

Imagining Liberation



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To Alma¹
Whose strength I can never *imagine*



¹Alma Mohammad Ghanim Jaroor, is a 12 year old Palestinian girl from Gaza. When the rescuers came to save her from under the rubble of a building on the 2nd of December 2023, she pleaded that they save her last " save me last, save my mother and father and grandma and brother and sister, except me. Save them first, let me be the last one". And then, selflessly, she quickly adds "or you can pull me out, so I can help you".

Abstract

Imagining Liberation is an artistic research project with the aim of investigating methods in speculative nonfiction. This project begins with a question: What kind of cinematic images can arise from imagining a liberated Palestine? Dalia AlKury's interest in staging simulated pasts in her earlier documentaries and then staging speculations of futures during her PhD research stems from a deep frustration with the lack of art imagining a world that she hopes is possible. Both practices—staging in documentary and speculative fiction—are rooted in posing the question “What if?,” to offer another possible world or narrative. Her work combines these approaches in the realization of her own method in speculative multitemporal nonfiction. Dalia approaches documentary filmmaking not as a way of documenting reality, but as a way of constructing an alternative one. Her final artistic results are informed by a long legacy of politically poetic Palestinian aesthetics and by grievances over the historical and present day witnessing of the violent ethnic cleansing of her people.

By committing to framing her vignettes in a fictional liberated Palestine, an emancipatory art making process starts to take shape. The process excavates an often-oppressed critical rage and pushes it up to the surface through different narrative tools. *Imagining Liberation* traces the filmmaker's confrontational journey while experimenting with staging, subverting, futuring, abstracting, and decolonizing to reach a type of catharsis in the face of a continuously fragmented diasporic existence.

By staging her own return to a liberated Palestine in different modes from writing to filming, Dalia runs into ethical dilemmas questioning her self-censorship, representation of “others” and the elusive role of cinematic catharsis. This book encompasses her critical reflection on the short films, narrative experiments and video diaries created throughout her research. The three main audio-visual works that will be shared and analyzed are *Congratulations on Your Return*, *Levitations*, and *What if a tree, What if a crow?*

Personal background

I remember as a child not being able to watch “Tom and Jerry” without feeling upset about Tom, the cat, being unimaginably cruel to Jerry. I just couldn’t enjoy it. Why would anyone create such evil characters in films and books, relishing in making their teeth so pointy and their poison so deadly? I felt this way as I read the Qurán in school, too, as I simply couldn’t understand why God would want to punish the infidels in hell. Who could possibly deserve this? I must have only matured a little since then, because I have never been able to reconcile myself to evil or injustice as being part of the fabric of life.

My angel, my mother, would drive us in her air-conditioned Cadillac to her family home in Alahmadi in Kuwait, forced to answer a steady stream of random questions that I would make up along the road. I can still remember arriving at my grandparents: the smell of the basil bushes as we entered their defiant, experimental garden. I remember the warmth of sitting on my grandfather’s lap as he taught me Al Fatiha. My aunts and uncles were still young and living at my grandparents’, and every time I visited, it was like arriving at a party full of opinionated, expressive, artistic, joyous, proud, and strikingly confident individuals. Everything in me that is self-assured, loud, and happy, I owe to them—and to the way they loved me.

My parents met in Kuwait at a book fair, where my mother was selling Mahmoud Darwish’s latest books. When my father went to ask for her hand in marriage, my grandfather was reluctant, as my father had never completed his studies, and my mom wished for a university graduate. Luckily, my clever grandfather, Ahmad, made the connection that both their brothers had become friends in Akka prison in Palestine in the late 1930s for being politically active

against British rule, facilitating trust between the families—and ultimately my imminent destiny to be born into this generous and vivacious family of six.

My rock, my father, is an entrepreneur and I think he’s been one since his years as a street-smart kid in Syria. Listening to his childhood adventures in Damascus is one of my true joys in this life. His stories never lamented the poverty and the refugee status that he and his six brothers endured. He’s one of those people you can’t say much about, because you simply have to meet him, the blissful man that he is.

My grandfather, Ahmad, was proudest of his Sindbad-type journeys across the Middle East as a truck driver. He claims to be the first man in all of Palestine to have built a truck with eight wheels with his bare hands. After my family’s violent expulsion in 1948, his mechanical talent and truck driving skills were how he fed his seven boys. He has gone through the “red death,” as he navigated the deserts of the gulf in heat for days, with nothing but old, dry bread to survive. My grandmother always tears up with morbid laughter when she recalls her horrible road trips with him across the world, when he attempted to get yet another passport. He later left his seven sons in order to build a new life for them in Sacramento, California, but only two of them followed his American dream. My feisty grandfather never let it go: I remember his face when he said to me, “We could have been lords if my children moved with me, Lordaaaat I tell you! Instead, they rotted in Kuwait’s heat, and all their work was burned down by Saddam.”

Indeed, my father and his family lost unspeakable wealth in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and yet he made sure we suffered none of it. As we escaped the Iraqi invasion in his Mitsubishi to Jordan, I remember feeling like my story had just began. My teenage years were healthy ones, full of mischief and feminist rebellious escapes from a rather stifling conservative society. At 17, my family immigrated to Canada to make sure we got a better education, and I was again ready to jump into a whole new chapter. But Canada

wasn't for me. I fast-tracked my university years and ended up with a BA in communications studies and international development. I was restless and full of dreams, and the world was calling me to far-away places. I taught English in Taiwan for a while and then headed to Slovakia, where I researched development work with the Roma minority. At the age of 22, I moved back to Jordan permanently to continue working in the humanitarian field. I joined an amateur filmmaking cooperative, and what began as a hobby—making short films and showcasing them in the local art scene—ended up being my true calling. Critical and political, together, my films and I talked back to the world. My films did well both commercially and in festivals, and I was granted a Chevening Scholarship to study documentary filmmaking at Goldsmiths University in London.

My journey as an independent filmmaker is long, but when I close my eyes and think about my entire film career, what I see are flashes of beautiful faces speeding by in a montage. Clear faces intensely looking at me beyond the lens, revealing something deeply personal. I see their faces clearly because I spent thousands of hours re-editing them and trying to communicate their embedded truths onto the screen. For people like me, who are insatiably intimate and hungry for deeper human connection, filmmaking is an oasis. The generosity, trust, and intimacy this film practice offers is gift that keeps giving, until you have to ask for funding.

I sometimes think that I made a career out of asking questions that most people don't want to answer. In a lot of ways, I am still that same girl, sitting in the back seat of my mother's Cadillac, sticking my head out the window and asking unanswerable questions, just for the sake of shaking—life—a little.

فِي مَآ حَيَاةً تَسُرُّ الْهَدِيْقَ
وَأَمَّا مَمَاتٌ يَغِيْظُ الْعِدَى

من قصيدة "سأحمل روهي على راحتي"
للشاعر عبدالرحيم محمّد / إعادة صياغة: داليا الكوري

Introduction

On a semi-cloudy afternoon, as I walked to the beach in the coastal city of Haifa in Israel, I witnessed a man standing in a uniform. It was a soldier's uniform; he was alone and looking at the empty Mediterranean sea. He slowly began putting away his rifle and taking off his shirt, his undershirt, and his pants, and my imagination started to run wild. This man is probably defecting from the Israeli army today, I thought. He looked like he was giving up: a man changing. But he wasn't; he was just a soldier going for a swim.

The raging militant hegemony in the Arab region has compelled me to visualize images of accountability, especially for the oppressed and disenfranchised Palestinians. I wanted to make a film in which Palestine is finally free and I, as part of the diaspora, will finally be granted the right of return. My objective was to explore what returning to a safe homeland really means and how to portray this cinematically, with complexity and realism. I was swiftly faced with the impossibility of imagining freedom while my homeland was under military occupation. It was only possible to write this script if I could start by imagining transitional justice. I had to create a completely fictitious world, set in the future, with an active transitional justice process underway.

These heavy themes—including forgiveness, empathy, anger, revenge, and accountability—combine in this project to portray the difficulty, awkwardness, and impossibility of generalizing what freedom, dignity, and justice mean to different people. As Balsom states, "Simple truths and totalizing meanings are the real fictions,"¹ and my aim was to investigate reality.¹ In fact, every time I reached a simple truth that felt like fiction, I challenged it by abstracting and complexifying the script. The script was a laboratory that refused a singular story and rejected the idea of imagining a simple, digestible, free Palestine. In the appendix, you will find excerpts from my short

story that was supposed to be turned into a film script entitled *We Never Left*, which functioned as my own alternate universe—a universe where Palestine was complicatedly free, "from the river, to the sea."

Lastly, I want to make it clear from the beginning that the logic of the speculative world I built is clearly fictional: Palestine is definitely not liberated in real life. Everything else, however, feels true—the events and characters are reacting to very true and real histories. I therefore like to refer to my work as speculative nonfiction or speculative documentary.²

¹Balsom, E. (2017). The Reality-Based Community. *e-flux*, 83. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community>

² For more on this term, visit <http://www.schoolofspeculativeliterarydocumentary.org>.

My practice: From staging pasts to fabulating futures

My choice to focus on this specific theme for my artistic research was not without a history. My art practice has centered around harnessing a method to break taboos by visualizing the personal fantasies of my main characters. Looking back at what I was trying to do, I realized that, in a subtle way, I was making portraits of my subjects' political unconscious. My aim in my character-driven films was to portray the elusive, intangible drive behind the everyday heroes in my region. This is most evident in my film *Syrialism*, but also in my feature documentaries: *Privacy of Wounds*, *Possessed by Djinn*, and *Pershmerga, One More Time*.¹ These films utilize tools related to staging and role playing, to achieve a more intimate and visual relationship with one's own narrative. Most of my work revolves around people who resist political regimes and subsequently end up in a tough situation. I am mainly interested in the story they tell themselves and their ways of interpreting their choices in life. In today's discourse, most of my work may be seen as being concerned with trauma and healing, though none of my film subjects use those words or that notion to describe their mental journey. In retrospect, my lens has always been on steadfastness (*sumud*) and resilience.

My method of working with my documentary subjects is usually highly collaborative, and we try to find a way to simulate part of their story that was once their past. My role as a filmmaker is to support them to dig deeper into their psyche and to make that philosophical aspect present or visual enough that they can interact with it themselves. This helps animate their thoughts and allows me to escape from the classic interview and enter a more creative documentary space, where more illuminating and embodied storytelling can unfold.

Below, I give some examples of my previous work in staging, serving as a stepping stone to describing how that led me to futuring narratives: By "futuring" what I mean is moving from asking *what if* Palestine becomes free, to writing as *if* Palestine is free.

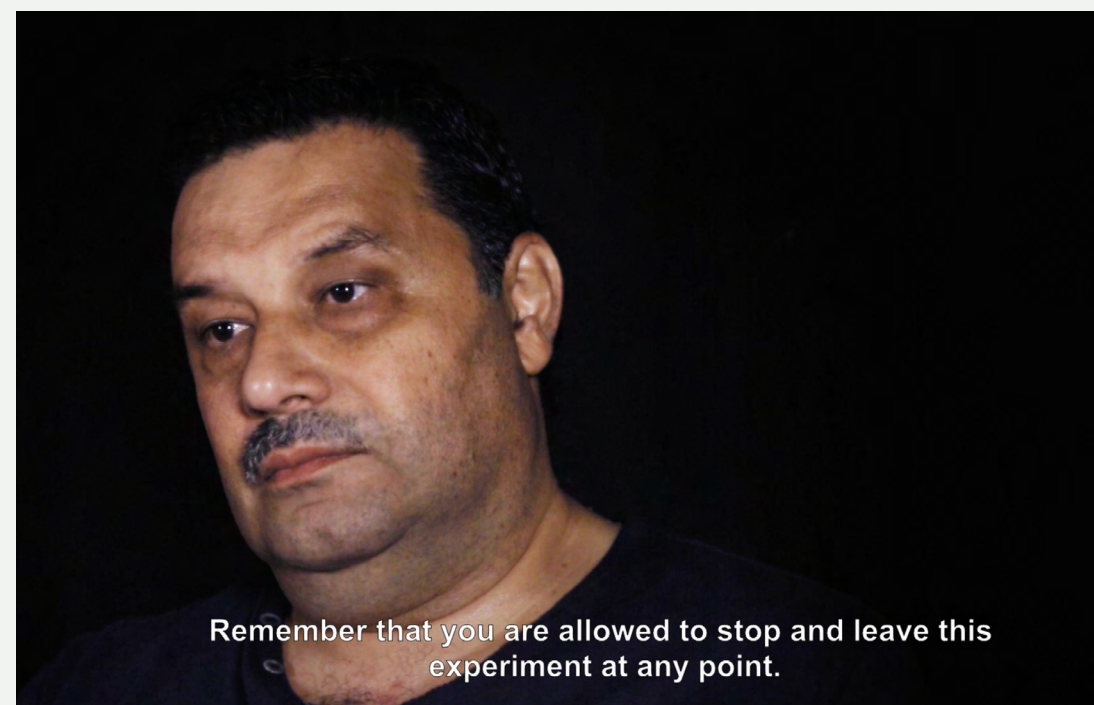


Stills from *Possessed by Djinn* / D. AlKury

The itching of lice is so wonderfully great (wonderfully great).

In my feature film *Privacy of Wounds*, I simulated a prison in Oslo, where three former political prisoners volunteered to be locked up again for three days, to revisit their memories in Syria's dark detention facilities. With no camera crew on set and the freedom to navigate their own memories instead of being directed by me, the film characters were able to revisit and relay their own memories in a more embodied and cathartic way. This film could easily have been yet another documentary on the Syrian regime, had it not been for the power of staging. I realize now that I have always believed that the body remembers—and that staging and role playing can encourage the body to bring forward stories that the mind cannot.²

This method is evident in my previous film *Peshmerga, One More Time*, in which I asked 3 old friends in their 60s to take a road trip, to simulate the people that they once were, decades ago. Here, I believed that if they traveled on foot with their bodies, their telling of their story would be very different. All three characters were Peshmerga fighters in the 1980s, who fought against the Saddam regime in Kurdistan, in Northern Iraq. They were members of the Iraqi communist party "al Ansar," which no longer exists. We agreed together that the best way to simulate that past and to excavate their memories would be for them to dress in their Peshmerga fighter uniforms and hop in a car for a winding, bumpy road to visit the caves, mountains, and villagers that once hid them away and saved their lives during their youth. The simple technique of having them wear their military uniforms on the road trip gave them a somatic experience that translated in the film. This instant connection to a past self is evident, as the film commences with them discussing their uniforms and laughing about how they look. The hardships they encountered as they hiked in the mountains at an older age (which I had asked them to do) evoked an embodied experience that gave them a higher level of intimacy and authenticity with their own past. The agency they had over where they went and whom they met comforted me, as I knew it was not just a film we were making, but something they truly needed and desired. There were moments that felt like closure, when they met with old comrades and cried together about things they were never able to be vulnerable about

Stills from *Privacy of Wounds* / D. AlKury



Stills from *Peshmerga, One More Time* / D. AlKury

during their battle for freedom. To finally sit and cry in the spot where they lost dear friends—where grieving was not an option—was healing and deeply moving, not just for the film, but for all of us. They were very proud of their journey and shared it widely with the world, as the film was shown on the Al Arabiya channel, reminding the world of the Arab solidarity with the Kurdish cause. The past was no longer delivered via old photos: Instead, the three friends were surrounded by it. They could see it and smell it and climb it, rediscovering their story in a safe space.

This is key in my storytelling method: I do not want to be told something by the film character or film subject—I want to watch them rediscover it as they tell it. I also need them to fully own it. As such, it is important that the process of staging and revisiting gives my subjects a feeling of agency over their story and courageous choices. As a director, my role is not to give them agency over the film, but to instigate a cooperative agency for them and me over the way in which we choose to tell their stories. This complicated relationship is laden with power dynamics. I try to navigate this ethically challenging terrain of agency as an interactive dynamic process. Agency resides in this building of trust between myself and the subjects and the story we want to tell together. The more trust and agency I give my subjects, the more of these they give back to me. It is a delicate process, and when working with the pain of others, a filmmaker must be conscious and sensitive, always checking in with their subjects. The building of trust and friendship is a primary reason why I find meaning in my work.

Indeed, I cannot work with people unless I am truly excited about our artistic kinship in cocreating the film. I tried to pinpoint when this happened to me the first time: this obsession with trust building. To illustrate the origins of this first spark, we must travel back to south Lebanon in 2007. I had just finished my master's degree in documentary filmmaking at Goldsmiths, University of London, and I was particularly interested in the use of humor in documentary films. I was inspired by Sean Mcallister's film, the *Liberati of Bagdad*, and Ben Hopkins' *37 Uses for a Dead Sheep*. With those two films as

my backdrop during my master's, I was preparing to shoot my first character-driven film—*Smile, You're in South Lebanon*—in which my main character's two children constantly asked me to film them doing something totally different. It was by listening to them and not editing them out that I realized the importance of cocreating with my film subjects. There was a truth that only the children could illuminate, which disarmed me forever, but in the best way: turning me from a storyteller into a cocreator and a meaning maker. The story was mostly theirs; I was only trying to communicate what I found beautiful in their story.

Staging for me is also just plain old fun. I enjoy it, and it brings me joy, as it is a fun way to listen to others, to have them play themselves. It is thus unsurprising that my favorite documentaries are films like *Stories We Tell*, *The Arbor*, *Dick Johnson Is Dead*, and *Casting JonBenet*. All these films resonate deeply with me because they reflect my way of directing films—and my way of staging, in particular. These films validate my method and inspire me to continue crafting my method of fabulating and staging.

In my most recent film, *Syrialism*, my method of staging went a step further. I discovered that—to portray my film subject's visceral experience of loss—I needed to stage his nightmares, literally. *Syrialism* is a hybrid film that explores the complex feelings of survival guilt felt by an enigmatic Syrian man living in Oslo. The film explores the nature of his own dreams, memory, and imagination as a way of dealing with his depression and loneliness in exile. The film flings us from an interview with Salam into the middle of his nightmares, where he is confronted by his dead brother. He wakes up, only to be flung into another dream, where his jealous sisters tease him about his comfortable life in Norway. In real life, Salam is fearful of becoming desensitized to his people's suffering, so tries to disconnect from these simple Norwegian comforts. For example, he would sleep on the floor instead of his bed or stop eating to empathize with his hungry family back home. I write these dreams with Salam, to the point where we started having similar dreams at night.



Stills from *Smile, You're in South Lebanon* / D. AlKury

MY PRACTICE: FROM STAGING PASTS TO FABULATING FUTURES



Still from Syrialism / D. Alkury

However, there was a defining moment while I directed this film that profoundly altered my perspective and reshaped what I want to do in my film career. It was a scene in which Salam is confronted with his two jealous sisters, whom he desperately wishes to help. In this surreal scene, Salam takes a water hose and connects it to his bathroom sink in Oslo, then drags it all the way to his kitchen window, where he drops it down to reach a village in Syria. His sisters help to lower the hose, in ecstasy. The joy and ululations in the scene were improvised and unscripted, and even though it was a greenscreen shot behind the window, we all had a kind of catharsis. The actors felt so happy that they could send a water hose from Oslo to their fictional family back home, even if it was not “real.” I cried during the edit of this scene. It made me realize how much I needed to create cinema that channels my frustration: cinema that raises its middle finger to a world that has separated us from our loved ones, from our right to clean water, for our right to live in our own countries in peace. But more than that, it made me realize just how much I need to defy the laws of physics through my practice, using speculative tools and imagery. In that moment, it became clear to me that I no longer have an interest in documenting reality, but in demanding it. Essentially, I crossed over to what can be described as critical fabulation.

Critical fabulation, coined by the American writer Saidiya Hartman, refers to a style of creative semi-nonfiction that attempts to bring the suppressed voices of the past to the surface by means of hard research and scattered facts. The notion of critical fabulation originally appeared in Hartman’s essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” and it largely resonated with my practice of speculating nonfiction. The main difference is that critical fabulation seeks to fill the gaps of past, a colonized or violent archive, whereas my current work tries to fill the possible gaps of a potential violent future. The intentions are similar, but the temporality and time travel are in opposite directions, and that is a minor detail.

Hartman references many authors as she asks an ethical question that looms over my work and probably over most documentarians whose works reflect on the pain of others,³

How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is it possible to construct a story from “the locus of impossible speech” or resurrect lives from the ruins?⁴ Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to “exhume buried cries” and reanimate the dead?⁵ Or is narration its own gift and its own end, that is, all that is realizable when overcoming the past and redeeming the dead are not? And what do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self?⁶ For whom—for us or for them?

I regularly confront this ethical question—“for us or for them?”—in my practice, and it arose in many guises in my research as I dealt with my agency and entitlement in narrating a grand collective grief. In *Syrialism*, I stage and reenact (or reanimate) some of my main character’s martyred family members: They were unavoidable when talking about survival guilt. They needed to speak. Salam and I tried to give them a voice that was domestic and true to us: To answer whether it was “for us or for them,” I can say it was for “us.” “Us” is enormous, and I will be confronting the “me” and the “I” and the “us” and the “them,” with all their multiplicities in my diasporic identity, throughout this reflection.

Fortunately for me, the future temporality I am working with in this research allows me to escape the archive which Hartman describes as a death sentence and tomb; instead of reanimating the dead, I animate the yet-to-come, a dream of return precious to so many millions of the Shatat (diaspora). Both the dead and the unborn are sacred and must be handled with care and respect.

Speculative storytelling felt more useful now. Its ability to liberate my ways of seeing and my way of experiencing this increasingly unfathomable world was a weapon I wanted to own. I wanted

Stills from *Syrialism* / D. AlKury

to create work that responds to the cognitive dissonance and alienating world I was no longer able to shoulder. I suddenly felt that the new temporality in which I want to reside—in order to demand my own reality—was in a future: a possible one. My motto became “If history is written by the victors, let the future be written by the oppressed.”

It became clearer to me that my artistic practice falls under post-colonial or migrant cinema. In this particular project, I feel that I am constantly on the borders of things, spatial and temporal: borders between reality and fiction, between now and the future, between utopia and dystopia.

According to Sandra Ponzanesi and Verena Berger,⁷ an element that surfaces in post-colonial cinema is spatiality. Spatiality foregrounds dislocations, borders, two worlds colliding, mental journeys, and fantasies that enable a kind of crossing. While endeavoring to answer whether I was making a utopia or a dystopia, their essay introduced me to Foucault’s (1986) term “heterotopia,”⁸ which describes spaces that have more layers of meaning than immediately meet the eye. According to Foucault, heterotopia is a physical representation or approximation of a utopia, or a parallel space (such as a prison) that contains undesirable bodies that make a real utopian space impossible. The Palestinian experience has been plagued and trapped in these heterotopias: from refugee camps, prisons, detention centers, holding areas, checkpoints, and cemeteries to a kind of meta entrapment in documentary films, academic essays, and the news—trapped and forever unable to cross through to justice or their right for self-determination. A key aspect of my practice is to re-world these heterotopias, changing them from places of violence to places of liberation. Thus, in my previous films, I constructed a prison to tell an empowering tale of overcoming, and a nightmare full of ghosts with whom to make amends and violent memories from which to obtain closure. Central to my practice is reinterpreting heterotopias in service to a story that defeats violence and becomes a place from which we heal, as is highlighted below. The purpose of my artistic research

is to demolish these suffocating heterotopias and see where their alternative representations will offer us: emotionally, ethically, and visually. This is explained in detail in the “Speculating and Futuring,” chapter, below.

In an essay written by Haim Bresheeth⁹ on the cinematic representation of the Nakba, he describes the necessity of telling stories of trauma:

Memory is at the root cause of trauma, Freud tells us, but it is also the source of its resolution. In one of his later works he outlines how the pain of reliving the events leading to the trauma may in turn hold the key for a gradual return to normality (Freud 1991 (1920)). Mourning, and the work of mourning, Freud tells us in a piece written some years before, is crucial for the return to normal life... Cathy Caruth sums up Freud’s question thus: what does it mean for the reality of war to appear in the fiction of the dream? What does it mean for life to bear witness to death ? and what is the surprise that is encountered in this witness? (Caruth 2001:8).

