Performing Palestinian Identity on the International Art Market

MSc Thesis
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"I don't like to represent.
I barely represent myself."

Mahmoud Darwish

Cover image: *Rotten Orange* by Fana' collective, Black Notebook, 2019.

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Arabic Transliteration System

I will use the transliteration system of the International Journal of Middle East Studies.

IJMES TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM FOR ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKISH

Consonants

A = Arabic, P = Persian, OT = Ottoman Turkish, MT = Modern Turkish

	A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT
ء	ʾ	ʾ	ʾ	—	ز	z	z	z	z	ك	k	k *or* g	k *or* ñ	k *or* n
ب	b	b	b	b *or* p	ژ	—	zh	j	j				*or* y	*or* y
پ	—	p	p	p	س	s	s	s	s				*or* ğ	*or* ğ
ت	t	t	t	t	ش	sh	sh	ş	ş	گ	—	g	g	g
ث	th	s̱	s̱	s	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	s	ل	l	l	l	l
ج	j	j	c	c	ض	ḍ	ż	ż	z	م	m	m	m	m
چ	—	ch	ç	ç	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	t	ن	n	n	n	n
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	h	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	z	ه	h	h	h[1]	h[1]
خ	kh	kh	h	h	ع	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	—	و	w	v *or* u	v	v
د	d	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	g *or* ğ	g *or* ğ	ي	y	y	y	y
ذ	dh	ẕ	ẕ	z	ف	f	f	f	f	ة	a[2]			
ر	r	r	r	r	ق	q	q	ḳ	k	ال	[3]			

[1] When h is not final. [2] In construct state: at. [3] For the article, al- and -l-.

Vowels

		ARABIC AND PERSIAN	OTTOMAN AND MODERN TURKISH
Long	ا or ى	ā	ā (words of Arabic and Persian origin only)
	و	ū	ū (words of Arabic and Persian origin only)
	ي	ī	ī (words of Arabic and Persian origin only)
Doubled	ـِيّ	iyy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)
	ـُوّ	uww (final form ū)	uvv
Diphthongs	ـَو	au *or* aw	ev
	ـَي	ai *or* ay	ey
Short	ـَ	a	a *or* e
	ـُ	u	u *or* ü / o *or* ö
	ـِ	i	ı *or* i

For Ottoman Turkish, authors may either transliterate or use the modern Turkish orthography.

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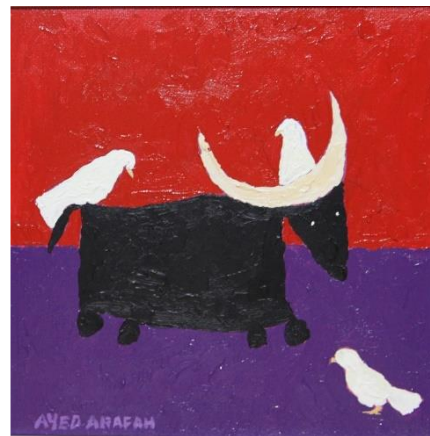
1 Introduction

On a sunny April afternoon in 2018 I unexpectedly stumbled into the studio of Ayed Arafah in Beit Sahour and found myself surrounded by bulls. Ayed invited me for a cup of coffee and told me about the project he was working on. The studio was filled with paintings of bulls in all shapes and colours. However, they had nothing in common with the rage and aggression that is usually associated with bulls. Ayed's bulls looked playful, contemplative and dreamy. Being from Dheisheh refugee camp Ayed told me, he felt that people always expect him to be 'a fighter', strong and confrontative. Instead of fulfilling the expectations of his audience by showcasing his protagonists wearing kuffiyehs and wielding slingshots in demonstrations, his bulls were painted into trivial situations, next to a line of drying laundry or a rake leaning at the wall, a bull with some pigeons casually resting on his head, a bull who dropped his horn, a bull transforming into a bike.



1: Ayed Arafah in his studio, bull paintings. (Source: top left: Tori Kaspareit Pelz, 2018; top right: Kristel Letschert, 2018; bottom left: Heidi Levine for *The National*, 2018; bottom right: Al Ma'mal Foundation, 2018).

A few weeks later I participated in a hike through the hillside around Ramallah where I met Johny Andonia, a painter from Bethlehem. In a spontaneous rant he told me how disappointed he was with the endless repetition of themes and symbols in Palestinian visual art. Talking about his experience as a teacher at Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture, he complained about his students' tendency to victimize themselves through their art which, as he claimed, mostly featured allegorical depictions of the occupation, the wall and the camps. His own current series of paintings focused on the contemporary Palestinian landscape, breaking with the romanticized depictions of pre-1948 olive groves, untouched by urbanisation and industrialisation. The art of Ayed and Johny was very different from the Palestinian art works I knew. Their style was more subtle and self-reflective, they did not use the common symbols of Palestinian visual discourse or actually questioned the representation of these symbols. My interlocutors made me aware that by entering the research with the goal of analysing Palestinian art as a discursive mode of resistance to the occupation, I would miss out on a world of perspectives and themes that do not as easily fit into the framework of 'resistance art'. I soon knew that I did not want to produce yet another study about the symbolics of olives and oranges and the political dimension of dancing dabke in Palestine. In each conversation my interlocutors expressed a need to talk about various other aspects of cultural production in Palestine and its reception abroad, convincing me that I did not want to limit my analysis of systems of power to the Israeli occupation alone but to pay closer attention to the dynamics of the art market.

Having set out to research Palestinian cultural resistance, I realized that the perspective on Palestinian art I had until then was quite limited and that I had always focused on those paintings, songs and performances that directly – and often bluntly – engaged with the Israeli occupation. My expectations and frame of analysis were well in line with all the academic literature I had read so far on the topic. My approach to Palestinian cultural production was defined by "the discourse on 'culture as liberation' and 'culture as resistance' that dominated studies of Palestinian art and music during the twentieth century and continues to inform most sociocultural analysis of Palestinian culture today" (El-Ghadban & Strohm, 2013:176). Looking back at my engagement with Palestinian cultural resistance I realized that almost every article and book I read on the topic featured the word 'resistance' in its title or at least similarly evocative words such as McDonald's (2013) ethnography on Palestinian music *My Voice is my Weapon* or River's (2015) *Narrative Power: Playback Theatre As Cultural Resistance in*

Occupied Palestine. Burris who centers the radical imagination of Palestinian cultural practices in his recent (2019) book *The Palestinian Idea* criticizes that "academic studies of Palestine are often wedded to rather traditional frameworks. As a result, I do not think film, media, and culture are properly appreciated except insofar as they can be instrumentalized as clear weapons in the Palestinian struggle. The importance that culture can play not just in fighting Zionist propaganda but in nurturing Palestinian dreams and visions is often neglected" (Burris, June 12, 2020). Most studies present Palestinian art as inherently political; in her introduction to an anthology of Palestinian literature Jayyusi claims that "Palestinians are committed by their very identity to a life determined by events and circumstances arising out of their own rejection of captivity and national loss (1992:3)." To this condition "there is no escape" and any attempt at escapism is considered unethical for a Palestinian writer "for to engross oneself for too long in 'normal' everyday experiences is to betray one's own life and one's own people" (ibid:3). Palestinian artists, according to this assessment, have an inescapable political responsibility towards their nation at all times and being Palestinian is synonymous with resisting Israeli oppression.

After a couple of initial encounters upon returning to Palestine in 2018 I realised that I was about to reproduce the exact same expectations towards Palestinian artists which limit them to their national struggle. By looking at Palestinian cultural production first and foremost as a tool of resistance, I had been overlooking an array of art, performance and music that did not satisfy this expectation or actively subverted it. I thus redirected my research towards investigating the connection between the dynamics of the international art market, especially audience expectations, and the representation of Palestine and Palestinian identity.

2 Methodology

Thanks to a student visa I obtained I was able to stay in Palestine for a year. I chose Beit Sahour as a base for my fieldwork since I had an already existing social network there and as it is very close to both Jerusalem and Ramallah which are important cultural centers. Also Bethlehem with its galleries, bars and the student scene around Dar al-Kalima art college was an important site for my fieldwork. Since having studied in Jerusalem in 2014/2015 I had returned at least once or twice a year to visit friends in Jerusalem, to attend the annual theatre festival in Jenin or to take Arabic classes in Al-Khalil. I don't speak Arabic fluently but enough to follow conversations around me and for my interlocutors to know that they could use expressions and references in Arabic during interviews and informal conversations. My knowledge of Arabic was essential since many lectures, discussions, theatre plays and concerts that I attended were entirely in Arabic. Between the summers of 2018 and 2019 I attended numerous concerts, festivals and conferences, visited exhibitions at museums and galleries, watched films and theatre performances and went to talks and discussions of Palestinian artists, researchers and curators. Additionally, I collected a wide range of textual and audio-visual publications from novels over art magazines to podcasts and music videos. Together with my daily fieldnotes this resulted in a vast amount of data which I started to thematically analyse in 2020.

During my fieldwork I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews in which I let myself be led by the experiences and associations of my interlocutors who actively take part in the Palestinian cultural scene. Furthermore, I had many more informal conversations with other cultural practitioners, art students and professors as well as with friends and acquaintances who on various levels participate in the art scene in Palestine. My interlocutors include musicians, visual artists, photographers, actors, theatre directors, filmmakers, art professors as well as a curator and an art collector. I decided not to limit myself to a specific art form because I realized that the dynamics I was interested in occur across artistic disciplines. The accounts of the musicians I met echoed the experiences of the painters, the struggles of the actors resembled those of the filmmakers and curators. My interlocutors belong to a younger generation of cultural practitioners between their early twenties and mid-forties and therefore speak from an inevitably idiosyncratic perspective of growing up, creating and working in the post-Oslo colonial reality of Palestine which is a central condition to my analysis. Even though coming from a diverse set of socio-economic and geopolitical backgrounds, most of my interlocutors in a certain way belong

to an educated cultural elite. The stories and opinions represented in my thesis don‘t claim to be representative of a Palestinian collective. Indeed, the very core of my argument is to question and subvert the expectation that Palestinian cultural practitioners ought to speak for a national collective.

Wherever I talked about my research during informal conversations at cafés, bars, exhibitions and cultural events, people often offered to meet me another time for a more in-depth conversation. Rather than contacting specific people for interviews, I often had people ‘finding me’. The sample of people is therefore certainly biased and anecdotal since it builds on the personal accounts and experiences of a number of people whose opinions, doubts and experiences resonated with the questions I raised. My main concern in contacting people who I did not get to know through a mutual friend or at a cultural event is linked to the core of my ethical concern – I did not want to impose myself as yet another Western researcher who takes up the time and energy of Palestinians while not providing any actual political support. Thus, I mostly interviewed people who showed active interest in the topic after an initial encounter during my fieldwork and people from whom I knew that they had previously raised similar questions and critiques in their works, their songs, their public talks, their performances and published texts. I see it as a main ethical concern of my research to not further pigeonhole Palestinian artists into a spectrum of victimhood and heroism and to not contribute to the burden of representation that rests on their shoulders. Instead, I want to use this thesis to uncover the dynamics and power structures which reduce Palestinian art to its ‘resistance potential’ and take a look at more subtle, sarcastic and self-reflexive voices.

My fieldwork and interviews were conducted between Beit Sahour, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Aida Camp, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Al Bireh, Birzeit, Jenin, Haifa, Yafa and Nazareth. Of course there are many other places in Palestine with significant cultural contributions, venues and events. I don’t make an ontological distinction between the cultural production in different parts of Palestine-Israel (Jerusalem, the occupied West Bank, besieged Gaza and the Israeli state) since this geopolitical fragmentation of Palestinians is colonially imposed and contested by Palestinian cultural practitioners on all sides of the separation wall. The cultural landscape is deeply intertwined and those who can, continuously cross borders to attend performances, exhibitions and festivals. Since many Palestinian cities are relatively close to each other, their respective art scenes are often interconnected with people regularly passing between the cities, especially in the

central triangle of Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem, including the surrounding villages and camps. Gaza is much more isolated because of the ongoing siege resulting in less exchange between the art scene there and other parts of Palestine. Since I have no personal contacts there nor have I been able to go, Gaza is hardly present in my research. This lack of representation of Gazan artists is not indicating the lack of a cultural scene but rather its enforced and violent isolation from the rest of Palestine. I also leave aside Palestinian art produced in exile across the world, not just because it would go way beyond the scope of my research but also because the post-Oslo colonial reality is experienced most acutely in Palestine-Israel itself.

An obvious shortcoming of my analysis with regards to the international art market is that I only conducted fieldwork and interviews among Palestinians within Palestine-Israel. Unfortunately, the scope of my research did not allow for accompanying Palestinian cultural practitioners to international festivals, biennials or auctions. Since I entirely relied on their recounted experiences and memories of past events and interactions, this research does not provide a comprehensive or representative analysis of the art market itself; it rather provides an aggregation of subjective perspectives on the dynamics of the art market as they are experienced and expressed by Palestinian cultural practitioners. To complement my own fieldwork I collected many secondary sources, ranging from book publications over art magazines, podcasts, exhibition catalogues, newspaper articles, blog posts and academic articles.

Starting from a very broad fascination for the connection between Palestinian artists' modes of representation and their audiences' expectations, the set of codes and themes in my analytical process continuously evolved. While my social network in Palestine and the data I collected expanded, the focus of my research kept shifting and research questions emerged and were reformulated several times throughout the inductive process. Finally, I decided to focus on the following research question:

How do the dynamics of the international art market influence representations of Palestine and Palestinian identity and how do Palestinian cultural practitioners perceive and navigate these dynamics and inherent expectations?

Even though the evidence I present is anecdotal and subjective, my thesis aims to methodically point out repetitions and tendencies which I found to constitute larger socio-political phenomena, acknowledging that socio-political phenomena are intrinsically dependent on individual experiences and – in this context – their artistic expression and reflection.

In the presentation of my data I would like to mostly let Palestinians speak for themselves throughout the pages of my thesis. I consciously decided to include as many verbatim quotes as possible from my interlocutors instead of rephrasing them. The same applies to quotes taken from Palestinian publications, ranging from academic articles to podcasts and art magazines. With this thesis I am aiming to connect the dots between these various personal stories and opinions by pointing out trends and connections that will hopefully lead us to a more nuanced understanding of the complex web of power relations which Palestinian cultural practitioners are navigating. While foregrounding experiences from within the Palestinian art scene, I consider my presence and interpretations an inevitable part of this qualitative inductive research. Rather than trying to hide behind a positivistic approach I will present my personal opinions and interpretations as the result of my interactions, conversations and observations as a temporary visitor in the Palestinian art scene.

The relevance of this study lies in examining Palestinian cultural production in the context of the international art market and situating it within the neoliberal colonial situation that has been consolidated since the Oslo accords in 1993. The main goal of this thesis is to shed light on the little acknowledged and under-researched connection between representations of Palestine and the dynamics of the international art market, i.e. the expectations of Western audiences and funding institutions. The aim is to not simply conceptualize Palestinian art as a response to the occupation but to take it as the starting point of my analysis. With this research I hope to lay a groundwork for further academic studies on Palestinian cultural production that don't reproduce a sensationalist gaze towards 'resistance art' but carefully take up the reflections and critiques from within the Palestinian art scene to identify a more complex web of power relations surrounding cultural production and how it is navigated, challenged and subverted by Palestinians artists.

In the next chapter however, I will take a step back to contextualize Palestinian cultural production under Israeli occupation in order to understand the dominant discourses around the role of art and the meanings of cultural production in Palestine. I will then go on to outline a number of concepts that will help us to re-evaluate these discourses and open up the frame of analysis.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Art and Resistance in Palestine

Studies of Palestinian culture and arts in the past two decades have done an important job in drawing attention to the discursive level of occupation and resistance. While media and common political analysis tend to focus on the military, economic and legal aspects of the Israeli occupation, a crucial part of Israeli oppression and Palestinian resistance takes place on a discursive level. In fact, Israel has a Ministry of Strategic Affairs and *Hasbara* (הֶסבֵּר). While hasbara literally means "explanation", the function of the ministry is to disseminate the Israeli state's point of view, essentially producing state propaganda[1] (Sheizaf, 2011). In the words of the former head of the Mossad (the Israeli Intelligence Service), Shabtai Shavit "we don't have another choice, PR is one of the pillars of our existence" (Schmitt, 2013).

While the Palestinian Authority (PA) nowadays does not employ a similar lobbying machine, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) back in the 60s already had an acute understanding of the importance of representation. Indeed, the PLO had a bureau for culture and production and established a film unit in 1968. Between the 1960s and 1980s Palestinian artists were commissioned to produce posters for the political factions and Palestinian musicians composed political songs to support the national struggle (Yaqub, 2018; Boulos, 2013). George al-A'ma, a leading Palestinian art collector from Bethlehem, emphasizes the importance that was attributed to artistic production: "The PLO had a clearer vision [than the PA] and believed actually in the role of art – to be the main speaker, the forefront, the first soldier hitting the international community to claim the right of the Palestinians for freedom and to return to their land. […] If you look at the Palestinian posters produced since 1955 up until 1990, this is what made the Palestinian cause visible and more tangible to the international community. Paintings, posters – it was a machine! It was a propaganda machine. […] It was not only artists, but poets, writers, movie directors. And it was successful. More successful than today, even though we have more freedom in artistic production" (al-A'ma, 2019).

The main Israeli discursive strategy is concerned with the erasure of Palestinian history and national identity which has been crucial to legitimize Israeli appropriation of Palestinian

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[1] Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy | Prime Minister's Office (www.gov.il); the main focus of the ministry lies in discrediting the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement *(BDS).*

land. The Israeli military has repeatedly looted Palestinian archives and libraries in Palestine and Lebanon and confiscated Palestinian historic material amounting to a memoricide (Sela, 2018; Azoulay, 2017). Until this day the municipality of Jerusalem still keeps changing Arab street names in an ongoing effort to further judaize the eastern part of the city (Roth-Rowl, 2015). Israel has a long history of denying the existence of Palestinians as a distinct cultural and national group. This ranges from Golda Meir's famous statement that there is no such thing as Palestinians until the more recent claim of Knesset member Anat Berko in 2015 that Palestinians cannot possibly exist because the Arabic alphabet does not contain the letter 'p' (Washington Post, 1969; Berko, 2015; Payton, 2016). "This created a situation in which Palestinian artists were charged with the responsibility of supporting the Palestinian cause through the promulgation of nationalist iconography" (Lionis, 2015: 71).

Given their important role for political mobilization and legitimacy the Israeli state has since its creation been oppressing, imprisoning, exiling and even assassinating Palestinian artists. Mustafa al-Kurd, a Palestinian songwriter who accompanied himself on the Oud, became a symbol of the early protest-song movement in the 60s and 70s. He was arrested several times and put under administrative detention. In 1976 he was deported and spent nine years in exile (Boulos, 2013). His songs, written in colloquial Jerusalemite dialect, talk about his personal experiences under the occupation. "Often after his performances the audience would demonstrate against the Israeli occupation" illustrating the power of music to mobilize people for collective political action (Boulos, 2013: 58). In 1972 Ghassan Kanafani, a famous Palestinian novelist, was assassinated by the Israeli intelligence agency in his car in Beirut (Wild, 1975). A more recent example is the poet Dareen Tatour who despite her Israeli citizenship was arrested in 2015 after publishing a poem on social media which contained the lines "Resist them, my people, resist them!". She was accused of terrorist incitement, spent several months in prison and almost three years under house arrest (Ziv, 2019). Nabil al-Raee, a theatre director at The Freedom Theatre in Jenin, was also arrested in 2012 and has had his home raided by the Israeli military several times (European Parliament, 2012). His colleague and chairman of The Freedom Theatre, Bilal al-Saadi, was arrested on 11 September 2022 and has been held without trial or charge since then (PEN America, 2022).[2] Another common practice is the denial of visas and border

[2] Administrative detention is a popular tactic with which the Israeli government targets Palestinian artists from the West Bank and Jerusalem. The initial duration of six months can be renewed an arbitrary number of times while the detainees do not get a fair trial and are not told on what grounds or for how long they are being held (B'Tselem, 2017). Other recent cases include

crossings. Actors and students of The Freedom Theatre, for example, have often experienced difficulties to reach their performances abroad (The Freedom Theatre, 2016). On 22 July 2020 the Israeli military raided both the *Yabous Cultural Centre* and the *Edward Said National Conservatory of Music*, confiscating documents, files and electronic devices. Simultaneously they detained their respective artistic directors – the Jerusalemite couple Rania Elias and Suhail Khoury who are driving forces in the Jerusalemite art and music scene (PCHR, 2020).

These few examples illustrate how Palestinian artists across different art forms and geographies whether in Palestine-Israel or in exile unsettle the Israeli hegemony by drawing attention to the occupation abroad, calling on fellow Palestinians to resist or even by simply continuing to exist and to create.

3.1 The Romance of Resistance

While there is an obvious urgency to call out the Israeli occupation and its discursive tactics and oppression of Palestinian cultural practitioners we should be wary of analysing Palestinian cultural practices solely as a tool for political resistance against the colonial Israeli regime. The recent popularity of Palestinian art in the international art circuit as well as studies on Palestinian 'art as resistance' reveal a tendency to romanticise resistance. According to Tawil-Souri "the *strength* of both Palestinian cultural production and the study thereof is precisely in – often overt, sometimes, unfortunately, crude – *the focus on the political*" (2011:469, original emphasis). However, in the Palestinian context this 'focus on the political' usually does not encompass a comprehensive range of socio-political topics but exclusively refers to the Israeli occupation. Other power relations that are more subtle than a military occupation usually get swept under the rug and are considered 'less urgent'. In the current academic paradigm of 'art as resistance' to the Israeli occupation – which is the most obvious form of oppression – we tend to overlook other systems of power that Palestinian artists are dealing with. In her ethnographic study among the Awlad ̓Ali Bedouins in Egypt Abu-Lughod realises how the young women who are resisting against kin-based power in their community are getting caught up in other power relations that are tied to the Egyptian economy, Western media and the Egyptian state and articulate

Mohammed Abu Sakha, a circus artist and trainer at the Palestinian Circus School who was held in administrative detention for 21 months and finally released without any charge (Amnesty International, 2016). Ata Khattab, a Palestinian dancer and choreographer, was put under administrative detention in February 2021 without any charges (Rowe, 2021)

themselves in increased consumerism, adopting discourses of sexualised femininity and increased individualism. "If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels" (Abu-Lughod, 1990:53). Thus, instead of romanticising specific forms of resistance and taking them as indicators of the ineffectiveness of systems of power, Lughod urges us to examine resistance as a diagnostic of power. In the complexly entangled globalised world we live in "studying the various forms of resistance will allow us to get at the ways in which intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together these days in communities that are gradually becoming more tied to multiple and often nonlocal systems" (ibid:42). This is certainly relevant for the context of Palestinian cultural productions which are funded and consumed far beyond Palestine. I argue that the strength that Tawil-Souri sees in the focus on the political, i.e. the Israeli occupation, is also a weakness as it doesn't take into account other power relations that shape cultural production in a globalized Palestinian art scene.

3.2 Multiple Occupations

Palestinian artists are well-aware of these multiple and intersecting structures of power and oppression they are dealing with. Nabil al-Raee, the former artistic director of The Freedom Theatre in Jenin, told me that the theatre is constantly dealing with "different types of occupations that exist in our lives, starting of course from the big umbrella – the occupation, the Israeli one. Second one, I guess, is our own authority-occupation [the PA], third one I consider the community occupation itself, through different practices, NGOs-occupation and end up with mind-occupation which is the most dangerous one"[3] (al-Raee, 2019). An analysis of Palestinian cultural production today should take into account all those forms of oppression instead focusing solely on the Israeli military occupation. In this thesis I will try to understand how various systems of power that affect the Palestinian art scene reinforce or contradict each other. The same institutions that fund Palestinian art might uphold Palestinian oppression and well-meaning support for Palestinian resistance might limit artists in the experiences they are expected to express and the identity they are expected to represent. We should "respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resistors but by letting their practices teach

[3] Interestingly, I often heard people in Palestine call different forms of power and oppression 'occupations' indicating not only that the Israeli occupation forms the basis for their analysis of power but also that other forms of oppression are to be taken as serious as the Israeli military occupation in terms of their impact on people's lives.

us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power" (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 53).

