah. He snorted, saying he wished that he were in Ramallah. Jenin, it seemed, had been unkind to the Freedom Theater. A gang of boys had condemned the Freedom Theater in the past, throwing Molotov cocktails at the door. Now they were after the city's one youth hostel, an old converted church adjacent to a cinema. For the past two

nights, Mer-Khamis said, the young men had lobbed more Molotovs at the hostel, leaving a scathing note.

Less than three months later, I would learn, Mer-Khamis was shot five times by a masked gunman outside of the theater. He was buried on the other side of the border, at an Israeli kibbutz.

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Next I went to Jerusalem, to see what had become of the holy city that Palestinians so cherished as their would-be capital. Some Palestinian activists believed that the Palestinian Authority had symbolically ceded Jerusalem by building up the city of Ramallah, which serves as the West Bank's administrative capital. When Al Jazeera published the "Palestine Papers," a trove of secret documents revealing that in 2008 the Palestinian negotiating team offered to cede large tracts of East Jerusalem, it seemed to confirm their fears. So, too, did the Palestinian Authority's decision to consolidate its offices in a sparkling \$40 million facility in Ramallah.

I was in Jerusalem for not ten minutes before stumbling upon a picture of Palestinian collapse. A crowd of journalists had gathered outside of the Shepherd Hotel in Sheikh Jarrah, an Arab neighborhood in East Jerusalem where dozens of Palestinians have been evicted from their homes in recent years. A large yellow crane was slowly carving away the top of the hotel, knocking off sand-colored bricks and sprinkling passersby with a fine layer of dust. As chunks of the building fell to the ground, a photographer ran across the street to snap a photo of the building. An oncoming bus filled with women in hijab slowed in front of the demolition.

The hotel—a symbol of Palestinian nationalism—was originally built as a residence for the Grand Mufti of

Jerusalem, a man named Haj Amin Al-Husseini who famously led several uprisings against Jewish immigration to British Palestine in the 1920s and '30s and who met with Hitler to ask for his help in blocking the creation of a Jewish state. Though Husseini never lived there—he transferred the property to his secretary, George Antonius—some Israelis and American Jews saw the hotel as an incarnation of anti-Semitism. In 1985 the hotel was purchased by Irving Moskowitz, a Florida millionaire, with the intent of turning it and several other East Jerusalem properties into Jewish housing complexes. After years of wrangling between Moskowitz and the Jerusalem municipality, Moskowitz was granted permission to build last year.

As the crane bit deeper into the building, construction workers began stapling plastic partitions to a chain link fence surrounding the hotel, obscuring the view of the demolition. By mid morning, East Jerusalem's dignitaries and activists had arrived: a teary Dyala Husseini, descendent of the grand mufti, Adnan Husseini, the beleaguered and politically powerless Palestinian-appointed Governor of Jerusalem, Itamar Haritan, a clean-shaven Israeli peacenik, Nasser Ghawi, the unofficial spokesman for the evicted families of Sheikh Jarrah, and Muhammad Ahmad Hussein, the current mufti of Jerusalem, looking not unlike his antecedent in a traditional white, flat-topped hat.

I approached Dyala, who looked like a bit like Jackie Onassis, wrapped in a long beige coat with a pair of large black sunglasses perched on her face. She was so choked up she could barely speak, and kept apologizing as the words came out. "We know that we can live with the Israelis. But they don't care," she said. "Israel wants to empty Jerusalem of the Palestinians."

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When I returned to Ramallah, I visited the opulent Mövenpick Hotel, its notched stone turret designed to mimic Jerusalem's hallowed white walls. Here was the oasis within the oasis, the very development that had earned Ramallah its nickname as the "five-star occupation."

I walked through the Mövenpick's sliding glass doors and headed up the marble steps into the main hall. There was a photo of Yasser Arafat on the wall. He was wearing his signature keffiyeh, wiry hair sprouting higgledy-piggledy across the lower half of his face. This was clearly a photo taken in old age, when the intifada had worn his spirits to a nub. The way the photo was positioned, Arafat seemed to be staring with utter disdain at a string of decorative glass balls that cascaded from the ceiling of the Mövenpick.

The photo of Yasser Arafat, in fact, was the Mövenpick's only reminder of the Palestinian dream of statehood, and really, of Palestine at all. The hotel had the effect of making the Israeli occupation vanish completely. I could have been in Abu Dhabi. I could have been in Tel Aviv.

But perhaps that was the allure of the Mövenpick, and the secret to the Ramallah boom. The Ramallah boom—which had perplexed and delighted and angered so many people in this tiny, contested strip of land—was the only instance of Westernized, highbrow normalcy in the whole of Palestinian life. Ramallah is the de facto capital of Palestine, but beneath that, it is something else: a place to pretend that one is no longer Palestinian.

I thought back to the demolition of the Shepherd Hotel in East Jerusalem. Standing there, coated in dust, I turned to Dyala Hussein, who was watching one of her great

family's relics disappear before her eyes. I asked her what she made of Ramallah's expansion.

"We go to Ramallah to breathe," she said.

# Journey to the Other

An interview with Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, 2011

MOHAMMED S. DAJANI DAUDI

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi's ancestors include custodians of King David's tomb, two mayors of Jerusalem, and an assassinated peace activist. Dajani, a Palestinian professor of political science, non-violent activist, and founder of al-Wasatia, a moderate Islamic movement, is actively upholding this lineage.

Born in Jerusalem in 1946, Dajani experienced the ramifications of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war firsthand. As Israelis took over Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem, his family fled to Egypt, only to return as refugees in 1949. After the 1967 war, during which Dajani was separated from his family, he joined the ranks of Fatah, which advocated for the liberation of Palestine through armed struggle, and trained as a guerilla.

In 1970, Dajani's passport was revoked by Jordan during the so-called Black September civil war, and in 1975 he was deported from Lebanon to Syria. Disappointed by the corruption he observed within Fatah, he took the opportunity to "divorce" politics and "marry" academics.

He then, on an Algerian passport he was granted, traveled to the United States to complete a series of advanced degrees, including a master's in social science at Eastern Michigan University, a PhD in government from the University of South Carolina at Columbia, and a PhD in political economy from the University of Texas at Austin. In 1985, King Hussein of Jordan issued Dajani a pardon, allowing him to return to Amman, where he worked at the Applied Science University as chair of the political science and diplomacy department.

In 1993, after twenty-five years of exile from Israel because of his activities with Fatah, Dajani obtained a family reunion permit to return to Jerusalem, where his father, sick with cancer, was undergoing chemotherapy. Observing his father's treatment by Israeli medical practitioners, and later his mother's treatment for an asthma attack, Dajani saw what he had previously thought impossible: tolerance, respect, and care for Palestinian patients by Israelis.

During Ramadan in late 2006, Dajani witnessed a group of Palestinians on their way to pray at al-Aqsa mosque being blocked from crossing a checkpoint at Dahiet al-Barid by Israeli soldiers. Expecting the conflict to turn violent, he watched in surprise as the parties came to an agreement spontaneously and peacefully, with the soldiers providing busses to drive the Muslims to the mosque.

Inspired by these events, Dajani founded al-Wasatia in January 2007, a movement that calls for pluralism, non-violence, and reconciliation, with a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Old City of Jerusalem internationalized, and religious tolerance within a democratic Palestine. In March of 2014, the movement made international headlines when Dajani, then a



professor at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, led the first ever group of students from the Palestinian territories to visit Holocaust sites at Krakow and Auschwitz.

The backlash to Dajani's visit to Poland was swift in the West Bank. Protests erupted on Al-Quds University's campus, he received death threats and was called a "traitor" and a "collaborator," and the school released a statement distancing itself from its employee. In May, Dajani submitted a letter to the university resigning from his posts as rector of libraries and director of the American studies graduate program. He has said this was intended as a kind of litmus test to see if the university would reject his resignation and take a stance in support of academic freedom. Instead, the school accepted it.

Dajani talked to me via Skype from Washington, DC, where he is currently a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. A secular Muslim with a collection of many translations of the Quran, Dajani speaks calmly and deliberately. A year after his contentious trip to Auschwitz, he continues to receive threats to his safety—just a week prior to our interview, his car was set ablaze in front of his home in the Beit Hanina neighborhood of East Jerusalem. Despite such devastating obstacles, he is firm in his commitment to working toward reconciliation and peace in his homeland. "They sent us a message to terrorize us," Dajani explained. "And we sent them a message that we will not be terrorized."

—*Tiffanie Wen for Guernica*

**Guernica:** Can you explain the ideology of Wasatia?

**Mohammed Dajani Daoudi:** The idea of Wasatia is to bring moderation to the forefront. There has been an escalation of radicalism and extremism, particularly in religion in recent years, which has affected politics. The

most radical interpretations of religion are becoming more popular. I don't know why, I don't know what's going on with the masses, that they enjoy radical rhetoric and extremist ideology more than a moderate approach. You talk to them rationally, logically, with objectivity, and you may only reach a few among them, the elite who have their eyes fixed on the future. The rest are intoxicated with the glories and fantasies of a past that would never come back. But to reach the masses, it's important to make moderation more appealing by talking to them in a language they revere and respect, that of religion and not politics or philosophy. In Palestine and the Islamic world, the language of the Quran is the language that reaches people. So the goal of Wasatia is to promote moderation, and the way we do that is by studying the Quran and teaching its peaceful and humane message.

Unfortunately, Islam has been hijacked by radicals through misinterpretation and misrepresentation. That's what inspired me to embark on my Wasatia initiative in January 2007. It's not the first of its kind. There have been others in different times and places, people who wrote about the concept of Wasatia in Islam and urged Muslims to adhere to that middle-ground path. But what is different between us and them is that we are not only advocating moderation within Islam but rather moderation as a common value within all religions, so that all religions can work for moderation and humanity.

So we want Wasatia to do two things: first, to bring people together within the one community in love, harmony, and cooperation; and, second, to bridge the gap between different cultures and civilizations. Moderation is a value that all religions call for and all religions believe it, and so we should all practice it. And in practicing it,

actually, we can have peace within us and between us rather than conflict. I believe that moderation in this way will usher in reconciliation. And then it will not be understood as a clash of civilizations, but rather a dialogue of civilizations, which would lead us to a life of cooperation and prosperity.

**Guernica:** What does the word “Wasatia” mean? What are its roots in the Quran?

**Daoudi:** The word “Wasatia” comes from the Arabic root *wasat*. Linguistically, the word means “center”—like the center of a circle or middle of a road. However, religiously speaking, *wasat* is justice, tolerance, temperance, middle ground, and centrism. The term itself, *wasat*, is mentioned in the Quran more than once.

In the second chapter, or *surah*, it is in verse 143. It says, “We have created you *ummatan wasata* [a moderate nation].” It is interesting that this verse is number 143, while the whole chapter is composed of 286 verses. So it comes right in the middle and it symbolizes the concept of moderation, centrism, and middle ground. We believe this embodies the true spirit of Islam.

We refer to the Quran to support the notion of moderation. And from there we show that the Quran teaches us that Muslims are not in collision with other religions. Islam is not here to replace Christianity, or Judaism, or any other religion, but to complement them. Because the Quran instructs that God will guide whomever He desires and that if God wished, He would’ve made all humanity one nation or had everyone speak one language or have one religion. But that was not His intention. He created us as different tribes, different languages, different people, different faiths. So that we would get acquainted and cooperate with each other.

**Guernica:** I understand you joined Fatah in the late 1960s. Can you tell me about that time?

**Daoudi:** My experience of joining and working for Fatah was most fulfilling and enriching. During those years, from 1967 to 1975, I was living most of the time in Beirut, which at the time enjoyed an educational, artistic, and cultural renaissance. It was an enlightening experience for me.

The American University of Beirut was the Harvard of the Middle East. It was the most advanced, academically and intellectually, in the region at the time. It had one of the best libraries; it had a highly intellectual selection of professors teaching, and a very high quality of students from the wider region. You had students from all over—Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, and even Europe. It was a cauldron for ideas. You could be a Maoist, a communist, or a capitalist.

There were also writers from all over the Arab World who were publishing books at a high volume and they would come to Lebanon and share their cultural, political, philosophical, or artistic experiences. Artists were coming to work there, freely, until the civil war in 1975. There were hundreds of restaurants, dozens of daily newspapers and magazines being published reflecting a spectrum of views. It was a cultured society and living there was an awakening experience. I was exposed to so many views and new ideas.

My motivation to join Fatah was idealism. However, when idealism clashed with real politics, I opted out.

**Guernica:** What attracted you to Fatah, specifically?

**Daoudi:** Before 1967, I considered myself an Arab nationalist and believed in the liberation of Palestine through the unity of all the Arab regimes. The Palestinian catastrophe of 1948 filled me with hatred, rage, and anger against Israel, making me feel, “It is us or them.” But after

the 1967 war with Israel proved that the Arab regimes were inferior to the Israeli army, many Palestinians at the time, including myself, shifted from Arab nationalism to a primary Palestinian identity. I joined Fatah because it reflected the idea that no one would liberate Palestine except the Palestinians. We believed it was to be a revolutionary war and Palestine would be liberated from the inside.

However, once we began our work, in reality, I realized that it was not about achieving this model state, because within the structure of the movement itself, there was no democracy. Instead, there were abuses of power and corruption. So my idealism started to collapse and I began to understand my reality. The reality is that in order to survive in a movement like [Fatah], you either have to become like them, or you opt out—if you can, because they might not allow you to leave.

When I joined Fatah, I viewed politics and ethics as distinct but complementary spheres. However, my revolutionary experience with Fatah taught me ethics and politics are incompatible and that there is a wide gap between them. When I reached that conclusion, the only thing that was left for me to do was to leave politics and move on in the sphere of education. Justice and ethics could be compatible but politics and ethics are far from being compatible, as I had discovered during these revolutionary years in Beirut.

