Palestinian Futurisms:

A no-state (re)solution, and other new imaginaries

by

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PREFACE: Triangulating my position in space and time

On a frigid evening in early January 2020, hundreds of people gathered in a nondescript, unmarked storefront on Southwest Detroit's Michigan Avenue. They slipped inside the imposing gray structure, shaking snow off the shoulders of coats stiffened by the cold. They were gathered for the opening of an art exhibition entitled *Preoccupations: Palestinian Landscapes*, which featured the works of eight Palestinian artists from around the world. The title of the exhibition itself, *Preoccupations*, indicated the type of relationship that many Palestinians have to place, and curator Kathy Zarur spoke in her opening remarks about the impetus for organizing the exhibition along the lines of landscape. In the context of a diasporic community facing continual dispossession and ethnic cleansing for over seventy years, she explained, landscape and place become a central topic of focus. In her curatorial note in the exhibition program, Zarur noted that "the artworks reflect a variety of relationships with the land, whether exilic, diasporic, occupied or under siege," noting that a Palestinian "preoccupation with the land can be traced, in poetry, literature, cinema and art, to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 on the historic land of Palestine." (Zarur, *Preoccupations*). For Zarur, and for myself, place and landscape play a central role in Palestinian understandings of identity, history, and culture. Given that a great majority of Palestinians live outside the land of historic Palestine, and that many of those inside of Palestine are internally displaced, many of us contend with issues of uprootedness, of belonging to multiple places at once, or no place, when thinking about landscape.

It is thus imperative for me to begin by triangulating my position, by locating the

landscape, in which my thinking on the topic at hand has developed and emerged. The practice of using futurism and speculative fiction as a tool for imagining radical liberatory possibilities has always been, for me, deeply rooted in the city of Detroit. It is in Detroit where, in 2015, I was first exposed to the idea that these two seemingly disparate practices could in fact be deeply intertwined, when I attended a book talk and signing for the (then newly-released) anthology, *Octavia's Brood*, co-edited by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha, at the Allied Media Conference. The book brings together twenty short stories, in the spirit of Afrofuturist writer Octavia Butler's legacy, "to explore the connections between radical speculative fiction and movements for social change." The talk left a deep impression on me. Three years later, in 2018, I would move to Detroit, whose suburb of Dearborn, located just fifteen minutes west of downtown Detroit, is home to the largest Arab-American community in the United States. It is here, on native Anishinaabe land, between two remarkable cities, one majority Black and one majority Arab, where I developed my understanding of the link between futurism and post-nationalism within the Palestinian context. An entire essay could be written just on how location has played into my understanding of these concepts. Suffice it to say that I locate my understanding of radical futurism and the power of speculative fiction for liberatory ends in Detroit, because it is a city full of power and magic that defies all odds; and I locate my beliefs on nationalism in Dearborn, because it is an example of the dynamic ways that communities can adapt, change, flourish, and develop new trajectories outside of and beyond the country of origin. It is to these cities, to the thinkers, artists, and cultural producers in them, that I owe the development of the ideas that I have only just begun to think about through this project.

Finally, I view my position as a researcher as one that is indebted to a long line of Palestinian artist-historians, people who have, for generations, written about the artist community

in which they are producing work. This lineage includes Palestinian scholar-artists such as

Kamal Boullata, Bashir Makhoul, Samia Halaby, Tina Sherwell, Steve Sabella, and many others,

whose research-based art practices interact deeply with their scholarship on their respective

communities of Palestinian artists. My intention is thus not to write a study that follows all

conventions of art historical analysis but, rather, to write about Palestinian art, drawing on

various histories, including mythic histories that may, at times, fall outside of the Western

academy's conception of what constitutes historical writing, as well as my own personal

experiences and knowledge as a Palestinian artist. In so doing, I aim to produce a work that takes

a more decolonial approach to writing about Palestinian art history, drawing on ideas developed

by Julietta Singh in her book *Unthinking Mastery,* which calls for less "masterful" approaches to

knowledge production in the academy.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to identify and describe a genre of futurist art and literature produced transnationally by Palestinian artists and writers following the end of the Second Intifada in 2005. Using first-hand interviews with seven contemporary Palestinian artists from around the world who are producing speculative and future-oriented work, I argue that contemporary Palestinian futurist art is characterized broadly by the dismantling of space and time, which produces an entire collapse of reality. This reflects the increasingly fragmented reality in which Palestinians live. Taken together, these works surveyed in this paper challenge the nation-state as a paradigm for liberation, breaking open necessary space for post-national visions of Palestinian liberation. The thesis gives attention to the artistic and political context out of which these works have arisen in order to illuminate the important role played by Palestinian futurist art in transforming Palestinian national imaginaries beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, offering new conceptions of Palestinian identity.

Introduction: A futurist framework

A first moon landing

In 2009, a spacesuit-clad Palestinian artist named Larissa Sansour set foot on the moon,

planting the Palestinian flag proudly on its surface—at least, that is what her five-minute film, *A*

Space Exodus, would have us believe. While Sansour's film was not the first Palestinian work to

venture into futurist ideas and themes, it does represent, for me, the beginning of a shift (in the

words of the film itself, "a small step for a Palestinian,") towards a new direction for Palestinian

artists living across the world, from historic Palestine to the diaspora. Today, ideas about what

encompasses futurism in Palestinian art are much more expansive than the early work pioneered

by artists like Sansour. During interviews with artists profiled in this study, I asked many of them

whether or not they considered their work to be futurist, and what their understanding of the

word 'futurist' was. Answers varied, but common themes emerged. One of the central ideas was

that futurism is, as San Francisco-based Palestinian-Jordanian painter Suhad Khatib articulated,

"an intention more than it is a pretention." Khatib describes herself, in her Instagram biography,

as a "futurologist," and locates her futurism in the intention behind the work. "I am not claiming

that I am [a futurist], I think I'm intending…I feel like all liberation fighters have been futurists,

they just never labeled themselves that way." Nazareth-based architect and artist Dima Srouji

defines futurism as a "state of being… or a lifestyle," adding that, "It's not about a place later, or

something to work towards that might happen, it's a state of being. It's a movement towards

liberation, in some ways." Yazan Khalili, too, pointed to a futurist intention underlying his work:

"There's futurism embedded in the work, and in the way the work sees itself. How it positions itself in time and in relation to what's going on, so it's futuristic in that sense, it sees its mission in the future, in time. But to say that the work is 'futuristic' in a genre sense, like say Larissa Sansour's work, definitely not." Khalili was careful in delineating the difference between science fiction, or genre work, and futurist work that "tries to change the image of the future, through the present."

In order for us to understand this 'first moon landing,' we must consider it not only within the scope of Palestinian art and visual production (I'll address that in Part One), but also within the context of futurist art and cultural production as a whole. Arguably, no communities have done more intellectually and creatively to explore the liberatory potential in futurism and speculative fiction than Black communities, both in the diaspora and in their countries of origin. While Afrofuturism is a genre that many of us in the United States are familiar with, the term emerged in a particular time and place (that is, in the 1990s in the U.S.), and thus, it invokes a cultural specificity that can limit our understanding of the entire scope of Black speculative thought. Many scholars have illustrated that Black artists around the world and across time began producing speculative, future-facing work much earlier than this, with the origins of Black speculative thought located "at the nexus of nineteenth century scientific racism, technology, and the struggle for African self-determination and creative expression" (Reynaldo Anderson, 1). Black artists producing future-oriented work have long used the genre as a way to imagine new possibilities for liberation from racial and colonial violence. In his book *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, scholar Alex Zamalin invokes W.E.B. DuBois's short story "The Comet" (1920), and his later novel, *Dark Princess* (1928), as early examples of future-oriented literature with utopic/dystopic, future-facing bents that grapple

with issues of racism and re-imagine the prevailing socio-political realities of the day. At the same time, scholars such as Sofia Samatar in her paper, "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism" (*Research in African Literatures*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2017), have argued for more transnational approaches to Black speculative thought, proposing new histories for Afrofuturism as a genre. She highlights how the (American) cultural specificity inherent in Afrofuturism often serves to erase future-oriented work produced by Black artists in their countries of origin. Many of these artists, like their peers in the United States, use futurism as a way to address political and social issues and imagine ways to transcend them.

Either way, it is clear that Black artists have been among the most important thinkers and artists shaping futurism as a speculative tool capable of challenging white supremacy, racism, and colonialism. We cannot understand Palestinian futurist art outside of this powerful and enduring legacy, which has, like many other forms of Black radical thought, laid the groundwork for Palestinians and other people facing oppression to better understand their own conditions and imagine future solutions. One of the futurist artists I spoke to for this thesis, Suhad Khatib, succinctly articulated the impact of Black radical thought on her understanding of her own identity as a Palestinian during our interview: "I feel that I was able to understand it, and understand myself through it." This sentiment is in no way particular to Khatib, and it manifests in multiple ways, often without going acknowledged, in contemporary Palestinian leftist political thought. While the focus of this paper is not to trace the impact of Black radical and speculative thought in Palestinian futurist work, it is critical that we keep the deep impact that it has had (and continues to have) at the center of our understanding of this work.

Ruptures in space and time

In order to begin an exploration of Palestinian futurist art, I would like first to explore

several of the key concepts and themes that underpin my conception and definition of Palestinian futurist art within the context of decades of Palestinian creative production. Central to my conception of Palestinian futurist art is the recurrence and centrality of ruptures in space and time, and how these ruptures influence understandings of nation and nationalism within the Palestinian context.

The artists profiled in this study whose work I have identified as 'futurist' are doing two main things: producing a sense of alienation from place (rupturing space) and manipulating or collapsing time (rupturing time). I argue that these ruptures of time and space are indicative of a collective Palestinian sense of loss, dismemberment, and fragmentation in the post-Oslo era, after 1993. Emily Jacir identified this sense of rupturing as a core theme of the works produced during the A.M. Qattan Foundation's 2018 Young Artist of the Year Award (YAYA) competition. That particular year, the competition did not issue a unifying theme or call for artwork, as it historically had. Selected artists—ten Palestinian artists from around the world between the ages of 22 and 30, myself included—were invited to produce work on whatever topics and issues they wished. Jacir, who curated the exhibition, entitled the show "We Shall be Monsters," citing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the source of the title, with an excerpt from the story serving as the epigraph to her curatorial statement: "It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another." Jacir categorized the works in the exhibition as being unified by their "explorations of stitched, broken, ruptured, wounded, dismembered and buried bodies and their parts," which are "examined through narrative experiments into rupture, glitches, and locating the broken body in a multitude of identities and topographies… reaching into the past and the future simultaneously" (Jacir, "We Shall Be Monsters").

It is this sense of rupture, central to so much of the work being produced by contemporary Palestinian artists, that I propose is one of the bedrocks of the futurist work explored here. An added element, which Jacir did not focus on, and which I propose distinguishes a work as futurist, is the sense of latent possibility that emerges from many of these works, and which I argue distinguishes them as futurist. These works do not simply produce a total rupturing of space and time so as to invoke a feeling of defeat or disillusionment in the viewer. Rather, the futurist artists profiled here work to alienate us from what we think we know, to undo long-entrenched readings of history, to disrupt the notion of linear time, for the purpose of breaking open new possibilities for the future.

I describe these new possibilities as 'latent' because most of the time, this sense of future possibility is not explicit, but implied. Zeina Barakeh, a San Francisco-based Lebanese-Palestinian artist who produces complex stop motion animations by combining 'cut-out' style images selected from a relatively limited bank of photographs, describes this sense of latent possibility when discussing the process that she uses to create her animations. "Because my animation is stop motion, I take stills, and I combine them, and each animation has…let's say 5,000 images…so the possibility of mixing those images is enormous…I am thinking about those multiple narratives and the potentiality and the infinite possibilities that emerge…depending on how I combine the images." Likewise, in his 2010 photography series *Landscape of Darkness*, Yazan Khalili photographs the West Bank at night, using darkness to rupture the viewer's sense of space (Figure 1). In these photos, great swaths of darkness are punctuated by the dull glow of orange and greenish light sources from distant Jewish-colonial settlements. Khalili writes that the series was inspired by an incident in the spring of 2002, when he was stuck in Birzeit under Israeli curfew for a period of several weeks. One night, Khalili and

a friend decided to take a night walk, and upon reaching the top of a hill, saw, beyond the

darkness, the city of Yaffa, aglow. "Oh my God, I never knew it was this close," his friend says,

before they set out into the darkness towards the city, which was seemingly at arm's length.

Khalili describes how, as they walked, and the sky began to light up, the city "completely

vanished into light" (Khalili, "Landscape of Darkness"). For Khalili, the darkness in the

photograph dismantles the colonial structures of the occupation that prevent him from reaching

Yaffa. In *Landscape of Darkness*, darkness obliterates the landscape in order to provide space for

a multitude of imagined (liberated) realities. From these examples, we can understand how

ruptures in space and time, combined with a sense of latent possibility, imbues the work with

what Palestinian artists working in futurist modes have described as an intended, embedded, or

inherent futurism.

I argue that you cannot produce the described sense of latent possibility without rupture—that is, in order for these potential multiple futures to emerge, one first has to dismantle existing structures and understandings of the world. In the case of Barakeh, it is the dismantling of the linear, narrative structure, the dismembering and rearranging of the still frames of the stop motion, that provide this potentiality. This is the dismantling of linear time. For Khalili, latent possibilities are brought to the fore through the annihilation of the landscape through darkness in the photograph, implicitly demanding that the viewer use their imagination to 'fill in the blanks' and thus implying a multitude of possibilities. Khalili thus alienates the viewer from the once-familiar landscape by rendering it unrecognizable and unknown, producing a rupturing of space. Thus, a dismantling of time (in the case of Barakeh) and alienation from space (in the case of Khalili) produce a seemingly infinite slew of new possibilities, making way for innovation and imagination. In tandem, they produce the complete breakdown of reality.

Reconfiguring the nation

If we hold modernist understandings of nation and nationalism, especially those developed after 1983, in the wake of writings by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm, to be true, then we can understand nation, as Anderson has argued, as "an imagined political community" that shares founding mythologies, consolidated linear understandings of history, and a variety of cultural traits and practices. Thus, it is in the dismantling of history and culture, in the rupturing of space and time produced by Palestinian futurist artists, that the very bedrock of nationalist imaginings come undone.