Furthermore, the discussion about Palestinian art and culture is still very much shaped by their role, form and content during the First Intifada. Artists today move in a very different context though as cultural production is no longer tied to political factions of the liberation movement and the biggest amount of funding nowadays comes from European and international institutions. "It is primarily in reference to the period of the 1970s and 1980s that most studies on Palestine and Palestinians tend to emphasize resistance as a dominant political and cultural paradigm. In many ways it has become an unquestioned premise on which most subsequent literature on Palestinian music is built. As a result, it has also become a discourse toward which Palestinian musicians and artists today are compelled to position themselves. […] Other dimensions of that period – particularly those related to the role that mediators such as political factions, grassroots organizations, and international NGOs played in the way Palestinians constructed their own subjectivities and cultural identity – have tended to be overlooked" (El-Ghadban & Strohm, 2013:185). In this research I will analyse the role of these mediators, donors and audiences, examining their interests and expectations with regards to Palestinian cultural productions and how the resulting dynamics on the international art market influence Palestinian artists' representations of Palestine.

3.3 The (De)colonial Paradox

Upon visiting an exhibition in Ramallah that showcased close-ups of colourful cloths in a refugee camp Tawil-Souri observed that "the photographer was pushing Palestinian culture out of its political box by *not* focusing on the political reality of refugees. Hers will continue to be a rare feat that can only come with privilege, distance and a forceful divorcing of culture from the political. For the foreseeable future, however, the photographer will likely remain anomalous. She will also likely be forgotten in the annals of Palestinian culture. For the strength of Palestinian culture and cultural studies is precisely in merging the political with the cultural" (Tawil-Souri, 2011:479, original emphasis). But is it necessarily a sign of privilege and ignorance to not explicitly address the occupation in a specific art work? Can a Palestinian refugee speak about no other subjects than camps and exile? Or should we rather be wary of the opposite - Palestinian artists living abroad with European passports making works about camps and

bombings of Gaza that are then sold for thousands of Euros at international art fairs? Are the dynamics of the international art market prompting Palestinian artists to make a career based on their people's suffering? What is resistance and what is the commodification of resistance? When does the gaze at the Palestinian struggle turn into neo-orientalist voyeurism? If less politically explicit art is "forgotten in the annals of Palestinian culture" (ibid) isn't that rather a deficiency of a sensationalistic art circuit than of the artist's approach? We should critically question whether Palestinian artists are pushed to participate in a trend that fetishizes art from areas of conflict. We should question whether resistance has become a commodity for Western audiences that consume the thrill of it and pride themselves in supporting subversive art while the governments, the NGOs and the international institutions that act on their behalf don't challenge the ongoing oppression that these artists are addressing.

If our analysis of and emphasis on 'the political' in Palestinian art confines itself to the occupation alone, we are running the risk of limiting Palestinian artists to a political identity as being oppressed by and resisting the Israeli occupation. As Fanon and other decolonial thinkers observed "one of the pathologies of colonialism is the very dependency of the colonial subject on an identity defined by the colonial struggle" (Alajaji: 108). The counter-narratives of Palestinian artists are always entangled with the hegemonic narrative against which they exist since "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978:95-96). "The hegemonic narrative serves, in a sense, as a limiting factor: it produces a mode of resistance that in turn produces the discourse against which alternate expressions of the (Palestinian) Self exist – the resistance, then, becoming its own limiting factor" (Alajaji, 102). I consider this phenomenon as a feedback loop in which oppressive and resistant narratives and representations condition each other. Palestinian cultural productions that directly confront the claims made in Israeli discourse run the risk of unintentionally reproducing its underlying logic and concepts.

The irony of the 'art as resistance' paradigm is therefore that Palestinian artists tend to be perceived not in their own right, but primarily according to their opposition to the system which oppresses them. Many artists, choreographers and performers indeed are frustrated "by the difficulties endured in pushing representations of Palestinian-ness beyond those determined by the conflict" (ibid, 2013:110). For Tawil-Souri a main task of Palestinian culture is to address the

ongoing *Nakba*[4] which lies at the heart of the Palestinian experience (2011:470). According to many artists, musicians and performers with whom I talked, Palestinian art and culture should go well beyond this. Of course it is essential to challenge the ongoing occupation, yet its dominance and repetitiveness in artistic representations seem to limit and simplify Palestine to the experience of exile and dispossession, to oppression and resistance alone. During my fieldwork I encountered repeated criticism from within the Palestinian art community that Palestinian art is 'stuck with the Nakba', that it reproduces a 'victim perspective' and that it suffers from repetitive themes and visualisations. The victimisation of Palestinians is the flipside of their romanticisation. Obviously, Palestinians are subjected to a violent colonial regime that oppresses and erases them, yet the constant reiteration of their identity as victims maintains their subaltern status within a global hierarchy and goes hand in hand with a humanitarian framework which masks Western complicity in the Israeli occupation.

3.4 The Burden of Representation

In 1977 the PLO's Media and National Guidance Committee produced a Palestinian musical soap opera for Syrian TV. After the success of the show and its songs the head of the committee, Abdullah al-Hourani, facilitated the establishment of the musical group Al 'Ashiqeen consisting of Palestinians living in Syrian exile. The group transformed folk material into melodic forms that were more suitable for stage performances "adopting a more cosmopolitan/urban melodic and rhythmic framework. […] They had to be catchy, and they had to appeal" (Boulos, 2013:60). They also included Western harmony and instruments such as drum sets and synthesizers (El-Ghadban & Strohm, 2013). This case illustrates how Palestinian cultural productions already early on considered their audiences and adapted their cultural repertoire and artistic performance in order to appeal to them.

Palestinian art has multiple audiences inside and outside of Palestine; these local and international audiences of Palestinian cultural productions have diverse and sometimes contradictory expectations with regards to Palestinian art and culture and to representations of Palestine. There has hardly been research on the question of how Palestinian artists navigate those different spheres of reception and aesthetics. Which kind of art works are produced for

[4] *Nakba* is a Palestinian term that literally means "catastrophe" in Arabic and refers to the war, dispossession, dispersal and ethnic cleansing of 1948.

which audience? This is especially relevant in the Palestinian film industry where literally every film is co-produced in Europe while cinemas in Palestine have shut down over the past few decades. This research will pay less attention to the differences between various art forms in terms of production and reception but focus on the common dynamics that can be traced across different art forms.

Palestinian artists, musicians and performers are generally expected to represent the cause to the outside world. “Palestinian artists have long carried the burden of representing the Palestinian struggle in their work, and any move beyond this has been greeted with disdain” (Lionis, 2015:82). After the Nakba in 1948 and with the emerging national liberation movement Palestinian art became evaluated according to two categories – *fan multazim* (art committed to the Palestinian cause) and *fan ġēr multazim* (non-committed art), (Boulos, 2013). The authoritarian principles of the PLO’s cultural policy increasingly marginalized alternative projects; “the gap between what was considered fan multazim versus fan gheir multazim became wider and more hostile” (Boulos, 2013: 61). Musicians started to feel compromised in their musical expression in the 1980s as they were “increasingly categorized and labelled according to their loyalty or faithlessness to the struggle for Palestine” (Boulos, 2006:12). El-Funoun dance troupe who had been performing *dabke*, Palestinian folk dance, faced censure from various Palestinian groups “when more of their performances began to feature classical ballet and modern dance and incorporated programming that did not directly refer to the conflict or rely solely on representations of pre-1948 Palestine” (Alajaji, 2013:109). This censorship coming from within doesn’t reflect the Palestinian audience’s disdain for diverse dance forms but rather their disdain for diverting from the supposed function of Palestinian cultural productions – namely to represent their cause to the world.

The expectations that Ayed Arafah wants to subvert with his bull paintings are both internal and external. On the one hand, he subverts Palestinian audiences’ expectations around camp identity and ideals of masculinity, on the other hand his work targets the more general expectation that as a Palestinian artist he ought to represent a national identity, whether in the form of an occupied victim or of a resistance fighter. Palestinians share this constant burden of representation with other cultural practitioners from the global South who are expected to explain and justify their countries and cultures for Western audiences. This naturally leads to self-censorship exemplified by “the cautious habit of people in the Arab world to see Arab

cinema and media art not through their own eyes but through anticipated Western judgments" (Marks, 2015:14). Palestinian artists are well aware of how their works are expected to symbolize and epitomize 'Palestine', "for in their rolled eyes and exasperated sighs were not necessarily judgments on the aesthetic qualities of those musical expressions after which I inquired, but an exasperation with the burden of representation they each must carry and the essentialist narratives they espouse – or rather, are seen to espouse" (Alajaji, 2013:98).

3.5 Expanding the Paradigm

Studies of Palestinian cultural production have a tendency to treat their subject matter as pure and authentic expression of the artists' experiences. This perspective disregards the materiality of artistic productions and their circulation on the global art market and the ensuing commodification of symbols and identities. Furthermore, the experiences articulated by Palestinian artists are often assumed to represent the *entire* Palestinian experience, ignoring the internal debates, tensions and contradictions both within the Palestinian art scene and within Palestinian society at large. "For artists and cultural critics on the margins, speaking, writing, and performing are a constant negotiation of this burden" as each of their works and performances is expected of "synechdochically summing up a vast and presumably homogenous community" (Shohat, 1995:169).

Tawil-Souri urges that it is the task of Palestinian cultural studies to reclaim history and dismantle the Zionist narrative. "The legacy that a Palestinian cultural studies will leave behind is the formidable task of *national* self-expression, self-representation, and self-realization" (2011:479, emphasis added). However, if we listen to Palestinian artists, musicians and performers today, the self-expression, self-representation and self-realization should not exclusively be bound to the national level, but should also give space to more personal experiences and speak to and from other social and political collectives than that of the nation. In the words of Elia Suleiman, one of the most famous Palestinian film directors, "there is still some work to be done about 'dismantling the flag'. I am trying to deconstruct this imposed national image, this image constructed by all these cultural actors who are always droning on about what Palestine means to them and who seem to fear that if this image disappears their artistic inspiration will disappear with it" (Suleiman, 2000:99). Importantly, the intention here is not to depoliticize art or to abandon the Palestinian cause but rather to recognize the radically

political impetus of deconstruction and dis-identification. Since Palestinian national discourse has been formulated as a direct response to Zionist discourse, the deconstruction of nationalist logic, static national identities and symbolisms presents a possible way out of the feedback loop. Here, I am relying on Rancières assessment that “a political subject is […] an agent of disidentification” (2009:45) in order to claim that the more subtle, fragmentary and sarcastic approaches within the Palestinian cultural scene are highly political, relevant and visionary.

According to Edward Said “one of the roles of the intellectual at this point is to provide a counterpoint, by storytelling, by reminders of the graphic nature of suffering, and by reminding everyone that we’re talking about people. We’re not talking about abstractions” (2003:187). This task is essential in a time where Palestinian lives in Gaza are erased on a scale that is hard to even grasp and where mainstream Western media turn Palestinians into numbers without names, faces and stories. However, if we always foreground the suffering and struggle as *the* defining characteristic of Palestinian life and culture, we equally run the risk of turning Palestinians into a flat and simplified version of themselves instead of acknowledging the contemporary contradictions in which they live, including the very different geopolitical realities between Gaza, the West Bank and within the Israeli state.[5] Furthermore, the constant emphasis on victimhood holds the danger of reproducing Israeli hegemony and Palestinian subordination on a discursive and psychological level. Many Palestinian cultural practitioners have therefore turned their focus to the cracks and contradictions within the colonial system. Instead of relying on the mere documentation of injustice, their approach is to reveal the absurdities and deficiencies of the Israeli colonial state rather than reasserting its power, they have set out to imagine a radically free Palestine beyond the constraints of nationalist discourse and Western expectations.

Palestinian cultural studies should provide a counterpoint – *not only* to the Zionist narrative – but also to a limited reading of Palestinian cultural productions which centres on its opposition to the occupation alone. Based on numerous conversations with my interlocutors in the Palestinian art scene I claim that it is possible to expand our perspective on Palestinian cultural production without losing the occupation out of sight. In Massad’s analysis of

[5] I want to point out again that my research mainly focuses on the colonial condition in the West Bank since the Oslo accords which has been a very different situation from that in Gaza where nearly two decades of blockade and the ongoing genocide leave hardly any space for humorous deconstruction and sarcasm. However, it would certainly be cynical that, if a ceasefire is reached and the mass killing of Palestinians in Gaza will find an end, the Western world would applaud and satisfy themselves with a return to the status quo of siege and occupation. It is exactly that process of normalising the colonial condition that Palestinian cultural practitioners seek to unsettle and dismantle with their sarcastic and cynical approaches.

Palestinian film he states his hope “that Palestinian cinema will not only remain a *weapon of resistance* but that it will also become a *weapon and an act of culture*” (2006:44, original emphasis). According to Tawil-Souri however, “the political conditions that would allow for this kind of ‘freedom’ are nowhere near happening” (2011:487). From a perspective of almost two decades later, I claim that Massad’s hope is already taking shape and that Palestinian artists are increasingly claiming that ‘freedom’ while simultaneously being acutely aware of the ongoing occupation. While a new generation of Palestinian artists and activists refuses to wait for national liberation in order to address and express a multitude of political, social and personal visions and to experiment with new forms of representation, I think that scholars who want to take Palestinian artists seriously should recognise the complexity of Palestinian cultural production today and foreground contemporary debates within the Palestinian cultural scene which critically reflect on the role of culture and arts in Palestine. In the following chapters I want to locate Palestinian artistic practices in a complex matrix of international funding, multiple audiences and the dynamics of the international art market. I will also analyse how those factors are intertwined with the Israeli occupation. Acknowledging that a romanticized vision of Palestinian cultural resistance obscures the less obvious systems of power in which Palestinian art is produced, I start my analysis from the emancipatory and (self-)critical impulses I found in the contemporary Palestinian art scene. My focus will lie on the opinions and experiences of Palestinian artists themselves, examining how they navigate these multiple systems of power and challenge the expectations of their audiences, subverting and reinventing modes of representation.[6]

In the following chapter 4 I will provide an overview of the geopolitical context of Palestine after the Oslo accords focusing specifically on the neoliberalisation of the West Bank, the psychological effects of the colonial limbo on the post-Oslo generation and the irony of Palestinian museological narratives. Chapter 5 elaborates the NGOisation of Palestine and the conditions of international funding for Palestinian cultural productions. Chapter 6 investigates the dynamics of the international art market with regards to Palestinian cultural productions, exploring the burden of representation and the fetishisation of Palestinian resistance. The chapter juxtaposes two contrasting expectations of Western audiences that impact Palestinian cultural

[6] Even though in this research I want to focus on factors beyond the Israeli occupation, it is crucial to acknowledge that the international perception of Palestinians is largely conditioned by the Israeli occupation. Whether Palestinians are pitied as victims, vilified as terrorists or romanticized as resistance fighters – all those representations are ultimately a result of the occupation.

production – the romanticizing and the victimizing gaze on Palestinians. The chapter focuses on the experiences of cultural practitioners who navigate and subvert these expectations and ends with a case study of a play by The Freedom Theatre. Chapter 7 starts with a genealogy of Palestinian self-representation and questions its relation to hegemonic Israeli discourse. This investigation is followed by a presentation of Palestinian efforts to deconstruct static notions of nationalism and its symbolisms and explores dis-identity as an emancipatory strategy that simultaneously subverts Zionist colonial logic and the expectations of the international art market. Ultimately, we will explore radical imaginings as an antidote to victimisation ranging from documentary to science-fiction.

4 The Geopolitical Context

In this chapter I will present the geopolitical context as well as anecdotes that will enable us to situate our later analysis of cultural production within this political, economic and cultural landscape. I will outline the colonial limbo within which Palestine has been stuck since the Oslo accords and its political and psychological effects on Palestinian society. A special focus will lie on Ramallah as the epitome of the neoliberalisation of the West Bank. We will end with a short contemplation on the paradoxes surrounding national museums within this colonial context.

4.1 The Epistemic Murk of Oslo

If we want to understand cultural production in Palestine today, we need to have a look at the political and economic situation that has been shaped by the Oslo accords and how it affected Palestinian society and mindset. From the Israeli perspective the aim of Oslo has never been Palestinian sovereignty. With the creation of an officially recognized Palestinian body and its concurrent obligation to enforce Israeli security policies, Israel managed to further illegitimize different forms of Palestinian struggle, especially armed struggle. The Palestinian Authority (PA) which was established in 1993 and has hardly any authority at all, "became a subcontractor for the occupation, in a sense, managing security and repressing dissent through its own internal military and intelligence apparatus" (Maira: 42). For Rehab Nazzal, a visual artist, photographer and professor at the Bethlehem Art University *Dar el Kalima* "the most painful aspect [of Oslo] is the effect of the Palestinian Authority on the people. Who are the police and all these security services – who are they? They are your neighbours, probably your relatives. So when you see those around you involved in this process and part of their job is to silence you, to watch what you say, to watch how you act – it's the most painful. That is the source of set-back, of disappointment. […] The biggest achievement of the colonial state was Oslo" (Nazzal, 2019).

The framework of the accords indeed provided the basis for Israel to consolidate its system of control over Palestinian life. The West Bank was divided into areas A, B and C, creating a deliberate "epistemic murk" (Maira: 40) that serves the settler colonial regime in dividing Palestinian society. As a consequence, Palestinians in the West Bank were isolated into urban enclaves divided by settlement blocs and roads that connect the settlements to Israel but are not accessible to Palestinians (B'Tselem & Forensic Architecture, 2018). Besides of approximately a third of agricultural land in the West Bank having become inaccessible to

Palestinians since 1993, the water and energy supplies of the West Bank are controlled by the Israeli state. Israel also controls all external borders as well as Palestinian exports and imports (Kerem Navot, 2013; OCHA 2017). The decimation of agricultural land and the lack of local production led to high unemployment rates and an increase in West Bank Palestinians working in the agricultural and construction sector in Israel. Within the West Bank two of the main employers are the PA itself as well as the NGO sector. An increasing number of Palestinians is employed in the public service sector paid by the PA. Another substantial part of Palestinian households is dependent on payments by the PA for families of prisoners and martyrs. Taken into account that there is hardly any local industry, the Palestinian capitalist class draws its economic power from its proximity to the PA which granted them monopolies and customs exemptions (Hanieh, 2013). Given Israel's full economic control over the West Bank their accumulation of wealth is tied to Israeli consent and means that these economic elites are profiting from the structures of the occupation. These conditions have led to a deepening class division with a poor rural population, a small elite around the PA which profits from its neoliberal economic policies and an aspiring middle class in the cities that is largely intertwined with the NGO sector which, as we will discuss later, plays a crucial role for the Palestinian art scene.

2: Graffiti of an eagle – the PA's symbol – committing suicide by headshot, anonymous artist, Ramallah. (Source: Philip Hopper, 2014. https://www.philiprahnhopper.net/pilgrims-and-protest-tourists/).

4.2 Ramallah Syndrome

Ramallah, once a small hill town and now the de facto capital of the West Bank, is the epitome of the neoliberal transformation and the new consumer lifestyle that has emerged since Oslo. Rent and real estate prizes have exploded in the city which hosts a substantial number of foreign NGOs as well as chic cafés and bars, creating a sort of '5 star occupation'[7].

In order to finance that cosmopolitan consumerist lifestyle many Palestinians take loans to finance their consumption and education, to buy homes and cars, leading to an increasing debt crisis. "These forms of individual consumer and household debt potentially carry deep implications for how people view their capacities for social struggle and their relation to society. Increasingly caught in a web of financial relationships, individuals seek to satisfy their needs through the market, usually by borrowing money, rather than through collective struggle for social rights. The growth of these financial and debt-based relations thus individualizes Palestinian society. It has had a conservatizing influence over the latter half of the 2000s, with much of the population concerned with "stability" and the ability to pay off debt rather than the possibility of popular resistance" (Hanieh, 2013). Living in the 'Ramallah bubble' as it is called by many, Palestinians can temporarily push the occupation to the back of their mind. "There is an illusion of freedom, but the freedom is in civil services and municipal services only, which is basically taking the burden of the civil part of the military occupation and putting it on the shoulders of the occupied people" (Nazzal, 2019). It is a paradoxical state of living in a colonial present while endorsing a cosmopolitan lifestyle within neoliberal capitalism. Yazid Anani, Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal did an artwork called "Ramallah Syndrome" for which they hung posters around the city with questions such as "Is Ramallah under occupation?" and "What's wrong about having a normal life in Ramallah". The cafés and restaurants where they placed the posters became the site of a public art intervention questioning the very lifestyle that these places represent (Maira, 2013; Hilal & Petti, 2008/9).

[7] See Zeveloff, 2012 and Mohsen, 2019.

One of the most apt characterizations of the Ramallah Syndrome is the song *Ramallah* by the band *Bil3aX*.[8] The sarcastic lyrics accompanied by cheerful raggae point out the contradictions of the city:

Ramallah oh Ramallah
Oh coffee on the sidewalk
How far you are from the streets
Even though you're on the sidewalk

Ramallah oh Ramallah
City of glass
How you sparkle and shine
But you don't have a leader.

Ramallah oh Ramallah
How much art you have
Your audience is
the same at every show.

Ramallah oh Ramallah
What people you have -
They speak of politics
But they don't know what they're talking about

Ramallah oh Ramallah
You are full of journalists
They talk and talk and talk
And forget who they are

Ramallah oh Ramallah
You are full of NGOs
Who is our target?
And the state – state?? – is a banana republic

Ramallah oh Ramallah
You are full of coffee shops
The menu is in French
Those who can't afford it, can go fuck themselves

The city is so sad
Covered in make-up
From the outside very attractive
From the inside depression

Yen, dollar, euro
And the funds are thrown at you,
While your children are [begging] at the traffic lights and indebted up to their knees

Ramallah for the sake of god
Don't stay on the sidewalk
Be the streets
Don't stay on the sidewalk!

According to Rehab Nazzal "the whole [Oslo] agreement with its details shifted the Palestinian economy towards capitalist liberal economy. Which means consumerism, even if it's fake, even if it's dependent on credits and foreign funds and loans. So it's like colonizing the minds of the people. We live in a prison but they want us to be part of global economy. How does this work? So here the problem begins actually! Now you have the illusion that you're free and you wanna buy a car and build a house and have a normal life."

[8] You can listen to the song here: [Ramallah | Bil3aX (bandcamp.com)]()

In the 2019 edition of the Ismail Shammout Award, a competition for emerging Palestinian artists, Ala Albaba submitted a painting called *The Modernity of a Troubled Place*.

3: *The Modernity of a Troubled Place* by Alaa Albaba.
(Source: Ismail Shammout Award exhibition catalogue, 2019).

The painting shows an elegantly dressed couple in a café sipping red wine. Outside the glass front extends a Palestinian camp with narrow alleys and houses stacked on top of each other. The houses of the camp are flipped 90 degrees to the left indicating that the couple in the café does not relate to the camp as a real space of everyday life, they are living in an entirely different dimension. Albaba points out the stark contrast between these two spaces that are directly adjacent, yet worlds apart. The painting perfectly encapsulates the growing socio-economic fragmentation of Palestinian society with the cosmopolitan middle-class lifestyle in Ramallah on one side and the socio-economic deprivation of refugee camps that surround the city on the other side.

Trapped between Israeli borders, checkpoints and the wall and suffocated by the surveillance and repression by the Palestinian Authority itself, it is quite comprehensible why the post-Oslo generation is characterized by political fatigue and cynicism and ready to buy into the neoliberal illusion of freedom sustained by "nice cars and escapism" as Bashar Murad, a Jerusalemite pop singer, calls it. "After I graduated from college [in the US] and moved back here [to Palestine] and felt this pressure, all we did was drink, all we did was smoke weed. Non-stop. All my friends, that's all we did. We would get fucked up every day to feel numb and I even noticed that the older generation does that as well, they just wanna party and they wanna get drunk. I just noticed people aren't happy, they're just trying to escape" (Murad, 2019).

4.3 Another Suicide on the Radio

Mafar, a rock band from Bethlehem, gives insight into the political apathy and numbness of the post-Oslo era in their song *'Al Radio* (On the radio) on their 2019 album *Visa*. In the video clip of the song, the lead singer, Jeries Babish, enters a shared taxi driving people from Bethlehem to Ramallah, the news broadcast on the radio reports that a Palestinian has been shot to death by the Israeli army. Jeries looks around in the taxi but no one seems to be troubled by the news report, they all look out of the window or are fixed on their smartphones. He then turns to his fellow passengers and starts shaking them but they appear to be entirely numb and unresponsive, neither reacting to his touch nor to the news on the radio, entirely disconnected from the world around them. After this introduction, the song then opens with the line "On the radio there are news telling a story of suicide" (عالراديو في تجمع اخبار بتحكي قصة انتحار).[9] With that line Mafar calls into question the notion of martyrdom. Yet another person killed by the occupation forces is not regarded as a heroic figure anymore who died for the sake of national liberation, but it takes on the significance of just another suicide. The wording of 'intiḥār' (suicide) as opposed to 'istishhād' (martyrdom) is crucial. The majority of Palestinian society would reject this terminology in this context because it means that the death of the person was meaningless. The song diagnoses Palestinian society as having become so used to the occupation and the lives that it claims that ultimately no one cares about such news anymore. Everyday oppression and everyday deaths are met with indifference. The song is based on Jeries own experience: "I was going from Bethlehem to Ramallah in a taxi cab […] and the news went on the radio that a Palestinian was murdered by the Israeli occupation forces. I was looking around in the taxi cab, no one cared. […] It was crazy actually. I wrote the song in the taxi. When I got home I just took my guitar and finished it in one day. Cause I really felt it – what the fuck is happening?! No one really cares" (Babish, 2019).

