



# ANYWHERE BUT NOW

Editors

Samar Kanafani

Munira Khayyat

Rasha Salti

Layla Al-Zubaidi

LANDSCAPES OF BELONGING IN  
THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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## ANYWHERE BUT NOW

### Foreword

This publication derives its title from a three-day symposium held in Beirut in April 2009, which brought together scholars, writers, filmmakers and artists to explore questions around landscapes of belonging. The multi-disciplinary nature of this symposium inspired novel and creative engagements; some of the attendants even called it magical. This publication seeks to capture the spirit of the event by addressing related themes through a variety of formats: reviews, essays, film dossiers, conversations, academic papers, literary excerpts, dramatic scripts for plays, and illustrated fiction.

The publication *Anywhere but Now* assembles diverse desires for *elsewhere*. It is a compilation of apart-ness, a chronicle of ruptures, violence and yearning, through time and across geographies. Contributors grapple with what seem like ordinary landscapes in the hope of unearthing the stories buried underneath them, exploring the meaning of their borders and bounds. Reflecting on the dynamics of exclusion and exile, home-making, traces of movement, trajectories of everyday life, maps of memory, and genealogies of catastrophic loss, this collection of explorations expresses a momentary sense of being and belonging – always pierced by the nervous “but” of exception and suspension. The works collected here register the *wheres* and *whens* (or *nows*) of violence, flight, siege, haunting echoes from the past, subtle tremors of fear and aspirations, and ultimately the now of a region in constant flux.

Reflecting the panels that came together during the symposium, this book is divided into four sections:

“A Place Like Home” dwells on the raveling and unraveling of home, on belonging, longing and the making and unmaking of place. It plumbs the paradoxes of living in the shadows or memories of an *other* home, an elusive but omnipresent elsewhere. Authors explore the mystery of impossible identity, the uneasy tension between emplacement and un/belonging, the prescription of legal writ in the making of home, the bitter-sweetness of nostalgia and everyday life.

“I, Nation” exposes the barbed extremities of state and nation. Authors illuminate the forceful yet brittle performance of national pride, explore the darkness at the heart of national exclusivity and exclusion, journey through treacherous yet beloved landscapes, and gingerly tread the threshold that separates light from darkness along the nation-state’s (meta)physical borders, the limens where state and nation are at once enforced and constantly undermined.

“Poetics of Passage” traces the movement of people along the multiple tracks that constitute spatial-temporal trajectories and practices of containment. Authors examine the correspondence and discord between physical and social boundaries, and explore the realities of mobility and transgression, (in)visibility and presence. Scanning the expanse of the political realm, they also explore the ways temporality is variously articulated and illuminated by both desertion and desire. Geographies change, places are transformed, people rediscover their place in the world.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“All that Remains” registers what cannot be undone, and what continues to haunt the present as time slips away. Authors meditate on how a ghostly presence is enunciated, capturing the moment it vanishes.

This book is dedicated to those who continue to struggle and die to realize their dream that the place where they – we – exist *now* may become a place to live... and not somewhere to leave behind.

*By Samar Kanafani, Munira Khayyat, Rasha Salti and Layla Al-Zubaidi*

*Anywhere but Now*, the symposium and book, would not have been possible without the commitment and support of participants, contributors and the long list of friends and attendants who contributed to this positive experience. For their great support, we are indebted to all who labored with us throughout this process. Particularly, we want to recognize Donal McLaughlin, Robin Moger, Clem Naylor and Walid Sadek for their inspired translations; the astute photography of Hussam Msheimish and the timely audio recording of Jim Quilty. We appreciate all the dedicated efforts of the Heinrich Böll Foundation team, Corinne Deek, Dina Fakoussa, Doreen Khoury and Heiko Wimmen. A special thanks goes to Hiba Haidar for her painstaking work in transcribing recordings.

We want to thank the Beirut Art Center for hosting the symposium in April 2009, and extend particular gratitude to Roy Samaha for facilitating the teleconferencing session with Ella Shohat on the opening night. Finally, we wish to acknowledge Walid Charara for his advice and Samah Selim for her generous patience.

A special dedication goes to Naeim Giladi who passed away in 2010 before seeing this book, to which his contribution was inspirational.





# 01 A PLACE LIKE HOME





# FORGET BAGHDAD: ARABS AND JEWS, THE IRAQI CONNECTION

re-enactments & transcripts of conversations with

**Naeim Giladi and Ella Shohat**

transcribed by Hiba Haidar

**Naeim Giladi (Khalaschi)** belonged to a small but vocal group of Jewish anti-Zionists who openly denounced the State of Israel in its contemporary form. Born in 1929 in Iraq to a family of farmers, he was exposed to a rich cross-section of Arabic culture, prose and poetry. After immigrating to Israel, Naeim Giladi joined the Israeli Black Panthers, an organization formed to defend the rights of Oriental Jews, and became its representative in the General Trade Union. He also campaigned for Arab/Israeli peace and published in *Al-Hawadith*, a newspaper advocating Palestinian rights. After the massacre in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut in 1982, Naeim Giladi renounced his Israeli citizenship and moved to the US. He wrote a book entitled *Ben Gurion's Scandals: How the Haganah and the Mossad Eliminated the Jews*. He died in the fall of 2010.

**Ella Habiba Shohat** teaches Cultural Studies and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. She has published extensively on issues of race, gender, Eurocentrism, Orientalism, and (post-)colonialism. Born in Israel to Iraqi parents, Shohat has developed critical approaches to the study of Arab Jews in Israel. Published over 10 years ago, her essay *The Mizrahim in Israel: Zionism from the Perspective of its Jewish Victims* is considered an intellectual breakthrough. Her work includes the books *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989), and *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994). She has also served on the editorial boards of several journals, such as *Social Text*, *Critique* and *Public Culture*. She appears in the film *Forget Baghdad*, directed by Swiss-Iraqi filmmaker Samir.

On Thursday April 2nd, 2009, the **Anywhere but Now** conference opened with a welcome note by Layla Al-Zubaidi, director of Heinrich Böll Foundation, Middle East Office, and the screening of *Forget Baghdad* by Samir. Naeim Giladi and Ella Shohat had been invited to attend the conference and discuss the film after its screening. In the days leading up to the event, Naeim Giladi's health deteriorated and Ella Shohat could not travel to Beirut due to a family emergency. Rather than resigning ourselves to accepting their absence, Layla Al-Zubaidi interviewed Naeim Giladi by phone and shared her conversation with him with the audience in Beirut. Through a live satellite broadcast, Ella Shohat was able to speak with the audience in Beirut from a studio in New York. What follows are the transcripts of the two conversations.



*Conversation with Naeim Giladi: live re-enactment of a transcript of a telephone call. Layla Al-Zubaidi, Naeim Giladi and Rasha Salti.*

**Layla Al-Zubaidi:** Unfortunately, Naeim Giladi apologized, he couldn't take part in the teleconference for health reasons. I nonetheless conducted a phone interview with him and he wanted his words to be heard by the audience.

**Rasha Salti:** Before reading the interview, I want to point out that Naeim Giladi appears in the film *Forget Baghdad*. When the protagonists talk about the Black Panther party, and archival black and white footage appears, you can see a man holding a microphone – that's Naeim Giladi. He was second-in-command in the Black Panther party at the time. Charlie Bitton, the leader of the Black Panthers was elected to the Knesset, he was Moroccan. Naeim Giladi was the director of his office in the Knesset, and he was also a journalist. Naeim is an Iraqi Jew, and like all the Iraqi Jews you saw in the film, his fate was also to land in Israel. His story was different from the communists', because after the *Farhood Massacre*, he became a Zionist. The moment he landed in Israel however, he realized that he couldn't possibly affiliate with Zionism. He grew up in the transit camps, with all the other Iraqi Jews, and it is where he came of age. The next turning point in his life was the creation of the Black Panther party, where he was a prominent figure. The Black Panther party was dissolved, I think in 1975 or 1976. The party's second convention was in 1975 and the first item on the agenda was the call for an independent Palestinian state. A very brief shorthand to give a sense of what the party stood for. After the dissolution of the party, Naeim worked as a journalist. In 1982, when the Israeli army marched from Sidon to Beirut and besieged Beirut, and the story of the Sabra and Shatila massacre broke out in the news, he used his journalist credentials and went to

the massacre site to see with his own eyes. He went back to Israel almost immediately, told his wife to pack up their home and take their kids and move to the United States. He would follow her months later, after he had sorted out all the paperwork he needed to. He moved to Queens, New York and never went back. The family applied for a Green card and for US citizenship. And the moment he got the American passport he gave up his Israeli citizenship. This, in very brief terms, is Naeim Giladi.

### The interview

*(Layla performs herself, Rasha performs Naeim)*

**LAZ:** Yes. Imagine that it is midnight in Beirut, I am calling him in New York. Every five minutes he tells me “I’m sorry, I have to close, call me back in five minutes.” So it took me two full nights to finish the interview. I hope you appreciate it.

**LAZ:** Mr. Giladi, we would like to read a conversation with you to our audience in Beirut. Are you ready to answer some questions?

**Naeim Giladi (Rasha Salti):** You are very welcome. I’m ready to answer all your questions, under one condition: that we speak in Arabic... Why do you call me from Lebanon and speak English? Let’s talk in Arabic. I would like to let you know that I’d like to be with you in Beirut personally. I’m ready to make the trip and be with you.

**LAZ:** Tell us about your life in Iraq. How was it to live as a Jew in Iraqi society?

**NG:** How were we living? We lived like kings. I remember that as a child, when our Muslim neighbors celebrated their holidays, we brought them sweets, and when we celebrated our own festivities, they would visit us, bring us oranges and pomegranate and celebrate our holidays with us.

**LAZ:** So what exactly happened that made you decide to leave Iraq?

**NG:** Things started to deteriorate in the 1940s because of political upheavals in the region. I was 13 years old, visiting my uncle in Baghdad when I witnessed British forces attacking Jewish neighborhoods. They used Indian

troops, who looked like Iraqis and who were themselves oppressed. I was shocked. I asked myself, after 1,600 years of Jewish presence in Iraq, could this happen? Two days later, the Zionist agency operating secretly in Iraq, published a pamphlet in Arabic, asking Jews to leave the “Land of Babel.” I joined the movement, became an activist and later helped to organize the transfer of Jews from Iraq to Israel.

**LAZ:** Yet, today you are known as an anti-Zionist. How come?

**NG:** I left Iraq in 1950. The moment I stepped on the soil of Israel I realized what was going on, who was behind the bombs that had hit the Jewish neighborhood in Baghdad. I later discovered that the exodus of Jews from Iraq was the result of a secret deal between Ben Gurion and Nuri al-Said (the Iraqi prime minister), mediated by the British. Ben Gurion wanted to get rid of the Palestinians and exchange them against Arab Jews, while Nuri al-Said wanted to get rid of Iraqi Jews. Why? Because many were active in leftist movements, not because they were Jews. He was also greedy. It was a perfect deal for both, a lot of money was involved. All of this is in my book *Ben Gurion’s Scandals: How the Haganah and the Mossad Eliminated the Jews*, which is banned in Israel until this day. We received Iraqi passports for one exit and without permission to return. Until 2003 it was forbidden for us to go back to Iraq.

**LAZ:** Did you ever go back to Iraq?

**NG:** Only in 2004. I went to Baghdad to the penal investigation office to demand the files on the bombings of 1950 and 1951.

**LAZ:** What did you find?

**NG:** The information I found was very interesting. All available evidence affirms these secret negotiations. You can find it all in the new edition of my book.

**LAZ:** Apart from the role of the Zionist movement in the departure of Iraqi Jews, what exactly did you witness in Israel that made you join the opposition to Zionism?

**NG:** I saw with my own eyes that the so-called independence war of Israel was absolutely not a war of independence, but a war against the Palestinian population and the Arabs. Even when I was in Iraq, I had identified with the Palestinian cause. We, the members of the Zionist organization, used to march in demonstrations, shouting "Palestine is Arab, down with Zionism" (*Filastin Sarabiyyeh, wa tisqut as-sahyioniyyeh*).

**LAZ:** Isn't that contradictory?

**NG:** You are asking me whether this is a contradiction? I didn't see it as that. I identified myself as an Arab. Only in Israel, I realized it was impossible to be an Arab and a Zionist at the same time. So I decided join the opposition and became anti-Zionist. I contacted Palestinians from the start, and published a great deal with them proclaiming the rights of Palestinians. In 1973 I joined the Black Panther movement that defended the rights of Oriental Jews. I became the General Secretary and its representative in the Trade Union, the *Histadrut*.

**LAZ:** Tell us about your experience in Lebanon.

**NG:** I have been to Lebanon only once, during the Israeli occupation in 1982, as a journalist. I was writing for a Hebrew-language as well as for Arabic-language papers. I dressed up in uniform and blended with Israeli soldiers.

I talked to refugees in Sabra and Shatila and to members of the Sa'ad Haddad militia. The massacre had stopped on a Thursday evening, I arrived on the Saturday at 5 o'clock in the morning. I collected a lot of written documents from Lebanese and Palestinian and Israeli protagonists and wrote an article titled *An Eye-Witness Account from Lebanon*. Of course, I was not allowed to take pictures of the victims.

**LAZ:** Who didn't let you take pictures?

**NG:** Guess who! The Israeli army obviously. I didn't stay in Lebanon for long, only a few days. What I saw in Sabra and Chatila was the reason I left Israel. It was not the only reason, I had several others that compelled me to look for another place to live. Eventually, I was able to obtain a visa to the United States. I visited for two weeks in order to investigate whether I could live there. You know, I didn't want to exchange the bad for the worse... I found it was



livable, so I emigrated there. I applied for American citizenship and gave up my Israeli citizenship. Since then I have never returned to Israel.

**LAZ:** How did you give up your Israeli citizenship?

**NG:** I went to the Israeli embassy in the United States and said I want to renounce my citizenship. They didn't give me any problems, because they considered me a troublemaker and they had been wanting to get rid of me for a long time. So when I applied formally, they told me: "welcome." I filled out the application and was later given a paper attesting I was not an Israeli citizen anymore. I sold my house in Petah Tikva in Israel for cheap. At the time, many Arab Jews wanted to leave Israel. They were fed up with the racism and discrimination. There were many Iraqi Jews in Petah Tikva, but also in Ramat Gan [a neighborhood in Tel Aviv]. I once went to the mayor of Ramat Gan to collect contacts of Iraqi Jews, and he told me just to look for those houses with satellites antennas that were directed towards the Arab world on the roof. In the beginning, and until the protests against discrimination erupted, Arab Jews were ashamed to watch Arab films. Then, the Israeli public television channel began to broadcast one Arab film per week.

**LAZ:** What about the new generation, the children of Jewish Arab families? Do they still relate to Arab culture?

**NG:** The new generation doesn't speak Arabic anymore, but many understand the language. My daughter teaches Arabic and Islamic Studies at the university in Israel.

**LAZ:** Did you study yourself?

**NG:** Yes, but this is ages ago. What can I tell you, I'm old, very old!

**LAZ:** But you give the impression that you are very young...

**NG:** No, believe me, I'm old. What can I say or do about it...

**LAZ:** Is there anything you would like to tell our audience in Beirut?

**NG:** I want to tell you, I would love to live in any Arab country, blend with the people. My culture, my ethics are Arab. I follow all Arab TV channels because I want to hear my language. Iraq is my nation. I will always miss Iraq and the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris. Iraq is an agricultural country, everything is about sustaining life. The waters of its rivers, the *sumsum*, the hummus, the dates... When I visited Iraq in 2003, I found it completely changed. But it is still my Iraq. If I could return, believe me, I would leave tonight. However, all my family, my friends left. I would have to rebuild everything from scratch. I can't do this anymore. This is why I'm saying I'm really old. And now my wife, who is very beautiful, is standing behind me, telling me that I should take my medicine and go to sleep. But I would like to tell you about this film... "Bye bye Baghdad"...?

**LAZ:** Do you mean *Forget Baghdad*?

**NG:** Ok, whatever it is called, *Forget Baghdad*, say that nobody who was born in the former Iraq will ever be able to forget Iraq. Never. It is my soul, my life, and the deepest place in my heart. It is closer to me than mother and father. Can you please say this to your audience.

**Rasha Salti:** When I was doing my Masters thesis, I interviewed Naeim. He was very paranoid for a long time, so I had to get his approval through Ella Shohat. She had to call him and tell him that I was ok, and then I could call him. The first thing he told me as well was to speak Arabic.

His English isn't so great anyway. We made a date for the interview and I asked him what I could bring him. I thought I'd just go to the pastry shop and pick up some sweets. He replied he wanted any Arabic newspaper or book I had at home and was willing to give up, just give them to me. So I showed up with all issues of *al-Hayat* newspaper, and he almost had tears in his eyes. I'm sure that nobody has ever cried receiving *al-Hayat*.

**LAZ:** He also asked me to go to a bookstore and to see whether any of his books are translated into Arabic. He said that they are prohibited in Israel and he doesn't know what's going on in the Arab world. I will search for them.

**RS:** His choice of settling in the US was traumatic because he spoke only Arabic and Hebrew, no English. So he couldn't really make a living in the US. For a long time he worked as correspondent for an obscure Libyan newspaper. That was his only source of income.

### Conversation with Ella Shohat in Live Telecast from New York

*In New York, Ella Habiba Shohat sits alone in a small dark studio gazing at an empty monitor screen, waiting for Rasha Salti and the Beirut audience to appear on the screen, and for a long time all she receives are some camera-related instructions but little confirmation about a communication breakthrough from the technician. In Beirut, Ella appears on the screen, fixing her hair. It is apparent that she can't see the Beirut audience.*

**RS:** She wants to look pretty for Beirut.

**LAZ:** There are probably a few minutes left for the technical test. Maybe I should tell you that Ella Shohat was really very moved by the invitation.

*Ella counts to five.*

*(Audience laughter.)*

**LAZ:** Both Ella and Naeim really wanted to come to Beirut. But Naeim said that his wife didn't let him...

*(Audience laughter.)*

**LAZ:** And Ella has elderly parents who are presently very sick; she could not risk leaving their hospital bed.

**Ella Shohat:** Okay, I'll turn off the telephone.

*(Audience laughter.)*

**RS:** Can you hear me, Ella?

**ES:** No, I'm supposed to speak after the film *Forget Baghdad*. I assume that the audience has seen it.

**RS:** Can you hear me, Ella?

**ES:** Is Rasha Salti there? Her idea was to have a conversation after the film. I don't have a paper to read, but I'm happy to begin the conversation.

**RS:** She's talking to the technicians... Can you hear me, Ella?

**ES:** Yes. This is wonderful. It's really a shame that I can't see all of you. This is so exciting.

**RS:** Yes we are working on it. *Habibti*, hopefully next time it can be in the flesh in Beirut.

**ES:** *Inshallah*.

**RS:** So I am going to start by asking you a few questions and we will try to take questions from the audience afterwards. Can you tell us what the film *Forget Baghdad* represents to you, how Samir came in contact with you, and what your involvement with the film was beyond appearing in it and giving the interview?

**ES:** Yes, the story of Samir and I meeting has an interesting dimension because, before I met Samir in the flesh, I actually saw an earlier film he had made, at the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia. The film, *Babylon 2*, about minorities in Switzerland, included in part the story of his friendship with a Swiss Jew. I was very excited to see it but I did not think much about the matter afterwards. A few years later, I met a relative of Samir's at a conference in Basel (on the occasion of 100 years of Zionism), and she told me that he sent his greetings and appreciation for my work on Iraq and Arab Jews. I had no idea that he had read my work. We met in London for the first time and, sure enough, he told me about his new project and asked me

to serve as an advisor, a consultant for the film. I was very happy to be part of this project for a number of reasons. Besides appreciating Samir as a filmmaker, I was also very moved that someone who was not an Iraqi Jew, but an Iraqi of Muslim background, would take an interest in our story. Eventually, during the process, he invited me to be an interviewee in the film because he felt I represented the younger diasporic generation, or as if, metaphorically, I was the daughter of the protagonists at the center of the narrative. In turn, I suggested he could not hide himself and therefore had to introduce himself as part of the narrative as well. So, in this sense, the film reflects our dialogue. On one level, my story is not within the framework of the four protagonists – it is outside it – and yet my own story, as well as Samir's, is crucial for the story of rupture; it adds another dimension to the story of exile.

**RS:** I am sure that there will be a lot of questions from the audience and from my colleagues on exile, diaspora, identity and all that. I just want to focus a bit on the film for now. Did you attend any screenings and can you tell us how audiences reacted to the film?

**ES:** Yes, on a number of occasions Samir and I spoke in conjunction with screenings of the film. On other occasions, I travelled with the film both in and outside of the US, Latin America and Europe. Over the years, I've had incredible encounters with audiences. Some write to me – people whom I have never met – in response to the film. In the US the responses have been varied. There were some coming from a traditional Zionist perspective, who regarded the film with incredible hostility because, in spite of the fact that the four protagonists live in Israel, there is a major critique of Israeli policies in relation to Arab Jews. There is also the assertion of a younger generation of Arab Jews who have not forgotten their Arab heritage. The film's premise is very





difficult for American Jews who really have a hard time with people like us asserting our belonging to an Arab heritage, precisely because “Arab” is always constructed in opposition to “Jew,” and therefore the notion of an Arab Jew is for them oxymoronic, strange, even surreal.

On the other hand, I’ve received very moving responses, particularly from Arab Americans, who feel that the story of Arab Jews is partially their own story – a story of dispossession, exile, multiple belongings and identities. They feel affinity with various places including with the Arab world, while also thinking of themselves as Americans, living in between spaces. As for Americans who don’t have any relationship to the Middle East: for the most part, there was an incredible curiosity about the film’s narratives, particularly because they have never been exposed to our side of the story. To them, Jews were from Europe and Arabs were all Muslims. The notion of Arab Jews, or also Arab Christians, is usually very foreign to mainstream audiences in the US. On that level, I think the film and the conversations following the screenings have been quite an educational process.

**RS:** It sounds brilliant. I just want to note that in the Arab world, it is very troubling to read the name of a filmmaker who has only a first name, Samir. I have been asked a hundred times: “Samir who?” “What is his father’s name?” “What is his family name?”

**ES:** Well, let me say that it is not only in the Arab world, but in most places at this point. Nation-state bureaucracy has introduced us to a first and last name; no longer “*abu*” or “*ibn*,” “*um*” or “*bint*.” I think it is quite a provocative gesture on the part of Samir. By the way, his last name is Jamaladdin. He is not hiding it, but I think using the name Samir is a way of asserting his belonging to multiple places and communities, not only to the well-respected Muslim background associated with his last name.

**RS:** Were there any screenings in the Arab world or among Iraqi communities in the diaspora, or in Palestine?

**ES:** Yes, there have been quite a few screenings of the film. To my knowledge, Samir has travelled with the film in the Arab world. I know that it was shown in Cairo recently and was actually reviewed in *Al-Ahram* newspaper. There was one previous screening in Beirut. The film has also been shown in Palestine, Israel, England, Holland, France, and Brazil, so it has had quite a number of screenings, and in different places. I don’t want to generalize about Arab audiences, but I can really speak about the encounters with Iraqis of diverse backgrounds. The film has been very moving to Iraqis, whether in Britain, Austria, Holland or Germany. That is precisely because after the diverse wars on and in Iraq, displacement, dislocation, dispossession, and exile have been the story of *all* Iraqis, not only of Iraqi Jews. Samir is so careful, too: while he focuses on the question of Iraqi Jews, he places it in relation to the question of Palestine, even though it is not the central

theme of the film. At the same time, it is the narrative of many Iraqis – in his own case, of an Iraqi of Shiite and communist background – you know, as someone also with multiple dislocations and exiles. The rallying around the film has created a kind of an emotional space, where Iraqis of diverse backgrounds mourn the loss of Iraq with poignant melancholia – “*Rahet Baghdad, Rahet al-Iraq*” (“*Baghdad is gone, Iraq is gone*”). There is an astounding melancholy. I know that atrocities have been committed in Lebanon and Palestine; people have been killed, massacred – Palestinians and Lebanese. But precisely because this is a perspective of Iraqi Jews who do not subscribe to the dominant Israeli narrative, it has been particularly moving to Iraqis. At least this is what I have experienced in encounters with Iraqis who have watched the film.

**RS:** The tragedy of Iraq is ongoing and is overwhelming, and takes on different natures. You are absolutely right. I am going to ask you one last question before I hand the microphone to the audience. You speak of dislocations and identities in exile: what have these dislocations done to you? You choose to live in New York; you’re incredibly prolific; you’re one of the most creative scholars to have written about Israeli cinema, and what you have written about Palestinian cinema has been groundbreaking; the same goes for your writings on gender. Now you’re more interested in exploring the way the world works, global economies and neo-liberalism. The expanse of your work is riveting. Do you want to talk a bit about what the dislocations mean to you, what they have done to you? And are you just going to stay in New York?