I read Bresheeth’s essay, reflect on my work of futuring this trauma into a post-colonial Palestine, and say to Caruth and Freud: The surprise that is encountered in life witnessing death is that life dies in a genocide, then witnesses more death from above and still creates beautiful stories full of hope and resilience (*sumud*¹⁰); the surprise you ask about is actually a speculative documentary that imagines justice, regardless of what comes. Just as our people exist because they can imagine freedom, so do my films exist because they can imagine freedom.

In the coming chapters, I will share my process, which resulted in a body of experimental work that resembles the functioning of a dream inception, rather than “film.” My hope is that these experiments can add a drop of *sumud* and solidarity to all narratives seeking liberation today.

¹ These films can be watched on my Vimeo page: <https://vimeo.com/daliaalkury>.

² A good reference that confirmed my understanding of how trauma gets interlocked in the body is Bassel van der Kolk’s (2015) book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, published by Penguin Books.

³ Hartman, S. (2008). Venus in Two Acts. *Small Axe*, 26(12), 1–14. (p. 3)

⁴ Best, S. *The African Queen*, unpublished essay.

⁵ Djebbar, A. (1993). *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*. Dorothy S. Blair (Transl.). Heinemann.

⁶ Das, V. (2007). *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. University of California Press. (pp. 39, 47)

⁷ Ponzanesi, S. & Berger, V. Introduction: Genres and Tropes in Postcolonial Cinema(s) in Europe. (2016). *Transnational Cinemas*, 7(2), 111–117.

⁸ Foucault, M. & Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), pp. 22–27.

⁹ Bresheeth, H. (2007). The Continuity of Trauma and Struggle: Recent Cinematic Representations of the Nakba. In Ahmad H. Sá di & Lila Abu-Lughod (Eds.), *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of History* (pp. 162–183). Columbia University Press.

¹⁰ *Sumud* (in English, “steadfast perseverance”) is a Palestinian cultural value, ideological theme, and political strategy. A fresh resource on *sumud*’s versatile meanings, is Rana Issa’s (2023) *Nakba, Sumud, Intifada: A Personal Lexicon of Palestinian Loss and Resistance*, in *The Funambulist*, issue 50. Available at: <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/redefining-our-terms/nakba-sumud-intifada-a-personal-lexicon-of-palestinian-loss-and-resistance>

هل نسينا شيئاً
وراءنا
زعم! نسينا
تلفّت
القلب

كيف نشتغل من حبّ
تونس
محمّد درويش

Speculating and futuring

I spent the first phase of my research (from January 2020 to January 2022) exploring how a future sovereign Palestine might unfold in a story that could become a film. I spent this time interrogating every minor detail that crossed my path as I walked down liberated Palestinian roads and alleys. I immersed myself in reading anything written by Palestinian futurists and authors. I remember the thrill of finding books like Ghalayini's *Palestine Plus 100*, Azem's *The Book of Disappearance*, volume 1 of LIFTA's *Future Palestine*, and Copley's *Reworlding Palestine*. However, regardless of the books I read, I still felt quite alone, as most of the fiction I found was dystopic or a cautionary tale. This style of fiction was not my goal: I was determined to write a "feel good," triumphant story. So I walked into the dark corners of my ongoing Nakba and intergenerational trauma, determined to find the hidden, realistic version of my returned and liberated homeland. My method of doing so was simple: I wrote. My only condition was to write from an authentic experience of nostalgia toward freedom and liberation using my own pain and loss rather than the pain of others. I believed that I needed go all the way into my own intergenerational trauma, using science fiction tropes and whatever it took to begin re-worlding this return. I had to re-world everything.

However, before I introduce my research methods, I want to share a summary of my story (excerpts of the script are in the appendix). This should guide the reader in understanding the metaphorical terrains I hiked across throughout the four years of researching the topic of imagining liberation.

WE NEVER LEFT

Synopsis

We Never Left is a science fiction film script set in the year 2040. The story revolves around Shams, a playful Palestinian woman who moves back to Palestine after the fall of Israel's 92-year occupation. Although Shams was doing well in her career in Oslo, which is where her father is from, she nevertheless opts to return. Governed by a progressive party and an artificial intelligence (AI) president, both Palestinians and Israelis are granted equal rights and prepare for a glorious decade of healing. Healing, however, turns out to be intensely challenging, with too many intergenerational traumas and angry ghosts with which to contend. A special drug is designed, to help the citizens of this brave new single state to cope. With this drug, Shams erases her traumatic memories in order to move on from her dark past growing up in East Jerusalem. She begins warming up to her job in Haifa as a peace pill "techno-healer," as it distracts her from facing her loneliness. As Palestine prepares for the festivities marking the third anniversary of their independence day, Shams' clients, mother, and the political atmosphere begin demanding more of her. This culminates at a party when she accidentally meets her radical ex-boyfriend, Jameel, whom she had been trying to avoid since she returned. A romantic evening—during which she reconciles with her past and celebrates with her childhood friends in Jerusalem—challenge her approach to peace and forgiveness, reminding her that her grief might be what she actually needs in order to heal and move on.

Decolonizing Palestine using science fiction tropes

There were many elements in my imagined new Palestine that helped me re-world and decolonize. I use the word "decolonize" quite literally and concretely: namely, I imagine a world in which Palestine is not physically under settler colonialism. This premise naturally starts to decolonize the behavior of that world—the logic of it. New objects, systems, and elements thus start to respond to that logic. I want to introduce two world-building elements that can provide insights into my process of building this future, as they proved instrumental to that process: the peace pill ("Sussu") and the transitional justice courts.

Imagining healing

When I first embarked on this journey of imagining a liberated Palestine, healing was neither my purpose nor my method. The theme of healing emerged as I wrote the fictional part of the work. World building proved a laborious endeavor. I wanted a peaceful state that made sense from as many angles as possible. While trying to establish the rules for the fictitious country, I soon realized that I needed a miracle drug of sorts: a drug that would make this brave new world a functional one. This is when I created the most important element in my (science) fiction: a peace pill. Below, I describe this peace pill in greater detail, as it was integral in helping me imagine. It broke down my walls. I may have even been addicted to it, because I began living parallel lives: one in my imagined liberated Palestine, and one in my office and home in Oslo. Via an excavation of an older version of the script, I now share how the peace pill made itself known.

WE NEVER LEFT



Still from *Congratulations on your return* / D. Alkury

The peace pill: "Sussu"

The peace pill is a pharmaceutical drug that was legalized and launched for public use in 2037, in Jerusalem. It was discovered by two medical scientists who were conducting research on how to control irritable goats. The pill's main ingredient is plant-based; the plant is a mutant species of the herb *Salvia officinalis*, which mysteriously appeared in tunnels between Gaza and Sinai.

The plant was first discovered by a Bedouin shepherd who smuggled medicine between Gaza and Egypt through tunnels in the 2000s. The shepherd noticed that, after they ate the shrubs, his goats would become notably calmer with other male goats. Analysis of the tiny purple plant revealed that it targeted an area of the brain that is related to aggression and hyperactivated the part that induces empathy. With a team of neuroscientists and behavioral technologists, the two scientists became shortlisted for the Nobel peace prize, for developing a peace pill that could save humanity. They decided to try it out on Israel first, as this was deemed the best place to do so.

Drug-loving youth in both Israel and Palestine began taking Sussu. The result was a new political party that worked to topple the Israeli state. The new party targeted politicians and decision makers, sneaking the peace pill into their food. Many soldiers began defecting from the army. All of this unfolded as Israel was committing what was deemed the world's worst massacre and facing global censure, including losing funding from the United States and Europe.

Who would have thought that Jesus would come back as a pill? The world rejoiced and everyone embraced the good news. Unlike most psychoactive, plant-based drugs, this pill induced neither hallucinations nor any discernible signs of intoxication. Users remained functional and exhibited normal behavior. It was thus challenging for its opponents to make the peace pill illegal, and both the Israelis and Palestinian agreed (democratically) that it was the



Still from *Congratulations on your return* / D. AlKury

only way the new single state could function smoothly. It is truly a magical pill.

For some, however, the peace pill causes memory lapses, especially concerning things in the past. For others, it can be too intense, causing them to cry involuntary, for hours. This can be mitigated by taking lower doses. Some individuals do not seem to be affected by the pill's intended effects, and many of these resistant cases are dealt with in the "empathy labs." In these labs, they are visited by Sussu experts. Shams, the protagonist of this story, is one such expert: a techno-healer at the nation's Sussu headquarters. The pill is compulsory, as it is what is maintaining the fragile stability of the country. Shams' job is to regulate the dosage of the pill. People open up to her, she has charisma, as does her trauma-defusing machine (which we learn more about, below). But Shams' dark side emerges when her clients refuse to take the pill. How dare they jeopardize the stability of the country by refusing to take one pill a day? After all this nation has been through!

While writing this fictional story, I found myself needing to understand better how a country and its citizens might heal, forgive, and move on after a century of constant oppression and trauma. That question weighed on me and felt central to any kind of story I wanted to write. I truly believed that a decentralized government run by AI might be the only solution. As an Arab who witnessed so many corrupt dictatorships and puppet regimes, I felt only AI could be trusted. So I let that weighty element of world building turn into a character with which I could interact, to understand what democracy might mean to me. My choice of governance manifested itself as an android president named Tilda, as an homage to Tilda Swinton. My co-supervisor at the time, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, had just discovered a forgotten film entitled *Friendship's Death*¹ where Tilda Swinton plays the role of an android diplomat sent by aliens to spread peace, but who accidentally lands in Jordan during Black September's violent conflict between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Jordanian government. Spoiler alert: The film ends with her choosing to fight along the Palestinians—hence my choice.

Now that I had a functional government, I could delve into other world-building questions. These included the weather, the economy, the water crisis, transitional justice, and the technology—all of which I found exciting because my main interest was creating a utopic future in which Palestine was experiencing a renaissance, with the whole world cheering: "If Palestine can be free, we all can." While nearly everything could be rebuilt and solved, what remained unsolvable was the question of coexistence. Even the pill did not suffice for my mind to bypass the trauma, anger, and need for justice that I knew would remain among the Palestinians. Only Palestinians know the weight of trying to imagine coexistence: For many, to even imagine this coexistence is to betray the very dream of liberation. Coexistence is equated with peace, and peace is equated with injustice—with the Oslo Accords that betrayed the cause. Committed both to imagining the impossible and to my freedom of thought, I doubled down on the peace pill and confronted the mammoth in the room.

The following is an excerpt from the script for *We Never Left*, which illustrates how the pill and the memory implant machine contend with the hairy subject of coexistence.

Shams is now on her bicycle, wearing her slick helmet and white robe with a flashy TECHNO-HEALER sign on the back. She is arriving at a client's home in the old section of Haifa, which always makes her nostalgic. Shams' main job is what is called a trauma techno-healer. Her job is to visit those who have nightmares and traumas that the peace pill cannot fix. She works with both ex-Israelis and Palestinians, entering their memories with the assistance of a machine certified by the state. This machine allows her to see exactly what her clients see inside their head. Her task is then to help them alter their past by taking a different action. Once they are satisfied with that action, she implants the new memory with the new ending. This helps the client move on instead of living with regrets. It may not be entirely ethical, but memories are largely based personal fiction. Besides, changing one's narrative has been proven to be healthy—and perhaps the only way forward.

Shams is good at her job, tailoring her personality to each client. Using highly efficient behavioral psychology techniques, she is able to convince her clients to reinterpret their past and move on. She is now inside Amina's apartment. Amina is a Palestinian woman in her late 60s—she is a bit nervous about being hooked up to the machine and having Shams enter her consciousness. Shams is very professional, however, and by simply placing her hand a meter away from Amina, she manages to help her relax. Amina is struggling to integrate because of having lost her home in an Israeli attack that bulldozed her entire home as punishment for her son's political work.

Shams: "Okay, I can see where you are now. I want you to stand there, Amina, and instead of crying, I want you to go to that bulldozer. You now have a gun in your hand, do you see it? Okay, great, you are able to scare the driver of the bulldozer. He's walking out, and you can now climb inside of it. What will you do?"

Amina: "I don't know what to do."

Shams: "Yes, you do. You can do whatever your heart wants to do. You are fully protected, you are invincible, and your family is invincible, too. You have time—think about what would feel good in this moment."

Shams turns a dial on her machine and Amina's brain go into a REM state. The video Shams is watching, which reflects Amina's fantasy, is getting clearer. Aminah is driving the bulldozer to a gated Israeli settlement, wreaking havoc as random settlers are running for their lives. The bulldozer is destroying trees and the walls of houses, and it is so comical that Shams must try to refrain from laughing at this woman's wrath. She is trying to guide Amina, but Amina is so deep in her trance that nothing can stop her.

Later, Shams cycles away, with big old Hajjeh Amina shouting things like "May God bless you, my child, you have healed my broken soul." Shams reminds her to think twice about implanting that memory: It might be too intense. Amina smiles back. "*Shu* intense, we are a different generation, and as you said, we can always reverse it to the original memory, right?" Shams stops fiddling with her bike and says to Amina, "I will never understand your pain of losing a son. You are the only one who can decide how you want to manage your grief. Do you know if any of the Israeli soldiers who destroyed your life confessed to the truth commission or apologized? Approached you?"

Amina: "Not yet, none of that. You know, what scares me the most is if there is a new law banning us from talking about our martyrs, that my son's sacrifice for this country will be erased— just like they did today, asking us to vote on the music ban for fear of glorifying our violent past. They say it's for the greater good, for the future. I am an individual, with individual loss and pain, not just a collective Palestinian consciousness. I'm tired of acting, for this ambivalent collective consciousness."

Shams takes a pill from her bag. "This is why we have this pill! The heightened empathy can reduced our tiredness. Heightened empathy will build us a new path."

Amina: "A path that respects the past, though."

Shams: "Says the woman who is inviting me for memory Botox. Yes, I will fight for a future that respects the past. And by the way, Amina, your bulldozing skills can build a pretty good path."

This excerpt from the script exemplifies how I imagined a future conversation might unfold, between the tension inherent in the questions “Can we forget? Will we forgive? And at what cost?” This tension is central for anyone who begins to consider future scenarios in any post-war imaginaries, and it remains within me, to this day. I have participated in a few demonstrations in Oslo against the genocide in Gaza, and I created a prop for a recent one. This prop represented a martyred child, wrapped in a bloody white cloth. All 270 activist stood in front of the NRK television station with bloody props, requesting a cultural boycott. As I left the house that freezing, -10 degree day in Oslo, I looked at my prop, which I named after a little girl named Roh El Roh² (“the soul of my souls”), and screamed in anger—so loudly that my husband could hear me: “I will never, ever forgive the world that forced me to make a dead baby as a prop to ask Norway to boycott a genocide!” Alex yelled back in support: “You shouldn’t!” A few days passed, and as I was cleaning my house, I noticed something protruding from a bag. I shook the bag and it fell out. I had completely forgotten about it, the dead baby prop. I held it, unwrapped it, and let that realization—the emptiness of my forgetting—work its way inward.

Imagining accountability and reconciliation

I reached the difficult part of my imagined return: transitional justice. Again, Sussu, with all its touted benefits, could not trespass this wall of transitional justice in a country that is founded upon on countless human rights violations. How do we coexist and should we even humor this notion? What should be addressed in such volatile narratives?

Each time I tried to write from outside reality—from a happier, rosier place—reality hit, shaking my utopia and sobering me up with a vengeance. It is important to note that I was writing my science fiction script during 2021,³ turbulent and painful year for Palestinians

sparked by the evictions in Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah area. I was drowning in feelings of despair and grief, as so many were killed, detained, and brutalized while the world watched silently. My determination to imagine a free Palestine was not completely derailed, and in the face of the dystopia unfolding on my phone and in my heart, I remained determined to create a hopeful future. My job was to familiarize what seemed so foreign and unimaginable, and I could not quite do that. Against the constant visual flow of despicable violence that left me utterly fatigued, what helped me in the end was deciding that I did not have to use the news, the archive, nor the heavy facts to write. Reality only served to clip my wings and hinder my momentum, my temporality, my commitment and task of fabulating a better future. The Palestinian mind was already saturated with evidence and historical facts—my task was to offer something else. I was not an Instagram content creator, I was a filmmaker, and my context was the collapsing world and how I feel about it. My task was therefore to share the slowly brewed emotional baggage that I had with this world in the most honest way I could.

Yet, it remained a struggle. My documentary filmmaking background pushed for more facts, but my heart soldiered on with abstracting and fictionalizing. I was tapping into my collective memory to fight our collective forgetfulness. The forgetting of hopeful and triumphant endings in cinema and storytelling—the forgetting of making utopic endings—worried me. The facts in my fiction were the catalysts, but I did not want them to overpower the future I was trying to manifest. If my goal was to decolonize the image, I needed to abandon the archive. Notably absent from the archive are fair trials for the disenfranchised Palestinian population. In the entire history of its repeated violations, Israel has seen only a couple of its soldiers punished for their crimes against humanity. Thus, re-worlding Palestine could never be sweet without my own spin on accountability.

The Palestinian Truth and Justice Commission

During the research phase of my world building, I had several conversations with my sister Jumana, who studied international human rights law with connections to organizations in the West Bank. Jumana contacted different lawyers working on Palestinian rights cases, with the goal of writing parts of the *We Never Left* script. We conducted interviews with eight lawyers working in different fields in law. They all found my idea of setting up a fictional court in a liberated Palestine an interesting challenge but were not able to contribute to an imagined justice. At one point during my research, I asked Jumana to write a preliminary draft describing the kind of truth commission we would have. She wrote an elaborate introduction to what she termed the Palestinian Truth and Justice Commission (PTJC). Below is a short summary of this introduction:

The Palestinian Truth and Justice Commission (PTJC) is an official body tasked with reconciling wrongdoings and human rights abuses committed during the 1948–2030 occupation of Palestine. In the spirit of shared responsibility, the establishment of the PTJC is a mechanism to redress past harms and victim grievances through public truth sharing, to establish a public historical record, and to build a common narrative for the citizens of the Free State of Palestine. The commission's mandate includes fact-finding and investigation of abuses committed and suffered by all parties involved in the conflict.

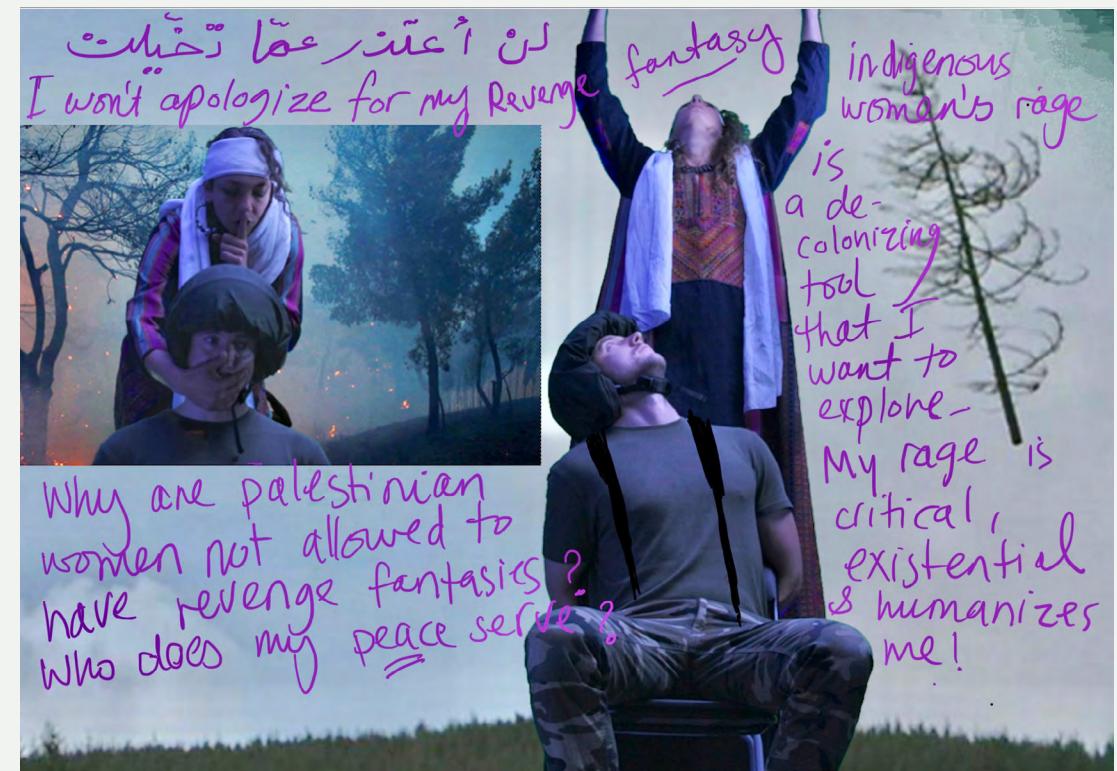
The PTJC commissioners' and teams' main task is to create an archival record of all testimonies, investigations, and claims; to synthesize all acts of violence, including disappearances, extra-judicial killings, forced displacement, torture, and other widespread and systematic human rights violations; to establish and determine responsibility for acts and violence committed during the occupation; and to provide recommendations that restore, reconcile, prevent, and protect.

With the PTJC and its structure and conventions established on paper, I was able to decolonize the narrative and move on with my script. I imagined countless encounters with guilty soldiers, vengeful victims, scripts that went wild with Mad Max style endings in desert landscapes, with ghouls and blood and femme fatal Palestinian grandmothers savoring the nectar of sweetest liberation. Below is an excerpt from an earlier draft of my short film experiment *Congratulations on Your Return*, which came to me once the PTJC was established.

Shams is intrigued by a few posters hanging on the walls. The posters display the faces of soldiers and ex-military who are wanted for confession by the PTJC for committing war crimes. She walks into the nearby church, but it is not a ceremony that is taking place: It is a truth commission trial. She sits in the back and enjoys the show, with a bag of fresh green almonds.

The trial is quite tense, and it is now the Palestinian victim's turn to speak. She tells the convicted soldier and the judge that she will only forgive this pathetic soldier if he can bring her husband back from the dead. To everyone's surprise, the soldier tells her that he can. The woman bursts out in unexpected laughter. He repeats, "I can bring him back. That is why Israel has kept the bodies of the martyrs—they were cloning them, and I can bring him back now."

Shams is in shock, and people are giggling. The lawyer opens a curtain behind the podium, and the cloned martyr is standing there. We know this because the wife faints. The audience is in utter shock. The judge is speechless. Shams wakes up in her chair at the church. Apparently, she had dozed off while watching the confession. Everyone else is on their way out of the church. Did that actually happen?



Experiments using greenscreen: decolonializing revenge fantasies / D. AlKury

Personally, imagining triumphs—both little and big—also meant that I had to face something I was not prepared to ever face: the banality of belated justice. While writing the script, random characters would appear on my screen to manifest Shams' dilemmas. One of them was an older Palestinian man who begged me to think differently. I met him on a bench outside the PTJC.

Old man

"I don't know who to put this anger and blame on anymore. It is so frustrating to live in peace when your family is dead. At my age, I gain nothing from peace—I don't know what to do with it. My whole life I fought, that's all I know. There is no place for my generation, peace came too late."

Shams

"But that is why the pill was invented: Your pain is too large. Don't you have any grandchildren to be happy for, now that peace exists?"

Aziz

"Wait, why were you inside the confession booth?"

Old man

"I was looking to see if the soldiers who killed my son could be inside. Maybe it would ease my loss, maybe it would make this whole new Utopia feel real for once."

Aziz

"But why isn't it real for you?"

Old man

"All I know is having a criminal of war whitewashing their guilt as performance and entertainment makes me more angry. It's like killing my son again, yet I have to clap for it."