Given the relationship between history, culture, memory, and nationalism, and given the sense of rupture that is so central to futurist work, I argue that Palestinian artists working in a futurist mode are, in dismantling time and space, implicitly questioning nation and nationalism

as a paradigm for liberation, breaking open space for multiple, new liberatory possibilities. These possibilities look beyond the construct of the nation-state for the long-sought-out ideals of "justice, liberation, and return," which, despite changes in attitudes towards the place of the national struggle, remain three core tenants of Palestinian futurist art and cultural production. Thus, futurist works represent the shifting attitude of a new generation of Palestinian artists, scholars, activists, and organizers who are, increasingly, calling for new approaches to Palestinian freedom and justice that go beyond narrow ideas of territorial sovereignty set forth by so-called (failed) peace negotiations, the Oslo Accords of 1993, NGO agendas, and the corrupt leadership of officially-recognized Palestinian political bodies, first and foremost of which is the Palestinian Authority, but also other political groups.

It is important to note here that although the artists profiled frequently challenge nationalism and the nation-state as a paradigm for liberation, they do not necessarily attempt to undo the categorization of Palestinians as a people. While these artists may acknowledge the constructedness of Palestinian identity, they also recognize that this identity is based on shared material historical and political experiences and conditions to which the Palestinian people have been subjected on a transnational scale. These artists do not attempt to deconstruct Palestinian-ness as a whole but, rather, work to conceptualize a new and more fluid, porous, and changing conception of what Palestinian means and what a nation can be, outside of a state structure. Thus, their conception of a nation of Palestinians is not tied to a territory or the nation-state but exists beyond it.

Nakba as nexus

I tend to agree with Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon, who, in their book *The Origins of Palestinian Art*, locate the mythic 'origin' (in Said's conception of the term, which lies in

opposition to a manmade 'beginning') of Palestinian national identity in the Nakba of 1948. This central rupture impacted all Palestinians (albeit differently) irrespective of geographic location, social or economic class, and ethnic or racial background. On the use of the Nakba as the central, unifying 'origin' of Palestinian identity, Makhoul and Hon write:

> "We will be taking rupture and discontinuity as our starting point. Rather than trying to restore a pre-1948 identity, we will enter the idea of Palestine through the point of its failed origin as a nation-state. The Nakba has become the degree zero that everything either moves towards or away from. For Rashid Khalidi, it was a point of principle not to allow Zionism to determine the study of Palestinian identity. To take the Nakba as the degree zero is to give Zionism too great an influence. It brings the discussion dangerously close to the idea that Palestinians exist because of, rather than despite, Zionism" (68-69).

Makhoul and Hon have developed a framework in which they "look at the Nakba through its conscious and unconscious representation in cultural production, not as the beginning of a historical period but in its mythological place in relation to the idea of origin." They point out that "Khalidi's insistence that the Nakba is an end rather than a beginning ignores the fact that, in terms of narrative, an end is also inevitably a beginning" (Makhoul and Hon, 69).

I will be using Makhoul and Hon's framework (which, paradoxically, identifies a historical moment of shattering and "discontinuity" as the unifying force linking Palestinian experience on a transnational scale) as a starting point for understanding the mythic origins that underly much of Palestinian art and cultural production. Irrespective of whether the artists in question work in tandem or in opposition to this founding mythology, the fact of its dominance as a unifying national mythology that serves to connect Palestinians transnationally is a reality that must be reckoned with in some way by Palestinian artists.

Part One: On nostalgia, nationalism, and Palestinian art

Problems in Palestinian Art History

      In order to understand the impact and significance of the futurist artwork that is the focus

of this paper, it is first necessary to contextualize it. In this section I will, in very broad strokes,

attempt to render an image of some trends and movements seen in Palestinian art throughout

history. While Palestinian scholar-artists like Kamal Boullata and Samia Halaby have offered

rich and informative readings of Palestinian art history, I have noticed a tendency in their work

to project contemporary nationalist readings onto artwork created before Palestinian national

identities began to crystalize. Such readings serve to naturalize Palestinian national identity by

asserting that the works reflect a present yet dormant Palestinian national identity that has existed

amongst the people of the region from time immemorial. For instance, in his discussion of the

works of icon painters working in Jerusalem at the turn of the 20th century, Boullata writes that,

while "unaware of their pivotal role," 19th century Jerusalem icon painters were key in paving

the way for "a national form of visual expression" (Boullata, 51). This mirrors common tropes

seen in many nationalist historiographies, wherein contemporary nationalist attitudes are taken

for granted, then projected backwards onto historical events that predate the formation of a

national consciousness. Here, icon paintings are framed as containing a dormant nationalism,

ready and waiting to awaken in the hearts and minds of the people. Samia Halaby takes a similar

approach, but reaches even further back in history, projecting contemporary nationalist readings

of Palestinian art history onto ancient modes of visual production that predate nationalism by

hundreds of years. As far back as the 7th millennium B.C., Halaby argues, the ancient murals, icons, ceramics, and textiles have reflected a "sense of being an enduring part of the land of Palestine and its ancient sites is coupled with sincere awe at the beauty of it." This legacy, she says, forms a core part of the "visual aesthetic of Palestinians" (Halaby, 2).

Much has been written on the formation of national identities as a phenomenon that is linked intimately with the advent of "modernity." At least two book-length works have been written (in English) exploring the formation of Palestinian national identity, one by Muhammad Muslih (*The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, 1988) and another by Rashid Khalidi (*Palestinian Identity: The construction of modern national consciousness*, 1997). Both come to essentially the same conclusion, which is that Palestinian national identity crystalized as distinct from Arab Nationalism in response to the changing material realities that Palestinians were enduring under the British Mandate. Writes Khalidi:

> "Isolated within the frontiers imposed on them by the British, and having to deal with their own specific problems, just as other Arab peoples were isolated within their own foreign-imposed frontiers and had to deal with their own problems, the Palestinians necessarily had to adjust. Inevitably, larger Arab concerns quickly began to fade by contrast with pressing Palestinian ones. This distinction between the two forms of patriotism, in exactly the same terms, formed the practical basis of nation-state nationalism in Palestine and other countries of the Arab *mashriq* in the years that were to follow, as commitment to Arab nationalism continued, but over the decades eventually declined into little more than lip-service" (169).

As Ilham Khury-Makdisi argues in her book *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914* (2013), contemporary readings of Arab that assume nationalist identities were inherent to their societies, when in fact national identities had not emerged yet or were else just beginning to crystalize, erase the multiple potentialities contained in past political movements and art and cultural production. Ilham-Makdisi makes a clear call for alternative readings of Arab cultural production during the period in question.

"We need to reinterpret this entire period from a different perspective than that which as dominated Middle Eastern Historiography to date. Namely, rather than reading the *nahda,* this period of great intellectual and cultural effervescence in the Arab world, as a chapter within the larger text of Arab or Syrian nationalism, we should instead consider it within a global perspective…not as the making of national culture but as an effort engaging mostly in the production of global radical culture. This is not to suggest that the emergence of nationalism, specifically Syrian nationalism, was not in and of itself a global radical production; in many ways it was precisely that. However, nationalism can be seen as one possible historical interoperation, turn, or outcome of such diaspora and subversive culture, and one that ought to be contextualized within a larger picture of contention shaped by local as well as global movements" (58).

I read this as a call for more radically imaginative scholarship, scholarship that makes room for the multitude of possible political futures contained in past cultural production, and it is a call that I wish to heed in my treatment in the history of Palestinian art. Likewise, it is critical to understand that readings of Palestinian history themselves are not static, and shift based on our contemporary realities and political conditions. In Anaheed Hardan's book *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities* (2016), the book's crucial first chapter, "The Nakba in Arab Thought," does a phenomenal job in tracing the shifting political meanings of the Nakba in Palestinian popular imagination over a series of decades. She argues that in the years immediately following 1948, the Nakba was conceptualized primarily through an Arab Nationalist framework in public discourse, framed as a collective Arab failure. Post-1967, she argues, the political importance of the Nakba was briefly eclipsed by the Naksa of 1967, but by the 1980s, the Nakba had re-emerged as an issue of central unifying importance in the formation of a Palestinian national identity, framed as a specifically Palestinian catastrophe. This chapter serves to put into perspective contemporary readings of the Nakba vis-a-vis Palestinian national identity that we take for granted, undoing the idea that Palestinian history and identity are static facts, and instead contextualizing these phenomena by illustrating the shifts that they have undergone over the course of several decades.

With all of this in mind, I wish to move forward with a reading of Palestinian art history that strives not to naturalize contemporary understandings of Palestinian national identity but, instead, interrogates the various versions of Palestinian national and political identity that the work helped shape. While I could consider the work's impact on a number of political or social factors, I have chosen to focus on national/political identity formation specifically in order to better illustrate what sets Palestinian futurist art apart from other kids of Palestinian artwork through history, which, I argue, lies in its distinctly post-national conception of Palestinian identity. Like Makhoul and Hon in *The Origins of Palestinian Art*, I aim not to try and identify a mythic Origin for Palestinian identity through the work but, rather, to trace its various Beginnings and identify ruptures, understanding Palestinian national identity not as a natural phenomenon, but precisely as something that has been crafted with the help of generations of artists and writers, and which has taken on various shapes and forms. I also agree with Makhoul's assessment, in a separate 2011 article on the work of Suleiman Mansour, that for Palestinians, all art is political because in the Palestinian context, "the machinery of power is not implied, it does not need to be exposed—it is in full view and cannot be ignored" (Makhoul, "Looking Through the Cracks," 17). Moreover, because of the political realities of ongoing ethnic cleansing and Palestinian erasure on the part of Israel, to simply state that one is Palestinian is rendered a political act, regardless of intent. These are realities that must be acknowledged as we begin any discussion of Palestinian art and cultural production.

Shifts in art, shifts in identity

As I have mentioned, it was in Mandatory Palestine that a distinctly Palestinian national consciousness began to emerge as distinct from Arab nationalism. Yet much of the visual art

produced in Palestine at this time still had a distinctly Arab nationalist flavor to it. Kamal Boullata has illustrated how artists during this period began to Arabize European art practices, and contemporize traditional Arab ones. The painter Daoud Zalatimo, for instance, created vivid oil paintings representing imagined scenes and heroes from Islamic history, whose stories were also the subject of popular Arab nationalist literature at the time. These paintings served as allegorical representations of the current political situation. While representative of specifically Palestinian political conditions, they operated within an Arab nationalist 'vocabulary' that was present in a variety of forms of cultural production. Palestinian artist Jamal Badran revived traditional Arab and Islamic handicrafts using modern tools and production methods. In contemporizing ancient indigenous art forms and Arabizing European ones, Palestinians asserted their place as a modern people with multiple overlapping conceptions of ethnic, religious, and national identities. The particular shape and form of that identity is one that was still being debated and developed through the works in question as artists drew on various religious iconographies, regional mythologies, and creative practices to articulate various forms of identity.

The Nakba served at once to shatter Palestinian society and to coalesce it into a single body, as people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds, with different nationalist political leanings, were brought together around a common shared tragedy. While the Nakba impacted different social and political classes of Palestinians differently, it once and for all solidified Zionism and Israelis as a common 'other,' and it is for this reason that I locate the Nakba as the nexus of contemporary Palestinian national identity. While this identity has transformed in various ways throughout history and has been anything but static, the material reality of the creation of a settler colonial nation-state called Israel made the formation of a distinctly

Palestinian national identity that took precedence over all other forms of social, religious, and political identities necessary for survival.

Just as the Nakba became the nexus of Palestinian national identity, visual regimes established in the early work of artists responding either directly or indirectly to the Nakba, like Isma'il Shammout, Nabil Anani, and Sliman Mansour, served to encode visual regimes and iconographies of Palestinian national identity that prevail to this day. Like all artists, they drew on visual regimes established by their predecessors, adapting their work to contemporary political and social realities. Many of these artists were born very shortly before or after the Nakba, and painted imagined scenes of the catastrophe itself and idyllic pastoral images of an imagined Palestine before its ethnic cleansing. They too incorporated visual references to traditional Arab and Palestinian crafts, incorporating traditional designs from Palestinian *tatreez* (embroidery) into their works, and many of their paintings were featured at one point or another on political posters that lined the walls of Palestinian refugee camps throughout the region. This made their work accessible and readily available to a wide variety of people, many of whom had never been to Palestine or had little memory of it. Together, their works helped form not only a collective memory of an

Figure 2. Shammout, Ismail, Al Nasr, 1972, Lebanon, https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/al-nasr.

imagined history, but also a mythology of enduring struggle. Posters depicting Palestinian *fedayiin* preparing for battle, or Shammout's numerous paintings of Palestinians in various states of struggle and resistance, can be read as an assertion of Palestinian identity as one intimately tied to resistance against colonial domination. This is perhaps why the second part of Boullata's book on Palestinian art, which covers artwork produced in the post-Nakba period, is aptly titled "Memory and Resistance." The visual regimes established during this era also operated within the context of "Third World Liberation" movements, often drawing direct comparisons between Palestinian resistance efforts and those of other anti-colonial struggles within a trans-national context. For instance, in a 1972 poster by Isma'il Shammout, the Arabic word for "victory" (*al-naṣr*) is displayed in bold letters across a banner, which is held jointly by Palestinian and Vietnamese resistance fighters, with a fiery yellow and red sunset behind them (Figure 2). It is through these works, too, that many of the dominant symbols in Palestinian nationalist art— doves, olive trees, *tatreez* motifs, and cacti, to name a few—were established and solidified as core icons of Palestinian national identity.

In the aftermath of the First (1987-1993), and especially the Second (2000-2005), Intifadas, and the catastrophe that was the Oslo Accords, there came again a monumental shift in the way Palestinian society organized and perceived itself. In the previous period, much of Palestinian social and cultural activities were rooted strongly in diaspora communities. But with the disintegration of the PLO and its infrastructure, and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 in the occupied territories, refugee and other diaspora communities were systematically severed from the rest of Palestinian society and from one-another. A lack of any unifying political and social infrastructure aggravated societal fragmentation, emphasizing differences between Palestinian communities across borders. At the same time, the

intensification of draconian and violent Israeli occupation practices, when combined with the central Palestinian political entity being based in the Occupied Territories, focalized Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza as representatives of an 'authentic' Palestinian experience and identity. It was with the establishment of the PA in the post-Oslo era too that Palestinian society began to undergo what scholars such as Rema Hammami have identified as the 'NGO-ization' of Palestinian society. In her work, she outlines the ways that Palestinian society has transformed from a relatively centralized one under the PLO, comprising of vast networks of committees, unions, and well-developed infrastructure (including infrastructure for arts and education,) to a fragmented one after Oslo. The proliferation of NGOs in Palestinian society has caused what many have characterized as a depoliticization of the Palestinian struggle in favor of human rights rhetoric grounded in so-called 'universal' humanist values, replacing grassroots social movements with institutionally-acceptable activities that are subjected to requirements and criteria set by (often foreign) funding sources.