The theme of apathy and numbness runs through the entire album. The first track opens with a desperate and intimate whisper without music: "I need to do something. I need to move. I even forgot that I don't exist. I forgot. It's been enough!" The song then continues with the lines "wake up and see who is deciding for you. Who erased your better judgement, who?" Another song keeps repeating the chorus "We are waiting in queues" referring to ubiquitary processes of waiting – waiting at checkpoints, waiting for a permit to enter Israel, waiting during curfews

[9] You can watch the music video on here: 'Al Radio – Mafar | E03 - حلقة ٣ | مفر – عالراديو - YouTube

imposed by the Israeli army, waiting for a visa, waiting in exile for the Right of Return. The imposition of waiting can be considered psychological warfare aimed at exhausting people's spirit, leading to resignation and apathy. "This experience of waiting is a banal evil precisely because it engenders a 'slow death'" (Lionis, 2016: 155) or as Jeries put it, "people are contentedly waiting to die" (Babish, 2019). The song *Tarboush* plays with the idea of revolution, of subverting the current power structures which are symbolized by the tarboush, the common hat of the elite in Ottoman times. At the end of the music video the character wakes up and realizes that the revolution was just a dream. "At first I say 'declare your revolution and revolt against society!' […] but at the end I say 'don't do it' because you will become only a painting on the wall in the end. That's the only thing that will happen. You will be a painting on the wall" (ibid:2019). With these words Jeries alludes to the countless posters of martyrs all over the walls in West Bank cities and camps. All in all, the lyrics of Mafar's latest album are ambiguous – on the one hand they constitute a wake-up call, urging for a political and social revolution, on the other hand they are fraught with cynicism, darkness and defeatism.

4.4 Nation Estate

Larissa Sansour's sci-fi short film *Nation Estate* provides a poignant dystopian vision of where post-Oslo Palestine is heading. At the beginning of the video we find ourselves in a squeaky clean, modern underground station. The floor reads 'Amman metro' insinuating that Palestine has become only accessible through underground tunnels while movement on the land itself has become impossible. We follow a woman with a suitcase towards an escalator. After a long escalator ride the woman reaches a lobby and waits for the elevator. A big sign next to the elevator indicates the different floors. Most of the floors are Palestinian cities and villages, others comprise institutions that shape and administer the social and political landscape in Palestine, government headquarters, NGOs, archives etc. The main market is located in the basement, an olive grove is found on the 12th floor.

4: Still taken from short film *Nation Estate* by Larissa Sansour. (Source: Larissa Sansour, 2012).

When she enters two people are already in the elevator. Their clothes resemble those of the woman – elegant futuristic suits that are reminiscent of fish scale. The other two get off at the 13th floor – Jerusalem. When the elevator door opens we catch a glimpse of the Dome of the Rock in the middle of another lobby. The scenery looks like a miniature replica of the city, the symbolic monuments have been fully transformed into symbols. They are perfectly clean and splendid, yet entirely disembedded from the actual urban context of the city. The woman who we are following stays in the elevator, a screen on the side displays an advertisement in English for the Gazan seashore “Best Sushi on the Block.” Notably, all text in the video is written in English, indicating that the video is intended to be screened for international audiences but also reflecting that many of the products in a vast Palestinian landscape of billboards are also advertised in English to suggest to the consumer that the advertised good goes beyond the local standard and offers cosmopolitan value. The woman finally gets off at Bethlehem (the artist’s hometown), located on the 21st floor. The lobby to which the elevator opens is the square in front of the Church of Nativity. It is a miniature of Bethlehem’s old city with futuristic gates on either side. The woman turns to a tunnel built of glass and metal, neon lights illuminate a golden statue of mother Mary.

5: Stills taken from short film *Nation Estate* by Larissa Sansour. (Source: Larissa Sansour, 2012).

The woman enters an apartment by swiping a sort of hotel card with a Palestinian flag on it in front of a key symbol next to the door. It is not an actual key, such as the ones Palestinian refugees handed down through generations, nor does it open an actual Palestinian house. Both the key and the flag have become symbolic designs on trivial modern objects. In the living room she waters an olive tree which is inserted directly into the floor of the apartment. Also the olive tree has mere symbolic value – uprooted and standing several levels above the ground it serves as decoration instead of being harvested as part of a larger olive grove. The woman enters a sleek modern kitchen and opens a closet which contains identical boxes bearing the names of traditional Palestinian dishes printed on them. Pressing an inbuilt button the dish heats itself. She puts the instant meal in bowls printed with the pattern of a kuffiyeh and then goes over to the

glass façade spanning one entire wall of the living room. Outside the window we see Jerusalem, the epitome of eternal longing, beautiful and unreachable. It's the real Jerusalem, unlike the replica on the 13th floor. When she presses a button next to the window the scenery changes and Jerusalem is dipped into the golden light of a sunset. While we watch her contemplating the view in a wider shot we realize that she is pregnant. At that moment we change perspective, looking at her from outside of the window. When the camera pulls out the immensity of the tower bloc is revealed. The huge skyscraper however, is confined to a very small piece of land surrounded by the Israeli apartheid wall[10]. The Palestinian dream of self-determination and a national home has been transformed into a real estate project on the neoliberal market. The fragmentation of Palestinian cities has reached its peak by dividing them on different floors. The Palestinian skyscraper is a fully functional futuristic microcosm, secluded from the real world.

Larissa Sansour's video offers a glimpse of a future Palestine that provides all the amenities of modern middle class life trapped in a colonial arrangement that has been consolidated over generations. The connection to the land is simulated by olive trees inserted in concrete floor hundreds of meters above the ground. Palestine has become an amusement park, full of shiny illusions and national signifiers that have lost their meaning beyond the banality of interior design. In chapter 7.3 and 7.4 we will come back to a more in-depth analysis of Palestinian symbols assessing how symbolic expressions of belonging and political demands have turned into marketing strategies and how the romanticization of certain symbols is subverted by Palestinian cultural practitioners. Larissa Sansour's short film is showing us the ultimate consequence of the Ramallah bubble – political dystopia disguised as a dream of modernity, ghettoization disguised as progress. Who would mind to live in a ghetto if it's so beautifully designed?

[10] For the legal definition of apartheid and the application of the term in the context of the Israeli occupation see the 2022 OHCHR report: https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/A_HRC_49_87_210321.pdf

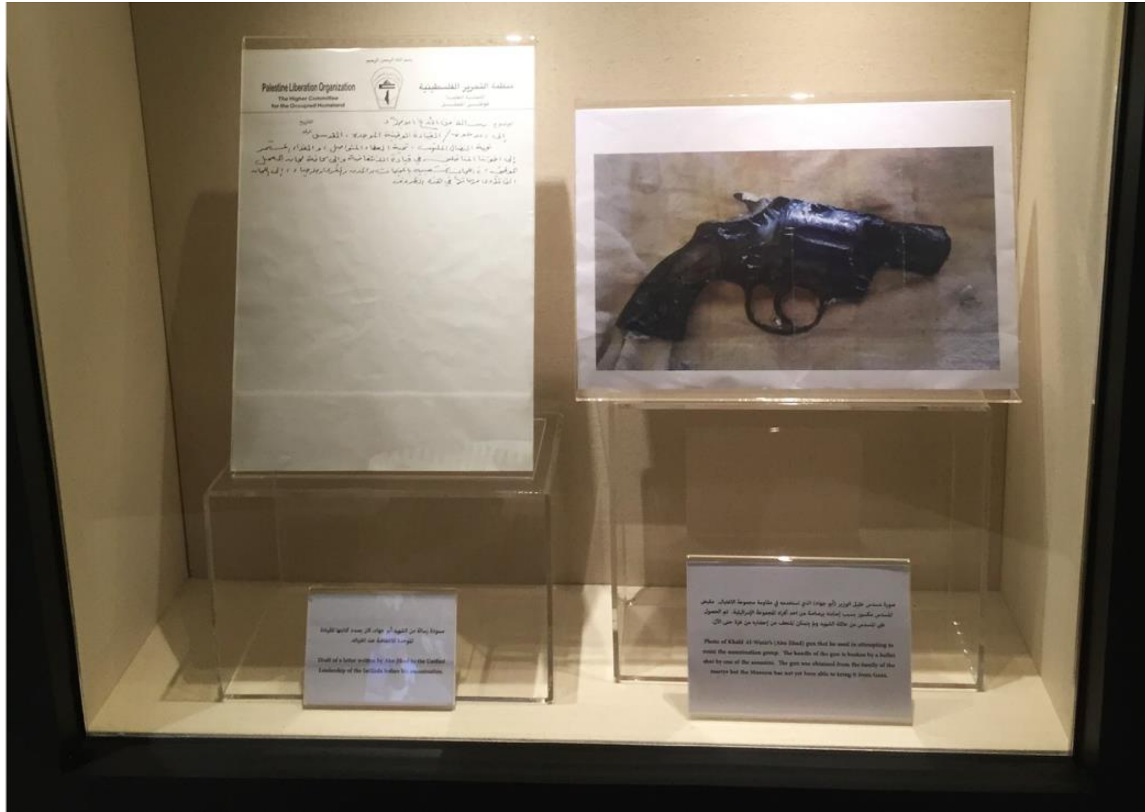
6: Stills taken from short film Nation Estate by Larissa Sansour. (Source: Larissa Sansour, 2012).

4.5 Abu Jihad's Pistol

The strong connection between the political movements and the art scene ceded after the Oslo accords when the Palestinian Authority came into being. "Politically they can't support any art work that revolutionizes people, that engages people in questions about what's happening because of backing the illusion. There is the illusion that we're free, we're building a state. […] The illusion reflected itself into the arts – instead of the main subject matter being the occupation and resistance, it transformed into non-violent struggle, peaceful works, whatever you call it" (Nazzal, 2019). One day Rehab Nazzal got a call by a friend, "There is an exhibition at the Arafat Museum about those who got assassinated. You have a powerful video about the topic, why are you not in the exhibition?" (ibid, 2019). Rehab looked up the exhibition and saw that the cases of assassinations included poets, artists and other figures from the civil and cultural sector. "Why are they excluding leaders, diplomats, activists? […] I sensed that it's part of the whole system. Like anything that has to do with the right to armed struggle is buried and crushed and not allowed. Even in the language, in discourse, in art making it's not allowed" (ibid, 2019).

Since the Oslo accords several museums were built under the auspices of the PA to commemorate the Palestinian struggle for liberation even though national liberation has not been reached. In the words of Lara Khaldi, a curator and art critic from Jerusalem, "museums in Palestine have technical glitches" (Khaldi, 2019) because they represent as history what is ongoing reality. The Arafat Museum in Ramallah is a good example for this. In the permanent exhibition is an empty spot for the pistol of Abu Jihad, the co-founder of Fatah. The caption reads "The museum has not yet been able to bring it from Gaza." The impossibility of bringing the actual pistol from Gaza to the museum reveals two things: one is the obvious lack of Palestinian sovereignty that prevents a Palestinian institution from bringing an object from one Palestinian territory to another Palestinian territory a few kilometres away. The second is that the pistol – even though it is conceptualized as a historical artefact by the museum in Ramallah – holds the potential of an actual weapon in the geo-political context of Gaza. As armed resistance is a daily reality in Gaza, which has been under Israeli blockade since 2007, the pistol is not able to pass an Israeli checkpoint and remains a potential tool of armed struggle while the photo of it in Ramallah historicizes it as an artefact from past struggles. Thus, the PA's attempt to present itself according to a narrative of nation-building and statehood, as we see it in national museums elsewhere, is not quite convincing in the context of the ongoing occupation. The narrative

presented in the Arafat Museum reveals the PA's counter-revolutionary impulse in their attempt to historicise the resistance and reminds us of their economic interest in the Israeli occupation.



7: Placeholder for the pistol of Abu Jihad at Arafat Museum, Ramallah. (Source: https://darjacir.com/The-missing-pistol, 2019).

At the *Qalandiya International* biennal in 2018 Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri presented a counter idea to such state-controlled museums by forwarding the idea of *The Communist Museum of Palestine*. The two artists envisioned a decentralised museum situated in people's homes across Palestine and around the world that hold Palestinian artefacts and pieces of art in their possession. Each home would be marked by a tile on its façade indicating that it forms part of the communist museum and people would be able to visit on certain days and talk to the owners of the exhibited piece. This proposal takes into account the scattering of Palestinians around the globe and the fact that the occupied Palestinian territories still remain inaccessible to most of them. In comparison to state museums, this concept would allow for a multiplicity of histories and narratives, especially since each piece would be contextualized by the owners' personal stories. In chapter 7.3 we will also have a look at the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit whose founders and curators follow a radically different approach than PA-controlled institutions in their conceptualisation of Palestinian identity.

In this chapter we have seen how the deliberate 'epistemic murk of Oslo' serves to further the colonial rule over the West Bank. The normalisation of the occupation over several decades and generations and the complicity of the Palestinian Authority in maintaining this colonial state have given rise to an increasing neoliberalisation of the West Bank with Ramallah as its vanguard and culmination. As a consequence, the post-Oslo generation growing up in West Bank cities meets the colonial condition with a good dose of cynicism and political apathy. Larissa Sansour's sci-fi short and the songs of Mafar and Bil3aX are diagnoses of these socio-economic, political and psychological developments that have shaped the West Bank since the Oslo accords. In the following chapter we will have a critical look at the rise of NGOs since the Oslo accords and analyse how the institutionalisation of popular movements conditions cultural production and political work through foreign funding.

5 Funding and NGOs

In this chapter we will examine the role that NGOs play as main actors in the cultural economy of the West Bank since the Oslo accords and analyse their effects on political and cultural work. Furthermore, we will have a look at the influence of Western funding on Palestinian cultural productions and identify the donors' political agendas and underlying preconceptions. In the end, we will shortly consider alternatives to foreign funding and their pitfalls.

5.1 The NGOisation of Palestine

NGO salaries in the West Bank are much higher than wages in the public sector. Many young Palestinians see NGOs as a career path to a cosmopolitan lifestyle with access to prestigious institutions. Unfortunately, "the new professionals tend to treat the 'grassroots' in a patronizing and condescending manner" (Hammami, 2000: 27). This has furthered the depoliticization of the NGO sector and created a new middle-class. As international aid requires NGOs to write reports and use certain language and management standards, these NGOs need to hire staff that is fluent in English and tends to have a Western higher education consolidating the elitism of the NGO sector. The profile and programming of cultural NGOs in Palestine often attracts a certain crowd that corresponds to these international standards and to the socio-economic status of its employees. As the former director of the Sakakini cultural center in Ramallah observed "the audience was not diverse, but an educated middle class audience with some artists and expatriates" (Laidi-Hanieh, 2006:33). Later on she realized "that the classic model of an art center located in a 'nice' area of town, providing a regular fare of high and middle brow culture would only cut itself off from the population at large. I did not want the Sakakini to be one of those cultural tombs" (ibid:38).

Contrary to their elitist status nowadays, most Palestinian NGOs emerged from early PLO mass mobilization. The popular committees from the first Intifada slowly underwent the process of institutionalization within the paradigm of civil-society building after Oslo and professionalized to meet the requirements of foreign funds. In the 1990s most Palestinian NGOs turned to European donor funds in order to make ends meet and to be less financially dependent on political factions they had been affiliated with (Hammami, 2000). These funds however, also represent certain European political agendas and ideologies and often "are focused on issues of participatory democracy, citizenship, self-empowerment, and governance, all in the context of a

‘colonized outpost in the postcolonial world’ in which these concepts are paradoxical, at best, and, at worst, suspect for those who consider this a form of evasion or containment of resistance struggles” (Maira, 2013:142). By allocating funding to certain institutions and projects rather than others, donor funds determine what kind of resistance is legitimate, indirectly forcing Palestinian cultural institutions to make compromises in their political activism and artistic vision. As Nabil al-Raee, the former artistic director of The Freedom Theatre, puts it – “I think money controls and when I have the money and you want my support, you will try to please me in so many different ways! So we sometimes accept some kind of guidelines – which is very dangerous in my opinion – for how resistance should be, for example, let’s give it a title – ‘the beautiful resistance’, ‘the non-violent resistance’, ‘the smart resistance’ – whatever that means. But what do you know about resistance and how do you want to implement that as an idea?” (al-Raee, 2019).

The dependency on foreign funds has put Palestinian NGOs “under increasing pressure to disengage from direct action” (El-Ghadban & Strohm, 2013:187). Conditions required by foreign funding in Palestine result mainly out of US and European counter-terrorism policies. As Nabil al-Raee (2019) points out “the other challenge is that some of these foundations will condition you to sign that you are against terrorism. But my question is – what is the definition of terrorism? In which way do you describe terrorism?” In a context where Israeli politicians launched accusations at Palestinians for ‘journalistic terrorism’ and ‘academic terrorism’ the term has become a watered-down cliché of Zionist discourse. Palestinian legal efforts have been decried as ‘lawfare’, boycotts of illegal Israeli settlements have been called ‘economic terrorism’, even non-violent protests are delegitimized as ‘political terrorism’ (Friedman, 2012) and hunger strikes by Palestinian political prisoners have been described as ‘terrorism in prison’ by Israeli officials (Schaeffer Omer-Man, 2013). Of course Europe, the US as well as international institutions are extremely cautious not to be affiliated with anything that Israel defines as terrorism. In a situation where any political and even cultural practice that challenges Israeli politics – as we have previously seen – can be labelled as terrorism, Palestinian artists risk to loose funding because of their statements and affiliations and are forced to police themselves according to European and US standards of what is legitimate and ‘non-violent’ resistance. In 2020 the Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PPAN) issued a statement against the EUs recently decided funding conditions, saying that these conditions would “criminalize the Palestinian people’s legitimate national struggle” and that the EU’s “decision is severely biased

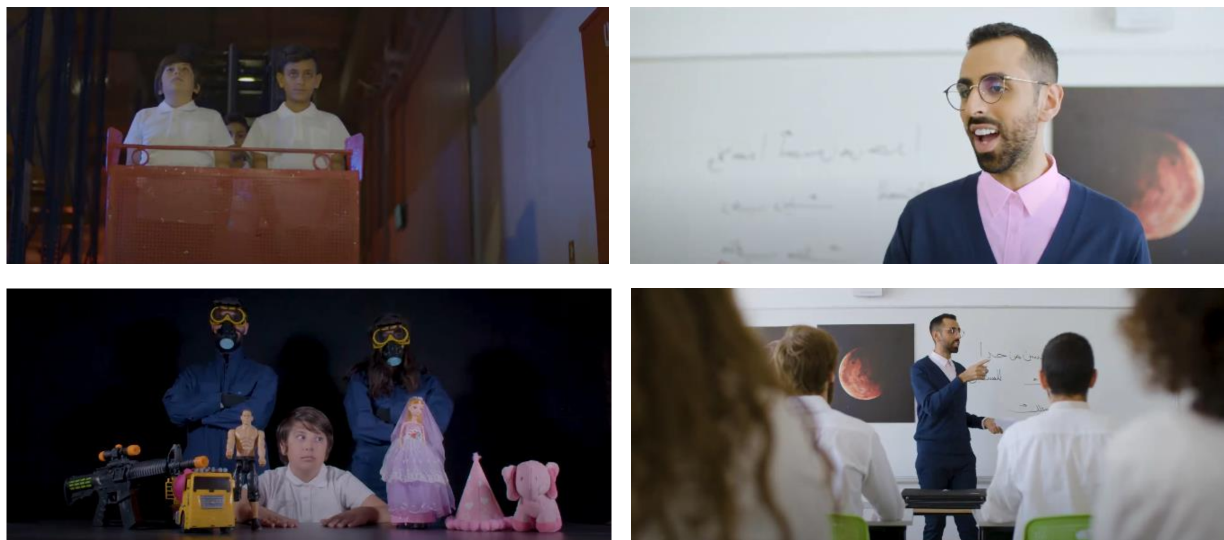
and indicates no balance in defining the ruthless and dehumanizing actions of the Israeli occupation against the Palestinian people." In many cases, the conditions and expectations of foreign funds are not explicitly stated yet Palestinian cultural practitioners are aware of the underlying assumptions of funding institutions shying away from controversial issues. "Sometimes the conditions are not direct or it's not in the contract but it seems that people have a romantic idea about what we need to do or what we are supposed to show and when we don't, they are not happy" (al-Raee, 2019).

5.2 The Civilizing Mission

Bashar Murad is a young Jerusalemite pop singer who openly expresses his queer identity and who has composed feminist songs such as *Ma Betghayyerni* and *More Like You* challenging genders norms and talking about queer love. When the *UN Women* initiative invited him to their office in Ramallah and commissioned him to write a song for them he was very excited and directly started working on a snarky satirical song about patriarchal norms in Palestinian society. "So I went home and wrote *Ana Zalame*[11] but the first version was very aggressive. Because that's what I wanna do, I don't wanna sugarcoat things, so I had one verse where it was like 'I go out and my wife stays at home but what if she knows what I do in the middle of the night' – stuff like that and the chorus says 'I'm a man, I'm a man, I do what I want, don't try to tell me otherwise, I'm a man, I'm a man, don't try to convince me otherwise!' So I sent it to them and we had another meeting and they were like 'Hmmmmm, no we don't think people will understand that you're being satirical, we think you're gonna encourage people to …' and I was like okaaaaay, so I started to make it softer, to make it politically correct, I got rid of the 'I go out, what if she knows what I do' – I changed it to 'I come and go as I please but my sisters aren't allowed.' It's still true, but softer. And then they made me change that chorus – the satirical one where I say 'I do what I want, don't tell me otherwise' so I sing it in the first time, but in the second time I changed it for them and I made it 'I'm a man, I'm a man, I respect her and I love her." Elaborating the textual adaptations in our conversation at the Sabreen recording studio in East Jerusalem Bashar started laughing. At that point in the song the music video features a class-room situation in which Bashar appears as a teacher lecturing his adult students about respect for women. The scene is in stark contrast to the beginning of the video which starts with

[11] You can watch the music video here: *Ana Zalameh* – Bashar Murad (2018)

powerful visuals in a ‘factory of men’ where little boys are carted through dark corridors to be indoctrinated according to male gender norms. While the first half is unsettling and full of dark irony, the second half of the video turns into an unimaginative didactic play.



8: Stills taken from music video *Ana Zalameh* by Bashar Murad (2018) – first half (left), second half (right). (Source: Mediana productions, 2018).

Clearly, the office of *UN Women* were afraid that the song would be misunderstood as being chauvinistic and would ultimately have bad repercussions on their own reputation. Thus, the sarcasm and satire of Bashar’s original version was reduced to a minimum. It still shines through the first part of the song that exudes sharp social satire but is subsequently drowned in what appears as an educational video with an unambiguous mission to educate Arab men about gender equality. When I told Bashar that I really disliked the second part, he called out laughing “Me too! Me too! I like the first half of the song and then the second I’m like ‘aaaaaahhh cringy!’ […] So when I do it live, I just keep repeating the first chorus. But for the recording I just had to do it and it fucked with my artistic identity. […] It was one of the first [funded] projects I got and it was quite scary for me. Because I knew *UN Women* would be a good opportunity, just having that with my name, so I made a few compromises but… I kept trying to convince them that people are not stupid and if people are stupid we need to make them smarter, we need to start a discussion, we can’t just spoon-feed everybody.” Bashar said that the experience of working with the UN taught him to never compromise his artistic vision and style again and that these foreign funds ultimately care more about their own reputation than about artistic value and expression:

"I learned that people who have desk jobs and who are working for NGOs shouldn't be telling an artist ever what to do. When you don't like it, find someone else to write you a song." Turning a provocative and challenging song into a petty civilizing project reveals the UN's paternalistic neo-Orientalist approach which supposes that Arab society needs to be educated about women's rights in the most unambiguous manner possible. Bashar Murad's experience shows that in the cultural sector just as in other domains "the aid machine reified aid recipients according to donors' political priorities, often informed by neo-Orientalist concepts" (Laidi-Hanieh, 2006:30). By working with foreign funding and international institutions such as the UN, Palestinian artists are "yielding part of their ownership and control of their creative process and musical practices to mediators like NGOs. Individual Palestinian artists and musicians, and the various Palestinian liberation movements, are no longer the only, nor even the principal, agents handling the production of Palestinian art and music and its meanings" (El-Ghadban & Strohm, 2013:188).