Shams holds his shoulder lovingly and gently asks

"You think if you killed that soldier, or his son, it would make this Palestine more real?"

Old man

"Not at all. I just wouldn't have to pretend anything, that's all. Nobody would have to pretend."

I realize now how absurd it would be, and how unfulfilling, to receive justice at this point. This feeling was so weighty for me that I (naïvely) believed in the power of manmade justice, even in the face of such massive, unimaginable injustice. Reading about truth commissions like the post-apartheid commissions in South Africa confirmed that my hunch was not far from the truth. Indeed, much of what I have researched confirms that reparations and justice after so much violence are insufficient for the victims.⁴

Directing the short film *Congratulations on Your Return*

It was time to test a scene from my script for *We Never Left*. I called this scene, “Congratulations on Your Return.” While it would have ideally been filmed in Jerusalem, the travel ban to Israel was still in effect for a second year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I thus ended up shooting this scene using a new, cutting-edge technology called virtual production. I was encouraged by Professor Troels Linde to take advantage of his virtual production research project, which introduced this technology to the film school. Although my wish was to film in Palestine, I couldn’t resist trying this futuristic technology: After all, it complemented my futuristic script. My aim was to rework my script to function in a studio simulating a real set in Jerusalem. In addition to the technological aspects of this experiment, my main interest was the world-building freedom that this technology would grant me, as I would be able to create whatever prop I wanted using 3D game engines.

I was interested in how one object could reorient the entire temporal setting, from present to future. I needed to know what kind of props could enable a filmmaker with a small documentary budget to create a science fiction film that looks believable and elegant. So, what does a scene as simple as “a woman walks into a bar—a hummus bar” in a liberated Palestine look like? Precisely when in the future is not important, because, ideally, this scene



Still from *Congratulations on your return* / D. AlKury

should have taken place sometime in the past. In fact, if I want to be precise, this scene should have never been imagined in the first place. As our beloved, assassinated Ghassan Kanafani once wrote in his celebrated novella *Returning to Haifa*, “Do you know what a homeland is Saffiyya? A homeland is none of this happening.”

But since it does happen, Saffiyya, I chose to imagine Jerusalem circa 2040 to help guide my world building. The Palestine that I would want to return to is a sovereign, independent state with equal rights for all its citizens, for all religions. It is governed by its rightful owners and looks like Jerusalem today—perhaps with a few futuristic, movable objects that might come and go, so I added a sculpture or a science fiction-looking vehicle. I decided that the infrastructure and the materiality of the building should remain quintessentially Jerusalem-like. Slowly, I began to notice that adding anything to my scene that was too futuristic threw me off. I suddenly became conservative. I had worked on other scenes in my script depicting other parts of Palestine, and it was easy to imagine futuristic foreign objects in these places. But I was never able to come around to a modern-looking landscape or modern architecture in Jerusalem, at least not on screen. What was happening to me? Was I afflicted with nostalgia? How dangerous was this?

As a passport-collecting Palestinian who has lived in the diaspora all my life, I am only allowed to visit Palestine as a “tourist.” But I am not a tourist there. Tourists do not feel every hair on their body rise with pleasure because of a light evening breeze that seemingly transports them into an indescribable, ancestral, abstract, transcendental experience. I am not a tourist. That being said, what do the grandchildren of forcibly expelled refugees imagine when they visualize Palestine? They imagine it as their grandparents left it. With the exception of a few movable objects, most Palestinians imagine a Jerusalem brimming with heritage. If nostalgia is a sin, then I am guilty as charged. This nostalgia and resistance toward modernizing our cityscapes is unsurprising: It is a reaction to our never overcoming the Nakba and forced expulsion, never accepting

that we should overcome it, symptomatically rendering a resistance to visually modernizing our cityscapes in our collective imaginary. Ultimately, I decided to abandon my science fiction Jerusalem aesthetics, settling for a perfect 3D set of a churchyard in Jerusalem that we found online royalty free. I was ecstatic. You cannot achieve a more authentic 3D environment than with an actual pixel-by-pixel 3D photogrammetry. Authenticity: check!

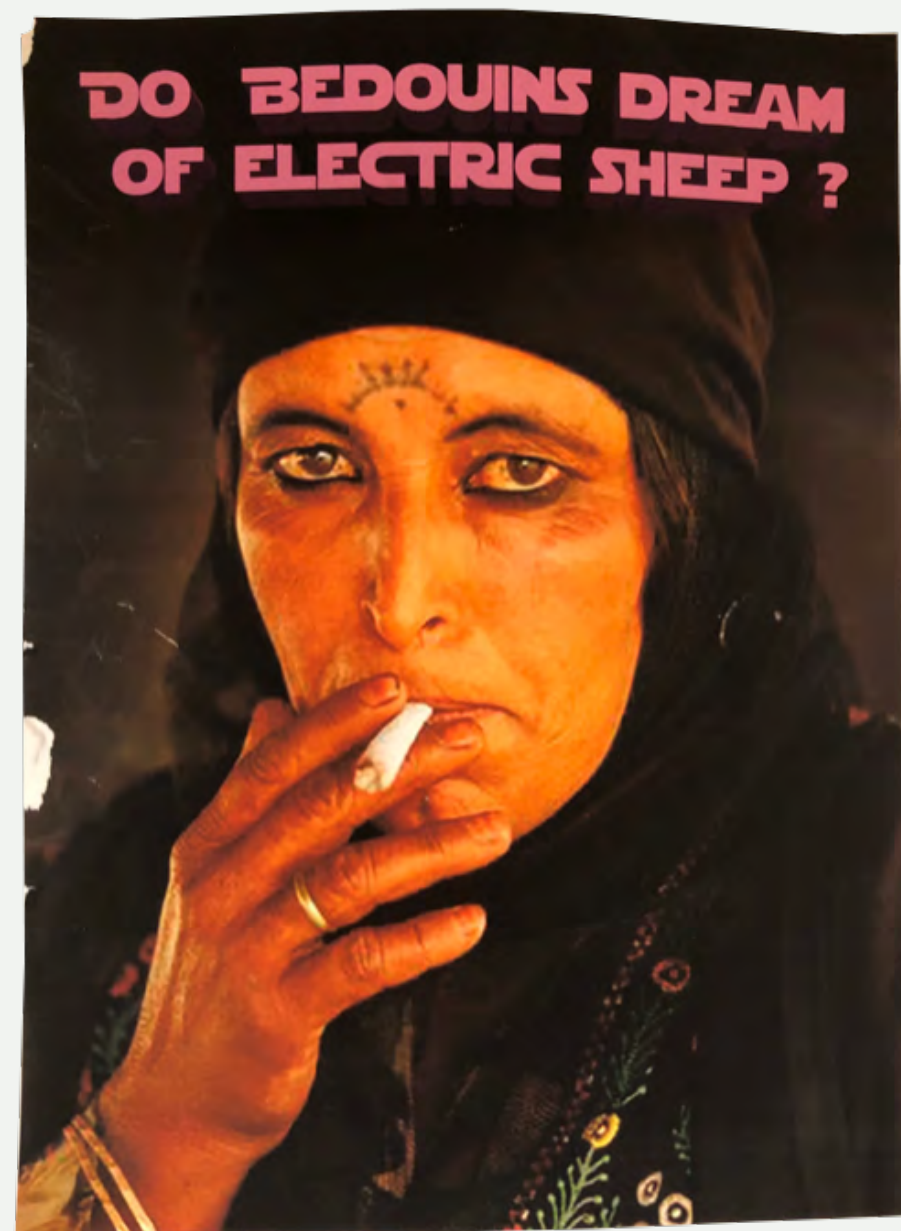
My mission now was to populate this old, authentic backdrop to make it look intriguingly futuristic without falling into Hollywood science fiction clichés. First, I added a peace pill dispenser called the “harmonizer,” close enough to be spotted in the scene. This prop was important because, as I mentioned earlier, my script was actually based on a speculation that the only way the single state would work is if the citizens of the free state of Palestine would take Sussu, the trauma-diffusing, empathy-boosting peace pill. You will notice, however, that this 3D dispenser is not in the scene. I was quite wary about entering an uncanny valley, and I felt like nothing looked real enough or dignifying enough for my beloved Jerusalem. Had I written my script to be set in an unnamed Palestinian town, I would not have been this concerned, but Jerusalem was more sacred to me than I thought.

In the backdrop, some weathered domes begged to be futured. I thought I would manipulate one of them and turn it into a glass dome, with citrus fruit trees growing inside. My idea was to secularize many of these religious spaces, using them in more “fruitful” ways. Unfortunately, achieving realistic details would have required that I hire an expensive 3D artist. My producer reminded me that this was merely an experiment to see whether the new game engine tracking technology would sync with the camera movements. I therefore tabled my idea and focused once more on the script. All I needed in order to test the technology was a 3D object on the screen with which my actors could interact: something that could affect the IRL (in real life) set. This gave rise to my Middle Eastern-looking drone that we designed in 3D and tracked real-time so that my actors could talk to it as if it was actually hovering

absurd science fiction poster that evokes the wonderful title of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

This placed a significant burden on the drone. What could this futuristic prop be offering? There was no more need for spying, post-war, so could it be selling or marketing something? In Jerusalem, it would likely be selling a religion. I researched various religions to craft lines that the drone and characters might plausibly exchange in the scene. I even had the privilege of discussing this with AI futurist Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, who introduced me to many ideas on how religion will likely look in the future. Nevertheless, all I managed to create the "One Light Unite" temple and the "Post-Truth Church." All my other ideas proved too confusing when I tested them out with others.

Interestingly enough, two years after I shot this so-called futuristic scene, drones began to literally speak to Gazans, warning them to evacuate in a ridiculous, human, non-robotic tone. This went viral on social media and many sent it to me, saying that my pilot reminded them of it—except that my drone was far cuter and it was only marketing a new church. My goal was to re-world the disturbing drones that Gazans must live with daily and create a version in which the drones become useful to humans.



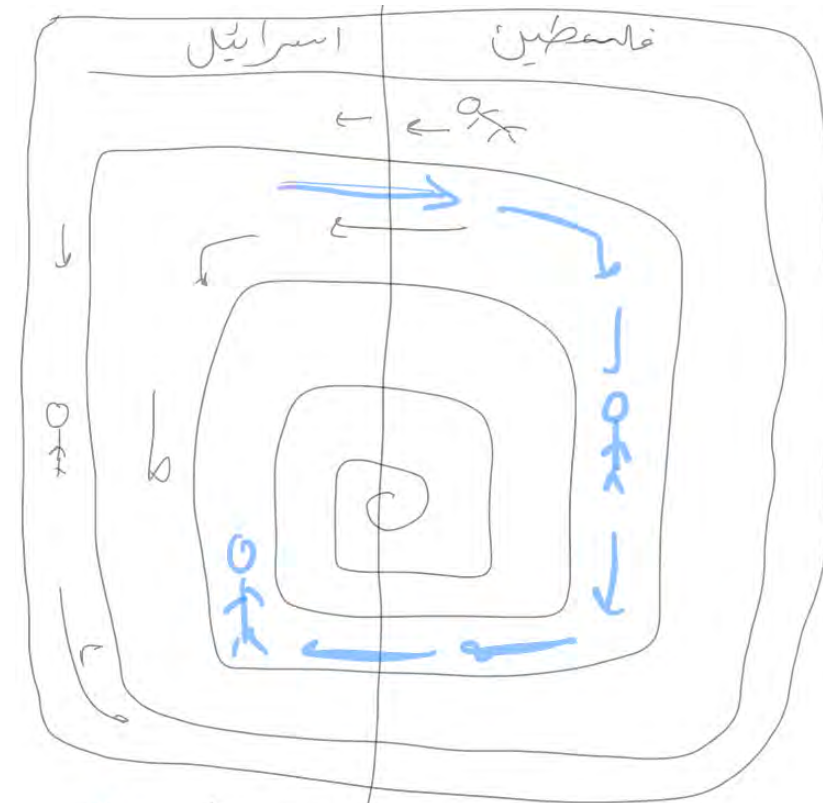
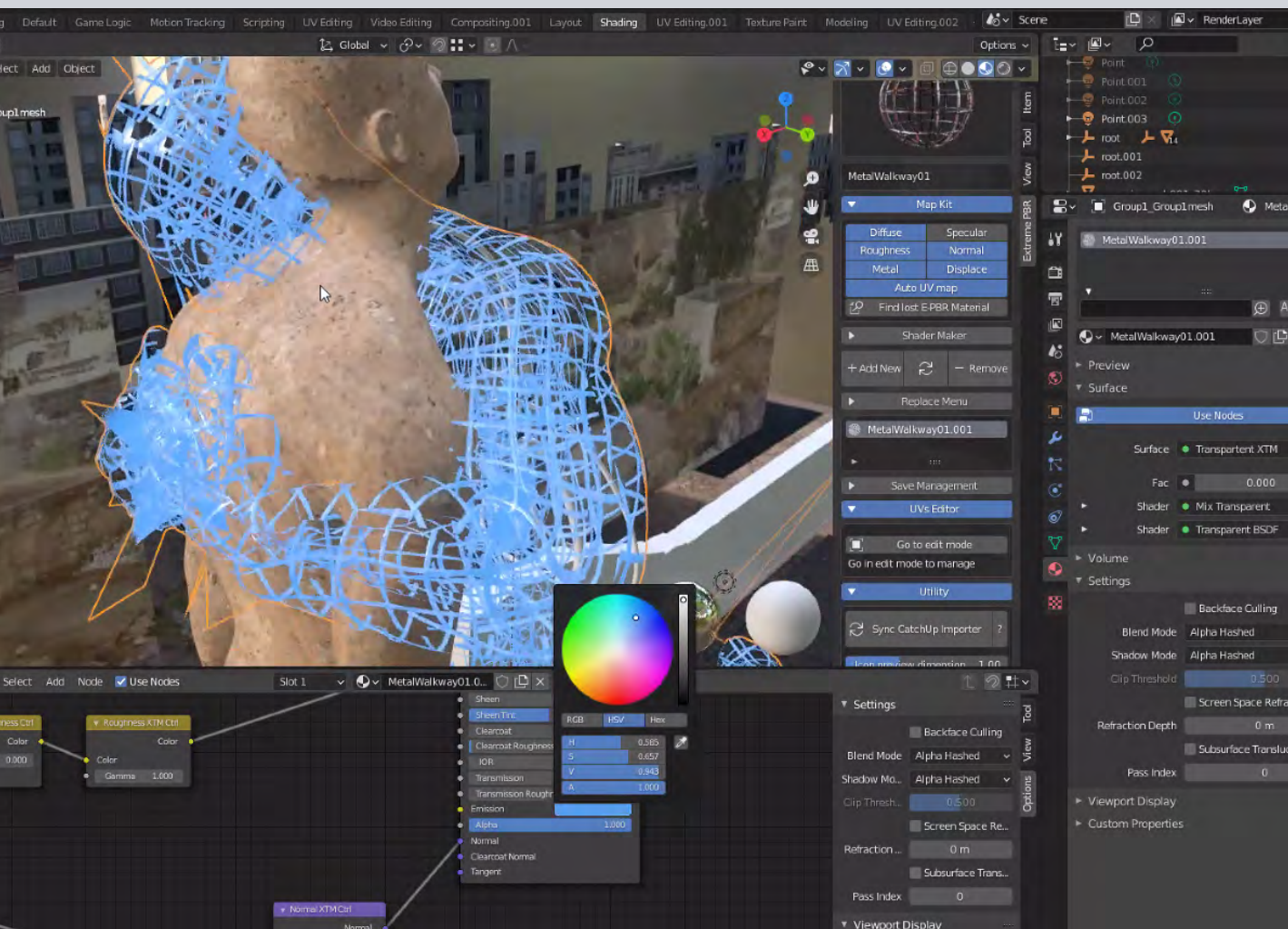
Poster design for film *Congratulations on your return* / unknown photographer

As another example of how life imitates art, a year after I shot this scene, I went to Jerusalem, and as I walked down the alleyways, teary eyed and grateful, I came upon a hidden monastery behind the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. As I approached, I realized that I was standing in that same rooftop yard, the very same 3D church that I had simulated for my set. I approached the Ethiopian priests who work there and explained that I had made a film set in their church. I showed them the film on my phone, hoping that they would get it, that they would laugh and engage. But they were utterly confused. Their shaky English and my strange computer generated (CGI) drone selling a new religion rendered our conversation surreal. I bought a couple of candles to support their church and left, feeling like I had created a portal of my own. My worlds were left colliding.



Sketches for *Congratulations on your return*





The characters can teleport through different consciousness through some kind of tunnels. The drug does that, it infuses ppl w/ different histories + memories. The philosophy is, if you've been a bit of everyone, the Hamas + the soldier, the mother + the detainee, the child & the grand child, we will experience one-ness. Altruism however is unachievable. Only empathy.

WE NEVER LEFT

Sketches for Congratulations on your return

Shifting power dynamics

I often questioned how to introduce archive images in a way that could strengthen the historical backdrop of this scene without it feeling forced or contrived. The answer presented itself with serendipity. While editing this film, I asked my actor Chiara Ayad, who was visiting Palestine, to be filmed walking around the streets of old Nablus, to establish her character before she enters the hummus bar. The cinematographer, Yousef, filmed her staring at graffiti depicting the victory sign on a wall. As I watched this in the edit room, I suddenly felt a cognitive dissonance. The symbol of the victory sign, emblematic of Palestinian steadfastness, suddenly felt clairvoyant when seen in the world I created, which is a free Palestinian state. It is no longer a symbol of hope: It is a symbol of triumph, which creates a refreshing estrangement and a renewed affirmation that the Palestinian resistance will succeed—or has succeeded. The way in which the Chiara looks at the symbol, the way she touches the graffiti on the wall in the old town—that is the type of archive needed to localize and authenticate the Palestinian hopepunk aesthetic in this hybrid method of re-worlding.

Here, it is important to note that I use “hopepunk”² interchangeably with the term *sumud*, to emphasize the latter’s universality. Hopepunk is simply a “fresher” term that is used in the speculative fiction world to describe narratives and approaches of resistance, rebellion, and resilience as counters to the apathetic, cynical, and dystopic world views being mediated to us. Hopepunk describes works that counter pessimism and tell stories of collective heroism and survival against all odds, which can be traced to stories and fables as old as storytelling itself. I use hopepunk as a term when I am specifically talking about aesthetics. To be more specific, I would use *sumud* to describe a young Palestinian girl who is detained by three Israeli soldiers but who smiles back at her family with pride and dignity, and I would use hopepunk to describe Offred, the main character of the series “The Handmaid’s Tale,” as she smiles into the camera while bloodied and abused, promising that she will never let go of her right to freedom. For both hopepunk and *sumud*, the

human instinct and approach in fiction and in reality are similar. But these are just definitions, and I am not trying to make an argument or a linguistic suggestion. I am simply trying to situate a deep-rooted, specific cultural term within a wider contemporary trend—which will probably be flipped on its head by another sub-genre before I publish this.

For me, the point of working with Palestinian futurism is to imagine that we triumphed. As noted earlier, my motto while working on this was “If history is written by the winners, let the future be written by the oppressed.” I needed to illustrate that in some way in the five-minute scene or short film. Notably, never once in my shifting of the power dynamics do I make the Palestinians inflict the same violence that was inflicted upon them. My aim was not to appear righteous or progressive—indeed, I believe art can encompass all kinds of human emotions—but I simply had no interest in making them do so. However, I do like to joke around and get some entertaining micro-dose vengeance. This is why Roni, the ex-Israeli soldier, is so important. By writing a few lines in which Roni is restless, needing to help the bar owner or even the old neighbor (Um Sabri) with her laundry, we understand that the ex-Israeli soldiers in this free Palestine are tormented: Even if they are on “peace pills,” they still feel guilty. One of my favorite lines is when Roni, whom we imagine was an illegal settler, tells Sarah that he feels “unsettled,” upon which she implores him: “Don’t feel settled, please, enough settling.” That is the kind of script writing process I enjoy when working with non-actors who have their own agendas, like my brilliantly funny friend Angie, who plays the role of Sarah and came up with this pun on the spot while rehearsing.

Both Roni and the ideological drone hint at the fact that decolonization would be an ongoing and nuanced complicated process. It is not enough to have a free Palestinian state. Both weighty ideas are written with absurdity to make this short scene digestible. In both scenes, Sarah responds politely but with strength, to usher Roni and the drone away.

WE NEVER LEFT



Writing these lines did not come easily, and I had to imagine how a guilty, disarmed-yet-Zionist ex-soldier might feel when Palestine returns. As an exercise, I wanted to imagine the kindest type of ex-soldier, to give them the benefit of the doubt. I was prototyping a better world: not a utopia but a protopia. Unlike the perfect utopia, a protopia is a constantly evolving and improving society which may never achieve perfection. “Pro” here stands for progress, something I wanted to explore and prototype through writing different versions of Arab and Jewish Palestinians. I had spent many hours in discussions and reflections with Yonatan Shapira, one of the most prominent and radical Israeli activists who defected from the army and now lives in Oslo. Yonatan and I rapidly hit it off and became quite close friends over the years. We had sessions in which we brainstormed what it would take for Israelis to have empathy. One “what if” led us to another “as if,” and together we daydreamed a brave new Palestinian state. He wished that I had made Roni more of a “bad guy,” but I insisted that Roni is pathetic enough. George, the actor who played the role of Roni and who had not acted since high school, had the idea of picking up an olive or a piece of fruit while doing the scene, as he could not accept that a self-entitled Israeli soldier would go into a Palestinian restaurant without trying to get something for free. Again, that is the joy of working with non-actors: George brought his own agenda with him to the set.

My documentary practice insists that I trust my characters, and it is in these details of giving agency to their true voice that I get the joyful kick of collaboration. My role as a fiction film director is always overridden by my documentary directing practice, and I am placed in an awkward position when I detect that happening. For now, however, I will thrive in the in-betweenness. Debating over what to wear and what to say and what kind of Palestinian or Israeli characteristics should be present is the most meaningful part of fictionalizing for me. These negotiations of the aesthetics give rise to the ethical challenges I yearn to explore.

Rewriting the enemy to reach radical empathy

“And if it is a despot you would dethrone, see first that his throne erected within you is destroyed. For how can a tyrant rule the free and the proud, but for a tyranny in their own freedom and a shame in their own pride?”

Jibran Khalil Jibran, “On Freedom,” *The Prophet* (1923)

An ethical question that I faced throughout my research lies in the politics of representation of an Israeli who is transformed into a version with whom we can coexist. How do we represent a remorseful ex-Israeli soldier in a liberated Palestine? My version does not have Israelis holding hands and singing with Palestinians like the clichéd AI images that pop up on my Instagram feed to promote peace. Nor will they be sharing a joint or a cigarette, like the infamous photo of King Hussein and former Israeli Prime Minister Rabin on the Al-Husseini bridge crossing. Coexistence can look more “real.”

In *Congratulations on Your Return*, Sarah’s response to both encounters with post-coloniality is self-assured. It was easy to decide that I want my Palestinian characters to have dignified, nonchalant characteristics. There was no need for her to take these pathetic characters to heart. It reflects her nonchalance of being one of the true owners of the land. This does not change before or after the liberation: It is a constant, and it is admirable when you notice it while walking in mixed areas in Palestine, where soldiers look like scared thieves and Palestinian children walk around like they own the place. For me, as a member of the diaspora, it is quite staggering how nonchalant a Palestinian can be while being checked and interrogated at random checkpoints. It is something that director Elia Suleiman is able to depict so brilliantly in

all his films—this deadpan, unfazed demeanor of the wise Palestinian.