These changes in Palestinian society, especially the impact of NGOs on Palestinian political and creative activities, also reflect a shift in Palestinian national identity. Palestinian scholar and curator Rawan Sharaf has done important work on the impact of the NGO-industrial complex on Palestinian art and cultural production. Drawing from an (unpublished) work of hers, Jonathan Harris writes:

> "Post-Oslo, [NGOs] tried to begin to foster a kind of indigenous Palestinian Authority "contemporary art"—based in performance, installation, video and multimedia. These are the forms of global art…popular with the biennial exhibition curators around the world…The NGO-ization of civil society in the State of Palestine has fundamentally reformed the definition and character of the workers (of virtually all kinds, including artists, curators and administrators) who access such funding…Sharaf notes that since the Oslo agreements, [the artists'] identities have been reshaped into that of "clients" rather than autonomous, self-directed producers." (169-170.)

The problems with this reality are illuminated by a personal account from Adila Laidi-Hanieh's of her time working as the founding-director of the Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah (1996-2005), a hub for arts and cultural production in Palestine. She noted how, despite the NGO-boom in Palestine post-Oslo, "the abundance of funding for NGOs did not extend to culture." She writes in 2006:

> "We were grateful for the donations from major figures in Palestinian philanthropy, but even their priorities were more classic charitable causes. As for the international donors, they were primarily concerned with the hard political objectives set in their home bases. Thus, the aid machine reified aid recipients according to donors' political priorities, often informed by neo-Orientalist concepts, in a process we would neither stop nor change but had to join to survive…I had to couch my requests for support in noncultural terms: children, Arab solidarity, and so on." (30-31).

Such expectations have had a tangible effect on Palestinian art production, especially as artists compete for spots in prestigious European Biennales, vying for the distinct honor of representing the Palestinian plight to an international audience. The works produced in the post-Oslo era, then, move away from the objectives of solidifying national collective memory or positioning Palestinians alongside third world resistance fighters. Rather, these artists appeal to human rights, and attempt to show, using a variety of contemporary media from film to installation, the reality of the Palestinian situation, all within a visual language that appeals to the aesthetic sensibilities of elite art circuits like international Biennales. Here we have artists like Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir, whose experimental interventions and conceptual art installations serve to put Palestinian resistance, suffering, and history on the world stage. Like artists before them, they encode distinctly Palestinian motifs into their work even as they operate within supposedly 'universal' visual regimes that dominate the contemporary art world. While icons of Palestinian national identity, like the cactus, the kuffiyeh, the stone, and the olive tree, take new forms, there is also an incorporation of images of Israeli violence and destruction. Israel's

apartheid wall, checkpoints, and armed soldiers feature prominently.

Makhoul and Hon problematize the appropriation of Israeli structures of violence, such as the wall, into the visual lexicon of Palestinian art.

> "It could be argued…that even to represent the wall is to take ownership and that the various aesthetic decisions that need to be made to produce these images reframe it as a Palestinian object…The danger is that the wall, by entering the iconography of Palestinian art, becomes a constituent of Palestinian identity through cultural production. On the other hand, it cannot be ignored" (60).

As Palestinians attempt to visually translate the violence and injustice they have endured for an international audience, Palestinian national identity becomes entwined with that of the oppressor. On top of it, a victim narrative emerges, which many Palestinian artists have consciously tried to oppose. It is within this context that Larissa Sansour's "Palestinauts" enter the scene, making that spectacular first moon landing (Figure 3). And while I would not characterize Sansour's 2009 foray into space as the first Palestinian work operating with a futurist framework during this period (Yazan Khalili, for instance, has been creating future-
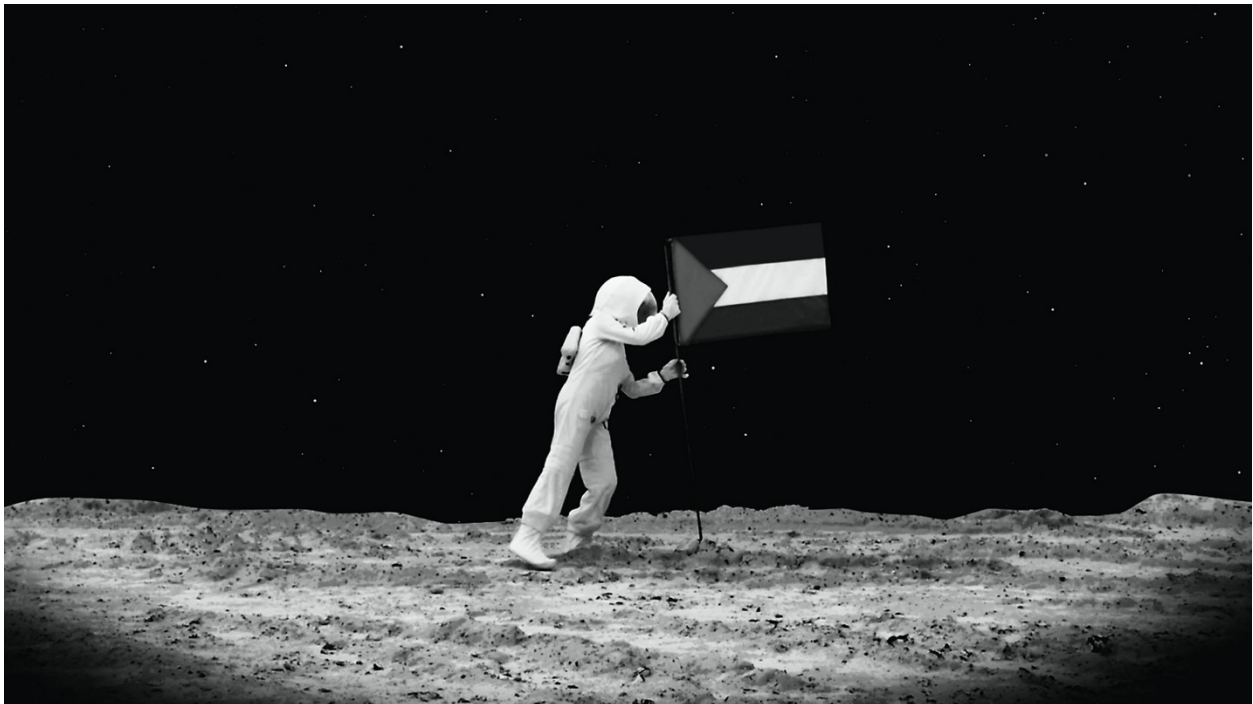
Figure 3. Sansour, Larissa, A Space Exodus, film, 2009, https://larissasansour.com/A-Space-Exodus-2009.

facing work since at least 2007) it does for me represent another monumental shift among

Palestinian artists that unifies Palestinians transnationally. Many (but not all) of the artists in this

paper have come of age in a post-Oslo world, having grown up with the legacies of the post-

Nakba artists informing their sense of self, only to find the world irreconcilably shattered. Fed up

with defending their humanity to international bodies, their work does not bother to translate

itself for audiences who may not be familiar with the Palestinian context. Futurist artists break

away from post-Nakba artists through iconoclastic interventions on and subversions to

Palestinian nationalist iconography and nostalgia, and from many of their post-Oslo

contemporaries through a refusal to directly appropriate or rearticulate Israeli structures of

colonial violence within their work. These artists have found themselves 'floating in space,' so to

speak, and seek to articulate Palestinian identity as they have experienced it, in all of its messy,

dystopic, ruptured realities.

Part Two: Palestinian futurisms: Ruptures in space and time

Obliteration as utopic possibility

I have discussed how Yazan Khalili has used darkness to obliterate the landscape in

Landscape of Darkness, and much of Khalili's other work also explores the rupturing of land in

other ways. I began my interview with Khalili by asking him about his relationship to landscape

through his work. He stated that much of his work has been focused on "trying to understand"

the landscape, in particular, the ways that it is romanticized and mobilized within the Palestinian

national struggle. Through his photographic practice, Khalili strives to question how images of

the Palestinian landscape are produced and looked at in order to "question the national identity

through questioning the image of the landscape." In Khalili's work *On Love and Other*

Lanscapes (2011), which is described as "a film made in the format of a book" (the mythic film

upon which the book is based doesn't exist) produces a narrative of a "failed love story," in which the narrator presents photographs taken by a woman who has left him (Figure 4). The book begins, "i wish i never took a photo of you/i told her years after she left/she kept looking at the scene behind me/i kept looking at her." Each line of text—yellow monotype on a narrow black background—subtitles a series of eerie film photographs of the Palestinian landscape. The photographs are devoid (mostly) of humans and, perhaps most notably, devoid entirely of any signs of occupation, such as the wall, or military checkpoints, which dominate so much of the visual production of landscapes of the West Bank. "we drove around that year/she wanted to
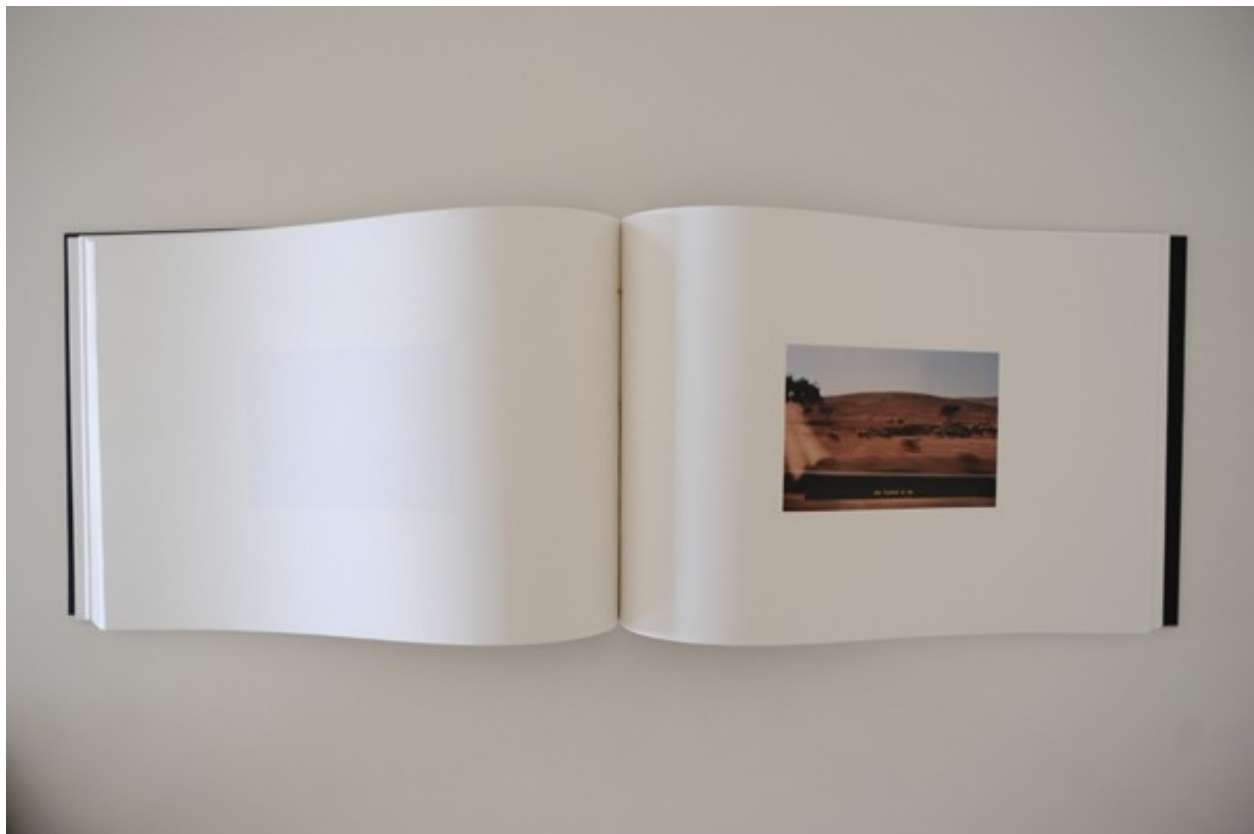
Figure 4. Khalili, Yazan, On Love and Other Landscapes, book, 2011, http://www.yazankhalili.com/index.php/project/on-love-and-other-landscapes/.

drive away from the wall/she didn't want to take photos of it anymore." Sometimes blurry, or out of focus, often shot along the side of a road, or with a side-view mirror in the frame, the reader seems to glimpse the scene out the window of the moving vehicle and along pitstops on the side

of the road, accompanying the absent lover along his road trip through the West Bank. "we exchanged [the photographs] later/she gave me her photos of the landscape/i gave her mine of her/i was never in any of her photos/she was in all the ones i took." The main subject appears, through the photos, as a ghost, his presence haunts us, as does the presence of the wall, always out of sight, but never out of mind, as if a pivot of the camera's viewfinder to the left or the right would expose something hidden.

What does it mean to produce new realities from a photograph? To generate photographic evidence of a landscape that is different from what we know it to be, that is haunted by what we don't see? Filmmaker Ryah Aqel also explores these themes in her short film, *The Harvest is Full of Thorns* (2019), which was displayed adjacent to Khalili's *Landscape of Darkness* at the Preoccupations: Palestinian Landscapes exhibition in 2020. Throughout the duration of the fifteen-minute video, which is an excerpt from footage that Aqel is using to make a full-length documentary about her family's village of Yatta, the lens stays fixed in one position as Aqel's elderly uncle harvests wheat. Located in the South Hebron Hills, Yatta and its inhabitants have been subjected to constant harassment, army demolitions, and extreme settler violence. Aqel's uncle is the last person who lives in the village, which he tends to and refuses to leave. Throughout the video, his repetitive movements as he hacks into the wheat are threaded together by his humming—he was once shot in the throat by Israelis, which has altered his vocal chords, causing his voice to sound low and gravelly, almost like an unearthly transmission. Aqel explained that the footage was shot somewhat incidentally, as she was attempting to capture footage of army buses going to the firing zone that the Israeli army has set up beside the settlement on Aqel's family's land:

> "I had been watching [the army buses] all day trying to film them, and then I get a shot and they had disappeared completely…We were watching them from a field

where my uncle was harvesting wheat, and we spent the day out there with him while he was working…You don't hear anything out there unless it's…bombs going off in the distance [from the Israeli Army's firing zone]…So all you can hear in this video is my uncle. All you can see in this video is land that belongs to us. There's no wall, the buses have disappeared. We're also sitting in a valley where you can't see any of the settlements. Usually if you're higher up from where my uncle's house is, you can see Yaqob's Farm, one of the outposts, or this chair sculpture that they [the Jewish settlers] have built…or you see Jeeps in the distance. And this was one time where we weren't seeing any of that. So I kept the shot on my uncle specifically. I think it did well in representing how I was feeling when I was sitting there, completely unseen, unmonitored, and thinking about how that moment was able to be created in the present political reality."