**Guernica:** What came next for you?

**Daoudi:** I was lucky to have the opportunity to travel to the United States, where I studied and lived for ten years. It was a sobering experience, where education and the democratic-liberal culture facilitated my transition to non-violent, pluralistic work. It was refreshing to be in the

United States and away from the charged politics of the region, and to see the democratic system working in the United States.

I also had two great intellectual mentors: professors Carl Leiden and James Bill, who had a great influence on me and guided my American experience. I think mentors are very important and influential. If you have a revolutionary mentor, you will be a revolutionary; if you have intellectual mentors, like I did, you will be an intellectual.

It is also important to note that, in the 1960s, the dominant intellectualism and flourishing nationalism in Beirut were directed against the United States, as the imperialist power usurping Arab resources and wealth, and supporting Arab dictatorships and reactionary regimes. Israel was an implant in the heart of the Arab nation to be a base for Western powers to colonize the Arab world. So to be pro-American or to accept the idea of negotiations, reconciliation, or peace with Israel was considered treason to the Arab cause. In 1966, I was a student at the American University of Beirut when the founder and editor of the Lebanese daily *Al-Hayat*, Kamel Mrowa, a Lebanese Shia Muslim, was assassinated by a Nasserite who walked into his office and shot him in cold blood. The image of his crying daughter, Hayat, after whom the newspaper was named, is still vivid in my mind. The assassination was linked to the newspaper's criticism of Egyptian President Nasser and the Arab nationalist movement. There were more than ten bombing attempts to close the newspaper.

**Guernica:** You were banned from Jerusalem for more than two decades because of your work with Fatah. What was it like to return? And how did it influence the shift in your ideology?

**Daoudi:** Being banned from Jerusalem for twenty-five

years made me feel like the wandering traveler moving from one country to another without the roots to settle down. I lived in wonderful places but never felt I belonged. It even affected my attitude toward marriage. I was worried that a foreign wife and a family might become an obstacle preventing me from returning to my homeland.

I went back to my homeland in 1993, on a family reunion permit issued by Israel, because my father was suffering from cancer. I started to accompany my father to his chemotherapy at Ein Kerem Israeli hospital, to find that other Palestinian patients along with my father were receiving medical treatment on an equal level as the Israelis. A similar episode helped open my eyes to the human side of the other, wherein Israeli medics struggled to save the life of my mother.

I believe that, prior to 1967, the evil in the other had opened the gates of my heart and ushered out the evil in me: “It is us or them.” But through these experiences, the good in the other opened the gates of my heart and ushered out the good in me, making me feel, “It is us *and* them.”

**Guernica:** You’ve said that radicals have misinterpreted the Quran in numerous ways. Can you give some examples?

**Daoudi:** Radicals have taken the Quran and used it to advance their political platform by changing the terminologies within the Quran. To Muslims, the Quran is considered the word of God. You can’t add, modify, or take away anything from it, so radicals play with the interpretation, *tafseer*.

As one example, the Quran says that the religion to God is Islam, so extremists are teaching our children that Islam came to replace all other religions, and God has preference for one faith over the two other heavenly religions. But if you read the Quran carefully, it says that Abraham was

*hanif*, which, in a way, means a Muslim; that Moses spoke to his people and his people said they were *Muslimun*; and that Jesus spoke to his disciples and they said they were *Muslimun*, in that they were believers of God.

So here, in Arabic, Islam means two things: one is a noun—Islam the faith—and the other is a verb meaning to surrender yourself to God, to believe in God, to have peace in God, and to worship God. If you use Islam as a noun, then it is exclusive. It excludes Christianity and Judaism. If you are using it as a verb, then it is inclusive.

Wasatia comes in order to help people see such misinterpretations of the Quran and to show them the true values of Islam. The values of Islam are similar to the values of other religions. If you take the Ten Commandments, for example, you will tend to find it embodies all there is in any other religion—don't kill, don't lie, don't steal. There isn't any religion that instructs the followers to kill or to lie or to steal.

**Guernica:** How does Wasatia fit into the broader political and social landscape of Palestine?

**Daoudi:** In Palestine you find that there are three broad segments within society on the political and religious levels. On the right end of the spectrum, you will find twelve to fifteen religious Islamic parties—Salafists advocating a clash of civilizations. They focus on the precedence of Islam over the other two heavenly religions and focus on the ascendancy of the Prophet over the other prophets God has sent, in disharmony with the text of the Quran. And they constitute 5 to 10 percent of the Palestinian community. The second segment of society lies on the left. There are more than forty secular parties in Palestine. They call for secular ideologies such as democracy or socialism, or communism. They make a strict separation between



religion and state. They don't have a place for religion within their ideology. And they constitute 35 to 40 percent of the Palestinian community. The rest in the middle are the oscillating silent majority, more than 50 percent of the people—they are Muslims and moderate. They're not extremists, they're centrist.

There are nearly 1.5 billion Muslims in the world. I believe that the extremists who are terrorizing people would account for no more than 50,000. However, because the media gives them so much attention, they're being equated with the other more than billion people and are viewed as the representatives of the Muslim *umma* [community]. Perhaps 90 percent of Muslims around the world don't pray five times a day, but that doesn't mean that they're not religious. It is a private matter between them and God. It means their style of life or the way they behave or express their faith is their concern and not that of others. They are believers and Muslims and when Islam is under attack they would stand up to defend it. Radicals are denying them their Muslim identity because they don't grow beards or follow their path.

**Guernica:** Do you see Wasatia eventually becoming a political entity?

**Daoudi:** This is our goal: to make Wasatia a political entity where the state won't be secular like the United States, or a religious state like Iran, but rather a middle-of-the-road state, in the sense that the state will embody ethical and moral religious values, but not be ruled by clerics or the Sharia Islamic laws.

At the same time, the state is hands off religion. People should have full freedom to worship and exercise their right to express themselves freely. For instance, there are Muslims, Jews, and Christians in the state of Palestine, so

we should allow people to observe the holy days for the three religions. They should also have the right to build their own holy shrines, mosques, synagogues, or churches where they can exercise prayers freely. That's the model we are advocating.

**Guernica:** Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party recently received a surprise victory in the March elections in Israel. Days before the election, Netanyahu publicly reversed his support for a two-state solution when he told an Israeli reporter there would be no Palestinian state under his leadership. As Netanyahu attempts to build a coalition, how do you see Palestinians responding?

**Daoudi:** On the political level, the Israeli elections brought a right-wing government with no interest in making peace. On the economic level, Israel's control of the borders, its withholding the taxes it collects every month on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, and the decrease in donor funding, have resulted in a deteriorating economy and rise of unemployment. The building of Jewish settlements on confiscated Palestinian lands continues and more Palestinian prisoners are being detained.

We need an Israeli leader with an embracing mentality, which views Israel as best defended by making peace, embracing its neighbors, and giving them a helping hand to move on with their daily lives as people and as human beings—not one with a *masada* [fortress] mentality, which views Israel as best defended by isolating itself in a bunker then committing suicide when the odds are too much to overcome. Preserving the status quo while waiting for the storm to pass is not a prudent strategic option and reflects a myopic vision.

The Palestinians were pinning their hope on an election victory by the Israeli moderates [that] would rejuvenate the

peace process. However, the election results made them lose their hope in having a viable peace partner in Israel, particularly with Netanyahu one day accepting the two-state solution, and the next rejecting it. He also openly rejects the sharing of Jerusalem as the joint capital of the two states.

To move ahead, Palestinians need to adopt a positive strategy for winning over the Israeli public to their cause and convincing the Israeli public that they genuinely want peace in order for them to vote for a party with a peace agenda. They ought not opt for taking the unproductive path of prosecuting Israel in international courts just to please the masses, since such a course would only solidify the feelings of enmity and hatred among Israelis, prolonging the occupation and delaying the prospect of declaring the independent state of Palestine.

**Guernica:** What would Palestine look like according to the principles of Wasatia?

**Daoudi:** Palestine would be a democratic state where people from different religions can live in peace and harmony, with equal rights and the same responsibilities. While secular parties separate between religion and state, the more orthodox Salafist Islamic parties want the state to be *khilafa*, dominated by religion. One is total separation, the other is total amalgamation. That's why Wasatia stands in the middle, building bridges between the state and religion, where the state is not dominated by religion, but is guided by the moral teaching of religion toward good governance of integrity, transparency, and accountability.

**Guernica:** How has the media attention following your controversial trip to Auschwitz last year affected your work?

**Daoudi:** The media is just like any other thing: it can be

useful and it can be harmful. Like dynamite, it can be used for peace or it can cause havoc and destruction. Similarly, a gun can be used to protect people from evil, or can be used to kill people. That's why in the United States you say, "Guns don't kill people; people kill people." It's the same with the media. When it informs and enlightens, it is positive, but when it fabricates, distorts, and incites, it has a negative influence.

During the last day of our visit to Auschwitz, *Haaretz* published an informative article about the trip, and other media picked it up. However, when the Palestinian online media picked it up, it misrepresented the facts in order to incite people against the trip and its organizers. For instance, *Haaretz* reported that two Holocaust survivors accompanied the students. The Palestinian news article said the trip was funded by two Zionist organizations, which is not true—*Haaretz* mentioned that the trip was funded by a German research foundation. Also, the Palestinian news article said that the Israeli universities organized the trip, while *Haaretz* explained that the trip was sponsored by the Freidrich Schiller University in Jena. Nothing was mentioned about Israeli students visiting 1948 refugee camps in the West Bank to show balance.

The Palestinian newspaper didn't have the professional courtesy to interview me to check their facts before publishing the article. They just published it as the translator forwarded it. When we tried to correct the facts, it was too late. On the Internet, the article received so many negative comments—to the extent that it became life-threatening to both me and the students who went on the trip—that the paper finally took it offline. It seems that the translator wanted to incite, so he translated the text

incorrectly. Once the paper published it and realized the mistake, they found it hard to go back and apologize.

However, the bottom line is that [the coverage] did more good than bad. We were able to explain to our people the aim of this educational experience and I believe that generally speaking the Palestinians supported us. We asked on the Wasatia website who would go if we organized a second trip, and 95 percent of respondents said they would.

**Guernica:** You, personally, though, are now unable to travel in the West Bank and speak and work as freely as you did before. You were forced to resign your job from Al-Quds University. And I understand you were recently the victim of an arson attack.

**Daoudi:** These developments affected my family, friends, and students. When my car was torched, it was around midnight, so the whole family and neighbors were shocked at what happened. The danger was the threat to the security of my family.

That day, my brother, with his son and daughter, picked me up from the Tel Aviv airport at Ben Gurion around 3:30 p.m., and we didn't realize that the perpetrators had poured chemicals into the motor of the car a few days before. They had poured this very strong wood glue on the motor of the car, to cause it to burn while driving. When you put it on the separation of the hood of the car, the chemicals seep into the wires, so when the car gets hot, it explodes. We were extremely lucky that, when we were driving, the car didn't get hot enough to explode.

We parked outside the house at around 7:30 p.m. and the perpetrators came around 11:30 p.m. and threw Molotov cocktails on [the car]. It took the firefighters four and a half hours to put the fire out. It was interesting, though, that a

copy of the Quran that was in the car didn't burn, though the entire car was demolished.

This incident affected the whole family and the work we do. But it is not frightening us to stop doing what we are doing. It is a warning sign. They sent us a message to terrorize us. And we sent them a message that we will not be terrorized. That's basically the bottom line. We will continue the work we do because it is something we believe in and we will not remain bystanders. On the contrary, we want to have bystanders stop being bystanders and become more vocal and expressive.

**Guernica:** One of the biggest criticisms leveled against you is that you are in favor of normalizing relations with Israel. How do you respond to that, and what is your position on the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement?

**Daoudi:** One thing my critics often say is that they are not against Wasatia and the concept of moderation, but they are against normalization of relations with Israel and the Israelis. But you cannot disconnect one from the other. If you believe in moderation, you believe in peace and reconciliation, and this would lead you to normalization, particularly on the human level. You can't make peace with the other without dialogue with the other.

If they want to boycott Israel economically, politically, socially, and academically, because in their view this would end the occupation and protest its expansionist settlement policies, they can exercise their right to do so. But why deny me my right to choose a different path for the same goal of ending the occupation and restoring Palestinian rights? If you boycott all Jews and all Israelis, those who are with you and those who are against you, this is anti-Semitism. But if you want to boycott the products of those settlements that

are built on Palestinian occupied territories, you will find many people to support you.

The problem is that anti-normalizers want to boycott everything, even academic joint ventures. But joint academic ventures are actually meant to get Israelis and Palestinians working together in peace, to make academic research a part of building trust. What's wrong with that? Let us do more of that. Maybe in doing so, we can bring people together and they can start to know each other better and to have trust in one another.

[Wasatia's] response to the anti-normalization boycott movement is that we should learn from the South African experience, not copy it. We do not believe in the dominant paradigm that reconciliation comes post-conflict resolution. We believe that reconciliation begins in the midst of conflict, paving the way for conflict settlement. When Nelson Mandela was elected president in South Africa, still there was not yet conflict resolution. He made a televised speech in which he urged his countryfolk to throw their weapons and hate and anger into the sea. "I'm your elected president and you need to let me lead you," he told them. Even his wife, Winnie Mandela, was advocating for violence at the time. And then, South Africa moved toward reconciliation and conflict resolution.