5.3 Between Financial Solidarity and Elitist Bubbles

All cultural practitioners I talked to articulated the wish for more local funding and self-reliance in the Palestinian art scene. Actor Moataz Malhees (2019) sees the responsibility with the economic elite in Palestine – "Rich people should understand that they should support movies or theatre productions because we don't have to keep asking organisations from outside to put a hand on this. We should help ourselves with that. I'm not a fan of the idea of funding from outside." Also art collector George al-A'ma (2019) acknowledges that "we need more financial back-up – from inside, not from outside. We need some patrons to be there for us as an artistic community. I am trying to create that kind of patronage, this is the missing thing." He encourages Palestinian cultural foundations such as Al Qattan to "play a major role in the lives and careers of some artists" (ibid, 2019). However, even Palestinian foundations might align their institutional profile and funding choices with the trends of the international art market in which they have to situate themselves.

Visual artist and art professor Rehab Nazzal told me how she was approached by a student who asked for help with applying for a grant at Al Qattan foundation. She was shocked to find that the funding process was entirely in English "I don't think they actually visibly dictate conditions but the whole process from the very beginning, it has layers of conditions that are invisible. For example Qattan, if they tell you 'you have to write it in English' – that is by itself a

condition. If you don't speak English – then you're out. You don't get funding" (Nazzal, 2019). Notably, Al Qattan is not a foreign NGO, but a Palestinian institution and one of the most influential funding agencies for Palestinian art. This points to the fact that even local cultural institutions are promoting a cosmopolitan artistic elite that is able to speak English and preferably also to speak the aesthetic language of the contemporary Western art market. According to Rehab Nazzal Al Qattan foundation's language and programming is responding much more to the demands of Western funds and markets than to the needs of local artists. Referring to the elitist circles frequenting Al Qattan George al-'Ama (2019) observed that "sometimes such institutions helped in creating the bubble which we have now."

As a notable example for funding alternatives, the *Qalandia International* arts festival decided to refuse all foreign funding in 2018. All Palestinian cultural institutions that took part in the biennial financially contributed to the realization of the event, stressing Palestinian solidarity and making the festival independent of conditions imposed by foreign institutions (Gronlund, 2018).

In this chapter we have seen that the institutionalization and standardization of socio-political and cultural work through NGOs has contributed to a depoliticization of the West Bank, especially in the cities. Western institutions are the major source of funding for Palestinian cultural productions. However, they routinely condition and censor Palestinian expression either by following neo-orientalist agendas that seek to patronize Palestinian society or out of fear for their own maintenance and political indefeasibility. Even though there is a clear demand for more local and unconditional funding, Palestinian funds and institutions might reproduce Western norms and exclusionary structures as they are situated within a much broader international art market the dynamics of which we will closely examine in the next chapter.

6 The International Art Market

"You have prostituted Palestine." Sari Khoury

In this chapter we will examine the expectations of international and local audiences towards representations of Palestine and Palestinian identity and the impact of these expectations on Palestinian cultural productions and practitioners. Palestinians, just as other non-Western societies, tend to be perceived as a monolithic cultural entity rather than a complex society with diverse opinions, tastes and ideologies. The reception of non-Western cultural productions is often defined by an anthropological gaze at the Other, disregarding the individual artist who is assumed to represent an entire culture or nation. Zoe Lafferty, a British theatre director and associate artistic director of The Freedom Theatre in Jenin, states "there is a Western way of thinking 'We're gonna see a play about Syria' or 'We're gonna see a play about Palestine', rather than a play about a specific story like 'three bourgeois sisters being bored with life' or 'a marriage breaking apart'" (Lafferty, 2019). This expectation urges Palestinian artists to speak on behalf of an assumed Palestinian collective, to 'explain Palestine' or, as we will see later, to represent a particular Palestinian identity. Looking at the dynamics of the art market with regards to Palestinian cultural productions we can observe two contradictory trends. One trend urges Palestinians to tell 'universal' stories in order to be more 'relatable' to their Western audiences and to 'prove their humanity'. This humanitarian and deeply Orientalist expectation urges Palestinian artists to coat their perceived Otherness and their political demands in everyday stories and to echo Western concerns and aesthetics. The other trend on the contrary, demands political explicitness and urges Palestinian artists to be the ambassadors of a political cause, placing politics over craft and collective identity over individual expression. In this chapter we will dive into the experiences and reflections of Palestinian cultural practitioners with regards to these audience expectations in and outside of Palestine.

6.1 Proving Humanity

Due to the Orientalist gaze at Arab societies in general, and Zionist discourse in particular, which brands Palestinians as terrorists, Palestinian artists are constantly faced with the task to counter stereotypes and stigmatizations that portray them as backward, evil and violent. An online review of the 2018 Palestinian play *Grey Rock*, directed by Amir Nizar Zuabi, says about one of the

actors “Natour makes you completely believe in Yusuf’s dream, and with it the humanity of Palestinians” (Weiss, 2020). The play, as the reviewer joyfully claims, “is another milestone in American recognition of a suppressed truth I remember John Ging telling our delegation to Gaza ten years ago, Palestinians are a deeply civilized people” (ibid, 2020). The assessment of this Palestinian performance shows very clearly that ‘the humanity of Palestinians’ and their ‘civilization’ are not taken for granted but need to be proven time and again. Palestinian cultural practitioners comply with this demand hoping that Western audiences will influence global policies to end the occupation. In the context of Al-Kasaba theatre’s production *Alive from Palestine* director George Ibrahim says that “the message is ‘we are people like everybody else’” (as quoted in Varghese, 2020:71) and director Iman Aoun from Ashtar theatre asserts that one main intention of *The Gaza Monologues* was “to show the world we are human beings” (as quoted in Varghese, 2020:79). These efforts indicate that there is a section of the international art market which approves of Palestinian productions on the condition that they prove their humanity and which reveals that Palestinian demands for freedom and justice are only accepted if they are relatable enough to their Western audiences.

As Rania Jawwad argues, the perception of Palestinian humanity is very much linked to a performance-based logic which evaluates Palestinians according to neoliberal norms and Western aesthetics. “The cultural sphere thus becomes a site for assessing how ‘normal’ Palestinians are performing in the sphere of the everyday” (Jawwad, 2014:38-39). Normalcy in the Western neoliberal perspective amounts to a lifestyle between work, education and leisure in bars, theatres and shops. “Accordingly, normal (like the status of human) can be achieved without the need to overthrow the colonial regime. […] According to this perspective, the presence of Palestinian cultural production is not part of anticolonial resistance, but rather serves in place of the struggle. In effect, resistance collapses into performance” (ibid:39).

In Western discourses, concepts such as ‘nonviolent resistance’, ‘cultural resistance’ and ‘beautiful resistance’ are usually pitted against other acts of resistance instead of being seen as complementary. They attract international solidarity while other forms of resistance, economic or armed, are considered inacceptable. Since violence is only deemed legitimate if it is exercised by a nation-state, Palestinian armed resistance is seen as a proof of the need to further pacify, civilize and ‘normalize’ Palestinians since they use violence in the absence of a nation-state. Thus, cultural productions that showcase victimhood according to a Western humanitarian framework are likely to be accepted by Western institutions. On the other hand, cultural

productions that portray and reflect on armed resistance are extremely tricky to produce as we will see in chapter 6.7 in the case of The Freedom Theatre's *The Siege.*

The Roadmap for Peace[12] states as its first point "Ending Terror and Violence, *Normalizing Palestinian Life* and Building Palestinian Institutions" (United Nations, 2003; emphasis added). Palestinians are expected to perform their willingness for 'normalcy' and immediately renounce all armed resistance while sovereignty remains a promise based on the assessment of their performance. However, since normalcy is defined rather by a liberal lifestyle than by the liberation from colonial occupation, cultural productions which formulate the plea to be recognized as humans and the desire to 'just live a normal life' may at times divert from the anti-colonial struggle. Rehab Nazzal (2019) says that some artists consciously avoid a discourse of liberation politics as they are worried about the rejection of their work at exhibition and festivals "What do you think the selection is based on? When it comes to Palestine, it is political. So some artists choose a safe path by selecting universal themes, so departing from the actual struggle." In the attempt to please and appease Western audiences, actual stories and characters might have to be boiled down to a more innocuous and easily digestible version of reality in order to relate to Western audiences. This is especially relevant when Palestinian art projects are funded by state-related or state-funded Western institutions that shy away from political statements about the Israeli occupation and are afraid of endorsing armed resistance. The risk here is that Palestinian artists feel that they have to omit terminologies, experiences and life choices that are too ambiguous for their Western audiences who cannot relate to the fight against colonial erasure. While resistance against colonial erasure is essentially a response to the violation of their individual and collective humanity, the representation of the decolonial struggle in cultural productions might backfire as it triggers Western fears and might play into the Orientalist stereotypes that Western audiences might hold.

The play *And Here I Am* traces the story of Ahmed Tobasi, a young man from Jenin refugee camp who joined the armed resistance as a teenager and later on became an actor and theatre director. Zoe Lafferty, the director of the play and friend of Tobasi, recalls that the playwright Hassan Abdulrazzak who wrote the script based on Tobasi's life story, was deeply concerned about the reception of the play by its British audiences. "Hassan was like 'we have to

[12] The Roadmap for Peace was devised by the UN, the EU, the US and Russia envisioning a two-state solution for Palestine-Israel in three stages, however lacking mechanisms to enforce and monitor them (as well as a clear timetable). See annex of S/2003/529.

protect Tobasi! He can't go on stage and say he was part of Islamic Jihad and was kind of proud of his cousin who was one of the most notorious suicide bombers! Why would we say that?? We just don't need to say that and the audience will be more empathetic with him'" (Lafferty, 2019). Lafferty and Tobasi who plays himself considered the playwright's concern of shocking and alienating their British audiences but finally decided not to censor certain points of Tobasi's life story. They ultimately trusted that the context in which Tobasi's story unfolds – the invasion of the camp, his imprisonment as a child, his losses, depression and social pressure – provided a sufficient background to understand his ambiguous life choices. Zoe Lafferty emphasised that it was important to them to show Tobasi's character in its full complexity and not to depict him as a mere victim of the conditions he was born in, "he is not like a humble sweet little guy who is just naïve, no! He is like a motherfucker sometimes and arrogant and that's also fun to have on stage." *And Here I Am* refuses to comfort Western audiences by deciding not to sugarcoat Tobasi's story but to bring him to the British stages in his full ambivalence – rough and raw and full of cynicism and dark humour (Lafferty, 2018). With their dramaturgical choices Lafferty and Tobasi refuse to fit into the Western humanitarian framework and to comply with expectations of Palestinian victimhood which we will further examine in chapter 6.5. While many Western audiences and institutions reiterate the demand for proving of the humanity of Palestinians, fostering self-censorship and shying away from ambiguity, there is another trend that expects Palestinian cultural practitioners to act, first and foremost, as representatives of a national cause.

6.2 Not Palestinian Enough

While the first trend, which is looking for relatability and 'humanity' in Palestinian cultural productions, eludes explicitly political statements, there is an opposing and equally prominent trend on the international art market that requests exactly those explicitly political representations of Palestine. This oppositional trend is wonderfully staged in a scene of Elia Suleiman's 2019 film *It Must Be Heaven*. Suleiman who plays himself enters the office of a film production company in Paris. The producer thanks Suleiman for his proposal but tells him that they won't be able to produce his film because it doesn't correspond to their editorial line, "it's not at all a matter of wanting to make a very didactic or exotic film about Palestine but it's true that we almost didn't find it *Palestinian enough*. […] Even though it takes place in Palestine, the

story could take place anywhere and it would be the same, it could even take place here" (Suleiman, 2019, emphasis added).

This raises the question of what is 'Palestinian enough'? What do international audiences, artistic directors and film producers expect when they want to see 'a play about Palestine' or a 'Palestinian movie'? Generally speaking, marketing a cultural production as 'Palestinian' means that it should explicitly address the occupation. According to painter Johny Andonia (2019) there is an international demand for such politically explicit representations as "there are international activists around. There are people who want kind of literal political depictions. It has a market." Also in the experience of Riham Isaac, an actress and performer from Beit Sahour, displaying one's political identity as a Palestinian artist is an essential asset for securing funding and getting invited to perform abroad "because if you want to write a proposal, if you want money – there are certain topics, certain issues that you should talk about. There is a market for politics now, that's my humble opinion. Internationals, international audiences, that's what they expect from you. You know, there are some topics that will sell easier, that will be much more accepted, if you talk about this subject it could tour in Sweden etc." (Isaac, 2019).

Examining the power dynamics on the international art market Gardner (2011:143) states that "the biennals, the competitions, and the neoliberal conditions of the globalized have surely brought about a renewed colonial force" and that there is an "increasing market for overt markers of Otherness" (ibid:150) in which artists from around the world find themselves catering towards cultural stereotypes that are on demand among Western audiences. Palestinians in traditionally embroidered dresses sell better than Palestinians in jeans. The apartheid wall provides a more dramatic backdrop to a scene than an ordinary Ramallah neighbourhood. A painting of a Palestinian camp satisfies Western audience expectations more than a painting of the Palestinian city next to it. Western curators and festival organisers are on a constant search for 'authentic' representations from the Global South which mostly means that cultural practitioners need to cater to Western expectations of Otherness in order to successfully enter the international art market. These unspoken expectations and Palestinian anticipations of these expectations create a self-fulfilling cycle in cultural production. In her analysis of the reception of Arab cinema in the West, Marks summarizes that "foreign audiences wanted to gain an authentic Arab view through the eyes of the work; local audiences tried to anticipate what the foreign audience would look for in the work; foreign audiences rejected some works as not authentic enough; local audiences rejected some works as giving the wrong impression to foreign audiences" (Marks, 2015:16).

As one Australian visitor at the 2018 PPAN[13] showcase and conference aptly observed, "Western audiences like to see 'conflict productions' from war zones. There are topics that are more exploitable and sellable than others." In the case of Palestine, the main marker of Otherness which makes Palestinian art 'exciting' to Western audiences is its articulation of oppression, struggle and resistance. Another film that deals with Palestinian filmmakers' experiences with Western funders and producers is Sobhi al-Zobeidi's *Looking Awry*. In one scene the Jerusalemite scholar and filmmaker who, just like Suleiman is playing himself, has a meeting with two US American producers in a café. The producers reiterate that they are "so excited!" and one of them is leaning over with glowing eyes, telling al-Zobeidi with a conspirational smile that "especially now, with Jerusalem at the heart of the conflict, all eyes are looking at you!" (al-Zobaidi, 2001). The producer's comment shows her unapologetic intent to capitalize on 'the conflict'. Later on, ironically, they ask al-Zobeidi to cut out a ten-second shot of an Israeli soldier shooting at Palestinian children who are throwing rocks into his direction. Their own romanticized imagination of Jerusalem is ultimately more important than the political reality which Zobeidi's film team is capturing on the ground.

However, it is not only the Western art market that evaluates Palestinian art according to its representation of political identity. George al-A'ma, a Bethlehemite art collector who has been representing Palestinian artists at galleries, museums and auction houses around the world, asserts that the Arab art market has similar expectations, "The international public, when they have the intention to buy Palestinian art, they are looking only for political subjects or for political influences on the art. […] I am talking about museums and major collectors who have got major artistic or cultural institutions across the Arab world, such as Barjeel Art Foundation, Nimer Art Foundation, the Dalloul Art Foundation in Beirut, the Sharjah Foundation[14] – all of those are looking for the most serious, most representative artworks by the well-established artists and that should include 'something Palestinian' and when you say 'Palestinian' that basically means 'political'" (al-A'ma, 2019). Artists who do not satisfy this label are often overlooked. Reflecting on the publicity and status of different Palestinian visual artists George al-A'ma asserts that "we have some serious abstract artists like Samia Halaby, Samir Salameh,

[13] The Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PPAN) organized a 3-day showcase and conference in 2018 which I attended. Unfortunately, I am not able to retrieve the name of the Australian participant who made this remark in an informal group conversation during a walk to the Popular Theater in al-Amari refugee camp.

[14] Barjeel and Sharjah foundation are based in the United Arab Emirates, the Nimer and Dalloul Foundation are based in Lebanon.

Vladimir Tamari. But if it's not with a political context, it won't come to the surface as much as artworks that are clearly and bluntly talking politics like Sliman Mansour" (ibid).[15]

Shafeeq Alsadi, a qanun player and composer from Beit Sahour, recalls being interviewed by several Arab and international media during his time with *Lamma* band, "We were always asked 'you as a Palestinian... what is your challenge as a Palestinian?'" (Alsadi, 2019). Shafeeq eventually grew tired of always being approached as a representative of the Palestinian nation and would rather be acknowledged as an individual musician speaking for himself. "It always comes down to talking about yourself being a Palestinian, it's not about yourself being an artist and talking about your art. There is always something related to the cause […] and usually people expect that I should deliver a message about my people. I want to be invited or to be appreciated or to be seen as a human being at first. I am a Palestinian and I lived here and I have the honour of being Palestinian, but most importantly I am an artist!" (ibid).[16]

Maysa Daw, a singer-songwriter and rapper from Haifa expressed similar feelings with regards to the reception of her music and the identity politics around it, "Especially, not only, but especially with Western media and audience from around the world, they don't look at us as musicians, they look at us as *Palestinian* musicians and that makes a lot of difference because for a lot of people if you don't add 'Palestinian' at the beginning of the sentence they won't even look at it, they won't even listen to it. A lot of times that makes me feel like people are treating Palestinians in general as victims. I really hated that feeling. Whenever we had interviews with Western media the questions would 80% or 90% be political. […] yeah ok, politics have a big role in our lives because of this place that we live in, but common I'm not a politician, you wanna ask me something – ask me about what I do! This was something that was bothering me for a long time and then I understood, okay but I portray myself in the music as a victim by only writing about things that have a strong saying, a political saying. Until today if I wanna write a love song, most of the time I would stop myself and say, this is not relevant, it's weird for me to write only a love song without more strong sayings that go into that" (Daw, 2019). Thus, Maysa

[15] Similar dynamics can be observed elsewhere on the international art market. Frank Bowling and other abstract artists, for example, "were overlooked partly because they were black artists who could not be placed in the pigeonhole of more openly activist black art" (Pes, 2019).

[16] Even though the wording here resembles the appeals we have examined in chapter 6.1, the reasoning here is different; Shafeeq's claim does not try to appeal to the humanitarian framework that Western institutions and audiences apply, which urges Palestinians to prove their humanity in order to have their collective rights respected and their national cause acknowledged. He actually presupposes these collective rights and demands to be recognized as an artist who is not bound to speak for a Palestinian collective. The reference to his humanity argues for his recognition as an individual as opposed to a mere representative of a national cause.

suppresses the impulse to write a love song because it wouldn't meet the requirement for being 'Palestinian enough'; love songs are not considered legitimate expressions of Palestinian experience, let alone representative of Palestinian identity. Zaid Hilal, a singer-songwriter and buzuq player from Beit Sahour, voices a similar feeling concerning love songs, "There are hardly any Palestinian songs that just talk about love. Rarely, wallah! It's kind of impossible to think about it" (Hilal, 2019). Zaid himself has written and recorded a couple of love songs; interestingly, he tends to switch to a lighter, more urban, even Lebanese sounding accent when performing these songs. He admits that he finds his native Palestinian accent "not sexy enough" as it is mostly associated with protest songs and folklore. Also Apo Sahagian, Jerusalemite lead singer of the indie rock band *Apo & the Apostles*, experienced that "once at a panel someone from the crowd said *Baji Wenek*[17] has no social value. It's a love song" (Sahagian, 2019).

At a point where Palestinian musicians feel that they are not allowed to write love songs or don't dare to sing these songs in their native dialect one might dare to question whether the link between Palestinian cultural production and political activism has become such a rigid imperative that it limits Palestinians in their artistic expression. As Maysa Daw pointed out, the expression and the perception of Palestinian identity condition each other; both international and local expectations define the framework of what is considered 'Palestinian' art, reproducing a certain image of Palestinian identity. Thus, the burden of representing Palestine ultimately produces self-censorship, since cultural productions which are not political enough and therefore 'not Palestinian enough' don't qualify as legitimate Palestinian art. Zaid Hilal's comment about his change of accents reveals that audience expectations have a profound impact on Palestinian artists' self-perception. A mundane and innate sentiment such as the musical expression of love is perceived at odds with one's own accent since that accent is reserved for the expression of political content. Journalist and poet Rajaa Natour reminds us that the expectations of Palestinian society towards their cultural practitioners are no less demanding, "any deviation from the defined lines, be it in the plastic arts, literature or poetry, is interpreted in the internal Palestinian discourse as a national betrayal. It is deemed a selfish act that derives from privilege. Deviation from the collective is not perceived as a creative, innovative attempt but as abandonment of the goal for which Palestinian art is destined – the fight for national liberation" (Natour, 2019). In

[17] *Baji Wenek* is one of the most successful songs of the band, released in 2014. It talks about a relationship to a woman and the dread of daily life.

this regard, Palestinian, Arab and international audiences agree that Palestinian art's ultimate purpose and incessant responsibility is to represent Palestine's political struggle.

As we have seen, Palestinian cultural productions and their (anticipated) reception on the international art market condition each other. Therefore, academic research should always take into account the dynamics of the art market when analysing Palestinian cultural productions; the analytical framework of 'resistance art' often presupposes a certain functionality of Palestinian art and might contribute to the disregard of Palestinian artists who do not satisfy the expectations of a national political identity defined by the occupation.

6.3 The Occupation Imperative

DAM, a hip hop group from Lydd, which has pioneered Palestinian rap, has produced countless songs on the occupation. However, when they produced one song about gender-based violence in 2012, criticizing patriarchal power structures their own society, international scholars instantly criticised them for not relating the topic to the occupation. The song *If I Could Go Back In Time*[18] for which DAM collaborated with Palestinian singer Amal Murkus was a response to a series of recent femicides in their hometown al-Lydd. Scholars Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi (2012a) claimed that different factors produce familial violence in the context of Palestine, such as "economic strangulation" and "the frustration of occupation and unemployment". However, patriarchy and violence against women have existed before the Israeli occupation and will most likely outlive it. Israeli policies have indeed sought to consolidate patriarchal family forms to facilitate control over Palestinian society. Thus conversely, one might argue that Palestinian musicians who challenge patriarchal norms and gender roles, also challenge the underlying power structures and logic on which the Israeli occupation is built and work on a civil society which gives space to women to be empowered and equal political actors. The scholars claim that "DAM's video does nothing to remind us of the structural violence that is usually front and center in their songs" (Abu-Lughod & Mikdashi, 2012a). But doesn't the oppression of women in patriarchal societies also constitute a form of structural violence? It doesn't need to be Israeli state violence in order to be structural. DAM wrote an open reply to the scholars in which they refute the claim that they released the song without providing a broader political context, "This

[18] You can watch the music video here: DAM featuring AMAL MURKUS - If I Could Go Back In Time لو أرجع بالزمن - YouTube

song, however, is one chapter of many in a compilation. Each piece offers a portion of what DAM addresses. We should not have to mention the Occupation in every song to prove our political legitimacy" (Nafar, Nafar & Jrery, 2012). DAM simultaneously confronts Israeli and patriarchal oppression without necessarily having to explicitly relate them within each and every song. "Some tracks address our society from within. Others address the occupation of Palestine. We see all the tracks as part of one political battle" (ibid).

The other main criticism of the two scholars is that DAM plays into the hands of Islamophobic discourses. By not locating gender-based violence within the context of the occupation, Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi (2012a) claim that DAM is "relying on cultural narratives that have served to racialize and ethnicize Arabs as one of liberalism's 'others'." DAM replied that "when we write songs, we do not sit and think, 'what would America or Israel think of this?' We open the window and document what we see" (Nafar, Nafar & Jrery, 2012). The musicians remind us that the song "was *written in Arabic*, *for an Arab audience*, followed by workshops in the same areas in which these murders occurred. We have a strategy that we are implementing. We see the risks in singing about Arab social and political issues. Opportunistic actors can co-opt and manipulate these messages. But this is not the case for us. DAM is addressing an Arab audience in Arabic. We can speak to our own communities without being worried about how others will abuse it" (ibid, emphasis added).