The peaceful atmosphere, lack of physical indicators of the occupation marring the landscape, and the auditory environment crated by the low, rhythmic humming of Aqel's uncle, produces at once a deeply familiar, yet simultaneously strange and alien landscape. It calls to mind the idyllic paintings of Palestinian farmers created by artists like Ismail Shammout and Suleiman Mansour, but is grounded in the present day realities of the occupation, especially by the humming, which is a constant reminder of the ways in which the violence of the occupation have marred the physical and psycho-social body. The repetitive motions of Aqel's uncle as he harvests the wheat produces a sense that this moment is one without beginning or end, simultaneously reflecting an idyllic past, a utopic present, and a hopeful future. The totalizing effect of the work is the production of a landscape that is at once eerie and disorienting, yet full of idealist possibility.

Both Khalili and Aqel utilize absence to create utopic images, erasing visual markers of colonial domination from the landscape. Yazan Khalili's *Landscape of Darkness*, which I have previously discussed, works similarly, but this project erases not only the markers of colonial occupation, but also markers of Palestinian-ness, denying the viewer any opportunity for nostalgia and romanization of the landscape. This is a kind of deeply unsettling, dystopic-utopia that leaves the viewer or reader with more questions about the future than answers. I will discuss

in more depth how the obliteration of Palestinian history, culture, and presence from the
landscape often serves to create a disturbing sense of dystopic-utopia in Palestinian futurist art
later on in this section.

Fragmentation as dystopic reality

Other artists use visual disruptions to landscape to explore the fragmentation and
dismemberment of the Palestinian psycho-social body. Scholar-artist Bashir Makhoul's
installation, Shifting Frequency (2014), uses lenticular images of refugee camps positioned under
glass hemispheres, which are also magnets, to create a sense of visual discontinuity in the
landscape. The ten-centimeter hemispheres, which are arranged in a grid, create a spectacular
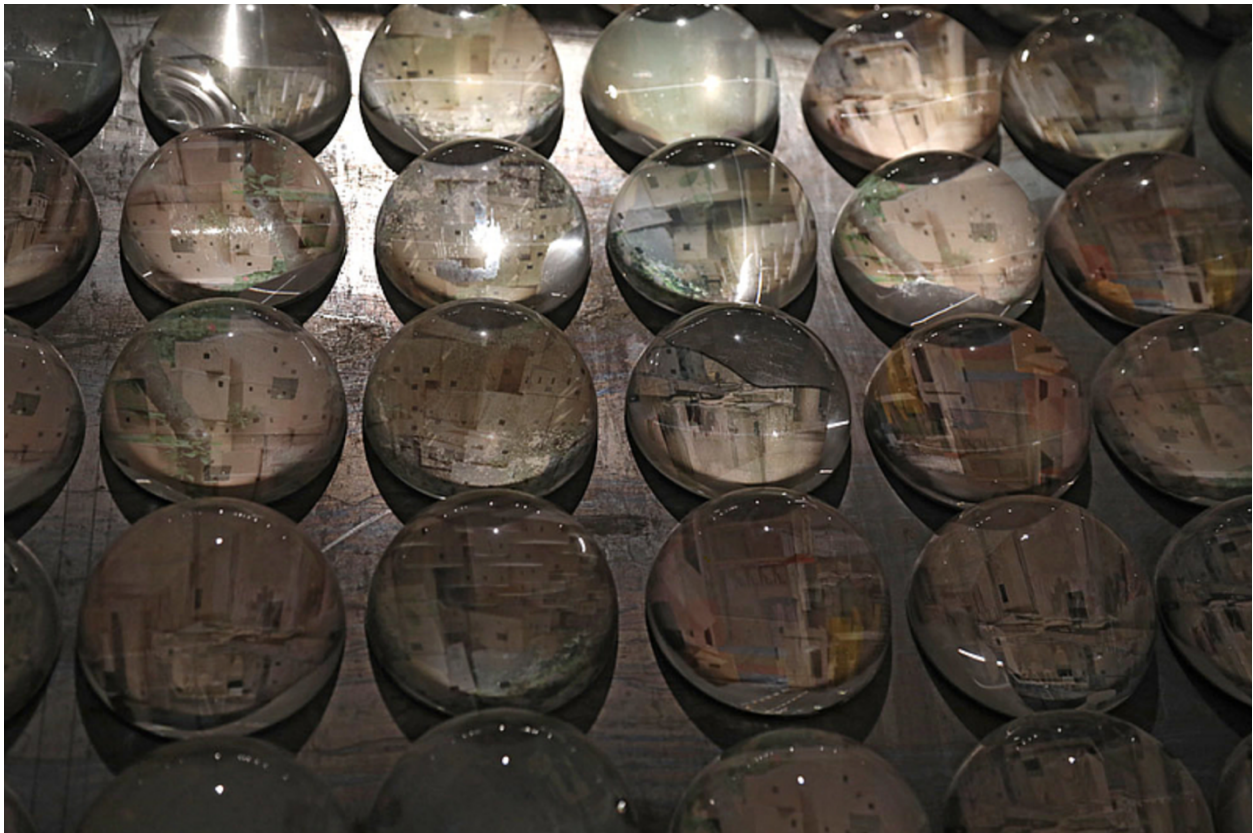
Figure 5. Makhoul, Bashir, Shifting Frequency, installation, glass hemispheres and lenticular images, 2014,
https://universes.art/en/specials/qattan-foundation/subcontracted-nations/photo-tour/bashir-makhoul.

and dizzying effect, never revealing a complete image (Figure 5). The multiple photographs in the lenticular format blur together and shift as the viewer moves, while the glass further warps and distorts the image, catching and refracting glimmers of light that also shift, and further obscure the image behind the glass. The program description for the piece explains how "the work exposes the illusion of integrity upon which nationality depends," and in particular, highlights "the temporal uncertainty in the notion of return as it becomes a special uncertainty and impossibility" (A.M. Qattan Foundation, *Subcontracted Nations,* 41.)

A closer look reveals that the buildings seen in the hemispheres include photographs of earlier works by Makhoul, notably, his 2012 installation *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost*, and a 2013

Figure 6. Makhoul, Bashir, Giardano Occupato, installation, cardboard boxes, 2013,
http://bashirmakhoul.co.uk/giardinooccupato.html.

extension of that project, the *Giardino Occupato* installation. In *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost,*

Makhoul created an enormous maze, also using lenticular images of refugee camps to line the

walls. These images continually shift with every step the viewer takes, finally leading into an

open space in which cardboard box houses are stacked on top of one another and shoved against

a wall. In *Giardino Occupato*, which was displayed in the *Otherwise Occupied* exhibition at the

55th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2013, audience members were invited

to arrange the cardboard box houses themselves, "setting up their own cardboard house-models

and placing them randomly around the garden…jamming the garden with new cardboard

houses" (Sharaf, *Floating Homes,* 22-25) (Figure 6).

Of *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost*, Makhoul writes that he set out to examine the idea of a

"spectral space," that is, a space "between the virtual and the real such as mock cities built for

training in urban warfare, the spectral, parallel world of surveillance, CAD inspired urban

developments and the interactions and confusions between the virtual and the real in the

urbanization of global capitalism and conflict" (Makhoul, "Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost). Meanwhile,

in *Giardino Occupato,* the project explores "other ways of imagining the nation outside and

beyond the conflict" in order to address the "de-territorialization of Palestine" (Makhoul,

"Otherwise Occupied"). Both projects destabilize the viewer's sense of space in order to invoke

feelings of temporality, unreality, and disorientation. In these works, space becomes as unstable

as it feels to a diasporic population that is uprooted from the land and living in spaces (refugee

camps) that are meant to be temporary, but have, over time, become disturbingly durable. The

walls of the maze in *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost* suggest ever-changing, virtual, temporary

realities—one that leads, at the end of the maze, not to a treasure, freedom, or escape back into a

stable world, but into essentially a pile of moving boxes, literal mobile homes that suggest a

continual state of packing up and moving elsewhere. Meanwhile, *Giardino Occupato* affords the viewer moments of individual agency, while increasing the feeling of instability—at a moment's notice, the entire installation can be rearranged and reconfigured, broken down or built up. Writes Makhoul, of the installation, "Palestine…has been constructed by the imaginary of widely fragmented communities across the world; a far-flung diaspora, a huge population of refugees…there exit simultaneously no Palestinian state and many Palestinian states" (Makhoul, "Otherwise Occupied"). The boxes in *Giardino Occupato*, then, imply the fragmented, shifting, unstable, and reconfigurable realities of Palestinian diasporic life.

In using images from both *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost* and *Giardino Occupato* to create the images we see in *Shifting Frequency*, Makhoul takes the key ideas in each a step further. The project's self-referential nature, literally using images of imagined, virtual, and collectively constructed landscapes, further compounds, shatters, fragments, and distorts these realities. That the objects are also small magnets, and that they feature lenticular images often seen on kitschy postcards, brings to mind a souvenir trinket that one might collect and bring back from a trip to a place that they wish to remember. The arrangement of the spheres in a grid visually calls to mind a display of magnets in a souvenir shop, but in this case, the shop is located in some kind of demented, dystopic reality, and is selling off fragmentary pieces of an incongruous landscape. They are, in a sense, souvenirs of a single moment in a constantly changing, destabilized, and fragmented time. Each hemisphere is different from the next, and we get the sense that these tiny, inconsistent realities could be multiplied in an infinite number of ways, with differently configured arrangements of boxes photographed, then collapsed and combined with one-another through the lenticular image, all encapsulated in a glass hemisphere, and placed in a grid whose cells are forever rearranging themselves. One feels, as they peer into the glass, that they are

looking into a tiny crystal ball, attempting to read the future, only to find an image that is unclear, constantly shifting, and somehow simultaneously reiterative. This "constantly shifting instability," the program reads, prevents the viewer "from reaching resolution and closure" with respect to the landscape (41). It is here, in this multitude of realities, where the latent possibility of continual, uncertain change embedded in each emerges.

Utopic-dystopia/dystopic-utopia

  Shifting Frequency was one of 53 works by 60 artists displayed at the 2018 inaugural exhibition of the A.M. Qattan Foundation's new Cultural Center in Ramallah. Curated by Palestinian artist, scholar, and curator Yazid Anani, the show was entitled *Subcontracted Nations*. Anani stated that the show was designed to explore "the concept of the modern nation and relationship between the state, society, and people" in an age in which NGOs and neo-liberalization proliferate society in lieu of government and services, in order to question "the current forms of states and how feasible the existence of the state in its present form is against privatized services" (A.M Qattan Foundation, *Ramallah: Subcontracted Nations Exhibition's events*). Ultimately, stated Ananai, the show was designed to "conjure personal expressions on the theme of the exhibition whether through nostalgia of the past, or kitsch mockery of the present or an imagination of a dystopic or utopic future" (A.M. Qattan Foundation, *Subcontracted Nations*, 13).

  Also featured in the *Subcontracted Nations* exhibition was a work Samah Hijawi called *Holy Dives!* (2012/2018), images from which are seen in Hijawi's 2012-2013 installation, *It all collapses in the living room.* In *Holy Dives!*, Hijawi explores what she calls a "tongue-in-cheek, and somewhat surreal put plausible 'solution'" to the situation in Palestine:

"In fact a very large earthquake is predicted in the coming years to hit along the geological fault lines between the African and Asian tectonic plates, which runs from the Red Sea in the south all the way up through the Jordan River Valley. If the earthquake finally hits it will be devastating. But this may be the solution presented by mother nature—the entire geography of Palestine/Israel to sink under water in an apocalyptic/natural disaster…and some years following this catastrophic event, we could experience the Holy Land in deep-sea diving expeditions along the Mediterranean coast line." (A.M. Qattan Foundation, *Subcontracted Nations,* 225).

The image was originally conceptualized and displayed as a postcard entitled *Diving Jerusalem,* which was displayed in the *Cities Exhibition* in Palestine in 2012. Hijawi's new, expanded version of the original postcard depicts a scene of the Dome of the Rock and its surrounds nestled underwater, beyond a lush coral reef with vibrantly colored tropical fish, which sits in the foreground (Figure 7). The tiny Dome of the Rock sits at the center of the

Figure 7. Hijawi, Samah, Holy Dives!, digital collage, 2012/2018, https://universes.art/en/specials/qattan-foundation/subcontracted-nations/photo-tour/samah-hijawi.

image, far away and out of reach. The image at once presents the utopic, 'alien' underwater landscape of the coral reef, (with the Dome of the Rock and its surrounds, miraculously, perfectly intact) while suggesting an utterly apocalyptic situation in Palestine, taking one of the most sacred Palestinian national symbols of survival and unity, and converting it to an underwater relic, implying a disaster passed which has undermined the relevance not only of the structure itself, but by extension, all of its political and social connotations.

It all collapses in the living room is predicated on the same alternate reality proposed by *Holy Dives!* and *Diving Jerusalem*. The installation features the original *Diving Jerusalem* postcard, along with photography from Hijawi's 2012 film, *A Script for a Beautiful Landscape*, which, like Khalili's work, seeks to explore "different perspectives on nostalgia and beauty projected onto the landscape of Palestine," but this time, "from across the Dead Sea Valley in Jordan," in order to problematize the ways that people project nationalist narratives onto the landscape, creating an alternate reality in which the "act of reiteration produces its own failure" (Hijawi, "A Script for a Beautiful Landscape"). The installation also features documentation video from a public intervention entitled *Jericho First: the new road map*, in which members of the Jericho community, including the mayor, participated a discussion around what would happen if Palestine suddenly became an underwater landscape, and both the occupiers and the occupied disappeared.