I believe in the idea that reconciliation should begin today, regardless of the conflict. If I sit with you at a table and I perceive you as my enemy and I perceive you as the devil and I don't trust you, then everything you say, even if you say, "Look, I want to withdraw," I will be suspicious [of], because there is no trust. We need to end the incitement against each other, the demonization of one another. They are obstacles to peace.

**Guernica:** You're in Washington, DC, for the next few

months as a visiting fellow with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. What are you currently working on?

**Daoudi:** I will be working on explaining the Wasatia vision and perspective. I feel it's so important that our message reaches the West. Since we started, we have tried to explain how radical teaching of Islam may hit home because the younger generations of Muslims are being brought up on the extremist teaching of religion, which would eventually become a threat to national security and general welfare of people. That's why it's so important to promote Wasatia in Europe and the US and wherever Islam lives. We want young Muslims to be brought up without this notion that jihad means to kill and to terrorize. We want young Muslims to understand that, on the contrary, jihad is meant as the struggle within.

**Guernica:** What are your plans after your stint in DC?

**Daoudi:** I have signed a memorandum of understanding with Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, by which the Wasatia Academic Institute, which we are establishing in Jerusalem, will offer a PhD program in reconciliation, ethics, conflict resolution, and comparative religion. It will be a three-year program—for the first two years, students will be hosted by the Wasatia Academic Institute. In the third year, they will go to Jena to defend their thesis and, if successful, get a PhD from the Friedrich Schiller University.

We are hoping that our graduates will go back to Palestine or Israel and teach reconciliation, so we will have professors who are specialists in peace and reconciliation research and education. It's not necessarily related to the Arab-Israeli conflict exclusively, but to conflict globally. We will teach about genocide, for example; how all genocides



are crimes against humanity. For instance, the Holocaust was a crime against humanity, not just against Jews.

We are also hoping that the mayor of Jena will help us establish Wasatia House as a center for interfaith dialogue, advocating political and religious reconciliation and moderation based on ethics and morality. The goal is to focus on what brings us together and leave what separates us outside the door.

# Crushed

2015

JULIANA FAHRA

*Ours is a country of words. Talk. Talk. Let me rest my road  
against a stone.*

*Ours is a country of words. Talk. Talk. Let me see an end to this  
journey.*

-Mahmoud Darwish, "We Travel Like All people"

Over the last few months, the amplification of the routine violence in which Palestinians have lived for decades has thrown up a new set of linguistic hot potatoes. I've been especially struck by claims of 'incitement' which my Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'that which rouses to action; a stimulus, incentive, spur.' This useful noun used to enjoy common ownership but lately appears to have been requisitioned for exclusive use by the Israeli cabinet and the U.S. House of Representatives.

Over the last two weeks alone, Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely has begun pressing Silicon Valley executives to pull online videos of Palestinians being shot by Israeli occupation forces, while her government shut

down three Palestinian radio stations in Hebron and launched an Orwellian review of Tel Aviv's Nakba film festival, lest any of the images or words presented in these outlets "incite" Palestinian violence.

Although I remain perplexed by its mysterious precision of the "I know it when I see it" variety, my own investigations have narrowed its definition down as follows: when uttered by a Palestinian leader, any noun, verb, adjective, punctuated by a pause, comma hyphen, animated by an underscore, exclamation mark, in any order whatsoever, constitutes the "incitement" which propels young men and women to pick up stones or knives with which to assault Israeli settlers and heavily armed soldiers.

By contrast, I've noticed that neither the failure to prosecute the murders of Ali, Saad and Riham Dawabshe, nor forty-eight years of occupation of Palestinian land meet the rigors of this revised definition. This is also true of the epidemic of settler attacks on Palestinian olive farmers while Israeli occupation soldiers stand idly by or the incarceration of Palestinian children, not to mention the daily expansion of illegal settlements and the demolition of Palestinian homes.

A few weeks ago, a six year-old Palestinian boy was detained by Israeli forces in Bethlehem, along with the ten children who were arrested in East Jerusalem the same day. Two of them were nine, the eldest fourteen. In 2011, half a dozen Palestinian "Freedom Riders" were arrested for travelling on Hebron buses intended only for Israelis. In Old Hebron, 400 settlers are kept safe by 2,000 Israeli soldiers, and Palestinians are barred from Shuhada Street, the city's main commercial thoroughfare. Those who live

on the street have had their doors welded shut and access their homes via adjacent properties or alleyways.

In 2013, the writer and Hebrew University lecturer David Shulman wrote, “a visit to Hebron eats into one’s soul;” just imagine what it does to the souls of the Palestinians who live there? Still, we’re told, the only permissible response to this Jim Crow-inspired ugliness is acceptance; anything else is ‘incitement.’

This reformulation was formalized by the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee which did AIPAC proud on November fifth, passing a resolution condemning Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’s “incitement” of Palestinian youth. The vote followed a committee hearing with the smugly un-ironic name “Words Have Consequences.”

Questions such as these about the ownership of language and the boundaries of permissible speech, were already on my mind when I arrived at “Rethinking Trauma and Resilience in the Context of Political Violence”, a conference here in London in November about the psychosocial impact of Israel’s sustained aggression against the Palestinian people. The event was organized by the UK Palestine Mental Health Network, of which I’m a member, and other groups and it’s where I came across Brian Barber, founding director of the Center for the Study of Youth and Political Violence at the University of Tennessee.

A rather melancholy fellow, Dr. Barber described two key findings that emerged from his interviews with Palestinians who had been youths during the first Intifada, which began in 1987. First, he said, their chronicles routinely included accounts of Israel’s “persistent, indignity-violating humiliation” of Palestinians, from

random house searches to indiscriminate harassment at checkpoints. This “brutal form of psychic violence” is often overlooked by experts on war and trauma, said Dr. Barber.

Dr. Barber also told us that the Palestinians he interviewed repeatedly used the same handful of analogous words to describe their current feelings about life under occupation. “Broken,” “destroyed,” “shaken up,” and “crushed” appeared on a screen behind him. At that point, a Jungian psychoanalyst, Heba Zaphiriou-Zarifi, interjected that in Arabic the adjective “crushed” doesn’t merely connote a state like bored, say, or hungry. Instead, she said, “crushed” bears within it the notion of being acted upon; as such it invites the listener to contemplate just who has been crushed by whom.

Besides the linguistic clarity it provided, Zaphiriou-Zarifi’s contribution was a reminder that while words themselves can be said to wield power, they nonetheless remain stand-ins for the dialectic between subject and object, the self and other. Of course, colonialism is always a lopsided affair, sustained by whatever works while it works, and abandoned when its utility is exhausted. In the case of Israel/Palestine, if historic entitlement loses its force, call it security or anti-Semitism, call them a “cancer”, call their children “snakes” or “cockroaches,” call them an “invented” people, desecrate the Holocaust.

These are the means by which words and the narratives they weave reconstitute the oppressed as the oppressor, and pave the way for all manner of savagery.

Against the backdrop of these perverse, inverted narratives, the recurrence of “crushed” and similar states of destruction troubled me especially, for it exposed the depleted condition of *sumud*, a pivotal concept meaning “steadfast perseverance” that has characterized and

animated the Palestinian resistance since 1967. In fact, sumud has been reformulated many times over, shedding connotations and acquiring new ones as facts on the ground change. Here's an interpretation from Abdelfattah Abusrour, founder of the Al Rowwad Cultural and Theater Training Center, which appeared in *Jerusalem Quarterly*:

Sumud is continuing living in Palestine, laughing, enjoying life, falling in love, getting married, having children. Sumud is also continuing your studies outside, to get a diploma, to come back here. Defending values is sumud. Building a house, a beautiful one and thinking that we are here to stay, even when the Israelis are demolishing this house, and then build a new and even more beautiful one than before—that is also sumud. That I am here is sumud. To reclaim that you are a human being and defending your humanity is sumud.

However defined, for Palestinians sumud is embodied in the olive tree whose cockled trunk and extensive root system represent the Palestinian love affair with the land, an ardor which undoubtedly explains the sadistic glee with which Israeli settlers destroy these centuries-old living emblems, symbolically crushing the steadfastness that has marked the Palestinian resistance. Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine's poet laureate, brought his people's love affair with the land to vivid life in much of his work, including his 1967 poem "Diary of a Palestinian Wound" where he writes:

O brave-faced wound  
my homeland isn't a suitcase

& I'm not a traveller  
I am the lover & the land is the beloved

Affecting metaphors aside, you needn't dig deeply into Darwish's oeuvre to find evidence of his ambivalence about the power of words, and even an explicit disavowal of that power. For instance, in "On Poetry" he writes:

If only these poems were  
a chisel in the hand of the proletariat  
a grenade in the palm of the struggler  
If only these poems were  
    If only these poems were  
a plough in the hand of the peasant  
or a shirt or a door or a key  
If only these poems were

His conception of verse devoid of either utility or agency, illustrated here through a string of sturdy nouns and a clause that never ends, is captured more elliptically in "State of Siege" when Darwish cautions:

To a reader: Do not trust the poem  
The daughter of absence  
It is neither intuition nor is it  
Thought  
But rather, the sense of the abyss

I spent much of the summer of 2006 reading Darwish as I researched and wrote "Cultural Intifada," my Master's dissertation about art and political resistance in Palestine,

while Israel laid siege to Gaza in Operation “Summer Rains.” I felt tremendous sorrow when he died unexpectedly in August 2008, four months before the next Israeli blitz of Gaza, Operation “Cast Lead.” And thanks to J.K. Rowling, Darwish has been much on my mind again lately as I’ve watched the daily executions of Palestinian youth in the streets of Hebron and East Jerusalem, the weekly razing of Palestinian homes, and the detention of scores of Palestinian children.

Recently, the *Harry Potter* author fronted a clutch of public figures, including several British politicians, to denounce academic and cultural boycotts of Israeli institutions. Under the banner “Culture for Coexistence” her group alleged that only “cultural bridges” will build “peace” between Israelis and Palestinians. When challenged on this flaccid claim, Rowling’s gambit was to invoke Darwish.

The ploy struck me as artfully insolent, for Darwish was not blind to the limitations of his medium. Sure, he was a thorn in the side of the Israeli authorities who kept him under house arrest for years. Indeed, as we’ve just seen in Saudi Arabia, where the Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh has been sentenced to death, those who wield power recognize the unruly force of words to “disrupt the order and hierarchy of the soul” thereby disrupting “the order and hierarchy of political authority as well,” as the philosopher Judith Butler puts it. In the face of this force, she says, Plato wanted to ban poets from the Republic outright.

Still, as any student of his work can tell you, while Darwish acknowledged that acts of imagining can flout the reductiveness of the Palestinian identity, (“If I write love poems, I resist the conditions that don’t allow me to write love poems,” he once said) he never conceived of them as



the exclusive currency in some mythical “negotiation” between his own exiled and occupied people and their swaggering, hyper-militarized occupier. For Darwish, poetry was a gesture not a debate, and the pen was neither mightier nor feebler than the sword. The pen was the pen, the poet the poet, and the soldier the soldier. If they were useful at all, words were metaphorical instruments, sometimes blunt and at others devastating, but neither weapons nor tools of a make-believe reconciliation.

I’m sure that to some these thoughts will seem dubious, sacrilegious even. After all, we’re talking about the secular humanist scribe of Palestine’s hopes, its suffering and its rage, author of its 1988 Declaration of Independence. Nonetheless, for me Darwish’s poetic consciousness is a compelling prototype of the fraught battleground between art and political struggle. As he told the journalist Adam Shatz in a *New York Times* interview, his exalted status did little to palliate the frustration of being “read before I write.”

“My readers expect something from me, but I write as a poet,” he said. “So when I write love poetry, they think it’s about Palestine. That’s nice, but it’s just one aspect of my work.”

If Darwish’s poetry is a stand-in for anything, then, it’s the refusal to submit to the denial of Palestinian humanity in all its facets. It is both a bridge uniting fragments of the broken and brutalized self, and a mirror with which to see them. It is sumud.

Still, the “cultural bridges” affair reminds us that language has always been wielded with savage ruthlessness in the relentless moral and political siege that enables and emboldens Israel’s expansionist project. After all, “a land without a people for a people without a land” are eleven

words that together sought to disappear indigenous Palestinians long before the first gun was fired or the first village razed during the Nakba.

Indeed, those who defend Israeli ambitions expend much energy denying even the basic terms of reference that might constitute the beginnings of a dialogue. There was no Palestine, there is no occupation, there are no war crimes, and the twenty-five feet high concrete separation wall is merely a “fence.” They insist instead on their own lexicon of “terrorists,” “security” and “God’s will.”

On the other hand, I heard an Israeli remark at a lecture recently that it doesn’t matter whether we call the current eruption of violence in Israel/Palestine an “intifada” or a “banana.” Its name, he said, neither elucidates the sentiments or situation that propel it nor determines its contours or outcome. For now, let us call it “the sense of the abyss” and then leave Darwish to rest in peace.

# Passing Through

HALA ALYAN

My mother is calling at midnight again.  
I've lost her house. I wore it under a dress. I wore it  
six times into the new year. My mother wants to know  
if she should leave. Her father is dying, her father  
is Beirut and Akka and a single building in this world.  
I don't know where the chickens go when it snows.  
I know he is dying. Yes. I know because he tells us:  
also the X-rays, the flesh sinking into his bones.  
Like what? A boat. A plank. My body displaces  
water from the bathtub. I colonize. I toss fish bones  
in the garden; so many birds pecking at the stems.  
The building is on a mountain. Did I already say that?  
There's a metal gate that rolls over each window.  
This is how we keep the moon out. Still, America got in.  
Still, there's a sign with his name out front. I won't tell you  
where it comes from. I won't tell you what he sold for it.