It is remarkable that Palestinian rappers are criticized by international scholars for writing feminist songs that could be co-opted by Islamophobic and Orientalist discourses. This raises the broader question of how Palestinian artists can criticize Palestinian society. Do they constantly need to consider international audiences when addressing their own society? Do they need to mention in every song and every artwork how the occupation is entangled with any other social and political topic they talk about? Many Palestinians have expressed to me how fed up they are with the general attitude of postponing and ignoring certain social issues in Palestine until the occupation is solved.

Even though it is essential to examine how deeply the occupation is intertwined with literally every aspect of Palestinian life, the younger generation in Palestine on both sides of the wall also acknowledges that blaming the occupation as the ultimate cause and answer to every socio-political issue in Palestine is a too simplistic analysis of power and strips them of their responsibility to effect socio-political change within their own communities. Mustafa Sheta, the general manager of The Freedom Theatre, expresses the need to fight several systems of power

simultaneously, “I don’t accept, for example, a religious country in my land after all of this struggle. I look for Palestine to be a free space for any person... No one supports ending this occupation and this colonialism in order to bring in a dictatorship against human rights” (as quoted in McCarthy, 2023). Samar Hazboun, a young photographer based in Bethlehem, who has toured with an exhibition on gender-based violence in Palestine and abroad, equally emphasizes that “the urgency is to show that we are a nation that is articulate in all topics and that we can – just as well as we can talk and create about occupation – that we can talk and create about other problems and that we are aware of their existence. We don’t want the scenarios of where it feels like we are so unaware of the fact that maybe our women are oppressed and we need someone to save us” (Hazboun, 2019). DAM’s 2019 song *Prozac* directly addresses this Western Orientalist discourse of ‘saving Arab women from their own societies’ and Arab representation in Western media, stating clearly that they don’t wish Western interference in their feminist struggle.

> *Camera? Again? So he hits me?*
> *What's the scenario? Women’s rights?*
> *Hypocrisy! Chauvinism is not a Middle Eastern but a patriarchal thing.*
> *Everyone has their role - I will deal with the honour killings*
> *and you deal with your porn industry!*

While *If I Could Go Back In Time* might not be the most felicitous song with concerns to relating several systems of power, DAM actively acknowledges the need to fight several forms of oppression at the same time in order to truly emancipate Palestinian society.[19]

As we have seen, Palestinian artists need to deal with contradictory dynamics on the international art market – on the one hand, they are supposed to prove their humanity and to be ‘relatable’, on the other hand their art needs to satisfy Western and Arab imaginations of what is ‘Palestinian’ in order to prove their legitimacy and relevance and to cater to the Western demand for Otherness. While one trend censors their political struggle, the other trend tends to reduce Palestinians to their political struggle. Both dynamics however, condition Palestinian self-expression and foster self-censorship. On top of that, cultural practitioners might even have to

[19] JASADIK-HOM (2019) [Your body of theirs] as another example, talks about the self-assertion of Palestinian women living under both patriarchy and the occupation, with a focus on the Arab female body with lyrics such as “If you resist, you hurt their Zionism – if I resist, I also hurt their masculinity.”

justify their artistic and political choices to international academics. In the following chapter we will dive a bit deeper into the romance of resistance and the fetishisation of the Palestinian struggle and the commodification of 'resistance art'.

6.4 Revolution Fetish

"Palestine is a sexy topic" Riham Isaac

Walking through the streets of East Jerusalem on our way to a party at *Sabreen* studios where Bashar Murad was going to perform, I was chatting with Apo Sahagian, the lead singer of the band *Apo and the Apostles,* whose members are from Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Jokingly, yet with a serious undertone, he shared with me his cynical perspective on the reception of Palestinian art and music abroad, "Me and my peers always use to joke that European leftists are the worst thing that ever happened to Palestinian artists. They will invite a mediocre artist who fits into their political agenda rather than someone who makes great art but doesn't talk about the occupation. *That* artist will stay in Bethlehem because he doesn't fit into their political profile. And people in Europe will see the mediocre artist and go like 'O well, that art sucks! They deserve to be occupied!'" (Sahagian, 2019a). Even though sarcastic to the bone, Apo's comment expresses the widespread frustration that ultimately it is not artistic value that decides the recognition and success of Palestinian cultural productions abroad. Painter Johny Andonia (2019) agrees with his view, "People are expecting some kind of attitude from artists here, to be victims, and even sometimes to tolerate bad quality […] because it's Palestinian, it's kind of a fetish. There is a market out there, like an international market for art and activism." Also curator and researcher Lara Khaldi endorses a similar critique, lamenting at a lecture at Dar Jacir in 2019 that "rather than artistic technique, the era of revolution became a market value."

There is an ongoing discussion within the Palestinian art scene about the shifting meanings of politically engaged art once it enters the global market. "I am questioning whether what we are doing is really activism. If it really comes from grassroots let's say - then it makes sense, but not that it becomes a market", actress Riham Isaac (2019) told me in a reflection on the Palestinian theatre scene. "Global market forces, discourses, and transnational political solidarity campaigns can help circulate, but also commodify, co-opt, or empty protest art of its political message, leading to depoliticization and possibly normalization" (Salih & Devroe,

2014:13). Such a co-optation takes place when the market value of Palestinian art is first and foremost defined by its production under occupation and when the recognition and success of Palestinian artists is dependent on their ongoing colonial oppression.

According to Bashar Murad (2019) "it's all becoming like a brand, even being Palestinian. It's something that I think about that a lot of the time, maybe bookers and agents for festivals, they will look at one band, not for the music but for the fact that they're Palestinian [...] I do feel sometimes that people before they hear the music they're interested just because I'm Palestinian and just because I'm queer and that's like a brand – two brands! But it's a good thing at the same time because it attracts attention but I think the important thing is how you use it, how you take advantage of it? [...] I've heard from some other musicians who were invited to festivals where they didn't even know what kind of music they did. Just like 'oh a Palestinian band!' – you know."

During my fieldwork I talked to many cultural practitioners who, when they were invited abroad, felt that they were supposed to represent a political identity rather than presenting their own music or art works. Ayed Arafah described such an experience when he was invited to participate in a group exhibition in Italy. After a few conversations with the Italian curator Ayed got the impression that "he wasn't interested in my art at all, he only wanted someone Palestinian there to be part of the exhibition!" (Arafah, 2018). This branding of Palestinian art has several consequences. First, it is about the brand and not about the piece of art itself. Secondly, the political message is prioritized over artistic quality, innovation and creativity. This pushes Palestinian artists to reproduce established political symbolisms rather than exploring new artistic forms and diverging topics. According to Gardner, non-Western artists constantly need to balance on a "tightrope between positive assertions of difference and its fetishization" (2011:146). In the case of Palestine, cultural practitioners balance between resistance and its fetishization, between the artistic subversion of the hegemonic colonial discourse and the commercialization of revolutionary impulses.

I would like to argue that a romanticized engagement with resistance instrumentalises Palestinian art which ultimately doesn't serve the Palestinian cause but the self-promotion of international activists. Criticizing the attitude of foreign activists, Johny Andonia (2019) complains that "they never carried a flag of their own country, then they come here and carry a Palestinian flag. Stop this! – anti-nationalist when you are at home and when you come here, you try to feed the nationalist idea!" I claim that the attitude Johny describes can be witnessed not

only with Western activists coming to Palestine for a 'solidarity visit' but also among avid audiences of Palestinian art abroad. Through the consumption of 'resistance art' – the more blatant the better – these audiences affirm their own political identity and display their affiliation with leftist and decolonial struggles. "Very often the Palestinian artist (in whatever discipline) does art for a foreign audience, maybe because it's a clear market that clearly wants something political to fulfill their own sense of 'we're woke!'' (Sahagian, 2019b). While activist circles and institutions in the Western world might support the Palestinian struggle for liberation, they might equally reproduce a limited conception of Palestinian identity and contribute to a fetishization of resistance and the commodification of its symbols.

Ihab Jadallah's short film *The Shooter* talks about the portrayal of Palestinian characters in Palestinian cinema which is both funded from and produced for abroad. The short film features a scene in which a Palestinian resistance fighter with a machine gun is hiding in a half-destroyed house. After firing a couple of bullets he passes by a BBC news reporter who comments on the dulling of Western audiences towards such images of war. She never manages to finish her lines though, since each time the take is cut early by the director. The scene is embedded in a prologue and epilogue starring a Palestinian actor in a cowboy outfit with plastic guns, walking around a barren desert landscape and reflecting about his frustrations with the film industry in Palestine where literally all films are financed and produced by Western countries. According to Lionis (2016:171) "the film's revelations about the staging of resistance for the camera lens unveils the ways in which Palestinians are asked to 'perform' a revolutionary identity." The lead actor himself however, suggests that he is usually casted into the role of a victim, "I'm not a bad actor. It's the roles they give me that are all bad, depressing, defeated. Western producers never give Palestinians the role of a hero. They show what they want and they ignore what they want. This is what Western colonialism is – intellectual colonialism" (Jadallah, 2007). Whether portrayed as heroes or as victims, the short film suggests that Palestine and Palestinians are subjected to another system of power, namely that of Western media coverage, sensational news reports and movie productions which reduce them to their experience of oppression and resistance and urge them to perform stereotypical and symbolic roles.

Mariam Barghouti, a Palestinian writer and activist, urges Western solidarity activists to stop romanticising the Palestinian resistance, "Romanticizing the resistance is a form of objectifying Palestinians. […] Idealisation takes away from the technical strategies and the actual, hard struggle towards liberation. It belittles the cause and devalues the significance of

resistance against colonization. The Palestinian struggle towards liberation is not a poem; it's an unforgiving reality of demanding justice and human rights" (Barghouti, 2013). The heroic and romanticized representations of resistance create a distorted image of Palestinian life which is unfolding between violent colonial policies and the cynical navigation of daily life. In the course of such romanticization Palestinians are expected to perform a certain heroism. "This is what they are supposed to paint – very romantic or heroic images", Johny Andonia (2019) claims, "it is about romanticizing Palestinians, they portray them as heroes, you know, people are still struggling, they don't portray us as idiot as any other nation." This discontent with romantic and heroic imagery should not be understood as abandoning decolonial liberation but as a disapproval of being portrayed as symbols rather than as real people. Gardner observes that "the art market's growing comfort with identity politics as a new brand of exotica increasingly locked artists from so-called peripheries into a narrowed scope of themes they were expected to confront" (2011:146). Ultimately, the romanticization of resistance is a form of Western voyeurism in which the most tragic and spectacular scenes will get most attention on the art market and overshadow other aspects of the Palestinian experience and hinder a more nuanced analysis of the various forms of oppression that Palestinians face.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether any form of Palestinian resistance poses an innate threat to Zionism. The most blatant performances of resistance risk getting stuck in a defensive quabble with the hegemonic power since they are exactly what the colonial power expects. In this sense Rancière has warned that "resistance […] often conceals submission to the order of things behind a heroic picture" (2014:144). Palestinian resistance can easily be coopted if it operates within the Zionist logic. As scholars researching Palestinian cultural production we should therefore be wary of romanticizing heroic postures that remain trapped in hegemonic constructions of reality. We should critically examine whether with our analysis we contribute to the feedback loop in which Palestinian identity is constructed by mirroring the colonial discourse. While this sub-chapter has focused on the heroification of Palestinians and the romanticization of the resistance, the next sub-chapter will explore the dynamics of victimisation, its function and consequences on Palestinian cultural practitioners.

6.5 Victimisation

Oftentimes, Palestinian artists are not trusted to do 'proper' art or 'actual' theatre. Internationals who visit The Freedom Theatre often expect them to mainly do drama therapy. "It's again this amalgamation of ideas that often comes from people in the West, that's like 'It's Palestine. People are sad. They must be doing therapy, not real drama.' In Britain you would never go to a theatre and ask 'What's your drama therapy program?'" (Lafferty, 2019). Working under occupation Palestinian theatres are often associated with the realm of therapy, rather than artistic performance. The Orientalist gaze at Palestinian cultural productions favours imagery of destruction and deprivation. This demand for the display of suffering is amplified by the imagery produced and funded by NGOs who want to draw attention to real and pressing subjects, yet simultaneously reinforce the Othering of Palestinians and create a hierarchy of pity. "There's a framing to Palestinian art internationally. People want to see the suffering," says Yazid Anani, one of the curators of the Qalandiya International biennal 2018, "they want to see the wall, they want to see checkpoints, and they want to see the Israelis. Less has been done on the status quo of the Palestinian Authority and its troubling construct" (as quoted in Gronlund, 2018) pointing out that other less visible power structures are overlooked. Also Emily Jacir, when asked about representations of Palestine at the 2020 Berlinale, stated with a sigh that "it's always camps". Indeed "the global art market maintains and reproduces the consensus of the established aesthetic regime. Catering to broader international audiences, it recycles established hegemonic symbols of checkpoints or the wall, thus reifying and normalizing the Palestinian as victim" (Salih and Devroe, 2014:21). In another scene of Elia Suleiman's *It Must Be Heaven* the director is with his friend Gael Garcia Bernal in a U.S. production office. Garcia Bernal tries to introduce him to a producer who is deliberately ignoring Suleiman, "This is my friend Elia Suleiman. He is a Palestinian filmmaker" and then quickly adds when she keeps ignoring him "but he makes funny films!" (Suleiman, 2019). Garcia Bernal's comment reveals that Suleiman and other Palestinian film makers are expected to make serious and sad films about violence, deprivation and struggle and are certainly not expected to strike up a comedy. Suleiman recounts how he faced problems in finding funding and distributors abroad "because I was making funny films about Palestine, while the public expected films on Palestine to be tragic. […] The Western countries have an agenda, they have country quotas and give you financial aid on condition that you speak about your country. But it's our responsibility to resist this pressure; if you accept the conditions of the

funders, if you agree to play by the rules of the game, you give in" (2000:100). Suleiman's experience makes us aware that cultural practitioners who refuse to cater to the Western gaze at Palestine resist yet another form of oppression. While their work might be dismissed as not explicit or serious enough, it is actually deeply political and bold as they break out of the tokenized role they are assigned on the international art market.

In his recent book on Palestinian film and radical imagination Greg Burris urges us to question from which perspective we want to examine Palestinian cultural productions. "Such a focus on Palestinian brokenness is widespread. However, while Palestinian suffering is certainly real, it is not the only mode of Palestinian existence, and it does not have the final say. Nakba, dispossession, and death are not Palestine's only stories. Liberation is also a lived reality, and I believe that it can serve as a much more radical starting point for analysis than Zionism's victories" (Burris, 2019:29). Furthermore, the international demand for imagery of oppression fosters the self-victimisation of Palestinian cultural practitioners. If we assume that the major task of Palestinian cultural productions is "to document pain and oppression [it] seems to imply that Palestinian speech is worthy of our attention only insofar as it takes the form of a bloodcurdling scream" (ibid:91). In his introduction on Palestinian cinema Hamid Dabashi actually claims that the strength of Palestinian film lies in its "traumatic realism" (2006:18). However, it would be perverse if "Palestinian films are sufficiently political only insofar as they are filled with images of falling bombs and dying bodies" as Burris (2019:91) criticizes the common expectation towards Palestinian cinema. In this sense, the victimizing gaze of Western audiences itself becomes a form of oppression. Indeed we should not confuse politics with trauma. As we shall see in the last chapter, utopian imaginings of liberty and self-ironic comedy can be much more radical than purely factual and explicit reiterations of colonial violence and injustice. Also on the level of academic investigation we should be wary that "a focus on inequality – however critical it may be – tends to parrot the propaganda peddled by the apologists of existing power formations" (ibid:24). We shall explore this argument in more detail in chapter 7 when we examine the dialectic relationship between Zionist discourse and Palestinian constructions of identity.

Apart from a Western interest in maintaining a global hierarchy of power, another motive for the emphasis on Palestinian victimhood is to keep one's own support for Palestine as unambiguous as possible. Reflecting on British audiences that are supportive of the Palestinian cause but shy away from sensitive topics, Zoe Lafferty (2019) says, "we love to focus around the

issues that are easily being able to put in the box of 'victims' but what we try and avoid – and I understand why we avoid it – are the much more complex conversations. But theatre is there to address complex and nuanced and difficult conversations. It's not just there to reinforce the narratives that people want to hear." Obviously, it is much less risky for European institutions to invite artists and plays that portray Palestinians as victims than to feature performances and art works that talk about the much more ambivalent topics of economic boycott and armed resistance.

6.5.1 Self-Victimisation

In an interview with the New York Times about the theatre play *Greyrock*, Palestinian theatre director Nizar Zuabi and lead actor Alaa Shehada sum up the pitfalls of performing abroad and their self-awareness in representing Palestinian characters on stage, "'As a Palestinian, you are always afraid of being identified as a fighter or a terrorist,' Mr. Shehada said. 'Or an occupied victim,' Mr. Zuabi added" (as quoted in Soloski, 2018). Both perceptions exist alongside each other and Palestinian artists may find themselves placed in either category on different occasions or even simultaneously. The fear of being branded as terrorists may oftentimes prompt Palestinian artists to emphasise their suffering when performing or exhibiting for Western audiences.

Johny Andonia and Maysa Daw think that the expectations of their audiences – local and international – push them towards self-victimization. To victimize yourself, according to them, means that people reduce themselves to painting, singing and talking about their own oppression while omitting other aspects of their lives and identities. When Johny came back from his studies in Europe he went through what he calls a "confused period". Suddenly being confronted again with the reality of life under occupation after years of absence, the restriction of movement was a shock and he felt himself "as a victim". With a slightly embarrassed smile he vaguely told me about his art works, "I did something quite literal, I did something about…… yeah I shouldn't be ashamed of it – about the wall, about the checkpoints… for one and a half years I made many of these paintings. Even some kind of caricature painting, like showing someone smashing Gaza. And it went really well! People liked it, they bought these paintings directly. Some collectors from here, some foreigners" (Andonia, 2019). Since then, Johny has distanced himself from such explicit depictions of the occupation. In his opinion the demand for political statements in Palestinian art favours artworks that are very blunt and simplistic in their engagement with the

occupation and don't leave much space for interpretation or ambivalence and the more subtle expressions of Palestinian life and identity.

The explicit language of these art works employs a certain repertoire of symbols that have been established as signifiers of Palestinian rootedness in the land such as the olive tree, the orange and the cactus. Besides these symbols taken from the Palestinian landscape, Palestinian bodies themselves become tokens for the national cause when put on stage, on screen or on canvas, representing figures such as the refugee or the resistance fighter, rather than individual characters with personal thoughts and stories. When I asked the actor Moataz Malhees what he meant by victimizing he said that it's "when we talk about symbols all the time. To be honest I started to realize these things just four or five years ago. Before that I was part of this in some ways" (Malhees, 2019), listing a number of plays in which he performed characters that represented 'a Palestinian' instead of a personal story.

All three, Maysa, Moataz and Johny at some point in their beginning artistic career as musician, actor and painter respectively, came to the conclusion that they were victimizing themselves and adopted a different attitude from then on. When asked how he came to this realization Moataz cannot pinpoint an exact turning point "I don't know. I just woke up!" (ibid). He now refuses to act in plays that are mostly symbolic and only takes roles that provide him with sufficient depth and character development while Maysa at some point decided to allow herself to also compose love songs without feeling guilty of betraying the Palestinian cause. They demand to be recognized as individual artists rather than serving as political tokens whose main role it is to represent the national cause. Part of that realization is that they don't need to satisfy audience expectations but can actively challenge and subvert them with their art. "So I understood that my problem with how the rest of the world perceives us starts from the way I am portraying myself" (Daw, 2019), Maysa concludes.

Many Palestinians however, hold on to the hope that the international community would rush to their support if only people knew about the injustices they endure. When Syrian documentarist Mohammad Malas set out to make a film with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon one of his interlocutors in Qasmiyeh told him unequivocally that "we want your film to show and talk about how oppressed we are" (Malas & Alkassim, 2016:30) expecting the director to be the ambassador of their suffering. After decades of documentaries and myriads of informative art works it must be clear however, that it is not a lack of information that maintains the colonisation

of Palestine and that “merely becoming aware of the facts, however, does not inevitably bring about any particular political change” (Burris:92).

Of course it is tempting to victimize yourself when your oppressors use a discourse centered on their own oppression as a means to appeal to international support and in order to legitimize their political actions. Najwan Darwish (2014) writes in his poem *The Gas Chambers*:

“I don’t have a grandmother who died in the gas chambers
My grandmothers died like most do:
The first did not have the patience
to witness the first intifada;
the lungs of the other failed her
once the second subsided

Grandmothers, you didn’t suffer enough
for us to be saved
How horrific was the Nakba?
How harrowing to be a refugee?
These are but small pains
for niggers like us”

His cynical lines point to a supposed hierarchy of suffering, according to which different historical injustices and traumas are weighed up against each other and only the most victimized will be heard and their political discourse be recognized by the international community. It is hard to make a case if your oppressors themselves claim a 2000-year history of persecution and genocide which they now use in order to justify their oppression of others. Victimhood in this case becomes a political strategy. Art collector George al-A‘ma (2019) commented that “victimisation became sometimes a trend among artists, a must-have in the character.” Also visual artist Larissa Sansour states that “Palestinian identity has always been tied to the fact that they have been done wrong. They talk a lot about Al Nakba in 1948, the catastrophe when Israel was formed. And this identity has followed Palestinians until this day, so Palestinians always think of themselves as victims and cannot get out of that role” (Sansour, 2015). The visual artist thinks that the collective trauma of 1948 and the following decades of exile and occupation lock

Palestinians in the past, “it’s about holding on to trauma from the past and constantly projecting towards the future, thereby living in a limbo where the present is not really there” (ibid). She voices the concern that the idea of Palestine which people hold on to and the way in which they reiterate national belonging “is no longer an active way of building your identity, but more a thing that you hang on to because you’re afraid that, if you don’t, then you won’t understand what your identity is” (Sansour, 2019).

In a conversation about Palestinian self-representation in museums Beshara Doumani (2010) states, “I understand the temptation of victimhood and the urge to occupy the high moral ground, but going too far in these directions robs Palestinians both of their agency and of the responsibility that comes with agency.” Furthermore, as Rania Jawwad (2014) argues, by performing their victimhood and pleading for the acknowledgement of their humanity, Palestinian cultural productions are operating within a human-rights based framework which is diverting from the anti-colonial struggle. Many contemporary Palestinian artists and performers are indeed critical of playing into the hands of a Western gaze which subordinates them as victims. Also actress Riham Isaac (2019) expresses that she wants international audiences to treat Palestinians as equals, recognizing that pity subordinates them and makes them subject to humanitarian intervention rather than inspiring decolonial solidarity, “if I want to provoke change and if I want people to be more active with my cause, with the Palestinian problem […] they shouldn’t look at me and feel sorry. That is not what I want them to do, I want them to relate to me.” Larissa Sansour (2019) furthermore emphasises that she wants her artistic work to be acknowledged as such and not only in its function of making her audience emphasise with Palestinian suffering, “I want to make work that is not about feeling sympathy for people, but work that makes you interested in the work itself.” In the next two chapters we will explore the experiences and the artistic work of Palestinian cultural practitioners who refuse to comply with expectations of victimhood and heroism, diving into ambivalence and complexity.

6.6 Layers of Complexity

Video artist Basma Alsharif thinks it is dangerous to reiterate the idea of a ‘Palestinian ghetto’ in which people are first and foremost defined by their oppression “because it means that we’re trapped in this disenfranchised state, purely victims of the situation. I don’t think that’s true. We have writers and corrupt politicians and poets and thieves and all manner of human characters

and complexities… Those nuances sometimes get lost in the political activist model of work made about Palestine" (Alsharif, 2018). In order to stop reproducing their own victimisation, the actors and performers I talked to emphasize the importance of bringing complex individual characters on the stage. Moataz told me that he is fed up of playing token roles that represent a national collective but don't have much character development on their own. "I'm more with realistic acting, I need something with a character, with a full character." Distancing himself from the label of cultural resistance he asserts that "art is a weapon and you can use it. But I don't mention myself under something called resistance. […] I'm Moataz, it's just me myself and somebody who builds characters in himself, not under any name. […] it's beautiful to say cultural resistance but more than this I'm doing acting" (Malhees, 2019). After the arts have been put in the service of national liberation for decades, many contemporary artists, musicians and performers desire to return to prioritize the craft over its political instrumentalization. Also performance artist Riham Isaac is in favour of theatre productions that trace individual stories in depth, "because this shows how many layers you have as a person who is living here. You're not just a figure, that's why. That's what's interesting about these plays. Cause you're not a figure of heroism or a figure of 48, where you become a stereotype. So then in these plays you see me as a lover, you see me as a poet, you see me as the one who is actually fucked up, who has her own problems with herself. That's more honest, that's more real!" (Isaac, 2019).