In *It all collapses in the living room*, all of these works are arranged in a central living room format, with a couch positioned across from a TV that plays video from the *Jericho First* intervention (Figure 8). Photographs from *A Script for a Beautiful Landscape* are displayed on the wall, and a stack of copies of the Jerusalem Dives postcard are placed on a small table beside the couch. Like Makhoul in *Shifting Frequency*, Hijawi has created a self-referential work,

Figure 8. Hijawi, Samah, It all collapses in the living room, installation, 2012-2013, https://www.samahhijawi.com/it-all-collapses-in-the-living-room.

collapsing past works into one-another to create a new reality predicated on a series of imagined

and invented ones. In *It all collapses in the living room*, Hijawi has taken her meditations on the

destruction of an exterior landscape indoors, to examine its effects on the interior space. Here,

we have a very familiar and intimate environment—that of the home—distorted through the

dystopic and alien realities that enter the home through the television, photographs, and

postcards. Here, Edward Said's piercing, critical reflections on "Palestinian Interiors" in his 1985

photobook and collaboration with Jean Mohr, *After the Last Sky*, comes to mind. Said writes on

the intense impulse for reiteration in Palestinian societies, as if by repeating to ourselves and one

another the national narratives that we have formulated, that we could will ourselves into

continuity and existence, despite our continual rupture, fragmentation, and erasure.

> "This compulsion to repeat is evident in the interiors of Palestinian houses of all classes…the same displays of affection and objects—replicas of the Mosque of Omar, plates inlaid with mother-of-pearl, tiny Palestinian flags…they authenticate and certify the fact that you are in a Palestinian home. But it is more than that. It is part of a larger pattern of repetition in which even I, supposedly liberated and secular, participate. We keep re-creating the interior—tables are set, rooms furnished, knick-knacks arranged, photographs set forth—but it inadvertently highlights and preserves the rift of break fundamental to our lives." (Said, *After the Last Sky*, 58).

When we think about the roles that such photographs, knick-knacks, and other material objects play in terms of creating a Palestinian reality in the home space, we can interpret the photographs, postcard, and video in Hijawi's installation as calling attention to the invented-ness of the narratives imbued in the types of items normally seen in Palestinian households, which are so foundational to delineating the space as a Palestinian one. In *It all collapses in the living room*, the once-comfortable living room space is rendered utterly alien as we see a different Palestinian reality, a parallel one, something that could be, proliferating the space through the media and objects that line the walls.

Hijawi writes that through the piece, she addresses a problem where "political discourse today lacks imagination, and marginalizes dreaming—whether utopian or dystopian—as an essential part of rethinking and understanding current political systems, and notions of individual and collective identities" (Hijawi, "It all collapses in the living room"). Thus, the installation ultimately explores the interplay between public and private spaces, between exterior and interior landscapes. The couch and the television illustrate our own passivity, while the reconfiguration of outside reality through the objects in the household cause us to think critically about our consumption and reiteration of politics and media, imbuing in the viewer a sense that they have more agency over the narratives produced around our reality and history than we may initially believe. The uncomfortable reality that Hijawi produces is at once utopic and dystopic, just like *Holy Dives!* and *Jericho First*. If the elimination of markers of the occupier are utopic, while fragmentation, destruction, and discontinuity of the Palestinian landscape reflects a dystopic lived reality, Hijawi demands that the viewer, quite literally, sits in an uncomfortable space located between the two. In visually producing both the obliteration required by utopia and directing it instead towards Palestinians, Hijawi is asking us to reckon with the constructedness

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of Palestinian national narratives and identity as much as she invites us to imagine ourselves beyond the boundaries and limitations drawn by colonialism and occupation. The result is the invention of a disturbingly dystopic kind of utopia.

Khalili's 2012-2015 project, *The Aliens*, also sits in a disconcerting space between utopia and dystopia. Another photo project proposed as an "installation consisting of stills from a movie," the piece tells the story of a group of astronauts who have returned to earth, only to find it unfamiliar, "causing them to wonder if their act of return is real, or if all returns are fictional" (Khalili, *The Aliens*, 81). The piece was originally exhibited as part of Khalili's 2015 solo show at Transit Gallery in Belgium, and was republished in a new format for the 2018 "Palestine Issue" of the Arab American literary journal, Mizna. In the Mizna version, the photographs are positioned sporadically on the page. Often, images are cut off at the edge of the page, then continue on the following page. Photographs of people exploring an abandoned Luna Park in Palestine are positioned amongst photographs of what appears to be an abandoned airport. Photos of enormous, rusted and grounded airplanes are positioned alongside similarly rusted green, yellow, and pink spaceships from the amusement park rides, which have been dismantled. As in *On Love and Other Landscapes*, yellow monotype captions a number of the photographs, documenting the journey. At the end of the piece, following the journey, the text concludes, "everything was real/but no return is real/so we kept wandering/do we ever return?" The utopic dream of return as enacted by the space travelers is met with a dystopic landscape marred by neglect and visually defined by the groundedness of flightless aircraft. The open-ended conclusion of the work ultimately demands that the viewer ask themselves questions about where we are headed, and what we imagine when we speak of 'return'.

Miami-based Palestinian graphic novelist and game designer Iasmin Omar Ata also deals

with return through space travel in the companion comic to a video game that they created,

entitled *Being* (Figure 9). The game is an RPG that was created in a free, accessible software

called RPG Maker 2000, and it's rendered in the nostalgic visual style of 8-bit video games such

as early Pokémon and Mario, which helped define the childhood of many millennial artists in

Ata's generation. The game launched in 2017 at an exhibition at the NYC-based gallery

Babycastles, whose mission includes "fostering and amplifying diverse voices in videogame

culture" while "drawing values from…history in New York's DIY scene" (Babycastles,

"About"). The exhibition, entitled "Over the Rainbow," was a collaboration with Art Palestine

International, and in true Babycastles style, featured several video games, all housed in custom-

built arcade cases. In *Being*, the user plays a Palestinian space traveler from the future, who has

arrived on a now-abandoned earth from their Palestinian space colony on a mission "to recover

artifacts, memories, and messages from a mysterious house near an old border" (Ata, "Being"). The player navigates an unfamiliar and abandoned landscape, often in intense, monochromatic reds and greens, and dotted with palm trees. While the terrain itself is alien, it is mediated by a visual universe that invokes in the target audience a nostalgia for childhood

Figure 9. Ata, Iasmin Omar, Being, video game, 2017,
http://iasminomarata.com/being.

video games, from the visual style of the graphics, to the arcade cabinet in which the game was housed.

Amongst the artifacts recovered are two halves of a photograph, a picture frame, and a number of keys, (which have specific symbolic value in not only in the Palestinian context, but also in the universe of early RPGs, where they are used to access new rooms and areas within the world of the game). Also included are symbols of nostalgic forms of technology, such as a cassette tape. The object of the game is to collect all of the hidden artifacts in order to bring them back to a Palestinian space colony. As such, these objects are seen as the keys to constituting a Palestinian identity for a people untethered from place. Ata invokes a sense nostalgia in the player constantly throughout the game, from the visual style of the game, to the discovery of 90s ephemeral such as the cassette tape, to icons of nostalgia central to Palestinian national identity formation. In doing so, the work serves as an exploration of the central role of nostalgia in the building of Palestinian national identity.

A short companion comic to the game, which is also entitled *Being*, was self-published by the artist as a zine, and follows the main character in more detail. "What does it mean to "go back"…?" the main character, known as Cadet #491-Thaa (Ista'eda) muses. "The only Palestine I've ever truly known is here, in space." (Figure 10). We learn that in space, Palestinian and Israeli space colonies have entered into new negotiations, which Ista'eda is less than enthusiastic about. "The new Israel regulation and our previous generation of Palestinians found it best to sign a temporary null-state solution," the commander, Mx. Faraj, informs Ista'eda, "Both groups would fully evacuate to their respective space colonies, and cadets would be sent on missions to repair the land for eventual return." By proposing the Palestinian nation as a space colony, we see a nation that is totally disconnected from the land—in fact, it is quite literally floating in

space. Thus, Ata asks questions about the meaning of nation, undermining the role of borders and physical land in the formation of national identity, and emphasizing the Palestinian collective as something constructed and formed beyond the confines of a physical landscape. Like Hijawi, Ata conjures an alternate, utopic-dystopic reality, in which political realities of colonial oppression are dissolved by a physical removal of people from the land, in a situation where the earth has been so totally decimated that everyone has been forced to

Figure 10. Ata, Iasmin Omar, Being, digitally illustrated comic, 2017.

dissociate from it—and all of the political realities tied to that land—entirely. Only in such a (utopic/dystopic) reality, proposes Ata, where all structures of oppression are completely obliterated, could disparate Palestinian and Israeli space colonies work truly collaboratively for a common cause, to "restore the land." Like Khalili's *The Aliens*, the ending of this narrative is an intentionally open-ended one, demanding imaginative engagement on the part of the viewer.

Borderless bodies

For Palestinian-Syrian dancer and performance artist Leyya Mona Tawwil, the alter-ego

becomes a vehicle for transcending not only land and borders (space), but also linear time. Lime Rickey International is the intergalactic time-refugee alter ego of Tawwil. Clad in head-to-toe green, including an iconic green wig with bangs that hang down into her eyes and a sharp bob haircut, Lime rocks black combat boots and a costume covered sometimes in glittering sequins, other times in triangular cutouts. Resembling a punk rocker from outer space, Lime "is a refugee from the future," Tawwil explained to me over Yemeni tea in the secluded upstairs balcony of Dearborn's bustling Qahwah House, "so she's displaced in time, not geography." In this way, Tawwil emphasized, Lime embodies not only "untethered-ness to place," like Ata's Palestinian space colony, but also, significantly, "untethered-ness in time." Lime Rickey International has developed three performances. *Unstoppable*, what Tawwil refers to as Lime's "migration story," charts Lime's first extraction from the time she comes from, and her arrival in the present (Figure 11). In *Future Faith*, Lime has found herself firmly "shipwrecked in the present," and she attempts to make a home in an unfamiliar landscape. Lime's third performance piece, *Noise*

Figure 11. Tawwil, Leyya Mona, Unstoppable, performance, 2018, https://www.theinvisibledog.org/all/2018/11/2/lime-rickey-internationals-unstoppable-mona-leyya-tawil.

and Nation, is still in development (as of late April 2020). Tawwil describes it as "a re-dissolving of even that place," (that is, the place that Lime seeks to manifest for herself in *Future Faith*), "a re-emerging into the non-bordered places." In *Future Faith,* Lime asks us what it means to be displaced from the place that you were displaced to.

In *Unstoppable,* Lime uses drum machines and looper pedals to create multi-dimensional soundscapes in real time. The compositions are at times overwhelming and dissonant, filling the room with grating noise, and at other times offers trancelike rhythms. Tawwil describes the sounds that Lime creates as transmissions to home, as attempts at moving through time and space in ways that transcend what the physical body is able to achieve. "Sound, I would argue, is borderless," says Tawwil. "That's why sound is such a primary form and practice in the work, it's because it goes through the walls. And it goes through space in a way that your body cannot." This would seem to indicate a double-dissolving of the physical body—first, through the collapsing of the artist, Leyya Mona Tawwil, into the alter-ego, Lime, followed by Lime's efforts at dissociating from her own body as she attempts to reach the outer-limits of space and time by producing vocal transmissions that have the power to pierce through walls and whose echoes reverberate through time, rendering both immaterial.

Through Lime, Tawwil fuses a number of influences particular to her diasporic experience using dance, sound, and performance practices. These include the noise music scene that emerged in Detroit (where Tawwil was born and raised) and Arab traditional forms of music and dance such as *tarab* and *dabke*. Lime is Tawwil's medium for "twisting the folk forms into future forms by fictionalizing them," for dancing Future Folk dances and singing Future Folk songs. "Like all Arab music, it's much about love and country," Tawwil says of Future Folk, "but in a post-national way…she mourns the winds and she mourns the stars and these other

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things that are displaced in time as well." There is a tendency, when constructing national

narratives, to view the songs, dances, and other cultural practices associated with that nation as

natural phenomenon. Yet, when we bear witness to folk practices of the future, we cannot help

but become acutely aware of just how invented those practices are. Whatever sense of rootedness

we may have in the national mythologies that are underpinned by moths around cultural practices

begins to disintegrate. We become aware of a multitude of possibilities, not only for how we

constitute our present identities, but also how we may choose to constitute them in the future.

Lebanese-Palestinian artist Zeina Barakeh uses animation to produce another sort of

alter-ego, as a digital icon of herself traipses through surrealist landscapes and non-linear

timelines. In her psychedelic stop motion animations, Barakeh uses photographs of herself, clad

in black, as an avatar. In most cases, this avatar has a horse head rather than a human head.

Often, there are multiple copies of this avatar in a single frame, which move together or interact.

Figure 12. Barakeh, Zeina, Homeland Insecurity, digital animation, 2016, https://zeinabarakeh.com/2016-homeland-insecurity.

The horse head avatar, Barakeh explains, is a symbol of the oppressed or colonized people, while another kind of avatar, that of a centaur, represents the colonizer (Figure 12). Barakeh explains that the idea for this symbolism emerged when she was looking at a photograph on page 110 of Walid Khalidi's book of archival photographs from pre-1948 Palestine, *Before Their Diaspora.* "When I was looking at it and I was looking at the British soldier, you don't see them clearly and they look like centaurs to me," she explained. The animations also utilize archival photography and the artist's own photographs of ancient Islamic architecture. The animations, she explains, are designed to explore and define a space that she calls The Third Half. "Everything I do right now with my artwork has its source with my experience growing up in Beirut," Barakeh begins. She grew up there during the Civil War in the 1970s, and struggled with constant assumptions and projections from society based on her Palestinian and Muslim background. "When I talk to other Palestinians, every single narrative is so different, obviously, and there are so many of them," she says. This, she explains, is where the idea of The Third Half came from.

> "What is the point of all these years that you've spent in this war, if the alliances change so regularly? So I was always interested in this space, where you can be you without having to belong to a certain party, without having to be Lebanese, without having to be Palestinian, without having to be Muslim, without having to be this or that, where you have the option, you're not expected, you have the space to talk from. And this is where the idea of The Third Half emerged from, because it does not exist."