# The Unshowable Photograph

ARIELLA AÏSHA AZOULAY

It was only as an adult, when she read her father's birth certificate, that the political theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay learned the name of her paternal grandmother—and the fact she was of Algerian descent. After that, Azoulay reclaimed the name her father had refused: Aïsha. “My father clearly did not want this name to circulate and be associated with our family, to taint the semi-white appearance he worked hard to acquire [in Israel],” Azoulay writes in her new book, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. She accuses her father of having “betrayed the ancestors,” condemning the logic of a man who had learned to conflate erasure with progress.

*Potential History* is a project spanning centuries and nations, from the mass expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492 to Palestine today. It is a critique of and intervention in imperial knowledge production and the technologies that make it possible—museums, national archives, the discipline of history, the discourse of human rights, and the camera, which “made visible and acceptable

imperial world destruction and legitimated the world's construction on empire's terms." Azoulay aims "to make non-imperial sense out of existing knowledge that imperialism has manipulated and relegated to different domains." This includes reimagining everything from timelines to political sovereignty to interpretations of individual photographs.

I talked with Azoulay over Google Chat while she was in Berlin and I was in Brooklyn. She prefaced our discussion by saying that she tries to think and communicate in non-imperial terms. I understood this as an invitation to allow language to take unexpected turns. What followed was a dense, rich, daunting, and hopeful discussion about the (im)possibilities of decolonization, the potential of gallery spaces, and the invisible work of research. Central to Azoulay's process—whether creating the contents of a book, a gallery exhibition, or a film—is refusing the role of the scholar who, as the expert, assigns meaning and "discovers" new knowledge. In practice, this involves tracing, cropping, cutting, juxtaposing, annotating, and erasing the texts from history's totalizing narratives. Yet her process is even richer than that: *Potential History* is not only about the past, but about the enormous possibilities of the present.

—Sabrina Alli for *Guernica*

**Guernica:** I'd like to start with photography. You write, "photographs should not be thought of as raw archaic material, primary sources, or positive facts whose intrinsic meaning is to be spelled out through research." So what do you think photographs are?

**Ariella Aïsha Azoulay:** Photography was invented as an imperial practice and it was thus a productive practice—geared toward the production of images, and,

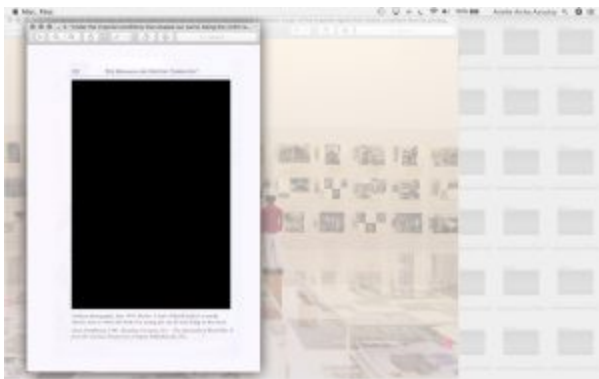
in a broader sense, commodities. This valorized photography's products, meaning photographs, and enabled the undisputed use of others' free labor—those being photographed—as raw material.

In a non-imperial understanding of photography, the photograph is only one possible outcome of a complex encounter. The encounter involves not only the one who holds the camera and those in front of it, but also other participants, including imaginary spectators. These spectators are not necessarily the same from the point of view of the photographed person as they are from that of the photographer. While the person who holds the camera is most likely committed to a milieu of experts—an editor, for example, in the different venues where the photograph is likely to be published, and an audience—the person who is photographed has perceptions and aspirations of her own. We should not let the photograph, a contingent product, overshadow the complex nature of the encounter out of which it was taken, nor to blur the inequalities, the patterns of exploitation, and the incommensurable expectations, aspirations, and modalities of participation inherent in a photographic event.

When we understand photographs not only as the focal point or end product of photography as a practice, we face both its imperial and non-imperial potential. It also makes it easier to see how we can be manipulated to naturalize photography's imperial nature; that is, easily inhabiting the scripted roles offered to us as scholars, curators, photographers, and spectators. This fantasy of photographs as discrete objects that can be owned by one person or institution is part of the imperial regime that makes us believe that the photograph captures a bygone moment to which we are the latecomers. This teaches us

imperial notions of time and separates shared encounters into the property of an individual.

Photography was built on already existing imperial practices, structures, and regimes that it continues to reproduce. Relating to photography as if it has a separate history originating with the invention of the device in the nineteenth century means ignoring the way photography accelerated and enhanced the process of primitive accumulation of wealth (especially visual wealth), labor, and resources from people in Africa, India, and the Middle East. Without this primitive accumulation of photographic wealth, the majority of Western-type museums and archives could not exist. Scholars are trained to see archives and museums as benign sites of research where they can find their objects, forgetting that they themselves take part in the conflation of violence and scholarship. In the book, I reject the centrality of the camera in the story of photography's invention and foreground instead "the infrastructure of extractions": that is, what enabled the camera's access to people as free raw material for the production of photographs, which then became "primary sources" for other experts to consult and interpret. My book questions the naturalization of this category of "sources" ("primary" or "secondary") and reconstructs the production, accumulation, and naturalization of the photographic "raw material" under imperial power. What is free raw material, to whom is it free, and what do we forget?



“Under the imperial conditions that shaped our world, being the victim is not only the outcome of violence, it is also ‘a right’ that can be given and taken.” From Azoulay’s digital files.

**Guernica:** I was struck by a part of the book where you arrive at this analysis about photographs that show the event well known as the Holocaust. What I took away from your analysis is that we, the viewers, don’t assign meaning to photographs, they’re given to us. There are photos that we all recognize as depicting the Holocaust—which have become iconic, and make it seem exceptional compared to other atrocities.

**Azoulay:** The identification of the term “Holocaust” with the extermination of the Jews overshadows the multiple groups targeted by the Nazi extermination plans. This enables the exceptionalization of the extermination of the Jews alongside the exceptionalization of the Nazi extermination plans, thus normalizing centuries of genocide of different peoples.

Those photographs of piles of corpses taken in liberated camps are associated with the extermination of Jewish people, but actually we have no way of knowing whose bodies these are, since different groups were incarcerated



and exterminated. They could be African soldiers from the colonies who were taken as prisoners of wars and sent to the camps, they could be Communists, Jews, or Roma people. This helps create a regime of differential sensitivity to violence, predicated on who is targeted, by whom, and under which circumstances.

Under this regime, being born an “Israeli Jew”—a violent category toward non-Jews and non-white Jews alike—means recognizing the exceptionality of the violence toward Ashkenazi Jews as the primary definition of violence. It also relates the violence perpetrated by those identified as “Israeli Jews” as a simple policy, one that is tolerable or perhaps not even “violent” at all. In my book, I describe my rejection of the adjective “Israeli” as part of my identity, acknowledging that the name of “Israel” legitimates a campaign of violence that omits the destruction of Palestine. Writing this book is part of righting this wrong. I refuse to be enlisted in ontological violence. I insist on actualizing other lineages that the state renders unimaginable, such as me being an Arab Jew and a Palestinian Jew of African origins.

This takes us to this image. My project of inscribing the rape of German women in the photographic imaginary of World War II originated in a similar refusal. Among the thousands of photographs taken during what is known as the end of World War II, there is not a single photograph associated with the rape of between one and two million German women. Rather than going to the archive and searching for the photographs of these acts, I reviewed the existing corpus of photographs. Based on the assumption that many of them were taken at the same sites where rape occurred — one to two million rapes, largely in one city, so consider the dense geographic occurrence of rape —

I asked myself which of them required an extra epistemological manipulation in order to dissociate it from the mass rape of women. The question was how to reject the status of mass rape as incidental to the major events of the war and the foundations of democratic political theory, and show its important role in the imposition of “the new world order.”

Prior to my study of the rape of German women, I studied the rape of Palestinian women by Jewish soldiers and its role in the establishment of a racial patriarchy in Israel. Other scholars studied the rape of women during the partition of India and Pakistan, and that of enslaved Africans and African Americans. When these rapes are considered together, it is hard not to see that without the violence of rape, democracy could not gain its status as the only viable political regime. That is, the mass rape of women is both central to western democracy and has been occluded by it.

With these series of “untaken photographs of rape” I impose on the archive a different kind of photograph—what I call the “untaken photograph.” I took sentences about the rape of German women in 1945 from books and transformed them into captions. I printed these captions below blank squares in different sizes, figured as placeholders in the archive, challenging the way the imperial archive operates through absences and silences. If we are seduced by this trap of “the archive’s silence” we can find ourselves seeking the documents it has the power to conceal from us. Producing these placeholders is a way to switch from the position of passive clients of what is in the archive to the active position of rejecting its authority to define what exists and what does not. It is worth emphasizing that these placeholders do not mark unknown

events; they deliberately mark events we know happened, but which the archive orchestrates as non-events because of the lack of documents, as if documents are needed to prove a large scale campaign of violence.

The mass rape of German women by Allied Forces in occupied Berlin after 1945 was conducted with the justification that Germans had to “pay the price.” When some German women started to talk about this rape, they were silenced under the pretext that they could not, as citizens of Germany’s overthrown Nazi regime, inhabit the position of the victim. Under the imperial condition that shaped our world, being the victim is not only the outcome of violence, it is also “a right” that can be given and taken. Being born a Jewish woman, I felt compelled to use my position as a Jew against the way this history was scripted to justify that violence. As a scholar of photography, I sought to inscribe this rape in the same imaginary of violence from which it was removed, and to place it alongside other types of violence, refusing the script given to us about victims and perpetrators.

**Guernica:** I am trying to understand the relationship we have to photography and its limitations. Do we have the right to see everything? What is role of photography in helping to create a culture of memory?

**Azoulay:** We certainly do not have the right to see everything, but this cannot be defined by the state or by experts. The practice of non-imperial potential history, as I describe in my book, engages with how different communities can restore the limits they impose on this imperial right, without aspiring to come up with some universal ethics of the gaze. There is a very recent example concerning the publication last year of the coffee table book *Sex, Race, Colonies*, edited by French historian Pascal

Blanchard. This man acted like a neutral historian who had “discovered” a collection of postcards from the French colonies and whose professional duty was to bring them to the awareness of the public. These are postcards that show different degrees of sexual violence, and that circulated among the French across their empire. The images are certainly not his discovery, and such a collection cannot be published as is under the mantra of “education.”

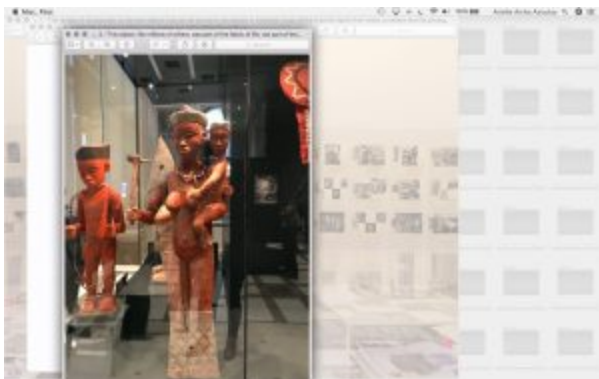
It is academic audacity, born of imperial ways of knowing, that enables a historian to act as if it doesn't matter that victims and their descendants know what was done to them; it doesn't count as “known” unless it is articulated in academic language by a credible expert. Historians who “discover” imperial violence from the archive often seek to share it with their peers, who enjoy similar privileges of access to documents of violence for the purposes of academic “discovery” rather than for the purpose of halting the violence inscribed in them.

For a white male French historian, postcards that were taken in the nineteenth century are historical objects. For racialized women in the former French empire, this is not a bygone past, as members of the French collective *Cases Rebelles* wrote in a brilliant manifesto, *The Exhausted Bodies of the Colonial Spectacle* (*Les corps épuisés du spectacle colonial*), against the publication of the book. When imperial violence is not brought to an end through the transformation of the infrastructure that enables it, such violence will be a continuous reality. So rather than seeking some universal rules drafted by experts, local communities should have the right to set rules about who has the right to see and to show, what is known and unknown about imperial violence, and how it could be repaired.

The idea of the book, of working in this 500-year temporal framework from 1492 onward, is to foreground the amount of imperial violence that was and is required to destroy different cultures and enable the imperial fantasy of universality to exist. The allegedly universal ethical code about looking at pain and death doesn't make sense when we broaden the scope out to 1492. It is not about whether future corpses should be shown or not; what do you do with all the corpses that have already been shown, let alone produced? Reminding ourselves that billions of people have been killed by imperial actors in the last 500 years is also a reminder that there is nothing progressive about the idea of not showing bodies.

**Guernica:** The imperial idea of temporality claims that there are discrete units of time. There is the past, which is over, and there are the present and the future. In your work, you break with the borders that imperialism requires, both spatially and in temporality, but also within institutions like archives and museums. Can you say more about your understanding of the relationship between plundered objects in a museum and the neutralizing function that museums serve within society?

**Azoulay:** I took this image last year at the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium.



This museum was founded by King Léopold II to display objects stolen from the Congo, access to which other imperial actors had “granted” him with imperial hubris and power. King Léopold II, responsible for the genocide of millions of Congolese, built this museum with the resources, free labor, and treasures that he plundered from Congo. Seven years ago the museum announced that it was starting a process of decolonization and closed its doors until reopening last year. I’m afraid, though, that the museum’s understanding of decolonization is very limited. In the 1950s, when Congo was still under Belgian occupation, this object stood at the top of a chief’s house. I saw it first in a small booklet of images taken by a Belgian art historian. What does it mean to be a Belgian art historian who publishes research in state publications when the objects you study are stolen and the people to whom they belong are under occupation? It means that you have free access to everything expropriated from these people and the imperial right to see everything. This right is recognized by one’s imperial peers, but refuted by the people to whom the objects belong.