**ES:** Well, thank you for the kind words. I can only say that the question of this choice is not only a choice; it is a very complicated matter. As you have seen in the film, this dislocation, especially of Jews from Iraq, is not

simply a natural occurrence and it cannot be separated from the question of Palestine. The way the story of Arab Jews circulates is saddening. It is not only that people, Palestinians and Arab Jews, have been dislocated, but the way in which the story of Arab Jews constantly emerges to suppress the rights of Palestinians; it’s terrible. I think this is one of the questions. There is the physical aspect of bodies dislocated, people losing their homes. There is also the aspect of how the story of dislocation is used to justify the ongoing dislocation, in this case of Palestinians. The question of Arab Jews and Palestinians is part of a larger story of colonial partitions. The case of India and Pakistan for instance is telling of what partition has really resulted in: tragic consequences for the diverse populations in the region. Partition is not necessarily something natural – neither is it a matter of choice. Palestinians were not asked whether they would like to leave Palestine, nor were Arab Jews asked if they would like to live in Palestine. But as a result of the dispossession of Palestinians in 1948 with the *Nakba*, we, Arab Jews, were caught in a situation in which we did not have much agency. I don’t want to compare our story to the Palestinians. There are no analogies, any which way you look. Quite the contrary: it is a more complex question of departure from the Arab World. We can only say – I can say – with a great deal of sadness, that the tension, anxiety, and fear of this equation between being a Jew and being a Zionist has made our place in the Arab World an anxious one. This is one kind of departure; the other – in my case, when I left Israel – is also a matter of choice. It is a political choice: a departure from a place I feel robbed me of my Arab identity. I am not speaking for all Arab Jews. I wouldn’t want to be perceived as representing all Arab Jews – but I am speaking of a certain community of leftist Arab Jews who feel that, in many ways, we were dispossessed. For me to have reclaimed my Arab identity – to announce it, to write about it, to

investigate it – was not a simple task, precisely because of this context in which the notion of Jews versus Arabs is constantly promoted, and precisely because I did not grow up in Iraq. Being in New York, a place like New York, has been something very positive, precisely because there are so many refugees here, exiled people who have had to leave their own places because they could not belong to one particular nation. To me, New York, despite its problems – racial discrimination against blacks and Latinos; profiling and harassment of Muslims – is still a place that allows for people to have multiple belongings. In a strange way, it is in New York that I was able to make friendships with people of diverse backgrounds, to live with Arabs, to live in part with a Middle Eastern community, an exiled Middle Eastern community, if you like, something that I do credit to New York.

**RS:** Thank you, Ella. We're going to pass the microphone to the audience. Everybody has watched the film and some people are familiar with your work. We're passing around the microphone. Can you hear us?

**ES:** Yes, I can hear you. But unfortunately I still cannot see you.

**Ralf Ftouni:** It is very nice to talk to you live like this from Beirut.

**ES:** Hello, hello. We got disconnected.

**Ralf Ftouni:** Hello, hello.

**ES:** Yes, I can hear now, thank you.

**Ralf Ftouni:** My name is Ralf Ftouni. I am from the south, from the region of Tyre. First I want to say it is really nice

to have this live conversation with you from Beirut. It seems interesting to me that in the film the communists who are usually atheists are the ones that seem to be carrying the Arab Jewish heritage. My question to you is: do you see many people outside of the communist circles maintaining this tradition, trying to protect this heritage?

**ES:** Thank you. It is also my pleasure to be virtually in Beirut. Thank you for the question. In the film most of the participants are actually no longer members of the Communist Party; I myself was never a member of the Communist Party. But now the notion of the Arab Jew is part of a loosely leftist vision that strives for justice and peace. They used to be members of the Communist Party, like Sami Michael and Shimon Ballas, but not anymore. Keeping the heritage, or the question of maintaining Arab traditions, I would say exists along a wide spectrum, a spectrum of diverse political positions. Claiming your heritage does not necessarily mean or indicate where you stand politically in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or in relation to Zionism. I just want to be clear about it, because it is one thing to claim one's cultural affinities and cultural heritage; how to go about claiming it, within which political perspective, especially when we speak about the question of Palestine, is another matter. There is no unanimous approach here. So I would say that Samir's choice was to highlight Arab Jews who claim their *Arabness*, but who also have a leftist perspective. Yet, I wouldn't say that we represent all Arab Jews across all political perspectives. You could say that we represent one kind of voice and one kind of perspective among Arab Jews. There are others who celebrate their Iraqi-ness or Moroccan-ness, or Syrian-ness, etc., but that does not mean necessarily that they share our critical position with regards to Zionist history and Israeli policies.

**Sarah:** Hi, I am Sarah. I would like to ask you where you consider home to be?

**ES:** You know, you are touching at the core of the problem of what “home” is. This has been a very painful question for me, because here I am, a person who grew up in an Iraqi household in Israel, in a place where I spoke Arabic at home but was schooled in Hebrew, then moved to the US, and now I have been living in New York longer than I have ever lived anywhere else in the world. So you know, of course New York is the city where I feel most at home. But, again: why do I feel most at home there? Precisely because it does not ask me to belong to one place. It allows for this multiple, hyphenated identity. So my home – really in terms of emotional geography – I would say that Baghdad will always be an integral part of my feeling of home; it lives in me even though I have never lived there. Certainly people like my parents continue to carry the Baghdad of *maqam*, of Daoud and Salah Al-Kuwaiti, of Salima Pasha and Nazem al-Ghazali, with them to New York where they live.

But I also want to emphasize that home for me is friends and people, a community of people like Rasha, people who think and view the world in a kind of a way that does not confine your belonging to one narrow sense of ethnicity or religion or nation. So in that way, while I want to fight against injustice, I am also not necessarily suggesting that I am a strict nationalist. Even if I have an affinity with Iraq, I also belong to those who believe in fighting for justice. Iraqi culture itself contains multiple influences; just as Lebanese culture consists of multiple influences. If you remember the music in the film: it includes different genres and is drawn from diverse sources, Egyptian musical, Iraqi music, nationalist songs, jazzistic Arabic music and so on. And the images also use multiple sources: still photographs,



archival footage, newsreels and so on. The thing I liked about the film aesthetically is that it brings so many visual and acoustic layers together, taken from different periods and places. Aesthetically, the film illustrates the notion that home is not a single place in the present. Especially in the era of globalization, in the era of multiple dislocations and movements of populations, whether by choice or not, it is hard to speak of an affinity to one place and one home being this one place. I think that belonging is complex, plural, and is mediated through these multiple affinities, and, for me reflects not only all the places I have lived in but also the ones passed on to me, and also the new ones I have encountered.

**RS:** Thank you Ella, thank you for the kind words. You've taken me to Brazil, too.

**ES:** (Laughs.) Yes, that's right.

**Question from audience:** Thank you for being with us. I wanted to ask you how much you think that racism and the singular identity and narrative used against Arab Jews in Israel is actually inherent to nationalisms?

**ES:** Well, this is a very interesting question. I think it is partially inherent, or can be inherent to nationalism, but more dangerously, it is inherent to a racist world view. Nationalism does not always have to be racist. It is perhaps sometimes exclusionary – that depends on what the vision of that nationalism is. Nationalism is problematic because of its genealogy; after all, the ideology emerged – at least when you speak about the third world – as a response, a kind of conceptual vehicle against colonialism and the oppression and the injustice it wrought in the process. It is fascinating reading Frantz Fanon's writing about Algeria. He was one of the groundbreaking intellectuals in formulating his ideas of anti-colonialism and anti-racism and yet he is careful to include Jews in the discussion so as not to participate in the French divide-and-conquer strategy that separated Muslims from Jews ever since the Crémieux decree. Again, I don't want to idealize any version of the history of religions or ethnicities in the Middle East, but I think colonialism played an important role in the new formations of identities in ways that created nation-states and produced very problematic places for religious and ethnic minorities. And I am saying this with a great deal of caution, because I am acutely aware of the ways in which the stories of Arab Jews, Iraqi Christians or Egyptian Copts, are now used sometimes to produce a very racist image of Islam; as if to argue that Islam is by definition a racist ideology. That's why I'm trying to be very careful when speaking about the question of minorities in the Arab/Muslim world because I don't want to reproduce this narrative. At the same time, I don't buy into the narrative of a rigid homogenous nationalism purely as a response to colonial injustice, a rigidity that sometimes has had lethal consequences for minorities.

I will add one more thing to the question of Arab Jews: the first book I wrote, about the history of the representation

of Palestinians and of Arab Jews in Zionist discourse as reflected through the cinema, actually traces the genealogy of this kind of East/West conceptualization to Europe's racist relation to the Middle East. I wanted to show the links between the broader Orientalist interpretive model – in the way intellectuals like Anwar Abdel Malek and Edward Said have used the term – to the specific case of Zionism's representation of “the East” and “the West” with its production of a very shallow, stereotypical and binary image. The story of Arab Jews for me is not a separate story from the general story of the way Eurocentric discourse imagined the Middle East. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said speaks about how – in the post-enlightenment era, and especially



after World War II – Orientalist discourse began gradually to split the European Jews from the Arab, and build up a general anti-Arab image of the Middle East. My argument has been that Zionism itself split the Jews according to Orientalist paradigms. It represented European Jews in ways that echo stereotypical discourses about “the Eastern European Jew,” who for Zionism had to be Westernized, and later, it is Arab Jews who had to be de-Orientalized. In Zionist discourse, Arabs and Palestinians continue to be a negative element – just as generally in Orientalist discourse – but Arab Jews had to be de-Arabized to be regarded positively. Usually, the Middle East is imagined as devoid of (Arab) Jews, but we appear in the Zionist rescue narrative when Euro-Israel is saving us from our Muslim captives and oppressors, and from our inferior culture. This has now become the dominant narrative. Thus, it is not simply racism per se, but rather racism in conjunction with a settler colonial ideology and in conjunction with Orientalist discourse. The way I regard the question of “the Arab Jew” is: it’s a complex intersection that gains meaning within the context of the larger question of Zionism and Palestine, on one hand, and Eurocentrism as Orientalism as a whole, on the other.

**RS:** I guess you can see us now?

**ES:** I do, I do!

*(Audience claps and cheers.)*

**ES:** And it is lovely to see you all! *Bawsat!* (Kisses.)

**Samar Kanafani:** My name is Samar Kanafani. I am one of the organizers of this event. I would like to return to the notion of nostalgia. It is very prominent in the remembrances of the people we saw in the movie, and in the interview that

Layla Al-Zubaidi did with Naeim Giladi over the phone. Can you tell us a bit about nostalgia and how in some way it can be one of the constituent factors of the Arab Jews living in exile, if you consider that memories are constructed out of the position from where we are remembering?

**ES:** Nostalgia can be used for very conservative purposes, sometimes even racist purposes. Nostalgia can also be used for more progressive ends: articulating a new version of history and identity, especially in the context of oppression, denial and taboo memories. So if we speak about the Israeli-Arab wars and the question of Palestine, I have tried to write about nostalgia in a context where Arabness was denied to people like myself. Arabness was exactly the thing that was forbidden; Arabs were the enemy. This is how I was schooled in Israel. At the same time, at home, my culture was Arabic. In my early work, I talked about that kind of schizophrenia, and tried to reconstruct a different kind of memory of the Arab world. Precisely because I did not grow up in Iraq, until now, I am attacked in certain quarters and sometimes even by Arab Jews, often with a different political take: “How dare you claim that? You never lived in Iraq. You are not an Iraqi.” The question for me is how to articulate that memory, in spite of the fact that not growing up in the Arab world has been a crucial factor, because I am saying that the severing, the rupture that has happened in my family between, say, my sister who was born in Iraq and myself, had to do with the partition of Palestine and how we ended up dislocated. However, just because the official narrative claimed that the Arab is the enemy, we still grew up with an affectionate relationship to Arab culture at home. For me, it was important to articulate in the public sphere what up to that point was only articulated within the private sphere. It was not just about fighting economic and political rights. The question of cultural rights was also important for me from the





outset. And in this sense the reconstruction of memories is crucial for an alternative vision of the future. If you take another example, in the context of Israel and Palestine, the debate over *falafel* and who has the right to claim *falafel* is ultimately a symbolic debate over indigeneity. You know, there is a debate over the appropriation of the Palestinian or Lebanese food, *hummus*...

**Samar Kanafani:** That's Lebanese.

(Audience laughter.)

**ES:** (Laughing.) It is not merely a question of pathetic debate, it is rather a meaningful debate; it is significant because culture is not separate from the political realm. In this way, people like us, who engage in cultural activism and write about culture, refuse to see culture as a separate realm from politics. In other words, what we are trying to argue for is the concept of "cultural politics." And therefore nostalgia forms an important element of how we write about the past, how we articulate the past, how we narrate this relationship of Jews and Muslims and Christians and

others within that vast geo-political space of the Arab world. How we articulate this relationship is very meaningful. What you have now is a debate between those of us (like Naeim Giladi, myself, and others) who try to articulate the very specific disaster colonialism and Zionism catalyzed for Jews and Muslims in Arab countries; and those who argue the opposite, that Jews in the Muslim world, not unlike in the Christian world, were always persecuted and therefore, you know, there is ultimately a justification for what happened to the Palestinians. So nostalgia is not just about weeping when you listen to Nazem al-Ghazali or Oum Kulthoum, which is of course an important element; but it is also about how intellectuals and cultural activists resist official narratives and institutional taboos, and generate different, complex memories of these relationships. I will give you another example of this question. You can find it on YouTube: an Al-Jazeera reportage, I believe, called "The Last Jew of Babylon." It is about an old Iraqi man who was presumably rescued from Baghdad after the American occupation of Iraq, and taken to Israel where presumably he was liberated. The thing is that the film shows him to be happy in Baghdad; he arrives in Israel and becomes very lonely, depressed and melancholic until he goes to Jaffa, where he mixes with Palestinians in a café, and plays *shesh-besh* or *tawleh*. He enters an Arab-speaking world where he no longer feels isolated and estranged. It's interesting that he also feels estranged in the world of what are now Iraqi-Israelis because there is an incredible separation gap of some 50 to 60 years. Why am I bringing up this example? Because in his arrival in a context that regards the Arab as the enemy, the Baghdadi Jew feels the pain of losing Iraq, not unlike the way the generation of Naeim Giladi or my parents has been nostalgic for Iraq, and felt cheated out of their country. Nostalgia gains political meaning, not simply because you have the hankering for smoking *narguileh*, but because you are

denied something, which is taken away from you forcefully, and in a context where you are not supposed to remember Iraq, and supposed to have amnesia about your past.

**Heiko Wimmen:** I would like to ask about the sixty-year gap. I was in New York in 2003, which of course for Iraq was unlike any other year. I think it was April or May 2003, and I had this conversation with a young Israeli lawyer, obviously an educated person, of Iraqi origin. She was amazed by the images broadcast on television. She said, “I have seen all these pictures of Iraq now and I was surprised to see such huge cities like Baghdad, because I imagined it to be a completely agricultural place.”

*(Ella laughs.)*

This was the daughter of Iraqi immigrants to Israel, so only one generation removed. Now we have heard all these wonderful stories about the Black Panthers and all of this. But what is left of this? I mean what else is left other than those who voted for Begin in 1977, other than those who maybe now vote for Shas? What is left of the opposition, the force that was mounted against the dominant Zionist narrative, by people who thought like you or the generation of Naeim Giladi?

**ES:** Thank you. Well I think this is a very tough and very appropriate question. First, it shouldn't be surprising to us that Arab Jews, or the *Mizrahim* [children of Arab and Middle Eastern Jews], living in Israel should say that. One thing that we have to understand about Israel – and I can tell you that some Palestinians *fil-dakhil*<sup>1</sup> speak that way – is that until 1967, you have to imagine that Palestinians *fil-dakhil* and Arab Jews were completely disconnected from the Arab world, especially the younger generations. Israel is a highly centralized state, where education is

totally controlled by the state. In fact, until 1992 or 1993 there was only one TV channel, owned by the state – even if there was some Arabic programming – and the same applies to radio. So in other words, even if they broadcast in Arabic, it was according to one paradigm of political, national and Orientalist perspective. When I was in school, we did not read anything about the Arab world. We were basically taught European history, and the very few pages dedicated to the Middle East were only about Muslim and Arab persecution of Jews, and about the Arab world's underdevelopment, primitiveness, and backwardness. To the extent that some Palestinians and Arab Jews growing up in Israel have fallen into that narrative, you can understand that children who were raised that way would buy into it. It takes an incredible amount of resistance, or it took an incredible amount of resistance, to shape new narratives. I would say that especially after the Oslo Accords – despite their problematic impact on Palestinians in terms of their basic rights, the right of return, etc. – there has been a visible discursive shift. *Within* Israel the Oslo Accords allowed the name *Filastin*<sup>2</sup> and discussions of Palestinian rights to become more legitimate, however problematic and manipulative. But still, at least as far as discourses go – as opposed to practices – it opened up the debate, also within the U.S. It also opened the debate on Arab Jews. All of us who appear in *Forget Baghdad*, with our kind of work and writing, we used to be denounced, but suddenly we became influential, to the point that, by the late 1990s and early 2000, the question of Arab Jews even became fashionable among the younger generation of Arab Jewish/Mizrahi intellectuals and activists. Now people are using the term “Arab Jews” in previously unthinkable ways. I am talking about young people who were born in the 1980s, so really the equivalent of the grandchildren of Naeim. Culturally, it has now become a realm of *engagement*, for instance the new fusion music.

<sup>1</sup> Arabic for “inside,” here referring to the Palestinians and Palestinian territory within the Israeli state, ie, within those Israeli borders established in 1948.

<sup>2</sup> Palestine.

In terms of films, there is an incredible production of films. *Forget Baghdad* was shown at the Tel Aviv Cinemathèque; fifteen years ago, that would have been unthinkable. At the same time, while the question of Arab Jews became quite fashionable, unfortunately it is sometimes emptied of its critical meaning. Now it can be a celebration, a nostalgic celebration of our special identity, but sometimes appropriated for dominant narratives. It is as though: “we are Arab Jews, but we don’t talk about the question of Palestine.” You hear that sometimes in such statements as: “it’s irrelevant, I just enjoy listening to Arabic music.” In such instances, the celebration engages Arabic culture and produces new fusion music, with Moroccan tunes and Spanish tunes, but without actually engaging any of the political dimensions. In other words, in response to your question “What is left? The Black Panthers, etc.” There are things left, but I will not tell you that they necessarily challenge the dominant perspective. At the same time, it’s there and who knows... As you know, with every kind of community, identity it’s in flux. I cannot say that this is a fixed history. People believe in certain ideologies and they change, and this is part of an ongoing dynamic process in a conflictual zone. But given the dislocation from the Arab world and the generational gap, it cannot be regarded as if it’s the same moment of the 1960s and 1970s, or even the 1980s.

**RS:** This is the last question I am told and you have only seven minutes to answer the question.

**ES:** How sad!

**RS:** I know, it’s been really delightful; *inshallah*, in the flesh next year.

**ES:** *Inshallah*.

**Munira Khayyat:** Can you hear me?

**ES:** ‘Alli sawtik min fadhlik. (*Please raise your voice*).

**MK:** Hi, my name is Munira. I am a PhD student at Columbia University and I had the honor of seeing you speak many times in New York in the flesh, and I’ve admired you for many years. My question to you: do you think there is a possibility to recuperate the place of the Jews in the Arab world, apart from the realm of the intangible, and by that I mean culture, memory, music, cooking, film, etc? I am thinking of the physical space and the social space; I am thinking of the crumbling or already gone Jewish quarters in the Arab cities, the locked-up synagogues, the few old people languishing or hanging on to the last years of their lives, who will soon be gone. Or it is all over?

**ES:** Well, thank you so much, because this question is really incredible. It is very touching. While I think we are in agreement here about the question of Palestine and Zionism, and that this is one dimension of the narrative... To me, the question of the Arab Jews and the question of what happened in the Arab world post-the-establishment-of-Israel have been very difficult to engage. Of course for people like myself, the burden is always that we have been accused of being traitors, just as Palestinians *fil-dakhil* have been accused sometimes of being traitors. At the same time we understand that what happened to us as Arab Jews, that our departure, was not exactly a choice, but was the result of a set of very complex reasons, which I can expand on at a later point. But the padlocked synagogues that I have seen in Tunis and Cairo, or the cemeteries that are being taken care of in Marrakesh, those right now are the sites – very significant sites – of this battle; and represent this kind of discomfort that

I think many Arabs have been feeling about Arab Jews. Who are those Arab Jews? Are they with us or against us? Then when people with more critical perspectives like Naeim and the people you saw in the film appear on the scene, it obviously forces us to engage the question from a different angle. I believe it is possible; I think what's happening here is a very courageous, very courageous dialogue, and I thank you all for coming. Because I understand this is something that *is* possible to recuperate. We *can* think about it and talk about it, and I can share with you that I have a young generation of students, including Palestinians, who are working on the question of Arab Jews from a critical perspective. And I think this is very important because right now the question of Arab Jews forms a symbolic battle over that very story of colonialism in the region. I believe that we can open a dialogue in diverse Arab countries – without reproducing the narratives of traitors or non-traitors – to truly understand the complexities, including, truly, the question of fear (without reproducing Zionist discourse). I think it is possible. I have a very good friend, an Iraqi Jew, whose family left Baghdad in the late Sixties. They were among those few who remained, and she herself also lived and studied in Lebanon. She did not grow up in Israel, never lived there and never subscribed to Zionism. And yet she feels that she cannot give expression to this problem precisely because it would immediately be understood as if she is somehow rejecting Palestinian rights or somehow reproducing Zionist narratives. And this is not the case. We have to understand that there are several other ways in which we can open up the debate beyond the “us versus them” narrative, and I think it requires a complex understanding of what happened, as well as a really courageous look at the question of nationalism. If we're honest enough to understand that we can produce critical perspectives about certain aspects of nationalist narratives but without

endorsing colonialism, Eurocentrism, imperialism, etc., we'll see that there are many other more complex ways to engage in this conversation.

So, thank you.

*(Big applause from the audience.)*

**ES:** *Inshallah daiman bi khayr. (May God keep you all well always.)*

**LAZ and RS:** Bye-bye.

**ES:** *Alf shukran, ma'a salama. (A thousand thank yous, goodbye.)*

# BELONGING AND UN-BELONGING: HOME IN BOURJ AL-BARAJNEH PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP

by Nadia Latif

**Nadia Latif** is an assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University. She received her doctorate in Cultural Anthropology from Columbia University. Her research examines the relationship between memory, lived experience, and belonging to place among several generations of Palestinian camp refugees in Lebanon. Her work has been published in *Asylon(s)*, *The New Centennial Review*, *Arab Studies Journal*, and *Feminist Review*.

The social sciences have long treated refugee camps as transient spaces providing temporary shelter until their occupants return “home,” or assimilate into a new “home” provided by the host country. The Palestinian camps in Lebanon have existed now for over sixty years and are inhabited by four generations of refugees, who, all but the first, know Palestine primarily from the accounts of the first generation and the mass media. However, scholarly and journalistic work on the inhabitants of these camps are replete with a cross-generational assertion of refugees’ desires to return to their homeland. Examining oral accounts from Bourj el-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp, this essay explores the complicated, often contradictory ways in which memory and lived experience build upon each other to produce a sense of community, as well as a sense of belonging.

What is home? A physical structure? A geographic location? A set of familiar routines and habits? A network of relationships? Is the meaning of home known only after it has been lost or left behind? These questions form the point of departure for this exploration of how the Palestinian inhabitants of one of the world's longest existing refugee camps imagine home. If globalization is understood as referring to a state of transience, dispossession and displacement, then the Palestinian refugees of Bourj al-Barajneh camp, who have experienced multiple dispossessions since 1948, may be considered global subjects par excellence. Yet these refugees, irrespective of gender and generation, continue to identify with the villages that the first generation was dispossessed of in 1948, and to demand their right to return. How is this place of return imagined? How does this imagining shape the refugees' relationship to the camp – a place they've inhabited for the last six decades?

With the constitution of globalization as an object of study, a dichotomy has been posited between the essentialized, rooted-in-place identities of the immobile past, and the cosmopolitan, de-territorialized identities of the hyper-mobile present (Appadurai 1996; Augé 1995; Bauman 2000; Malkki 1995). This body of scholarship argues that in the contemporary globalized world, community and identity are no longer territorially rooted. Thus, home has become what border-crossing individuals and groups carry with them and are able to re-create due to globalized trade, transportation, and media technology. On the one hand, this decentring of geography has facilitated a reorientation towards community and identity as historically and socially constructed. On the other hand, by conflating place with geographic location, this body of scholarship fails to consider whether place – similar to community and identity – is also historically and socially constructed, and whether place-making relies on processes and practices, similar to those that contribute to the construction of community and identity. If identity is understood as emerging from belonging to community, and community is viewed as frequently articulated in the language of kinship (Anderson 1986; Chatterjee 1993), does kinship play a role in place-making?

The following extract from an interview with a first generation camp refugee provides a typical and typifying account of everyday life in pre-1948 agrarian Palestine.

*Nadia: Who worked the land?*



**Umm K:** *All the inhabitants of the village worked the land. The women worked more than the men.*

**Nadia:** *What did the women do?*

**Umm K:** *When they planted wheat, the women would pull out the weeds so that the wheat would grow stronger. They also planted chickpeas, lentils, corn, barley...*

**Nadia:** *Would they gather together at night?*

**Umm K:** *The girls would gather together and knit with beads and wool. They would play cards and tell old stories like "Antar" and "Bani Hilal." They would play "Skambīl and Basra" and the children would ask the elders to tell them stories. So the elders would tell them stories like "Alf layla wa layla." They would read to the children. This is what I can tell you about our village and about Palestine. At harvest time, the inhabitants of the village would help each other. If someone wanted to build a house, the people would help. If you needed olives, I would give some to you. During the wheat harvest, I would give to the people who didn't have any. Also, if I milked my cow and my neighbor didn't have milk, I'd share with him or give him yogurt. People loved each other. Not like here. In the past people cared for each other. Now they have changed. If I took a bus and the seats were full, one of the men would always get up and offer me his seat. We respected people who were older than us. If two kids fought, any adult from the neighborhood could give them both a beating and the parents would never ask, "Why did you hit my child?" They would say, "He hit them both because both of them were wrong." There was love. There was humanity. But now there isn't. In the past, there weren't milk bottles to feed babies. If my son was crying and I was busy, I would ask my neighbor to feed him. Most of the kids were brothers and sisters from rid'a (literally means "suckling." Children of different women are considered to be siblings by rid'a if breastfed by the same woman even once). Children were brought up differently. We were all brothers and sisters. If a boy and a girl wanted to get engaged they would ask if they had been breastfed by the same woman. Now no one cares for anyone else. Even brothers don't care for each other.*

The accounts of first generation refugees such as Umm K., which describe pre-1948 agrarian society through a discourse of kinship, can certainly be characterized as nostalgic. The image of harmonious cooperation that these accounts present, obscures the well-documented political and economic instability experienced in the region during the late Ottoman and Mandate periods (Khalidi 1997; Pappe 2004), and draw attention away from the existence of gender, age, and class-based hierarchies in pre-1948 agrarian society (Swedenburg 2003). Umm K. herself alludes to these hierarchies when she says: “The women worked more than the men,” and, “We respected people who were older than us.” However, to dismiss such accounts as generic, or to limit their analytic utility to case studies of the production of nostalgia, would constitute a failure to recognize the seminal role played by kinship-based values and practices of fraternal reciprocity in the imagining and articulation of community, identity and place in pre-1948 Palestinian agrarian society. It would also indicate a failure to consider the ways in which kinship-based values formed an ideational structure transposable to the imagining of nation, as well as camp community in the decades following 1948.