Even after reading several interviews with Suleiman, whose work is an inspiration, I still could not discover how he works on his representation of the Israeli characters in his films. I therefore decided to call him on the phone for a casual interview. I asked him how he manages to portray the Israelis as such fragile and weak people even at the height of their power as occupiers. I asked him how he emasculates them so effortlessly even though I know that representing the enemy in film is quite contested and difficult. Laughingly Dir. Suleiman says my question is impossible to answer and that it's too academic a question. Suleiman continues by emphasizing how he works on doing nothing for such a long time, in order to create a void, a void which allows for daydreaming. These daydreams result in images that float in his mind and end up becoming scenes. He doesn't strategize how to represent the Israelis. Most of the scenes are based on things he witnessed in real life. It's a question of aestheticizing the images, and working with characters inside the frame or the tableaux. The Israelis seem how they seem in his films because of who he is a person, and because of his sense of irony and humor.

I asked him if he struggles with the issue of humanizing the enemy. He said that some people represent the Israelis as evil violent killing machines to show reality, but that he prefers to deviate and instigate a comic and ridiculous portrayal, because everyone knows they are violent, and we don't need to show them in cliché behavior. However, these ridiculous soldiers in his films are always carrying guns or standing by their tanks and checkpoints, so we know they are dangerous.

Writing about my main Israeli antagonist in the fiction script required a few rewrites. In summary, the antagonist was a mean, older Israeli judge who was resistant to the peace pill. He still held many racist views and believed that his

judicial powers were just and that evicting residents from East Jerusalem was right. While dealing with this client, Shams (my protagonist) frequently found her capacity for forgiveness to be challenged. I had to get inside his head, to try to write him from his point of view (as I did with all my characters), rather than from a judgmental, morally superior point of view. Rewriting and actively trying to like and respect him was an enormous challenge, but it eventually led me to an uncomfortable place of radical empathy. According to a basic dictionary definition, radical empathy involves actively striving to better understand and share the feelings of others. When empathy does not come naturally, radical empathy entails finding a way to activate it, trying to fundamentally change our perspective, from judgmental to accepting.

I will attempt to condense my journey into radical empathy. When I first started writing, the Israeli antagonist was a soldier who shot my protagonist in a conflict, leaving her to live with one bionic arm. He also killed her best friend in that conflict. In later drafts, this soldier character was replaced by a military court judge, as I realized that I wanted the antagonist to have more political will. Later, I realized that I was not as interested in seeing him punished as I was in how the Palestinians negotiated which punishment was appropriate. I was interested in the impossibility of finding the perfect punishments for such a multilayered matrix of wrongdoings and unspeakable war crimes. I was interested in putting that discussion on the table. What *is* justice for us—and how do we feel about knowing, deep down, that no justice is good enough, and no reparation is healing enough? I spent a significant amount of time grappling with that grief in my office in Oslo. My writer's block was more like a grief block. A number of my drafts would stumble to a halt after describing the transitional courts. The horror of realizing that justice is unattainable was simply too much for me to digest. I always wondered why a Gazan mother who had just lost her child under the tyranny of the Israeli war machine would raise her

arms in the air and say “May God take revenge on them.” It was never “I will take revenge,” it was always God. The question was, could I be content with that realization, or would I still try to find a way for my protagonists to take justice into their own hands?

In my final attempts to rewrite the character of the Israeli judge, I made him mentally ill: literally, as he was a schizophrenic. It was the only way for me to understand him. It was my final compromise and the only way to be true to my angry, disenfranchised self. That was as radical as my empathy could go. This last draft was written while Russia’s war on Ukraine was starting, and I became influenced by the discussions that arose as to whether Putin was mentally ill or just pure evil.

This then begged the following questions: What if he was crazy? What if many war criminals are mentally ill? Could I empathize from here and embody that man now? Could I write from his position, a paranoid victim of Zionist brainwashing? Would my empathy mean anything now? I was cheating, of course. If I had really wanted to empathize with him, I would have written him as an intelligent, calm man—and I could not. The only way I could empathize with him is if I made him highly disturbed. Needless to say, I did: I empathized completely with this pathetic, brainwashed criminal. I even invited him to stay in Palestine, should he feel like this was his only home. But what now? What happens to the Palestinian story after radical empathy? It is not the Israeli war criminal whom I care about: What interests me is my (our) state of mind, post-“what ifs,” not the “what ifs” themselves.

And how forgiving should my Palestinian protagonist be? How angry? How vengeful? These were even more difficult questions to answer. It was only by writing different endings for the court scene in my fiction that I was able to test these difficult moral positions. This method of writing different

scenarios as a catalyst for transformative political thought was perfected by two stellar productions that I happened to watch. One was the Academy Award winning American film, *Two Distant Strangers*, which uses the “Groundhog Day” trope to deliver the “stuck in a loop”-like struggle of African Americans. The storyline revolves around a Black man who encounters a racist, White policeman. In every version of this encounter—and there are many—the Black man gets killed.

This potent trope was used even more effectively by a brilliant British filmmaker named Michaela Coel. Coel created the HBO series “I May Destroy You,” in which she stars as Arabella, a young Black writer who seeks to rebuild her life after being raped. In the final episode, Arabella sees her rapist in the bar where she was raped, and multiple scenarios begin to unfold. In an online interview, we get a peek⁷ at Coel’s process of brainstorming a dignifying ending with her rapist. Angelica Jade Bastién summarizes the scenes as follows:

The first scene is pure revenge fantasy: three women doling out justice like vigilante crime fighters. The second is another twist: David has a breakdown in the bathroom stall. He becomes more metaphorical, a manifestation of her trauma rather than a real person. The third detaches further from reality; Arabella buys him a drink, and they make love, with her penetrating him in her bed. In the final beat, Arabella decides not to return to the bar. She chooses, instead, to spend time with her friend and housemate Ben.

Interviewer Alex Jung⁸ from *Vulture* magazine asked Coel to talk about the idea of having radical empathy toward someone who has violated you. Coel responded,

For me, this is the thing that needs a trigger warning, empathy, because it’s uncomfortable. I think it’s a really uncomfortable arena. I spent a lot of my life asking, pleading, hoping for empathy. ... If I am pleading for

people to do this for me, then it only feels fitting for me to try to do the same thing, to know what that might be like, the act of putting your feet in somebody else's shoes. I think this is radical empathy, isn't it? ... I'm not saying "Go and buy a local rapist a beer." It's metaphorical [laughs]. Radical empathy feels sadly taboo, which is odd, isn't it?

Indeed, for me, writing a nicer, more humanized war criminal felt taboo, and even when I was finally able to achieve it in writing, I was wise enough to know that there is a time and place for everything, so I erased it again.

At this point in the process, I was primarily interested in this concept of speculating multiple endings as a device to deliberately open up space for a critical audience. It sells the truth: that I as an author have no answer, I am questioning, and I am inviting the audience to cowrite and cocreate. I am confronting or daring to confront those questions, from a diaspora perspective—which is unnerving, to say the least. So, I stayed with the trouble and I did not publish my story and I did not share my short film experiments. I stayed with the trouble, alone, hoping that my silence was golden and that something would be developed enough to share one day. I indulged in the secret freedom of choosing not to publish.

In any case, I still had unanswered questions about the aesthetics of our triumphant independence. Paradoxically, I always argued that Palestinians have triumphed from day one: They triumphed by never surrendering to a world system that is out there to annihilate them. Each day that they demand their freedom, they become freer. Is not freedom a state of mind, after all? How could I aestheticize something that Palestinians do beautifully every day? So, what was I actually doing? What was I offering? The short answer is that I placed the freest people in a liberated land. I did not change the behavior of Palestinians in my different experiments: It is not

like they suddenly became Norwegian. Rather, I changed the behavior of the world. The Palestinians are proud and laidback in each version of this artistic research project, from script to screen, in all the genres and temporalities that I directed.

When robbed, try centering!

In his writing on the process needed to decolonize Palestinian archives, Stephan Sheeh⁹ goes into depth about a rare documentary photograph. The photo is of Palestinian laborers eating hummus taken in the 1930s by the Armenian refugee Elia Kahvedjian. Sheehi's articulate and poignant example helped me solidify my understanding of how centering colonized narratives is a critical act of resistance. He immerses us in how and why this photograph is used in contemporary culture as evidence of the quotidian Palestinian rustic life. He brings to our attention what the photo is not showing, utilizing a strategy I now understand as critical fabulation, and the importance of this when narrating from the archive.

But what is outside this image of workers and kept at bay by the fetishised delights of hummus? The labour in this image is likely an effect of the historical moment, labour that was essential to the economic transformations and jostling of the 1930s. The origins of urban labour lay in the dispossession of Palestinian peasantry during the 1920s and 1930s, who were removed from lands after they were sold by absentee landlords to the Jewish National Fund. Others were subject to increased rents and ravaged by two decades of over-taxation. Yet more were adversely affected by the transformation of the Palestinian economy with the opening of Palestine's market to cheaper imported goods by the British. ... These workers became the fighters of that popular

uprising against Zionist colonisation and British rule. The Great Revolt of 1936–1939, in fact, started with a widespread and comprehensive national strike. The strike was largely organised and initiated by Palestinian labour, whose up-swell of pressure forced the Palestinian elite to sign on (and later usurp). Therefore, perhaps the more accurate title of this photograph should not be “Eating Hummus, 1935” but “Palestinians on the Eve of the Great Revolt.”

Similarly, author Gil Hochberg documented how Palestinian artists are using the archives as a way to trace the future, not just the past. They are decolonizing the archive by critically challenging what counts as an archive, who decides what is an archive, and what can be done with archives to center the Palestinian story. Amongst the artists she features are Jumana Manna, Kamal Aljafari, and Larissa Sansour. Her numerous examples of acclaimed artists recentering the archive validates my need to work in an untraditional temporality and that I indeed suffer from “archival fatigue.”¹⁰ This fatigue pushes many artists like myself to refuse to narrate or tell a story or to inform or educate using the “archive” in a traditional sense.

Not only do I have archive fatigue, but I also do not perceive any of the archives post-Nakba as archival. They lack the quality of something that belongs to the past; instead, they feel like a continuous present, as we still suffer the repercussion of the ongoing Nakba. As Hochberg writes, “With particular intensity since the mid-1990s, scholars, artists, archivists, curators, and data specialists have been defining, condemning, rescuing, defending, performing, questioning, queering, creating, negating, restaging, reclaiming, and debating the archive. What was once an under investigated source of historical authority has become a tantalizing enigma.”¹¹

I recall attending a powerful exhibition by artist Ayman AlAzraq at Fotogalleriet in Oslo. The exhibition featured archival and found footage related to the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon in 1982. I remember thinking: the only noticeable difference between these images and the tragedies unfolding in Gaza today is the style of women’s hair. Without the context of their hairspray and 80s haircuts, it would be difficult to guess when the picture was taken. This left me feeling very uncomfortable. It made me feel robbed of the privilege of linear time. It made me physically ill to notice this. I almost forgot that my people were not only colonized spatially, materially but temporally!

I ask myself to defeat the imposed “Groundhog Day” reality and continue to imagine a safe place where we can all return beyond the colonized space and time. I find that there is a lot of Re- in the English language when it comes to my experience with Palestine.

Remember

Resist

Revolt

Reimagine

Not Return, Not Revenge, Not Restore, Not Resettle, But Remain, stuck in Re- ... something or other. I continue to Refuse and I make up glimpses of my Returns and this is not a poem nor an attempt at one. It is just a Rehearsal for what we know will come.

¹ *Friendship's Death*, a (1987) feature film by Peter Wollen: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093050/>

² "Roh el Roh" was the nickname one of the most memorable martyrs of the first month of the genocide: a child who was dearly loved by her grandfather, Khaled el Nabhan. He was filmed hugging her, saying that she was the soul of his souls. The video shook the world and we all came to love Roh el Roh, whose real name is Reem, as if she was our very own.

³ For more on the 2021 political climate in Israel and the occupied West Bank, see <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/israel-and-palestine>

⁴ An eye-opening documentary that highlights the complexity of reparations and its disappointing impact on the victim's lives is the (2023) film *Theatre of Violence*: <https://ff.hrw.org/film/theatre-violence>.

⁵ For more on hopepunk, see <https://www.vox.com/2018/12/27/18137571/what-is-hopepunk-noblebright-grimdark>.

⁶ To learn more about steps towards radical empathy, visit <https://www.terrigen.com/radicalemathy/>.

⁷ Bastián, A. J. (June 5, 2020). *I May Destroy You* Confirms Michaela Coel's Stunning Talent. *Vulture*. Available at <https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/i-may-destroy-you-review-michaela-coel-hbo.html>

⁸ Jung, A. (August 24, 2020). *I May Destroy You* Ending Explained by Michaela Coel. *Vulture*. Available at <https://www.vulture.com/2020/08/i-may-destroy-you-ending-explained-michaela-coel.html>

⁹ Sheehi, S. (2021). Decolonising the Photography of Palestine: Searching for a Method in a Plate of Hummus. In K. Sanchez Summerer & S. Zananiri (Eds.), *Imaging and Imagining Palestine: Photography, Modernity and the Biblical Lens, 1918–1948* (Chapter 10). Brill. (pp. 355–356)

¹⁰ Hochberg, G. (2021). *Becoming Palestine: Towards and Archival Imagination of the Future*. Duke University Press.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 31

From speculative futurisms to speculative nowisms ¹

As I entered my third year, the borders to Palestine and Israel finally opened, COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed, and I finally traveled in May 2022, to test my fictional story against reality. I set up casting calls and tested my writings with actors. I rented a cultural center in Haifa and cast actors for some roles in the hope of directing my fiction. I include here a diary entry reflecting on casting as a process. These diary entries also highlight the emotional journey that led me to drop future temporality and lean toward rewriting my script as if Palestine is already liberated today, not "tomorrow." The only way to elaborate on this transitioning phase is by reading my diaries from that period.

Diary entry: June 7, 2022—the ethical dilemmas of casting in a colonial state

My 12-day visit to Palestine has been eye opening, heart wrenching, mind boggling and perhaps the most intellectually and emotionally intense trip I have done in years. I want to reflect on it day by day but for the purpose of this writing exercise, I need to answer why it might not actually really work to shoot in Palestine. Instead of focusing on all the artistic parts of the film on the trip I ended up trying to find out if I should hire actors that have participated in Israeli funded films. I wanted to cast only Palestinians living in Israel because it would mean they can travel wherever I decide to shoot. Also, since I planned that the film takes place in Haifa and Jerusalem, it wouldn't make sense to hire actors from the West Bank that aren't allowed to go into these territories. Little did I know that 99% of all the actors I cast have worked and will continue to work with Israelis, because how else can they financially survive?

I didn't want to be judgemental, but instead of focusing on their acting skills, I ended up wondering who acted with whom, and would they do that again, and what reputation do they have?

Every casting session started with this topic—the shame and guilt in their voices that they have worked with the enemy is so evident, and it really is a paradox that no actors or artist should suffer. The Palestinians wouldn't be able to work as artists without Israeli funding, since there are no alternative funds that cater to serious productions. But try to explain this to the Palestinians in the West Bank, who are disgusted by these actors and told me that they would never be interested in watching my film if they see that the actors have acted in Israeli films. I should have known this before I went there, but things like this don't hit you until you are on the ground and meeting these opinions face to face in a jewelry shop in Jerusalem or at a bar with an opinionated lawyer in the Christian quarter. How can I argue against these Jerusalemites suffering under occupation about what is right and wrong. I dare not do that with the actors in Haifa either. I mean, I won't forget how grim one actor looked when I asked her about her role in a Netflix series with a famous actor (whose name I won't mention, to protect her). How she didn't even

watch the film because of her regret for having worked on it. Who am I to judge or argue? I needed time to go reflect and find what my moral compass says. A friend of mine is a famous Palestinian actor who's moved to another country to work on a permaculture farm. She can no longer navigate these wrongs. I called her in desperation while in Ramallah one night, hoping she would give me clarity. For an hour she gave me a semi-lecture on spirituality, on how Palestinians need to reconvene, get in touch with themselves, and find a collective solution and stance. We are not united (and for good reasons).

One opinion that stuck with me was that of an actor whom I met very briefly. He was recommended to me as someone who doesn't work with Israeli productions, but very quickly he said to me that he probably needs to accept those jobs now: that the boycott movement is reductionist and tells actors not to act with Israeli funding but it doesn't give them an alternative source of income. I asked him what the hard-headed Palestinians told me: "Why don't you work as a baker or something? Must you work in an Israeli-funded cultural sector?" He wasn't easily provoked, and simply said, "I want to act, I am actor, I don't want to be a baker."

There is research, and then there're field trips to Palestine. The office is not a place for a filmmaker like me: Thank God COVID is over, but I must admit, I wouldn't have been able to write a sci-fi if it wasn't for the travel restrictions. I needed to enter a portal to write *Congratulations on Your Return*, and now the portal is closed. I had missed reality so very much. Watching the casting tapes, I realize again how the conversations with the actors were a lot more interesting to me than their acting out my script, precisely because I missed reality, and I missed my documentary practice. The improvised sessions I did with them, imagining "the day after the liberation," will stay with me much longer than their acting. Together, we staged and fabulated, the way I know how, instead of writing by myself in Oslo (although I obviously had many conversations in Oslo, too, but they were not the same).

It was mostly conversations with people on the street that stuck with me and changed my entire approach to imagining Palestine as a free state.

To begin with, after a few random conversations with everyone from friends to taxi drivers to falafel shop owners, I found out that people don't dare to dream about what liberation would be like. Literally, there is an imaginative resistance. This is because they are afraid that if they imagine liberation, other enemies will resurface, ones that are of their own flesh and blood. For example, what would you do with an Arab mafia that collaborates with the Israeli government? Musaab, a cool young guy I met in a café in Haifa, was telling me how he wants to leave the country because his uncle turned out to be one of those "Arabs" collaborating with Israel. The taxi driver who drove me to Jordan told me how his neighbor got shot by one of the Arab mafias and nobody dares to take the suspects to court. The Israeli courts would just let them go. They love the Arab mafias: let the Arabs kill the Arabs. The biggest fear is to have an enemy that is your uncle, your neighbour, and not the Israeli soldier. That is the intelligence of the mastermind behind the occupation. An enemy you know is always better. The hate that the Palestinians have for the Palestinian authorities (PA) and Mahmoud Abbas is almost as great as the occupation, if not greater. What I mean to say is that these conversations helped situate where imaginative resistance is coming from: the resistance to imagining a liberated single state for Palestinians. It's as if people forgot that these mafias and the incompetence of the PA is symptomatic of the occupation and that it's possible to imagine something bigger, an actual proper decolonization of Palestine which automatically destroys the internal enemies. I faced that a lot in my script, too, trying to imagine the guilt and shame that Palestinians will face about who collaborated with Israel. But then I realized that it distracts from facing the enemy that created these relationships, so I chose my battle and remembered who expelled me from my land. Needless to say, I did write a silly scene with a wild Bedouin woman who wanders the night in Ramallah sucking the blood of a particular collaborator.

One nice thing about fiction is that I can maybe escape putting people's lives in danger when they act out my politically challenging or taboo fantasies. No matter how delusional the world is about Israel being a democratic state and the art-washing, I know that staging with real people might harm them and so it's best to stick to acting. I know that whatever is happening in Israel now is only going to get darker and I

don't want to risk any real people's lives because of my film. This fear of persecution was proven to me when I asked the friendly breakfast chef at the Hashimi Hotel, where I was staying, how he would feel if I invited him to a simulated trial of an Israeli soldier. He looked scared and said that it's quite dangerous right now to say anything against the state of Israel in Jerusalem.

One encounter with a guy on a street was clarifying, he said to me "Hey, you see that dark woman soldier there? She's got so much blood on her hands. She actually shot a guy from this neighborhood a while ago." I was shocked that a soldier would return to work in that same neighborhood of old Jerusalem, knowing that all the residents know that it was she who killed their neighbor. It's not that the Palestinians suffer from imaginative resistance, it's that their lives are unimaginable.

Diary entry: June 20, 2022—how dangerous is my film?

I am torn. I don't know how to fund my film or even go on with it. My dream of producing a feature fiction faded away when one of my two potential producers dropped the ball on me. It was a slap in the face and also a time to reflect and focus on artistic research. It gave me the perspective that what fiction would entail from me is something I am not prepared for. I am not prepared for years of begging to prove that I can direct a fiction film. I know what I am good at, and it's not exactly fiction. Even though I thrive in staging and world building and my imagination is no longer able to be contained in documentaries, I still panic when I see my script turning into fiction. My script is sci-fi, and I cringe at low-budget sci-fi productions. I've seen too many bad ones, and the uncanny valley is not my kind of *wadi*².

But a hybrid approach of casting real people and presenting them as non-actors can cause danger. At this point, actors and non-actors are all feeling unsafe. Fictionalizing a liberated Palestine in any genre or

approach will cost everyone. I am actually impressed that anyone came to my casting call, having read the synopsis of my film. But who am I to choose if people want to visibly speak against Israel? If documentary subjects want to speak up, they are welcome and honored and free. I'm not paying them or abusing anyone—they are responsible, free adults. This ethical question central to documentaries is a discussion that should be assessed case by case, depending on the film's overall political context. Erica Balsom brings this up in her essay "Reality-Based Community,"³ as she paraphrases

Foucault was right when he deemed visibility a trap. Exposure is violent; it makes the surveilled subject vulnerable to capture by apparatuses of power. But before romanticizing the escape of invisibility, we must remember that to be invisible is also to be cast out of the body politic, into the precariousness of un-grievable life.

These dilemmas are dawning on me. Art can never escape the world, even when countering it. I hate how committed I am to this so-called "impossible" liberation. I am not exhausted, I am exhausting. But I'll give myself a break and pull out my favorite trick. I'll pretend that my main character is in a dream state, almost like she's hallucinating, because it really is all just my dream and fantasy, right? The more serious I come across in presenting my fiction, the more I'm stepping on other people's sacred version of the dream. Again, political unconscious is what I enjoy doing and I think for this story, it will save me and everyone a lot of unnecessary attacks. Am I escaping taking responsibility over my dreams? Yes, one should not be responsible for their dreams, but in dictatorships they are. Some people go to prison for a dream they had, where we come from. I'm going to stick to dreams, as it's my comfort zone for now.

It never occurred to me until now that what I've been writing would be so radical and disturbing for Zionists. To watch my fiction unfold on screen is probably a nightmare. They would much rather me show them brutalizing Palestinians than apologizing to them. It's much easier for them to see me portraying an Israeli soldier as a bad guy, because that is expected of me, but a soldier repenting and crying, directed by a

Palestinian, might be too big of a camel to swallow.

I'm reading one of my deleted scenes. A Palestinian in her 70s, Hajjeh⁴, walks into the bedroom of a soldier while he is sleeping and puts her hand on his forehead and starts reading the Qurán, as if to heal him. He is too paralysed by her to actually move or say anything. The tension there in that scene is something I wanted to explore, nothing more. What kind of tension in this scene can agitate the enemy and dignify the victim? What surprise would this encounter hide for me? What humanizes and what doesn't?

Yonatan Shapira is in my office today and we rethink power dynamics and imagine different scenarios. He is engaged by my scenes and is certain that he doesn't want the Israeli war criminals to be in a position to apologize. Yonatan is provoked by my radical empathy and says "I don't need the apology of the war criminal ... apologizing gives you a position that you are on the same moral level as others, and they don't deserve that." When I asked him if he ever fantasizes, as a leftist, that the Zionists whom he opposed would one day apologize to him, for calling him a traitor or such. He resisted saying this, but finally admitted that he is human, and deep inside he would like if his previous employers in the army would come and apologize to him, to say that he was right to defect, and that they were blind and evil. Why not? He concluded, though, that it is not what drives his activism, and it doesn't occupy him at all.