Even though they had been colonized, people sought ways not to let experts see everything. Their resistance was

often repressed by armed forces, but ignored by non-armed experts of empire, meaning scholars. The image of this object taken in the 1950s encapsulates this. The Belgian art historian who took the photograph wrote in the caption that the left arm was deliberately broken by the local people who didn't want to be forced to disclose its meaning or hand over the power of the object. Even though the art historian understood the message, he nonetheless took a photograph of the object, which was then transferred to the museum and is still being shown there, with no account of the violence that facilitated its transfer. Now displayed in the museum, there is no caption attesting to this resistance, and the object, actually crafted in the mid-twentieth century, is displayed as an old tribal piece, a ruin of a sort.

The local people were prepared to damage their own beloved object to protect their culture from the invading gaze of the colonialists. What we do not know is if the elimination of this piece increased or decreased the amount of violence exercised against them to force further disclosure of their secrets in the name of scholarship and “universal” values of art, knowledge, and historic preservation. This object, like millions of others, was part of the fabric of life, not part of the monoculture we now call “museum.” When we speak about the plunder of objects, the violence is not only that of extraction, it is also the violence of naturalization: that is, of what was extracted by the museum so that museum-goers can look at the objects as detached from the physical, spiritual, and cultural environment of which they were part and from the decades of violence that severed them from that environment.



**Guernica:** The picture of the hands. What is this image?

**Azoulay:** I produced a series of cropped images like this one, foregrounding the extraction of objects. I'm interested in the gestures involved in the practice of expropriation and the transfer of these objects to museums. My assumption is that as scholars, artists, photographers, and curators, we have inherited these gestures, and we have to recognize them in our bodies in order to unlearn them. Rather than engaging with such photographs as documents that, as a scholar, I'm expected to study and interpret, I approach photographs with pens, scissors, and tape in order to break the spell of the photographic document.

The original caption describes a collector specializing in African art. For me, he is not a collector, nor an ethnographer, but an actor in an orchestrated campaign of plunder. Rather than studying him in comparison to other collectors and affirming the collector as a neutral category, I'm looking at the materiality of the act of extraction. This what guides me when I decide how to crop the image. The one who extracts holds the object in his hand—in a way common to curators or other experts who manifest, through this gesture, the embodiment of their knowledge.



But there is another hand nearby, a non-white one. This is the hand of the person from whom information is being extracted and used to empower the experts and enrich the institutions for which he works. Extraction is never only about objects, it is also extraction of knowledge. Without the informants, those would-be-experts could not be experts, since the objects would be kept opaque to them. It is worth mentioning that during the initial process of extraction, these informants were exploited—their labor was assumed to be free to take. Once the information was extracted, many of them were compelled to be porters for the white scholar-experts, expected to carry tons of these objects to the ports to be shipped away. In this cropped image, you can see one example of how experts became authoritative figures from whom generations of students learned about other people's cultures.

We started our conversation with my struggle to unlearn the right of the nation-state to become the adjective that defines me: “an Israeli.” This struggle cannot be detached from the one against the imperial premises of scholarship, the refusal to let institutions define what I see or expect to see, what I can say and what I'm not allowed to say. Both citizenship and scholarship come with a set of privileges that should be unlearned. Going on strike against the archive is one way to do so.

To fight the ideology of the distant gaze, I'm experimenting a lot with images. Here, for example, is a series of drawings that I traced as a way to bypass the regime of copyrights. It is another cropped image. I focus on this man who sits near a big book in which he writes information regarding the trafficking in African bodies. We don't know exactly what he writes, but he is part of the culture of lethal documents that proffer verdicts of

enslavement to people who have been kidnapped. I am interested in the presence of documents at the moment when physical violence is exercised and how the documents are used to tame the horror. Tracing these images, cropping them, detaching them from the institutional authority under which their meaning is defined, is part of an attempt to undermine the assumption that the archive is a deposit of primary—and hence sacred—documents. These documents of violence are themselves violent: They partake in the transformation of people into slaves. I am trying to create a different imaginary of the persona of the archivist. Our conception of the archivist is of a tedious ant at the service of scholarship, but archivists are also violent actors who traffic in bodies, brand them, transfer them from one place to another, put them under chain and lock.



**Guernica:** You drew that?

**Azoulay:** Yes. But not as an artist would draw an image. I sometimes draw them, other times I crop or tape them. One of these drawings is central to the book. It is the “Unshowable Photograph” of my Palestinian companion. I first encountered his photograph at the International Red Cross Archive, I think in 2009. The archive didn’t allow me to show the image in an exhibition I was curating. I

was asked to sign a document consenting to show this and other images from the CIRC Archive with their original captions only. The meaning of my term “Unshowable Photograph,” then, is not that the image cannot be seen but rather that it cannot be shown by me. The archive acts as the proprietor of the images of which it is only the guardian, and purports to decide how those images will be shown, by whom, and to whom. You can go to the archive and see this image—the point is that you won’t see it as I would show it to you. This is what I refuse when I draw the image: the right of the archive to preserve the terms under which violence will be shown and studied. The caption, in this case, obscuring the destruction of Palestine and normalizing the creation of Israel, is crucial. It replaces one order with another, to make people believe that Palestine is gone and Israel took its place.

*This interview has been condensed from the original. —Eds.*

# Water as a Weapon of War

2013

MICHELLE CHEN

We measure the devastation of war in the number of homes, people, and governments it destroys, but the ecological scars left behind by conflict are often the less visible tragedy in contested territories. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the struggle over the region's water shows how a natural resource can become a weapon of war. As the aquatic analog to the border wall, the water tensions surrounding the occupied territories reveal the scope of the occupation's human and environmental impacts.

The Gaza Strip is perhaps the most spectacular illustration of the water crisis. Sewage has been washing over the streets of Gaza since the start of November—the result of a massive electricity outage and subsequent breakdown of a wastewater treatment facility, which in turn are byproducts of a fuel shortage created by a blockade at the border with Egypt. Isolated Gaza neighborhoods have long relied on resources funneled through the Rafah border's intricate network of underground smuggling

tunnels, but Egyptian authorities' crackdown has intensified local fuel scarcities.

This chaotic scene—now aggravated by the torrents of ferocious winter storms—is just the latest escalation of a long-term water crisis, with much of the Palestinian population suffering constant shortages of clean water. According to United Nations monitors, approximately 90 percent of the water from Gaza's coastal aquifer, the region's main water source, is “unfit for human consumption as a result of pollution caused by raw sewage and rising seawater infiltration.”

Meanwhile, in the Palestinian communities of the West Bank, water scarcity can also be traced to a more insidious resource struggle over the Jordan River Basin, a key source of freshwater. The Jordan's watershed—which touches the Occupied Territories, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel—has steadily deteriorated over the past half century. According to researchers, waste dumping has caused heavy damage, as has the diversion of water that favors Israeli settlements over the Palestinian territories.

For Palestinians, water scarcity is as much a political dilemma, deliberately built into the structure of the occupation, as it is an environmental crisis. Israel has long exerted fierce control over freshwater resources through a nominally cooperative management system, the Israel-Palestinian Joint Water Committee, that effectively enforces unequal water access. While settlements flourish, the Palestinian territories are systematically deprived of water. At the same time, the exhausted watershed system, along with the fragile environment and agricultural landscape of the Jordan River Basin, are saddled with crumbling infrastructure and pollution dumping.

The entire region has become a casualty of conflict.

Media reports in recent years have described holy pilgrimage sites marred by sewage. Paradoxically, while the region divides sharply along nationalist lines, the collective flow of filth pools together sewage and saline water dumped by Israel with waste from Jordanian and Palestinian villages. The governments of Jordan and Israel have initiated some remediation plans for the pollution, but the fate of the region's fresh water supplies remains firmly under Israel's grip.

In the Occupied Territories, the Israel-Palestinian Joint Water Committee was established initially as a temporary arrangement for riparian management in 1995. But it continues to administer what activists call a system of "water apartheid" across a patchwork of subdivisions. As it currently operates, the system undermines any potential for economic or environmental self-sufficiency on the Palestinian side. United Nations authorities estimate that some 300,000 Palestinians in the West Bank are "vulnerable to water scarcity." In Israel, per capita water consumption was several times greater than in the West Bank. With the vast majority of the West Bank's water resources under Israeli control, residents must often rely on privatized water sales, which means struggling households are often beholden to corporations that deliver water services at exorbitant prices, aggravating the burden on distressed neighborhood infrastructures. And while besieged by encroaching Israeli settlements, Palestinian farmers watch their crops wither due to a lack of irrigation, thus deepening the economic devastation of occupation.

Ultimately, this systemic, politicized resource scarcity makes it a struggle for colonized communities just to survive day-to-day, much less pursue long-term sustainable development. In a recent analysis of the

region's water politics, international relations scholar Jan Selby called Israel's grip on Palestinians' water access "both illegal under international law and one of the major impediments to Palestinian statehood."

The Jordan River crisis is at its core a political issue, but also reflects a pattern of environmental erosion across the Middle East, which is exacerbated by political boundaries and tensions over shared resources. Earlier this year, a U.S.-led research team published a satellite-data analysis showing massive degradation of groundwater resources across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. In a field report, hydrologist Jay Famiglietti wrote that the amount of regional water loss over a seven-year period was "equivalent in volume to the Dead Sea." An underlying problem was that "the international policy and legal framework is simply not in place to ensure peaceable water management capable of circumnavigating the complexities of the 21st century water landscape."

Lately, environmental groups and officials in the region have signaled an interest in dealing with depletion of the riparian habitat, but not without controversy. For example, earlier this year, through a joint rehabilitation program for polluted lands, Israel began releasing a small amount of fresh water from the Sea of Galilee into the Lower Jordan River, somewhat alleviating a decades-long blockade. Still, the small scale of the plan, with water flowing at just a fraction of the overall volume needed to really replenish the river, has come under criticism from international water experts and environmental groups.

Meanwhile, the World Bank has proposed a plan to restore water resources through linking the Red Sea and the rapidly shrinking Dead Sea, and to distribute desalinated Dead Sea water to Jordan, Israel, and Palestine.

But the scheme faces intense criticism following environmental assessments that reveal it might, in fact, significantly worsen the very environment it claims to be restoring. And while the project was touted as a collaborative effort of Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, some Palestinian NGOs protested that the scheme failed to deal with the core issue of the unequal water-sharing system imposed on Palestinians.

For the Palestinian communities mired in parched farmlands and sewage-clogged streets, water deprivation continues to aggravate the chronic pain of an overarching humanitarian crisis.

The ruination of Middle East's ancient waterways may seem like just a ripple effect of occupation. But distorting the ecology of a contested land is actually part and parcel of the dehumanization of its inhabitants.



# People's Teeth

AHLAM BSHARAT AND FADY JOUDAH

One question of childhood: why  
do some people have gold teeth?

I could spot them from a distance.  
A sun shines. In each of their mouths  
a different sun.

But I never said:  
the woman with the gold tooth came,  
the man with the gold tooth went.  
Though I could have,  
my voice was strong.

I used to feel they were the bearers of something  
beautiful.

Something their hands did not hold, unlike a sack.  
Unlike a necklace.

And not on their heads like a keffiyeh,  
not in their pockets like a handkerchief  
or candied almonds,  
not those things which, to me,  
a girl besieged by poverty,  
signaled satiety and wealth.

The notion that a gleaming stone sat  
in someone's mouth made me happy.  
My sister Jamilah and my Uncle  
Abdul-Rahman possessed such stones.

I used to wait for others to talk or laugh,  
for their lips to part,  
I used to search for gold in oral caves.

And my hands were always ready  
to grab a gold tooth if an awesome force  
snatched it from its owner's jaws.

I used to count stars, worms,  
vegetable boxes, trucks heading east across  
the river Jordan.

I used to count water springs  
and people's teeth.

# Imagining Myself in Palestine

2012

RANDA JARRAR

Trouble began weeks before I boarded my flight to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport. I had heard horror stories about a detention area there, dubbed The Arab Room, and in my anxious and neurotic style, I had emailed a dozen people—American academics and artists of Arab, Indian, Jewish, and European descent— and asked them what I was supposed to tell the immigration officers at Ben Gurion once I arrived. They all wanted to know if I was using my American passport, and I assured them that I was. The vast majority told me not to tell the officers I would be staying at my sister's in Ramallah. They said this would cause trouble, and offered up the names of friends and family for my use. The generosity of people poured in, and I was advised to say that I was staying with this writer, or that visual artist, or this former-IDF soldier—people I had never met, but who had volunteered themselves to be my proxy hosts. A friend of mine, who is a phenomenal

photojournalist, gave me her phone number and said to tell the officers I would be staying with her, and I agreed. She told me to prepare for the officers to call her themselves once I gave them her number, as this is something they are known to do.

I was so afraid of facing the guards at the airport that I had a difficult time imagining the rest of my trip. I would picture myself walking around Ramallah with my sister, or attending a concert, or visiting my aunts, or seeing the separation wall, or staying at the American Colony Hotel for an evening, and I would draw a blank. There was a wall there, too, between my thoughts and Palestine.