Palestinian peasants’ resistance against land sales to Zionist organizations during the British Mandate, and post-1948 participation in the struggle for national liberation, have often been characterized as a “natural” reaction to the loss of their land. This characterization has been invoked in Palestinian nationalist narratives, as well as by sympathetic and non-sympathetic analysts of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The characterization of the relationship between peasant and land as “natural” suggests the assumption of a primordality, reminiscent of evolutionary and modernization discourses prevalent in mid-twentieth century anthropological analyses of kinship, community and land tenure in Palestinian peasant society (Cohen 1965; Patai 1945; Rosenfeld 1978). Yet, the precise nature of the relationship between land and peasant community has remained unexplored, rendering its invocation in camp refugee accounts, as well as Palestinian nationalist narratives, vulnerable to the charge that it is being strategically deployed to combat Israeli nationalist narrative attempts at delegitimizing Palestinian claims, on the grounds that they lack historicity and authenticity.

The pre-1948 Palestinian peasant community’s relationship to the land may be examined in light of the connection between labor, space and social organization suggested by Henri Lefebvre’s conceptualization of the social production of space

(Lefebvre 1991). Drawing on Marx's conceptualization of labor, Lefebvre argues that space is not limited to land. Rather, it is a historical product of labor that simultaneously contains and organizes the social relations of production and reproduction specific to a given society, at a particular point in its history. The relationship between land, community and identity can thus be understood in terms of the space produced through peasant labor. In the case of pre-1948 agrarian Palestine, this labor was organized via kinship-based values and practices of reciprocity, which produced relationships of fraternity, as well as patron-client ties.

Prior to 1948, Palestinian peasants' land cultivation did not merely provide them with a livelihood, but it also played an important role in the production and reproduction of the social order of agrarian life. Peasant claims to space in their villages, and sense of identification with the community, lay in the cultivation of land perceived as being communally owned. The fruit of the peasants' labor was not only the wheat or olives cultivated, but also the kinship, friendship, shared habitation and patronage that engendered this particular manner of sustaining and reproducing life. The attachment posited between peasant and land is not natural in the sense of being an essential or intrinsic characteristic. Rather, it should be understood as the historic product of each generation's labor on the land. Continued cultivation allowed each generation to imagine itself as connected to past generations *through* the land, despite changes wrought by the passage of time.

The immovability of land creates the impression of stasis. Thus, land may provide a powerful metonym for the values, practices and relationships that constitute a social order, particularly in narratives that seek to claim continuity in the face of upheaval. In other words, the equation of land with space in camp refugee accounts, as well as Palestinian nationalist narratives of what was lost as a result of 1948, should be placed within the context of the unequal terms of contestation between Palestinian and Israeli nationalist claims of historicity and authenticity. The keen and painful awareness of this inequity among Palestinian peasants-turned-camp-inhabitants may explain the concurrence between camp refugee accounts and Palestinian nationalist narratives.

Fieldwork carried out in Bourj al-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp between 2003 and 2007 confirmed the findings of other scholars (Peteet 2005; Sayigh 1979; Sayigh 1994), that the kinship-based values and practices, which have shaped the

space of the pre-1948 village, continued to mold social relationships within the camp, as well as between the camp and its Lebanese environs. The settlement of the camp along pre-1948 village lines and the use of village names to refer to areas of the camp, can be understood as attempts to re-create, remember and lay claim to the homeland of Palestine (Peteet 2005a, 2005b; Schulz and Hammer 2003). However, equating the space of the village with the space of the national homeland may preclude the possibility that the two spaces will not always coincide. In other words, despite the seminal role of the pre-1948 village as the source of raw material, as well as its emotive power in shaping camp refugee imaginings of Palestine, the space of the village is not subsumed by the space of the national homeland.

Interviews conducted with first generation camp refugees indicate that the settlement of the camps along village lines was motivated by the desire to mobilize familiar as well as familial relationships, values and practices in order to survive the uncertainty and upheaval of dispossession, rather than a consciously articulated urge to re-create the homeland. Moreover, the accounts of camp refugees also revealed an acute tension between mobilization in pursuit of a sense of security and control over resources that would allow for the sustenance of life, in a manner deemed dignified by the peasants-turned-refugees, and a refusal to re-settle and be re-settled away from their villages of origin. Consider the following extract from an interview with a second-generation refugee.

**Nadia:** *So when they built, did they build the way they used to in Palestine? For example, did they have a big yard and one room, and when the son got married would he build a room in the same yard? Did they used to do this?*

**J:** *Yes, in the beginning it was like that. Let me tell you. I'll talk about this camp. When they came here, it was all sand dunes. There weren't any streets or buildings. There was only one way to get up here and it was at the end of the camp. If someone came and my grandfather knew him from Palestine, he would ask them to come live next to him in this neighborhood, because this neighborhood was my grandfather's. When people started to come, he would allocate places for them to live in. Why? Because he thought ahead about what he wanted to give to his sons. Whenever one of his sons got married, he would give him a room, a kitchen and a bathroom. And in the middle would be this big yard. But this would only have worked*

*if we were in Palestine. There, there would have been enough land. When the sons grew up, they could have built next to him, but here [in the refugee camp] they couldn't. They didn't realize that, because they thought they would return. But we still haven't returned...*

J's account demonstrates the ways in which the social production of the camp as a space was shaped by the kinship-based, peasant norms and practices that had characterized the fabric of agrarian life in pre-1948 Palestine. The transposition of these norms and practices may have been facilitated by the peasants-turned-refugees, sharing of the same kinship-based social fabric with their Lebanese class counterparts. Prior to the demarcation of the border between Lebanon and Palestine in 1923, the Galilee (the place of origin of most of Bourj al-Barajneh's inhabitants) and the south of Lebanon were bound together by ties of kinship, trade and migratory labor. J's grandfather's claim to the area of Bourj al-Barajneh camp where he had pitched his tent appears to have been based on his possession and inhabitation of it, similar to the way in which Palestinian peasants, prior to the registration of private property during the Ottoman Tanzimat (1839-1876) and the British Mandate periods (1923-1948), had based their claims to land on its continued collective cultivation and inhabitation. The fact that J's grandfather had the authority to persuade families of his acquaintance to settle in his vicinity suggests that he and/or his family were recognized as persons of influence in their village and were acting to repair the kinship-based relationships of patron-clientage that had reproduced the space of the pre-1948 village, in an attempt to deal with the upheaval of dispossession.

However, J's account is also significant in highlighting the acute tension, which has only increased over the years of displacement, between the camp refugees' need to establish a settled existence imagined along familiar/familial lines of the pre-1948 agrarian society, and their desire to return to their place of origin, where it is imagined that no constraints – legal or social – would be placed on the realization of that need, or on the manner in which it is actualized. Note J's remark that “this would only have worked if we were in Palestine. They didn't realize that, because they thought they would return. But we still haven't returned...” Thus, a characterization of the ways in which peasants-turned-refugees have produced the space of the camp as an act of re-creating and/or remembering their national homeland may not adequately represent the refugees' own experience of this process, or their understanding of the complicated relationship between the space of the camp and the space of the national homeland.

Camp refugees today have easy access to globalized media sources through inexpensive, informal satellite connections and Internet cafes that have proliferated in the camp over the last five years. Inflaming desire for the consumption-driven lifestyles they project, this exposure constantly reminds younger generations of what they lack, heightening their sense of feeling “stuck” or “trapped” as life passes them by. This enormous sense of frustration is associated with the fact of being a Palestinian-camp refugee in Lebanon, and it is projected onto the space of the camp. Consider the following extract from my field notes:

*June 14, 2011*

*Two weeks ago when I visit the Yusufs, talk turned to Manal's lack of marriage prospects. Manal says she wants a rich man who will leave her free to do whatever she wants. I say if that's what she wants she should play the lotto. She says she has and has kept every single lotto ticket she ever bought to remind herself of her foolishness. Later when we are talking about what she would do if she won the lotto, Manal tells us that she has been planning this for a while. She would build an entire housing complex outside the camp for the people she wants to live with from the camp. It would be beautiful. Well planned and laid out. Lots of trees. Plenty of sunshine and fresh air. And all the elderly and the sick would have Sri Lankan and Philippina maids and nurses to tend to their needs.*

*It is in light of such constraints and contradictions that I have attempted to examine camp refugees' relationships to the space of the camp, and their desire to return to a place of origin imagined as the only place to which their belonging is unchallenged by law or by society.*

It is in light of such constraints that I have attempted to examine camp refugees' relationships to the space of the camp, and their desire to return to a place of origin imagined as the only place to which their belonging is unchallenged by law or by society. “Why don't the Palestinians just accept the situation?” is a rhetorical question frequently expressed outside of the camp refugee community. In many respects, the theoretical counterpart to this question is the valorization of “nomadism” by certain post-structuralist theorists. In an essay entitled *Exile, Nomadism and Disapora: The Stakes of Mobility in the Western Canon*, John Durham Peters distinguishes between the exile and the nomad in the following way:

*Exile locates the home in a homeland that is distant and for the time being unapproachable. Home becomes an impossible object, always receding with the horizon. In claiming a permanent residence on earth, to be away from homeland is always to be homeless. Nomadism, in contrast, denies the dream of a homeland, with the result that home, being portable, is available everywhere... . Nomadic thinkers generally find illusory the quest for any fixed identity or homesite (Peters 1999, 31).*

From an anthropological perspective, I find this conflation of nomadism with rootlessness and wandering at will to be rather troubling. Empirically speaking, nomads do not exist as solitary figures. On the contrary, similar to the peasant – the figure they are commonly placed in opposition to – they have existed within networks shaped by kinship-based relations, values and practices, and as such were always part of a group that traveled together (Lavie 1990; Meeker 1979). Individuals forced to leave their groups due to a feud sought the protection of another. Nomadic life precluded the possibility of a solitary, individual existence. Nomads may not have been tied to a physical structure but they were bound to a certain expanse of land, as their migration followed a pattern shaped by the collective labor necessary to sustain nomadic life, which was organized – like peasant labor – along kinship-based values and practices of reciprocity and fraternity, within the power inequalities of patron-clientage. It was in the very traversing of this land, in following these patterns, that nomads knew and laid claim to their land – or, in Lefebvrian terms, produced space. This understanding of the relationship between the social fabric of nomadic life and land as producing nomadic space is attested to by the struggles of nomadic indigenous peoples in Australia, New Zealand, and North and South America to see their claims to these lands legally and socially recognized.

Thus, scholarship that imagines nomadism as rootlessness and a lack of attachment to place, in order to posit an answer to the problem of home in a world of transience, or as an ethical alternative to the violently exclusionary implications of national homeland, shares its imagining of nomadism with colonial and national-modernization discourses and strategies. In the case of colonialism, the imagined rootlessness of nomadic people was used to justify colonial expropriation of territory and the reorganization of the existing social fabric, enabling the hegemony of colonial rule. National-modernization discourses also offered a similar logic, justifying the expropriation of nomadic territory and forced sedentarization programs as necessitated by the threat posed to the sovereignty and development of the nation-state by nomadic rootlessness



and lack of regard for land. Both discourses are amply evident in Israeli nation-state policies towards the Bedouin (Eyal 2006; Lavie 1990).

In addition, the privileging embrace of rootlessness, in response to the hyper-mobility and transience perceived as characterizing the contemporary globalized world, underestimates the hegemonic power of the nation-state's claim to being the only guarantor of home. In his work on xenophobic nationalism in Australia, Ghassan Hage argues that nationalist discourse collapses the distinction between nation and home, claiming homeland as the site of home, and the sovereign nation-state as its true guarantor and protector (Hage 2000). For Hage, home is perceived and portrayed as that safe and protective space, which allows one to build, to formulate projects and pursue strategies to bring these, and hence one's own subjectivity, into being. Home is also, thus, the very process of building, of self-perseverance. Within the context of a nationalist discourse, home becomes the nurturing space that permits and facilitates the pursuit of the nation's collective project.

My interlocutors in Bourj al-Barajneh listed their fundamental wants as: protection, a safe place, freedom and respect, followed in priority by identity/belonging, work, education, marriage, family, friends and social life. These fundamental wants seem to echo the definition of home as a nurturing, protective space that allows for the establishing of projects and the pursuit of a course of action through which to achieve one's designs. Clearly, domestic space does not necessarily coincide with home.

In Bourj al-Barajneh, people have survived many wars, and have been able to rebuild and inhabit their dwellings again. Children have returned to school, and those who can find employment go to work. Order has been restored several times. The space of the camp has been reclaimed over and over again. But that precisely epitomizes the limits of domestication in the politico-economic situation that refugees find themselves in. The camp provides its inhabitants with shelter, running water, electricity, schools and shops. It affords them a place where they can go about the daily business of their lives without feeling looked down upon. But like a prison, the camp protects and allows its inhabitants to feel safe only insofar as living a daily life, in their very survival. The camp is *not* a space that is perceived by its inhabitants as facilitating the realization of their projects. It is not a home that allows them to be.

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# A DISTANT MOON, NOW

by Jabbar Yassin Hussein

translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

**Jabbar Yassin Hussein** was born in Baghdad in 1954. After the Baath Party took power in 1968, he joined the Communist Party at the age of 14. He was arrested and tortured because of his political activities, which included serving as chair of the Young Communists in Baghdad. He withdrew his membership in 1973, when the Communist Party was taken over by the Baath Party and from then on came under constant surveillance. Hussein studied at the University of Baghdad and worked as a journalist but was not allowed to continue his studies and work. Instead, he wrote novels, short stories and fairy tales for children. In 1976, he fled to France, where he co-founded the magazine *Aswat*. His texts are primarily concerned with the traumatic experience of exile and the loss of home. His books include *Adieu, l'Enfant* (1996), *Le Lecteur de Baghdad: Contes et Nouvelles* (2000), and *Histoires de Jour, Contes de Nuit* (2003), which recalls his childhood and life in Iraq. *Paroles d'Argiles – Un Irakien en Exile* (2003) is a collection of articles on the situation in Iraq. After 27 years in exile in France, Jabbar Yassin Hussein returned to Baghdad in May 2003.

In this essay, Jabbar Yassin Hussein recalls a day from his childhood when his mother first took him to become acquainted with his birth city, Baghdad. Twenty-seven years later he returns from exile, his mother having passed away in the meanwhile. As he revisits the places she had taken him to, he reflects on exile and memory, and on what has remained of a place he once called "home".

Many years later, in a secluded house in a forest, I remembered that distant morning when my mother first took me to become acquainted with the city. Back then, Baghdad was small and quaint, slumped over the Tigris, languid as a tortoise beneath the silvery winter sun. We crossed a little bridge over a green tributary that seemed to me like some shadowy scene from a dream.

Years later, when I returned to Baghdad after a long absence, I found no trace of the al-Khor Bridge or the river that ran beneath it. The waters had given way to dust, and the bridge had become part of a street in a sprawling city of which I knew nothing. To my right, one of Saddam's imposing palaces had replaced the woodlands.

But that day, as we approached the center of town from al-Beyaa, with its white houses set between fields of clovers, the al-Washash Barracks came into view, which in later years would become the Zouraa Gardens. "*Bab al-Nizam!*" cried out one of our fellow passengers – "The gateway to the regime!" The phrase circled in my mind, confused with the name of a nearby place called *Reema Umm al-'Izam*. The words conjured up the sight of soldiers standing outside the barracks' gate, as it stood then, decorated with palm fronds and flags. I imagined them standing there for eternity. The image itself seemed to come from a place and time more remote than that moment, mixed with other scenes by the raw, unstructured memory of a child.

Our bus stopped not far from the barracks' gate. A young soldier climbed on board having removed his beret. I heard the driver's friend call him Abou Khalil and assumed they knew each other. I examined Abou Khalil's grave face, gazing into the recesses of some other place. Where is he now, I wonder; has he changed the name that remains etched in my memory?

My mother held on to me as I stood between her legs, my head at equal height with the other passengers' knees. I studied their features, carefree and happy at the thought of what I would see in Baghdad. My brothers all "went down" to Baghdad, the phrase was like a dream to me, and here I was "going down" like them, the city unfurling before my eyes. To the left, planes sat motionless on the airport runway; behind them the outlines of distant houses where it seemed another city lay.

I knew nothing of how streets connected; the world before me was little more than a scene unfolding by some miraculous agency that did not concern me.

The day came when I found out that these houses belonged to al-Rahmaniya, a neighborhood I finally set foot in only after I had returned to Iraq, following an absence of twenty-seven years. But after all those years, it had changed. Of the al-Rahmaniya preserved in my memory as distant dwellings gleaming beneath the sun, I found nothing.

During my absence I had read the works of the mystic Muhammad ibn Abd al-Jabbar al-Niffari, in particular *Mawaqif*, and had lingered over his *Station of al-Rahmaniya*. As I read, the bitterness of my exile took me back to the sight of al-Rahmaniya, which had been snatched away from me in an instant, for eternity. It was as though my eyes had been created just to witness it, and had then closed their lids, preserving the memory for the afterlife, so I might tell those who come to question me on the Day of Reckoning: "I have seen."

That morning, just before noon, the vehicle slowed as it circled the Damascus Roundabout. The island at its center was sown with dark green grass; yellow and orange

marigold blossoms behind an iron fence adorned with iron stars; poppies like butterflies perched on a branch. The road we took led past the old airport, while another passed through fields and woods and mud-brick villages. After crossing the Jumhuriya Bridge, we arrived at one of Baghdad's hubs: the Eastern Gate.

Upon my return, twenty-seven years later, the car driven by a Jordanian cabbie took me down this same road. But there was no Damascus Roundabout; in its place, concrete flyovers bisected modern highways, obscuring my view of the gate through which I had first entered the city. But the road was still there, amid burnt-out buildings from which smoke still arose, weeks after the end of the war. It was noon and the city's inhabitants were taking their *siestas*, as a different vehicle carried me, no longer a child, towards the city's entrance of which nothing remained, save for snapshots from my memory, faded by years, wars and solitude – by absence.

I was returning alone. Not one of my friends or family knew I was coming. That noon, I felt more alone than ever before. A year later, I would recognize that my return had taken place even behind my own back.

But on that morning in the distant past, before I learned the meaning of the word "future," which for me was to signify an exile without end, I was staring at the Damascus Roundabout as a summation of time itself. It was the revealed present, the unfettered joy of a boy who at that moment did not care that he would have to grow up and become a man like the other passengers. As the car turned and the roundabout revealed itself, I became lost in contemplation, as lost perhaps as Christopher Columbus was in the instant that the *Santa Maria* docked before the Caribbean islands and he first spied his continent. And

everything there was like a newly discovered continent: the unfamiliar plants, the people, the dazzling light of a winter morning, and the incredible buildings; a bewitched and bewitching world.

To the left of the roundabout was the imposing edifice of the Central Station with its blue dome and twin towers built from London brick; to the right, the new Baghdad-Karkh Fire Station with its shiny red fire engines, toys the size of dinosaurs that I instantly coveted. An imposing billboard of two strange men walking along, each with a bag tucked under his arm, hung in the square in front of the fire station. Where were they going that morning? Years later I saw the same billboard somewhere else and realized that it was an advertisement for the Leipzig Trade Fair in the German Democratic Republic, back when there was a country by that name.

On the noon of my return, the advertisement had been replaced by a massive building still engulfed in flames. The Jordanian driver told me that it was the Iraqi Parliament; a building that rose and fell during my long absence as though it had never existed, or rather, as though it had never existed for me, save as a smouldering ruin; like any old log lopped from a tree, without identity, smouldering in some fireplace throughout the winter.

That distant winter's morning, as my mother (who passed away during my long absence) was composing a list of things to buy from the market, I looked out over the entire world. At that instant, the world allowed me to form a view of it that would come to define me, enabling me to live twenty-seven years in solitary confinement, locked up in my own thoughts. At that instant, by virtue of the modest size of the world revealed to me, every detail of the scene became one of my seven pillars of wisdom, pillars

that helped me live among the tribes of the world, through upheaval, pillage, murder and anarchy.

In the middle of the roundabout hung a blue flag, suspended vertically like a banner inscribed in Japanese, and on it in white *ruqaa*, it read: "Religion for God and the homeland for all." I was learning to spell at the time and I already knew the phrase, "No religion!" which most tradesmen had tacked up on their storefronts. I could partly make out "Religion for God," as a result, but it would be years before I was reminded of the phrase and understood its intended meaning. It occurred to me when I read an article containing the phrase, and immediately recalled the blue banner by the Damascus Roundabout. By then the roundabout had been leveled, the blue banner almost certainly torn down, and the homeland had become a private fantasy. It was the dream of an impossible return to a place transformed into a repository for old memories of which nothing remained, save for these images.

The Jordanian driver talked to me later that noon, but I did not hear him, caught up as I was in the vision of an imaginary place that he did not know (and that would have been of little use for him to know). The place was no longer a projection of my memory; it was my place, subjective and intimate, like the subjective pain that a doctor understands and cures, yet cannot feel.

That distant morning, after we passed the Damascus Roundabout, I understood that the world was vast and that it was not hard for a man, for a boy, to get lost in it. There was a vast market with countless passages leading in and out; I could not understand how my mother was able to roam around so freely without losing her way, or me, forever. Streets and alleys; stalls selling tobacco, fabric, spices and sweets; stores full of rice and flour, lentils and chickpeas;

bathhouses for men and women; horses and mules laden and led by men wearing yellow skull-caps; restaurants serving kebabs and trotters; glass storefronts displaying men and women's clothing; vendors shouting from behind carts adorned with mirrors; and so on. There was no end to this place that my mother strolled through contentedly.

I was afraid, and ashamed of my secret fear, grasping on tightly to my mother's hand. Outside a shop that sold aluminium cooking pots, stacked one inside the other like vast metal *ziggurats*, the late morning sun bouncing off them in brilliant shafts, I discovered the true scale of the world, the glaring cruelty of light and the ferocity of a crowd's din. Through the roar of sounds emanating from all directions, my mother's voice negotiating with the pot seller appeared distant, or rather it grew distant in that very instant. As I clung to her hand, an invisible gust swept me up and carried me far away from her, into a distant and barren future.

While the Jordanian driver talked to me through the intricacies of the city where I was born, I noticed a hole left by a bomb in the gates of the National Museum. I had witnessed the building's construction. That winter morning, twenty-seven years earlier, I had paid it little notice. And now I didn't hear what the driver was saying, lost as I was in the tale woven by memory, at the sight of that hole through which my memories slipped, returning to a morning long ago, to a place nearby, in search of the words my mother had spoken, which had escaped me. The thread that had been cut at that very instance, for eternity.

The return was just an excuse to search for a morning of which no trace remains.



# NOTHING DOING IN BAGHDAD

## KULSHI MAKOO

a working title for a fiction feature film in progress

**by Maysoon Pachachi**

director, co-writer

**Maysoon Pachachi** is a film director, editor and producer of Iraqi origin. She studied philosophy at University College London and graduated from the London International Film School. She directed and co-directed numerous feature-length documentaries, including, *Iraqi Women – Voices from Exile* (1994) for Channel 4, the award-winning *Iranian Journey* (2000) for ZDF/Arte, and *Bitter Water* (2002) about four generations of refugees in a Palestinian camp in Beirut. Her most recent film is *Our Feelings Took the Pictures: Open Shutters Iraq* (2010) – a documentary about women and photography in Iraq. Pachachi has also taught film, directing and editing in Palestine, and co-founded the Independent Film and TV College in Baghdad together with Kasim Abid.

**Nothing Doing in Baghdad** is a fiction feature project in pre-production. Filmmaker Maysoon Pachachi generously shared excerpts from the project's dossier. She is in the process of rewriting and fine-tuning the script, while fundraising and putting together her team.

### Synopsis

Imagine you are holding a mirror. You drop it. It shatters into thousands of pieces. If you are careful and lucky you can re-assemble it into its original shape – but now it is fractured. This is what it feels like to be Iraqi today; it is an image of the country, but it is also an image of what its people feel inside. It is as if the narrative, both internal and external, has been fragmented. In a situation like this – in which form can you tell your story truthfully? Probably not a very conventional or straightforward one. This film is a multiple-story drama, at the heart of which is the story of the friendship between two women. It opens with a murder, ends with a birth, and takes place in Baghdad in the autumn and winter of 2006-7, a time of extreme and unpredictable sectarian violence. Every night there is a curfew and every dawn it is lifted, and within this rhythm people try to live their lives. Every morning, just as the curfew is being lifted and the guards at the checkpoints change, Sara sits hunched over her computer, scouring the internet for news of the latest explosions: Where did they



happen? When? Car bomb, suicide bomb? How many died? How many were wounded? Numbers, numbers, numbers. She scrawls them down obsessively on scraps of paper. Sara is 40 years old, a writer of fiction, but right now she can't seem to write a word. It would all just be a lie. Maybe she'll leave this unliveable place and save herself and her young daughter, Reema. Reema is seven years old. She's very mischievous; she loves playing tricks and knows much more than she lets on. The big turning point for Sara comes one night when she is in the garden with her brother Yahya, trying to fix a dripping tap. During curfew – in the quiet dark – only the distant sound of mortars and random gun fire. Suddenly Sara sees a light in the street. She creeps up to the gate and looks out. Shadows of men running away, down the street. Facing her, on the wall of her neighbor Sabiha's house, in big, red, ugly letters: "Leave or else" – a message from an extremist religious gang. Sabiha, once a well-known actress, is 10 years older than Sara, but she is her best friend. She has witnessed most all stages of Sara's life and is the guardian of her secrets: her early indiscretions, her illusions, her loves, her griefs, her secret aspirations and ambitions, her anger. In fact, it is Sabiha who really knows who Sara is – and only her. In the morning, Sara stands in the street and watches her friend climb into a taxi piled high with hastily packed suitcases, and drive away, disappearing down the road heading north and out of the country.