As I rewrote in order to reach the zone of dangerous radical empathy in my fiction, I also reached another zone. A sad one. I reached a point where it didn't matter who forgives whom, after reparations and punishments and the occasional forgiveness by kind victims. Many have found that they are unable to forgive themselves. Many have been so dehumanized by their own monstrous acts that no forgiveness can ever make them whole again. I also reached a point where it wasn't my job to even worry about that. My fantasies of hearing apologies have completely evaporated after the genocide of 2023–2024. I now think fondly of the time when I wrote a funny scene where a guilty war criminal is ordered to write an apology letter to Palestinians. The order entails that his letter be based on the sad Palestinian poem by Samih Al Qasem's entitled "I am sorry." The war criminal is required to perform it like Al Qasem did, and rewrite it, taking blame for every violation pointed out in the original poem.

أخذت جزء من قصيدة "إلهي أنا متأسف" لسميح القاسم
وأمرت جندي إسرائيلي يعيد هياكلها في محكمة وهمية للتسليية

قتلنا
ما كنت خرافتي على ساعد
وليس لأغراض
أخرى
كالغفران
ملاك!
وهم
أصلنا
وهم
أهلوا عليها الهخور
ولهم
تينة ائلفوها
جرفناها
وزيتونة جرفوها
ولهم
ولي نخلة وجوها
عنفناها
ورالية عئفوها
مصفناها
وليمونة مصفوها

القصيدة طويلة، وهذا جزء صغير...

داليا الكوري

Re-reading my 2022 Diary in 2024 (post-genocide)

I just watched the U.S. Foreign Minister Antony Blinken saying how sorry he was to watch Al Jazeera journalist Wael Al Dahdouh lose his children in an Israeli airstrike. The comments on Instagram are a sneak preview of how provocative this was to the audience. Not a single comment approved of Blinken's fake apology. One commentator wrote in Arabic in response, "If the devil had an older son, it would probably be you." That should wrap any upcoming moral dilemmas about public apologies.

Visit Palestine: and prepare to change your film plans

When I say that my 12-day visit to Palestine was epic, I truly mean it. On both a personal and professional level, so much was resolved. It became clearer than ever that I am not interested in creating a fiction film as such, but rather vignettes, moments, and tableaux that can explore all my scenarios without being confined within the fiction film format. What I was interested in exploring in my practice was to create poignant images showcasing the trials and tribulations of justice and accountability, without the dramatic arch required for a single fictional tale. During my research trip, I realized that I lack the patience to stick to one genre, when my mind is producing multi-genre scenes. I would wake up one day and write a wild science fiction scene, then a surreal scene, and then a documentary scene. My mind was scattered and not functioning in a traditional scripted fiction format. The only thing all these scenes had in common was that they were in a Free Palestinian state. I therefore sat down in my office in Oslo, and pinpointed my "darlings"

in the script and undertook a distillation process. I stared at all the scenes I loved and wrote them down as a haiku instead—short visual haikus, suspended, with no character development, no backstory, no fiction script rules, just standard, tableaux-like scenes. In Assia Djabbar's film, *La noun des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*, the female protagonist admits upon her return to a free Algeria, "I'm not looking for anything, I'm just listening, listening to the sound of broken memories." This profoundly resonated with me, because when I visit Palestine, it always feels like I'm soaking in the world around me. I become a deep listener—and highly present and curious and alive. I wanted that persona to be my protagonist. I therefore decided that, in this film, upon her return to Free Palestine, Shams will also not really be searching for anything. She will mostly be listening: to the sound of karma, the sound of time healing wounds, for the back and forth between the sound of forgiveness and the sound of grief ... the echoes of those sounds bumping against each other. And so I ended up rewriting my science fiction script into what was both doable and more true to my practice.

Below, I enclose the synopsis, from roughly before my shoot in September–October, 2022.

Synopsis

Palestinian Levitations is a speculative hybrid film comprised of vignettes that are set in a liberated Palestine, right after the fall of the Israeli colonialist state. These segmented vignettes chronicle the places and people that Shams encounters on her journey across the fictitious new homeland. The subtle vignettes weave a kind of meta narrative of Shams' catharsis as she watches her people regain different forms of sovereignty, justice, and retribution.

Like most vignette films, this is not a character-driven film with a single plot. Instead, it has several subplots, with Shams as our minimalist protagonist. Her passive, quiet nature is necessary, to give the audience space to digest and react to this obscure

new world. Although Shams leads us into the freshly liberated Palestine as an observer, no observer is neutral: What she chooses to observe and to record is carefully selected. Her attention is focused on moments when people are asserting their right to self-determination. Her gaze is fascinating because, even in brief encounters with complete strangers, it allows us to feel the tension of emancipation and the shedding of old victimized identities. Her best friend on this journey is a tape recorder that she found while visiting an abandoned prison in Jericho.

At one point in her travels across the land, Shams takes a break and plays a tape recording of the announcement of the new liberated state of Palestine in a graveyard, so that her dead grandparents can hear that the Palestinians have finally reclaimed their homeland. This emotional scene is interrupted when a disturbed man tells her that she is delusional—that this is still Israel. They have a highly upsetting conversation, and we no longer know whether Shams' mind has fabricated this reality. The tension of that resonates throughout the film in very subtle and surreal moments.

The film does not specify a date for when these events take place, but the mise-en-scène hints that it is happening during our present day. If history is written by the winners, let the future be written by the oppressed. But for us, the future is already too late ... and so is the past. So the film must take place now.

¹ I use the word "nowism" in the way it is coined and defined by artist Stephanie Dinkins in her (2020) article "Afro-now-ism" in *Noema* (available at <https://www.noemamag.com/afro-now-ism>). Afro-now-ism is taking the leap and the risks to imagine and define oneself beyond systemic oppression. It is a willful practice that imagines the world as one needs it to be to support successful engagement—in the here and now.

² In English: "valley."

³ Balsom, E. (2017). The Reality-Based Community. *e-flux*, 83. Available at <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community/>

⁴ *Hajjeh* is a title we give to elderly women in Arabic, as a way to recognize and respect their age. It is also a character who ended up introducing herself into my script in strange places, always surprising me with her wisdom and wit.

Accepting my 'less urgent' diasporic voice

I say this lightly now, but the process of surrendering to the fact that this needed to be a self-fabulation was agonizing. My entire career has been based on listening to others, working with them to deliver their story with my vision that seeks to translate their emotions into something visual. How do I abandon my fundamental practice of collaborating with others, to solely focus on my own voice? My own fantasy? This felt a bit self-indulgent, to say the least—and not in a good way.

What is the importance of my story and fantasy? Shouldn't I be telling the stories of people who actually have firsthand experience under occupation? The answer came easily and clearly, but it took a trip to Palestine before it was confirmed for me: The only way my story would be important is if I stuck to the fact that I am strictly a Palestinian voice from the *Shatat*. There is nothing wrong with speaking from that position, even if it is less urgent than the voices of Palestinians living under occupation. This wisdom waived throughout my process of making *Levitations*. I often had to remind myself that my voice and my wild imagination of liberation is unique because each Palestinian fantasy is unique, even in the *Shatat*. Perhaps I cannot fight on the ground, but I can fight by using my privilege of safety in Norway and by making politically engaged and radical films. This safety gave me the room to film a project that I assume many artists on the ground would be unable to, because of security restrictions¹. I made sure that my foreignness to Palestine is visually evident and that my voice is not a local one at all, justifying my nostalgic romanticism. My audience is definitely the diaspora, as I am sure a Palestinian living under occupation will have a different version of the liberation.

I just needed to embrace my intergenerational trauma and remind myself that, as a third-generation victim of expulsion and displacement, my voice can resonate with millions of displaced people around the world. This is how I comforted myself. Unfortunately, this feeling of shame for occupying space

in the Palestinian art scene kept revisiting me in different guises throughout the project, which again is part of the diasporic pain—body manifesting in identity crises throughout my life. It also doesn't help that there aren't many films imagining a liberated Palestine, leaving me with a sort of unspoken burden of representation²: a burden that no artist should feel, and that is probably all in my head.



[Link to watch *Levitations*. By: D.AIKury](#)

¹A Palestinian friend of mine told me that, during his political detention, he met a man who had been detained for years in Israel because he had a dream that he killed a soldier and an informant told the occupation forces.

²This heavy burden of representation is explained through a lexicon of different definition of diaspora cinema in this recommended article by Alexander de Man's (2023) article "Reframing Diaspora Cinema: Towards a Theoretical Framework," in *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 25, pp. 24–39.

ACCEPTING MY 'LESS URGENT' DIASPORIC VOICE



The making-of *Levitations* / D. Alkury & cinematographer Yousef Hammad

Casting my sister

Now, who should represent my self-fabulations on screen— a minimal character, an observer, just like the protagonist I wrote for my film *Levitations*? It needed to be someone I knew quite well and would not have to direct very much. Since this whole project is an autofiction of my alter ego in an alter homeland, then who better than my sister Thuria? Thuria is the perfect “alter” to all these alternates. I had been role-playing with her from the day she could manipulate a Barbie doll: My partner in make believe for all my life, she is the perfect cast.

I recently found this video of her and me in Palestine in 2012, in which I document our journey with my family as we tried to find my grandparents’ home in Safad. I include it here, as it illustrates just how responsive she is to my camera. I also include it because it is a good home video, and I imagine that everyone in the diaspora who returns, looking for their grandparents’ home, has a similar one.

Aside from our make believe as children, Thuria had never acted, but I believe that she was able to take on this role almost effortlessly because of her training in healing techniques. It enabled her to embody emotions on the spot. I would say to her on set, “Thuria, you are in your grandfather’s olive grove, and you just saw the wall crumble as if it’s a dream. There, in the distance are your ancestors, coming down from trees, to see that their orchard has finally been reunited. ACTION!” And, with no formal training, Thuria would start crying actual tears. This is not to say that she was able to act as a professional actor, nor am I trying to promote her as an actor—nor myself as a director. I have no training in directing actors and have worked only with non-actors and my documentary subjects. What I know how to do comes from understanding authenticity as a documentarian. Needless to say, directing my sister was a pleasant surprise. The professional actors on set were far more difficult to direct, as it turned out. I did not have a rapport with them, as I had not met them prior to casting. We had not yet developed a language with which to communicate. This was another reason why I wanted to cast someone I knew as my protagonist.

Thuria seemed quite natural (at least, to me): It almost seemed as though she was not acting, but *channeling*. It felt like I was not directing Thuria, that something spiritual was occurring between the takes. When I asked her about her technique, saying that she looked like she was channeling, she responded that she was “inviting her ancestors,” not channeling. She explained that because the film was about returning to her homeland, which resonates with her experience of being uprooted, she was not acting the role, but rather “being.” Furthermore, as she had not visited Palestine in 10 years, being there again was very emotional for her: This made acting the role of a returnee unnecessary, as she simply had to be herself—*returning*!



Home-video of a potential Home-video / D. AlKury

Can we at least stage "healing"?

In this video diary, I include some of my conversations with my sister Thuria about decolonizing the notion of healing. I am grateful to her for being an amazing sparring partner throughout this research, especially with regard to our longings for liberation and experimentations with healing our Palestinian traumas.

It is important to clarify that I do not define or refer to healing as a process that can be over and done with. The traumas I deal with in my films are usually ongoing and highly complex, as I come from a region that has not stopped bleeding and is in constant state of war. I use "healing" here interchangeably with the word "grieving." My recent investigations into my practice have made this distinction clearer to me. It seems that I must face the fact that, for now, grieving is good enough—and I don't mean grieving on screen for the sake of grieving, but grieving that is ripe enough to transform our pain into power: grief that can strengthen our resistance and desire for liberation.

There is so much that we have not grieved, as humanity. Had we grieved properly and collectively, one war at a time, we might be less keen to jump into yet another war. I believe that film can offer a space for this essential reflection on our human suffering. I think this occupies so many of us in the documentary arts, how to grieve and how to heal. I remember telling a friend, after having attended an Arab film festival, that some of the screenings felt like walking into a cemetery. The Arab films were so full of martyrs and grief that I felt it should be called the Arab Film Funeral, instead of the Arab Film Festival. I was not complaining: I was reveling in that dark cinema, crying nonstop and allowing my busy life to stop. I wanted and needed to finally break down! As much as I cringed at the idea of going to watch sad films, I now view it as a form of activism—grieving in the cinema is a form of resistance that needs to be promoted as such, in this emotional hygienic culture in which we live.



Character study for the film / D. AlKury

Free The Body of Film

Free The Body of Film

Free the body of film

I have always loved slow, well-crafted cinematic vignettes, from directors like Roy Andersson, to Elia Suleiman, to Apitchatpong. What I believe characterizes the vignettes in most of these wonderful works I admire is the minimalism in both the mise-en-scène and the dialogue. The vignettes are anecdotal, poetic like a haiku—often absurd or sublime. In that sense, that layered yet minimalist language I admire about their work was something I was trying to craft for myself while creating *Levitations*—or, in Arabic, *Sarhaat*.

It is unlikely that this type of cinematic language would have become so dominant in my newer script had I not decided to forgo dialogue. My disenchantment with writing and editing dialogue and my fear that words would make my work fall into the trap of political rather than cinematic discourse (as well as the fact that dialogue requires good acting—something that I am not, nor do I intend to be, good at). But let's be honest, I wrote the scenes in this way not because of these fears, but because that is how I saw them unfold in my mind: either while writing or while shooting them. Take, for example, my scene in which three people come down the ladders in the olive orchard after the fall of the separation wall: This was written with more acting and close-ups of reactions. But, while filming them come down the ladders on set, and then go up again, the minimalist mise-en-scène was far more appealing to me.

I remember one of my co-supervisors, Mohanad Yaqubi, encouraging me to just trust the vignettes that I had filmed in Palestine and to not try to add a narration or story. And so I did as he advised. I admit, it was quite satisfying, and the film had this slow and illogical feel to it that I appreciate in art house cinema. In the end, I added this documentary footage of a somatic healing session, which took the film to where I believe it belonged. However, what I miss about my earlier version of the film is the stillness and the slow rhythm and the minimalism that gave the space to transcend meaning. In those longer takes in my earlier version, Thuria's body

had more weight or presence—it demanded more explanation, since you didn't really know what she was doing.

I realized then, that feeling the presence of an actor's body is one of my favorite experiences of cinema: when a body becomes heavy on screen. I think of bodies that haunted me in films: the body of the lead actor in Nicolas Winding Refn's "Copenhagen Cowboys," as she stares at the other characters, asserting her will so beautifully; the body of the Indigenous man in Apitchatpong's *Memoria*, as he takes the longest nap in the history of cinema; the naked bodies of the main actors in Adina Pintilie's nonfiction film *Touch Me Not*; and the main character in Gus Van Sant's *Last Days*, portraying Kurt Cobain's final days as he overdoses all over the film. In each of those films, I felt like the body of the characters were suddenly in my living room, and I had no choice but to deal with them. They were no longer on screen—they were so raw and so political, radicalized and vulnerable, demanding not just my gaze, but also my physical space. I believe it was Adina Pintilie who brought to my attention this concept of how a film can also have a body, and ever since then, I started to notice this more.

Finally, after shooting *Levitations* in Palestine, I had nine sessions with a somatic experiencing practitioner, who helped me connect to my body in ways I was not aware of. Ewa, the practitioner, would tell me to speak about my troubles from the realm of the body and not the mind. Funnily enough, that is similar to how I edit my film: I edit the scenes from the emotional bodily cues of the actors and not from the scripted mind realm. These sessions with Ewa were life-changing for me, and quite inseparable to my process of editing *Levitations*. If I was wealthy, I would have a somatic experiencing session once a week. As you can see in the film, I ultimately decided to film one of them—one in which my sister also participated.



Excerpt from *Levitations* / D. AlKury

World building and de-Zionizing

I hate to admit this, but my impulse for wanting to undertake this entire research project stems from a childish desire: one I won't share, as it is probably best to keep it to myself. However, I jokingly tell people that my target audience is quite niche. It is made with one group in mind: older Palestinians who suffer from Alzheimer's and other memory-related challenges, who would find this film sufficiently believable that they would feel immense relief seeing a liberated Palestine. I am the protagonist in Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye Lenin*¹, the son who is willing to lie to his mother, creating an entire world full of fake props and characters, to avoid breaking her heart with the truth.

I became particularly entangled with props in my world building. The props in my speculative world are not only objects that you put in the room and that can create meaning and stories around the character: They vibrate with ethical and political tension. I used them to challenge myself—they helped me imagine, and they were my method of demanding different meanings. In these vignettes, I have a few stereotypical, perhaps even cliché objects: olive trees, the apartheid wall, the coffin, a news recording, and a single Israeli flag. I did not intentionally place them there as I wrote, but as I traveled through a multitemporal, liberated Palestine, they offered themselves as backdrops. However, during the shoot, these so-called "background objects" barged themselves into the lens and became so much more than I had in mind. They held within them a home that had been—a home full of dusty but valuable props—asking me to wonder and asking me to trust. They were asking too much. They were asking the anti-colonial to engage with the post-colonial in one cinematic moment, but as the author Somdeep Sen summarizes,²

The moment of liberation is not a moment at all. This euphoric image in our heads of liberation represses the awkward reality that liberation is rarely a moment. Often, it is an awkward mix of the anti-colonial struggle and the post-colonial that begins long before the colonizer has left, and continues long after the official end of colonization.

Prop 1: The separation wall

Where should Shams stand when the wall falls?

I wanted to witness the fall of the separation wall. Artists have sabotaged this racist structure in hundreds of ways, and I wanted to know what my version would be, if placed in a freshly liberated Palestine. According to the logic of the world I was building in these vignettes, liberation happened without explanation. It simply happened—let's not get too picky about how and just trust the world without question and see what presents itself in the aftermath. For me, the challenging part was not how the wall fell, but how my protagonist (Shams) would react. Indeed, this encapsulates the essence of my work at that point: our reaction to the "liberation." I wondered, What should I place on the other side of the wall? Why do I never want Shams or the other characters to move toward the wall? Why does my mind refuse to watch her cross to the other side? Is it because I want her to have an internal journey? Is it because I know that our struggle is not about the land, but about fundamentally dismantling injustice beyond physical material proportions? Shams would not move. I preferred that she gaze at something ancient, and that something ancient would look back at her, and neither would need to say a word. I decided to place a horse in the scene. I chose a horse because it is not human nor logical: It is natural and I needed a witness who is apolitical to interact with Shams, so that the audience can have room to reflect without too much interference. But no matter what I wrote, Shams never crossed the fallen wall.

When I shared my dilemmas with Dr. Martin Hargreaves,³ he referred me to Judith Butler's writings on vulnerabilities. He pointed out that my refusal to have my character run toward the wall stems from my antipathy toward victimized narratives. Typically, the oppressed would rush to cross the border, but that is what the victim narrative expects, and I refuse that aesthetic. I am post-that narrative here. The immense tragedy that continues to pierce the lives of Palestinians has rendered them somehow predictable: They are in a loop of victimhood, reacting over and over again as predictably



Making of *Levitations*. Blue screening the apartheid wall / D. AlKury

as the oppressor's mass violence. In my fiction, I will not have them react as predicted. You don't tell me how I will grieve or when I will grieve or what is "grievable,"⁴ as defined by Butler. My work centers on subverting that expected, predictable Palestinian grief. I would far rather my audience be confused when they watch Shams' reaction. I would rather them ask the questions that I asked while writing that scene. I have no other agenda in this otherwise banal scene. I am reminded of the main character in Suzanna Abulhawas' book, *Against the Loveless World*⁵, who wanted to confuse the enemy as a form of resistance, to act unpredictably and catch them off guard. Resistance should be like belly dancing—they should never know where your hips will sway next. The only problem is that once I began working so rigorously with extrapolating, my mind kept generating confusing scenes. I often discarded them, as they did not exactly align with my moral compass. They were perverted and politically incorrect, and perhaps should only surface on a drunken night with some very close friends.

Returning to the separation wall, if we treat it as the main prop in the theater of daily violence that Palestinians must endure, then I would like to share the Palestinian artist Yazan Khalili's anecdotal reflections on its representation, shared on his website:

[My friend] told me that he looked out the window on the side of the car where his mother was sitting and said, "It's a huge wall, isn't it?" "Which wall?" his mother replied... He was astonished. At this point, he began laughing loudly. He replied, "What do you mean, 'Which wall'? This wall, The Wall..." and he pointed out the window. "Where?" His mother asked again. "There..." he said, and stopped the car. His mother looked out the window... and said: "I can't see anything... I can't see the wall that you are talking about!" And here it took him couple of minutes before he calmed down from laughing so hard, and he said to me: "Exactly," I told her, "This that you can't see is The Wall..." We kept laughing for hours. It is funny, this sudden condition of blindness, of failing to see this huge, big elephant in the room... A blindness that happens because one can see

nothing but The Wall... when seeing itself becomes a kind of blindness.

I was touched by Khalili's story and it made me think about the artistic choices I made while writing the wall scene. Ultimately, the wall was no longer a prop in my film to show injustice, but a prop to reflect the imminent destruction of injustice. I used it against itself, and where I ended up emotionally cannot be summarized in one scene, so it is best to keep it open-ended—uncomfortably so, confusingly so. It is not a utopia that I was trying to imagine or re-world. I merely sought to design a world that allows utopic questions to feel at home. As Khalili writes, "[W]e shall always fail to be political through images of pain, because we aim to be seen in pain. The image alone can't be political if it stays fixated in the realm of documenting and proving the victimhood, in making visible what should be fought against; the pain."

I doubt that there is a single Palestinian artists who does not go through this dilemma of representation: as if, by showing our pain, we lose out on showing our beauty. So we strive to maintain balance, constantly balancing, missing out on the beauty of extremes: something that we should be afforded in the arts. Personally, what I truly miss in the Palestinian art scene is anger: extreme and unapologetic anger. I yearn to watch epic anger, well-funded and on large screens. Sadly, our horror genre is only thriving in the documentary industry.



Still from *Levitations* / D. AlKury

Prop 2: The tree

Props are not only inanimate objects with which I populate my sets, they are also animate and can take the shape of animals or trees. While they start off as props, they gradually become characters, in the script and even more so during the shoot. They demand to grow from a prop to a character with agency, and so I listen. These non-human and post-human characters pop up in my work uninvited. It must be that they have a great deal of agency in the Palestinian collective poetic memory, which I channel while writing and “righting.” They especially cowrite with me when I imagine justice. Perhaps imagination is a muscle that is connected to childhood. Why else would they appear? In any case, since I dislike working with actors and dialogue, these props became animate enough to work quite deeply with the protagonist.

My post-human impulses seem to be informed by what Solimar Otero calls an “archive of conjure”⁷ that is “based on the dead as active agents” who are engaged with us in liberatory work. Otero argues that these archives of conjure are produced through residual transcriptions or reverberations of the stories of the dead, whose archives are stitched, beaded, smoked, and washed into official and unofficial repositories. She investigates how sites like the ocean, rivers, and institutional archives create connected contexts for unlocking the spatial activation of residual transcriptions. But more importantly, and because I have been disembodied from my roots and my identity as a Palestinian, I seemed to need other bodies in this narrative to lean on, abstract bodies, illogical ones that resemble my naïve and intangible sense of belonging. In *Body Drift*—a book on body politics that explores Butler’s and Harraway’s feminist approach to the meaning of having a body—Arthur Kroker states that

the back legend to all of Harraway’s thought is the notion that today more than ever, we no longer inhabit, if we ever have, a solitary body of flesh and bone but are ourselves the intersection of a multiplicity of bodies, with life itself as fluid

intersections of humans and plants and animals and minerals ... not as utopian imaginers, but to deepen the epic story of domination.⁸

This intersectionality of our human bodies with other non-human or post-human bodies influenced my creation of *Levitations*. I reflected on it by working with the idea of interbeing, as proposed by Charles Eisenstein (see “What is Spiritual Aesthetics?” in the appendix), infused with my simplified understanding of Karan Barad’s concept of agential realism. This idea of interconnectedness became increasingly apparent as I delved deeper into imagining radical utopias and alter-worlds. This notion also started appearing in numerous films and even television shows: many of them explicitly proposing deeply existential phenomena of how, if something happens on one side of the globe, it will affect the other. From the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, to *Memoria*, to *Leave the World Behind*, to *The Triangle of Sadness*. The final seasons of “West World” and the entire “Copenhagen Cowboy” series manifest this, too. The way these works approach the classic “otherness” in such a refreshing way offers a serious understanding of our privileged and unbalanced world.