Consequently, directors and performers in Palestine take on the difficult task of conceiving characters that international audiences can relate to without stripping them of their ambiguities. "I think what you're trying to achieve is getting people to understand the circumstances that lead up to what happened and why someone makes choices. So whilst Tobasi is not going to blow himself up, you understand where he is living and the circumstances he is living in enough to sort of understand why a cousin does that. […] And no one is expecting anyone to be like 'we get it, great!!' – no, it's fucking uncomfortable" (Lafferty, 2019). In the following chapter, we will take one theatre production as a case study to analyse how it approached this uncomfortable complexity while having both their local Palestinian audiences as well as Western audiences in mind.

6.7 *The Siege* – Navigating Audiences

In spring 2002 The Israeli army invaded Bethlehem. 39 Palestinian resistance fighters and approximately 200 civilians from Bethlehem, including monks and nuns, took refuge in the Church of Nativity. The church and its surroundings were besieged by the Israeli army demanding to hand over the fighters. For over a month the church was surrounded by snipers, tanks and helicopters transforming it into the centre of a warzone.

Thirteen years later The Freedom Theatre from Jenin refugee camp produced a play about the incident. *The Siege* premiered in the West Bank and then toured across the UK. In the development of the script the directors Nabil al-Raee and Zoe Lafferty, together with Ismael Jabarine, interviewed some of the fighters who had been inside the church. The directors decided to focus on the fighters' personal experiences during the siege – their internal struggles, the discussions amongst them, their decisions between moments of despair, hope, confusion and solidarity. While the play is an intense drama and full of tension, it also has a good dose of humour reflecting the hilarious absurdities and intimate moments of conviviality that arise from a 39-day siege inside a church. The aim was to portray the protagonists in their complexity as fighters, lovers, sons – with distinctive characters and personal motivations that had led them to join the armed resistance.

In one scene the fighters come back from a shoot-out with the Israeli army. Full of adrenaline they loudly celebrate that they shot a soldier until one of them angrily demands the others to stop it and shut up. He reminds them that that soldier also has a family and that they shouldn't celebrate an individual death, that their purpose is to fight an unjust system. "The main idea is not to complete the circle of violence, never! […] We are protecting a cause that is just and we have to keep our matrix of models alive, this is our mission, this is how people relate to us. We don't wanna turn into animals without thinking, without feelings. It's kind of direct criticism to the resistance and some people liked it, some people hated it. We broke this heroic picture that these fighters did nothing wrong" (al-Raee, 2019). Bringing on a play like this, Ismael Jabarine asserts, "is a crazy responsibility towards one's people, towards the nation! If a theatre play portrays the fighters as having failed, then you have a problem as a director according to the principle: 'you disgraced our martyrs!' or 'you violated the reputation that the fighters were martyrs!'" (Jabarine, 2019).

The directors had to strike a delicate balance when they wanted to portray the commitment and the endurance of the resistance fighters while also exposing their fallibility, their weaknesses and contradictions. The play had to speak to a Palestinian audience that had lived through the experiences unfolding on stage while also appealing to British audiences. Nabil recalls the enthusiasm with which the piece was received by its Jenin audience, "When we did the play here in Jenin, people loved it. And that's for a simple reason. The reality at that time [2002], it was exactly what was happening in Jenin refugee camp during the invasion. The siege, house demolitions, loosing friends, family… it was there. So it was an absolutely great emotion in the minds and hearts when they received the play" (al-Raee, 2019). Also Zoe Lafferty (2019) stresses that the local Jenin audience could easily identify with the characters on stage, "*The Siege* was incredibly successful in the camp because it's a camp that's so intertwined with armed resistance and even though the story happens in Bethlehem it's such a personal narrative here [in Jenin]. It was a very masculine play, it was very comfortable to watch that as a young man. It wasn't arty, it's a very straight, naturalistic play. So you didn't have to be a fan of the arts to understand the concepts being told, you could just be a young man and see guys on stage who have feelings like you, who have problems like you, who have choices that you are facing."

Making the British audience empathize with the characters proved much more difficult. Indeed, the main challenge in performing *The Siege* in Britain was that "you're asking them to understand and relate to men with guns. You know, we can very happily in Britain see many many plays about British soldiers in Iraq and be empathetic to the trauma and the PTSD and feel for them – but *Arab* men with guns? We have been so bombarded in the media and most probably Hollywood that these people are dangerous and scary and barbaric, so we don't understand why people pick up guns and what that's all about and actually the right to defend yourself in your own country" (ibid). According to Nabil the fighters' individual decisions to take up arms constitute the core of the play: "*that* was the interesting part! But as soon as we go out of Palestine, the discussion would be around 'terrorists or freedom fighters?'" (al-Raee, 2019). Zoe suggests that the British audiences "wanna see this kind of victim-Palestinian. And now you put guns in their hands. The discourse is either terrorists or victims. But I suppose the idea is that you're hitting both on the head. The aim is to challenge both. It is to say – these are the people who have guns, this is *why* they have guns and this is what's going on for them" (Lafferty, 2019).

But also the Palestinian audiences struggled with certain aspects of the play's representation of its characters. After several weeks of besiegement in the church the fighters are worn out by tension, wounds and hunger. One evening they sit down together and wallow in memories of lavish Palestinian dishes. Some Palestinian audience members did not appreciate seeing the fighters hungry on stage, anxious that their heroes were going to give in for such a trivial reason as hunger. Zoe says she understands where the disappointment was coming from – "you know martyrs and freedom fighters are something sacred here. We were pushing it a little bit" (Lafferty, 2019). Ismael is more critical of the expectations and preferences of the local Palestinian audience, "of course they only wanna see fighters, they wanna see heroic deeds on stage, so they can scream and clap and somehow be emotionally engaged" (Jabarine, 2019).

Finally, after 39 days the U.S., the EU, Israel and the Palestinian Authority had brokered a deal – the Israeli army would lift its siege on Bethlehem if the fighters were exiled – some of them to Gaza, some to Europe. One of the Christian fighters did not want to sign the paper: "I'm not going out! My life is here, my home is here, my love is here. I wanna protect my love. This is why I'm fighting. I wanna protect a relationship that cannot be normal under this cruel occupation, so why did we fight? What are we fighting for?!" (al-Raee, 2019). Nabil comments that it is a taboo to address issues of love as a fighter. Resistance fighters are supposed to fight for the liberation of the nation, not for romantic love. His reason for taking up arms was not the uncompromising dedication to the national collective but the basic desire to live a peaceful dignified life with his partner. Nabil explains that these passages constitute "an internal kind of criticism. It was a journey of explanations – who are these individuals and why are they fighting and what are they fighting for? […] We wanted to evaluate our struggle, to look at the fighters as human beings, not as machines, not as if they were people who were born to fight" (ibid).
Zoe stresses that one's own positionality is essential for the perception of a play, "sometimes the audiences here in Palestine said 'you showed that the fighters *weren't* just heroes' and in Britain they said 'you showed that they *were* heroes!' So it also depends what your relationship is to those people" (Lafferty, 2019). Thus, the exact same play will elicit different and even contradictory reactions from different audiences depending on their expectations and their personal relation with the subject matter. In Britain the play challenged the audience by showing armed resistance and adrenaline-driven Arab men, in Palestine it challenged the audience by showing their heroes as doubtful, hungry and fragile. All in all, The Freedom Theatre's *The Siege* represents a remarkable effort in acknowledging the personal complexities and ambiguities

inherent to the Palestinian resistance and identities while navigating multiple audiences. In the final chapter 7 we will explore more cultural productions that challenge audience expectations and fundamentally question and broaden representations of Palestine and Palestinian identity.

7 Representations of Palestinian Identity

„When the place you're in is no longer anything but its own representation, without the possibility of other representations, it's time to leave."
Elia Suleiman

In the previous chapter we have explored the expectations of local and international audiences that Palestinian cultural practitioners are confronted with. We examined the complex and at times contradictory dynamics that they need to navigate when exhibiting and performing abroad, securing funding and selling their art. In this chapter I will take a closer look at how Palestinian cultural practitioners respond to these dynamics and expectations and sketch out alternative approaches to representations of Palestine and Palestinian identity. First, I will briefly outline the genealogy of representation in Palestinian art, then I will present discourses and practices within the Palestinian art scene that formulate the desire to go beyond the established modes of representation of the past decades and to subvert the expectations of both local Palestinian as well as international audiences.

7.1 From Refugees to Revolutionaries: A Genealogy of Representation

For a long time, studies on Palestinian visual arts recounted the history of Palestinian art starting from the Nakba as if there had been virtually no Palestinian art production before 1948. This is certainly influenced by the fact that we mostly think of Palestinian art in terms of its opposition to Israel. Thus, Palestinian artists before 1948 don't fall into that opposition and did not depict the typical motifs of national resistance according to which Palestinian art is framed as such. It wasn't until the mid-2000s that Kamal Boullata (2009), Ganit Ankori (2006) and others drew attention to earlier artists whose paintings reflect a range of styles and topics.[20] Just as Palestinian visual art existed well before the Nakba, so did a regional Palestinian cultural identity that became more and more formulated in terms of a national identity during the British Mandate and the increasing Zionist immigration leading up to the foundation of the Israeli state (Khalidi, 1997). At the same time however, through the traumatic experience of the Nakba, the very sense of being Palestinian was subsequently anchored in the collective experience of loss and dispossession (Lionis, 2015: 72). The main themes in visual art after the Nakba and up until the 1960s reflected the shared experience of exile and life as refugees and the longing for the lost homeland. Features of the Palestinian landscape such as the olive tree, oranges and the cactus

[20] Most of these painters became exiled throughout the Arab world after 1948.

became symbols for the lost homeland and also served as a decisive statement about the Palestinians' rootedness in and cultivation of the land, countering the Israeli narrative that Palestinians didn't really exist and that it was the Israelis who finally "made the desert bloom" (Eshkol, 1969). Other common symbolisms were that of the land as a female figure nurturing her children as well as the Dome of the Rock representing Jerusalem as the religious centre of Palestine (Boullata, 2009; Ankori, 2006).

The 1960s witnessed a generational and ideological shift. The ranks of the fedayeen (فِدائيّين, armed resistance fighters) increased who sought to liberate Palestine with arms. Between 1965 and 1967 the fedayeen associated with Fatah carried out approximately 200 raids on Israel. The 1967 war resulted in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Palestinian disappointment with pan-Arab ideology and the further radicalization of the Palestinian national liberation movement (Boulos, 2013; Lionis, 2015). Fatah eventually established a political and military headquarter in the Jordanian village of Karameh from which they repeatedly tried to infiltrate the West Bank. On 21 March 1968 Israeli forces attacked the base and even though they employed a huge military arsenal, outnumbering the Palestinians by large, they withdrew after suffering more casualties than expected. The reported fearlessness and success of the fedayeen fostered a downright mythology of Palestinian heroism, motivating more Palestinians to join the armed struggle. The new generation used art and music as a deliberate tool to support and reflect their new collective identity that was anchored in revolution and militancy. The perception and self-representation of Palestinians transformed "from peasants to revolutionaries" (Sayigh, 1979a) and the visual aesthetics mostly adopted a social realist style and featured new symbols that reflected the shift of the Palestinian identity such as the gun, the flag, the kuffiyeh and the fedayeen wearing them (Lionis, 2015).

During the first Intifada 1987-1993 "the symbol of the revolutionary peasant was gradually overshadowed by that of the children of the stones and of the martyr" (El-Ghadban & Strohm, 2013:184). This period marks a popularization of the Palestinian struggle; the armed fighters weren't the main subjects of national liberation anymore but the common people, armed with nothing more than a few stones to throw at Israeli tanks.

Thus, the artistic representation of Palestinian identity reflected the political watershed moments in the collective Palestinian experience and Palestinian self-perception. Since the Oslo accords Palestine is stuck in a neo-colonial state where the Palestinian Authority collaborates with Israel in suppressing armed resistance and the popular struggle has lost momentum. The

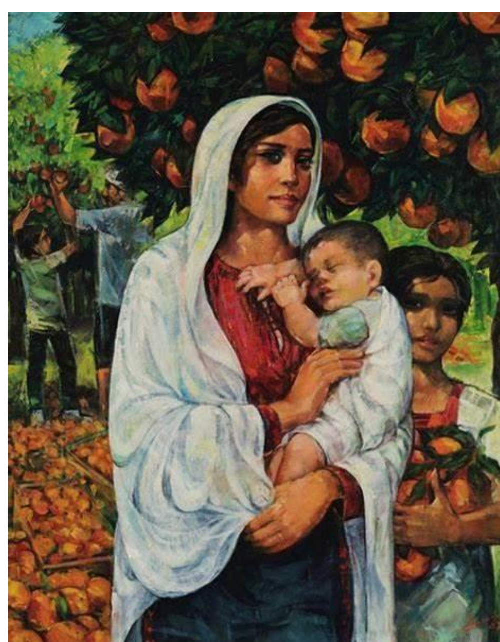
fedayeen are dead or imprisoned, the children of the stones are caught up in a neoliberal lifestyle that distracts them from their oppression, the occupation has been normalized on many levels. Many artworks however, still reflect the earlier stages, the revolutionary impulse, the popularisation of the struggle for liberation and most importantly the experience of exile which still is an ongoing reality for millions of Palestinians and their children.

7.2 Caught in the Defensive - As if we were all Peasants

"They fell into a trap" Jack Persekian

Throughout the decades and the changes in Palestinian self-representation one important and consistent theme in Palestinian cultural productions has been the landscape and rural life. Since the Zionist argument was that they came to "a land without a people", started cultivating it and "made the desert bloom" (Eshkol, 1969), the obvious Palestinian response was to prove that their families and communities had been cultivating that land for generations and that they had a deep attachment to its landscape. The olive tree became a prominent symbol of Palestinian rootedness in the land with numerous paintings that depict the olive harvest. Oranges are representative of the longing for the lost homeland such as in Kanafani's short story *The Land of Sad Oranges* where the Palestinians on their passage into exile stop to pick up some oranges on the way.

9: *Yaffa* by Sliman Mansour (1979)
(Source: *Intimate Terrains* exhibition catalogue,
The Palestinian Museum, 2019).



10: *Madonna of the Oranges* by Ismail Shammout (1997)
(Source: WikiArt.org)

After a 2019 presentation by art historian and curator Tina Sherwell about Palestinian utopian landscapes in Palestinian visual art the audience at Al-Ma'mal Foundation in East Jerusalem got into a heated debate about the representation of Palestine. The Jerusalem intellectual elite expressed their discontent and annoyance with the eternal depiction of rural life and the prominence of the fellāḥi [فَلَّاحِيْ, farmer] figure that made it seem as if urban populations had not existed prior to 1948. In many of their eyes the Palestinian political leadership had made a mistake by elevating the fellāḥīn as national identity while disregarding the cultural richness and diversity of Palestinian cities. Even though a majority of the Palestinians in 1948 were indeed living in the countryside, there was a vibrant urban culture with concerts, cinemas and literary events that was well connected to the cultural scene of the broader region. Also anti-colonial resistance and uprisings emanated from both the rural and urban populations. Jerusalemite artist and curator Jack Persekian is an adamant critic of the narrowing of Palestinian identity to the peasant experience, "I know there were confrontations [with the British mandate and the Zionist movement] in the cities as well as in the villages and countryside. But when it eventually came to the question of representing either this or representing this as an identity, it was immediately as if we are the fellāḥīn, so everybody took off their tarboosh and started wearing ḥaṭṭah w ʿgāl (حَطَّة و عِقَال)[21]" (Persekian, 2019).

Thus, while the national movement has been combatting Israeli strategies of erasure mainly by focusing on peasant life and culture to prove their presence on the land (Swedenburg, 1990), the cultural life in cities prior to 1948 is much less documented and evoked in cultural productions. Institutions such as The Popular Art Center in Al Bireh have been archiving and performing folk songs and dances from different villages since the 1960s, only much more recently people have turned their attention to urban composers. Nader Jalal is challenging this selective national memory by reviving urban Palestinian music composed before the Nakba. As founder and director of the Palestinian Institute for Cultural Development *NAWA* he collects and re-arranges the music of classical Palestinian composers prior to 1948 to bring their compositions back on stage and into Palestinian consciousness.

[21] The ḥaṭṭah or kuffiyeh has been a common head garment for men in the middle East, The ʿgāl is a black chord that holds the kuffiyeh in place. In Palestine the kuffiyeh has been mostly worn by and associated with rural populations while many Palestinians in the cities during the Ottoman Empire (1516-1918) adopted the style of wearing a tarboosh, especially the educated and economic elite. The tarboosh remained a common fashion item in Palestinian cities during the British Mandate (1920-1948).

Jack Persekian claims that “the mistake that Palestinians fell into is that Jews were saying ‘We were here before!’ As if ‘*we were here before*’ means that ‘*we have a claim*’ or ‘*a more rightful claim to this land than you who've been here only maybe a couple of hundred years*.’ So that's this argument that they got into. […] It's not about who came first. Because these people are actually the product of all these different nations including the Jews who are here. So yes we are Jews also and we are Christians and we are Muslims and we are atheists and we are Romans and we are Byzantines and we are all of that together. Why do you need to argue who came first and who owned the land before? And those people, the intellectuals, the city dwellers who were working in academia, who had newspapers, who were publishing or I don't know what... They shouldn't have fallen into this kind of oversimplified argument of what this identity is!” (Persekian, 2019).

Drawing on Foucault’s assertion that “resistance […] always relies upon the situation against which it struggles” (1996:387), we may conclude that the logic of Palestinian resistance relies on strategies of Israeli oppression and that Palestinian identity has been formulated as an antithesis to Zionist narratives. The broader issue here, as Persekian pointed out, is that Palestinian identity has largely been conceived in response to Israeli discourse and not as and of its own. Hanan Toukan (2018) stresses that “this counternarrative is extremely important and necessary insofar as it responds to Israel’s military and Zionist discursive narrative that attempts to erase the Palestinian people. However, there is a need to go beyond the defensive. As Beshara Doumani puts it, “how can Palestinians take control of and shape their own narratives, but not in a defensive mechanical way that simply responds to how they are represented by others?” (Doumani & Biemann, 2010). If Palestinian identity has been formulated essentially as a response to Zionism and to the Israeli occupation it becomes increasingly harder for subsequent generations of Palestinians to exist, perceive and represent themselves beyond their own oppression. The risk of Palestinian cultural productions that present the colonial state as an all-dominating power which defines the Palestinian experience, is that they might inadvertently consolidate their own subjugation. In the following sections I will have a closer look at different artists who seek not to mirror the Israeli discourse of national entitlement but to transcend its exclusionary logic.

7.3 Palestinianism – Dismantling the Flag

Persekian's aforementioned conception of Palestinian identity reflects Edward Said's notion of *Palestinianism* which Said saw not merely an anti-thesis to Zionism but which advocated a much broader and inclusive notion based on the long history of multi-layered identities in Palestine (Said, 1970). As Palestinian anthropologist Rashid Khalidi describes, Palestinian intellectuals and public figures in the late 19th and early 20th century used to simultaneously harbor their affinities between "the Ottoman Empire, their religion, Arabism, their homeland Palestine, their city or region, and their family, without feeling any contradiction, or sense of conflicting loyalty" (1997: 19). In addition to the already existing layers of identity, Palestinian identity became even more complex after the dispersal of approximately 700,000 Palestinians in 1948 (Morris, 1997) since which Palestinian refugees and their descendants have been living in exile across the Middle East and the rest of the world with various legal statuses, with and without citizenship. Rosemary Sayigh whose anthropological studies contributed significantly to the understanding of Palestinian experiences in exile stated that "a unified Palestinian society cannot be *re*constructed because it has never existed (1979b:108, original emphasis) and warned that "a reconstructed Palestinianism could be reactionary or merely sentimental" (ibid: 108). Said's notion of *Palestinianism* however, conceives an identity that is inclusive and open-ended. It is formulated in opposition to the exclusionary nationalisms that are based on the fear of the Other. Said imagined a non-sectarian future that embraced Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze in a vision of Palestine that represents "a dynamic intervention in history, rather than a return to origin" (Shatz, 2021) or to the reactionary and sentimental society that Sayigh was wary of.

Faced with colonial erasure and in order to unite the diverse and dispersed population under one national struggle the idea of Palestine has been narrowed down throughout the last decennia, departing from an inclusive multicultural and multireligious *Palestinianism* as envisioned by Edward Said to a rather exclusive nationalism (Al-Shaikh, 2009). In a similar fashion Palestinian *fan multazm*[22] has been narrowing down representations of Palestine to a one-dimensional nationalist struggle and as a result oftentimes transformed a complex reality into simplified stories and symbols. According to journalist and poet Rajaa Natour (2019) "a patriotic or nationalist cultural discourse leads to the creation of a collective, uniform and shallow art that has a single voice and a single story to tell – the national historic story of the collective, and not

[22] Committed art; see page 15

necessarily its complex cultural story.” Bethlehemite painter Johny Andonia is equally harsh in his critique of the nationalist undertones of cultural productions and events such as the Ismail Shammout Award, a yearly competition for young Palestinian visual artists. Telling me about the choice of the 2018 competition theme ‘kulna lel waṭan’ (كلنا للوطن - *all of us for the homeland*), he complained, “it’s very cliché, it cannot be more cliché! […] What does it mean – *waṭan?* For what? To be against afterwards? This is what I wish for Palestinians to have a *waṭan* for one day in order to turn against it. […] Once a journalist asked me ‘so are you with the one-state solution or the two-state solution?’ and then I told her ‘for zero-state solution’ - I think she got what I mean after a long discussion...” (Andonia, 2019).

11: *Ahed – the Homeland Promise* by Issam M. Mukhaimar (left) & *Lilies of the Vase* by Doaa Saad Qeshta.
(Source: Ismail Shammout Award exhibition catalogue, 2018).

The 2018 selection of works for the Ismail Shammout Award featured many symbolic paintings including depictions of the Dome of the Rock, olive branches, Palestinians with flag and kuffiyeh. Several of the selected paintings featured Ahed Tamimi, the Palestinian teenage girl who got arrested and charged to several months in prison after slapping an Israeli soldier when he entered her home. Tamimi who was already known for her political activism since a young age quickly became an icon of Palestinian resistance after her arrest in December 2017. One painting shows her in front of a symbolic landscape fusing the Dome of the Rock and

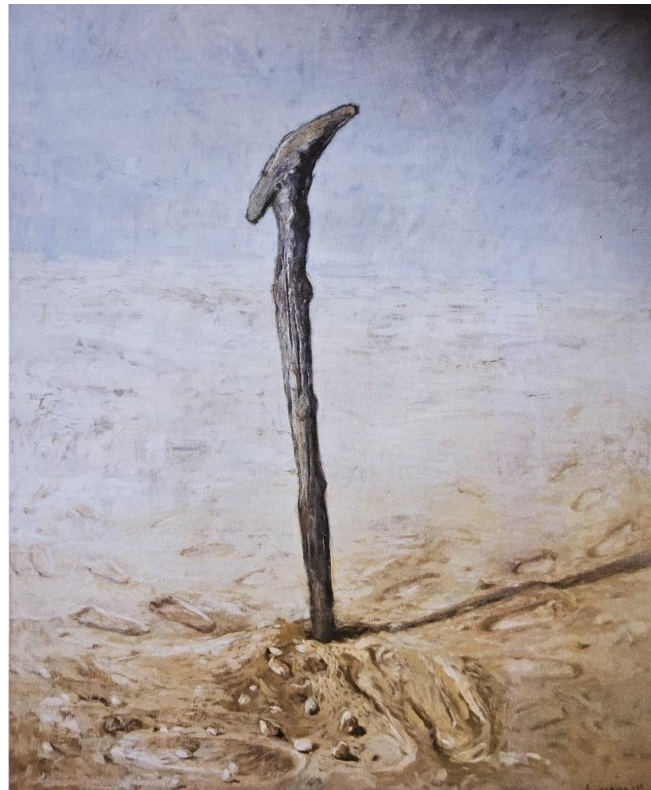
destroyed houses in Gaza (both very far from her hometown where the incident occurred) sitting with a raised fist on the shoulders of Ibrahim Abu Thuraya who was shot a year before while protesting at the Gaza border fence in 2017. Another painting shows her as growing out of an olive tree, being one with the occupied land and holding the Dome of the Rock to her chest. Both paintings are highly symbolic compositions that attempt to squeeze a wide range of visual markers of resistance and national identity into a single frame.