At that moment, Sara feels as if the page on which the story of her life was written, has been torn up. This moment of loss and rupture brings Sara back to life and she begins to rediscover a sense of defiance and resistance within herself. By the end of the film she knows she will not leave this country, come what may – she will not let "them" rob her of her story. Finally, she begins to write.



The film ends with Sara walking across the street and letting herself into Sabiha's garden. She begins to gather up dead leaves and pull up weeds – Sabiha might come back one day. In the course of the film, Sara's story intersects with those of many others. Here are a few of the other characters:

Zahra and Saif, two very young children, brother and sister, who work and live on the street;

Kamel, a cab driver who spent 20 years as a POW in Iran, and is now trying to make up for lost time and erase the past;

Sana'a, his very pregnant wife, who is not allowed to see the children from her first marriage;

Dijla, Sara's slightly manic-depressive friend, who has a complicated love life and is always on the hunt for "happy pills;"

Haider, a teenager on the cusp of manhood, intent on avenging his mother's death, slowly getting drawn into the violence;

Ahmed, a young man who sleeps in his small boat, in which he ferries people across the river because he doesn't want to go home;

Yahya, Sara's brother, struggling desperately to help rebuild and repair the damage to the city without becoming complicit in corruption;

Tamara, a young 20-year old woman, a Sheherazade of terrifying stories, who will do anything to survive – step over dead bodies, put flowers in her window so she doesn't have to smell the corpses on the street outside. Like most of her generation, she is impatient for change and fed up with the stultifying endurance of the older generation.

All the stories in the film have their own narrative arc and development. In the end this is a film about keeping alive a sense of hope – and of self – in a situation where your inner and outer worlds are fragmenting.

This project was developed by myself and Irada Al Jabbouri, an Iraqi novelist living in Baghdad. The springboards for the film are dialogues, scenes and stories witnessed and transcribed by us, verbatim. From this documentary material, we extrapolated our characters and their stories. The film is a work of fiction, a drama permeated with humor and a certain lyricism, but its roots in documentary material give it the vitality, unpredictability and authenticity of real life. A vein of humor and a degree of surrealism run through this lyrical realist film; with jokes and small acts of resistance, older generations struggle to overcome shocks of the present time and losses from the past, while younger generations struggle to discover where the possibilities of change and a real life might lie. In the end, *Nothing Doing in Baghdad* is a story of what it means to survive in an extreme situation like that of Iraq today, how individuals try to keep a sense of self and hope alive. The film is written and directed by two Iraqi women, and perhaps the emphasis on the ordinary in the midst of the extraordinary and destructive, on how life persists in the midst of death, is a particularly female take on war and its seemingly never-ending "aftermath."



### *Filmmaker's Notes*

Our multiple-story form is more unusual and perhaps more difficult to sustain than a straightforward singular narrative. In trying to depict a place like contemporary Iraq, however, intuitively, it feels right. The challenge will be to keep the audience interested in the characters, their situations and their respective stories.



A friend, an Iraqi journalist, was recently relating something that had happened to him, when he paused and laughed. “You know, here we are living all these crazy things,” he said. “And who knows – maybe years from now, a historian or novelist will come along, and make some story out of it all. But will it really be true, this ‘package’?”

I don't think this “package” is the only way to tell a story, nor to define what a story is. I want to try to tell another kind of story; one that expresses the sense that while I'm living my own three-act plot, so is everyone else; and together, our lives at this particular time and place weave a collective drama. My experience as a documentary filmmaker has inclined me to plumb beyond the surface of things and excavate the stories underneath, but I remain wary of imposing a spurious coherence on what I see. Although this project is not a documentary film, I think I bring some of the same sensibility to it. We are aware that we probably have to focus more clearly and perhaps reduce the number of characters. Increasingly, we are trying to sharpen Sara's story – which is, in some sense, the main narrative – without losing the multiple-story form of the film. Writing has always kept Sara alive but now she can't write a word. Every day she obsessively collates the number of fatalities; writing fiction just seems like a lie. Maybe she will leave this place and save herself and her young daughter. Her oldest friend, the keeper of her secrets, is forced out of the country, and this loss eventu-

ally opens up a space of resistance for Sara. By the end of the film, she knows she will not leave, she will not “let them win.” And she begins to write. Sara's story illustrates one of the main themes of the film – the way in which creativity, the making of something, can be a kind of assertion of existence in the face of the fragmentation of our world. In an indirect way, the film also questions the nature of the “story” one can tell in a situation like Iraq. As a director, I'm anxious to give everyone their moment – for each character, however “minor” or fleeting, we should get a sense of his or her individuality and singularity. Even the woman whose body is discovered at the beginning of the film, for example, is not just a body, rather a real person who has been killed. We never find out anything about her, and yet at that moment when her body is discovered, we have a sense of her as a once living human being. This is part of the ethics of the film; the characters live in a “war zone,” but they are not merely victims of war. This sense of particularity is something I very much want to work on with the actors. It will also be important to evoke the particular sounds, light and rhythms of different times of day and night, to create the underlying pulse of the film,



as the characters progress through their lives. Often in films about places like Iraq, you only see the disheartening aspect of life, which reduces places and people to the ravages of war and nothing else. And yet the shard of beauty in the midst of ruins expresses an inner resistance and hope. In this film, the light on a palm frond or the sound of a dove in the afternoon represents a counterpoint to the traffic jams, checkpoints and bloodletting in the streets. People live between these two poles. I want to capture these simple moments of lyricism. I want to thread shots through the film, which will not depict action or characters, but convey moments that bring tonal shifts and elevate the film out of the literal narrative to create another kind of space. They are not intended as separate “cutaway shots,” but occur occasionally at the end of a scene, when the characters exit the frame and we just hold, long enough for the background to become foreground and take on a more metaphoric, more contemplative resonance. These moments will be accompanied with a different type of music; for that purpose, I have spoken to Khyam Allami, a brilliant young Iraqi composer/oud player, about composing the music for these moments and he has expressed great interest.

I am not keen on using over-elaborate camera staging; the filming will be simple, but with a clear aesthetic. I am inclined to try to hold shots for longer and to cut when I need to, rather than shooting a scene from many angles. I am interested in a depth-of-field that will allow me to “cut within the frame.”

The cast of actors will be Iraqi, largely from inside the country and others who have lived outside. Professional actors from inside are mainly theater trained and have not had the opportunity to work in film. This might be problematic, and it is obvious that a lot of rehearsal time will be required.



Moreover, many roles will be played by non-professional actors. I plan to work with improvisation and will be open to the changes that result from this process. Although most of the film's heads of department will probably not be Iraqi, I plan to involve Iraqi assistants and trainees in the various stages of production. I am hoping that the experience young Iraqis, both men and women, will derive from working with us on this project will encourage them to start making their own films. Their voices certainly need to be heard.

# THE HIDDEN LIFE OF WAR

by Munira Khayyat

**Munira Khayyat** grew up in Beirut. She holds a PhD in anthropology from Columbia University and is currently the Whittlesey visiting professor of anthropology at the American University of Beirut. Her dissertation entitled *A Landscape of War: On the Nature of Conflict in South Lebanon* examines the ordinary and affective dimensions of inhabiting a place of war. It is based on fieldwork conducted in South Lebanon in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 “July War.”

This excerpt from Munira Khayyat’s PhD dissertation (Anthropology, Columbia University 2012) entitled **A Landscape of War: On the Nature of Conflict in South Lebanon** is the personalized prelude to the larger academic work, which was conceived during the intense days of the July 2006 war. In her dissertation, Khayyat explores how the predominantly tobacco-farming village communities of the South Lebanon borderland inhabit a long-term and ongoing state of war in its ordinary, everyday and also violent guises. In **The Hidden Life of War**, she locates the sources and inspiration for her dissertation within the emotional and physical landscapes of her own life, a life that was conceived and began in war.



*We are loath to believe that a time of destruction and ruin lies in wait for the world. Even when we witness the tottering of mountains. And were the winds not to drop, no power could pull creation back from collapse. But in fact they die down and grow violent in turn, first rallying and then charging before being repulsed once again. And so catastrophe threatens more often than it occurs; the earth buckles but recovers, and having toppled regains its balance.*

—Lucretius, De Rerum Natura

*And the time will come when you see  
we're all one, and life flows on within you and without you.*

—The Beatles “Within you without you”

### Life and War

Growing up in the context of the Lebanese civil war that began the year before I was born, it naturally took some time before aspects of my childish sensorium and experience were cobbled together to compose an idea of “war” that I could identify and talk about. Driven by a desire to grasp what I came to understand to be the defining condition of my life-world, I developed a picture of war in the child’s imaginative laboratory of a thousand questions and ten thousand answers that in time seemed to fit a passable grammar that only needed minor adjustments here and there as the war years unfolded and I grew... .

The civil war ended when I was fourteen, and soon, as my childhood imperceptibly receded into more distant country, this “thing” called war that I had quilted from the fabric of the world, its experience and stories, frankensteined into something with a life of its own, embodying accessible perspectives and narratives, which were often utilized to elucidate a (trans)forming identity... at the same time that it quietly fell out of touch and feeling... except at certain Proustian moments, like when I open a cabinet in my grandmother’s house in Sidon and whiff that shadowy-dry-warm-sweet, cedarwood-and-sugar smell... .

Then I am back there in a time and place that I cannot recognize from the outside (let alone call normal or strange)...

...when my grandmother and her neighbors were forced out of their homes by the militia boys, including the younger sons of Tanios, the shopkeeper from downstairs,

who we used to play with among the olives and along the broken wall. My old grandmother, her neighbors and their young children were roughed up by the armed youths and thrown out into the street in the darkness of dawn, and the building was ransacked, and she and her neighbors from across the landing and the floor below were evacuated by the Red Cross and came to live with us for a spell. What a fun state of affairs! We played lots of Atari with the neighbor's son.

Months later, when the occupation ended and the militia partisans had been dealt an ugly retribution in that endless cycle, we accompanied my grandmother back to her beloved home where she had vowed to die (and would die years later), carrying her up the six stories because she was too overcome with emotion and her poor old knees would not carry her (and the elevator was, as usual, broken). Excited, we swarmed through the open front door, shrapnel and glass and gravel coating the gray marble floor, glittering like quartz and crunching underfoot, the dusty velvet furniture overturned, a shell hole in the balcony, a bullet through the gilt-framed portrait of my



dead grandfather, a reserved smile on his lips, as in life, as always. The Czech crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling in the *salon* presided impassively over the scene of destruction, evoking suspended, frozen teardrops.

The destruction and disorder was nothing unusual – we often played in the picked-over ruins of homes – and we were only marginally concerned with the feelings of the adults (who thought nothing of bringing us here in the first place, so natural were such returns) as we climbed over disemboweled sofas and collected spent bullets...

...digging for pottery shards and rainbow-glass in the dead yellow heat of a summer noon in an ancient Phoenician gravesite freshly uncovered as yet another unregulated building went up next door... before it was dynamited to make way for the building's foundations...

...Swiss cheese scenery, faded signs, abandoned businesses, flayed, frozen, disintegrating structures abandoned to the elements and yet embroidered with clingy shreds of care – a picture on the last standing wall, flowery curtains framing shattered windows... plants on abandoned balconies gone wild and then relentlessly scorched by the sun year after year, empty birdcages... endless traffic jams at innumerable checkpoints, toffees wrapped in golden paper, mismatched felt *pantoufles*, the gluey darkness of nights with no electricity, the irritating buzz of the long neon bulb in the kitchen, boiling water for baths, rooms piled up to the ceiling with broken furniture and beguiling boxes of accumulated junk, the tightness and tenseness of extended families living under one roof, flickering, grainy TVs deviously ensnaring Israeli and Cypriot airwaves, the smell of diesel and kerosene and the shine of candles on cold terrazzo floors, tangerine peelings, the rhythmic patter of shooting and the thud and boom of bombs indistinguishable from thunder on winter nights...

Fragmented scenes, collaged materials of a now distant childhood formed within war: a nostalgic and natural history (of destruction).

### (Post)War

The post-war years crisply unfolded in an old-new world, where the new was loud and insistent and in-your-face and the old was silently resonant and strangely invisible. General amnesty was declared, gauzily blanketing the violent acts of the past and transforming their perpetrators in to state-sanctioned political players. The media (and everyone) lauded the Lebanese phoenix, the re-birth, the rebuilding, and we



soon adjusted to new parameters handed down from above: Greater Beirut (and Lebanon), Peace, Government, Regulation, Law, Unity, Reconstruction, Prosperity, Paved Roads, Electricity (traffic lights!), overlaying all those newly declared no-no's: militias, protection rackets, thuggery, corruption, sectarianism, suspicion, burning hatred, resentment, fear, weapons. These were the officially designated ruptures, New Beginnings defining Peacetime as opposed to War. Of course, things unfolded differently and much less (if anything) changed at the level of contiguous, continuous everyday life, where few at first even (if ever) recognized that the war was over, where all those no-no's were inextricably tied up with living and loving, being(s) and dwelling(s), identity and politics, somatic, affective orientations absorbed into the enduring, resonant materials of this world.

Living in Beirut as the nineties became the new millennium, the swiss cheese structures were slowly (quickly!) torn down, and those that weren't fell out of visible consciousness. Attention was directed towards the Lebanese "miracle" and everyone was breathlessly caught up following the latest dramatic twist in the ever-troubled political arena (the ongoing, acrimonious contest dubbed the "cold civil war"). Yet people continued to inhabit unsung practices, perspectives and places forged in the

crucible of the war years. It is a stale observation by now, but for example the *services* of Beirut, those battered old Mercedes taxis that ply set routes throughout the city, still attend to a divided urban geography – with few crossing the now non-existent but once-deadly Green Line dividing the city. To get to the other side of the city one has to take a service to an unmarked place where West meets East, cross over by foot, exactly like in times of war (but perhaps without the stomach-clenching anticipation of imminent death), to take another service plying its route on the other side. Another example: our rooftop apartment was not easily rented out, and our landlord was at his wits end by the time we came along, for rooftops are never desirable dwellings in a place of (imagined, anticipated, recurrent, eternal, potential) warfare: they are unsafe during bombardments and often commandeered by militias. Thus it took tenants like us, not existentially tuned into such potentialities, to want such a place. War lives on in spatial and temporal practices, affects and affections, in a myriad of entangled networks, in matter, in the sensitive, sensuous lives of humans and plants and animals, because these are what war is when it *is* – and also when it isn't. War is not defined (solely) by treaties and ceasefires and politics and The News or that ultimate decider, the presence or absence of violence.

It took an unexpected season of war to blow over us for the hidden life of war to come back (briefly) into the open.



## Ghosts

In 2006, in the summer of my thirtieth year, war returned to life. I was living in Beirut, nurturing an infant and contemplating a dissertation, unheroically embroiled in the daily life of a city tangled up in the brash and new and moneyed and the muted but resonant remains of the many wars that silently and not so silently live on...

We were living in Kantari, an old popular quarter of Ras Beirut on the edge of Clemenceau, a more affluent neighborhood, not far from the American University of Beirut on one side and the exclusive (rebuilt, reinvented, reinvested) Downtown on the other. Our quarter gathered remnants of some of its old, pre-war and civil war buildings and inhabitants together with the newer post-war crowd and modern apartment blocks, living together yet apart under the enduring and palpable yet strangely invisible shadows of two ruined ghosts, two ghostly ruins. When we came to the neighborhood in September 2005, the quarter had already entered a phase of accelerated transformation: daily flattening into car parks of graceful, silent, old dwellings faded to dusty pinks and yellows ensconced in wild gardens with fragrant trees, largely abandoned structures home to antiquated dwellers or neighborhood cats – most of whom (cats and humans) became my close friends. Still, as the old quarter was progressively decimated, some gossamer threads of old-time being and continuity endured in the living and nonliving materials of the place, as the destruction-through-construction gripping the capital since the end of the civil war gathered momentum.

Our apartment was on the third and last floor of a 1940s building whose high-ceilinged, terrazzo-floored spaces and many green-shuttered windows opened up to the sun and the sky, the street and neighbors, and especially an old rubber tree that spread its sturdy branches and thick, glossy leaves above the dead-end alley, spanning the distance from our kitchen to our bedroom window, and reaching across the narrow traffic-less back alley like a protective canopy. This was the quieter, more intimate side of our living space and it contrasted like night and day with the riotous front of our home, where our small balcony hovered across from the sheer face of a massive apartment block, a few meters above honking school-related traffic jams twice a day, continuous corner-store sentry-duty, parking scuffles channeling neighborhood power-struggles, catfights (real cats I mean), rhythmic cycles of hawkers, construction work, and such assorted, boisterous day-in-the-life activity.



In the back alley oasis underneath the rubber tree lived a collection of beings: an Armenian old lady, Madame Alice, with her calico cat and brood of borrowed grandchildren, all ensconced in a small, damp, leafy dungeon below street level; a sisterhood of spinsters cattily ruling a once grand but now disheveled rooftop apartment; Coco, another sprightly, sharp-eyed old spinster who kept discerning watch over the alley's narrow entrance from her balcony that jutted out from an old abandoned building where she was the only resident; she regularly harangued the slick-haired young men who loafed under her balcony around their lovingly refurbished, seventh-hand, outdated, roaring sports-cars. Toward the center of the alley, its large terrace forming a kind of courtyard, was a pink two-story structure, housing on the ground floor a colony of Filipino migrant workers who regularly sang karaoke, and a collection of transient students with eventful love-lives on the upper floor. A family of southerners squatted an unclaimed ground-floor space connecting Coco's building and the pink house, a place awkwardly cobbled together in weird angles and discontinuous materials but strangely embellished with a lushly laminated, real-wood front door with a large gold knocker. The alley ended at an ugly, boxy 1970s building inhabited by conservative, mainly Kurdish residents. Parked cars clogged the narrow street and were used alternatively as sun-beds or parasols by the alley's many cats.

As mentioned, our neighborhood was bookended by two of Beirut's greatest ghosts: the burnt-out hulk of the *Holiday Inn* that was destroyed in the opening chapter of the fifteen-year civil war in 1975-6, during what came to be called the "War of the Hotels" when the armed (leftist and right-wing) factions battled for control of the capital in its famous and glamorous nest of luxury hotels. After this phase, Beirut's "Golden Years" were gone for good, and the demarcation line bifurcating the city was pushed further east to the old city center, where it stabilized into the infamous Green Line. The *Holiday Inn* remained a strategic military position throughout the war and collected its many scars, which it still bears today: blackened walls, massive blooms of shell-holes especially along its eastern flank, rashes of bullet holes. The *Holiday Inn* stands empty and strangely invisible today, cordoned off at its base by the Lebanese army to prevent entry. The other ghost is Murr Tower (*Burj al Murr*, which ironically translates literally as "the tower of bitterness"); it was being built to become the Beirut Trade Center by the prominent Murr family when the civil war erupted, and has remained – then and now – a massive grey cement shell. Then the tallest building in Beirut, during the civil war it transformed into a landmark of terrible strategic importance in the morphing, militarized urban geography as it soared over



what became the divided city's frontline, exposing surrounding areas. Tales of terror and torture (and many tossings) interleave its many identical stories; it remained frozen in the post-war landscape and – like the *Holiday Inn* – has curiously disappeared from everyday view.

Embroiled in its daily, endless unfoldings in the invisible shadows of ghost-buildings and other worldly and otherworldly objects and beings, our neighborhood was an example repeated across the city and land, one of many such resonant, ruined, regenerating landscapes. Thus we existed there in the scrum of life in Beirut, fifteen years after the end of the fighting, living in our little building, our little quarter, in an ordinary landscape animated and configured by wars still palpable in its thriving life and resonant, affective matter. To think about the hidden life of war in such a setting required a move of simultaneous distance and immersion, and the insistent clamor of

the everyday I ordinarily inhabited made that hard to do. But the summer war of 2006 brought subterranean movements, perceptions, orientations and sensations out of the woodwork; it sharpened the picture for me and set me on the path of my dissertation.

### **Opening the Box of War: *Harb Tammuz/July 2006***

One July morning we woke up and there was this empty feeling in the air. The excitement of the World Cup, which had just possessed us all for a month and climaxed in the violent final between Italy and France featuring the infamous head-butt on the pitch, had subsided, and our daily rhythms and emotional scales were readjusting to an amorphous everyday lacking the anticipation of matches and their accompanying peaks of excitement. It was a Wednesday, one of those mornings when the humid Lebanese summer has really started to boil. Short tempers, horns and shouts from the street, the ever-present drum of construction work near and far, the smell of frying onions, boiled lentils, exhaust, street cats, neighbors on balconies, the buzz and drip of ACs – summer in Beirut.

Over breakfast, we heard some news blowing in fresh from the South and rippling through the city: Hizbullah had just kidnapped two Israeli soldiers in an ambush along the border. It was a newsworthy occurrence to be sure, but just another event in an ongoing story that had been unfolding already for decades with different twists and turns, since before (my) life began... so nothing to choke on, we thought.

We thought wrong. All of us misjudged where this incident would take us – even Hizbullah, it appears. A little later, we watched the first press conference after the abduction with Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary General of Hizbullah, projected on a large screen to a roomful of media people. Nasrallah, a familiar personality to us all, displaying his usual mix of sweet smiles and angry defiance, appeared relaxed and unperturbed as he exchanged friendly banter with some of the journalists in the room. Nasrallah's message was reassuring: soon after the kidnapping that morning, Israel had retaliated forcefully with bombing attacks and a few botched incursions across the southern border zone, but he seemed to think that after this show of force there would be no further military escalation. Instead he reminded us that this morning's abduction was the first step in the realization of a "True Promise" (*al wa'ad al sadiq*) he had made to bring back Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners – including remains of fighters and prisoners – being held in Israel. Hizbullah was ready for war, Nasrallah said, but this abduction was not a declaration of war: the abducted Israeli soldiers

were to be used as bargaining chips in a forthcoming prisoner exchange. And so it seemed to us all that this was indeed another twist in the ongoing struggle with Israel that defines the larger and finer grain of life and politics and the parameters of our moral landscape – our existence, in short – in this part of the world. As neither side had played the military escalation card for some time – the last major encounter was the devastating “Operation Grapes of Wrath” in 1996 (and we didn’t even count the repeated Israeli attacks against Lebanese infrastructure in 1998 and 1999) – we were easily assured that this event would play out in the sphere of negotiations and political quid pro quo – *not* war.

By the break of the following dawn, the bombardment that would not cease for thirty-four days had begun.<sup>1</sup> With the bombing of Beirut airport we were instantly boxed into a new war. I speak for myself, but I sensed it all around: the barely closed containers of emotional, bodily, temporal, existential modes and orientations that stirred beneath the blunted, fuzzy, everyday textures of “post-war” life in Lebanon reopened and took hold... .

As the war unfolded, during the hours that the electricity was cut and there was no TV or Internet news to follow, I relied on the sturdiest of war companions, the battery-powered transistor radio, for updates. I listened in my kitchen where the reception was best. Sitting at the open window listening, I idly observed the back alley through the branches of the big old rubber tree. During this war the southern family who lived in the patchwork structure with the massive wooden door in the back alley sprung into action. Ordinarily they practically lived on the street, socializing outside on their doorstep in village fashion; the interior of the house was used for cooking, washing, eating, sleeping – routine, intimate matters. Everything else took place outdoors under the sky and in communion, in a way or another, with their environment: human, animal, plant, stone. The entrance to their place formed a rectangular walkway flanked by a riot of greenery, both decorative and edible, planted in old powder-milk tins; there was always a constant stream of people entering and exiting. The permanent residents of the household were the wily and able Umm Hussein, who smoked incessantly, and her two thin and docile blonde daughters, one of whom tied her headscarf at the back of her neck in old-time southern village fashion (now almost entirely usurped by the more severe – and impractical – *Hizb* style across most of the Shiite South). The three women worked as servants and cleaners in nearby affluent households and businesses, and represented the remains of a much larger and much younger family who came as refugees to the neighborhood during the civil war, when they left their

<sup>1</sup> See my war diary: “One week of war: Every decision is a gamble,” *Electronic Intifada*, July 23, 2006, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/one-week-war-every-decision-gamble/6210>.



village close to Bint Jbeil along the southern border, during the first Israeli invasion of 1978. The Amal militia that was in charge of our neighborhood by the mid-1980s had put them up here and they were among the last of the neighborhood's *muhajjareen* refugee-squatters, hanging onto the space between two buildings, as good a home as any.

Umm Hussein was a close friend of Umm Walid, my beloved Egyptian neighbor from downstairs, who burned the flame of Bastet<sup>2</sup> by caring for all of the neighborhood's stray cats (and I was her loyal assistant). The two women had cemented their alliance as residents of the civil wartime neighborhood and visited each other often. In the spring, Umm Hussein brought Umm Walid bagfuls of fresh dandelions and other edible delicacies gathered from wild southern meadows on weekend visits. Once, Umm Hussein recounted to me her virgin brush with warfare during that first spring-time Israeli invasion in 1978 when she escaped on foot in the darkness of night with her five tiny children under a rain of bombs to the next village, carrying those who couldn't walk, with the others grabbing onto her skirts as she ran. That was a long, long time and many, many wars ago. And now, like many families from the South, her

<sup>2</sup> Bastet is the Ancient Egyptian cat-headed goddess.

children were grown up and distributed across the country and even abroad, here and there, making a living, while her husband farmed tobacco back in the village, which was liberated in 2000 along with the rest of the occupied border strip. Umm Hussein continues to work in the capital, maintaining and depending on the social networks that she forged during the war years to make a living.