To bring this down to earth and make it concrete, with regard to my choices in this film, this philosophy especially resonated with me because of the way I entangled trees in my work with Shams and the way she leans on them as if they are body parts that she can wear. Indeed, it is interesting to look at those non-human extensions in my work, not as utopian imaginings, but what they represent in terms of power dynamics. Our identity as Palestinians (on the land) is heavily shaped by its intersection with other bodies of domination. And our identity as Palestinians (off the land) is shaped by the opposite of entanglement: Mine, at least, is shaped by separation. Someone who lives on the land would likely never use trees in the way I have used them in my narratives across this project; it is clear that I suffer from disembodiment and nostalgia. I will not deny that I am a bit embarrassed by this nostalgia for trees. I console myself by saying that at least my nostalgia is political—my trees have political agency.

They take on different characters. In one scene, they are grievable and bleeding. In another scene, they are wicked and angry enough to fall on a couple of settlers. In my science fiction film *Congratulations on Your Return*, the protagonist returns to Jerusalem because of a fig tree, and there, the tree has so much agency that the tree's backstory never has to be explained. One fig tree is enough to make a woman embark on a mysterious mission. Thankfully, my nostalgia is not so great that it lets me forget that I write from a privileged diasporic position that romanticizes the tree. The documentary filmmaker in me is fully aware of that romanticization—and of the pain and labor it takes to tend and fend for trees and herbs under a brutal military occupation.

While trying to think of the logic behind my liberated Palestine unfolding in fragmented vignettes, I succumbed to one rule. The world building logic is that Palestine, with all its elements—sentient and non-sentient, human and post-human—has been through pain and violence, translating into deep traumas. These traumas have lived an unnaturally long life, so they begin to possess divine supernatural energy. That consciousness and force of energy no longer need humans as vessels, but can teleport from human to animal to tree to river. That was why I did not feel the need to explain why a tree ends up falling on two settlers in the comfort of their stolen home. That is why the wall falls without explanation, without us seeing the catalyst for that fall.

I will take a wild guess here and say that all of us who romanticize the tree have one thing in common: We all live in exile. Rarely do I find a local artist or a local farmer hugging a tree for aesthetic value. They hug it to protect it from bulldozers and from violent settlers that burn trees. My intentions when contextualized should not serve a romantic, Orientalist nostalgia, but a political recentring of the agency that trees continue to have in our collective memory. I am reminded of my favorite text by the martyred activist Basel

Al Araj⁹, in which he defends romance as a latent power that can be weaponized at times of war. Al Araj confirms that romanticized stories of sacrifice are what we have surpassed our enemy, thus I intend to keep mine.

I hope that the self-indulgent embrace of trees in many of my vignettes serves as an antidote to the systematic separation that has rendered these embraces into images of resistance. May a tree one day be simply a tree—holy and desirable because it is a tree—and a river, just a damn old river, unburdened by our fatigued symbolism. Until then, I will romanticize every tree that comes my way in Palestine.

It would be easy for me to go off on a tangent, describing how mesmerized I was with the fertile hands of a distant relative living in Lebanon's refugee camps. The way they could make everything grow in their three-square-meter garden, from papayas to avocados to bananas to lemons to the supreme, creamy, divine qishta. Their trees are visual and edible reflections of *sumood*. *Sumood* is also a tree, standing tall with grace and color against all that grey necro politics. This becomes quite literal when you look at drone images of the genocide/domocide in 2023, when people were the only colors in a landscape of grey, bombed buildings. Every image you make with *sumood* as a subtext is part of the visual legacy of the Palestinian hopepunk aesthetic that no Marvel studio can ever replicate. One is authentic lived experience powered by the sun, and one is simulated in rendering farms powered by dollars and some solar panels in a poorer country.



Stills from the making of *Levitations* / D. AlKury

بيهيحكن السلاح والتارات بالأرياف
 يمكن ما عندكم ولاد عم تزورهم بالمستشفيات
 يمكن ما شافين الرهاص بالركاب شتو بيعمل
 بالرجال
 أوكله هيا بعيونكم مسلسلات وأعلام
 سكبي الكم عالم الظلام ..
 نحن بنعرف تحت خبنا ندفن لفوق
 انتو بتبيعوا تحت سكس تايب للفوق
 الراس ومحرارك من أغنية
 فرستايبل ريل غانغستا ستريت شت

Prop 3: The Israeli flag

My location scouting in Palestine ultimately felt like scouting for a homeland. But this is not an emotional personal diary entry—it is not about home. It is about making a film and missing one prop, and how if I dismantled this prop on location, I might actually create a momentary liberation, a home returned.

I was in a beautiful, charming mountain village in Deir Ghasaneh, where many of our strongest Barghouti leaders and poets come from. I was on a location scouting trip there, and it seemed as though every corner would work as a location. Hussein, a helpful local man from the village, had become part of our team there and was showing me a traditional house with dome-shaped ceilings for a scene that I planned to shoot.

Everything in that house was simply stunning, but I did not have an old, traditional house on my list. My line producer and cameraman, who had accompanied me to the house, tried to convince me to consider the house as a location for the radical Israeli settlers scene. (For context, the scene I was hoping to shoot the following week was meant to take place in a run-down, make-shift concrete house that some young, illegal Israeli settlers were squatting in to lay claim to more lands in the West Bank. It was certainly not meant to be filmed in a beautiful house.) They argued that, as most settlers have taken our beautiful old houses, the scene should be shot in this traditional house. Indeed, it would be an eyesore to see two young, illegal settlers living there, so I was happy to change my mind. Visually, it would be so much more aggravating.

To accommodate this change, we required props to make the house look like some young Israelis had trashed it and that they obviously did not belong there. One of the props we needed was an Israeli flag for outside the front door. We would be shooting this scene the following week, so the production designer (Salim) was tasked with ensuring that we had an Israeli flag by then. However, the day before the shoot, as I was revising with the line producer at around



Dalia while location scouting / Photograph by Salim Abul Jabal

midnight, Salim surprises me by saying that he was unable to find an Israeli flag. I thought he was joking, but he insisted that it was true. I emphasized its importance for the scene, so he promised to push harder to find one.

It was now the day of the shoot, we had been in the village shooting since seven o'clock in the morning, we were an hour behind schedule, and we had to begin shooting the settlers' scene in the house. Salim informed me that our production designers still had not found an Israeli flag. I was highly provoked, and my sense of irony about this was starting to fade. Seventy-four years of Israeli occupation, and my crew—which had moved mountains for me to create some incredibly difficult scenes that I wanted to shoot—was unable to find me this one small prop. Was it a mental block? Was it hard for them to acquire this because they hate that flag? I told Salim that we would be shooting in an hour, and I needed the flag. "Let's get someone in the village to get some spray paint, or even watercolors for God's sake, and create one out of an old t-shirt! Whatever it is, I want that flag." And the more I was told that they could not find it, the more I wanted the flag. It was absurd: We were living under the tyrannical visual bombardment of the Israeli flag plastered everywhere just a few kilometers in any direction, and no one could get ahold of one?

Our resourceful best boy, who had been working around the clock to pull strings for us, suggested that he go to a nearby settlement five kilometers down the road and climb up the wall to grab one. I thought this would be too dangerous. This best boy had already risked his life the day before by bringing fake guns as props for that same scene. He had been stopped at a checkpoint on his way to our film set, with some fake AK 47s in his trunk, which he had borrowed from his friend. The Israeli soldier at the checkpoint asked him the typical search question, "Are you carrying any weapons?" And being the clever man he was, he simply charmed her by jokingly saying, "Yes, I have a couple of AK 47s in the back." She laughed and let him go. He could have been killed at once. This was no joke, especially after Israeli soldiers had just killed four Palestinian men a day earlier in Nablus for no reason.

Ultimately, a man overheard our conversation and offered to make the flag. In half an hour, we had a decent-looking flag. (Everyone else thought it didn't look real enough, but I didn't care.) To have that flag—and have my protagonist look at it as she approached that old occupied house, pick it up and throw it aside as she enters what is clearly a Palestinian home—was a moment of catharsis for a few of us. When I arrived at my rented apartment, later that day, I had that flag with me. I put it in on the floor and was very anxious about it being in the house. What if someone walked in on me in Ramallah and saw that I had an enormous, handmade Israeli flag in my living room? What remains with me is how nobody else saw the irony. I saw it because I didn't live there.

I am starting to understand that "home" is not so much a place, it is an action, a verb (home is a verb): an act where what you do is in harmony with what you believe. My homeland, at least, is not a noun—it is a verb, an action that I am building, scene by scene, one cathartic frame at a time. But who am I to define home, the nomadic and exilic body that I am? Our poet Mahmoud Darwish was once asked in an interview whether his exile had become a mask. He responded, "No. I am now being tested: I can choose between an external exile or an internal one, an external or internal homeland—I don't know what I want. Exile is so strong within me, I may bring it to the land."¹⁰

I have yet to define what home is, but the diaspora is so strong within me that I will definitely bring it back to the land. For now, all I know is that I will always blame Mahmoud Darwish for giving me an internal homeland that agitates my external exile: "Poems can't establish a state but can establish a metaphorical homeland in the minds of the people. I think my poems have built some houses in this landscape." I would tell Darwish that, yes, I visited those houses, watered their gardens, and tended their owners' graves with a wonderful West Bank film crew.

I think what is interesting in my generation's diaspora versus my grandparents' is that the Zionists did not have Instagram in mind when they created Israel. Had they known that Instagram would be able to create a new unity in the watered down Palestinian diaspora starved of connection, they would probably have exterminated us all. They thought it would take two to three generations, but social media created what Hanine Shehadeh terms a virtual floating Palestine.¹¹ Our feeling of exile did not fade: It grew and became a *giant*,¹² just like Kanafani had hoped.

Shaping this digital floating homeland was not only an experience of dispossession that relied on a national imaginary, but also a "textual strategy" of plurality and multiplicity, the mobilization of an imaginary. The term imaginary is quite complex and carries a variety of meanings. Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic notion of the imaginary involves the subject's internalized image of the ideal, whole, and self, and is situated around the notion of coherence rather than fragmentation. This desire for wholeness propels the imaginary in a mirror that works against the primordial experience of fragmentation.

I relate to this experience of residing in a digital floating homeland, and I occasionally feel that it is dangerously comfortable. It is essentially a space in which digital intifadas unfold in visual, consumable posts and stories, but all from the comfort of our sofas and clicks. Nevertheless, it is better than no homeland at all, and it has mobilized the world in incredible ways that even the visionary father of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, could not have anticipated. The archive that has been produced in that digital floating homeland can never be erased, nor bombed. And since social media is all about stories, Palestinians will always win that war— especially those who have not yet been shadow banned.

Strange things can happen when shooting under occupation. For example, the Palestinian director Annemarie Jacir was telling me how on one of her shoots with an American production, a crew member miscommunicated to the second casting director, ending up with Israeli extras to act as characters in a checkpoint scene waiting in line. The funny thing is that these extras who were obviously new Ukrainian and Russian immigrants to Israel simply couldn't handle the heat nor the role, and kept complaining, asking for chairs and water. The Palestinian crew on set just took a moment to indulge in this and to savour their agony. Indeed, the Palestinians have been dealing with these dehumanizing cages and checkpoints for decades and yet these extras couldn't even play their paid role for a few hours. Similar humorous stories have been relayed to me by other directors when setting up colonial props in their films. The behind-the-scenes political drama that takes place on Palestinian film shoots, could almost always become films of their own.



Still from *Levitations* / D. AlKury

Prop 4: The tape recorder

The prison scene was not meant to be as simple as the one that we see in the finished film. The scene in which Shams, the protagonist, finds the tape recorder was initially much longer. Moreover, it was supposed to follow a grandiose scene of an elderly, strong, and angry Palestinian woman who drives a bulldozer, dismantling an Israeli military prison with revenge clear on her face. Two other women are also seen going crazy with bulldozers, breaking and tearing down prison cells. Shams watches them and, later, sneaks up to this dismantled prison and finds the tape recorder. Inside it, there is a tape with an emotional recording from a prisoner to his daughters, in which he promises to teach them how to swim and jump from Akka's cliffs as soon as he is released from prison. However, when I began to edit the scene, something else emerged. I began to explore this by replacing the prisoner's recording with a more abstract sound: for example, a transcendental Sufi beat. I simply couldn't include an expected, logical sound to materialize on the tape.

I knew that whatever Shams listened to would make her break down and cry (indeed, I had scripted this), but I was unsure what that catalyst would be. I wrote a few drafts of fictitious letters and researched Palestinian prisoners' letters from online archives, but the more I read, the more I was convinced that I needed to take a post-narrative approach. Our grief for our political prisoners cannot be contained in a story or even a beloved song or poem. I was confronted with abstraction. The tape recorder was there to help me abstract grief—and the tape inside of it invited me to listen to something more abstract than the Palestinian story or eternal human suffering, in general. It should be noted that I have nothing against telling a factual Palestinian story, believing it neither redundant nor unnecessary to do so. It just felt inappropriate in my film at that moment, because of the genre to which I was trying to adhere. Moreover, I was unsure how best to delve into the tremendous intergenerational trauma of detentions in one scene. Again, I refuse to proclaim that the Palestinian archive is redundant or in any

way not suitable for my film: I just did not want to use the archive because my narrative is post-colonial and my challenge was to go beyond our story of pain and victimhood.

Emil Habibi writes how it pains him that the Palestinian victim is ashamed by being a victim.¹³ Habibi encourages the reader to embrace the most humane thing about being human: that is, our weakness. He mentions an older Arab poet's observation that strength and bravery are something we have in common with animals, not with humans. He humorously criticizes how Palestinians are so ashamed of weaknesses that they give themselves frightening pseudonyms when their parents gave them beautiful names. They write poetry about being tough when in reality they would not dare to kill a chicken. This is why he believes that all religious and fundamentalists movements will not have a future, because they are essentially aggressive against human nature and human weakness. Habibi believes that the most important mission for Arab creatives and artists is to search for this pearl of human weakness. This leads him to discuss one of my favorite questions in my research: How do we humanize the enemy? Habibi writes the following in a way that I struggle to translate accurately, but that has shifted my entire perspective on power: Nobody can humanize the enemy like the Palestinian child who does not hesitate to throw a rock at a soldier, because the child knows deep inside that behind that armor is a human that has weaknesses. The Palestinian child makes the soldier human by throwing a rock at him. Let this sink in: Nothing is more humanizing than a Palestinian child attacking a tank with a stone.

In the summer of 2023, I was perusing photographs on Getty Images, scrolling through thousands of painful images of Palestine dating back to the invention of the camera lucida. I suddenly came across an image I never thought I would see: an image of a wounded Israeli man. Yes, despite being a 42-year-old Palestinian, I had

never seen a photograph showing where our flying intifada stones ultimately land. I always thought they just mysteriously ended up in a black hole that sucks in all Palestinian stones ... Two intifadas and constant war and not a single image of an injured Israeli.

But there it was.

On my computer screen.

The first and last image I ever saw of an Israeli man with stitches on his forehead, holding our superhero weapon: the stone randomly picked up from the sidewalk.



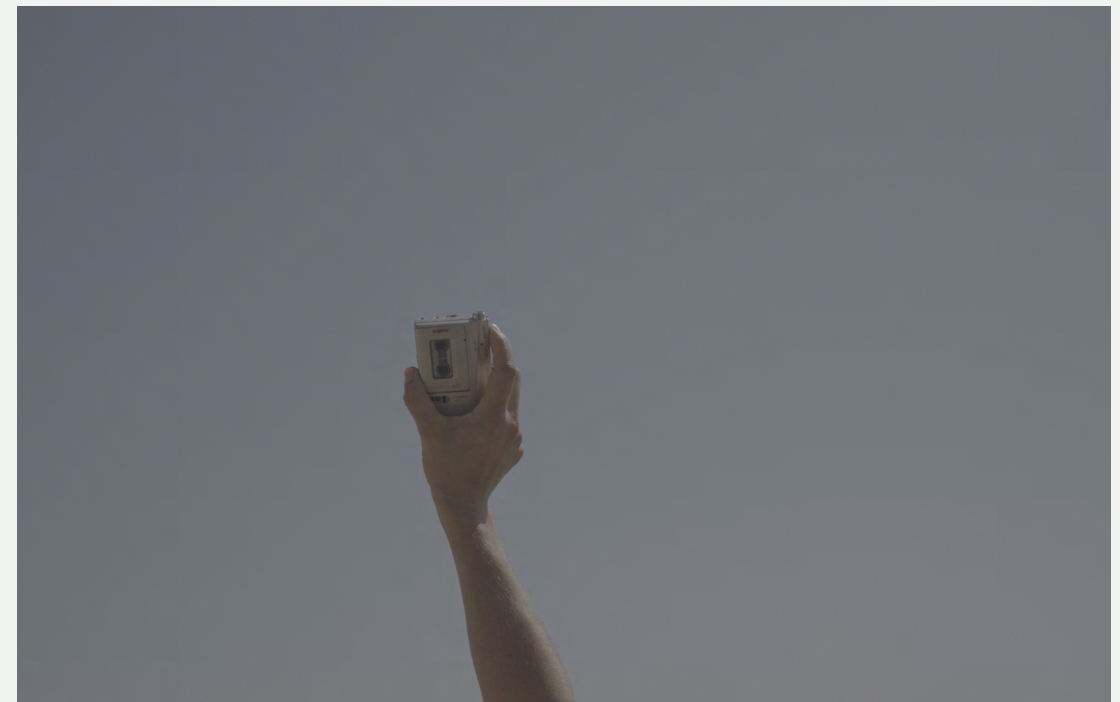
Jeff Rotman

I emailed my friends living in Palestine and Israel: "Guys, have you ever seen a photo like this?" They pondered for a moment, then confirmed that this was indeed a rare find. They also all agreed that there is something sinister about the photo. A few months later, 1,200 Israelis were allegedly killed by Hamas and the incompetent

Israeli army. I again went to Getty Images: Surely, there would be photos of wounded Israelis now, I wonder how they will be represented? I found nothing. Perhaps it is that they do not like to show weakness, my friends and I thought. For Israel, when their soldiers are injured it is a weakness; for us, being injured is being wronged—it could be used as evidence, if that ever meant anything. I believe it was the renowned Dr. Ghassan Abu Sitta, who was in Gaza during the 2023 genocide, who said that “Gazans can’t imagine that people know what is happening and still allow these crimes to happen, in other words, they feel like, if they share visual evidence, the killing might stop.” In contrast, the Israelis do not have to prove anything in order to kill: They have impunity. It is that simple, and that tragic. We need to make it clear that Palestinians do not show their children bleeding and dying because they do not care about their privacy. They simply cannot afford the luxury of privacy—nor the luxury of grief.

I took the liberty of going back to Getty images in December 2023, to search for pictures of what happened on October 7th. I expected to find different results. However, I did not find a single photo of an injured Israeli—except for one of a happy, good-looking soldier who was recovering in a hospital. It seemed almost like a hospital advertisement. (Perhaps there were Israelis in a couple of the photos of corpses zipped up in black body bags.)

Instead of injured people, what I found were numerous pictures of teddy bears: enormous teddy bears in an installation with pictures of hostages. Now contrast those teddy bears with the thousands of videos and images of Gazans covered in fine, grey dust as they rise from the ashes of bombed schools and hospitals and mosques and bakeries—dead or alive, but definitely injured. My mind could not understand and my heart was filled with anger and grief. Again, we dug in books and essays, again we tried hard to find answers, but nothing made sense. One day, I would like to meet him—the wounded soldier in the photo I first found—and ask him whether he kept that stone as a souvenir, a trophy to prove his humanity, like Emil Habibi wrote. And perhaps I would ask him whether he would be so kind as to lend it to me for a prop in my upcoming film.

Stills from *Levitations* / D. AlKury

DELETED SCENES

I could say a lot about why I deleted a couple of scenes from my final film, *Levitations*. They were scenes that were dear to me, so instead of completely deleting them, I made a cruel noir-style film reflecting on their deletion. Instead of burying them, they live a good afterlife in a five-minute world of their own. Using video as an artistic form of reflection, as encouraged by my supervisor Lotte, has been instrumental for me in experimenting and finding different film languages to speak about the vulnerable parts of my process. Lotte's essay "Sidespor"¹⁴ delves into the question of why some of her outtake footage still looms in her memory and insists on being taken into consideration. Could it be that the abandoned film clips, outtakes, and sidetrack clips that haunt us do so because they contain parts of our own taboos or societal inhibitions?

My deleted scenes were not outtakes. They were well thought out vignettes that I desired to film but did not succeed in doing so, for different reasons. In this film study *What if a tree? What if a crow?*, I investigate the most pressing reason: self-censorship. Although this self-censorship is part of a matrix of political oppressive censorships, I still prefer to blame myself as an artist for not going the extra mile: to agitate myself and really pose the question for artists like me who I know unconsciously or consciously censor themselves for fear of being labeled antisemitic—or vengeful, in my case.

I have also deleted texts, not just deleted footage, that loom and knock on my door, asking for an audition, for one last chance. I share here a vignette that I wrote in a flash while going for a run on the beach, and so I trust where it comes from but not where it is going. I hope you can finish it in your own way, in the spirit of galvanizing your imagination and appetite for liberation. It's a bit of a joke, this vignette, but as we say in Arabic, three quarters of a joke is always true. I call it "an Un-Guided Palestinian Meditation," and it contains blasphemous props that I hope will find their way into some of my films soon, *inshallah*.



Still from *What if a tree? What if a crow?* / D. AlKury

An Unguided Palestinian Meditation

This visual meditation takes place in my imagination, and it's set as if in a psychologist office with a psychologist I call Ewa, named after my favorite somatic experience practitioner in Oslo.

Ewa: In this safe space, a place for your body and mind... allow yourself to feel, to speak.

Dalia (exhales): I'm standing there, by the fallen wall.

Ewa: The wall has fallen. This is good. Can you get your body to walk toward it?

Dalia: No, I can't.

Ewa: Take your time, ask your body, "Why don't you want to cross? What is that resistance, after all this waiting?"

Dalia: I will not cross, because only a victim will cross.

Ewa: And you're not a victim.

Dalia: No, I stand here, I'm Palestinian, we stand ...

Okay wait, I will walk there, just to take a look.

Oh shit, I see it...

The wall was just the tip of the iceberg, it's what's *under* the wall.

Ewa: What is it that you see?

Dalia: An abyss, so deep...

And it's full of something strange.

Worms...

Ewa: And do they—

Dalia: No, they are not worms, they are dicks. Thousands of them, a valley of white dicks, oh, and brown, and black, it's just cut-off male dicks. This is... Wow, It looks rather safe though, so I'm going to go down, actually.

Dalia starts to walk down a solid metal ladder.

She passes through mist and dust along the meandering ladder.

The ladder is very long, and on her way down, she sees the most outrageous people doing the most outrageous things—unspeakable things. Those people can be seen through cracks and faintly lit windows. Dalia is in awe; it's as if she is climbing down the famous painting "The Garden of Earthly Delights," by painter Hieronymus Bosch: mostly an orgy of men having bizarre sex with strange objects, they all seem in pain and utterly desperate.

She finally reaches the last step and jumps off. She notices that the dicks are much bigger up close, she pinches her nose to illustrate how smelly these penises are... She hears a noise across the distance, a clamor from a cheering crowd.

It's a *souq*—a stereotypical Middle Eastern *souq*. Dalia is bemused and starts cursing.

Dalia: I can't believe how deep Orientalism goes. My brain is so fucking colonized. This is unacceptable—a fuckin' *souq*! *Ya salam*!