Growing up, my Palestinian identity was mostly tied to my father. He was the Palestinian in the family, and when we went back to the West Bank it was to see his brothers and sisters and parents. We always entered Palestine through Amman, crossing the Allenby Bridge over the river Jordan and waiting in endless inspection lines. I remember these trips dragging on through morning and midday and well into the afternoon. My father would sit quietly, and when I complained my Egyptian mother would tell me that the Israelis made it difficult for us to cross into the West Bank. She told me that they wanted us to give up, that they would prefer we never go back. “We must not let them win,” she’d said. My relationship with my Palestinian identity was cemented when I enrolled in a PLO-sponsored girls’ camp as a tween. We learned nationalistic songs and dances and created visual art that reflected our understanding of the occupation. After my family and I moved to America in 1991, my Palestinian identity shifted again, and I began to see myself as an Arab-American. My father’s fiery rants on Palestine died out when Yitzak Rabin was murdered by a Jewish-Israeli extremist. I remember

my father weeping in our American wood-paneled den. He said that Rabin had been the Palestinians' last chance.

When my sister got a job in Ramallah last year, teaching music to children, I knew I would want to visit her. I had not been to Palestine since 1993. I had planned to go back in the summer of 1996, but I was pregnant and unmarried. My parents did not want to speak to me, let alone take me with them, in such a shameful condition, to the West Bank. I never went back with family after that. I led my own life. I moved about a dozen times over the following fifteen years—an American nomad. I didn't want to visit the West Bank and be at the mercy of family. If I ever visited, I would do so independently. When my sister moved to Ramallah she found an apartment of her own, and it had an extra room. It was the perfect time to go. My husband booked my flight, and, thrilled, I told my sister I was coming.

I felt uneasy as soon as I arrived at the gate in Philadelphia. There weren't, as far as I could see, any other Arabs boarding US Airways flight 796 to Tel Aviv. On the airplane, I found myself surrounded by Christian missionaries and Evangelicals and observant Jewish men. The group across the aisle had their bibles out, the man sitting next to me read from a miniature Torah, and as the flight took off, I found myself reciting a verse from the Quran, almost against my will. I am an atheist, but all the praying was contagious.

I spoke to no one on the plane, and no one spoke to me, until I got up to stand in line for the bathroom. A man with a wandering eye and a yarmulke asked if I knew why a section of the plane had been hidden behind a thick grey cloth. I said that it was probably to give the flight attendants a little privacy during the eleven-hour trip. He nodded, and said, "Good. I was worried that it was for those

crazy Ultra-Orthodox people. They're like the Jewish Taliban." I nodded, uncomfortable. I wondered if he would have spoken to me like this if he knew I was of Palestinian descent, and an ex-Muslim. He continued, "They're ruining Israel. They spit on an 8-year-old girl because she was dressed inappropriately." I had heard about that, and told him so. A bathroom opened up, and he moved to slip inside, but before he locked the folding door he said, "Unbelievable how crazy they are."

It was not a conversation I had expected.

As we descended into Israel, the blue Mediterranean floated by below us. We saw the shore of Tel Aviv, and the buildings along it. An American teenager sitting in front of me started shouting, "It's so pretty! It's so pretty!" She wouldn't have any trouble clearing customs, I was sure.

When we landed, everyone on the plane clapped, something I thought only Lebanese people did, and I smiled. I turned on my phone and called my sister and let her know I had arrived, and that I would call her on the other side of customs and immigration. I was only an hour away from her. I took a deep breath and did something superstitious, as I tend to do when I am feeling powerless and anxious. I flipped to a random page in my passport, hoping to find meaning and reassurance in it. On the page I flipped to was a picture of an old steamship, presumably in the shadow of Ellis Island. I found the image inspiring, calming, and I felt ready to face customs.

I had deleted anything on my website critical of Israel, which amounted to about 160 posts. I had deleted the section in my Wikipedia entry that said that I was a Palestinian writer. It had been unsettling, deleting my Palestinianness in order to go back to Palestine. I had been told that the Israeli officers might confiscate my phone and

read my Facebook posts and Twitter feed, so I temporarily deactivated my Facebook account and locked my tweets. The entire endeavor left me feeling erased.

I had read an article about the hundreds of activists that had flown into Tel Aviv Airport last July 8th. They had all been detained over the weekend and then flown back to their countries of origin. Only one of them had made it through. When she was asked how she managed it, she said that she chose the “smiliest” immigration officer and stood in her line. So, when I entered the immigration hall, I did the same. The agent I chose was blonde and young, and her line was moving the fastest. I stood, waited, and tried to relax.

When there was only one person in the line in front of me, the woman went to the back of her booth and a young bearded man took her place. He did not seem “smiley” at all. I considered switching lanes, but I knew I would look suspicious. So I waited.

When it was my turn, I gave the officer my blue American passport. As he scanned it, I noticed that he had unbelievably long lashes. He thumbed through the pages, and I was afraid of what he would make of the Lebanese stamp. He asked me what my purpose was for visiting Israel. I told him it was my Spring Break, and I had come to visit friends. He asked me where I was staying. I did as I’d been told, and said I was staying in Jerusalem, with the photojournalist. He picked up a black telephone. When he hung up, he told me to go wait in the room in the corner. I asked him if I could have my passport back, and he said no. I asked him when I would be getting my passport back, and he didn’t answer. He only repeated that I needed to go to the room in the corner.

I crossed the immigration hall diagonally, and entered

the Arab Room. Sitting in the room and waiting were a young Arab man and an older Arab woman in hijab, two black men in African garb, one of whom was holding an iPad, two middle-aged Arab women in hijab, one dark-haired Tunisian-American woman in a long skirt, one woman in a Whitney Houston t-shirt, her hair gathered up in a turban, and one dark-skinned Arab woman in a pant suit. It was readily transparent that we had all been racially profiled. A young man joined us, and got on his phone. I heard him saying, “No, they just finished questioning me. I’m half-Egyptian. I should be out soon.” I got up and told the woman guard at the door that I needed to go to the bathroom, and she nodded. When I came back to the room, I sat down and took out a magazine, reading as calmly as I could. About twenty minutes passed before a redhead, who couldn’t have been older than nineteen, summoned me down the hallway. I followed him to an office where a few brown men were answering questions. The redhead asked me to take a seat and swiped my passport through at his station.

He asked me, “What is the name of your father? And what is the name of your father’s father?”

My father and I hadn’t spoken since he read my first novel, nearly four years ago. He had sent me an angry email, and told me that we would no longer be seeing one another, or speaking.

I gave the redhead the names he’d asked. He noted something on a piece of paper, and asked me where my father was from. My father was born in 1950, when the West Bank was part of Jordan, so I told the redhead that my father was a Jordanian-American.

“So, he is from Jordania?” the redhead said, and I said that technically, yes. “Where was he born?” he said, and,



cornered, I told the redhead that my father had been born in Jenin. He noted something else on a piece of paper, gave it to a man who seemed like a superior, and asked me to go to another room in an opposite corner. When I said that I was a writer and an American citizen, born in Chicago, he shrugged, and instructed me, again, to go to the room in the opposite corner.

I went to the room, and I waited.

My father had said in his email that, by writing about sex in my novel so shamelessly, I had disregarded the legacy of my Palestinian family, which, he claimed, had defeated Napoleon.

I always thought he was being dramatic about Napoleon, but eventually I looked it up. In a book titled *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus 1700-1900*, I found the Jarrar family, and I found Napoleon. The Emperor's attempt to conquer Palestine had been stopped short in 1799, and an ancestor of mine named Shaykh Yousef Jarrar, the mayor of Jenin, had written a poem "in which he exhorted his fellow leaders... to unite under one banner against the French forces." I'd never heard of this poet-warrior ancestor before, but I had given my son the middle name Yousef, as if by instinct.

A woman, wearing seven rings on her fingers, and a lot of blue eye makeup caked around her eyes, emerged from a small interrogation room and asked me to join her. She told me to close the door behind me. The room was the size of a walk-in closet, and I knew it had been built to intimidate travelers. The woman said she liked my necklace, and we spoke about jewelry for a few minutes. I admired one of her rings in particular, and she smiled and said it was from Egypt. She then swiped my passport, and asked me about my parents' names, again. This time, I told her I was not

in communication with my father, and that I was an American citizen, and a writer. She did not seem to care about this information one way or the other, and spoke my grandmother's name. I hadn't heard my grandmother's name in years. She had died in the early eighties. I told the officer this, and she nodded, and gave me the names of many of my ancestors. I wanted to ask her for her grandmother's name, but gave her the name of my friend in Jerusalem, and my Israeli publisher in Or Yehuda instead.

"Your publisher?" she said, confused, and I said, yes, my book had been translated into Hebrew and published in Israel. I could see her computer screen. She plugged in my publisher's name and my friend's, in Hebrew, and their addresses came up. The program she was using looked clunky and old, but it held information on every citizen in Israel. At this point, things began to feel Kafkaesque.

She said that there was a Palestinian ID attached to my name. I told her I had no such ID. She said that I had entered the West Bank with the ID in 1993, and that they had record of the entry. She said that this would be a problem. When I tried to plead my case, she asked me to put my right finger on a glowing red scanner. Then my left finger. She took my photograph and asked me to go back to the first waiting room. When I asked her what I should expect, she said she wasn't sure.

Half an hour later, a group of teenage guards took me to baggage claim. I asked them if I could speak to someone from the American embassy, or the consulate, and they nodded, smirking. A few minutes later, I asked them what we were doing there, and they said we needed to find my bag. I said that my carry-on bag was my only bag, and they seemed shocked. I travel a lot, I told them, which they

seemed to find suspicious. They asked me why, and I said I was a writer. They frowned at me. We waited for more guards. It must have been their shift change. The baggage claim was deserted. In the corner, a few guards were giving each other massages. The guards I was waiting with gave each other high fives and chatted about teenage stuff. I kept asking what we were waiting for, and they ignored me.

Finally, they took me to a room in the corner of the baggage claim area. It was becoming clear to me that at Ben Gurion, unjust things happened in corners. The guards asked me to open my bags. I did as I was told. I noted that the room was filthy. The Israelis were concerned with showing a clean and gleaming exterior—the floors of the airport outside shone—but for suspected threats and people like myself, behind closed doors, tucked away in dirty corners, they hadn't bothered. A very butch young woman asked me to follow her. She led me to yet another room, where the walls were faded and filthy, and the floor was covered in dirty carpet, littered with small bits of paper and hair clips. It reeked of intimidation, and of humiliation.

I don't believe in hokey things such as souls or spirits, but I could sense a deeply disturbing feeling in the room. There, though I was not strip-searched, the young guard poked and searched every millimeter of my clothes and underclothes. I tried to keep myself distracted, so I wouldn't weep. I tried to keep my spirits up. I wondered if she thought I was a "hair-rist." I did not want to allow these teenagers to rob me of my dignity.

When I came out of the room, a boy with pimples, who looked like he was my son's age, was going through my clothes. Above him hung a tourist poster for the Dead Sea. The poster read: The Dead Sea; Where Time Seems To Stand Still. I had been in Ben Gurion for over two hours,

and knew the feeling. It was as if I existed outside of time, suspended in a strange molasses of interrogation.

When he was done checking all my clothes, he asked me if I needed any help re-packing the bag. I said that I didn't, and that I had a system for packing. "You have a system?" he shouted. I told him this was an American idiom. Still, he watched me closely as I packed.

I was worn down and angry. The teenagers escorted me back to the waiting room, the Arab Room, where there was now a new guard. A few people were gone, and a few new people had arrived, but it was still an Arab Room.

The woman with all the rings walked in with my passport in her hand and said that she was sorry, but that I was not allowed to enter Israel. She said she had spoken to her supervisor, and that he had decided that I was not to enter. When I asked her if I could speak to him personally, she said she would ask, and walked away with my passport. I never saw her again, nor did I see the supervisor.

I called my sister and told her the news. She was devastated. A friend of mine had been waiting in his car outside the airport to drive me to her, and I called him, too. When I told him now that I was being shipped back to the U.S., he said, furious, that he would call his friends at the U.S. Consulate. When I called him back, he said that there was nothing they could do, and that I was banned by law from entering Israel because I was considered Palestinian.

I told a guard that I was a diabetic, and hungry, and an hour later someone wordlessly brought me the sandwich. I began to feel like a prisoner, grateful for a dry bit of bread and cheese. Half way through the sandwich, I asked the other people in the room if they were hungry. A middle-aged woman in hijab said she was, and I gave her the rest of the sandwich. A large guard appeared over me, hovering,

and asked me in Arabic where I was from. I answered reflexively in English, "I am from here. And from California." He asked me, in Arabic, where I was going after the airport. I said, in English, that I was going to Jerusalem. He walked away and accused me of pretending not to know Arabic. He said the word Arabic hatefully. I followed him, and said, in Arabic, "OK, I do speak Arabic. Where do I want to go after this? I want to go to a bar with my friends." He laughed at me, and said I could go to a bar when I got back to America.

After a while, I was the last person in the room. It had high stone walls that spanned every floor of the airport, and when I tried to look all the way up, I could not see the ceiling. I felt as if I were trapped in a strange, deep well.

An elderly man who was not Jewish but who had attempted to make Aliyya was put in the room with me. When they told him he was being deported back to the U.S., he said he would not leave. The guard said to him, "I could do this the nice way, or I could do this the not nice way." It was ludicrous in more ways than one, to hear a nineteen-year-old speak to an old man that way. He sounded like a thug.

An hour later, the bearded young man who had originally questioned me at the immigration hall became my guard. When I tried to go to the bathroom, he said I was not allowed. This made me nervous. I had been allowed to go before. I told him so. "Well, it's different now," he said.

"Different how?" I asked. "Am I under detention?"

He would not answer me. I told him that I was an American citizen and that I demanded to know whether or not I was under detention. He closed his eyes, then opened them, and said, reluctantly, "Yes."

I lost it. I demanded to see someone from the embassy or

the consulate. He ignored me. I said that he needed to take me to the bathroom. He said no. I lifted up my dress and pretended to squat, and shouted, “Fine, then I will go to the bathroom right here!”