Now in the summer of 2006, her family was re-collecting in Beirut, once again a place of refuge, as another season of war took hold in the South. A man, a son or a close relative, set himself up on a plastic chair among the potted plants and cats outside their doorstep in the alley, having arrived from the South or the southern suburbs on the day the war began. Manning his cell-phone, he kept track of the movements of his various family members as they made their way out of the warzone to places of lesser danger and ultimately, and if possible, Beirut. The man would garner the locations of his relatives as they fled and report back to others as they also made their way toward safety. The complicated and urgent logistics echoed off the narrow walls of the alley and floated up to me, framed in my third floor kitchen window among the leaves of the steady rubber tree... .

This was just one family among many across the capital and other Lebanese cities gathering its members to a place of safety – a familiar rhythm that had played out many times in years past across different times and geographies, depending on the mutable and capricious configurations of danger and safety. In the first days of this war, as the city filled up with the displaced and the war proceeded apace with more death and destruction accumulating daily, everyday work-a-day life was temporarily suspended in favor of the immediate events at hand and the need to secure the basics for successful wartime living in the current safe-zone. Residents and refugees alike, many of whom had lived through the Lebanese civil war and several Israeli campaigns and invasions, smoothly fell into practiced step. They did not know what would happen next, but they assessed the facts at hand and accordingly adjusted to the alternate rhythm re-introduced to their realm of being with the return of wartime.

Experiencing war from a safe-zone is very different from experiencing war itself, even if that safe-zone exists within or adjacent to the theater of violence. This is something that people who have inhabited the complicated quicksand geography of the Lebanese civil war know well, and it is something that they readjusted to during this round of warfare after the first few days. Thus what was both strange and special about this war was that

although it was a very destructive war and *like all things* potentially unstable, it soon became clear that the areas of battle had been delineated and stabilized,<sup>3</sup> and that those outside the danger zones could indulge in observing the war unfold.<sup>4</sup>

### War Tide

The war washed over us, reviving the war-beings in us: reminding us of its rhythms, readjusting our existential parameters, reacquainting us with subterranean emotions and submerged life forms... And then it receded. But like any sudden low tide, it left a scene of devastation behind and stranded affective objects usually concealed from view by the muddle of the everyday, now high and dry and for all to touch and feel and breathe and see. It was a little like seeing ghosts.

As I said, in the thirtieth year of a life that began in war, this thing called “war” that had become hard to see – too distant yet too close, meshed in life and living, mediated by too many scripts and by who knows what or whose memories – was once again thrown across my path. The 2006 war opened a box of stuff that cannot be summoned unless lived, like love or pain. This war threw me back into the life of war... and onto the path of inquiry that led to my dissertation.<sup>5</sup> Appropriately then the study begins with a moment of historical destruction, but unlike Benjamin’s Angel of History whose wings are helplessly caught up in the gale blowing from Paradise, this (wingless) anthropologist follows in reverse the path of the storm to poke among the ruins for things that do not (only) live in words.

<sup>3</sup> During this war, it became clear that Israel was directly targeting Shiite areas. The South and *dahiyeh*, the southern suburbs of Beirut, were pounded and pulverized. In a short time, people began to operate on the assumption that anywhere not Hizbullah-affiliated was “safe.”

<sup>4</sup> The explosion of bloggers who expressed their experience of this war (for most of them their first) is an indication of this exciting combination of dramatic, attention-grabbing, yet non-threatening violence close at hand, and the enabling position of (largely) middle-class connectivity and connectedness. This entitled perspective was not lost on me; still this did not stop me from keeping a log of those days.

<sup>5</sup> My dissertation is entitled “A Landscape of War: On the Nature of Conflict in South Lebanon” and is based upon research conducted in South Lebanon in the wake of the 2006 war.



# "BEIRUT," THE BELLY, THE EVENT

by Marc Nichanian

translated from the French by Walid Sadek

**Marc Nichanian** was professor of Armenian Studies at Columbia University between 1996 and 2007. In 2008 he taught at the Haigazian University in Beirut, and is currently visiting professor at Sabancı University in Istanbul. He edits an Armenian-language series on literary studies and translations of European philosophy. His numerous publications include *Writers of Disaster* (Vol. 1), *The National Revolution*, and a trilogy on Armenian literature entitled *Entre l'Art et le Témoignage: Littératures Arméniennes au XXe Siècle* (2006-2008). His latest book, published in 2011, consists of a series of lectures he gave in Istanbul, and has been translated into Turkish and published under the title, *Edebyat ve Felaket (Literature and Catastrophe)*.

Marc Nichanian reflects on *A Day from Home* by Samar Kanafani (2009, video, 20min. Arabic with English Subtitles). Using pregnancy as allegory, this video approaches the uneasy relationship between an individual desiring a modicum of belonging and an elusive nation/home. The impossibility of a perfect fit between the two prods a reconsideration of the passion that binds the "self" to the nation as "home." Is mutual infidelity a necessity?

1. A city between quotation marks, therefore cited; the city of which we speak. It is to me not quite unknown. When the image is still, all cities resemble one another. Yet here, no room for mistake, the city cites itself: “Mount Lebanon Hospital.” It was therefore a citation, even an auto-citation. Samar Kanafani’s video film (*A Day from Home*, 2009) cites Beirut. It does it so that Beirut, in a way, cites itself. Overall: it does it so that the city, in a way, speaks of itself – in the feminine. The film also tells in passing of little seemingly anodyne things: a pregnancy, an apartment interior, a body that grinds, that bends, a construction site from a window viewed below. Anodyne, indeed, they are. Or would be, rather, if without the image. Before the anodyne we are obliged to ask: why the image? Between my body and me; between me and the city; between me and the moment when my belly will open; why the image? Why does the image coincide with the wait? A difficult question. We can, from the apartment, film the interior and the exterior. (Inside, nothing not already known: the comfort of a sleeping room, an impeccable bed on which lovers have never embraced, bathrooms, a ventilated living room, books, the full weight of the day, the air moist, interminable hours, a slowness at work. Outside, the construction-site, noise, work.) Of the body, on the other



hand, we can only film skin, the grain of skin, a belly. To look inside it, we would have to open it. Could it nevertheless be that the image disembowels? Or is it not rather that it supposes disembowelment? Is it not that without the image, the most anodyne, we would have never heard of disembowelment, and never therefore of the event? This is what image theoreticians will never understand, for they are but the historians of their own discipline. But this is also what the iconoclast will never understand. And that is just as grievous.

2. It was 1977, two years into the war. At the end of a stay in France, V. returned to Beirut, where it was possible to live in spite of all, as long as bombs were falling elsewhere. The city was already disemboweled. I had asked her to send me photos of the city, of destroyed buildings, of devastated streets. I wanted to see Beirut disemboweled. I wanted to see the disembowelment. What madness! She eventually did send a few photos. She did not understand what there was to see. She was right. Feeble photographs, feeble scenes of a city-center in ruins. Post-war Warsaw. Not a living soul. No sufferance, no screams. A nameless disrepair. Later, in 1980, I stayed in Beirut for a few months, where I published my first book in Armenian. Pure heedlessness. It is true, here as well, that bombs fell only at the peripheries. I would see them whizz and blaze from my eleventh floor. Life went on; newspapers remained dailies; literature didn't halt. True, the disaster happened again and again, but eyes saw nothing. The image was a must. The borders of the image were a must. As if only the image could see the disaster, not us. Yes, but it could see it directly, and certainly not show it. For that, the most anodyne of images was needed. (And as if, inversely, images could only be of disaster – as if, behind every image, disaster lay hidden, in waiting. But here, I am well aware, is a complete, other proposition. Besides, is it

really true? What could this mean? Should not the contrary be said: that every image is made so as to render disaster invisible? And that would be the iconoclastic position. If every image is made to annul disaster, to render it invisible, then images must be prohibited; as if, through prohibition, we would suddenly render the disaster visible or, on the contrary, respect it in its absolute invisibility.)

**3.** I did not owe my heedlessness to physical danger; to a fear that could have indirectly wormed into me. What is strange is that during that summer I never felt fear. No, I owed my heedlessness to the fact that I wanted to publish, to exist, in a ruined language. Thus I also wanted to restore. What other intention, what other project, could reside behind this will to come to Beirut and publish a book in a ruined language? I wanted to make of myself a restorer of ruins. Of course, it was in Beirut that this language redressed itself in the mad hope of regaining its splendor of yesteryear. The city that promised ruin was also promised a redress. The big construction site was already on the go. Printers and publishers were found in Beirut. To publish was still possible. But to restore was another matter. Did I want to restore the belly of Beirut in my own language, to a feminine Beirut, which did not yet speak of itself, of its pregnancy, of the gravity of its own inhabited body? Did I want to repair the wounded image? What madness! I was engulfed by the image.

**4.** And so here, outside, lies a city that builds and rebuilds itself, the construction site, work, noise. And, inside, a child to be born, silence, the wait, the suffering body. Is it really different? Is not one the metaphor of the other, in a game of doubling, made so that we definitively lose our bearings? Behind the construction site, the disemboweling of the city, a pure forgotten past, that doesn't utter its name. But the child, itself, how will it be born



without a cesarean? The image is therefore needed for the disembowelment to really become an event, unvociferously of course, without drums or trumpets, but rather in the recess of alcoves and public life, in the bosom of a hidden complicity, one that is essentially hidden; the complicity of a “to be (born),” or a “not to be.” Always dug up, broken, torn. The image must be torn. But what image of the torn image? That is already the answer to the question “why the image?” I believe. Why the image? For the tearing. For the disembowelment to nevertheless see the day. In a film, a video, a painting. Theoreticians of the image will never understand that.





## 02 I, NATION





# HOME AND BORDER: REPRESENTATIONS OF BELONGING IN A SOUTHEASTERN EUROPEAN BORDER REGION

by Eleni Myrivili

**Eleni Myrivili** is an associate professor in the Department of Cultural Technology and Communications at the University of the Aegean, in Mytilini, Lesvos, Greece. She studied performance studies at New York University and holds a PhD in socio-cultural anthropology from Columbia University. She has published several articles in international journals and co-edited two books. She is also a member of the executive secretariat of the Greek Green Party, and a member of the European Green Party.

This text tackles the question of borders: the performative, violent power of the border, and the “sense of belonging” forcefully prescribed by the state on minority populations living by the border. Looking at the Prespa area, a tri-lateral border that cuts through the waters of a lake in southeastern Europe, Myrivili investigates the transferring and settling of other, more nationalistic populations near the border, in order to affect the area’s ethnic composition and put an end to the longing for lost “homes.” The piece shows how the Prespa area exemplifies practices used throughout the Balkans during the twentieth century.



The Prespa Border Region

### I am the Border

He is half-Vlach, half-*Dopyos*.<sup>1</sup>

Aris is in his early thirties. Sitting near the dock by the lake, I saw him driving his banged-up car, steering with one hand while the other dangled out the window holding a plastic cup of Nescafe and a cigarette. We met in the parking area. He was trying to wake up. His mother had been pestering him all morning about getting married. We sat in a *taverna* and ordered more coffee.

We were silent for a while, looking out over the water. "Could you believe that guy last night?" he said suddenly. "What a jerk! I saw him this morning with his cop friends sitting outside the police station. He pretended not to see me." The night before at the bar, Aris had asked the bar owner to play a Goran Bregovic song. He was dancing and singing along when a policeman who was there drinking with his friends demanded that they stop playing that "Slavic music." The songs were indeed composed by the famous composer from Sarajevo, but this particular recording featured a

<sup>1</sup> These are two of the communities that inhabit the Greek Prespa borderlands.



renowned Greek vocalist singing the lyrics in Greek. “We’re in Greece, God damn it,” the policeman shouted. “You’re in deep trouble, both of you traitors,” he shouted from one end of the bar at Aris and the bar-owner. He said he was going to close down the bar, because of the noise, and report the two men. It was around 3:00 am.

“National traitors,” Aris laughed across the table from me. “Right! One should just keep one’s mouth shut around here. No one trusts anybody. My father [a Dopyos] was in Poland for years and years. The communists took him when he was five years old, along with all the other kids from the village. He ended up in Poland where he spent most of his childhood. He came back in the ’60s, but until today, every day, all he wants to talk about is wonderful Poland. He avoids all other discussion. His mother – my grandma – a Dopya, lived in Prespa all her life, and still she cannot speak a word of Greek. My other grandmother, the Vlach, didn’t speak any Greek either. There has never been any communication around here anyway.”

He was cooling down. “Look over there,” he said, pointing towards Macedonia (FYROM). “Have you ever been there? They say those villages are very beautiful, that the houses there are villas! You know, I sometimes take my uncle’s boat and I go to the border, and I sit there right next to it, or just slightly crossing it, and I think to myself: if I scream, will they hear me? Who will hear me? And my heart beats wildly. You understand, don’t you? I have cousins over there I’ve never met. I am this border; I belong to both sides and to no one.”

### The Land

There is a deeply mysterious side to the relationships we develop with the spaces we live in – our “homes” (house, neighborhood, city, valley, mountain, coast) – where *mémoire involontaire* can be found lingering in the corner of a house, in a particular smell, in the dirt, on a tree, or around a street corner. Even more mysterious is our ability to extend that relationship to lands that we’ve never seen, to translate that relationship with the land into a relationship with the millions of people that live there, and from them to the socio-political institutions that purport to represent us all. Increasingly, since the eighteenth century,<sup>2</sup> the relationship between people and land has been filtered through, manipulated and monopolized by, the nation-state. It is difficult to separate “the land” from “the nation.” From an early age, ritualized, performative aspects of our everyday lives amalgamate the two and infuse our identity with this mixture.

<sup>2</sup> Much has been written about the formations that bring together and equate “the people” with the “nation,” the “state” and the “territory.” For a concise text on the discourse that developed during the age of revolutions in the late eighteenth century, see Hobsbawm’s first chapter in *Nations and Nationalism* since 1780 (1990, 14-45); as for the formation of “imagined communities,” see Benedict Anderson’s classic text (1991).

In Greek, the special relationship of belonging that links someone to “the land” is usually described as *dopyos* (ντόπιος), etymologically from *en* meaning *in*, and *topos* meaning *place*. The word is used to refer to someone “in place,” a local. In English, the word *dopyos* might be translated as *indigenous* or *native*, explicitly bringing the dimension of “birth” into the relationship of “self” and “land.” On the Greek side of the Prespa region, a mountainous remote area of the South Balkans, there is a community of people called *dopyi*. These people, who refer to themselves – and are referred to by others – as *dopyi*, use the term as a name rather than an adjective. In other words, the term is used as an appellation that distinguishes the members of this particular community from the other people who inhabit the area. These other people, this name tells us, arrived in the region from elsewhere. It seems evident that if it weren’t for the arrival of “others” that came and inhabited the Prespa area, there would be no need for such an appellation.

Actually the term *dopyos*, which has been used (and is still used to some extent) throughout Greek Macedonia, is linked to a specific event. That is, its denotation is historically specific: it is used to distinguish the people who lived in Greek Macedonia from the million plus refugees who arrived from Turkey in 1922-23.<sup>3</sup> However, these local Greek Macedonians were not a homogenous group. Among them were Slav-speaking populations, Sephardic Jews, Vlachs speaking a Latin-based language, Armenians, Circassians, and Albanians (Mazower 1997, 47).

In the Prespa region, a small part of northwestern Greek Macedonia, the term *dopyos* is used as the proper name (the appellation) to refer to the community of Slavic speakers. The identity of the members of this community, however, is both varied and complex, and remains contested; it has had trouble fitting neatly within the order of the nation-state and its borders.<sup>4</sup> Ever since the creation of the Greek nation-state and the establishment of its national borders in the early twentieth century, this particular community of people has been perceived as outsiders. Through different policies that repressed difference, and in an effort to socially engineer a “more Greek” Prespa, the Greek nation-state constructed the *dopyi* as a threat to the nation.

It is through this name, however, that members of this community lay claim to a privileged sense of origin, a sense of identification with the land and the waters of Prespa. This claim is implicitly recognized by people of other communities, the other

<sup>3</sup> For the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, see Hirschon (2003); for the rehabilitation of the refugee populations in Western Greek Macedonia, see Pelagidis (1994); for politico-economic relations between Slav speakers and refugees, see Michaelides (1997).

<sup>4</sup> More on this topic can be found in Anastasia Karakasidou (1997), in the collection of essays edited by Jane Cowan (2000) and also in Myrivili (2004).

Greeks, who also commonly refer to the community as Dopyi. The literal meaning of the term has to some extent faded through many years of usage. From this point onwards, I will capitalize the term Dopyos and the plural Dopyi when referring to this Prespa community and its members, as the name of one of several distinct communities inhabiting the area around the Prespa Lake in this mountainous region.

I would like to tell the story of the people of the Prespa borders. Whether they belong to the community of the Dopyi, the Vlachs, the Refugees,<sup>5</sup> or the Albanian immigrants, they are all haunted by a profound sense of displacement: they are in crucial ways attached to some other distant or unavailable “home.” This constantly renders them “out of place.” Within this context, the term Dopyos acquires a far more poignant meaning than “local.” It aptly represents the paradox of being a part of the national border while also being displaced by it.

While the Dopyi, a “community of place,”<sup>6</sup> are defined primarily by their relationship to “the land,” this land that spans all around the Prespa Lakes is not intact. It is broken up both literally by three national borders, and metaphorically by three very different interpretative regimes (socio-political and historical). The lake and its environs are intersected since the early twentieth century by Greek, Albanian and Macedonian (formerly Yugoslavian) national borders, carving the region into three segregated parts and prohibiting all contact/interaction between them. Since their establishment, there have been no border checkpoints along these Prespa region borders. On top of this severance of land and people, as a result of the particular type of ethno-nationalism that flourished in the Balkans, the historical, lived experience of the people of Prespa is also broken up into many fragmented and often conflicting interpretations of history and memory. On the Greek side of the Prespa region, the Slav-speaking community of Dopyi embodies “difference” in relation to the homogenized and naturalized ideal of the Greek nation. As traces of a pre-national past, they fuel and exacerbate a decades-long climate of suspicion and repression cultivated by the Greek nation-state towards them.

### The Lakes

The Prespa region is a drain basin: at 850 meters above sea level, two stunning tectonic lakes split by a narrow strip of land are surrounded by wetlands, valleys and sloping mountains. Small Lake Prespa is shared between Albania and Greece, while Big Lake Prespa’s waters and shores are split among Albania, Greece

<sup>5</sup> These nouns are capitalized as they are used as appellations of the specific communities and their members.

<sup>6</sup> A “community of place” indicates a place-bound community formed within the particularity of a specific geographical space, which becomes a lived place articulated through the social relations of the people that inhabit it, as well as through their cultural values and meanings, and the emotional, perceptual and symbolic investments produced therein. For more on landscape and identity, see Morley & Robins (1995); King (1997); Massey (1997, 1998); Carter, Donald and Squires (1993).



Vidronisi isle in Small Lake Prespa: looking south towards Greece and Albania (photo and © by Eleni Myrivili)

and Macedonia (FYROM). Best known for hosting the largest breeding colony of Dalmatian pelicans in the world, the Prespa region was recently recognized as one of the most important wetland ecosystems in Europe. Today the whole region forms the Prespa Park, the first ecologically protected area in the Balkans that traverses national borders. While the Prespa Park project opens up a new perception of space in Prespa, which allows for affective relations to the land that transcend ethnocentric fragmentation, the environmental discourse is arduously slow in displacing the absolute hegemony of a national discourse that has for decades inescapably defined Prespa through identity and difference.

In the past, the lakes must have played a crucial role in the formation of affective attachments to the land in Prespa. On the Greek side of Prespa, the people with the most profound relationship to the lakes are evidently the members of the Dopyi community. Among the eleven villages inhabited today on the Greek side of the Prespa only one is built on the waterfront. This village, called Psarades (Greek for



Fishing on Big Lake Prespa in January (photo and © by Eleni Myrivili)



The village of Psarades (photo and © by Eleni Myrivili)

“fishermen”) is inhabited exclusively by Dopyi. According to Dimitris Papadopoulos’ research (2010), the fishing areas of the great Lake Prespa were traditionally communal shares allocated to the “houses” of the village. The Dopyi kinship structures were once patrilocal extended families with up to 25 or even 30 people living under the same roof. The village community would internally allot fishing grounds based on the needs and size of each family. With this allocation of fishing areas, the lake ceased to be an abstract body of water. Over time, through their labor, the Dopyi “mapped” the lake in great detail, delineating and naming specific areas, hierarchically organizing them based on fish yield, imbuing the lake with meaning. The amorphous body of water became a highly articulated and readable landscape. As Papadopoulos points out, this knowledge is still embodied in the everyday fishing practices of the people of Psarades today and shared in the memories of the village community (Papadopoulos 2010, 306-7).

### The Liquid Border

One soft summer evening, I was asked by Michalis, a Dopyos from Psarades, to help him in fishing. When we reached our fishing grounds, he turned off the boat’s engine and handed me the oars so that I could slowly row as he let the nets down into the water. He had chosen a part of the lake that was close to the Greek-Albanian border, which cuts invisibly through the waters. He was mindful of the border that he wasn’t supposed to cross.<sup>7</sup> When we finished, before heading back to the village, he turned to me and said: “In my mind’s eye, it is still mine – the whole thing, the whole lake, without borders. Imagine... they could have drawn the border over there, next to the village, at Roti [a rocky cliff at the edge of the little bay where

<sup>7</sup> The Prespa borders that “cut” the waters of the two lakes of Prespa are to a large extent invisible. As there are no checkpoints in the Prespa area, the border indications are comprised of a few cement pyramids, land demarcations, and a few buoys floating on the waters. These form invisible lines that separate the three nations. Only the locals and the authorities know their exact location.

his village, Psarades, is situated]. Every morning when you wake up, it would be like opening the door to go out and banging your head on a brick wall.”

Michalis' words describe a historicized border. A border that is not naturalized; a border that is arbitrary, that moves. This view of the border calls the concept of the nation-state into question by exposing its historical contingency. But Michalis was also quite mindful of this strange line that is invisible and yet policed by armed forces. He would not cross the border, as he would risk provoking warning shots, arrest and being taken to the nearest Albanian police station. It would take a couple of days of bureaucratic red-tape before he would be escorted to the Greek-Albanian border checkpoint, several kilometers south of Prespa, in order to reenter Greece and hitch a ride back to Psarades.



Starting at the liquid Albanian-Greek border (grey line), the thin blue line represents the journey through Albania, south to the checkpoint and then north through Greece back to Psarades

The Dopyi know the border as a material manifestation of the nation-state's power. Whether physically manifest or liquid and mostly imagined, the border is an institution which articulates on a large scale who is or isn't considered a "local," who is or isn't at home. Michalis, like most Dopyi, is both. His Greek nationality makes him part of the nation, legally binding him to Greek law and affectively tying him through education to its history, its people and territories. His Slavic heritage, though, makes him an outsider to the Greek nation, a suspect, a possible traitor, as it links him to the "other" nation, Macedonia (FYROM), but also to the long-standing traditions of numerous generations who shared a lived experience around this lake, prior to the nation-state's arrival in the area. The national borders dictate and organize Michalis' relationship to the Prespa landscape, his complex sense of belonging, and the larger perception of space that he inhabits. He doesn't fit neatly. In the Balkan nationalist imagination – where national territory is like a "body" that houses the nation as its "soul" – borders act as skin: a boundary that contains and refracts the purity of the nation, while providing an ingress for contamination.

The borders and the border regions in this part of the world embody various threats (the proximity to a de facto dangerous outside, illegal immigrants, ethnic minorities, etc.), continually providing a "discourse of danger" (an inalienable feature of the nation-state), which justifies the use of repressive force (the same type of violence used to establish the nation-state) and ultimately maintains the order of the nation-state by underlying all law-enforcing disciplinary measures. Within this schema, the liquid borders of Prespa, the limits of three nation-states, become visible through the violence used by the police and military if and when they are transgressed. Forming an essential spatiality of the nation-state, the border, in a perpetual "state of emergency" (Benjamin 1969, 257), reveals the national order as the geopolitical locus and the institution of "terror as usual" (Tausig 1992, 11).<sup>8</sup>

### Locals and Nomads

The border subjects of the Greek Prespa region, both local and nomadic, include the Dopyi; the Greek police and military who arrived here with the establishment of the Greek nation-state, (the area remained under Ottoman rule until 1913); the Refugees, who came and settled the area after the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1922-23; the Vlachs, the great nomads of the Balkans in previous centuries, who came from the south of Greece and settled the area in the 1950s after the Greek Civil War; and the Albanian immigrants who started crossing

<sup>8</sup> For an elaboration of the argument in this paragraph, see Myrivilis (2004, 247-274).



the border after the fall of the Hoxha regime in the early 1990s (mostly transient residents working for short periods of time as wage laborers). All these people are *border subjects* as they have formed and occupied specific discursive positions in relation to the Greek nation-state's limits, both materially and rhetorically. But how did this particular composition of populations come to inhabit today's Prespa?

Within the social setting of the Ottoman Empire, up to the end of the nineteenth century, religion, ethnic background and language constituted the basic ingredients of the hybrid and multifaceted self-identification of the people who inhabited Macedonia. When national ideologies converged, claiming the Macedonian lands and their people – in an area of extreme ethnological complexity – they fuelled intense ideological struggles, soon to be followed by armed conflict. It was the beginning of a series of bloody wars that lasted for more than half a century and ravaged the Prespa area.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1920s, the newly-formed Greek side of Prespa had a population of over 10,000 people living across eighteen communities. Most people were Slav-speaking Orthodox Christians; some spoke Greek, the lingua franca of the time, and some spoke Turkish and were Muslim in faith. During the first years of the twentieth century, the Prespa communities were embroiled in nationalist guerilla warfare, which turned into the First and Second Balkan Wars. The Second Balkan War carried over into WWI and led to the first voluntary exchange of populations, which took place between Greece and Bulgaria in the early 1920s.<sup>10</sup> This population exchange paved the way for an unprecedented international decision. Signed in 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne called for forced population expulsions and relocations: i.e., the mandatory exchange of populations that took place between Greece and Turkey following the Greek army's defeat in Asia Minor (Hirschon 2003). And it set a precedent for all “exchanges,” “expulsions,” and “ethnic cleansings” of populations to come. Altogether, around 1.3 million Orthodox Christians arrived in Greece from Turkey, while 600,000 Muslims left Greece.<sup>11</sup> Several generations were scarred by the pain and loss of these massive displacements. Forced deportations and relocations meant that thousands of families were left homeless, uprooted, moved around and replanted in foreign environments. Nation-state borders were redrawn yet again, and notions of identity, belonging and difference were created anew, while state institutions endeavored to shape the new affective attachments of populations.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A wide spectrum of historical and ethnographic accounts of the national awakening in the Balkans, with a particular focus on the Macedonian struggle, can be found in the works of Perry (1988); Barker (1950); Durham (1905); Brailsford (1906); Veremis (1994, 1995); Mazzower (2003); Palmer and King (1971).