She walks to check out what is in the baskets, and it's just weapons being sold like fruits and veg. Men are shouting typical Friday *souq* phrases, "Arrib Jarrib Jarrib él khamseh bi dinar." A charming man looks at Dalia and says, "You can't resist it. Some are made in Germany, some in Russia, some in Iran—you know you want that F16."

People are buying and bartering. A boy is happy about buying two prosthetic legs for the price of one. But still, on the walls behind the *souq*, you can see worn-out “Free Palestine” posters and *Hanthala*.

Dalia is pissed, shaking her head at everything. Suddenly, she hears a familiar voice calling her:

Aboody: Dalia, hahaha you made it.

Dalia: What the hell are you.. doing...

Aboody: It’s about time. Welcome to prototyping heaven. This is just a shit place where things don’t go well and, it’s complicated—I can’t explain now. Let me show you.

He puts her on a donkey and they walk through what feels like the Wild West except it’s a dusty quarter in Jerusalem! They park their donkeys, enter a worn-out church, and lo and behold!

—enter your revelation here—

¹ *Goodbye Lenin* is (2003) a German film about a young man who must protect his fragile mother after she wakes up from a coma in East Germany. To keep her from realizing that the German Democratic Republic has fallen while she was in the coma, he fakes everything so that it seems like they are still living in a communist state.

² Transcribed from a recorded presentation of Somdeep Sen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BctFbLhY6KE>

³ For more on Dr. Martin Hargreaves, please visit <https://theplace.org.uk/profile/dr-martin-hargreaves-phd-director-of-research-and-postgraduate-programmes>.

⁴ Butler, J. (2015). *Precariousness and Grievability: When Is Life Grievable?* Available at <https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/2339-judith-butler-preciousness-and-grievability>

⁵ Abulhawa, S. (2020). *Against the Loveless World: A Novel*. Atria Books.

⁶ <http://www.yazankhalili.com/index.php/writings/regarding-the-pain-of-others/>

⁷ <https://www.embodiedphilosophy.com/reflections-on-an-african-diasporic-spiritual-citizenship/>

⁸ Kroker, A. (2012). *Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway*. Minnesota University Press.

⁹ Al Araj, B. (2018). *I Found My Answers* (Arabic version). (p. 333)

¹⁰ <https://thepalestineproject.medium.com/exile-is-so-strong-within-me-i-may-bring-it-to-the-land-667edf393af6>

¹¹ Shehadeh, H. (2023). Palestine in the Cloud: The Construction of a Digital Floating Homeland. *Humanities*, 12(4), 75.

¹² This quote is from the final paragraph in Ghassan Kanafani’s “A Letter From Gaza”: a chilling short story from 1956 that is still horribly relevant today.

¹³ Emil Habibi. (2006). Sraaj el-Ghouleh (in English: *the Oil Lamp of the Ogress*). pp. 63–65.

¹⁴ Mik-Meyer, L. (2022). Sidespor. *Norsk medietidsskrift*, 29(4), pp. 1–10.

Healing from healing

Some artists work with paint, some with chords, and others with ceramics, but the material I work with is pain. I paint with pain and with grief, disguised in dark humor, in an attempt to heal in some way—even more so after the Syrian revolution.

In my film *Privacy of Wounds*, the pain was not what interested me, and I knew this was the case when Hasan, the first character I cast for the film, helped me reenact a scene to illustrate how detention took place. As I describe earlier, in the introductory chapter, he and his two fellow ex-detainee friends began to reenact the torture they experienced in Syrian military prisons. The footage I have of that day is similar to the violent reenactments of Joshua Oppenheimer's subjects in *The Act of Killing* or Raed Andoni's *Ghost Hunting*. Watching them reenact violence made me realize that my interest is not in the brutality of detention—nor would I dare to attempt to document such brutality. I am however, interested in the story they tell each other post-violence, which I quickly noticed is different than the way they tell it to the media. I wanted to focus on their inspirational resilience, my fascination is with ability to heal, not with violent dictatorships. I knew, then, that pain changes completely when you have an audience. You only have to watch a three-year-old fall in front of his mom to know that pain is partly performative. Out of respect for their pain and post-trauma, I wanted these men to feel that they never have to perform, to impress, to document or respond to interview questions. I wanted to give them the space to be present with that grief, in their own way. This could have flopped—it was an extreme film experiment—but it worked.

In retrospect, what helps me when working with the pain of others (as I have, in many of my films) is that their pain is political, and because it is political, the “other” undergoing this pain and injustice becomes publicly important, leaving the confinement of personal suffering. Their private pain touches something much larger and narrates a historically important event. Perhaps it is that part which redeems documentarians’ filming of people who were victimized.

While some directors like to dwell on the pain—and I am not a fan of that—pain is almost always in the background. It is something that I try not to over-research, either, as that will taint what I have set out to do. While I did have to research Syrian detention centers and unfathomable torture, I never inspired me for the film. I would quickly abandon the research and return to my characters and their personal stories. I feared that the emotional intensity of the facts would overpower my goal. This is a tough period in pre-production: The filmmaker wants to research their subject, but is also afraid that the information might get in the way of the personal story. But an ethical question arises in pre-production and continues through to the last day of editing: Who am I to direct a film about the world's worst prison?¹

The question is complicated, of course—who am I, indeed? While my father was born and raised in Syria and my entire family on that side is quite Syrian, but just because I am familiar with Damascus and the culture and many of my close friends are now Syrian refugees, is that sufficient? Absolutely not. I have no single answer, but one thing is certain: I know how to make portraits about resilient people. I know how to make people shine through the darkness of their stories. I only make a film about trauma once I find a dynamic method to bring out people's story in a cinematic way that dignifies them and their cause. It is a commitment. That is what I believe myself, anyway. And because I consult and work with my characters every step of the way, and I take years to craft my films, I feel that our collaboration and trust is evident. Nevertheless, I sincerely believe that, for certain stories, only the ones who experienced them can tell them. For example, as a visual filmmaker, I was unable to successfully animate or visualize what was communicated in *Privacy of Wounds*. Anything I added felt so out of place and contrived and even disrespectful to the men's memories of being tortured in detention. The film lacks visual creativity, but I did not want to make a beautiful and visual film and so I dropped it. The film remained extremely minimalist. With regard to the pain of others, Susan Sontag encapsulates it beautifully²:

[T]he dual powers of photography—to generate documents and to create works of visual art—have produced some remarkable exaggerations about what photographers ought or ought not to do. Lately, the most common exaggeration is one that regards these powers as opposites. Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful, as captions shouldn't moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture's status as a document. The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!

We are all comfortable with different stories, and there is no single answer to this debate of whose entitled to tell what story—nor will there ever be one answer because each film comes with its own world view. Ultimately, one must remember that the audience does not just want to consume the stories we tell, they want to relate to how we found those stories, why they came to be told in this way, and why we are entitled to tell those stories. This is especially true in documentary films. Art cinema and creative documentary cinema attract political audiences, and we live in a time when our motivations mean so much. As Lola Arias, an artist who works on staging as a way of working with trauma, explains her work with traumatized subjects,

Sometimes people ask me whether I'm afraid of re-traumatizing these people as they re-live the past. But if trauma is the impossibility of living with an experience that has become painfully fossilized, returning to that experience through art allows us to change its form. That change of form is the operation that interests me, that inner movement.³

In this project, I have finally experienced how it feels to be the subject of my own films. And, while in a somatic therapy session with my sister, it became clear to me that I don't have interest in healing and that all I want to do is grieve. How I long for uninterrupted,

liberating grief. This desire was not from the mind, it was from a more trustworthy organ: the body. This realization shifted my understanding of my work. To engage in the act of grieving is part of healing, and it can never be skipped over. I gave myself permission to be entitled to my grief, even if it is a paper cut compared to the endless grief unfolding in Palestine. I don't think pretending that the privileged Palestinian diaspora is okay is helping anyone. My daily grief for Palestine is cellular: It is much bigger than I dare to admit, and I am going to go public with it. As an artist, however, my job centers on how best to communicate this grief. It is the style and aesthetic quality of grief that occupies me.

In the last line in my film *Levitations*, I tell my sister to leave the healing session, because "it's not like we can ever heal." I wrote these lines a couple of months before the genocide started in 2023, and they held true. Why would a filmmaker like me, who is quite committed to optimism and thrives in the hopepunk aesthetic, end a personal film with this sentence? In their wonderful book, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*, Lara and Stephen Sheehi brought to my attention Edward Said's engagement with queer theory, revisited by C. Heike Schotten⁴:

Why is it, after all, that Palestinians (are) trouble? Because, as Said observes, "they will not go away as they ought to."⁵ Said's characterization of Palestinians as troublesome resonates with queer theory's defiant attachment to all those who are not or cannot be made assimilable. Indeed, the inassimilable is in some sense who and what queer names—that illimitable list of deviant others whose existence destabilizes, disrupts, or thwarts the otherwise smooth functioning of institutionalized, hegemonic regimes of normalizing, heteronormative power.

I believe that the scene in which I invite my sister to leave the healing session and remain in Palestine articulates this queer theory discussion. In particular the shot where our blankets are abandoned on the floor emphasizing our departure. I wanted to make clear that we won't heal, we will remain "troublesome," before the liberation of Palestine. We refuse to heal, let alone assimilate into any system that might want to entertain this idea of healing individually while the rest bleeds and starves. We decide what is grievable and what is healable, and it is in fact they who will stay with the trouble, not us. Furthermore, it is the hegemonic power that needs healing, not us. My sister and I stay in Palestine, in that wide, liminal space between violent separation and imminent liberation, disrupting the notion that the diaspora had better stop dreaming of their right of return to their ancestral lands. And here, I will admit that I am not disrupting to ask for my right of return. I am much greedier than this, and my request is not a nationalistic request at all. But I don't want to get sidetracked: Let's liberate Palestine first.



I am sharing the news of Palestine's liberation with my grandfather

Still from *Levitations* / D. AlKury

¹ In a debate curated by the journal *e-flux* on decolonializing image making from the Middle East, this question of how to represent trauma repeatedly arises (see <https://www.e-flux.com/events/443945/contested-representations-making-images-from-elsewhere/>). They turn to Syrian dissident theorist Yassin Haj Saleh, who discusses the question of how one finds language or images in the face of the Syrian experience. Saleh argues that perhaps it is time to stare into the face of the atrocious and terrible. According to Amal Issa's reading of his work, "We have spoken a lot after World War 2 at the impossibility of looking at trauma, but maybe we have reached an impasse, that it is time to look squarely at the trauma. This act of seeing might seem exploitive but it could lead to the emancipation from the violence, in particular images of horror." Amal discusses this further with Stefan Törnowski, who traced the debate to the first serious documentary to be made in the wake of the Syrian revolution: *Silvered Water*. This Cannes winner sparked a heated debate among Syrian intellectuals, without resolving what constitutes "dignifying" and how to handle the portrayal of Syrian pain. In retrospect, both of my Syria-themed films contribute to this debate, though I did not realize this when I made my film *Privacy of Wounds*—which I will discuss further when I detail my approach to agency and the pain of others.

² Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Picador. (p. 77)

³ <https://professionals.idfa.nl/stories/playing-dead-notes-on-theatre-of-war-and-the-staged-documentary/>

⁴ Sheehi, L. & Sheehi S. (2021). *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine*. Routledge.

⁵ Schotten, C. Heike. (2018). To Exist Is to Resist: Palestine and the Question of Queer Theory. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 47(3), 13.

من أغنية "الفرعي" بعنوان: حنين

تَطْلَعُوا حِصَّةَ بَنِي إِسْرَءِيلَ
زَكُونُوا تَحَارُلُوا لَتَنَسُوا
بِقَلِّكَ هَيْكَلُ بَنِي إِسْرَءِيلَ

وصلتكو رسالة من عبد ...

كل الي استنكر واستبعد
مخيم صدام لن يركع

في فضائل بنت جهمع
بضحاوا عشائركي
ترجع

EL Farzi

"Stop the Car and Shoot!" A hybrid method

"Stop the Car and Shoot!" is the title for my favorite method of hybrid filmmaking. My supervisor Lotte Mik-Meyer encouraged me to define it as my own when I was describing my shoot in Palestine to her. In essence, I drive with my actor, cameraman, and soundman in the car, hunting for scenes that I have written in my mind. The method is basically location scouting, mixed with a bit of miraculous production. (It helps to have a small budget to feel inclined to use this method.) Perhaps it is only documentary filmmakers who would be interested in such a method, but for impulsive filmmakers like me, the pleasure of having things manifest from script to screen without preparation is much greater than with a prepared fiction shoot.

For example, I knew roughly that I wanted to shoot some scenes that required very few props and almost no acting. I wanted a scene by a body of water, a scene in an orchard, a scene in an abandoned prison, and a scene with a herd of sheep. Regarding the second scene, I had written in my script that I wanted my protagonist to be seen cleaning a dirty orchard. The point of this scene was that returning to a free Palestine would not just be rosy and cozy. Our orchards that we miss will likely be poisoned by years of violence and environmental neglect. And our return will require a great deal of cleaning up.

We therefore hunted for an orchard, by car. Instead, we ran into what seemed like a filthy river. We “stopped the car,” and I changed the script’s location from orchard to river. Thuria began to casually clean the river. She found a tree in the middle of this river, and we thought, “It’s begging her to take a nap on it.” I did not realize while filming this scene how layered it would become once we set it in a frame in which Palestine is free. Suddenly, the simple act of cleaning a river began offering new meanings, and it was a pleasure to see how the lack of story could give us room to imagine what that scene was trying to say. The simplicity of that act of cleaning the river—decluttering it—decolonized not just the image, but the imaginary.

That a sleepy woman taking a nap by the river could be more decolonizing than a grandiose big budget scene, isn't that what art should do ? isn't that why we/I love independent cinema ?

In the four unplanned scenes I mention above, I wanted to explore how much we can say with so little. I wanted to explore the extent to which I can trust that the world I imagined on paper is actually real. I wanted to investigate what it was that I desired to say beyond the theatrics of filmmaking: with one actor and one camera and the generosity of the universe. What can come out of a woman cleaning a river, a woman listening to the earth under some palm trees, a woman finding a tape recorder in a prison cell? What can those scenes say when the intention is clear and the frame is new—the intention being to connect with a returned homeland—and that holy frame is that Palestine is free, from the filthy river to the polluted sea?

Before we got into the car with the cameraman and the soundman, I told Thuria that she had just one task for the day: to connect and to listen, and maybe perform some somatic yogic moves wherever she found fit. That day, we managed to shoot four different scenes in four different locations without having set foot in any of them previously. This would never have worked, had I not had a strong vision of what my scenes in the script were trying to communicate. It should be noted that this method of production does not always work, but I feel that it gives me the best of both worlds: the documentary world full of magic coincidences and the fiction world that can deliver precisely what you want to communicate through directing the actor. I get to use both muscles in the “Stop the Car and Shoot!” method and still deliver speculative nonfiction. I am certain that a similar approach is used by many hybrid filmmakers, and it is something that I aspire to craft more of in my future work.

Another example of this precarious method is a short video that I made with my children while visiting Jordan in 2022. I had jokingly told them for years that if they did not improve their Arabic, I would drop them off with a Bedouin family in the deserts of Jordan, where



Unplanned shoots from the film *Levitations* / D. AlKury

they would have no choice but to practice the language. The film I share here was shot in less than an hour. I happened to spot a Bedouin tent across the road and asked my husband to shoot (on my iPhone) the fantasy of every frustrated Arab mom whose kids will not speak Arabic! I include this example to further illustrate the serendipity and effortlessness of the “Stop the Car and Shoot!” method.



[Link to a home video filmed by Dalia's husband Alexander Leirfall](#)

Toward a conclusion

"It was a lie, born of the tense situation, but as I uttered it I felt that I was speaking the truth for the first time." Ghassan Kanafani, "Letter From Gaza"¹

A tremendous amount of learning and unlearning has taken place during my four years of research. Looking back, it seems that I have mostly engaged in two major acts: The act of confrontation alongside the act of imagination. These two might seem like a rare pair at first sight, but they are your main tools when embarking on personal, critical fabulations and political, speculative world building. Creating a Free Palestine or a Free Kashmir or a Free Tibet or a Free Kurdistan or a Free Syria or a Free America or whatever you need to liberate requires an artist who is willing to look a great deal of evil in the eye and tell it that it can change. You cannot skip to *imagining* that the evil is gone: You must first confront it and determine what is true for you and what is not, in order to make work that resonates with the reality. Even if that confrontation never manifests on the screen or in your final script, if you are a socially engaged artist, it is difficult to overlook the status quo. Once I sat with that challenge, and wrote scenes in which I looked my enemies and demons and fought them on paper—and they then retaliated and we found a healthy combat ground—was I able to create scenes that I feel are true to my lived diasporic experience, privileged and grieved all at once.

What I think is important in speculative nonfiction is that, once an artist has done work that confronts the unfavorable realities of the present, liberating the faculty of imagination—or at least agitating it—the world begins to feel more hopeful. To familiarize the possibility of a better world is to bring it one step closer. I can visit a Freer Palestine whenever I need to in my imagination now: I've built my own sanctuary, and even though it isn't perfect, it's a good lab to start rehearsing for a more just world. There is no mystery surrounding my approach. To be transparent and systematic, here is a concise summary of the steps I took to create my multi-temporal,

multi-genre art works, in case you wish to give it a try yourself:

Find the theme.

Find the person that personifies that theme (sometimes they find you).

Establish the "facts" of that theme with the person.

Throw away the facts and imagine how things can work better, in an ideal scenario.

Write the imagined scenarios and find moments of truth and beauty.

Abstract it from words and dialogue, and turn it into an emotion, preferably a complex emotion.

Meditate on this emotion (with the subject and alone, i.e., through your preferred artistic method).

Create a visual picture or tableaux in which the essence of that emotion becomes visual.

Film it, and allow enough room so that it redirects you or the character, hopefully illuminating a deeper truth.

When I say "allow enough room so that it redirects you or the character" I do not say this lightly. Let me share an anecdote with you. When I had that strange hiccup regarding the Israeli flag and my crew struggling to find that impossible prop, something very interesting happened. I went back to Oslo and a week later, I contemplated about what had happened during that shoot. I allowed room for that scene to redirect me and say what it wanted to say, alas, it was too late. The scene spoke back to me, and I went into my parallel Free Palestine mindset and jotted down what that scene could have become:

A film director, let us call her Dalia, is on set with a 20-person film crew. Dalia can't believe that her line producer is telling her to cancel the scene with the Israeli flag. Dalia is furious. As she walks away from her crew, she stops by one of the actors and tells him that she's sorry, but the scene must be canceled because no one can find a damn Israeli flag.

The actor tells her that he never understood that scene: What is an Israeli flag? She laughs and tells him that he almost got her. He insists: What does Israel mean, really? It is a fictional land that she made up. It's an interesting name, he exclaims. Dalia gets annoyed and informs her crew that she's taking a cab back to the hotel to get some rest, and that she needs some alone time. While in the taxi, the driver asks questions about the film she's making, and she tells him about how it takes place post-liberation from Israel. He asks her why she would make up such a strange story, where Palestine is occupied historically: Why would Palestine be occupied at all, post-British colonialism? Dalia exhales and thinks the man is just joking around, so she tries to laugh it off.

When Dalia reaches the hotel, she asks the receptionist to help her determine the best route to Haifa tomorrow and whether the Shabbat would affect the checkpoint crossing. The receptionist had no clue what she meant by Shabbat. Dalia explains that, in Israel, Shabbat is their day off, and the receptionist looked utterly confused. What is Israel? Is it the new mall they are building by the el Nabi Saleh area? Dalia took out her phone to Google it, but nothing came up. Israel was simply a biblical name for a tribe that lived in Palestine more than 2,000 years ago. Dalia asks for a glass of water, as she is having a panic attack, and unfortunately faints. All she remembers are good-looking faces in her hotel room, mumbling "It seems she's been under a lot of stress; filmmaking is no easy work. But I just want to know why she insists that Palestine was occupied by 'Israshell,' or what did she call it? Poor girl. I mean, why would European Jews decide to oppress Palestinians like this? Come from a faraway land and rob us? What have we ever done?" Her codirector nodded. "It's just absurd."

What this anecdote reflects is that the act of speculative creation is so generative, and it comes to you so pregnant with possibilities, that if you are ready for it, you can pull out a few unexpected juicy watermelons.

When I destroy the separation/apartheid wall in *Levitations*, I do so because I am curious. I did not write that scene in order to tell the story of the wall, or the story of oppression. I wrote it because I truly wondered about the emotions that might arise after it falls. I am interested in confronting the tension of that moment. I am interested in it emotionally, ethically, and existentially. What happens if the thing that oppresses us crumbles, and we are able to retell our story—with dignity and power? This artistic research project made it clearer to me, that what drives my creative process is not a desire to communicate to the world, but to communicate with the world. *Bismillah!*

Yours,
Dalia AlKury

April 2024
The Free state of Palestine/Oslo/Norway

¹ "Letter from Gaza" is a work of short fiction, written by Ghassan Kanafani in 1956. It was published in English in 1980.

" لا يا هديقي! لن آتي لسكر ميتو. وأنا
 لست أسفًا البتة، لأنني أكمل ما
 بدأتاه معًا منذ طفولتنا:
 هذا الشعور الغامض الذي أحسسته وأنت
 تغادر غزة.. هذا الشعور الصغير يجب
 أن ينهض عملاقًا في أعماقك.. يجب
 أن يتخضم، يجب أن تبحث عنه كي تجد
 نفسك.. هذا بين اتقاض الهزيمة البشعة:
 لن آتي إليك، بل عد أنت إلينا. عد لتعلم
 من ساق ناريا المتبورق من أكل الفخيد، ماهي
 الحياة وما قيمة الوجود.. عد يا هديقي،
 فكلنا ننتظر "

'مقتطفة من 'ورقة من غزة'
 للكاتب عسان كنفاني

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And to my silent friend, the river Akers Elva across from my office in Oslo, whom I wished I had spent more time with.

Appendix

Excerpt from the story *We Never Left*

Shams wakes up to the sound of festivities under her apartment. There is so much noise, people are dancing to the beat of electro dabke drum beats in what resembles a carnival. She has no plans for the big day today and texting her new friends to see what they are up to. She realizes that she doesn't care about any of them and she's overwhelmed with the fact that she feels lonely. She spends the day with her fully charged electric puppy on her lap watching an animal planet documentary on mute, as she composed dark music to it. She finally decides to go out with her colleagues from the techno-healer association.

Shamsa is sitting with her colleagues in an oxygen hooka bar. They are Arabs and jews from the diaspora and are sharing stories about their first days back. We learn quite a bit about her past and how she decided to return after her parents immigrated to Norway as refugees from the annexed east Jerusalem. This night is fun but Shams is missing something and is not all there. She walks out with her buzzed colleague Layla (25) a wide eyed jewish Brazilian whose leftist parents couldn't raise her in Israel and left when she was a child. They are staring at a billboard outside about the peace pill. The billboard is stating "No more Flashbacks".

Shams: I am meeting so many clients lately that are totally skipping the pill and expect to just integrate. They don't believe in short-cuts to happiness or moral bypassing that the pill promises.

Layla: I think people here are addicted to suffering and as if being at peace and harmony is dangerous. Fuck that culture. You have this miracle where the cleanest drug can re-wire the brain and diffuse trauma and you say No, I want to stay hurt for three generations and pass on my traumas to my grandchildren. They are protecting trauma like its the panda bears before they got extinct.

Shams: are panda bears extinct already?

Layla: yesss.. didn't you know?

Shams (looks devastated): Nooooooo. Noooo. I don't want to know that. I must have blocked it.

Shams hugs Layla and says : why couldn't we protect the pandas Layla. Please cheer me up now I can't get in my hyper empathy mode now , give me any kind of good news.

Layla: Good news? Ok i have the perfect fix. There is a party run by the palestinian Latina returnees so you know its gonna be a good party, and its in Rafah beach in Gaza. Its all about burning down the ghosts of our past, you can break things and burn things its up your alley.