Barakeh's work can only be described as a surreal attempt at exploring and manifesting this impossible space, which exists "as the encounter between antagonistic forces in which people could exist outside of polarized communities" (Barakeh, "The Third Half".) Once again, we see a negative space, a space of impossibility, of non-being, as one that is utopic. It is utopic in the sense that it imposes no identity on the individual. The body is devoid of any of the usual social markers which dictate how one must navigate space. In many ways, The Third Half can be

seen as an aspirational, and thus, futuristic space. "With the third half, it is a process, it's not a fixed state, so I am developing it as I am making my art project. My art project serves to explore this concept and this space." Barakeh also describes The Third Half as "a disrupting mechanism system," designed to disrupt a "socio-political paradigm" in which people are "labeled within the factions with whom you share socio-economic identity markers." Thus, The Third Space breaks new ground for a variety of latent possibilities for personal identification that expand beyond national or religious lines.

The idea of The Third Half, in many ways, gestures to my earlier discussion of dystopic-utopias, in which Palestinians are the target of obliteration, resulting, in some ways, in a liberated state of being that is untethered not only to the nation-state, but to any national identity at all. While Barakeh's animations consciously explore themes central to the Palestinian experience—colonization, war, ethnic cleansing, resistance, and empire—she creates her own symbolisms. The world she creates is a surreal and alien take on Palestinian history and reality that is self-consciously divorced from heavy-handed nationalist iconographies. It's an iconography that consistently defies identity-based projections, and that often refuses clear-cut interpretation, demanding imaginative engagement on the part of the viewer.

Thus, for both Tawwil and Barakeh, the body is the starting point for the dismantling of all kinds of borders, not only external borders or walls, but also internal and psycho-social ones.

Unwriting history, undoing the archive

One of the key themes in Barakeh's work is the way history is written. As I mentioned, her stop motions are compiled digitally from a series of photographic images, which are at times morphed and manipulated, copied and pasted, shrunken or enlarged, in order to produce

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landscapes and narratives. She describes two of her animations in particular as core to constituting the visual universe and logic of The Third Half. They are *Slam Bang Blue* (2018), which explores the interplay between mechanisms of war and transnational mythologies, and *Homeland Insecurity* (2016), in which Barakeh interrogates the spread of empire. Barakeh describes these films as "two narratives of war," and speaks of the latent potentiality for other narratives inherent in the seemingly infinite number of combinations possible from the images used to constitute the animation. Thus, Barakeh decontextualizes, combines, shuffles, and reconfigures archival images and photographs of artifacts and ancient architectural structures to imagine different ways of writing about, discussing, or understanding history. She utilizes historical artifact and archive, which are often mobilized didactically in order to constitute a seemingly static national identity, and proceeds to completely unwrite everything we thought we knew. For Barakeh, history is not static but, rather, pregnant with a seemingly infinite multitude of possible readings, narratives, and future outcomes. It is by unfixing the static meanings so often assigned to archival photography that Barakeh, by extension, frees us from static readings of our history, ultimately breaking open space for new and radical re-imaginings of the future.

This is precisely the kind of work San Francisco-based artist Suhad Khatib had in mind when she began work on a series of portraits of historical figures, which she refers to as her "Study of the Ancestors." Her portraits, painted in her trademark style using bold blotches of India Ink, make her paintings appear as series of dreamlike apparitions, appearing as though they have emerged momentarily before our eyes on the surface of the water, threatening to disappear as spontaneously as they emerged. In our interview over Skype, Khatib described her approach to her Study of the Ancestors, explaining how her encounters with Orientalist archival photographs of anonymous Arab women online led her to approach the images differently

through her paintings. "What if I bring these women out of that image," she muses, "that image that we are all familiar with, that those orientalists have taken of them, and just give them some source of power?" In *My Home*, a Black Bedouin woman stares proudly ahead, bedazzled in the keys to Palestinian houses, which are strung around her neck (Figure 13). The keys are modern house keys, not the iconic keys to doors of ancient and demolished houses of the past. This causes us to question what exactly the meanings of "Palestinian homes" are, taking them out of a mythic past, and into a grounded present. Of the woman herself, Khatib insists, "She had to be Black, so we can start dismantling this idea of who do the houses belong to?" Meanwhile in *Sisterhood Secrets*, a woman whispers into her friend's ear. Khatib has drawn her here flipping off the photographer, and what was once a vase on her friend's lap is, here, a bong (Figure 14). This intentional subversion and re-imagining of archival imagery demands that the viewer read archival images differently, more imaginatively, and less didactically. In visually rendering for us her own personal reading and interpretation of the photographs, Khatib implicitly highlights the other ways that all of us impose readings and meanings onto archival photography.

In Khatib's "Study of Truth," the painter aims to tell stories that either aren't widely known, or to tell widely known stories in new and refreshing ways. Many of the paintings in the Study of Truth also have incredible, often magical stories that are attached to the process by which they were created, rendering a new mythology for Khatib's new archive. She describes how, when she completed her small portrait of Palestinian revolutionary leader Wadie Haddad (Figure 15), she began to see "a lot of lights around him, like little candles" and "started following the candles," working around his portrait in gold ink (the only color of ink that Khatib uses in her paintings other than black.) In the final painting, a small gas lamp and a number of candles surround a portrait of Haddad that is taped to the wall, forming an altar. It was not until
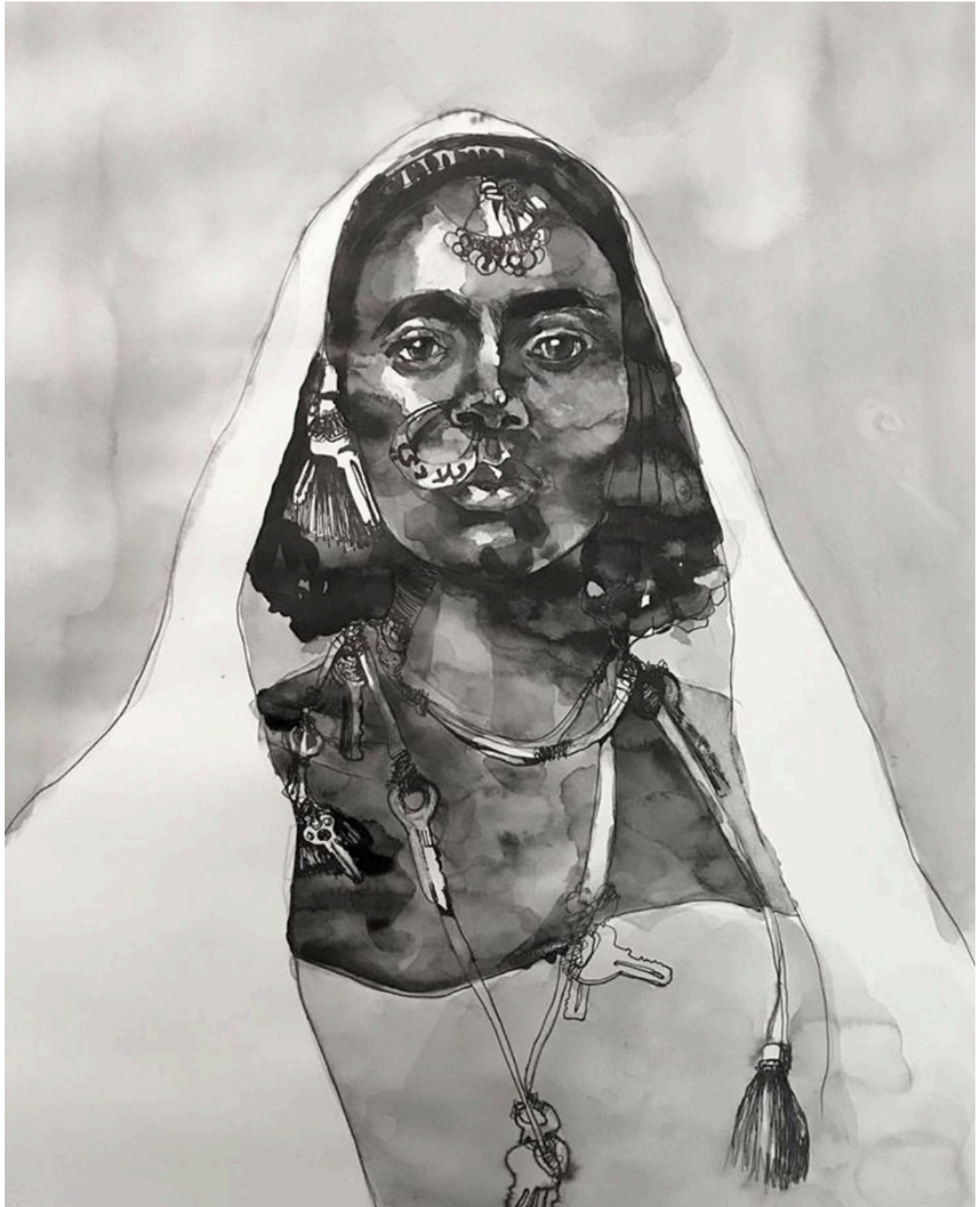
Figure 13. Khatib, Suhad, My Home, India ink on paper, 2018, https://suhadkhatib.com/prints-for-sale/not-your-fetish-fx2km.

Figure 14. Khatib, Suhad, Sisterhood Secrets, India ink on paper, 2018, https://suhadkhatib.com/prints-for-sale/nvftk05d3dd2vvet9h0kaexbq3y44o.

later that day, Khatib reveals, that she learned that it was Sabt al Noor (literally, the Saturday of Light), sometimes also referred to as the Holy Fire or Holy Light, which is observed the day before Orthodox Easter. On this day, Palestinian Orthodox Christians gather at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem with candles. "I didn't know, I never heard about it before actually," she explained, "because we live in a segregated religious society...and Wadie was

Figure 15. Khatib, Suhad, Wade', India ink and gold ink on paper, 2019, https://suhadkhatib.com/prints-for-sale/wade.

Christian…I've been studying him for months, you know? And then now I'm painting him today and I'm seeing lights around him, exactly candles that people light up during Sabt al Noor." In another uncanny turn of events, when Khatib painted another Palestinian revolutionary leader, Shadia Abu Ghazaleh, it led to a surprising interaction with an old friend from high school. "This person's mom, who I've known my entire life, apparently started crying, broke down crying, when she saw the painting, because she was her best friend in school, and I didn't know."

Thus, for Khatib, whose work is often guided by her deep connection to Islam, the process of creating the work itself, of unearthing or activating histories that are less discussed and archives that are under-studied, is part of a larger process in which past and the present are

linked through destiny and prophecy. For Khatib, it is through the act of painting that these histories are activated, that she connects with and receives transmissions of various kinds from the ancestors. This continuity of time, in which past and present exist together in a single moment as the ancestors seem to transmit cosmic messages to the painter as she works, has profound prophetic implications, gesturing to a path towards new futures in which we are guided by a connection to her predecessors via spiritual forces that lie beyond human comprehension. These are not versions of the ancestors as they are mythologized by popular media, but as they exist in our own minds and spirits. Khatib's work highlights that there are as many versions of these mythic ancestors as there are people in the world, as they take on different meanings and develop relationships with each individual person. These heroes-passed, like our histories and futures, are not fixed, they are malleable and ever-changing, like us and our imaginations.

Haifa-based artist Haitham Haddad has a completely different approach to collapsing past, present, and future in his installation *The New Mode*, which was commissioned for and exhibited as part of the 2018 Young Artist of the Year Award. In *The New Mode*, Haddad, who began his work as a costume designer and textile artist, questions the use of Palestinian traditional embroidery, *tatreez*, as a nationalist identity marker by creating a farcical museum installation tour for an "embroidery museum in Ramallah in the year 2170" (Haddad, "The New Mode.") The installation includes a series of future artifacts, from a time that has not happened yet in our present-day context. These include samples of futurist forms of embroidery, diagrams, outtakes from dystopic and garbled newscasts designed to hide the speaker's identity (Figure 16), a digital video of someone stitching *tatreez* into an individual's skin (Figure 17), and digital photographs from a nightclub of people revealing their *tatreez* skin embroidery (Figure 18). Through the installation, we learn that in this future world proposed by Haddad, wearing *tatreez*
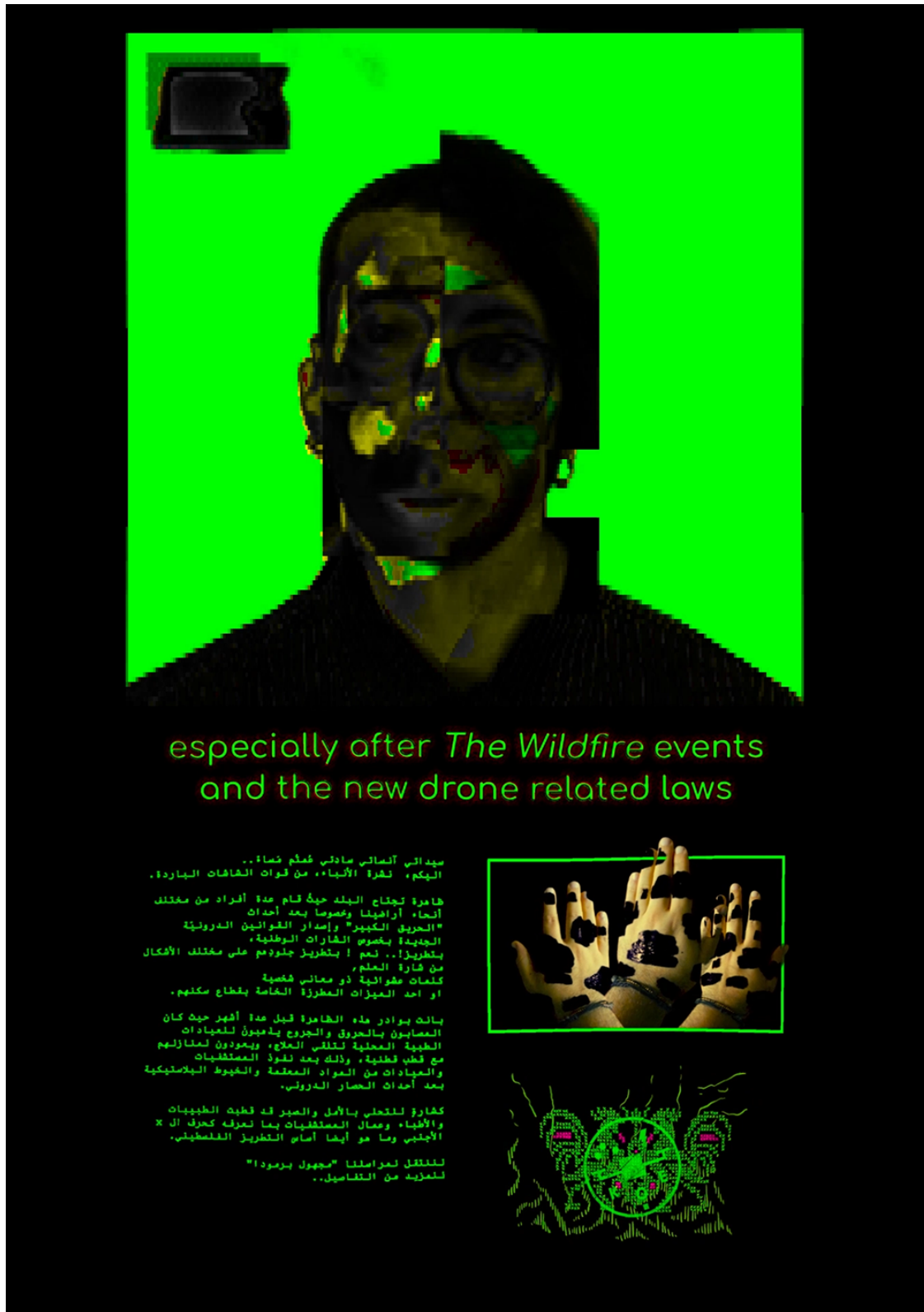
Figure 16. Haddad, Haitham, The New Mode, video, textile, illustration, and digital images, installation, 2018, https://mnjnk.com/The-new-mode.