<sup>10</sup> This exchange of populations followed the “Convention on Greco-Bulgarian Voluntary and Reciprocal Emigration,” between Greece and Bulgaria in 1919. Signed at Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, it intended to encourage minorities to migrate to their “kin state.” See Finney (1995); Ladas (1932); Cowan (2003, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> For the numbers of people exchanged see, for example: Hobsbawm (1990, 133); Karakasidou (1997, 145); Hirschon (1998, 36.)

<sup>12</sup> There is extensive literature on these matters pertaining to the Balkans. See, for example: Malouchos (1924); Mavrogordatos (1983); Hirschon (1998, 2003); Karakasidou (1997); Cowan (1990, 2000).

More than half of the incoming refugees were given land and settled in the recently acquired, war-torn<sup>13</sup> “New Lands” of Greek Macedonia (1913). That was when the Refugees<sup>14</sup> came to Prespa in 1922-23 – from the Pontos region of the Black Sea, from Izmir and Asia Minor – and dramatically changed the composition of the area’s population. They settled in houses abandoned by the expelled Turkish and Albanian Muslim populations and were allocated parcels of land by the Greek state. In Prespa, relations between these Refugee settlers and the Slav-speaking Dopyi were the kind that occur between two disenfranchised groups. The Dopyi called the refugees “Turks” and the refugees called the Dopyi “Bulgarians.” From the start, this relationship was blighted by the land redistribution issue: the redistribution of the estates that had belonged to the Muslim Ottomans.

### Land Distribution and Social Engineering

Before the arrival of the Refugees, the local populations<sup>15</sup> of Prespa were either landless workers on Ottoman estates, or owners of small plots of land. Since the end of the nineteenth century, they had been able to buy some of the land they worked through informal deeds and contracts, using both lawful and – particularly during the last years of the Ottoman Empire – unlawful means. Whether landless serfs or small landholders, the Slav-speakers of Prespa had high expectations for the land redistribution promised by the Greek State after its acquisition of Macedonian lands and the population exchanges with Bulgaria and Turkey. However, after the arrival of the refugees from Pontos and Asia Minor, the Greek authorities were not willing to ratify the Dopyi’s claims to the former Ottoman estates. Instead, the land the Dopyi hoped to inherit was confiscated, divided up into smaller plots, and redistributed, often on terms unfavorable to them.<sup>16</sup> The Dopyi felt entitled to this land they now saw being bequeathed to the Refugees. The Refugees had left behind large properties, including land and homes; and, according to the Treaty of Lausanne, they were entitled to land of the same quality and value (Michaelides 1997). They felt cheated by the modest pieces of land allotted to them by the Greek state. Neither group felt that the Land Redistribution Program (which in Prespa was designed and implemented sometime around 1933), distributed the land fairly. But land ownership was once again re-articulated and politicized in ethnic terms in the 1950s, a few decades before large-scale irrigation works and environmental conservation reshaped the landscape of Prespa (starting in the 1980s), ushering in the twenty-first century.

<sup>13</sup> The Balkan Wars ended in 1914.

<sup>14</sup> This community of people living in Prespa were and still are called “refugees,” even though, technically, the terminology is wrong as all the people expelled from Turkey were immediately granted Greek citizenship upon arrival in Greece (Hirschon, 2003). I capitalize the word, as it is currently the name of the particular community in Prespa, along with the name “Pontic” referring to the Pontos region of the Black Sea, place of origin for most members of the community.

<sup>15</sup> The term Dopyi became the appellation of the local, mostly Slav-speaking population of Prespa, following the arrival of the Refugees to the region.

<sup>16</sup> See Karavidas (1931, 211-32, 298-305, 307-18) and Malouchos (1924), cited in Van Boeschoten (2000, 37).



The Prespa fields today: irrigated bean monoculture since the 1990s. Looking north towards Macedonia (FYROM), both lakes can be seen as well as the thin land strip that separates them (photo and © by Eleni Myrivili)

In the late 1940s, during the Greek Civil War that followed World War II, the majority of the Dopyi sided with the guerillas of the Communist Democratic Army, while the Refugees sided predominately with the nationalists and the National Greek Army. At the beginning of the civil war, the Greek authorities and the National Army left Prespa; within days, they evacuated the Refugee populations to the nearest towns, leaving the whole region of Prespa under the control of the communist Democratic Army. Except for the few who had enlisted in the national army and those that fled the country, the rest of the Dopyi were either recruited by or supported the guerrilla rearguard and their headquarters in Prespa.

Thus, Prespa became geopolitically and symbolically separated from the national territories during the civil war, and the Slav-speaking villagers, the Dopyi, were identified with the communist guerrillas and their cause for years to come. It was during that time that the terms “Dopyos” and “Communist” became conflated in the eyes of the Greek state and right-wing citizens. “After the defeat in 1949, political stigma was thus added to the ethnic stigma” (Van Boeschoten 2000, 37).

After the Civil War and the defeat of the communists, the Dopyi fled with the communist guerrillas to Eastern Europe in fear of retaliation. They were labeled “national traitors” and their land was confiscated by the Greek state. Many of them were never allowed to return to Greece, as a 1953 law revoked their “nationhood” (ιθαγένεια). By the 1990s some of these political refugees were allowed under exceptional provisions to make short visits to Prespa. Out of the eighteen villages of Prespa that made up the stronghold of the communist leadership and rearguard, five were deserted by their inhabitants and never populated again. Their ruins still stand, gutted from the bombing of Prespa and by the passage of time.

After the Civil War, in the 1950s, new settlers were moved to Prespa – part of yet another government resettlement program. They were offered the land and houses of the political refugees (Dopyi/communists) who had fled from Prespa. This new group came to Prespa between 1952 and 1956. They were Vlachs, nomadic pastoralists predominantly from the Greek mountainous northwest (Epirus), who brought livestock to Prespa (sheep, goats and horses), spoke a Latin-based language and settled for the first time in their history, becoming small landowners. Politically the Vlachs were predominantly nationalist and right-wing conservatives. Once again, the Greek state confiscated and redistributed the land of Prespa to people who were considered more “Greek,” determining it necessary for demographic and national security reasons.

The endless wars and the ensuing periods of right-wing/nationalist political repression ravaged the area until 1974,<sup>17</sup> taking a huge toll on the population, the landscape and the economy of Prespa. The wars wrought the continual devastation of the land and the pillaging of the fruits of people’s labor by different armies and guerilla troops, as well as the ruin of material infrastructure (fields, houses, mills, etc.) The wars also drew a significant part of the labor force away from Prespa: a lot of young men (and women, during the Civil War) joined or were forcibly conscripted into the armies, leaving fewer hands to cultivate the land. Many died in battle. Many also died during the bombings of Prespa.

After the end of the Civil War, most of the Dopyi left the country, following the exodus of the communist army. By then, almost all of the children had already left. They were evacuated several times between 1944 and 1949 and taken to children’s camps or small towns and villages in Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia

<sup>17</sup> This was the end of the Greek military junta.

and Hungary, where they grew up. Some of them managed to find one or both of their parents years later, and very few of them returned to Greece. Other children from Prespa, though fewer, ended up in the *Queen's Camps*<sup>18</sup> or *Childrentowns* (*παιδουπόλεις*), as they were called. Some of them returned home a few years later, while others were adopted in Australia or America. Finally, the political repression and economic impoverishment that followed the wars provoked even further depopulation of the area. A lot of people left Prespa in the '60s, '70s and '80s, as economic immigrants to Canada, America, Germany and Australia.<sup>19</sup>

All these processes created large rifts in the society of Prespa and fostered a social hierarchy based on national loyalty, which was, in turn, based on ethno-cultural criteria. The original antagonisms and stratification involved only the Dopyi, the Refugees and the *palaioelladites*, i.e. members of the Greek state institutions, mostly bureaucrats and police who had moved to the region from the south. The introduction of the Vlachs further complicated the picture, elaborating and refining the actions and practices of the different peoples vying for recognition as the “most nationalistic.” That, of course, produced a wide array of performances of national identity in the region. The most tragic examples of such demonstrations were witnessed among the Dopyi, those who identified most fervently with the Greek cause but were nevertheless regarded as national threats or traitors.

These brutal ruptures of human relations through death, politics and the violent movements of people, which for decades kept delineating and re-articulating the Prespa region as lived landscape and memory, produced traumatic affective attachments to fragmented spatialities. Having lived through forced relocations, expulsions, marginalization, repression and endless wars, the border people – distrusting and mistrusted, shifty and uncontainable – remain displaced subjects, as they embody the border and reiterate it.

### Elena the Refugee

Elena is in her late 30s. She belongs to the Refugee community. Her family came from the Pontos region and settled in Prespa in 1923. She says that the first time she became conscious of being part of Greek Macedonia, of having a particular *regional* Greek identity, was in 1992 when Skopje<sup>20</sup> claimed nation-statehood and the use of the name, symbols and history of Macedonia. She felt personally implicated. She felt that her own home, her childhood, the land that she felt connected

<sup>18</sup> Frederica of Hanover was Queen Consort of the Hellenes as the wife of King Paul of Greece, who succeeded King George II to the throne in 1947. They are the parents of Sophia Queen of Spain (born 1938).

<sup>19</sup> According to the national census, in 1940, the population of Prespa had dropped to 6,880 people; by 1951 the number had dropped to 1,454; in 1961 it was 3,251; in 1971 it was 2,225; by 1981 and 1991, it had dropped to 1,545 and 1,520, respectively (Katsadorakis 1996).

<sup>20</sup> This is what all the Prespa people call the Republic of Macedonia, in public.

to, was threatened. “Maybe I felt more threatened because we are refugees. We already lost our homes once,” she said.



(Photo and © by Eleni Myrivili)

“My grandparents left everything behind; their homes, their land; everything was lost overnight. If they had stayed, they would have been slaughtered. They managed to get to Constantinople, where they were put on a ship. The ship was stuck at port for forty days. It was packed; several thousand people from sixteen different Pontos villages, without food and very little water. Only after several weeks, when the quarantine was lifted, were water and food allowed on the ship. Many died on that ship. My grandfather had one son and three daughters with him; all the girls died. He had to throw them overboard. Eventually the ship sailed to Greece, to Thessaloniki. My grandfather died a year later in the hospital from cholera, probably from the foul water on the ship and from his sadness.

<sup>21</sup> She is referring to the exchanged Muslim populations, mostly Turks that had been living in Prespa during the Ottoman Era.

“When my grandmother came to Prespa, she saw the fields and the lake and the empty houses left behind by the Turks<sup>21</sup> and she decided to stay. My people knew nothing about borders; they came from the depths of Asia. They just stopped here

because the borders stopped them; otherwise they would have kept going. Prespa was not a very wise choice after all: the land is good but it's dangerous. It's too remote. If something happens, there is nowhere to go to save yourself.

"During the Greek Civil War, my family, as we were supporting the political Right, was uprooted again and taken away from Prespa by the national army to Florina<sup>22</sup> to escape the communist guerillas. It took them three days by horse and cart to take their things and children to Florina, and on the way they were attacked by guerillas that shot at them with machine guns. Two of our people were killed there, an old man and a small child.

"In Florina, they all stayed in one room that belonged to a Vlach family. Four families lived in that house for three whole years – from 1947 to 1949. You know, it was military law then and everyone had to do whatever they were told. It was then that my father's half sister and brothers, who were younger than him, were taken from Florina and put into the children's institutions of Queen Frederica in Thessaloniki to save them from the communist guerillas, who were stealing children and sending them behind the Iron Curtain. They stayed there for two years and said they had lots of food and new clothes. Then my family left and went to work in Canada. The whole area here was devastated by the wars... the Civil War in particular. My father says that he remembers when the Italians were bombarding Prespa during World War II. The bombs, he says, were falling in the water, which was rising high – 'plaf' and 'plaf.'

"When I was growing up," Elena continued, "I lived with my grandmother. She never learned any Greek; she spoke only Turkish. During all those years that she lived in Greece, here in Prespa, up until the day she died, she kept telling me that she wanted to go back to Turkey, to her home in Pontos. For all these years she had the key to that house hanging on a chain around her neck. She wanted to be buried with it."

### Homes, Origins, Limits

Most of the narratives of Prespa are collective/personal memories of war, hunger, violent displacements, killings and loss of loved ones, repression and fear. The older people tell stories of events from the turn of the century, stories of the constitutive violence of the nation-state border formation. Some of them remember how the borders were drafted and moved around. Almost everyone has a story about how different policies concerning the borders affected their mobility, their daily experi-

<sup>22</sup> Florina is the town nearest to Prespa.



ence of familiar space, relationships to relatives, and identity politics. The stories go backwards and forwards, folding in upon themselves. They are about dictatorships, civil wars, world wars, occupations, military law, refugees, relatives becoming enemies, enemies becoming friends and relatives, and then deadly enemies again. The border people talk a lot about history, about the past, about origins and homes. But these origin narratives are different from the nationalist narratives, whereby the origin guarantees “the recursive character of history through spatial metaphor” (Feldman 1991, 18). They are different because the origins, the homes of the people in Prespa, are not territorially stable; they are “elsewhere,” far away or nearby, but never there in Prespa. The Prespa border subjects are displaced, dispersed and often mobile. These are borders that, like the local residents, do not remain static; they are highly historicized borders, and the people that live alongside them keep bringing the past into the present in a perpetual retelling of the story of the boundaries that haunt them.

The historicized border – one that is known to move, to be established by people and violence, delineated on the ground by governmental committees, then annulled and reestablished after more violence – is a national border that is not naturalized, a border that keeps revealing itself as radically contingent. In their repetitive acknowledgements of the border’s failure to become naturalized, the people of Prespa are discursively reconfirming and maintaining the otherwise invisible borderline, while simultaneously undermining its legitimacy, and by extension the legitimacy of the nation-state itself, precisely by reiterating the contingency of its limit/origin. It is a terrifying game between the nation-state and the border people: both constitute and threaten one another.

And while this contingency and the ensuing lack of legitimacy create an open field of identities, affective attachments and political contestations – an “antagonistic” field, as Laclau would call it – they also create a particular kind of consciousness among the people of Prespa, who have intimate knowledge of this type of contingency. This consciousness leads to a certain kind of fearlessness, which comes with the realization of having the power to challenge the nation-state, but also a nagging sense of guilt for the instability that they represent to a world that denies this essential contingency: guilt and “fear,” a fear of what will come next. The border subjects cannot step outside the nation-state, even though they can certainly challenge it. They are caught up in its web of borderlines.

But the state, too, has its limits. Despite efforts to present the discursive field as fixed and normative, it effectively creates struggle and a multiplicity of reiterations of the normative, which might indeed exceed its original purpose.

The story of the relationship between the people and the lands of Prespa (through labor, ownership, affective attachments) articulates a series of violations that the Greek state and its apparatuses have inflicted on the population. The displacement and loss that all of these people have suffered – uprooted, relocated, dispossessed, and forced to live away from “home” – are perpetually represented and repeated in the current lives of the different inhabitants of Prespa, through the performances of proximity or distance to the Greek nation-state. There is a proliferation of sites in which this process takes place, as it finds expression at the very core of their relationship to society; that is, the regulation of access to economic, political and social resources. Who has access to what in Prespa determines who will keep retelling the story of social/ethnic stigmatization. On the Greek side of Prespa, material relations and bodies are perpetually regulated and constrained by the nationalist discourse and its ideal subject positions. The results of this process seem to be the propagation of fragmentation, the continual implementation of new sets of boundaries, and antagonistic relations among the population, all shaped around the dominant discursive gesture of national identification.

If this nationalist ideology and the role of state institutions were geared towards creating an ethnically homogeneous society made up of disciplined subjects that have internalized and naturalized the nation and its self-evidence, then they have *failed*, despite their scrupulous attempts for over a century. It is a failure, that is, unless the consolidation of the national imperative is predicated on *contamination*, as much as *purity*. The state creates the disavowed, abject subjects that haunt its own domain. The relationship to the Greek nation-state brings to mind that of alien immigrant groups who have more recently settled in Greece: in the eyes of the state and its bureaucrats they are “pollution” inside the main body of the nation. And those “polluting agents” are all vying for better placement, for proximity to the national imperative: Greek identity.

Why is it, asks Foucault in the *History of Sexuality I*, that the repression of sexuality has simultaneously produced all this discourse about it? Through a critique of Freud’s “repression hypothesis,” Foucault proposes that the prohibition on sexuality,

<sup>23</sup> The *panigyri* of Psarades is a grand celebration in Prespa, which lasts for two days and two nights. The festivities take place mostly at night, particularly during the second night. Every village around Prespa has an annual panigyri and these are probably the most important days in the life of the village. It is usually related to the patron saint of the village, i.e., the namesake of the main church of the village. The panigyria usually take place during the summer months and they are always outdoors: in the village square, the schoolyard, or a field near the center of the village. During the fall or spring, when the weather is chilly, people light large bonfires. During the panigyri, people dance to live music performed by a local band. The music is amplified, and there is a lot of drinking and eating. In the villages where there are no tavernas to prepare the panigyri food, there are always hotdog and souvlaki vendors around. The festivities last the whole night. Each panigyri has its own unique character and reputation. Some *panigyria* are more famous than others. The panigyri of Psarades is the most famous one in Prespa. People from the entire region attend. The village of Psarades has a lot of tavernas and a lot of emigrants. Perth, Australia, alone hosts 700 people from the village of Psarades. There are probably a few hundred more living in Eastern Europe, in other parts of Greece, in Germany, Canada, and the US. Most of the emigrants who return to visit Psarades for the summer make sure that their stay includes the 15th of August, which is the day of the “Virgin Mary” and of the panigyri of Psarades. The population of Psarades, which during the winter numbers less than 100 people, quadruples in mid-August. All the inhabitable houses are packed, all the “rooms to let” are booked, and all the beds, sofas and most of the floor space of the Psarades homes are occupied by friends and family from far away. The panigyri is also the space in which ethnic tensions become most visible.

the repressive regime that surrounds sexuality, not only reproduces what it tries to prohibit and suppress, but in the process also expands its domain. It does this by proliferating the sites of control, discipline and suppression (Foucault 1980). The underlying hypothesis to this discussion of the border and its subjects is that the national discourse that creates the subject-position “of the border” and “as the border” functions in a similar way. That means that the very discourse that engenders “border subjects” also incites the transgression of this very border, proliferating its sites, and thus, augmenting its regulatory domain.

### The Festival

The *panigyri* of Psarades<sup>23</sup> is the largest event in Prespa. It takes place on August 15th, the day that traditionally marks the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. That is when visitors and relatives fill up every available room and mattress in the area. All are waiting for the nights of the 14th and 15th, for the fiesta of Psarades.

Towards the end of the second night, after everyone was quite drunk and had danced to the Dopya, Vlach and Pontic<sup>24</sup> songs played by the local band, Aris and a couple of others asked the band to play “Macedonian songs.” It must have been after midnight. Teary-eyed, Aris and his friend Spyros leaned over and translated the lyrics into my ear. Those Macedonian songs made some attendees cringe and others sigh. Watching the latter crowd get up to dance, I felt that the songs inspired them in a special way, lending them a sense of unrest, some kind of effervescence, an ecstatic quality. I had seen this among the people of Prespa and it was one of the things that I loved about the place. I had seen it in Aris who threw his head back and let out a deep sigh while listening to an Albanian clarinetist play a soulful solo from an Albanian song. I had seen it in the local bar, when, in the wee hours, the people of Prespa would play jazz and local folk gypsy music and dance around the room like it was the last night of their lives. This ecstatic quality was related to the Macedonian songs, music, and dances, and was shared by the other people of Prespa. But it achieved its fullest form among the Dopyi. That night at the fiesta of Psarades, Aris paid the band to play the Macedonian songs. He took his friend Spyros and I by the hand and lead us in a line. We started dancing around in a circle – just the three of us, at first. Someone from the crowd surrounding the dance circle shouted, “Aris, be careful – you’ll lose your job.” Aris laughed and said he didn’t give a shit; Spyros also started laughing, and we continued dancing. After a while, a few more people – about ten of them – joined in hesitantly. It was a

statement. The dancing became more and more intense, as more people joined the circle. Aris and Spyros took turns leading, loudly now singing the Slav-Macedonian words, as they had done quietly earlier in the night when we were sitting at the table. It went on and on, and when the dancing and the song had reached its peak, Aris suddenly turned the line around, and – breaking its circular movement – lead the line of dancers in front of the musicians. When Aris reached the musicians, he threw some money towards them and asked for “Rambo,” a Vlach song. The change in rhythm was quite abrupt but everyone immediately adapted their step, following Aris and Spyros, transitioning seamlessly as if nothing had happened. With renewed effervescence, Aris guided the dance, leaping in step, sometimes turning to dance with Spyros in front of the line and sometimes “pulling” the line and dancing in front, all by himself. It was a great relief to me that we were now dancing to a Vlach song because I felt a little uncomfortable enjoying the Macedonian songs while all the Vlachs that I knew were glaring at us from the periphery. Then Aris grabbed Aliko, a Vlach friend of his, and took her to the front of the line, giving her the lead. He then called her husband to join, offering him the spot behind her, placing himself third. Aliko and her husband led the Vlach song with much embellishment, and as it was finishing, Aliko asked the band for an Albanian song, which Aris and her husband paid for, and the musicians, not missing a beat, immediately started playing. Aliko led the dance with her girlfriend Soula and me behind her. After that song, Soula asked for a Greek song from the south of the country, an island song, but then she didn’t really know how to dance to it, so her daughter, a teenager who was further back in line called out to her, suggesting she dance it like a “Tik,” a Pontic dance. Seeing that her mother’s steps were still misguided, the teenager ran to the front and led her through the dance. Danae, Aliko’s daughter, went to dance next to her and we all danced a Pontic dance, fast-paced and rhythmic. It was now around 4 am and people had started to leave. Before they left, the older women of Psarades came over and complimented me on the way I had danced to the Macedonian songs. Eventually we all had a last beer and I went home.

While most of the revelers were getting in their cars to drive home to Aghios Germanos, Pyli, and other villages, Aris, who was from Aghios Germanos, was going to sleep in Psarades on the roof of the “House of the Child,” a government building, later used as an information center by the Society for the Protection of Prespa. “You know he does this every year just for the two days of the fiesta in Psarades,” some friends from Psarades told me as we walked home. “The house used to be his

<sup>24</sup> The Pontic dances – dances from the Pontos region of the Black Sea, home to many of the Prespa refugees – are famous throughout Greece for their beauty and their special tension: some of their dances have a wild, almost frantic energy and yet involve meticulous, minute and precise footwork, alternating with large steps that seem to slap the ground. Vlach songs, in contrast, are more languid, slow and proud dances, danced with big strides. They have none of the tension found in the Pontic dances. Vlach dances are not very complex even when they are upbeat. However, it is those Vlach dance songs that sometimes offer the best long, virtuosic, and heartbreaking solos from both dancers and instrumentalists. The Dopyi dances are usually upbeat; they are rhythmically complex and have beautiful melodies. Some of them have jumps and large skips, but not small, restrained jumps like those of the Pontic dances.

grandfather's. He donated it to the Greek state." I wondered under what conditions the house was donated to the state. Maybe it was actually confiscated. Who knows? My friends told the story in a compassionate tone; they also seemed proud of Aris, who had "every right to that house." He chose to exercise this right by sleeping on its roof for a couple of days every year, the roof of the house he was probably cheated out of by the complex politics of Prespa. I went to sleep thinking of Aris – under the starry sky, he was reclaiming his family's rights, lying on the roof of a big stone house overlooking the lake.

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# KÖKEN ERGUN: PERSONAL WORKS OF PUBLIC CEREMONIES

by Ian White

**Ian White** is an artist, curator and writer, and a former adjunct film curator for the Whitechapel Gallery, London (2001-11). He is the facilitator of the LUX Associate Artists Programme, a tutor of the performance program *practice-theatre* at the Dutch Art Institute, Arnhem, and writes for numerous periodicals. He is the co-editor of *Kinomuseum: Towards an Artists' Cinema* (Walther Koenig, 2008).

Ian White reflects on *I, Soldier* (2005, video, 7 min.), *The Flag/Bayrak* (2006, video, 9 min.) and other works by Köken Ergun. The first two videos, most central in this text, make up a two-part series in which the artist deals with the state-controlled national day ceremonies of the Turkish Republic.

Köken Ergun's work is about ritual. That is, about ritual circling contemporary popular ceremony as its subject of examination, picking at the unwitting detachment and willful fervor of its participants, looking at what we see on the television and at what we do not, pointing as much to ritual's ragged edges as its transformative social power. It records these public situations (and also sometimes (re)constructs them), not to extend them into personal or collective memory, nor as the imprint of propaganda, but as the means for a broader analysis which finds its form in a visual language that is at once off-hand, casual, and precisely because of this, acutely, carefully revealing. It is a practice that might be read through that which it opposes, to uncover the coordinates of what it is for.

Ergun's work in general, and his two signature video installations, *The Flag* (2006) and *I, Soldier* (2005), in particular, form a paradigmatic opposition, for instance, to Leni Riefenstahl's landmark film of the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, *Olympia* (1938). *Olympia* is a work of bravura filmmaking – iconographic, idealizing – in which bodies and actions become (pure) form, almost to the point of abstraction, or to a point at which they lose any semblance

of human fragility; crowds without the mess of life, high divers who never hit the water, discus throwers who turn but might as well not, so closely do they resemble classical sculpture. Riefenstahl's are indivisible images, reinscriptions of spectacle. Like her fabrication of the "ancient tradition" of the Olympic torch carried by a series of athletes from Mount Olympus to Berlin – in fact, a fiction existing solely in the film and only subsequently adopted as a feature of the build-up to the Games – they are absolutely invested in the generation of myth as if the film is in and of itself a ritual. What it proposes as aesthetic, if not also ideological certainty, Ergun's videos transcribe as a question mark.