Shams: Ghost busting you say? I should go and offer my expertise.

Shams and Layla are standing around a big pile of stuff by the beach in Gaza. People are throwing their military memorabilia in pile, lots of AK 47s, military boots, helmets, old bullets, crutches, etc. she looks for something to throw at the fire but she can't find anything on her. Suddenly a person lights the whole pile on fire and the whole thing goes in big flames, people sitting around the fire washing their past away as a live band plays some shamanic music.

Through the fire she sees someone she thinks she knows. His face is blurred by the flames, but suddenly we see her gaze intensifies. She is now having a very strong flashback of this guy. Romantic flashbacks of them in a rough alley, of him teaching her tricks to jump and climb up a wall, but also a bit glitchy. He gets nearer and looks at her flirtatiously. She walks towards him and gives the handsome cheeky guy the hug of a lifetime. He takes her prosthetic arm, and swings her around. She lifts his t-shirt, and notices that his bullet scar on his right chest is still there. His chest is full of tattoos, of which one big one reads: We won't leave . They hug again but this time Shams is more reluctant.

Jameel and Shamsa start a conversation about where they live and when she moved back. They are catching up and making fun of the time when they were both wounded and in love, writing lyrics in the camp to pass the time.

Jameel start rapping a song (obviously something they both know) which makes shams laugh.

Jameel:I know I should've called you when I heard you returned.

Shamsa: you don't have to explain, I also felt like meeting you and our old friends is dangerous for redefining our new "identity". Its too risky, we were so wild. even seeing you now I feel like going on a riot, you bring back too much of my old rebellious side.

Jameel: what? Is that why you didn't try to reach me?

Shamsa: Ya! Why else?

Jameel: we weren't rebels Shams. We were homeless. I remember when you had to live in the cave for a while. (Jameel start to giggle) Sorry to laugh, it was so terrible but you kept defending it..

Shams: we didn't live in a cave? You're exaggerating. It was a tent! Jameel is talking and talking but suddenly realises that Shamsa isn't. She says that it's been so long she can't remember much at all.

Jameel: shit Shams are you one of those happy pill people?

Shamsa: ya! Im a techno-healer. Are you judging me? We are not going to do this.

Jameel: No I'm not. But why would you do that? It's just... so fucking weird.

Shams: I was deeply depressed, I couldn't take the news of what happened to all of you, I couldn't navigate while people we loved were just dropping like flies, I had to move on, it was heavy and

Jameel: I totally understand where you're coming from..you were always a psychonaut anyway. Let's drop this. It's so good to see you. Let's just be here and now.

Shamsa: agreed...and ...damn those Latinos really know how to party. Layla is flirting with this Peruvian shaman over there. Let's leave, I'm hungry.

Jameel and Shams are now walking around town, sometimes in conversation, sometimes in silence. We watch the landscape and graffiti on the walls! Gaza is this hipster town with surfers and the world's best parkour tournaments and music scene , it has the coolest vibe in all of Palestine. They lay down on the Rafah beach with a big fat full moon smiling at them.

Jameel is burying shams under the sand for fun, when hes done, she looks at him and says, "even though I've been here for two years, I feel like I just arrived". Jameel kisses her nose and says " mabrook el Awdeh- congrats on your return". Shamsá s eyes get teary, and they both fall in blissful silence. A couple of inhales and exhales later, the world feels different.

Excerpt from the film script of *We Never Left*

Written in 2021, by Dalia AlKury

This scene is set in one of the challenging spaces I created while imagining a liberated Palestine. I called this conceptual place: the empathy lab. The empathy lab basically uses high tech virtual sets to simulate the occupation and settler colonialism of today. The idea was to shoot parts of it using documentary approach depicting the current violent oppression of Palestinians, but frame it as if it's a simulation for ex-israelis to taste their own medicine. But then it got more complex as all narratives from Palestine do. It's still worthy of including in the appendix as it took a lot of time trying to world.build this place. This excerpt takes place in the empathy lab in Jeusalem circa 2040.

2.

WE NEVER LEFT

By Dalia alkury

EXT. EMPATHY LABS (JERUSALEM).NIGHT

It's early evening and Shamsa is standing nervously in the waiting area terrace overlooking the Empathy labs. We see the lab from her point of view. The lab is essentially a refugee camp turned into a theatre set where the new citizens of Palestine are detained if they behave in a racist manner.

This gated refugee camp however is set in 2040 so there are a few glittery towers that make it look like its the future, the front facade of the labs is an industrial cyber punk gate with towering sculptures in an "empathetic" embrace and a neon sign "Empathy Lab - Jerusalem branch" in Arabic and Hebrew.

(Sarah) is standing on the other side of the terrace 3 meters away from Shamsa. The sound of a drone attack right on that hill facing them (behind the gate) startles Shamsa. She looks at Sarah next to her to find a sort of comfort but Sarah is smiling and nodding like " Rock & Roll". Shamsa smiles quizzigly and yet another bigger explosion takes off BOOOOM!!

Shamsa Exhales and puts her hand on her chest in fear

Sarah is nodding her head even harder like YAHHHH

SARAH

Do you think they finally
understand how we feel now?

Shamsa doesnt get a time to respond as she anticipates a cute yellow drone approaching her. It hovers right next to her

DRONE

Can I please get your pick up
number?

looks at her watch and says

SHAMSA

yes, its 6748

Drone blinks and Shamsa admires it

3.

DRONE

That would be Mr.Jameel Kamhawi?

SHAMSA

Exactly

Drone hovers to the right (looking at Sarah)

DRONE

What about your pickup number
please ?

SARAH

The same guy actually

Shams looks at her unpleasantly suprised, they both look confused.

DRONE

Thank you for waiting. 6748 will be released in 3 minutes and 45 seconds.

The drone flies off, Sarah follows it with her eyes, looks at Shamsa and extends her arm for a handshake

SARAH

Sarah, Jameel's friend. I didn't
know he called someone else to pick
him up

SHAMSA

I'm sorry something came up, so I
thought I'd pick him up. How do you
know Jameel?

SARAH

you know.. life!

Shamsa is trying to keep her smile on her face

SHAMS

what part of life? Jameel and I
go way back (Jameel min 3tham el
ragaba)

SARAH

it's probably the part he doesn't
want you to know about

SHAMS

Aiwaaa

4.

They both take a breath and stare at the robotic arm building the remaining part of the sculpture in awkward silence.

Jameel startles Shams from behind with a hug.

SHAMSA
You startled me you shit

Jameel turns towards Sarah whose smiling and gives her a strong handshake

SARAH
looking good Jameel

Jameels looks at his arm which is clearly in a cast and rolls his eyes

SHAMSA
I like the souvenir, suits you well.

JAMEEL
I knew you'd like it. how are you?
What have i missed?

SARAH
Not a lot, but we need you, so I'm glad your out

SHAMSA
Where are your bags?

JAMEEL
ahhh, ya, they confiscated them as part of the empathy experience.

SARAH AND SHAMS
Seriously?

JAMEEL
It's a war zone in there guys, I got looted, bribed, tortured, I was threatened, you name it. I lived the holocaust and the israeli occupation simulateneously. Im destroyed

SARAH
wow, all of this because you beat up an ex-settler asshole ?

5.

Shamsa is shaking her head seemingly upset with Jameel. He looks at her with mixed feeling

JAMEEL

JAMEEL (CONT'D)
Poor guy he's actually still in there

Shooting of fire guns in the distance interrupts Jameel looks at Shams:

SHAMSA
Shu, Childhood soundtrack

JAMEEL
Nostalgia 3aneefeh -- what are you doing here anyways, i was leaving w Sarah

SHAMSA
im so sorry i know. I wish I didn't need to come, but Aziz isn't doing well..So I thought we can drive there together. The whole gang is there and I know its important for you

Jameel looking disappointed.. looks back at Sarah

SARAH
Don't worry about it, go see your friend we can meet later.

He gives Sarah a comaraderie hug.

INT.VEHICLE. NIGHT

Shams and Jameel start walking and right away Shams starts to tease Jameel

SHAMSA
But who exactly is Sarah, and does she "miss her mother's bread, her mother coffee, and her mother's touch"

JAMEEL
you figured her out, yes, she is part of the "keepers of Darwish" group. She's a bit intense

6.

Shams stops and looks at Jameel in the eyes, holds his face in her hands and before she can open her mouth

JAMEEL (CONT'D)
You miss me?

SHAMSA
I cant stand you Jameel. Do you think you're better than us?

The whole country is taking the peace pill because its hard to co-exist. Its impossible, that is why We need a biological miracle!

SHAMSA (CONT'D)
But somehow you think you can achieve inner peace without the pill? Because your an enlightened rapper
(JAMEEL, SHAMSA)



Still from *Congratulations on Your Return* / photographer Majdi Fathi

Defining emancipatory aesthetics

*The following reflection is not essential to read, but may give insights into my aesthetic choices in the film, and why I think the mood of **levitations** comes across as ‘spiritual’ or emancipatory.*

In general, it was difficult to cast Thuria and not get spiritual and feminist undertones, especially having taken her to her motherland. I knew that I wanted her to indulge in earthing and grounding, since this film was a travelogue of a nostalgic woman reclaiming her connection to the land. My only way of representing this connection was to encourage her to be somatically present with the natural elements surrounding her. I wanted to see how the liberation of the land was mirrored in her movements, so I asked her to move and connect to the land in her own graceful ways. I was going for images that can illustrate a woman emancipated and free. Later, when I watched the footage, I realized just how much of her own spiritual quality was visible. I had to treat this with care: To me, spirituality is at its most beautiful when it is subtle. My self-censorship made this terrain challenging to navigate, because I wanted the work to seem political and I worried that so-called “spiritual” qualities would dilute its seriousness. This is unfortunate, because at its base, being political is often spiritual. To care for something other than yourself and become actively political about it is usually what spiritualism hopes for. Charles Eisenstein’s writings helped me overcome this internalized taboo by connecting those conflicted notions. He asks, “What kind of people stand passively by while their nation persecutes one unjust war after another? The answer is fearful people. Alienated people. Wounded people. That’s why spiritual work is political.”¹

I need to emphasize that, in my film *Levitations*, “spirituality” is embodied in the protagonist through her listening, being present, being still, taking the world in, observing, remembering, being vulnerable, and trusting what may come. Personally, I am never more embodied than when I am in my homeland. And now I invite you to imagine if I had to take myself to Palestine after its liberation.

I think most returnees would be exactly like this: utterly emotionally embodied and spiritually vulnerable. There is a post-colonial air about this type of visualization but I still can’t articulate it, so I’m attempting to define it as emancipatory aesthetics.

Unlike most Indigenous cultures, from Papua New Guinea to the Amazon, little spirituality is connected to the Palestinian narrative. This is not visually visible because of the dominance of Ibrahimic religions that have obscured any other spiritual connection to the land. In this film, my romantic spiritual connection to Palestine manifests in Thuria’s intimacy with her natural surroundings. The mise-en-scène that offers large, empty landscapes with Thuria nestled in the middle imbues that naturalistic aesthetic with a Zen harmony. The earthy color palette also contributes to that vibe. Her loose outfits, the sage leaves in her necklace, her messy curls and disposition, all give that air of romance I was trying to achieve. She is also a stranger to the land, however, as she is carrying a bag.

My aim here was to create a world that is foreign yet familiar, desired and longed for by a woman returning. This manifests in her reconnecting, deeply listening, feeling and resting, after so much separation felt by her Shatat. To help her reconnect and deeply attune, I gave Thuria a tape recorder, an object that I associate with listening, something I took on my first trip to Palestine in 2002. The tape recorder (which was used as a prop in the film) had recorded my first interviews with locals in old Jerusalem, so it is dear to me. When making this film, I was trying to visualize a state of interbeing, a term popularized by the thinker Charles Eisenstein, conveying the notion that all things exist in a state of interconnectedness, interwoven and mutually dependent on all elements of existence. I Recall what I stated earlier: that my task is to paint a world that has been freshly liberated from decades of settler colonialism. I wanted the visuals to reflect that feeling of interbeing and oneness that a person feels when they are healing from separation. I wanted the connection the protagonist feels to the land to be an antidote to my story of unbelonging and separation. I almost wanted the visuals to comfort those in exile by saying: “Don’t you worry, Palestine will recognize us—even the trees will remember our smell.”

خذني على بالادي
 خذني
 خذني يا ظبي
 تذكر في الغربة
 وطعنوني بالادي
 خذني

Handwritten phrase from Fairuz's song *Nassam Alayna el Hawa*. It is very interesting that I only just realized how much my connection to land is influenced by Fairuz's romanticism of belonging to one's home. Examining her music lately is a treat, because I grew up my whole life singing her songs without making the connection that her and the Rahbani brothers, are very formative of my feminist, poetic, political aesthetics pertaining the homeland.

In his futuristic photo essay in LIFTA,² Artist Yazan Khalili writes that all returns are fictional. If my return is going to be fictional, then let it be a fiction that I can enjoy—one that cheers up the oppressed and irritates the oppressor.

To accomplish this, my film seeks to imagine a new story in the Palestinian context, a story that is trying to cross from the old story of violence and separation to a story of interconnectedness. This has been hell for me as a filmmaker, because I kept trying to justify to producers at the beginning of my research that I did not want to write a film that follows a story. Palestine does not need more stories, I said. Please allow me to exit the story realm and the news feeds. I am trying to go post-narrative-arch, and I am only able to communicate in fragments and moments, which I will call vignettes. Years later, as I was talking to Director Elia Suleiman about his methods of working in fragments, he too warned me of the allure of story, saying that as soon as you start telling a story, you often lose cinema.

in her novel *Enter Ghost*, Isabella Hammad's protagonist says that every Palestinian family has a Nakba story. My family's Nakba story is nothing worth writing about, but I hope that my family's return story is one that I can tell my grandchildren, and this entire project is one attempt at that. But this begs the question, How will we, as conscious filmmakers, jump to the new story: the story of returning to a better world, a free-er world? More and more people on earth are being displaced and refuted, the number having reached its highest in 2022, at 103 million refugees in one year. This means that the Palestinian story has never been more relevant. I am the granddaughter of displaced and dispossessed and disenfranchised Palestinian people. My story and my pain are similar to those of a Chilean person who has been evicted from the Atacama Desert by Chinese and Chilean lithium production companies. Every extractive greed that robbed the ecosystem and its people from a home is relevant to us. I say "us" because I know that, even in one of the most functional societies in the world (i.e., Norway), activists still cannot seem to win battles against their government when it comes

to displacing the Indigenous Sami from their lands. Although I can never fully understand the pain and uniqueness of these grievances, I know how dreadful the consequences are of being expelled and oppressed, as I still desire to return to my homeland three generations later.

The greatest irony, however, is that I also have far more in common with a European mother who lives in a nice home with two children and a White partner. I have a privileged, comfortable life. On certain days, my polarized identities crash into one another and my skill at compartmentalizing does not function properly, and I feel homesick. I remember skiing alone this winter and thinking how unrelatable I am. An older Norwegian neighbor came across me cross-country skiing in the dark, and was utterly shocked and confused. “Dalia, are you skiing alone at night? You have really integrated well, I see.” Indeed, I have integrated far too well, rendering my story difficult to sell. The archetypes of third-culture kids have not yet been popularized in cinema, but their portrayal is coming, and they are going to be colorful and jarring and slightly unsettling—just like my three passports.

¹ Eisenstein, C. (2013). *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*. North Atlantic Books, p. 87.

² The first volume of LIFTA, *Future Palestine* (2020), is an art book of exercises and experiments that play with futurist anti-narratives on Palestine: <https://www.printedmatter.org/catalog/56132/>.



Staging my integration with my dear friend Angie Husami / D.Alkury

Dalia AlKury

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Dalia AlKury is an acclaimed film director whose work navigates cross-genre storytelling. Her films explore the resilience and political unconscious of the everyday hero in the Arab World. she holds an MA from Goldsmiths, University of London, and is currently a PhD candidate at the Norwegian Film School.

Education

PhD candidate in artistic research

The Norwegian Film school

2020-2024

Virtual and Augmented Reality Add-On degree

Hogskolen in Innlandet (2018/2019)

Internship at Glitch Studios/Oslo

Masters degree in Screen Documentary

Goldsmiths College, London UK, (2006-2007)

Bachelor of Arts, Communication Studies major /

International Development minor

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario. (1999-2001)

Filmography**Kon-tiki VR**

Glitch studio

Assistant director

A short VR animated documentary, which shows the experience of being on the famous Kon-tiki journey by the archeologist Thor Heyerdahl. The film plays permanently at the Kon-tiki museum in Oslo.

Privacy of Wounds

UPNORTH films

Funded by Viken film senter & Fritt Ord

Director

Set in a simulated prison in Oslo, three former political prisoners are locked up again for three days to revisit their memories in Syria's dark detention facilities. With no camera crew on set, the film offers an authentic reflection on the Syrian narrative today.

SYRIALISM

In production 2018 Integral Film

Funded by NFI & Viken film senter

Director

Syrialism is a docu-drama based on the true fantasies of a refugee. The film explores the complex feelings of survival guilt felt by him as he tries to integrate into the luxury of safety in Oslo. It will premiere in 2020.

Possessed by Djinn (Al mamsooseen)

75 min . ZDF Arte 2015

Director/co-producer

What can the brutal murder of four year old “Aya” in Jordan, tell us about the belief in Jinn in the Islamic culture.

Peshmerga, one more time!

60 min. Al Arabiya Channel. 2015

Director/producer/editor

Three old friends go on a road trip of a lifetime. All three were Peshmerga fighters 80’s, who fought against the Saddam regime in Northern Iraq, Kurdistan. They were members of the Iraqi communist party called “al Ansar” and non Kurds, unlike the rest of the Peshmerga today. The film documents their trip in Kurdistan where their memories come to life again. This coming of age story is filled with humor and political passion of the few remaining communist Arabs.

River Jordan “ The last breath” 2012

26 minutes, Al Jazeera Documentary Channel

Director / editor

The Jordan river is now running with only 2 percent of its original water, and the water in it is a mix of saline water and sewage water. The film is a journey along a historically important river where we meet different people that live or work close to the river, but not too close, as the river is a military zone with only a few people who are allowed to be near it.

Asdika Al Arab TV series. 2011

Three episodes. Al Jazeera News Channel. 90 minutes

Director

Asdika Al Arab is a TV series featuring Non-Arabs who have dedicated their time to work on enriching and promoting the Arab culture and history in their own countries. I filmed three characters, A translator from Rome, an activist from Florence and a political advisor and researcher from Paris.

To Be Adiga

48 min. Documentary- 2010

AL Jazeera Documentary Channel

Director

Ali Maher is a multi faceted artist and one of the most famous Circassians in Jordan. Through his passionate storytelling about his family history he starts recalling the confusing process he had to undergo which transformed him from being a Circassian Jordanian to a Jordanian with Circassian roots. The documentary features other Circassians, some still dream of going back to the Caucasus, some dance to feel connected, others document everything Circassian they get their hands on.

Although 150 years have passed since they have moved to Jordan, this documentary proves that it might be easy to uproot people from their homeland, but it’s hard to uproot their homeland from inside them.

Amman. East Vs West

28 min. Documentary- 2009

AL Jazeera Documentary Channel

Director

Like many cities in the world, Amman is split into two side: East and west. What are the real differences between the two sides and what is the danger of this geographical, social cultural divide? Do the two sides care to come together or are they happy to be apart. Eight different people from this city will talk about their experience in hopes to break the stereotypes that are leading to a bigger divide.

Banat Bab Allah

45 min. Documentary- 2009

Independent production

Director/producer/editor

Farida, a teacher of 8 disabled women, hates nothing more but a weak personality. Her choice to start up a handicraft workshop for the mentally and physically disabled people in her village in Tunisia is one that inspires and challenges her on a daily basis. Day in and day out, we see how these women deal with her "tough love" and her taste for wicked humor and perfectionism. In this small room social miracles are being woven between threads and tears. This film is a window on the many under funded villages in the Arab World with large numbers of disabilities.

Smile! You are in South Lebanon

53 min. Documentary- 2008

O3 Production-MBC

Director

While the politicians of the world are focused on saving Lebanon from a potential civil war and a reoccurring failed elections, the filmmaker goes on a family visit to south Lebanon and focuses the lens on her animated uncle Rami, who would much rather swim, little Mariam who is learning how to walk and Ali, the courageous farmer, who is giving his banana tree a Cesarean Section. The result is an intimate and vibrant family portrait, which represents the potency of the Lebanese dark humor—a talent that has helped them cope with wars still fresh in memory.

Arabizi 101

53 min. Documentary- 2006

O3 Production-MBC

Director

By following a character from Jordan, Egypt, and Kuwait, this film explores why arabizi is becoming a more widespread linguistic phenomenon in the Middle East. The film features academics that explain the phenomenon from different perspectives critiquing this hybrid language and the identity it generates. The film tries to empower the arabizi speakers who believe that they have no choice but to speak that way and offers them a challenge that suggests that indeed they do have a choice.

Caution! Comment Ahead

35 min. Documentary 2006- May, 2006

O3 Productions

Director/producer

Why are so many men ready to verbally harass women on the streets? What is going through their heads? The director travels the bumpy roads of Amman to highlight the social, psychological and moral complexity which happen to normalize this daily practiced phenomenon.

Short Documentaries and Video Art**Our Kuffiyyah in London**

5 min. Documentary- Jan, 2007

Sony PD 170 and still photography

By secretly snapping photos of Londoners wearing the popular Palestinian scarf, the "Kuffiyyah", the filmmaker is left wondering about how her Palestinian grandparents would react if they can witness their scarf's ironic commercial appeal.

A recycled love story

28 min. Documentary- May, 2007

Sony PD 170

One of those many British protesters dancing on the streets for "peace in the Middle East " is Clemmie James. But Is Clemmie idealistic because she's young? A whimsical portrait documentary of an imaginative British woman exploring her unlimited possibilities in alternative London. Clemmie turns this intimidating city into a cozy village where everyone on the street is a potential friend invited to her many circles. -Except maybe her father, who doesn't like circles much, nor holding people's hands and singing. Clemmie's 'holistic binge' is an appetizing one, especially for the romantic in us.

Beautiful Boy

1.5 min. Video art- 2006

Sony PD 170

Part of Femlink's "fragility" project

by filming my bed, i tried to portray an intimate relationship between myself and my beloved Adam whom i lost to the highest form of fragility : sudden death.

The Kiss: Suspended

2 min. Video Art- 2007

Part of Femlink "preoccupation" Project

"The kiss" by Gustav Klimt has been promoted as a romantic painting of a man and a woman kissing on a bed of flowers. The viewers' eye is often misguided by the kiss and hardly is it noticeable that the lady is clutching her feet so as not to fall off the cliff. My personal failed romance is what preoccupies me. I'm preoccupied with whether I should walk away before my fall, or enjoy the kiss while it lasts.

Like most of us Nayef has a mobile

5 min. Documentary- Jan, 2004

AFC productions

A documentary about an urban shepherd, whose presence with his herd in western Amman highlights the prevalent visual contrast between tradition and modernity, offering a refreshing outlook on shepherds in the 21st century.

Made in China

3 min. Video Art- June, 2004

AFC productions

A sensual journey of the fifth sense and its relationship to consumer culture.

Arab terrorist management camp

9.20 min. Mockumentary- August, 2004

AFC productions

When terrorism becomes even more closely linked to Arabs and Islam, a terror prevention rehabilitation camp known as the (Arab Terrorist Management Camp) is designed to help potential Arab terrorists overcome their terrorist tendencies. The film starts off in a documentary fashion but slowly takes the shape of an infomercial mocking the capitalization on "terrorism".



Still from film *Returning to Haifa* by Dir. Kassem Hawal

Still from *What if a tree? What if a crow?* by D- AlKury / generated by AI artist Rezan Erdem