The 2019 edition of the Ismail Shammout Award was formulated with a question mark, the theme of that year was 'Laweīn?' [لوين؟ - Whereto?]. As a consequence, the submissions were less partisan and symbolic, more subtle and ambivalent. 'Birds on their heads' is an ancient Arabic expression to describe a state of stagnancy in anticipation, potentially fearful, potentially dreaming. Reem Natsheh recontextualized the old expression within the colonial limbo that Palestine is stuck in since the Nakba, "Palestinians have in this time remained in a state of anticipation and waiting to see what will happen to their cause. What is the Palestinian, of displacement and suffering and patience, except the application of the phrase 'the birds on their heads?'" (Natsheh, 2019).

12: *Birds on their Heads* by Reem Natsheh. (Source: Ismail Shammout Award exhibition catalogue, 2019).

Ahmad Yasin's painting *Until When?* Is a reference to Ismail Shammout's painting *Whereto?* which inspired that year's competition theme. Shammout's painting from 1953 shows an exhausted father walking into exile with three children. Walking through the barren landscape he holds a cane in his left hand. Yasin's painting features the cane alone whereas the Palestinian refugees can only be traced by the footsteps they left on the soil leading all in different directions. The land and the sky melt into each other with nothing to hold on to and no destination in sight. The artist's statement reads, "The father who was carrying the cane is dead and so too is the national reference and the revolutionary basis upon which the Palestinian cause stands. The traces of the children are spread across a chaotic emptiness, indicating the fragmentation and loss we endure as we search for purpose and meaning" (Yasin, 2019).

13: *Where to?* by Ismail Shammout (1953). (Source: www.wikiart.org).



14: *Until When?* by Ahmad Yasin. (Source: Ismail Shammout Award exhibition catalogue, 2019).

Alaa Albaba's painting of the café which I mentioned previously[23] points out a more concrete socio-economic development - the widening socio-political gap between the camp population and the urban middle class that is aspiring to a neoliberal lifestyle while throwing a distanced

[23] See chapter 4.2, page 24

glance down at the camp next door. In general, all the works presented at the 2019 Ismail Shammout Awards talked about Palestinian experiences, most of them in a way that reflected the interrogative of the theme. Many of the chosen artworks transmitted a feeling of being lost and stuck as well as the lack of a vision for the future. Rehab Nazzal who also was on the jury for the award remembers the 2019 submissions as "so dead, so traumatizing actually… yeah for me it was… they're so desperate. Desperate!" (Nazzal, 2019). Nibras Barghouthi, a young artist from the West Bank village of Kobar, even submitted a painting that depicted a graveyard which exceeded the limits of the canvas. While his painting apparently was too pessimistic for the jury to be chosen among the finalists who made it into the exhibition, his somber work anticipated all the Palestinian lives lost until and during the genocide of 2023/2024. Interestingly, the exhibition didn't feature any grand symbolism or romantic visions of a liberated national home. The question of *Whereto?* remained open and the paintings rather indicated the disillusion and fragmentation that mark the post-Oslo generation.

Beshara Doumani who led a team for the establishment of the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit assumes that the instinctive reaction when establishing a national museum would be to build an iconic structure featuring exhibitions "that paint a romantic and defensive portrait of the past, that convey the trauma of dispossession and dispersal" (Doumani & Biemann, 2010). However, he envisioned an institution that would be critical of nationalist constructions of the past while affirming the existence of Palestinians in the face of Israel's ongoing oppression and erasure of Palestinian culture. In order to affirm Palestinian existence without romanticizing the past, victimizing the people or falling into essentialist nationalist discourse he imagines the new museum to present "a wide variety of narratives about the relationships of Palestinians to the land, to each other and to the wider world" (ibid). He envisions the museum as a process rather than a monolithic structure which presents a definitive national narrative. This approach reflects that every nation is an imagined community that relies on founding myths and state-building strategies to forge a common identity which can never fully encompass the diversity of any given people (Anderson, 1983).

In 2019 Fana' collective in Ramallah published a magazine titled *Black Journal*. It features texts, poems, art and photography from different Palestinian contributors. One text by Abed Shabane questions the idea of the nation state as a liberatory vision for Palestine and calls for an active rethinking of Palestinian identity instead of relying on customary symbols and narratives:

"What does the State of Palestine mean?
Definitely not an orange,
nor the olive tree,
nor the dabke dance in the off-season.
I don't really know what Palestine is or what defines the Palestinian, and I do not know how to define the homeland.
I don't understand any other country either. The concept of the nation-state developed, matured, and fell. The seasons changed and Palestine did not have a true definition within this framework.
What is the difference between Palestine and the Palestinians?
What is the difference between Brazil and the Brazilians?
We need to reconsider once again the depth of our self-definition and drop the remnants of nationalist lyricism, of the reactionary religious, and of the imported consumerism from our faces, from mirrors and from the eyes of our children. There, I think, lies the humanity of the resident on this thorny ground and also a more effective understanding of the relationship between a person and their immediate place."

Another adamant critic of Palestinian nationalist nostalgia is the film director Elia Suleiman who laments that "many people seem to think that the period of nation building that we are going through at present requires a linear discourse, a single voice, source of a nationalist art" (2000: 98). With his films he wants to leave behind stereotypical representations and instead "create images that transcend the ideological definition of what it means to be a Palestinian" (ibid:98). He humorously points out Palestinian hypocrisies and neurotic tendencies, reflecting Johny Andonia's wish for Palestinian art to "depict us as idiot as any other nation" (Andonia, 2019). Calling his self-deprecating irony "the humour of the ghetto" (Suleiman, 2000:100) Suleiman sketches characters that are neither victims nor heroes of resistance, they are a messy bunch of people, each imbued with a good dose of cynicism and questionable idiosyncrasies. Suleiman's movies might neither please a mainstream Palestinian public nor satisfy Western audience expectations for tragic Palestinian stories but they sketch a very recognizable, realistic and much more ambivalent picture of Palestinian society. Suleiman criticizes what he perceives as the Palestinian dependency on the national struggle as the main source for artistic inspiration stating that "there is still some work to be done about 'dismantling the flag'. I am trying to deconstruct

this imposed national image, this image constructed by all these cultural actors who are always droning on about what Palestine means to them and who seem to fear that if this image disappears their artistic inspiration will disappear with it" (ibid:99).

Calling into question their own identity and resisting the ascription of heroism and victimhood, Palestinian artists dissolve the established matrix within which inegalitarian power relations are reproduced. This anti-identitarian practice "is the one that is most often overlooked, but it is also the most radical" (Burris, 2019:57). In the following sections I would like to support these efforts by trying to unsettle the identitarian framework according to which we perceive and evaluate Palestinian cultural productions.

7.4 Deconstructing Symbols

Many Palestinian cultural practitioners have told me how they are fed up with the repetitiveness of certain national symbols and their romanticization. Armed with cynicism and irony, they have set out to deconstruct these symbols, pointing out the discrepancy between romanticized visions of the past and the actual transformation of the Palestinian landscape in the current colonial and neoliberal reality. We will also examine the commodification of symbols and shortly consider their repoliticization in the current global context.

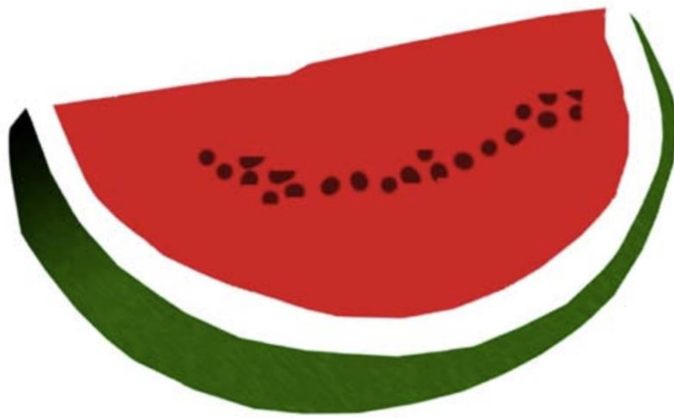
7.4.1 The Watermelon

After the Six-Day War in 1967 Israel banned the Palestinian flag in the occupied territories, this was followed by a 1980 law that even prohibited artists to use the colour combination of the Palestinian flag – red, green, white and black – in their artworks. Exhibitions and studios were raided, artists arrested and their paintings confiscated (Boullata, 2009). Some Palestinian visual artists twisted the Israeli ban by producing paintings that suggest the colours without actually using them. Sliman Mansour's painting *Bride of the Homeland* for example, shows a dead girl in school uniform lying on the grass, dedicated to a schoolgirl from Nablus that was murdered by the Israeli army in 1976. Her uniform is painted in blue yet known to be generally green and white, also the grass is painted in blue hues and the blood dripping from the girl's head is orange. Any Palestinian viewer at the time who would be looking at this painting could easily recognize the colours of the Palestinian flag that are contained in the painting without being shown explicitly.

15: *Bride of the Homeland* by Sliman Mansour (1976). (Source: www.palestineposterproject.org).

In 1980 a joint exhibition of Nabil Anani, Sliman Mansour and Issam Badr was shut down by the Israeli military three hours after its opening. The military officers urged the artists to stop producing politically engaged art and suggested them to maybe paint flowers instead. Badr then provoked the officer asking what would happen if he painted a flower in the colours of the Palestinian flag to which the officer answered that it would be confiscated – just as the painting of a watermelon (Chaves, 2021). 30 years later in 2007 when the *Subjective Atlas of Palestine* project asked artists to submit designs for a new Palestinian flag in 2007, Khaled Hourani, a conceptual artist from Al-Khalil, who had heard the anecdote of the Israeli officer, decided to submit a simple schematic painting of a watermelon. Since then the watermelon has become a symbol of Palestinian nationhood and resistance to Israeli oppression.

Nowadays, when passing from one town to the other one frequently sees fruit vendors by the side of the street who advertise their watermelons with little Palestinian plastic or paper flags stuck on top of the fruits. We have thus passed from watermelons being a symbol of national resistance to national resistance being deployed as a marketing strategy for fruits and other commodities. The subversive symbol has casually been trivialized through its commercialization when "the era of revolution became a market value" (Khaldi, 2019).



16: *Watermelon* by Khaled Hourani.
(Source: Subjective Atlas of Palestine, 2007).

17: Watermelon vendor, Ramallah.
(Source: https://darjacir.com/The-missing-pistol, 2019).

However, the watermelon recently gained significance again in an entirely different geographic context when Germany temporarily banned Palestinian flags in October 2023. After the Hamas attack and the subsequent war on Gaza Palestinian demonstrations in Germany were strictly prohibited and the mere display of a Palestinian flag or a kuffiyeh in the streets of Berlin were enough reason for German police to interrogate and arrest people (Sharma, 2023). Decades after Israel has lifted the ban on the Palestinian flag, the German state is displaying an unprecedented repression of Palestinians and the Palestinian cause. As a result, protesters started wearing T-Shirts, caps and flags with watermelons to circumvent German repression (Puche, 2023). Thus, while in the West Bank the watermelon had boiled down to a marketing strategy, it has regained its revolutionary potential in the current German crackdown on Palestinians and supporters of the Palestinian cause.

7.4.2 The Olive Tree

One of the most prominent symbols of Palestinian rootedness in the land is the olive tree. There are innumerable paintings of olive trees, branches and groves and of the olive harvest that emphasize a deep Palestinian connection with the land. Many of these paintings show an idealized, almost mythical landscape, depicting a romantic vision of rural life in pre-1948 Palestine. The harvest is never portrayed as hard and exhausting work but as a meaningful pastime in which Palestinians are in perfect harmony with the land (Sherwell, 2006 & 2019).

18: *Harvest* by Nabil Anani (2012). (Source: www.middleeastbooks.com).

19: *Olive Pickers* by Sliman Mansour (1987). (Source: https://www.instagram.com/sliman.mansour/p/Cj2yoV3tD2y/).

Johny Andonia's series of olive tree paintings serve as a counter point to all the romanticized landscapes in Palestinian art. During his extensive walks and hikes through the rural and urban landscapes of contemporary Palestine he simply paints his day to day environment as he encounters it. His landscapes are austere and without the usual traces of romanticism and utopia. As an average Palestinian living in contemporary Palestinian cities, you hardly walk through extensive olive groves but rather through concrete jungles. You might encounter an occasional olive tree as decorative item in the middle of a roundabout or in front of a bank building. Johny's paintings indicate that we are not far from Larissa Sansour's dystopian vision with olive trees being reduced to a matter of interior design on the 21st floor of a skyscraper.[24]

20: Four paintings from the series *Olive Tree by the Road* by Johny Andonia (2014-2015).
(Source: https://www.artsy.net/artist/johny-andonia).

[24] However, in rural areas olive farming is still an important pillar of Palestinian subsistence. The many incidents of Israeli settlers and military cutting and uprooting Palestinian olive trees are not only meant to destroy their livelihood but also represent acts of symbolic violence aimed at uprooting Palestinian communities from the land.

7.4.3 The Orange

Another symbol that has been evoked time and again are oranges[25]. In his short story *The Land of Sad Oranges* Ghassan Kanafani (1978) describes the journey of a Palestinian family from Akka towards Lebanon after the city had been attacked.

> "*All along the way there were orange groves. A sense of fear and anxiety spread over everyone. The car moved with difficulty over the wet soil, and from a distance, we heard the sound of gun shots as if bidding us farewell.*
>
> *When Ra'ss-Ennkoura appeared, the car stopped. The women came down from among the belongings and went to a farmer who was squatting in front of a basket of oranges. They picked up the oranges, and we heard them lamenting. At that moment I realised that oranges are something precious, and that they are dear to our hearts. The women bought the fruits and went back to the car. Your father stretched out his arm, took an orange, stared at it silently, then burst into tears, just like a miserable, little child."*

The father in Kanafani's story held on firmly to that orange from the Palestinian coast when he crossed the border and his hometown was taken; yet however tightly they held on to the dream of return, it never became a reality. Kanafani ends the story with the death of the father, the beloved fruit still lying next to his bed in exile, yet *"the orange was wrinkled and dry."*

Annemarie Jacir's film *Salt of the Sea* tells the story of an American-Palestinian woman who returns to Palestine on a tourist visa and decides to stay. Her dream proves to be a tough mission – upon entering the country she is interrogated, the British Bank doesn't want to pay out the money which was on her grandfather's account prior to 1948, her old family home is now inhabited by an Israeli woman and her visa expires after two weeks. When the dream of returning home and establishing a life in Palestine starts to crumble there is a car scene with a shot of an empty orange peel rolling on the dashboard of a car. The peel is still there yet the actual fruit, the substance, is gone, symbolizing that the return of Palestinian refugees to their old homes and their lives before 1948 has become an impossibility. The dream of Palestine has been hollowed out. Fana' collective goes a step further in their *Black Notebook* – the page opposite Abed Shabane's aforementioned text features the photograph of a rotten orange. The symbol of

[25] At the end of the 19th century oranges became Palestine's principal export and led to the urbanization and extension of coastal cities, especially Yafa. See Abusaada, 2020: https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1650539

national longing is overgrown with mould. After decades of paintings and poems that conjure the beauty of the pre-colonial homeland with flourishing olive and orange groves, a new generation of Palestinians is wondering whether this symbolism expired. They are tired of the repetitiveness of the symbols of longing and loss. Their take is a much more cynical one.

21: Still taken from *Salt of this Sea*. (Source: Annemarie Jacir, 2008).

٢. ما نراه من تشعب وتبدد في القضية الفلسطينية وتقلص المساحات الفاعلة في أجنحة المدافعين المفترضين عنها يعيد طرح تساؤل قديم جديد .
لماذا كل هذا العبث؟
ولمن كل هذه الصلوات؟

منذ انطلاق الثورات والانتفاضات الفلسطينية (المرتبطة بتخمر الوعي العربي ، والقومي ، والديني) تجاه الوضع المتهالك ، وابتداء من ظلم السياسات العثمانية مرورا بالحضور اللافت للقهر الإنجليزي ، وما تلاه من سبي صهيوني للذاكرة والمكان وحتى هذه اللحظة ، وما انفك الفلسطيني عن البحث عن زاوية الحياة والهوية في رقعة الشطرنج الدامية هذه .
ماذا تعني دولة فلسطين؟
ليست حبة البرتقال بكل تأكيد ،
وليست شجرة الزيتون ،
ولا رقصة الدبكة في غير موسمها .

لا اعرف حقيقةً ما هي فلسطين أو ماذا يحدد الفلسطيني ، ولا اعرف كيف أُعرّف الوطن ، ولا افهم أي وطن آخر أيضا . تطور مفهوم الدولة القومية ونضج وسقط وتبدلت المواسم ولم يكن لفلسطين تعريف حقيقي ضمن هذا الإطار .
ما الفرق بين فلسطين والفلسطينيين؟
وما الفرق بين البرازيل والبرازيليين؟

نحتاج إلى إعادة النظر من جديد في عمق تعريفنا للنفس ، وإسقاط ترسبات الغنائية القومية ، والدينية الرجعية ، والاستهلاكية المستوردة عن وجوهنا وعن المرايا وعن عيون أطفالنا . هناك حسب ظني ، تكمن إنسانية المقيم على هذه الأرض الشائكة ويكمن أيضا فهم اكثر فاعلية للعلاقة بين الإنسان ومكانه الآني .

تستحضرني الآن قصة احد المدافعين عن القضية الفلسطينية وإصراره أن مفاعل ديمونا النووي الإسرائيلي يقع في مدينة تل أبيب وليس في مستوطنة ديمونا نفسها ، ليس تهكما على هذا المناضل ، ولكن إصراره منتوج ثقافة الشعارات والرموز المهلهلة .

لا بد أن يكون بحثنا أصيلا لمعرفة إنسانيه أصيلة ترتكز على الخروج من مناطق الراحة والعاطفة ، ترتبط بمقاومة الفلاحين الإندونيسيين لحقول زيت النخيل ، وتربطها بتشكل مخيمات اللجوء الفلسطيني وتطورها . لعلنا حينها اقمنا دولة فلسطين خارج الحدود الفيزيائية الاستعمارية وخارج التعريف التقليدي لماهية الدولة ولربما بعيدا عن كل هذا صرنا أحرارا خارج حدود الكون الحالي!

Rotten orange برتقالة معفنة

22: *Rotten Orange*. (Source: *Black Notebook* by Fana' collective, 2019).

If the orange is rotten, the melon reduced to a marketing strategy and the olive tree – if not cut down by Israeli settlers – choked by urban concrete in the increasingly neoliberal landscape – what is there to hold on to? How can Palestinian identity be articulated without falling into the sentimental reconstructions that Sayigh has warned us about? How can Palestinian resistance be expressed without succumbing to the pitfalls of exclusionary nationalist discourse or entering into a discursive feedback loop with Zionism? If we acknowledge "that difference is quite simply all that there is" (Burris, 2019:47) what does that mean for Palestinian identity, community and resistance? How can Palestinian cultural practitioners make that difference their strength instead of a weakness as which it might appear at first glance? Having deconstructed the expectation that Palestinians should speak with a unified national voice, we will have a closer look at the ways in which Palestinian cultural practitioners tell and articulate Palestine from a more personal and idiosyncratic perspective. In the remaining two sub-chapters we will examine fragmentary and dis-identitarian approaches as an alternative to nationalist narratives and shortly wander into the realms of science fiction to discuss the possibilities of radical imagination and Palestinian utopia.

7.5 Embracing Dis-identity

Elia Suleiman consciously narrates his films in a non-linear way to better match the fragmented and multi-layered Palestinian experiences and the absurdities of a life between everyday banalities and intense politicization. "Palestinians have always been ghettoized in a way, geographically and historically. To translate this metaphor requires a nonlinear cinematographic narrative structure – there is a parallelism between the decentralization of the narrative and of the film's structure" (Suleiman, 2000:97). Suleiman's films are episodic assemblages of scenes often filmed by a static camera. These stylized tableaux almost resemble comic strips which could each stand on their own but taken together paint the acute portray of a fragmented society which "evokes the lack of community and the absence of a cohesive and unified identity" (Campbell, 2007). His film characters engage in repetitive, absurd and oftentimes apathetic behaviour which Suleiman never explains but gives his audience ample space to ponder on. In the first part of *Chronicle of a Disappearance* Suleiman portrays his native city Nazareth through the near endless repetition of trivial activities and mundane stories, pointless quarrels in front of a

restaurant, grumbling neighbours and gossiping mothers and a lot of sitting around in front of a stereotypical tourist shop called 'Holyland'. Suleiman paints spaces that are open to different readings and interpretations, a sort of visual poetry which he opposes to "an image still rooted in the ground and stuck in a dialectical relationship with immediate reality" (Suleiman, 2000:98). Ironically, Palestinian fiction films are often evaluated according to how truthfully they document the political situation. While resisting this demand of factual representation and linear argumentation, the episodic impressions of Palestinian life that Suleiman evokes might often be more truthful and comprehensive than a singular dramatized storyline. Most importantly, each of Suleiman's films sketches ambivalent and fragmentary conceptions of Palestinian identity which is never fixed but "an identity constantly seeking itself, in perpetual transition, antinationalist" (ibid:99).

Another visual artist whose work is marked by a fragmentary approach is Basma Alsharif. Her video essays associate diverse Palestinian experiences by assembling archival footage, text, own recordings, and audio commentary. Through the use of voice-over she is present as an author commenting on the images without necessarily arguing for a particular position. Her non-linear narration and fragmentary style reflects the nomadic and colonial condition of Palestinians around the world. She does not explain the dates, references, footage and metaphors she uses for an international audience. Rather than trying to explain Palestine to the outside or to appeal to international audiences, Basma Alsharif's video essays constitute a mode of self-reflection. Shireen Barakat argues that the fluid, cross-disciplinary and non-linear nature of video essays makes them a very suitable format "for the introspection of the representation of the current status of Palestine in the media, and the self-reflection of 'Palestinian-ness'" (Barakat, 2019: 30) She welcomes this introspective style for "diversifying Palestinian cinema, and contributing to a move away from nationalist discourse into individualist, subjective, self-reflexive video (essayistic) activism" (Barakat, 102). I would add that it equally is a move away from the international art market's demand to explain Palestine and to justify Palestinians claims. Both Alsharif and Suleiman require a different engagement with the images from their audiences by denying them coherent counter-narratives and challenging expectations of victimhood and heroism. Suleiman wants his audience to actively participate in the construction of the story by presenting fragments instead of a linear narrative with final conclusions. In his episodic style of vignettes that don't offer an obvious coherence at first glance the viewers themselves need to seek meaning (Suleiman, 2000:97).

While these fragmentary modes of representation might be more truthful than one unified national narrative, we might still be wondering whether fragmentation can be a strength rather than a weakness? Could this conceptual deconstruction of Palestinian identity be a constructive contribution to the decolonial struggle? I would like to argue that the cultural practitioners who disrupt nationalist representations of Palestinian identity provide us with an exit strategy out of the feedback loop as they refuse to respond to Zionist arguments or to satisfy Western audience expectations. According to Rancière politics does not refer to existing forms of governance and administration but rather to their disruption. While Suleiman's and Alsharif's work might seem less political at first glance they simultaneously disrupt the expectations of the international art market as well as the discursive feedback loop in which Palestinian artists are supposed to present defensive counter-drafts to Israeli colonial narratives.

In his recent book *The Palestinian Idea* Greg Burris takes on the mission to dispute the ontological fixity of Palestinian identity. Drawing on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* he argues against a Palestinian essence, stating that there is "no single authentic form of Palestinian identity. In fact, the closer one looks, the more one discovers that difference is quite simply all that there is" (Burris, 2019:47). While Freud sought to decentre Jewish identity by questioning the Jewishness of Moses, Burris equally tries to give Palestinian identity an anti-identitarian foundation, claiming that "the Palestinian has something non-Palestinian, something Other, at the core" (ibid:47). This view is shared by Palestinian artists such as Basma Alsharif who claims that "this lack of a national identity is part of the 'Palestinian Identity'" (Alsharif, 2018). Being born to Palestinian parents in Kuwait, having grown up in France and the U.S. and now living in Egypt she calls herself 'post-Palestinian'. This assertion shouldn't be mistaken as indifference towards Palestinian liberation; in fact most of Alsharif's work is a profound reflection on the Palestinian colonial condition. It is rather the assertion that the liberation of Palestine requires the liberation of hegemonic forms of representation. Acknowledging the burden of representation that rests on the shoulders of Palestinian artists Alsharif says that she is "waiting for the day Palestine is free so she can be free of her 'Palestinian-ness'" (as quoted in Barakat, 2019: 96).