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became outlawed by the Israeli authorities because of its nationalist connotations, calling to mindsrael's banning of the display of the Palestinian flag during the First Intifada. As a response, the people begin to embroider the tatreez into their skin, hiding it under their clothing, as an act of private resistance.

Figure 17. Haddad, Haitham, The New Mode, video, textile, illustration, and digital images, installation, 2018, https://mnjnk.com/The-new-mode.

Through the installation, Haddad examines the individual body as a site for private forms of activism designed to go unnoticed, visible only to the individual who has done the action. In doing so, Haddad questions the popular notion that "existence is resistance," calling for more intentional and visible forms of political participation that go beyond identity

Figure 18. Haddad, Haitham, The New Mode, video, textile, illustration, and digital images, installation, 2018, https://mnjnk.com/The-new-mode.

politics rooted in essentialized fragments of Palestinian culture. Haddad simultaneously criticizes the human rights narrative that has dominated so much of Palestinian art and organizing post-Oslo, which has been designed to be digestible and pleasing in the context of NGOs and meeting grant requirements from international bodies by centering cultural activities over more overtly political ones. In this collapsing of past, present, and future via the future artifacts and videos in the installation, Haddad represents "a report about a future that might not happen, of a reality that

unfortunately might be real." This imagined archive is designed to call to attention the problems inherent in over-emphasizing and projecting political and nationalist readings onto cherry-picked cultural practices.

Mapping alien forms and terrains

Nazareth-based artist Dima Srouji also explores the role of the artifact through her ongoing project, *Hollow Forms* (2017). To produce this series, Srouji, who received her Master's in Architecture from Yale, has teamed up with Palestinian glassblowers to create a series of alien-looking glass vessels. Srouji described how, while working in a small village between Jerusalem and Ramallah named Jaba', she first encountered the glassblowers' workshop.

> "When I walked into their workshop, they had all these chemistry labs on their desks, kind of in a really messy, chaotic way, and they were just producing a lot of stuff. I was really impressed with what they were able to produce, and it reminded me a little bit of the contemporary forms that I was producing while I was in grad school…but in this case, there was this kind of twist to it, which was that these objects that initially were kind of soulless in grad school because they were 3D-printed and almost without meaning, here, they completely relied on a specific economic system, a specific social structure, and a specific relationship to place."

Srouji began designing abstract forms like the ones she had created in grad school, inspired by organic objects, using 3D-software, and started up a collaboration with the glassblowers in order to create them. It is from this collaboration, from the interaction between the traditional practice of glassblowing and the futuristic forms that Srouji was producing using 3D-software, that *Hollow Forms* was born. Central to this process was experimentation with how far the material could be pushed. "Together, we were learning," she shared. "In *Hollow Forms II* (2017), there were these new techniques that we developed together that they hadn't even used before, like the idea of creating multiple different bubbles in the same form with legs, using two

Figure 19. Srouji, Dima, Hollow Forms, glass vessels, 2017, https://www.dimasrouji.com/hollowforms.

different colors at the same time, and sometimes there are spikes." While the first iteration of

Hollow Forms is characterized by round, voluptuous vessels, often with long spouts or bulbous

legs (Figure 19), *Hollow Forms II* pushes these techniques even further. Blue and pink glass is

sometimes combined in a single object. Legs are more delicate and spindlier, while sharp spikes

and delicate bubbles protrude from the surface (Figure 20).

Srouji speaks passionately about how the history of glassblowing in the region created

industrial networks between Acre, Hebron, and Saida—a history that, notably, transcends

modern notions of national boundaries and borders. She also emphasizes that this history is a

living one, and that *Hollow Forms* seeks to reactivate the glassblowing industry in Palestine, not

out of a nostalgia for a mythic national history tied to the production of particular handicrafts,

but out of a concern for the living people practicing the craft. "Exports [of glass] have slowed

Figure 20. Srouji, Dima, Hollow Forms II, glass vessels, 2017, https://www.dimasrouji.com/hollow-forms-ii.

down dramatically in the last few years, and I think that's partially an issue of design," Srouji

says. "They've been producing the exact same designs for the last 300 years, and it's time to try

to contemporize them. I don't think we should be scared of changing things. And so updating

things is part of the process of continuing to develop the craft." Though each vessel is a static

object, a sense of continual shifting and morphing is front and center when one looks at them.

The bulbs and spikes, the bubbles that protrude from the surface, each hollow twist of the glass,

physically maps the path of the glassblower's breath literally blowing life into the object. This

gestures to the living nature of the glassblowing practice that Srouji strives to highlight, while

implying too an infinite multitude of possibilities—a different way of using or directing the

breath would result in an entirely different form. In the interaction between imagination, 3D

rendering technology, and traditional glassblowing techniques, Srouji has activated a space for

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new possibilities within the context of a Palestinian traditional handicraft.

Interestingly, both Haddad and Srouji, through *The New Mode* and *Hollow Forms* respectively, are operating within a similar space as Tawwil's work producing "Future Folk". All three of these artists imagine future worlds and adapt traditional forms of Palestinian cultural expressions to those new worlds. In this sense, all three artists acknowledge that, just as the foundational building blocks of our national identities are not static, neither are our national identities themselves. All three, then, propose new latent possibilities for expanding what it means to be Palestinian, thus opening up space for others to do the same.

To return to the subject of mapping the breath, Srouji is obsessed with cartography and archaeology. Her works outside of *Hollow Forms* explore what it means to map not just the surface of the earth, but also its under-layers, and how excavations into the past can be used to manipulate and change narratives that privilege the linear progression of time.

> "The rule of superposition—it's also the title of my YAYA project—but it's a geological rule that states that the topmost layer is the most recent, and as you move down in the strata, they're older and older, so it assumes that time is linear. But I feel like that's such a simplification of how the ground works…a really great example is the volcano. So when a volcano erupts, not only does the earth from the bottom, or the lava from the bottom strata, move up to the top, but it also flips. So when the projectile flips, say the top surface is A and the bottom surface is B, when it flips from the volcano down to the ground, it does a 180 rotation, so B becomes the top and A becomes the bottom. And that manipulates the entire stratification of the rule of superposition. I love that so much. I don't know why I find joy in that, but this idea of a completely—not cyclical, but non-linear time—I find non-linear time really comforting."

Rather than conceptualizing time as a linear progression, Srouji describes a conception of time in which events form a network that influence each-other. This conception of time is visualized in *The Rule of Superposition* (2018) (Figure 21). Rather than using archaeology for "violent" and colonial means, to map, understand, and control the city of Jerusalem, Srouji remaps the city in sculptural form. In the piece, an enormous plaster block is suspended in the

Figure 21. Dima Srouji, The Rule of Superposition, carved plaster on scaffolding, 2018, https://www.dimasrouji.com/rule-of-superposition.

air, sitting in iron scaffolding. A set of stairs in the scaffolding allows viewers to observe

Jerusalem's cartography from above, viewing its dips and elevations devoid of any built

landmarks, while an empty space underneath the sculpture allows people to view the sculpture

from below. The lower strata maps archaeological ruins from around and near Jerusalem, but

their forms are scrambled, layered atop one-another, and not to-scale. This disorienting view of

the city renders it unrecognizable while using its own features and details as would be

represented on a map. The project highlights the way cartography as a colonial tool actually

serves to obscure the landscape, imposing new interpretations of form, space, and meaning onto

it that are markedly different from the way the city is actually experienced on an individual level.

Thus, by deconstructing and reassembling the landscape and its archaeological features that

render a linear history for the city, Srouji unwrites dominant (often colonial) narratives of

Jerusalems's history, reclaiming space for the multiple "maps" and knowledges that exist within the inhabitants of the city, and opening up space for new conjectures about what the Jerusalem's future might hold.

Larissa Sansour and her partner and collaborator Søren Lind do similar work subverting the logic of archaeology in their short film, *In The Future They Ate From the Finest Porcelain* (2016). The film proposes a future in which Palestinians bury fabricated "artifacts" for future archaeologists to find, rewriting history in order to manipulate the narrative of their society in the future. Here Sansour makes a mockery of the Western (colonial) practice of archaeology,

Figure 22. Sansour, Larissa and Søren Lind, Revisionist Production Line, painted ceramic plates and conveyor belt, 2016, https://larissasansour.com/Revisionist-Production-Line-2016.

throwing into question scientific research methods and simultaneously calling into question national historical narratives, exposing the ways in which these narratives are constructed by a multiplicity of actors. The film was accompanied by two installations, one entitled *Revisionist Production Line* (2017), and another called *Archaeology in Absentia* (2017). In *Revisionist Production Line*, a conveyor belt on which porcelain plates printed with the Palestinian Kuffiyeh pattern rest (Figure 22), while in *Archaeology in Absentia*, fifteen bronze munition replicas contain the longitude and latitude of the locations where these plates were buried in Palestine (Figure 23). Like Bashir Makhoul and Samah Hijawi, the self-referential nature of Sansour and

Lind's body of work serves to create an alternate universe in and of itself, with its own internal logics and regimes of knowledge production (and destruction), implicitly calling to attention the constructed-ness of Palestinian national identities and histories.

For all of these artists, the reconstitution and remapping of history, terrain, and artifact is a central part of their work. As these artist rethink archival material and consider history through a new lens, they also unwrite long-held, seemingly static nationalist narratives that have been cemented by so much of Palestinian art. Yet, as our faith in our own imagination grows,

Figure 23. Sansour, Larissa and Søren Lind, Archaeology in Absentia, installation, bronze munition replicas and engraved discs, 2016, https://larissasansour.com/Archaeology-in-Absentia-2017.

as we begin to understand that to be Palestinian is, perhaps, to adapt, to change, to transform continually based on our context, the more we recognize that, as Khatib said, "identity change actually, in itself, is Palestinian," the more we learn to question particular readings of history, and begin to unravel and unfix all of the seemingly static symbols and icons that have, for so long, formed the basis of our national identity, the more founding histories and mythologies that make up the national narrative dissolve, the more we are forced to question the entire Palestinian national framework.

Figure 24. Khalili, Yazan, Hiding Our Faces Like a Dancing Wind, video, 2016,
http://www.yazankhalili.com/index.php/project/hiding-our-faces-like-a-dancing-wind/.

Technology and unreality

During my interview with Yazan Khalili, I asked him about the paradoxical use of
photography—a medium that is often understood, by many audiences, to represent documentary
fact—to create new worlds and alternate realities. "I think we belong to a generation now that
cannot easily accept that a video or photo is factual," he replied. "It lost its ability to be factual.
The image has been so much played with, that now we understand that it contains fiction within
it…we are doubtful of every image we see now. It's very hard to accept an image as reality."

In Khalili's 2016 film *hiding our faces like a dancing wind* (Figure 24), the artist takes a
recording of his computer screen, which plays a pre-recorded video of an individual using their
hands to cover segments of their face in a browser meanwhile. Within that video, someone
continually positions an iPhone camera before the lens, filming as the iPhone attempts to use

facial recognition technology to identify the individual's face. Depending on the subject's hand placement, the iPhone either successfully identifies the face or fails to do so. Meanwhile, the invisible computer usesr opens various image files of previously-taken screenshots of iPhone screens successfully identifying the "faces" of what appear to be traditional African masks in a museum. The user then selects the faces that have been identified by the iPhone for screen shots. The piece calls to attention not only the ways everyday surveillance and technology devices are tied to racism and colonialism, but also the multiple ways in which our reality is mediated by forms of technology that don't have the ability to distinguish a human from a non-human. As the individual on the camera screen continually "tricks" the iPhone into thinking they're not there, they render themselves functionally invisible, or as a non-human subject, based on the position of the hands in relation to particular facial features, just as they are juxtaposed with the masks, which have been identified as human. As this continues, the implied person at the computer eventually opens a Text Edit file and begins to type a narrative that addresses the betrayal that the ancestors feel, going unrecognized at the hands of "thieves who stole our faces," calling to mind issues of erasure, memory, and the construction of history that seem to characterize so much of Palestinian futurist artwork. The piece serves to highlight both the racism, blind spots, and biases built into technology, and those built into our collective memories and national frameworks—after all, we humans are the ones who built the technologies that seem, continually, to betray us. Perhaps this began when we betrayed ourselves, and the technologies are only a reflection of us.

Haddad also addresses the way technology mediates memory and history in his 2016 piece, *Amira / Ctrl+S*. In the work, which was produced by Khashabi Theatre in Haifa, Haddad manipulated archival photographs of his family members using various image editing tools,

Figure 25. Haddad, Haitham, Amira / Ctrl+S, performance with projector and digital image editing software, 2016, https://mnjnk.com/Amira-Ctrl-S.

using software to render photographs into geometric-looking outlines in order to "stabilize the personal memory in the memory of the computer" (Figure 25). Haddad explains that "the outcome might be far from reality, but it nonetheless seeks to save memory from loss." Here, Haddad delineates differences between personal memory, which can be changed and lost and contains multiple interpretations, and digital memory, which is static, encoded through a binary, and appears everlasting. Haddad uses this to explore the way historical and collective memories (of a family or a whole society) that he did not personally experience or live through are assigned a static meaning or interpretation, with particular features selectively emphasizes while others are forgotten, and are then used as the basis for a national or individual identity. One gets the feeling, when watching the video recording of the edits and additions Haddad makes, that there are a seemingly infinite number of ways to trace and produce shapes from these photographs, highlighting the many ways that history can be narrated, and reminding us just how far from reality any history, whether personal or national, truly is.