He became angry and shouted to another guard to take me to the bathroom. When she said she couldn’t, he took me himself. He insisted on the gender-neutral handicapped toilet, and he waited outside the stall. When I was done, he checked the stall after me, to make sure that I had not concocted a bomb out of my pubic hair. I laughed at him, and he angrily took me back to the detention room.

I waited two more hours. Whenever a guard came into the room, I would ask him what was going on with my passport, and what I could expect. The guard would look down at me and sneer, “You have to wait. You have to wait.” When I told him I had been waiting for hours, he only repeated, “You have to wait.” My wait felt interminable. In his speech to the UN, Mahmoud Abbas quoted the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s poem, “State of Siege.” He read, “Standing here. Sitting here. Always here./ Eternally here,/ we have one aim and one aim only: to continue to be.” And he added, “And we shall be.” The state of sitting, of standing, of waiting, is the principal state of the Palestinian; it is the state of the refugee, of the oppressed, of the outsider, of the writer.

Eventually, two female guards came to tell me what time I would board the flight back to the U.S. When they did, I burst into tears. I had been holding out hope, right to the last. After they left, I was stuck with the male guard again, the one who had picked up the phone in the immigration booth.

I asked him if I could board a flight elsewhere—to

Amman, or Cairo, even Paris. I wanted to go somewhere, at least, even if I couldn't see my sister.

"No," he said. "You have to go back from where you came."

I said that this was unacceptable, and that I wanted the choice to go elsewhere.

This time, he shouted it. "No. You must go back from where you came."

"Are you from *The Lord of the Rings*?" I said.

He narrowed his eyes at me, and snapped, "Come with me." He made me stand in a hallway for twenty minutes, as punishment. I made fun of his long eyelashes. I asked him if he was related to Snuffalupagus. He ignored me.

An hour or so passed, and a guard came and eventually escorted me to flight 797, back to the U.S. We bypassed security, avoiding a scene, and when we got to the airplane the guard gave my passport to the flight attendant, an American.

"Do not give her back her passport until you arrive in America," he said.

She squinted at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"This woman was denied entry, and must return to the United States. Do not give her this passport until you have left Israel and arrived in America."

She looked at me and nodded, frowning.

I went to my seat, which was in the middle of the middle row, the worst place to sit on a twelve-hour flight.

The flight attendant walked over and handed me my passport. "Um, here you go," she said, and I laughed and thanked her.

Holding my passport again on that almost-empty plane, I understood, in a way, how lucky I had been. The passport hadn't been confiscated. I was not imprisoned. And yet,

this was how Israel treated someone with a voice and American citizenship. There are today, held without charge in the Israeli military detention system, hundreds of Palestinians, including children. There are reports of a systematic pattern of ill treatment towards them. Silenced and oppressed, these prisoners have little recourse. In the news recently I saw that two thousand of these prisoners have resorted to the last form of protest left to them: they have collectively gone on hunger strike.

I flipped through the passport, and, surprised, found that the officials had left a stamp on it. The stamp was massive, and read, in English and Hebrew, Ben Gurion Airport ENTRY DENIED. I stared at it for a few minutes. Then, I saw it: the picture of the ship I had seen eight hours earlier, that I had thought was a sign of good luck.

I remembered how, when I first met my mother-in-law in Texas, we had bonded over her collection of costume jewelry. A lot of the pieces were from her first husband, whom she had divorced before meeting my father-in-law. I noticed that many of the pieces he'd given her had imagery of boats and ships. When I pointed that out to her, she had raised her wine glass and said, "You're right! He was shippin' me out." And that's what had happened to me. I had been shipped out.

Two massive, bald-headed men sat on either side of me. If I believed the conspiracies, I would have thought those guys were Mossad. But it was obvious before long, from the way they blasted terrible club music on their earphones and, later, passed out, that they were just some doofuses on their way to America. In an attempt to be polite and not touch the men around me, I folded my arms, but this became terribly uncomfortable after a while. A few hours into our flight, I decided that I was tired of being polite and



so I put both my arms down. Minutes later, the man on my right began to jab my elbow. I ignored him and feigned sleep. He jabbed and jabbed.

Finally, I turned to him, my arm firmly on the armrest, and said, "I get it."

He looked at me, embarrassed.

"I really get it. But I am keeping this armrest. I am not moving. I will keep my arm here for the rest of the flight," I said. And I did.

# On the Eve of the Flotilla

An interview with Alice Walker, 2011

ALICE WALKER

Next week, Alice Walker will be among the passengers aboard “The Audacity of Hope” when it sails from Athens to Gaza to challenge Israel’s naval blockade. (The boat will carry letters from Americans to Palestinians, not aid.) The 67-year-old, Pulitzer Prize winner took a moment to discuss her impending voyage.

—Michael Archer for *Guernica*

**Guernica:** You just returned from a trip to Palestine a few weeks ago. You worked a lot with Palestinian children there. What’s changed since your last visit to the West Bank? What were your impressions of that experience? What did you leave knowing that you didn’t know before?

**Alice Walker:** My first trip to Palestine was to Gaza, in 2009, shortly after “Operation Cast Lead,” during which the Gaza strip was bombed for twenty-two days and nights, with airstrikes every twenty-seven minutes. There was enormous devastation: Over 1,400 people killed, including over three hundred children, and countless people, many of them children, injured and of course terrorized for the

rest of their lives. I tried to get into Gaza a second time to help deliver aid but was denied entry through Egypt. This most recent visit was to the West Bank (for a TED inspired event and a few days with the Palestine Literary Festival), which friends had told us was quite different than Gaza. They were right. There was the feeling of a more intact people, though frazzled and suffering every day from racist oppression which includes witnessing the theft of their land by construction of Israel's apartheid wall, which is amazingly huge and oppressive: simply gobbling up all the good land to be had, with the wall built right in people's faces in many instances.

I discovered that artists everywhere are a frisky lot, that we will raise our voices and our songs and our dances and our poems in the face of any oppression, and that we will maintain apparently to our dying breath a sense of humor about the craziness of other people's actions. This is brilliantly demonstrated in the talk by the writer Suad Amiry (available on [Youtube](#)), who closed out the TEDxRamallah evening by talking about her experience of being put under curfew by the Israelis at the same time that she was being visited by her mother-in-law. She had everyone rolling in the aisles with this story of how important it is to see one's dilemma, whatever it is, with humor and grit.

**Guernica:** You're leaving later this month to join the international flotilla sailing for Gaza to challenge Israel's blockade. Your boat has been named "The Audacity of Hope," taken from President Obama's book. What made you decide to join?

**Walker:** While I was being interrogated in April by a young Israeli who found all my activist history vis-à-vis Israel on his computer, we actually experienced a near

humorous moment when he said I'd agreed to go on this Flotilla, and I said I had not! I had not intended to go, but many of my friends are going and especially a Jewish American friend, Medea Benjamin of CODE PINK, a women's peace group. I said to her at some point when she invited me to join the Flotilla, *I don't think so*. But then again, *how can we let you sail on the boat without us?* She is very brave, and good. She reminds me of more brave and good people than she will ever know. To be on the boat with her and with others who see beyond their own comfort and affinities to reach out to the Palestinian people who need us — they need the whole world — is an honor, whatever the consequences.

The boat is called the “Audacity of Hope” because hope is audacious; that is part of its energy for change. But I will also be flying the colors of Andrew Goodman, James Cheney, and Michael Schwerner, two Jewish young men and one Christian black man who died trying to help us end American apartheid, injustice, and brutality in the South, in Mississippi. What we learn from helping each other free ourselves is that liberation, in order to remain in force, must be used constantly to help free others. Not only humans, but other animals, plants, water, mountains, the earth Herself. Saying “Never Again” must mean never again will we let it happen, whatever the atrocity is, because we understand our duty to stand against it, to the extent we can do this. And we grasp the importance of not singling out only our own nation or tribe for our protection. It is freedom itself that we protect; justice itself that we stand up for. We support the common good because we are all, after everything is said and done, children of the same planet. We are earthlings, whether we live in Occupied Palestine or in Tel Aviv. Or Northern California, where the

abuse and destruction of Native peoples a hundred and fifty years or so ago was similar to what is happening now in Palestine.

**Guernica:** A year ago, nine people in a flotilla of six boats were killed by Israeli commandos. Some pundits from major media outlets, including the BBC, argued that the commandos' actions were justified, done in self-defense, and that the protest did little or nothing to help those suffering in Gaza. What's your take on that, and what do you hope is gained from this year's trip?

**Walker:** I believe the people on the Mavi Marmara were attacked and that the people who were killed were massacred. We know that the Israeli forces confiscated virtually all of the footage of what transpired from the passengers on the boat. Then they sent out their own video, framing the fuzzy images in ways that support their narrative of having been attacked by the people on the boat! As I've written elsewhere, this fraudulent action on the part of the Israeli military brought to mind the old Redd Foxx joke about a man's wife catching him in bed with another woman: he says to her: "All right, go ahead and believe your lying eyes."

Sometimes the medicine we bring to others isn't tangible. Hope itself isn't a tangible thing. What is it? Not even gossamer. But it has infused the lives of oppressed people everywhere they suffer on the planet. South Africa is perhaps even a better example than the American South. Or India. Or any of the old colonial outposts where the people thought they'd never breathe a free breath again. One poem, one song, can unlock the prison door because the strongest prison is the one oppressed people inhabit, after years of being ground down, in their own minds.

Any boat that leaves the shore in order to help others has already landed, whether it ever docks or not.

**Guernica:** Noam Katz, minister for public diplomacy at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, told *The New York Times*, “We see this flotilla as a political statement in order to support Hamas in Gaza. Hamas is a terror organization that took control of Gaza and its people and is committed to the destruction of the state of Israel. We have a blockade, and we are going to enforce this blockade.” Your response?

**Walker:** I am reminded of something Bernice Johnson Reagon of SNCC said once: that the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee participants (of the 1960s) understood that the white supremacists of the south had a job, which might include abuse and murder of the students. But that the students had a job as well, which was to dismantle segregation and break the chain of fear that bound all people of color. The racists would do their job as they understood it; we would do ours.

I had never seen as much blatant terrorism as I witnessed in Gaza. Israeli-made; American-made. It is unfortunate that officials of Israel appear to know so little about what their government is doing in the terrorism department. In fact, Israel has a long history of terrorism, as does the United States. Both countries were founded on acts of terrorism against the indigenous populations. What a breath of fresh air it would be to have leaders who honestly acknowledged this and then went on to lay down even a tenth, a quarter, half, of their weapons. No one else on the planet is as well armed as Americans and Israelis. Or as vicious in the widespread use of arms.

# Teaching Poetry in the Palestinian Apocalypse

2021

GEORGE ABRAHAM

*Someday, with my hands*

*I will transform the image.*

Samih Al-Qasim, “I, The Pronoun of the Speaker”

I gave my first lecture, at my first academic job, behind a wall of plexiglass, speaking to an awkwardly spaced out group of masked students who had maybe already given up – and honestly, who could blame them? I walked in sweating and late because my building’s social distancing protocol required me to run up five floors and down two to get to my third floor classroom. Leaning into the mic, I opened with the joke: “Welcome to apocalyptic poetry!”

My students chuckled nervously. Maybe the joke was that it was day one of the fall semester, and who really wanted to be in a required advanced poetic form class? Or maybe it was my way of cutting the tension of our gathering, united by the sole purpose of discussing poetry in a time that, back then, felt newly apocalyptic to some.

Soon, apocalypse became a tired punchline. Languishing through mere existence, I did what any young Palestinian instructor of literature would likely do: I returned to Audre Lorde, who reminds us “poetry is not a luxury,” and June Jordan, who gives us models for writing against and despite the state. I returned to extensive traditions of Indigenous ecopoets who have been resisting western colonialism’s devastation of the Land since the beginning of the settler project. I turned and returned to [Don Mee Choi](#), [Etel Adnan](#), [Anthony Cody](#), and [Bradley Trumpfheller](#): living poets who are building new language for apocalypse by breaking capital-E-English – English as a state actor, English as a colonial accomplice, in our apocalypse.

Teaching poetry while witnessing the horrors of ongoing murders of Black Americans by the police, anti-Asian violence surging in the pandemic, and [medical apartheid policies](#) of the Israeli state in the vaccine rollout, I often returned to Franny Choi’s “[The World Keeps Ending and The World Goes On](#)” to open my lectures. The poem travels from the apocalypse of boats to the apocalypse of bombed mosques; from radioactive rain to settlement and soda machine (a reference to the Palestinian boycott campaign against the settler company [SodaStream](#)). In naming the collective(s) built in catastrophe’s shadow, the poem offered my students and I new possibilities of language for our grief, and for our survival of an *apocalypse* which mutates daily and without warning.

Choi’s poem is a window into a *here* where apocalypse is not stagnant and singular, but a continuous environmental catastrophe we (are) return(ed) to again and again: “by the time the apocalypse began, the world had already/ended. It ended every day for a century or two. It ended, and another



ending/world spun in its place.” Here, Choi’s imagination of apocalyptic time as cyclic and nonlinear calls readers to question the colonialist assumptions of immortality implicit to white & Western understandings of apocalypse.

To fear apocalypse as a singular moment in time is to imply that one’s own world has never been in danger of ending. This line of thought is unimaginable to someone with my history and ancestry, to victims of colonialism and other apocalyptic crimes. Impending planet-wide catastrophes such as COVID or our climate crisis were the first time some (read: people with proximity to Western power) reckoned with the possibility of *their* world ending; many of these same people continuously fail to see that capitalism and colonialism are to blame for these catastrophes, and that nearly all of this could have been avoided by listening to victims of colonialism. To those who call today’s state of affairs *newly apocalyptic*, I ask: where have you been? Who have you been (failing at) listening to?