The critical cinematic work of Alsharif and Suleiman shows us that it is not counter-revolutionary to disrupt the narrow conceptions of identity as they are formulated by nationalist discourse and operate as a mere defence strategy within the Zionist colonial framework. On the contrary, it is the very process of disidentification that brings about political subjectivization. According to Rancière (2009:45) "a political subject is […] an agent of disidentification."

Calling into question their own identity and resisting the double ascription of heroism or victimhood by international audiences and the burden of national representation in general, Palestinian artists dissolve the established matrix within which inegalitarian power relations are reproduced. This anti-identitarian effort "is the one that is most often overlooked, but it is also the most radical" (Burris, 2019:57).

Jack Persekians anger about falling into a discursive trap, Elia Suleiman's cinematic efforts of 'dismantling the flag', Johny Andonia's 'no-state solution', Edward Said's radically inclusive *Palestinianism*, Abed Shabane's refusal of nationalist lyricism, Basma Alsharif's self-identification as 'post-Palestinian' – they all stand in a long and growing Palestinian tradition that strives to exit the feedback loop of countering Zionist discourse with just another form of militant nationalism which is static and exclusive. They recognize that the struggle for Palestinian liberation is only liberatory if it does not succumb to essentialist notions of identity and refuses to be trapped within the exclusionary logic of Zionism. As the Israeli example of a Jewish supremacist state proves, "the underdogs who oppose oppression today can all too easily become the enforcers of oppression tomorrow, and as long as the movement against the Israeli occupation is based on a strictly defined and closed understanding of Palestinianness, it risks mirroring the very forms of identitarian hierarchy that it claims to contest" (Burris: 49)[26]. If we leave the confinements of nationalist reasoning and instead acknowledge the ontological openness of both Jewish and Palestinian identities, heeding "the lesson of Freud and to recognize that, like the Jew, *the Palestinian does not exist*" (ibid:45; original emphasis), any proposal to rigidly separate the land and the people seems absurd. As Edward Said demanded - the Palestinian struggle "must not be allowed to be put into an extreme nationalist, philosophically small-minded ghetto" (Said, 1980: 148).

It is in that sense that Palestinian efforts of disidentification and deconstruction of are not a weakness but a strength since they refuse to imprison themselves in the hierarchical discourse and ideological framework of political Zionism. Palestinian cultural practitioners who acknowledge and present the diverse experiences and multiple belongings of Palestinians therefore evoke a much stronger and pluralistic society that does not seek to reproduce hegemonic systems of power. In this way, Palestinian cultural practices of deconstruction and

[26] A fitting example of such an inversion of power relations is presented by The Freedom Theatre's 2009 adaptation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* that openly accuses and mocks the Palestinian Authority for benefitting from its collaboration with the Israeli state.

disidentification actually constitute an opening, a pathway beyond the double-bind of Palestinian self-representation.

7.6 Radical Defiance & Radical Imagination

Bearing in mind Abu Lughod's warning of romanticizing resistance we have examined Palestinian cultural practices to identify intersecting structures of power. By closely listening to the Palestinian cultural scene we came to understand that Palestinians are simultaneously combatting the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian Authority as its subcontractor within a neoliberal construct, the violent structures of patriarchy and the demands of Western institutions and media who pigeonhole and orientalize, victimize and tokenize them.

At the same time, we acknowledged that a mere focus on suffering and oppression can reinforce the oppressive system by arguing within the logic of the hegemonic discourse as it risks anchoring one's own subordination in the collective consciousness. One interesting approach is therefore to not focus on the military, economic and discursive power of the oppressor but instead on the cracks and gaps within the oppressive system. The very same cultural practitioners who have deconstructed static notions of Palestinian identity and nationalism have equally deconstructed the presumed power of the oppressor. Indeed, "the seemingly endless development of new technologies of coercion and control are not an indication of the existing inegalitarian order's power. Rather, they are a mark of its impotence" (Burris, 2019:23). Elia Suleiman wonderfully stages this impotence in his film *The Time that Remains*. In one scene taking place during the first Intifada we see an Israeli tank parked in front of a Palestinian house. A man comes out with a trash bag talking on his mobile phone and utterly disregarding the tank. While he walks back and forth throwing the trash and discussing a trivial matter on the phone the muzzle of the tank gun mechanically follows his every movement. By not giving the gun that is pointed at him any attention or showing any sign of fear while going about his daily business, he reveals the absurdity of the Israeli tank being stationed in a random residential neighbourhood. The scene mocks the Israeli military spending their resources on the surveillance of a bunch of Ramallawi trash cans.

23: Stills taken from *The Time That Remains*. (Source: Elia Suleiman, 2009).

Generally, the attitudes of the many unnamed Palestinian characters in Suleiman's movies express radical defiance towards the Israeli military system – the Ramallah partygoers that plainly ignore the curfew and the military's order to stop the music and continue partying; The woman who pushes her baby trolley along the frontlines of a shoot-out, making it clear that this street should not be a battlefield and reclaiming her neighbourhood as the shooting momentarily stops for the time of her crossing. When the Israeli soldiers shout at her to go home, she swiftly answers that it is *them* who should go home and who are out of place. In these scenes Suleiman unsettles the dialectic of the oppressor and the oppressed. Even though the violence is real, Suleiman's film scenes are radical imaginings of utter Palestinian defiance in the face of this colonial violence, exposing the Israeli military presence as out of place and entirely absurd. This portrayal is far more unsettling for the colonial state than yet another display of its destructive power. Suleiman recalls that Israeli audiences of his films felt destabilized and intimidated by his cartoon-figure representations of Israeli soldiers and his mundane and self-mocking representation of Palestinians, "they would have preferred that I represent them with more 'realism' so they could counterattack" (Suleiman, 2000:101). While some critics might argue that Suleiman's ironic style doesn't take the occupation serious enough, his work demonstrates that Palestinian sarcasm is far from being defeatist but can actually present a strategy to break free from the psychological stranglehold of colonial power. By laughing at the Israeli military and their inflated colonial egos, he dismantles the hegemonic discourse.

Even though the colonial violence of the Israeli occupation is undeniably present and pervasive the deconstructive efforts of Palestinian cultural practitioners such as Elia Suleiman remind us that "we should not mistake the hegemonic form of reality for all reality" (Burris, 2019:19). Mai Darwazah's documentary *My Love Awaits Me by the Sea* simply does not allow

the Israeli occupation to dominate the poetic beauty that the director encounters upon her journey through Palestine. She refuses to give centre stage to Israeli soldiers, settlers, flags, guns and walls. "While many other filmmakers focus on the Apartheid Wall, Darwazah instead focuses on its cracks […], the holes in oppression rather than the instruments of oppression (Burris, 2019:97)." I would argue that the most significant 'holes in oppression' that Darwazah showcases are the free and creative minds of the Palestinians that populate her film. In one scene a young man who is chilling around the old city walls of Jerusalem with his friends is sharing his sentiment of walking around the streets in the middle of the night: when no tourists, settlers and soldiers are around he feels 'like the king of Jerusalem', enjoying the nightly beauty of a free city beyond the daily humiliation and expropriation. The Palestine through which Darwazah leads us in her personal and poetic documentary is not defined by the occupation, her mindful gaze reveals a free Palestine that is already sensed and enacted by a generation of Palestinians who refuse to be defined by their oppression. Her representation of Palestinians who imagine, dream and practice freedom "is actually far more political than those images of falling bombs and dead bodies found in more didactic documentaries. Whereas the latter remain trapped within a hegemonic construction of the present, Darwazah transcends it" (Burris, 2019:97-98), giving us a glimpse of the Palestine that could be.

For the past decades however, Palestinian filmmakers have mostly focused on the more didactic form of documentary to show the world the injustice they endure. Despite Israeli propaganda and distortions, information about the occupation is widely available and accessible. This information however, does not automatically fulfil a liberating function; empirical information does not determine interpretation, let alone political solidarity. Thus, instead of continuing to document present-day injustice, some Palestinian cultural practitioners seek to challenge the reality of the occupation by radically imagining an already liberated Palestine. As Robin D.G. Kelley said, the most powerful political and social movements "do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society" (Kelley, 2002:9). In *My Love Awaits Me by the Sea* Darwazah's interlocutors speak with the calm assuredness that the Israeli colonial project is a corrupt construct from the past which is doomed to crumble sooner or later. The Palestine that they introduce us to is already theirs. Instead of abiding by representations of colonial injustice the 'kings and queens of Jerusalem' jump one step ahead and already claim the crown. Burris argues

that “the radicality of a piece of art, a protest image, or a film or media object consists in its ability to create a portal into the impossible and challenge the very coordinates of reality itself; it consists in its ability to magnify the fissures and hidden recesses of the social order around us and open a window into another world” (ibid:15). Thus, Darwazah not only challenges hegemonic representations of Israeli colonial power but also the expectations of Western audiences who would expect her to present hard facts instead of poetry, victims instead of radical dreamers or at least some angry stone throwing instead of calm contemplations.

24: Stills taken from *Divine Intervention*. (Source: Elia Suleiman, 2002).

In Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* the female protagonist, a West Bank resident, decides to cross an Israeli checkpoint towards Jerusalem without a permit. Instead of showcasing yet another scene of denial, threats, humiliation and violence, Suleiman goes full utopian – actress Manal Khader gets out of her car, puts on a pair of sunglasses and walks assertively towards the checkpoint. The Israeli soldiers are flabbergasted about her radically defiant attitude; at a single glance of her while slightly lifting her sunglasses the checkpoint tower collapses in a heap while she passes by unchallenged.

While artistic interventions can be indicators of power they can also foreshadow and evoke utopian visions of a liberated Palestine. Gazan artist Mohamed Abusal spent two months talking to engineers to design a metro network for the Gaza strip. He then built a metro sign post in the shape of a big M and carried it to the seventy designated metro stops on his map. The resulting photographs imagine Gaza with an effective public transport system, imagining a society that takes the traffic and pollution issues of the overcrowded area into their own hands. Since the Israeli blockade imposes a strict ban on imports to Gaza, people have built an underground system to smuggle everything from construction material over weapons to medicine and food into the blockaded area. Abusal just drew the obvious conclusion – "we're now experienced in digging holes and tunnels underground so we must put that experience to good use now. We are underground experts" (as quoted in Schembri, 2011). Instead of producing another work about the oppression and destruction of Gaza and the victimhood of its inhabitants, Abusal decided to focus on the skills and knowledge that they have acquired under their besiegement in order to re-imagine Gazan infrastructure, movement and self-determination. He emphasizes that "the artist has his own language that can present alternatives and solutions" (ibid).

25: *A Metro in Gaza* project by Mohamed Abusal (2011). (Source: https://abusalmohamed.com/project/a-metro-in-gaza/).

At the current moment, while most of Gaza is being bombed to rubble and more than 35.000 Palestinians are dead from the ongoing Israeli bombardment[27], performative and playful interventions such as that of Abusal might appear as futile utopian reverie. It is hard not to succumb to cynicism with regards to such art projects while Gazans are confronted with mere survival from one day to the next. However, Abusal's and other projects remind us of the Gaza that could be if it had not been under decades of occupation and blockade and that mere survival is certainly not enough for the people of Gaza but only the most basic requirement. They remind us that even if a ceasefire is eventually reached, simply going back to the normalized state of occupation won't stop Gazans from fighting for a free society and free movement through Palestine. Only because Gazans are held in a continuous struggle for survival it would be presumptuous and fatal to expect Gazan artists to be only concerned with matters of immediate survival and to judge Palestinian utopian imaginings as detached or useless. Indeed those imaginings prove that decades of colonial rule could not imprison Palestinian minds alongside their bodies. In the face of the ongoing destruction and erasure, "utopian dreaming is not a distraction; it is an obligation" (Greg Burris, 2019:29). It is important to recognize that the core of Abusal's project were not the photographs of his intervention which were then exhibited abroad but rather the conversations and interactions that he triggered in the streets of Gaza, encouraging residents to radically re-imagine the place they would like to inhabit.

As I have argued earlier and as decades of Palestinian documentary filmmaking demonstrate, a mere presentation of facts doesn't necessarily bring about political change and many Palestinian cultural practitioners have long turned to more abstract, metaphorical,

[27] as of May 2024. See https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-224.

introspective and sarcastic representations of Palestine. Another problem that Palestinian documentarists face is the disbelief of their Western audiences – the occupation is too absurd to seem true. After many experiences of having to defend herself for her documentary work Larissa Sansour finally turned to science fiction, "I know science fiction is not the first thing you think of when you think of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I have always worked mostly with documentary and the more I worked with documentary the more people didn't believe what I was saying because what's happening in Israel and Palestine is really so surreal so people start thinking that I am biased because I come from one side of the narrative. So for me it became more honest to work in a surreal way" (Sansour, 2017). Furthermore, Sansour wanted to unsettle the objectivizing and victimizing gaze of her Western audiences. "In a way you see a lot of documentaries about Palestine and that also puts the Palestinians in a very disadvantaged position, when you constantly analyse people, they become the analysed and you're the analyser, the outsider who analyses them. So I wanted the audience to be on the same par as the people they watch in the film" (ibid). Playing with Israeli discourse the protagonist of Sansour's sci-fi short *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcellain* calls herself a 'narrative terrorist' who buries porcelain in the ground which is painted in the pattern of the kuffiye so that future archaeologists would find evidence of Palestinian presence on the land. The short film does not explain how Israel has been strategically deploying archaeology not only to support their claims to the land but also to forcefully displace Palestinian communities up to this day. Instead of explaining colonial strategies to her Western audiences she simply delivers a sarcastic commentary by turning the tables on Israeli discourse. The critical use of humour and sarcasm that we find in Sansour's and Suleiman's work challenges the expectations of Western audiences and subvert the victimizing gaze towards Palestinians. "I think there is a difference between the perception of my work abroad and in Palestine. I think Palestinians are not afraid to laugh at what I am working on, whereas when I show it in Europe and the US – because it uses a lot of irony – it makes people uncomfortable. If they do know what's going on in Palestine they feel sorry for the situation, therefore they feel they don't have the privilege to laugh. Whereas in Palestine people have developed this sense of absurdity because they need to deal with occupation on a daily basis" (Sansour, 2015).

While most Palestinian science fiction is rather dark and dystopian[28], the genre also offers itself for radical imaginings. Emad Ed-Din Aysha's short story *Digital Nation* plays a hundred years after the Nakba in 2048. Palestine consists of a number of banana republics (with their subsistence agriculture literally being bananas) which are entirely encircled by Israeli walls. Israel on the other hand has consistently followed neoliberal politics and has privatized almost all its land, also water resources have been bought by foreign investors. The story is narrated from the perspective of the head of the Shabak, the Israeli internal intelligence agency. One day our protagonist gets the news of a Palestinian hacking attack – all Israeli virtual reality (VR) consoles are infused with a collection of games such as *Catering Guy* where your mission is to flood the world with Palestinian chickpeas and make the Israeli service sector obsolete. In *The Taxman* the players have to hide Palestinian government accounts until the Palestinian civil sector is entirely self-sufficient and you are able to finance healthcare, welfare and judicial infrastructure while secretly building up an arms stockpile, "so that, come the eventual day of independence, Palestine can simultaneously meet the West's patronising criteria for a functioning democracy, and show it has the firepower needed to defend itself should the West fail to be satisfied" (Aysha, 2019). A week later the Hebrew content on every digital device is turned into Arabic; Israeli schools, telecom networks and the stock market plunge into chaos. Shortly after, online maps and navigation systems replace the Hebrew names of towns and streets with their pre-1948 Arab names and all GPS signals are given out in Arabic causing traffic jams and disorientation across the country. Finally, the anonymous Palestinian hackers form a virtual government consisting of historical Palestinian characters from across the centuries with kids around the world playing the game which is leaked into every VR console worldwide. In order to score points the players need to administer the digital nation which is fed with real world data, issuing Palestinian passports, building permits, licenses etc. In the end, the intelligence service discovers that it is the defence computers in their own system that have been hacked and are used to execute the Palestinian commands. In order to stop the digital intifada, the Israeli state has to take their entire grid offline, paralysing Israeli infrastructure. Palestinians between the West Bank and Gaza organize and execute the few missing steps to overthrow the colonial regime and declare a free Palestinian state almost overnight. Importantly, the digital coup d'état as it is envisioned by Emad Ed-Din Aysha did not require a physical armed war. At the end of the story

[28] See for example the anthology of sci-fi short stories *Palestine +100: stories from a century after the Nakba* (Ghalayini, ed. 2019).

all Israelis are still there, moving around freely and visiting Jewish places of worship. Without any bloodshed the entire place from the river to the sea is simply redefined as a free Palestine for all its inhabitants. In a sense *Digital Nation* is the utopian counterpart of Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate*. In the former, virtual reality is cleverly played out to overthrow the Israeli occupation, in the latter, Palestine itself has become a piece of virtual reality in the form of a pretty prison – the neoliberal skyscraper. While Sansour's vision is a poignant diagnosis of current tendencies and power structures and in that sense feels more realistic, Aysha's utopian imagining is an equally important contribution as it challenges the colonization of Palestinian minds as well as the "philosophically small-minded ghetto" (Said, 1980:148) opening up the readers' imagination of what a liberated Palestine could look like and what liberation means.

In this last chapter I investigated the diverse approaches of Palestinian cultural practitioners to break free from Western representational shackles and from the feedback loop of colonial discourse, ranging from self-ironic humour over utopian imaginings to sci-fi and the many more subtle representations of Palestine and Palestinian identity. While these representations of Palestine might not effect direct changes on a political, legal or economic level they certainly combat the 'mind-occupation' and self-victimisation that Palestinians face, building a Palestinian society that is free from the inside; their creators are preparing themselves for a post-colonial future as a liberated society. While Palestinians never experienced an autonomous nation state, we can witness currents in the Palestinian cultural scene that go beyond a national vision fueled by patriotic sentiments in order to imagine not only a post-colonial but even a post-national society that refuses to reproduce the destructive power structures of nation states, instead giving space to the expression of multiple identities and fluid affiliations.

8 Conclusion

Initially, I had gone out to document more partisan political art works to argue for the discursive power of cultural resistance in Palestine, unaware that I was reproducing a rather simplistic conceptualization of Palestinian art as a tool of combatting the Israeli colonial discourse. I am extremely grateful for a number of encounters and initial conversations with Palestinian cultural practitioners that sensitized me for the underlying dynamics of the art market, the funding landscape and of audience expectations around Palestinian cultural productions. Romanticizing anti-colonial struggles can easily imprison Palestinians in a feedback loop of solely responding to the hegemonic discourse of their oppressor. As a result, we end up with a very flat understanding of a complex cultural scene. During my research I realized that many of the more subtle voices are often the more visionary and formulate a more comprehensive and radical liberatory vision.

We must refrain from a Western academic arrogance of telling Palestinian cultural practitioners how to resist or what to represent. Instead of criticizing Palestinian cultural practitioners for work that might be co-opted by Western and Israeli discourses we should directly tackle the Orientalist and Zionist logic that underlies these discourses in our own societies and in academia. In order to support the decolonization of Palestine we must acknowledge the complexity of themes and struggles that Palestinian cultural productions take on and the multiplicity of Palestinian identities that they express.

I also think it is necessary to conduct a systematic literature review on Palestinian cultural studies in order to analyse underlying discourses and to scrutinize the theoretical frameworks they apply. This will help us to identify blind spots and to critically examine the ways in which academic research might contribute to a pigeon-holing of Palestinian artists and to a conceptual limitation or conceptual broadening of Palestinian cultural productions. Also, as my research mostly focused on cultural productions from the West Bank and its geopolitical situation, further studies might want to expand their analysis to cultural productions emanating from Gaza or from the Palestinian diaspora. Apart from the geographic focus, an obvious limitation of my research is that it relies almost entirely on the recounted experiences of Palestinian cultural practitioners. There certainly is a need for further fieldwork in the very spaces where the admission, the framing, the distribution and the monetary value of Palestinian cultural productions are negotiated – action houses, art biennals, music festivals and the various offices of Western production companies, publishers, theatres, museums and funding institutions.

We have explored that Palestinian society is facing several systems of oppression simultaneously; the PA as subcontractor of the post-Oslo colonial state as well as Western donors and institutions that condition and censor political and cultural work, pushing Palestinians into the role of victims and consumers by applying a performance-based logic which favours a neoliberal lifestyle over decolonization, therefore normalizing the colonial limbo of the West Bank. Palestinian cultural practitioners across different fields and genres help us to identify and understand these intersecting systems of power which we might overlook if we only focus on blunt representations of resistance to the Israeli occupation. The cultural practitioners we have met throughout this research point out our blind spots and Western complicity in maintaining the occupation not just through direct military and economic support of Israel but also, more subtly, through the conditioning of Palestinian civil society, censorship of artistic expression and by pushing forward a neoliberal discourse of normalization. Far from being apolitical, many of the cultural productions I have discussed broaden the notion of resistance, politics and identity in the Palestinian context by addressing a complex web of power structures that include the cultural, political, socio-economic and psychological realm. I am aware that many of the voices I reference present rather a diagnostic of these intertwined systems of power than a clear liberatory impetus of how to overcome them yet the deconstruction of static symbolisms and nationalisms is in itself a form of liberation.

My research question arose from the discontent with academic studies that fail to contextualise Palestinian cultural productions within the international art market. It is vital to acknowledge that the production and the reception of Palestinian art, music and performances condition each other and that Palestinian identity is being performed abroad in anticipation of the audience's reception and tastes. Through the accounts of Palestinian cultural practitioners we have identified two contradictory dynamics on the international art market – one that urges Palestinians to prove their humanity and mimic Western themes and concerns and one that defines their identity mainly through their status as occupied people. This second dynamic engenders the victimization of Palestinians on the one hand and the fetishization of their resistance on the other. Thus, Western audience expectations and voyeurism push Palestinian artists to either victimize and censor themselves or to reiterate heroic tropes of national resistance in order to get attention on the international art market.

As we have seen, the representation of Palestine and Palestinian identity has constantly been adapted to political circumstances. It has also, since the Nakba, been formulated as a

response to Zionist narratives. This contraposition has forced Palestinians to argue within the hegemonic logic and to shape their identity in opposition to colonial discourses of erasure. The resulting representations of peasant nostalgia, sentimental nationalisms and strictly divided identities are still dominant and constitute the majority of cultural productions that circulate on the international art market. However, a great number of Palestinian cultural practitioners and intellectuals is articulating Palestine and Palestinian identities in a way that does not mirror the discourse of colonial violence and exclusive nationalism but seeks to transcend it. I argue that these anti-nationalist and dis-identitarian approaches are a more radical rupture than those which either mimic Israeli discourse or try to appeal to Western audiences and funding. Their work is relevant and revolutionary as they at once exit the feedback loop of Zionist logic and subvert the expectations of the international art market.

I am concluding this research in the hope that one day Palestinian cultural productions won't need to serve as a tool to oppose colonial rule and orientalist discourse anymore and will be free to explore all areas of life yet with the current genocide in Gaza we couldn't feel further from it. At times I had ambivalent feelings towards my argument, wondering whether I am betraying the Palestinian cause. However, I let myself be led by the works, experiences and voices of Palestinian cultural practitioners in whose subtle and comprehensive reflections I trust. Living in a colonial limbo shaped by neoliberal dynamics, they find themselves in a highly complex position of balancing between several tensions: expressing their ongoing political struggle without becoming fetishized as resistance hero pin-up, expressing the injustice they endure without painting themselves as victims without agency and in need of Western humanitarian saving, preserving their collective cultural memory without sliding into hollow symbolisms of nostalgia that have lost their strength due to decades of repetition and commodification. As long as we romanticize anti-colonial struggles, we will miss internal critique, easily falling into a simplistic nationalist discourse that streamlines complex identities into a coherent yet unrealistic national narrative. I believe that ignoring the multiplicity of voices and ambivalences *within* an anti-colonial struggle is ultimately harmful to the liberatory cause. With this thesis I hope that I have given space to a substantial number of Palestinian artists and their projects that imagine a Palestine which is not only liberated from colonial oppression but also stepping beyond the oppressive forces of patriarchal, nationalist and neo-liberal logic. As Edward Said (1996: xxxiii) reminds us "we must restore Palestine to its place not simply as a small piece of territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River but as *an idea*."

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