*The Flag* and *I, Soldier* record different events in a stadium, not in Berlin or Greece, but modern day Turkey, the exhortations of two connected annual national rituals that celebrate the founding of the Turkish republic and imprint its values onto its subjects: Children's Day held on April 23 and the Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day held just weeks later on May 19. Unlike Riefenstahl's, Ergun's camera occupies an unofficial position, unchoreographed and shakily recording each event as it unfolds. The margins are everything in its framing. What we see are two things at the same time, in tension: the orchestration of a mass public occasion, individuals performing prescribed roles, becoming a group and something else, and their anti-iconographic, entirely ordinary surroundings: scrubby grass, flickers of boredom or self-conscious smiles, empty plastic seats in the stadium. Both occasions eulogize the state through epic poetry with a metaphoric magnitude that is continuously undermined by the camcorder aesthetic that makes it known to us. Huge emotion is undercut by ambient noise, spectacle unraveled by an itinerant attention.



In *The Flag*, the love, support and nurturing of the country's children professed by the occasion becomes an imposition, a manipulation continuously threatened by the uncontrollable, only to be re-asserted. In the stands, children are seen through a wire mesh fence. In *I, Soldier*, the stadium address – a poem shouted as a display of über-masculinity by a uniformed soldier to the gentle strains of lyrical music – becomes a love song to his colleague who we see on the opposite screen in slow motion, simply turning his head, an icon occupying an altogether different cinematic register, and a homoeroticism that maps onto the display of troops running, marching and performing gymnastics.



These are personal works of public ceremonies, images divisible from the spectacle they otherwise witness. They refer back to Ergun's first video, *Untitled* (2004), in which the artist drapes himself in various headscarves as both a protest against the discrimination of a secular government and a private expression of rage that is also a parody of the *Pieta*. And they provide the template for *TANKLOVE* (2008), a constructed situation Ergun organized in a small Danish town, recording the public's response to an actual tank rolling down their high street, and *WEDDING* (2007), a three-channel video installation that documents and visually commentates the phenomenon of contemporary Turkish nuptials.

Ergun's work might most often be concerned with the rituals of his own Turkish identity; it does so not as a closed text to generate myth but for the opposite sake. Not rituals themselves, but footnotes to the fictions they picture, these works are notes to us on the nature of all modern social, political and cultural constructs.

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# ISTANBUL-BEIRUT-YEREVAN: A TURKISH JOURNEY TOWARDS ARMENIANNES

by Arzu Öztürkmen

Trained as a folklorist at the University of Pennsylvania, **Arzu Öztürkmen** is currently a professor in the Department of History at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. She is the author of *Türkiye'de Folklor ve Milliyetçilik* (Folklore and Nationalism in Turkey, 1998) and has published several articles on the history of dance and national holidays. Her areas of research also include oral history and history of performance in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A Turkish woman scholar, the author uses personal narrative in this essay to reflect on three different phases in the recent history of Turkish-Armenian relations. Beginning in Istanbul, where she grew up, it continues with a flashback to Beirut, where her parents worked as journalists, and ends with travel notes from her first visit to Armenia. In this first recounting of a tale she has carried with her for three decades, Arzu Öztürkmen tells of the Armenianness of the Ottomans and the Turkish uneasiness about the Armenians through a set of characters, places and curious situations, including stories culled from her mother and her friends.

In 1975, at the age of 10, I found myself in a French lycée. While trying to cope with the national curriculum and the various monsters of the French language embedded in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, I also received an eight-year-long unofficial education from my Greek, Assyrian, Jewish and Armenian classmates during every little recess and sometimes during afterschool socializing. The national curriculum of the 1970s was under the heavy influence of the National Front governments, a trend that was perpetuated later after the military coup of 1980. Years later, one of my Armenian classmates recalled this curriculum as follows: “The way these books were written would make even me feel proud of the Umayyad victories!” To cope with the uneasy coexistence of this official and unofficial education was not an easy venture. Every child would carry with it to school everything it had heard at home and test this on the other children during breaks. These encounters did not always have happy endings. For instance, a conversation about whether the school should remain open or close over Christmas and/or Easter could easily turn into a competition between religious holidays. Such conflicts could at times take an unfortunate turn, when for instance one of us would declare: “In a Muslim country, surely there will be a holiday for *Eid*.” The atmosphere would rapidly heat up, leaving some of us in tears, others defending themselves, and yet others complaining to the *Sœurs*. In the aftermath of such a clash, we would sometimes not talk to each other for a week, walk the school road as lonely souls, perhaps accompanied only by reflections of what had happened, and finally learn valuable lessons about how words can hurt others. However, being children, we missed one another terribly during these breaks, and since walks to school without friends were unbearable, we would soon reconcile through small gestures, eventually restoring our friendships, yet internalizing the lessons taken from each experience. Of course, the ASALA was also in our lives.<sup>1</sup>

You would go to a friend’s house or she would visit yours, and while you did your homework together, you would overhear the TV broadcasting the most recent ASALA news, before someone rushed to switch it off.

The most significant contribution to my unofficial education came from an Armenian friend. Both of us were hardworking students, devoting most of our spare time to exchanging information about our personal lives. Beside the topics of love, relationships and how our parents got married, our conversations would also lead us to religious issues, which introduced me to a totally new domain, the “history of religions,” one I never would have discovered in my “religion and morality” class. It is through my friend that I learned about the Old Testament and the New Testament, how the Greeks differ from the Armenians, the distinction between Orthodox and Gregorian Christians, the difference between celebrating Christmas on December 24 and on January 6. I learned that fasting was practiced in every religion, during Passover in Judaism, for example, and that Christians and Jews did not get along well because of what had been done to Jesus... . In addition to this general knowledge of religion, I was also introduced to the particularities of Armenian culture and its history. It was again through my friend that I first learned that Armenians were native to Eastern Anatolia, that they had established kingdoms before Christ, and that they used a different alphabet from the Turks of Central Asia – the Uighur alphabet. My friend’s grandmother had been one of the “exiled” ones. She had survived exile, going all the way to Syria, and eventually finding her way back to Istanbul. I still remember the moment during a Turkish language class when my friend told the teacher that the dictionary published by the Turkish Language Society defined the pejorative term *gavur* (infidel) as Christian. She went on to reveal that while Muslims were identified by *sect* as Sunni on our

<sup>1</sup> ASALA is the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia.

official identification cards, she was identified by *ethnicity* as Armenian, instead of Christian or Gregorian. More than the etymological information she spouted, I vividly remember being captivated by her sensitivity to these issues.

The fact that I now have Armenian friends in my life triggers my mother's memories of her own past. The first memory is related to her years in Beirut, the city where I was born. My mother enjoyed a smooth daily life there for three years without speaking a word of Arabic. She attributes this to the local Armenian community, which in 1960s Beirut did not yet resent speaking Turkish. The majority of these Armenians, who used to babysit my sister or host my parents for dinner, are believed to have migrated to Beirut after the Adana massacre of 1909. Things are certainly very different in the new millennium. The Beirut where one could once find Turkish-speaking communities no longer exists. In exile, during forced migrations or escapes, despite the traumas that they have endured, first generations usually stay connected to the culture of their country of origin, like the Armenians who migrated from Adana to Beirut. I came to understand this better after I got to know Leo Sarkissian. Leo is a musicologist who devoted his life to collecting local music in Africa. He was born into a Turkish-speaking home in Massachusetts in 1921 and grew up listening to Turkish music. When our students from the folklore club met him last year, they all expected him to talk about Armenian music. Instead, Leo spoke about Ottoman *fasıl* music, which was a central aspect of coffeehouse culture among the Armenian community in 1930s Massachusetts.

During my oral history research among the Black Sea communities, I also observed that individual generations develop different forms of belonging to the native lands

left behind. The archival records of the Asia Minor Center reveal how the first generation of Pontik migrants, who settled in Athens in 1916, still expressed a strong sense of belonging to their native towns. On the other hand, the second generation who were born into refugee neighborhoods in Athens came to adopt a totally different stance. Their memories generally retained the most dramatic and painful images from the narratives of their parents.

It appears that my mother also remembers some stories told about “Armenian neighbors” in her native Black Sea town, Tirebolu. The first name that comes to her mind is David Agha. Even today our grandfather's house is marked according to its proximity to David Agha's house in the land registry. She also recalls the story of “protecting their neighbors by taking them to the mountain houses when the ‘government’ arrived.” During my research, I encountered a neighbor of my grandmother's who told me all about the “red egg reunion” – Easter. Another narrator mentioned her childhood friend Maria. Yet, when I visit Tirebolu every summer, little remains from these times, with the exception of the place names, like Kirse Burnu (Kirse Cape), Ermeni Mezarlığı (Armenian Cemetery), or Paraputi (Barabut in Greek). During the Republican period, the church located in the center of the town was abandoned and changed hands. A couple of years ago, it was demolished overnight. Even though many residents of Tirebolu watched their first movie there or celebrated at least one wedding on its grounds, sadly no one claims this building's memory. The “others” of Tirebolu – I find them all in Kallithea, Athens.

After spending our youth together, from age 10 to 18, my high school friends and I embarked on different career paths in different places. And while postal addresses change, our bonds remain strong, resembling a form of



sibling relationship after all those years of teenage co-existence; we all have a deep knowledge of one another. In the late 1980s, my life took an academic turn, as I began my dissertation on folklore and nationalism in Turkey. The 1980s were the era of “nationalism studies” in academic circles. As graduate students, we were all reassessing our subject-matters in accordance with the perspectives offered by books such as *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson and works by Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, Adam Smith and Homi Bhabha. While examining how the study of folklore was used to construct national-cultural identity during the transition period from the Ottoman era to the Republic, I discovered pioneering works in the field. The first book that I came across was *Ours Once More* by Michael Herzfeld, who examined Hellenism and folklore studies in Greece. Similar to the way in which the history of folklore in Turkey focused on Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals, this book emphasized Greek nationalism. The first question that came to mind was whether they were Greek, Turkish or Armenian, and how the lives of the Ottoman intellectuals of the nineteenth century intersected with each other. I am inclined to think that many intellectuals may have been influenced by the same philosophers and publications, that they wrote letters to each other, and even worked within the same institutions. Although the monolithic approach of that period has been replaced increasingly by comparative studies, these questions still await answers from new researchers.

While conducting research on the history of folklore studies in Turkey, I discovered that this historical period coincided with that of the rediscovery of “Anatolia” as a “national cultural” area, and even as an invention of a new cultural space. Given the Ottoman administrative system, Anatolia certainly occupied its own particular place somewhere in between Rumeli and Hejaz, and embedded a variety of

local cultures. However, with its various parts articulated in different historical-geographical settlements, presenting this crossroads as a particular geographical unit called “Anatolia” was the most important project during the Republican period. As I was exploring the history of the folkdance movement in Turkey, I realized that the project of presenting Anatolia’s geo-cultural characteristics as embodiments of the “richness” and “diversity” of a national culture approached the cultural heritage of past Ottoman communities as a complicated memory, almost like an archeological relic, abandoned and incapable of being revived. At the time, I was a member of an international ethno-choreology group, which exposed me to ethnographic examples of different folk dance traditions in the cultural domains of the Ottoman past. These examples showed clearly that folkdances from Van were performed in Armenia using the same costumes and the same music, and that the *Akçaabat horon* was also performed by Pontik cultural associations in Athens. It is important to note that these dances have also been appropriated in Armenia and Greece as their own “national folk dances.” The well-known verse comes to mind: “*Owner of this, owner of that/ Tell us which one of you owned it first?/Be it a thing, be it a house/Take it and go, so you too pass your own vain time!*” When we present ourselves and our cultures to the outside world, we are actually forming a marketplace, a ruthlessly competitive marketplace.

The international dimensions of European conferences I participated in as part of my research in dance afforded me the opportunity to meet many scholars from Greece, the Balkans and Armenia. Amid these European circumstances, we would often gravitate towards one another, gossiping or sharing naughty secrets about breaking European rules. It looked like we all spoke the same language but in different tongues, which allowed us to form

a kinship on another level. I was able to bring three dance ethnologists from Armenia to Istanbul in 1998. They visited us again in 2007.

Many things happened between those two visits, of course. What we've been hearing and reading in Turkey, in and about the Diaspora since the 1970s, still holds true. Nevertheless, in the intermediary years, we staged a conference, we lost *our dove*;<sup>2</sup> there were other conferences and television talk shows with "numbers" and "documents." Then there was the football diplomacy; we visited them and they visited us. In the end, we even posed for a *protocol* picture with Hillary in the background.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, "brotherly songs" have been sung, dances have been danced, and memoirs have been written. Even Richard Hovannissian made an appearance some time, somewhere, and then disappeared.<sup>4</sup> We started to hear that there were people coming from Armenia to work here. As the borders were once opened and then closed again, Yerevan has become a destination that can be reached by direct flight from Istanbul. My students who visited Armenia before me recounted stories about their visits. I had to wait for my turn; and finally that time came.

It was 2010. We were heading towards Khor Virap Monastery from Yerevan. After a bumpy ride along the Akhurian River, upon our arrival in Khor Virap, I came across a structure reminiscent of Akdamar Church. The moment I remembered Akdamar, the "Akdamar incident" came to mind, and from there, with a twist of my imagination, I pictured the Sümela Monastery, ruthlessly restored in recent years. Since we were very close to the Turkish border, our mobile phones were naturally connected to the networks we used in Turkey. Thus, I ended up making domestic calls from Khor Virap to Istanbul. However, since Armenia lies in

the same time zone as Moscow, there was a two-hour time difference between us. During my travel to Noravank along the Akhurian River, voices, quotations, images from our meeting reverberated in my head. The title of our meeting was "Armenia-Turkey Civil Diplomacy Dialogue." However, as official diplomatic relations had – and have – not yet been established, it was difficult to be perceived as "civilian diplomacy." The Armenian academics, politicians and journalists, who were unable to find an official counterpart perceived us as "representatives of Turkey," rather than civilians. Some of our friends from Turkish NGOs had been to Armenia many times before us. They told us their adventurous tales of crossing the border. This gave me an idea for a new research project about the folklore of Turkish borders. Listening to the stories of my friends, I envisaged a new and contemporary folklore genre: *border-crossing stories*. Their stories contained all the elements of folktales, such as heroism, the good and the bad characters. Thankfully, the ones that I heard ended happily.

The villages we drove through were not that different from the ones I had seen in Eastern Europe; they carried traces of the Cold War. We observed the ways in which Armenia had been part of the Soviet system, while Turkey experienced its own nation-building process after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

As we try to grow close again after a long century of separation, we also realize how little we know about each other's recent dispositions. A hundred years have passed; the emotional memory from the beginning of the last century is still present on both sides: betrayal, violence, fear... One of the major fears is the fear of being divided!

One wonders rather naïvely why we don't think that we can indeed become *completed* instead of *divided*.

<sup>2</sup> *Our dove* refers to the last article journalist Hrant Dink wrote before his assassination in 2007, in which he compared his vulnerability in the face of threats he was receiving to that of a dove.

<sup>3</sup> Hillary refers here to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton posing with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and his Armenian counterpart Eduard Nalbandian, who signed the "Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Armenia" in Zurich on October 10, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hovannissian has been known for his activist scholarship on the issue of the Armenian genocide. He came to Turkey for the first time in his life to participate in the XIth International Oral History Conference organized in 2000 at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul.

# A TRAVEL GUIDE TO NORTHERN KURDISTAN

by Nazan Üstündağ

**Nazan Üstündağ** teaches sociology at Bosphorus University. She received a PhD from Indiana University, Bloomington, where she wrote her dissertation entitled *Belonging to Modern; Women's Suffering and Subjectivity in Urban Turkey*. Her interests include postcolonial and feminist theory, and state ethnography. She conducted policy research in Kurdish cities in Turkey, and was a columnist in a widely read journal until it was forced to close. Recently, she has experimented with writing on violence in different genres.

This text, presented as a “travel guide,” addresses how state violence imprints itself on landscapes by shaping geography and the ways in which it is narrated. People who dwell in a landscape of violence develop ways of producing alternative truths about the places they inhabit. Through the format of a travel guide, the author explores how to write in the academic world about these truths and how to align oneself with those who become objects of state oppression. She argues that the way we write about lifeworlds has a direct bearing on state policies and on the framing of claims for justice. It is only by understanding the relationship between dwelling, belonging and violence as formulated within specific stories that we can overcome the domination of law-based claims for justice and attend to the particularities of experience.

### Tourist

It has been almost two years since the day I was sitting near the grave of Ehmede Xani in Doğu Bayazıt,<sup>1</sup> gazing up at the towering Mount Ararat. It was an autumn night. My companions were two men working for the Organization for the Relatives of Arrested and Convicted People, a municipality worker, and my assistant. They had brought me here to see the Ishak Pasha Palace<sup>2</sup> and the shrine of Ehmede Xani, the Kurdish poet who in the seventeenth century wrote the unforgettable love story of Mem and Zin. Yet, I could not take my eyes off the mountains. The most beautiful place I had ever seen.<sup>3</sup> The rocks are bare, and yet each is shaped and colored differently by the wind – purple, blue, red, green. The sky and the clouds are so close; one imagines one could touch them. I remember calling my mom and saying, “You were right. God does exist.” I was mesmerized.

Months later, while reading the travel notes of Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar,<sup>4</sup> first published in 1946, I was pleasantly surprised to find my feelings echoed in his elaborate description of his first encounter with the mountains of Erzurum, a place not far away from where I was sitting that autumn night. He writes: “Even with their names alone, these mountains seem to have established some kind of a collective dream-sky for us living in this country. A dream-sky informed by the stories of those who have dwelled in this nature for centuries. That is why it is impossible for the traveler who meets these mountains for the first time, and who hears their names in the very landscape their strength and stability creates, not to be filled up with a sense of eternity and destiny, both of which give these mountains their identity.”

I suppose it is really the fact that these mountains have long been associated with both a destiny of oppression and violence, and a promise of eternal freedom, which makes them so beautiful to the traveler. On these mountains congeals a lived history of which there is no record. Their white and gray color, which blinds the observer from afar, breaks into multiple shades when one comes nearer and gazes closer; like when official history written with a capital H breaks into numerous irruptive memories in the geography where they ascend. Shadows created by the sun give movement to this otherwise motionless sight. One feels reminded of the ghosts that invest the dead, belated and colonized, and every day of marginality experienced on the shore of these mountains, with meaning, will and inheritance. The wind makes itself known by an uninterrupted noise in the background and claims the mountain for itself. So do the songs, legends, proverbs and idioms that circulate in Northern

<sup>1</sup> Doğu Bayazıt is a district of the city Ararat in the eastern region of Turkey, bordering Iran, Armenia and Georgia.

<sup>2</sup> Ishak Pasha Palace was built as a castle in 1784 for the flag officer at the time, representing the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is very much indebted to and inspired by Michael Taussig's *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901-1962) is an acclaimed Turkish writer who is considered to be one of the most important critics of Turkish modernity and progressive temporality in his novels; see *Parla* (2000).

Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup> They keep memories alive, and it is in their company that the lives of individuals and collectivities unfold.



Mount Ararat



In the lower left corner: Ehmede Xani's grave

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper I will use the phrase “Northern Kurdistan” to refer to the part of the nation-state of Turkey populated by Kurdish people. The region that is named “Kurdistan” by Kurds, where Kurds have been living for centuries, was divided between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey after the First World War when the borders of these states stabilized. By taking Kurdistan as a unit and calling the region that is part of the nation-state Turkey “Northern Kurdistan,” I follow the example of İsmail Beşikçi, who was the first academic in Turkey to problematize the colonization of Kurdistan and the non-recognition of Kurdish people by their respective states. İsmail Beşikçi spent more than 18 years of his life in Turkish prisons for his writings.

### Guide

Most of the memories Mount Ararat and Doğu Bayazıt collect and evoke are grim. There are, for example, memories of legendary love stories ending in centuries-long blood feuds, connecting and disconnecting kin. There are memories of rebellions by folk heroes who took to the mountains to escape authorities. First, the law of the aghas;<sup>6</sup> later, the law of the state; each bringing their tribe either honor or shame, but always notoriety. There are memories of genocide and catastrophe that took hold of the Armenian people and their culture at the beginning of the century. While escaping, girls were often left behind; thus, memories of Christian grandmothers turned into Muslim brides, remaining forever a little bit out of place, sighing and sobbing at the sight of the mountains. There are memories of a glorious past, when Doğu Bayazıt was a center of commerce and trade. Then there are memories of separation and devastation, when Kurdistan was carved into four different parts by mined borders, each belonging to a different nation. These became memories of isolation when, with the creation of the national borders, what was once treated as a center now found itself to be the furthest eastern frontier of the nation-state Turkey, with all the connotations of the word “East” attached to its life and soil. There are memories of fear towards the army on post during the 1980 military coup in Turkey, fears that would deepen in its aftermath. There are memories of insecurity and suffocation due to the heaviness of the air in the 1990s, when people would be taken into custody or be forced into an official-looking car only to be discovered dead a few days later; their corpses would often be dumped somewhere in the landscape, poisoning the attachment people felt to the surrounding nature. There are memories of rebellion in the mountains, and state retaliation once again: this time in the form of a war between a modernized Turkish army and a Kurdish guerrilla force, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). During that period, guerrillas would frequently visit the villages and the state’s response would be fierce: displacement, the burning down of villages and forests. Arrests, hundreds of them, and not only due to so-called terrorist activities. More often because people continued trading with their kin, who, while still being their kin, were assigned different citizenships under the laws of the nation-state system. The will of the state materialized in written rules and constructed walls that declared these economic and emotional attachments illicit. In Doğu Bayazıt, more than 50 percent of men are imprisoned at least once during their lifetime because of what the nation-state calls “smuggling” and what people here simply refer to as border trade among kin.<sup>7</sup> Many of those men, whose court cases continue, joined the PKK. In the geography the PKK

<sup>6</sup> Aghas are tribe leaders who, on the one hand, own all the land and extract surplus from what people produce and yet, on the other hand, are responsible for people’s well-being. There are multiple differences between feudal lords and aghas, the most important being that the peasants under their rule are their kin. For a discussion of authority in Kurdistan see Van Bruinessen (1991) and Yalcin-Heckmann (1991).

<sup>7</sup> See also Janet Roitman’s discussion of economic exchange in Africa in similar terms (2004).



creates and rules over with its frequent mountain border-crossings, they hope to experience the kind of attachments they inherited and imagined to hold sway over.

Many of those who joined the guerrilla ranks of the PKK returned and became secret agents of the state. Hence, there are also memories of betrayal. This time it is the living bodies of these returnees that poison the attachment people have to their community. Maybe it is this poisoning that causes people in Doğu Bayazıt to refrain from telling stories.<sup>8</sup> Their stories always run the danger of reaching the wrong ear. In the absence of words and stories, with an abundance of the untold, the untellable, in a void too immense, one tends to listen to the landscape itself. This Mount Ararat – lonely and yet colorful, bare and yet, with the help of the sun and the wind, multi-shaped. A whole world disturbingly unfolds, if one keeps looking. This Mount Ararat is a living and yet speechless monument to a whole geography caught in a war machine for the last 30 years, and its people who in this mess nevertheless continue to make sense. Make sense or often only laugh without making sense, again, thanks to this geography in which they must continue to dwell;<sup>9</sup> and thanks to the very man-nature-made monuments that crowd this geography and record their lives.

### Writer

This paper is about landscape and violence. It is not a story of a particular place but about the embodied experience of living in a certain landscape.<sup>10</sup> I invite you to take a tour with me through Northern Kurdistan while reading this paper, and become a fellow witness. Writing about violence, as many authors have already noted, forces one to transgress the genres of social science (Taussig 2005; Malkki 1996). Violence traumatizes, silences, robs a person of a sense of familiarity and belonging. They always feel a sense of betrayal when the social scientist, the journalist or the memoirist tries to articulate it.<sup>11</sup> Objectification and distance in writing is always a problem, but more so when one objectifies those who are already made into weapons, battlefields, those whose lives have been turned into palimpsests on which numerous forms of oppression are inscribed. Even more so when the people themselves know what they have lived deeply and clearly, and detest each coherent narrative that attempts to translate what they live into a public language for consumption. Even more so still when violence has shattered their everyday lives so that no sense of security can be taken for granted, rendering any social science text, by the very fact that it produces security and truth, a caricature of life.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In Doğu Bayazıt, it is difficult to hear narratives that are anything other than stories of poverty until one establishes intimacy and trust, which is not easy to achieve. In the words of a friend: "If you are from the state, I shouldn't tell you the truth because I would be committing a crime; if you are from the 'other side' then again just because I talk to you, I will be punished by the state."

<sup>9</sup> See Das (2006) for a discussion of re-dwelling in daily life once one has experienced the worst kind of violence. The difference here is that violence continues.

<sup>10</sup> Here, I follow Steedman's (1986) conceptualization of landscape. In her usage, landscape refers both to the symbolic and material aspects of spaces where specific lives unfold. Landscape is objective to the extent that it exists before one enters it, and yet, is also shaped by one's entry. Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, it is by means of objects, metaphors and stories that one becomes the inhabitant of a landscape without ever losing the memory and consciousness of the violence of belonging. Hence, the story told here is shaped at the limit of belonging and not belonging. Things, metaphors and stories are learned, shared, used and told further. However, the learning process occurs through the mediation of others from whom one, due to their privileged position, has a safe distance which itself is a cause for mutual bonding and bleeding.

<sup>11</sup> Although not in the context of violence. See Ganguly (2001) for an excellent discussion of the feeling of betrayal that one needs to address in all kinds of field research.