So maybe it’s not a universal Capital-A-Apocalypse I want to excavate language for, but a lowercase-a-apocalypse that colonialism has imposed on Indigenous and dispossessed peoples since the beginning of the settler project. The tired apocalypse. The assumed apocalypse. An apocalypse that keeps (a notion of) *their* world alive, at the expense of (a notion of) our own.

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*Massacres teach me not to wait  
for those who’ll be pulled out of the rubble,  
and not to follow the stories of survivors*

Maya Abu-Alhayyat, “[Massacres](#)” (trans. Fady Joudah)

In preparing for a recent reading, I returned to [some lyric essay fragments](#) which were written during my first and only trip to Palestine and published in my latest poetry

collection, [Birthright](#). The sequence focuses on moments during the trip that lingered with me: the Israeli politician who accused Palestinians demanding return of “advocating for the state’s suicide;” talking to families in Nabi Saleh actively protesting state-sponsored home demolitions (tell me, dear reader, where have we heard that before?). In returning to this piece in 2021, and all the apocalypses I’ve both survived and been suspended in since writing it, I saw, at its heart, a reckoning with witness and complications thereof – the irreconcilables of “Western diplomacy” as a language for and gaze asserted unto Palestine.

I was struck, in this revisiting, by the second section, in particular, which describes my visit to the ethnically cleansed Palestinian village of Lifta: the desecrated remains of former homes; the Israeli settlers bathing in the ruins, sitting among the remains casually reading newspapers; the tour guide named Yacoub who told us about the sewage leaking down from Jerusalem and erasing his father’s grave marker. The detail that is perhaps most heavy in my heart: “In the distance, there is a playground with a newly renovated park, speckles of white children running around. [Yacoub said,] ‘The government started building a, a... ya’ani, a new Israeli Quarter at the base of our village. This is our land, but they want to pave over it. We are fighting them, ya’ani, in the courts... But the construction has already begun.’”

The present day: an ad for Lifta Boutique appears on my Instagram feed. Marketed with filtered pictures of romanticized sunsets and hillsides, it is a resort for tourists supporting the settler economy built over the paved wreckage of our village. When I wrote down Yacoub’s words, I didn’t know that they would, in essence, become

vessels for a shattered memory of my land. That they would witness our land, suspended at once in pre- and post-apocalypse of a different *now*, a different *here*. Language as a collective offering, in the midst of our (lowercase-a) apocalypse.

As Palestinians have been tweeting and otherwise telling the world, every single city in Palestine was once Sheikh Jarrah, and Silwan, and Lifta, and and and. As a Palestinian living in the United States, I witness my homeland's cyclic apocalypse, as newer victims of Israeli ethnic cleansing replace older ones in the hashtags; as news met with Western apathy and Zionist suppression dissolves into silence. Palestinians – having no choice but that which the West fetishizes as “bravery” – rebuild, survive in ways the West couldn't begin to imagine, and above all, continue resisting. Every year, this organized resistance peaks on or around May 15 – the day we mourn the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, from the Nakba of 1948 to the Nakba of present day. And, on nearly every Nakba day of my adult life, I have witnessed the same pattern of Israeli aggression towards Palestinians, namely Gazans; Israeli aggression births Palestinian resistance births an excuse for further Israeli aggression.

The cycle – already unsustainable given the power imbalance between a Western, imperialist-funded, nuclear state and an Indigenous dispossessed people – intensifies with the years, pushing Palestinians into an even more desperate, catastrophic state of being. Israel knows the West will not hold them accountable, and furthermore, knows that its very ideology, its settler apparatus' survival, depends upon its ability to force Palestinians into this unsustainable cycle of violence.

As much as this cycle is a problem of “diplomacy,” and

Western failures therein, it is also a problem of (colonial imaginations of) language itself. Within this cycle, Palestinians witness repeating patterns of both-sides-isms and revisionist erasures of our struggle's ongoing memory emerging from the American media. In their [syntactical patterns and use of passive voice](#), in every statement divorced from [the transparent and well-documented reality of Israeli ethnic cleansing](#), in every failure to contextualize [the ongoing history of Palestinian resistance](#), the US media contorts the English language into a supremacist enactor of the colonial project. Many Palestinians, including [myself](#), have written against this irresponsibility of language time and time again. We say so, often, but, nowadays, it feels as if we are shouting into the void.

The void is deep, dare I say, the very heart of this nation itself. This abusive pattern of language that has been documented and studied for decades with little substantial effort to platform Palestinians in the US mainstream. June Jordan's "Problems of Language in a Democratic State," for example, documents a similar pattern of passive voice and lack of accountability-driven language in the US media (on Palestine and beyond) back in the 1980s, identifying an American capital-E-English which is not merely stagnant, but comfortable in our cyclic apocalypse. Jordan advocates for eliminating the passive voice from our English (especially in the media) and for critically deconstructing the ways English can become a state actor. She reminds us, as Palestinians are saying now: "Our lives depend on it."

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*Language is merely the placeholder  
for what the LAND has always known*  
Zaina Alsous, "[The Workers Love Palestine](#)"

Although these problems of language have been extensively critiqued and studied, the fact that little has materially changed for Palestinians with regards to victimization by the US media is, itself, a reflection on how deeply entrenched institutions of the English language are within the colonial project. What, then, can our future look like if Palestinians must exist within the English language? How can we build a better elsewhere, for all of us, in language if our current institutional imaginations continue to fail us?

One potential answer lies within the English(es) passed down to us from traditions of Black, Indigenous, and diasporic resistance poetry. My returnings to June Jordan this past year have been both balm and wind; both a reminder that Palestinians are not alone in apocalypse or (the problems of) language and a force to push us towards home. Never in the history of English have I felt as held, loved, and Seen, as a Palestinian, than in June Jordan's work, especially her poem "Moving Towards Home," which ends with the legendary lines:

I was born a Black woman,  
and now  
I am become a Palestinian  
against the relentless laughter of evil  
there is less and less living room  
and where are my loved ones?  
It is time to make our way home.

Here, Jordan's lyric "I" is both one and many – less a self among a collective than a self that is a collective, intimately tied to the Land and its people. The poet demands that

we see Palestinians beyond images of bulldozers, beyond white problems of language, beyond victims suspended in eternal and cyclic apocalypse. Instead, Jordan chooses the more difficult and transgressive path: to See, to Build with, to Love Palestinians. What better way to say “I love you” to a people than to say, not “I am you” or “I beyond you,” but “I *am become* you?” Or “I *future* you?”

And here, Jordan exposes a truth about the apocalyptic self: the contradiction of our many I’s. I’ve always hated the lyric “I,” or at least, the imagination of a lyric “I” instilled in and upheld by white canonical English poetry. Jordan gives me permission to find not a singular “lyric I” in my writing, but the existence of many consciousnesses, my many selves: the “I” that witnessed Lifta in 2017, the “I” that is witnessing Lifta Botique in 2021, the “I” that will see Lifta Returned to all of us in a future – these I’s that I don’t yet have a name for. My poetry is a reckoning with the disembodiments of the many selves housed within my body; the selves I survived to work towards the self I am becoming. The selves I had to kill to become.

Implicit to this apocalyptic “I” is the notion of a lyric collective, which calls forward my fears regarding the violence committed in the name of a white colonial imagination of a “lyric we.” So maybe, with a multitudinous “I,” I advocate not for *the* (universal) lyric “we” but a lyric “we” – one that is fluid and unknowably expansive, though precise, and always beyond my (and my (and my (and all my my’s’))) reach. A lyric-we I dare to call *impossible* if only to imply that we are always doing the work of (re(dis))becoming. The essence of this lyric-we would be solidarity – to show up in language and off the page. A poetics not just of theoretical insurgence, but that

demands the poet, the readers, and all listeners enact the poem with our lives.

To say, *I love we so much I'd burn this country down for us.*

To say, *I love we apocalyptically.*

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Earlier in 2021, I opened the Radius of Arab American Writers' (RAWI) festival by reading Al-Qasim's "Enemy of the Sun" and telling the story of its lyric collective. Among the items found in Black revolutionary George Jackson's prison cell after his assassination in 1971 was a collection of Palestinian resistance poetry carrying the same title. After his death, contemporary scholar [Greg Thomas](#) discovered that Al-Qasim's poem had been accidentally published by the Black Panther Party's newspaper under Jackson's name. Here, two radical political prisoner poets and lineages thereof, separated by countries and oceans, converge in a language of poetry, of history, of enemy:

It is the return of the sun,  
Of my exiled ones,  
And for her sake, and his  
I swear,  
I shall not compromise  
And to the last pulse in my veins,  
I shall resist,  
Resist – and resist.  
(Al-Qasim, "Enemy of the Sun")

These are words both Jackson and Al-Qasim lived and embodied with every breath in their lungs, in their brief, brief time on this earth. When Al-Qasim writes "I shall not compromise," he staked the lives of his many selves on it:

the self that survived Nakba, the self before and after his imprisonment for refusing Israeli military service – for refusing to allow the state to force him to ethnically cleanse his own land. And when Al-Qasim’s lyric “I” was found in Jackson’s cell, it became Jackson’s lyric “I” too. A lyric “I” entangled between the Israeli Occupation Forces and the military force that is the US police. A lyric “I” entangled between the singular corporate mechanism supplying the military and surveillance technology to both the US and Israel. A lyric “I” apocalyptic in its insistence of survival, despite.

And so I opened the space of RAWI’s gathering of more than 600 beloveds, in celebration of Arab, Southwest Asian, North African, and the shared and multitudinous lyric “I’s” of diasporic literature writ large – with the only words I could fathom in the apocalypse of now:

*Reflecting on these words, this history, this moment, I cannot help but return to my Brother Fargo Tbakhi’s words: “the past is a future we return to.” How can we find a language of returning, of un-compromise, in our work as writers? If our language isn’t freeing the Land, we are doing something wrong. If our language isn’t echoing in protest, we are doing something wrong. If our language isn’t setting fire to the nations who have stolen everything but the breath in our lungs, we must be doing something wrong. I ask you, fellow beloveds, to consider: what worlds need to end for us to begin?*

We are living in apocalyptic times, yes, so may apocalypse be a friend in time. Despite time. May this space be a balm, yes, but the opening of a new and un-countried wound. May our gathering, itself, be apocalyptic.

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*we will return  
that is not a threat*



*not a wish  
a hope  
or a dream  
but a promise*

Remi Kanazi, "[Nakba](#)"

Carrying Jordan, Al-Qasim, Jackson, Choi, and a long line of revolutionary diasporic poetics speaking beyond the singular canonical lyric I, I arrive at a truth poets and theorists have long engaged with: that by traveling deep enough into apocalypse, a colonized people will inevitably find a new world in the rubble and aftermath of our current one. It's an idea my students and I returned to with Etel Adnan's *Arab Apocalypse*, for example; how Adnan's speaker paints the sun into a symbol of empire, writing through the Lebanese Civil War, building toward her 59-sectioned poem's monumental ending: "Matter-Spirit will become the NIGHT / in the night in the night we shall find knowledge love and peace."

As I witness the ongoing Nakba in Palestine, behind a thousand notions of window, I find comfort in this framing of apocalypse. That [the Nakba of Sheikh Jarrah](#), [of Al Aqsa](#), [of Al-Lydd unsilenced](#), [of Gaza](#), [of a united Palestine – a unity intifada](#) from river to sea, from diaspora to Land – are in the process of birthing a new world despite our current light of day. Today's is an apocalypse made possible by the tireless work of grassroots organizers, the [youth paving our way forward](#), the Black Lives Matter movement, and the long history of Black radical support for Palestine. It is an apocalypse the English of colonial institutions will fail to embody.

The air is weighing differently on my lungs now, witnessing the unprecedented turnout to Boston's Nakba Day protest in May, the Italian workers refusing to load

ships of weapons to Israel, and the sheer volume of international vocal support for the Palestinian and our demands – calls to action from US academics, thousands of people protesting from London to Baghdad, words of solidarity from leaders in Bolivia to US celebrities. In this language of apocalypse, I do not see destruction, but a difficult love, a justice-centered reconstruction.

In an English of Western journalism, I do not know how to name the apocalypse in my chest, witnessing Palestinian youth climb the entrance of the Israeli consulate in Boston at our Nakba day protest, holding an image of our Al Quds and waving our flag in pride. That would require both [a language of returning](#), and [a returning to language](#).

Allow me to Return:

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Because تعبان, I.

Because I began with apocalypse but found, instead, an ars poetica.

Because I believe in a better elsewhere for language.

Because the apocalypse of Capital-E-English, I believe, begins in poetry, and not the poetry of Capital-E-English, but in our breakage of.

Because I am writing to a future Palestine I know will exist *and* beyond what I can know will exist.

Because the only Palestinian future I believe in is apocalypse.

Because, in the hearts and minds and spirits of my every beloved student, I see apocalypse.

Because, in every student, I see a window with which we can gaze and speak towards our future lyric selves.

Because, in our every youth, there is a future ancestor both in and beyond English.

Because the English we are building is an English beyond the passive voice, an English beyond the capital E.

Because the future ancestors of English will look back upon the failures of today's capital-E-English, and the small terrorisms we were able to commit against it, as a way of staying rooted in their work.

Because terror[(i)sm].

Because freeing Palestine would mean freeing ourselves from America and I don't know if some of y'all, let alone your English, are ready for that.

Because some of you are behaving like you're terrified.

Because you should be.

Because I am inviting the rest of you into a lyric collective beyond our present selves; a collective of who we are and are become.