In these examples, technology is a final frontier of sorts. It is ultimately through technology that reality folds in on itself, ironically, just as technology claims to record, preserve, and represent reality more accurately and in more detail than life itself.

Paranormal activity

As reality as a whole begins to collapse from every angle, as new possibilities for the future begin to emerge, strange paranormal activity begins to occur. For some Palestinian futurist artists, the sense of unreality explored throughout this thesis is expressed through the emergence of zombies, encounters with ghosts, and transformations of the body that align with the phases of the moon. Here enters Leyya Mona Tawwil's collaborative performance with her cousin and

musician Mike Khoury, *Zombie Frequencies from the Palestinian Diaspora*. Tawwil explains

how, similar to the process behind many of Suhad Khatib's paintings, the piece began from what

she describes as a "psychic thought" shared between herself and Khoury during a house show.

> "So we were in this performance in Toledo, and we're both vibing on this energy
> in the room. It was like energy that was coming out of the ground underneath the
> house…it wasn't the energy of the home, it was the energy of the land,
> specifically, under the house. We were both in it, we talked about it later. So on
> the way home we were like, yeah, that was some weird zombie frequency…we
> started to think about it in terms of the multiple traumas to the land, and also the
> multiple displacements, the multiple dispossessions, the multiple wars on people,
> and how is that sort of like build-up of trauma? What kind of frequency does that
> build?…We're an ocean apart from the homeland, but no matter where the
> Palestinian diaspora has taken all of us, there's a frequency in the ground that we
> can all tap."

In the piece, Tawwil and Khoury explore, through sound and movement, what Tawwil

has described as a "glitch process in the body, where you think you're doing one thing, and

you're actually doing another." By continually sending her own body mixed signals about what

she wants to do and where she wants to go, Tawwil creates what she has described as a "self-

traumatizing physical practice" as she allows these conflicts and glitches to play out rather than

repressing or attempting to control them. This reflects the conflicting realities of diaspora

experience, where multiple traumas, histories, and realities clash within the individual, creating

seemingly opposing desires, reactions, and processes in the body. The piece, which is still in

development, is slated to debut in fall 2020, with Khoury performing a semi-scored electro-

acoustic violin accompaniment to Tawwil's choreography. The piece itself, like Khoury, is

nomadic. "We're going to try and do as many venues as possible around the city [of Detroit],"

Tawwil says, "letting the venue itself morph the container of a work. So it's a modular

work…it's going to be able to live anywhere, as it should, being a diasporic work." Untethered

to landscape and constructed from a series of glitches and shatterings, Tawwil here uses

obliteration and fragmentation within the physical body to explore the malleable, unfixed nature of Palestinian identity in diaspora. Adapting and shifting as it goes, it is continually marred by historical traumas that are carried in the physical body which constantly bubble to the surface, creating ruptures in every-day reality. As Palestinian identity in the present becomes amorphous and malleable, so too do our personal and collective futures.

Meanwhile, Dima Srouji has been conjuring ghosts in her latest extension of the *Hollow Forms* project. Simply titled *Ghosts*, the

Figure 26. Srouji, Dima, Ghosts, glass vessels and framed info sheets, installation, 2019, https://www.dimasrouji.com/ghosts.

series of delicate, clear glass vases lined a long shelf that spanned the length of a wall in Amman Design Week 2019 (Figure 26). They are replicas of "displaced archaeological glass artifacts from the Levant landscape" that are currently housed in various Western art museums and institutions. Positioned behind each vessel is a framed image of the original with information about where it is housed and how it was acquired. These colorless and hollow glass replicas of the vessels celebrate the formal beauty of their originals, calling on the viewer to understand the artifact through a contemporary lens. They also cast ethereal, dappled shadows which themselves change as light pours through an adjacent window throughout the day, ever-shifting and contingent on the environment around them (Figure 27). Rather than serving as static and didactic representations of an essentialized ancient culture, these vessels not only respond to the

Figure 27. Srouji, Dima, Ghosts, glass vessels and framed info sheets, installation, 2019, https://www.dimasrouji.com/ghosts.

present conditions of light and atmosphere in the gallery, but are also ghosts of a present and future haunted by latent possibility. It's the possibility of a world in which colonization has not forced us to invent static and didactic readings of the past to counter European ones for survival, but instead allows for malleable and changing readings of the artifacts that give way to a diversity of possible futures. Like many ghosts, their presence, while unsettling at times, also has the power to comfort us—the very fact of the existence of these forms is evidence of the potential for new readings of history, and likewise, new possibilities for the future.

Finally, on the subject of a looming, shifting, spectral presence, I'd like to end this section by returning to where we began: the moon. For Suhad Khatib, the moon is a source of power in her Study of the Moon, a series of self-portraits with her back to the viewer, contemplating an enormous moon looming above her, in various states of dress and undress (Figure 28). Many studies of Palestinian women's art put intense emphasis on self-portraiture and the role of the body. For Khatib, the moon is a vehicle for moving beyond the body, while the positioning of her back to the viewer, ever-present in her Study of the Moon, mirrors the refusal of Naji al-Ali's Handala to participate in dominant and oppressive systems and

Figure 28. Khatib, Suhad, New Era, India ink and gold ink on paper, 2019, https://suhadkhatib.com/originalpaintings/m9cyqrsc4m7ntp76flx7g yf8uiqoms-kfrpd-znty2-x76yy-d64ya.

discourses. "There's something bigger than the body for us to be free as women," Khatib explained. "We have to dismantle an entire system against us, that has taken religion as one of its most important tools…so I wanna explore that spiritual part, and then the body becomes a complimentary to it." She explains that she owes it to her daughter, Jeneen, to not focus primarily on the body as a means for liberation as a woman, but also on the spirit.

Throughout Khatib's paintings, the moon appears only in her portraits of women, often illuminating them like a halo, and it appears regularly in her self-portraits. Thus, within the universe of Khatib's work, the moon unites portraits of matrilineal ancestors. It also appears in Khatib's only painting of Jeneen. When I asked Khatib about how accountability to future generations comes through in her work, she told me that her accountability to Jeneen defines this for her. "I can't claim that I have the imagination to imagine what two generations from now, how things are going to be. *Bas inno* I know that my responsibility is for her," she explained.

Khatib posted the painting of Jeneen, entitled *Letter to Jeneen*, on her Instagram account (Figure 29), and included the following caption:

> "Dear Jeneen,
>
> Last night you anxiously asked me why I was crying. I lied to you, again, mentioned that it was that darn yawn that keeps making my tears come down. You know I wouldn't lie to you kid, it just felt irresponsible to tell you about the fires consuming the planet you love so much.
>
> How do I explain helplessness to a 10-year-old? Or identity politics? Or media war machines? Nuclear bombs? Greed? Male ego? Armies? Corruption? Poverty? Child sex trafficking rings? How do I tell you that your school education is an indoctrination I cannot protect you from? And that slavery was never over?
>
> Kid, I had no idea the world was like this when I had you. And when I started finding out, I tried everything I could to make sure the world you live in is kinder to you than it was to me. But sometimes I wait until you sleep to cry the things I can't change. For now I want you to at least have this painting, and this love. الله يجعل أيامك أحسن من أيامي ليمونه.

Love you the mostest x infinity,
Your mom"

In the painting, Jeneen smiles. She clutches a small bird in her hands. She stands in a field of roses, which dissolve into birds, which dissolve into the sky. The moon looms behind, a supernatural force connecting her to all the matrilineal ancestors that populate Khatib's paintings. Khatib explained to me that although Jeneen's portrait doesn't appear in most of her works, she is consistently symbolized by the birds that appear in nearly all of her paintings. In Khatib's painting *The Anti-Nationalists*, Palestine's borders dissolve into a sea of birds. She writes, "How can you force a nationality on beings one cannot see like the seeds of the earth? Or the birds who migrate?" Perhaps we may envision that Jeneen, like the bird, might one day be free to migrate, guided by the moon, connected to the wisdom of her ancestors, beyond the body, beyond borders, and into a world beyond nation-states. We may not know where the future is headed. But perhaps, if we're brave enough to create new archives, to write new histories, to undo all we think we know about who we are and where we come from, maybe then we can free our imaginations from the constraints imposed upon it and envision new kinds of liberation, a new kind of future.

Figure 29. Khatib, Suhad, Letter to Jeneen, India ink on paper, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B7EAtlppVH1/.

Conclusion: A no-state (re)solution, and other future visions

In a recent anthology of Palestinian futurist short stories entitled *Palestine +100: Stories from a century after the Nakba* (ed. Basma Ghalayini, 2019), there is a story by Palestinian writer Saleem Haddad entitled "Song of the Birds." The story follows Aya, a preteen girl living in a liberated Gaza, in a free Palestine, in the year 2048. She is haunted by the memory of her dead older brother Ziad, who hanged himself some years before. As the story progresses, Aya sleeps off her depression, and we become aware, through apparitions of Ziad that appear to her in her dreams, that the reality in which Aya lives is actually a simulation, and that the only way to escape is through death. Glitches reveal Gaza as it actually is—utterly decimated.

Elsewhere in the anthology, a story by Majd Kayyal takes a different approach to a similar concept. In "N," the story shifts between multiple realities as narrators flip between a father and his son, named N, who live in parallel realities. N studies in an Israeli university in the year 2048, in a version of reality where all of historic Palestine has become Israel, while his father lives in a parallel reality in which all of historic Palestine is entirely Palestinian. At the beginning of the story, N's father describes the terrible cold he is experiencing in his reality as a cold made especially intense "after the long years of heat we invented, created, contrived, lied into existence on the long nights when we lived in a void, believing in the existence of a sun. A sun we invented, created, contrived, lied into existence before it set" (Kayyal, 43). It's clear, when N's father asks him about the weather in his reality, that things are much warmer where he is. We later learn that one of the few escapes from this piercing cold is playing VR games, which N designs. Playing the alternate realities engulfs the body in what N's father describes as "an

incomprehensible warmth" facilitating the user's acclimation to the new reality, and it becomes

clear that N's father plays to forget a lost love.

> "When I connect to the VR and play different realities (my library isn't very big), I start to forget you. If I didn't, I wouldn't spend so much time in there admiring Angie Aflaton, for instance. It's you I love; I'm not interested in Cairo or Paris as much as I would like to walk with you in the streets of Hadar. We used to walk there at the beginning of the 2000s and sense remnants of the 1990s everywhere, That was when we still used to invent the sun, before the cold flooded Haifa and everyone—Arabs and Israelis—buried themselves in the earth of their sofas, in their different realities." (Kayyal, 49).

If we understand utopia as a place where everything is perfect, and dystopia as a place

where everything is twisted and wrong, the anti-utopia is a place where everyone thinks that they

live in a utopia, but under the surface, it is in fact dystopic. Perhaps for these writers, and for

other futurist artist and thinkers like them, the nation-state of Palestine is, in fact, our anti-utopia.

In her article, "Who Will We Be When We Are Free? On Palestine and Futurity," Palestinian

scholar Sophia Azeb contends with the contradictions inherent in nationalism as a mode of

liberation.

> "A commonly prescribed antidote to the near-total exile…prompted by such a disaster [the Nakba] is nationalism: the claim of belonging to a place, an affirmation of home. A cuisine? A flag? "The homeland is not a dish of lentils." But we already know that nationalism is a placebo…These deprivations cannot be recovered through nationalism, itself a reproduction of the violence endemic to the modern nation-state. I have argued before that we must refuse to be recognized as Palestinians within the confines and language of such a nation-state…we make space, not states." (Azeb, 23.)

This search for "space, not states" is echoed throughout much of the work discussed in

this thesis, even as the artists in question deconstruct it. When we consider that utopia, for these

artists, is most often characterized by obliteration of one kind or another, it calls to mind the

etymology of the word utopia itself: Sir Thomas More coined the word in 1516 from the Greek

ou-topos, literally meaning 'no-place'. Perhaps this disassembling of space, this unmaking of

place, frees us from our constant 'Preoccupation' with the landscape. In some ways, then, it is a kind of ultimate iconoclasm, a forsaking of not only the nation-state to which we have for so long been expected to aspire, but of the very land itself. But to what end would one disassemble space and time? Bashir Makhoul gives us some clues in his exploration of time:

> "The occupation…was not just the colonization of literal and political space but also of time…Be it petty office one-up-man-ship or geo-political domination, we are all familiar with the political dynamics of being kept waiting. If we were to add up the hours of time each Palestinian has been forced to wait by Israelis we would have many lifetimes of dead time. This in itself is a crime—the murdering of other people's time." (Makhoul, Looking Through the Cracks, 18).

When you rupture space and time, there's nothing left to occupy. Yet, as we've seen, there is a spirit for these artists, both collective and individual, that transcends all borders. This collective spirit, the cosmic ties between one-another, between us and the ancestors, are, notably, not disrupted in these works. Yet, it's an uncanny kind of connection—we find ourselves the walking dead, conversing with ghosts, moving through time untethered to anything in particular, even as the particulars of our daily lived experiences delineate us from one-another in particular ways, further fragmenting us from both our histories and our contemporaries. Again, we find ourselves united in fragmentation, in collective dissociation. Yet from this, something new emerges—a form of collective identity, a shared consciousness of sorts. A type of social organization that transcends the construct of the nation-state, that is more expansive, more adaptable, more imaginative. Through this work, we render ourselves otherworldly entities, we transcend the hungry grip of colonial and racial violence by becoming un-conquerable, by dissolving ourselves on our own terms, and in this way, we survive. Rather than searching for a 'solution' tied to statehood, these artists refuse to play the game, to engage in the binary One-State/Two-State debate. Instead, they make a no-state resolution; they invoke the no-place.

It's easy to attack artists working within and around utopia as idealistic, as disconnected from reality, as unrealistic. But the dark utopias of obliteration proposed by these artists complicate this position, and the future-facing artists in this thesis are working to transform and expand the imaginations of their own communities. Just as these artists begin to break away from physical space and time and turn towards the collective spirit, that becomes the target of their work. Art doesn't change the world, people do, and imagination is everything. Palestinian futurist artists are working to push the frontiers of our collective imaginations. Their work can only signal the beginning of a monumental shift in the way we think about ourselves as Palestinians, about our history, and our collective future. How this will impact our movements for liberation is yet to be seen, but changes are undoubtedly well underway.

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