<sup>12</sup> It is no accident that Zülfikar Tak chose to express the torture he experienced while in Diyarbakır Military Prison between 1980 and 1983 by means of caricature. His drawings (1989) attempt to articulate that which cannot be articulated by means of narrative, autobiography, memoir, let alone social research.

As an attempted remedy to all these problems, this paper adopts the genre of the *travel guidebook* to explore the experience of living in Northern Kurdistan. First of all, many people who have guided me in Northern Kurdistan spoke through the idiom of travel and tour when they related to me. They wanted to show me places and sites, people and buildings. This shouldn't come as a surprise, since strangers like me often come to Kurdistan to visit archeological sites and natural beauties, or the "crime scenes" of war. In other words, the idiom of travel ensures a common ground for communication between those who are insiders and those who are outsiders, torn apart from one another by real war as much as by the symbolic war of developmentalism.<sup>13</sup> The idiom of travel not only provides a discourse by which the Kurds and Kurdistan can be legible to the Turkish as well as the Western gaze; it also allows Kurdish people to feel at home in this communicative exchange by situating them in the nationally shared fantasy of capitalist modernity achieved by tourism.<sup>14</sup>

Second, I would claim that living in Kurdistan (not necessarily only visiting it) can often only be expressed by means of a travel genre. This is not only because mobility (the search for seasonal and/or daily work, visits to multiple institutions in order to claim social rights for the poor, a process that necessitates the collecting of documents from different sites, etc.) today is part and parcel of everyday life, but also because the military rule under which Kurdistan was placed between 1978 and 2002 makes even a short trip from a small town to a city a high ordeal that merits the name *travel* rather than *trip* or *visit*. In order to access markets or pastures, people must still endure ID checks and cross police barriers, imbuing any movement with a sense of insecurity, adventure and unpredictability.

The third way in which the genre of travel guide offers itself as a means to discuss Kurdistan is local literature. The emergence of a modern Kurdish literature is relatively recent, and locals who write on Kurdistan very frequently write books about place and the history of place.<sup>15</sup> So this is an already established genre Kurdish people have utilized and partly re-invented in order to talk about their experience. I want to bring this genre into the academic world, hopefully contributing to it becoming qualified and recognized as producing truth. It is in this way that I also hope I will achieve talking "alongside" Kurds instead of talking "about" them.

<sup>13</sup> In Turkey, the developmentalist ideology operates by dividing the rural from the urban, to which a gradual gradation between West and East, encompassing national territory, is imagined to correspond. For a discussion of the consequences of the imagined division between the urban and the rural, see Ching and Creed (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Many people in Kurdistan believe that investment in tourism will cause a leap in Kurdistan's development, since many cities here are rife with natural beauties: mountains as well as idiosyncratic botanical and archeological sites. Accordingly they often complain about the lack of hotels, roads, resorts and renovation. A further route for development is imagined to reside in the founding of universities. Students often bring commercial activity to cities where universities are established and become the object of speculatively increased rents, books and paper.

<sup>15</sup> See for example the books and articles by acclaimed Kurdish writers and poets such as Evrim Alataş, Şeyhmuz Diken, Matur, Orhan Miroğlu, Suzan Samancı and Mehmed Uzun.

## Guide

So let us set out on our journey. Our first stop will be Amed, the biggest city in Kurdistan. After visiting a critical monument in Amed, we will travel to Van and gaze at the manifestations of the Turkish state, which at once magnifies and fossilizes, induces fear and produces laughter, as all states do when they simultaneously kill and care for their inhabitants. We will end our travel in the city of Hakkari where streets, buildings and people continuously face the danger of becoming souvenirs in a war museum. It is by becoming guides to their own history of victimization and by monopolizing a secret knowledge of transgression that the Kurds feel dignified in the global ontological war against the very existence of the subalterns – to which they proudly belong.



Abdullah Öcalan in court



The Imrali island prison where Öcalan is being held

## Guide (again)

Amed, or as it is called within the borders of the Turkish Republic, Diyarbakır, is the would-be capital of Kurdistan, itself a would-be state whose foundation once used to be the legitimating discourse for guerrilla existence.<sup>16</sup> It is also the place through which the path to Turkish membership in the European Union passes, in the words of both a former prime minister (Mesut Yılmaz) and the 1999-2004 E.U. Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen. Recently, it was called a “fortress.” The current prime minister hopes to win it over in the coming elections.<sup>17</sup> Being the capital, it is full of monuments and museums. Monuments of poverty and museums dedicated to the killings of renowned Kurdish leaders such as Musa Anter<sup>18</sup> and Vedat Aydın by unknown perpetrators abound.<sup>19</sup> The mayor of Diyarbakır, an elected official and the governor appointed from Ankara, lead an undeclared war over the memories invested in such places.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Some time before the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the PKK declared that rather than fighting for a separate nation, it would shift its goal to Kurds becoming a democratizing force throughout the nations in which they are divided in the Middle East, and that such a struggle should first start in Turkey. As part of this aim, it declared a ceasefire that would last until 2005 and during this period refrained from any attacks and instead supported and, at times, monitored legal organizations created by Kurds in Turkey.

<sup>17</sup> The current prime minister, Tayyip Erdoğan, is leading a specific campaign to win Diyarbakır in the coming municipal elections. Diyarbakır's municipality is currently run by Osman Baydemir, member of the Democratic Turkey Party (DTP), which is known to be the inheritor of a genealogy of pro-Kurdish parties all of which have until now been closed down by the Constitutional Court. A similar fate is expected for this party.

<sup>18</sup> Musa Anter is a famous Kurdish writer, journalist and intellectual who was killed in 1992 and whose murder has been described in detail by Abdulkadir Aygan, a former PKK member who was associated with the Turkish Intelligence Service. Abdulkadir Aygan claimed that Musa Anter was killed upon the order of the Turkish secret military service, whose existence is denied by the army and the state, but which is commonly believed to be behind most of the murders by unknown forces in Kurdistan.

<sup>19</sup> Vedat Aydın was the Diyarbakır representative for the HEP (one of the aforementioned pro Kurdish parties closed down by the Constitutional Court) when he was found assassinated in 1991. His funeral turned into a mass protest and sparked one of the most widespread *serhildans* (intifada, uprisings) in the region, leaving many dead and thousands wounded by army fire.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of how this war and conflict between the governor and the mayor manifest themselves in Diyarbakır's geography, see Gambetti (2005).

On your own time, you can visit all these sites. We, however, will make a stop at a particular site: a site where the ontological wars against the Kurdish people have crystallized, a critical place where the formation of a Kurdish consciousness has materialized.

### Guide

The discontent of the Kurdish people with the state has a long history. Since the creation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, there have been local upheavals and insurrections. Nevertheless, the formation of a popular, armed struggle that mobilized people against the state within the secular discourse of modernity and which claims to represent all Kurdish people is more recent. This development can surely be explained through the grand narratives of the globalization-localization dilemma, in terms of identity movements arising all over the world or, alternatively, by the expansion of capitalism and its effects. However, the recent Kurdish movement and the specific ethnic/socialist quality it took also have everything to do with the local history of the Turkish nation-state.

The 1970s in Turkey were a time of turmoil. The Left was strong; it had the capacity to organize strikes, bring parties to power, and overthrow them. The nationalist Right was also strong. Indeed, specifically in the last five years of the '70s, students and workers engaged in right and left politics, leading a de-facto armed struggle over cities and towns, neighborhoods and streets. The Left was mainly supported by students, while the Right drew much of its support from the “deep state,” as we’ve come to call it. That is, the Right consisted of paramilitaries, as the literature likes to call these kinds of formations now. In 1980, the military declared a coup that would last for three years. It supposedly couldn’t wait any longer because politicians were too involved with their own business and too inept to deal with the rampant anarchy. That is what we knew; that is what they told us.

The army chief at the time, now a self-proclaimed painter living in a small town, still full of precious ideas about how the government should be run, declared in a documentary made in 2000 that it was when he visited the Southeast – that is, Northern Kurdistan – that he realized the necessity of a military intervention. In his words, the place was like another country, with people still speaking Kurdish despite all the “Citizen, speak Turkish!” campaigns; and the Left was extremely powerful in the region, both because students of Kurdish origin steeped in leftist politics were returning to the region with ideas and tactics to create their own

independent associations, and because increasing numbers of Turkish students were coming to escape the police and prepare for guerrilla warfare. So, it was the situation in the region and the Kurdish people's unforgivable collective betrayal that forced the army chief to intervene in parliamentary politics (and more here than anywhere else in the country).

As one would expect, the fist of the military state struck Kurdistan hardest. And in one particular place, one building: Diyarbakır's so-called "military correction center," which would later become a detestable everyday monument, a perennial, silent and yet screaming, worn out and yet never-passed-unnoticed monument. It was here that the fist shook the earth most radically.



Diyarbakır correction center



### Tourist

I have yet to visit Diyarbakır without people pointing me to the correction center and saying, "This is the famous Diyarbakır cezaevi." And yet, even though I would look at it as hard as I could, I could never believe that this old pathetic building, which looked more like a dormitory than anything else, really was the site where the future of an entire people would be colonized forever. Maybe, I'm still thinking, I could not look hard enough. I could not use my eyes properly because of the sounds and the words that were overwhelming my ears; the sounds and the words I read in numerous memoirs written by former prisoners who would again and again say that living there under the guardianship of Esat Oktay – who would later be punished by assassination, shot from behind, affirming his unsuitability for an honorable death – was unimaginable, untellable, unexplainable.

### Guide

I will not attempt to explain to you the kind of torture people endured there, how they were forced to unlearn their mother tongue and forced to sing Turkish military marches, or how they were made to declare allegiance to the state every morning. In the words of a former prisoner: “We were expecting anything. This was a fascist government in our opinion, and fascists can do anything. Yet, in Diyarbakır prison, you go through an awakening where you simply say: ‘Fascists or not, this cannot be done to people. Human beings do not do such things to human beings.’” What happened in the Diyarbakır military prison was not a political, not an ethical war, nor an epistemological one. It was ontological. Its techniques: denial and destruction. It was as if the state wanted to prove to itself and to the Kurds themselves that the Kurds as such did not exist.

Beatings, beatings, beatings. More beatings. Hunger. People being forced to eat shit; live in shit. Raped, watching others be raped. Noises of pain, screams of suffering shadowed what one saw and experienced in his/her own body. And then, they were forced to sing again in Turkish. Maybe I should better use Orhan Miroğlu’s *Dijwar* (2009) to offer a glimpse of the terror that befell these prisoners.<sup>21</sup> *Dijwar* is a book about a man who would later become a state agent, a “confessor” as they called it in Kurdistan, and would in the ’90s orchestrate the killings of many important figures in the Kurdish struggle. Here is the scene where Dijwar awaits his transfer to Diyarbakır military prison while in custody in a place commonly referred to as “the Disco:”

*“Those who come from the Diyarbakır prison told us unbelievable stories. Even as we listen we sweat... They tell us we shouldn’t take toothpaste or shaving cream with us. ‘Why?’ we ask. They say that the first thing the guards would do is make us eat them... The lists that contain the names of those who will be transferred to Diyarbakır come twice a day. The guard brings them and starts to read. There are usually 15 to 20 names on each list. During the reading we hold our breath. It is as if time stops. If in that moment your name is not read, blood starts flowing through your veins again and your eyes smile. If your name is not on the list, you will be here for one more day. One day, one hour away from that place is such an amazingly long, such a magnificent time. The next day that fearful waiting begins anew.” (2009).<sup>22</sup>*

<sup>21</sup> Orhan Miroğlu is a former prisoner and a writer.

<sup>22</sup> My translation.



I don't know if I should say this, since saying this might give the impression that people who commit crimes do deserve such things, but I will: many prisoners were innocent. Many remained in custody for months without seeing charges brought against them. Mothers and sisters were taken in to be tortured so that their brothers or sons would confess. Passersby were taken in to be taught a lesson. An old man, for example, taken just for the fun of it, thought that he had died and gone to hell after he spent a few days in this prison. When it was announced that he would be released, he finally understood that what was happening to him was indeed real. He died of a heart attack and never again saw the light of day.

### Tourist

A former prisoner told me a few years ago in Paris that it was in the Diyarbakır military prison that he swore that he would never forgive the state, that he and the state had an honor trial, a blood trial and a land trial to undergo. Many former prisoners say the same thing. But not only them. A sister of a friend of mine living in Hakkari who never got involved with the police or the military repeated the same thing this very year. The evidence for her imaginary court case has accumulated over the course of the 28 years that have passed since the following events in the military prison took place.

### Guide

In the Diyarbakır prison, four people burned themselves to death, as they considered annihilating their own body to be the only honorable act that could be committed in a place where every single organ became a weapon of the state (Feldman 1991). After all, to be sovereign one has to be able to exercise violence over some living organism. They would be known as “The Four,” and the event would become famous as “The Night of the Four.” It was after this “event” that the “heroic” story of the PKK began. And it was its ability to name the unnamable by such acts, which would gain it respect and a reputation.

### Tourist

Anyone who lives in Diyarbakır has a story to tell about the Military Prison. If they weren't in it, then their relatives or friends have been there. But more important than that, most of “the killings by unknown forces” are committed by those who became “confessors.” The “confessors” were produced in this very prison. Hence, each news piece about the so-called deep state, a term that refers to the secret

crimes committed by the state and its accomplices (the confessors), makes people re-recognize the military prison around which they dwell. For people in Diyarbakır this history is not yet digested and the site of the fossilized prison continues to be one of the most important markers in their landscape.

### Guide

Exile is a common and often collective condition among Kurdish people. Forced movement of oppositional intellectuals, tribal leaders, rebellious sheikhs and their families to different parts of Anatolia first occurred under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Putting these different groups of Kurds together into camps, though, was an invention of the Turkish state practiced in the '50s. A more recent convention is the displacement of entire villages. It is estimated that over one million people were displaced by the Turkish state during the '90s, when the armed conflict between the state and PKK was at its peak. The story goes like this: the villagers are first exposed to an embargo restricting what they bring home from town centers to what they “really need.” The strictness of this restriction is, of course, dependent on what the army deems to be enough for a “normal household” that has “normal needs” and whose members can travel to the town center at “normal intervals.” Then follow restrictions on grazing pastures for the animals upon which the villagers depend for their primary livelihood. While the first of these policies is said to be implemented so that the villagers do not supply the PKK with food and other necessities, the latter is legitimized on the basis of “protecting” the villagers from the attacks that the PKK commits in “remote” and isolated places, which are of course not as remote and isolated for villagers as they are for the army.

If these impositions are not enough to cause “voluntary migration,” then the villagers are pressured to become village guards. That is, official paramilitaries who are supplied with guns and a salary by the government so that they will fight against the PKK alongside the military. Those villages that do not accept this proposal are declared to be “security risks” and hence are burned down and all the population is forced to leave. While insults, mass public searches and torture of men are part of this whole ritual, killing some known accomplices of the PKK in the midst of the village occurs less frequently. Needless to say, burying these half-terrorists is forbidden.



Displaced people on the roads



An empty house in an evacuated village

### Tourist/Witness/Daydreamer

As one travels through Kurdistan, from Diyarbakır to Van for example, or to Dersim, or from Van to Hakkari, one can see burnt forests and houses; the leftovers, the fossils of a violent history. While traveling from Tatvan to Van on a tight two-way inter-city pathway, squeezed in between the majestic Van Lake to my left and the sublime mountains to my right, scared of plummeting down into the lake due to the ever-icy asphalt, I noticed for the first time the tired and worn out nature of Kurdistan, that nevertheless resignedly continues to witness the atrocities that occur in its geography. I couldn't choose whether to become a witness alongside the darkened, sparse, dead and lonely trees, or to free my soul from my immediate existence by imagining the stealth movement of guerrillas in the mountains, when these were once full of magnificent forests and grassland. The same feeling must be true for the activists who work on displacement, since there is not a single website aggregating reports of displacement that doesn't contain one or more pictures of surrounding mountains. These sights/sites scream just like the Diyarbakır military prison. When displaced people start to tell you how much they miss the nuts they once collected from the trees and their deep sleep under the shade of those trees, the view finds its horribly loud voice: a never-ending lament.

### Guide

Those who were displaced and lacked the funds necessary to make it to a bigger city in the west are often either stuck in Diyarbakır, Hakkari or Van. In Van, Bostaniçi is where most of them are hosted.

### Tourist

This Bostaniçi is a strange place. Bare again, just like the houses in Mersin, and poor. All houses look alike: one story, ceilings made of plastic. They smell of cheap coal. Bad streets, too much snow, too cold, too many children. When they see a car, children scream: “The state is here!” Strange inhabitants, too. Most of them used to be village guards. One man we visit proudly announces that he killed a lot of terrorists. On his wall, he is shown being congratulated by the president of the government during whose reign the number of lost and exterminated people reached its height. Now he is a proud member of DTP, the Kurdish party. He repeatedly tells us about his nut trees in the village he was forced to leave, and declares that no one has the right to conduct politics based on blood. He tells me “Well, lady, don’t think that we want our separate land. It is the Kurds who have worked in the cotton fields of Adana, on the construction sites of İzmir and İstanbul. We have labored all over. We will not be content with our own state.” His wife is tired. She just came home from cleaning a construction site in return for a dollar, work she can only occasionally find.

In the midst of the neighborhood there is a slightly larger building. It is owned by the social services. “A community center” it is called, and it is by law obliged to fulfill innumerable functions. “Integration” is the official term for these multiple functions. The sweet blue-eyed officer tells us that the only thing he can accomplish here is warming up the kids, who are frost-nipped after hours of playing in the snow. He has a limited budget, no personnel and not enough connections. Then, he introduces us to a man whom he declares to be psychologically not very stable. The officer adds that a day ago they celebrated the world day for the mentally challenged together. The officer also bought a gift for the guy, which the latter shows us. When we leave the building one of my companions comments, “Well, here I suppose, the state becomes intelligible only when one is mentally challenged.”

In the center of Van, to which Bostaniçi district belongs, the governor’s building is huge. It used to be a military post. It is as if every road you take leads to the building, both figuratively and literally.

During our stay in Van, the governor called us frequently on our cell phone – supposedly because he wanted to help with our research and/or because he was concerned about our security. In a city like Van, where the government building is so huge and so persistently visible, it is inevitable that you will be drawn to it like a

magnet. At least, that's what happened to us. The governor was young and handsome, totally professional. After he inquired about our research on neoliberal social policies, he invited us to a meeting with his officers. According to him, this meeting would be the best place to learn about social policy.



Van government building: the architecture of occupation

The officers gave an admirable performance for us, a stately yet democratic, transparent, participatory performance. The governor asked every one of his officers to present the latest policy implementations. The gist of the story: we learned that the governor worked hard and everything was in order. The governor told us that a new state was coming into being, inspired by the concept of “service.” I understood this to mean that the sovereign performance was being replaced by a governmental one. And yet, could this “new state” really produce anything more transparent than the landscape it had produced? What would the criteria for participation be – speaking the same language? And if there really were democracy, would this state or any other remain in power? In other words, was it possible for law or governance to be more than a performance, in this geography or anywhere? Were there only good performances and bad ones? This was a question that I would ask again and again on this journey; for example, when I witnessed the municipality of Doğu Bayazıt proudly open a mobile health center that employed one nurse who was always late, who had no equipment, an opening that made the headlines in the local newspapers; or, when I visit the renovated, proudly-exhibited green card application

center in Diyarbakır. Green cards grant their holders free access to health services, provided that they can prove sufficient poverty and do not engage in illegal politics. The application center is a new, beautiful building with 24/7 Internet access.

After the meeting, the governor of Van directed us to the directorate of Social Services so that we could “witness” at closer range the transformation of the state from one that was merely concerned with security to one that is dedicated to improving the welfare of its citizens. He informed us that Van had proven quite a success in the last program of the Social Support Fund, which provided small entrepreneurs with micro-credits to establish their own businesses. Ninety percent of those who applied for a project in Van received approval from the central government in Ankara. The director of the program is a woman from Dersim, herself Kurdish. After detailing the success of her program and complaining about its under-appreciation by multiple actors, she let us in on a secret. This was a secret that most of the bureaucrats one encounters in Kurdistan share: “Miss Nazan, the people here have problems of perception, and I think it is because of malnourishment. I say something and it seems like they never get what I say.” I dared ask, “Might it be because of language barriers?” She replied, “That’s exactly what I’m saying. They have perception problems.”

They might indeed have perception problems. It is difficult to see eye-to-eye with them. But I have an explanation for that, one I heard the Director of the Association for Displaced People in Diyarbakır share with a friend of mine. She said: “Your words are under siege in this part of Turkey. You don’t make sense.” True. We cannot name and hence we cannot perceive. We name too quickly and hence our words act and wreak devastation. We don’t make sense. We rule over time. We cannot rule over those spaces where congealed lives, things, wounds, experiences gather.

In Van there is so much state that at one point I called a high school friend of mine to tell him that I felt scared and paralyzed. He is a man with important acquaintances. I said to him, “I am in Van. If I disappear, you should know I was in Van.” What it really meant to be disappeared, I didn’t know yet. I guess my reaction was part of a stage on the tour; a moment when one thinks one is going native. I hadn’t been to Doğu Bayazıt yet, where I would actually encounter the corpses of two men whose murders would be filed as unsolved and whose deaths would cause almost everyone in Doğu Bayazıt to change their cell phone numbers in order to achieve



at least the illusion of invisibility. I had not yet learned the lesson that no one calls you in advance; you simply disappear when the state is looking for you. You either escape voluntarily or become “lost,” leaving a vacuum at home, which reminds those left behind of your absence, as much as of the state’s presence.

### Sociologist

When I left the hotel, I saw a dozen men waiting for me at the entrance. One of them asked if it was true that I was listening to the stories of the forcibly displaced. If so, he had something to show me. I said I was, and we went to one of the workers’ coffee houses on the main street. People were smoking and waiting for someone to call them to work on a construction site or in the fields.

The man showed me the documents of the many court cases he had brought against the state for “evacuating” and confiscating his village. He also told me his story, a detailed story that I could not follow. The government had just passed a law declaring that it would pay compensation to all villagers who were forced to evacuate their homes due to security reasons.<sup>23</sup> It had apparently lost so many cases in the European Human Rights Court that it was forced to take the law into its own hand – to keep its dirty laundry in its own backyard, as it were. The EU had consequently cut the state some slack. Local lawyers were also happy with the situation, since they stood to make money if the state would really fulfill its promise. But it proved extremely difficult to document that a particular village had really been forcibly evacuated by the army, as the men who found me in the hotel insisted. Ironically, the law states that in order to qualify as having left one’s village by force, one needs to provide confessional documents from those who ordered and executed the evacuation. Call things for what they are, in other words. Not exactly something that the master of magic, the nation state, willingly does. The spokesperson of the village went on and on. I was again in a strange land. Seeing the desperation in my eyes, he told me: “Look I know that life will not be kind to you either, if you fight against this state alongside us. But tell your father, tell your mother, tell your neighbor what happened to us.” I did. And now I have told you. Accept it as another gift for accompanying me on this tour.

### Guide

Hakkari is the city where we will end our tour. It is a traitor city, the furthest south-east, a city that always succeeds in taking the last place in all conceivable rankings.

<sup>23</sup> For the application of the law, see Kurban and Yeğen (2012).

Least developed, lowest income per person, lowest rankings in university exams, lowest number of doctors and teachers per capita. It is a redundant city.

In 2005, the bookstore of an alleged PKK supporter in the Şemdinli district of Hakkari was bombed for a second time. Fed up with the bombings amid a period of peace declared by the PKK, people in Şemdinli gathered together and ambushed the car whose passengers they determined had set off the bomb. They were from the military. The trunk of the car contained maps of the city upon which the bookstore had been marked. Moreover, documents with orders to plant the bomb there and at other targets were also discovered. The crowd handed the accused over to the police without any resistance. A few hours later, word got around that the ambushed bombers had called Mehmet Agar, a former minister during the '90s and now the leader of a right-wing liberal party, to ask for help. A day later, the chief of the military declared that he knew the bombers personally and that they were “the good guys.”

For almost a week following the bombing, people in the district rallied and protested the military and the deep state. Now it was obvious. What had remained unnamed could now be named collectively. Assaults, kidnappings, murders by unknown forces were actually committed by the state. Names that were forgotten in the western part of Turkey or names never learned in the first place, names of deceased teachers, imams, party workers, and journalists were loudly remembered – names famous in a different period, now dusty to us, yet still shining in Kurdistan. Names were recalled of military people who were suspiciously killed after a speech that transgressed official discourse. During these rallies the police killed three people.



The bookstore after the bombing



Crowds gathered in front of the bookstore after the bombers' apprehension

After this event, Hakkari was visited by many Turkish opposition intellectuals. And a tour was given to each.

Besides being a laughing-stock for appearing at the bottom of all possible rankings, Hakkari is the most important border city through which guerrillas enter Turkey. Accordingly, it frequently found itself in the crossfire between the military and the guerrillas, especially in the '90s. Girls stopped having their periods and women had miscarriages because of the noise of gunfire. Many youngsters joined the guerrillas. The people left behind tried to make sense of the un-heroic everyday world they were living in and grew bitter. The ones I encountered told me that too many had died and life had lost meaning: "Time got arrested, so did our lives." The ear of a guy who was killed by a bomb that exploded in the post office is still stuck to a wall on the main street. An ear, a trace of an ear, from a dead body in the war museum that is called Hakkari.

It is likely that Turkish military planes are right now bombing the camps of the PKK, containing the sons and daughters of those who were interned in the Diyarbakır military prison. In Hakkari the telephone lines are cut before each of these bombings. So, at the end point of our tour, in Hakkari, we would be the first ones to know of the resulting deaths. Not being able to look death and violence in the face, we would probably flee the city to a safer place. Please, do not touch anything. There is nothing here you can take home.

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# NORTH: A WOMEN'S LAMENT AT THE MARGIN OF THE MARGIN

by Samar Kanafani

Residing in Beirut, **Samar Kanafani** does research in anthropology and art. Her inquiries have focused on national imaginaries, migration, gender, the body and the city. Her short videos include *'Street-play'* (2001), *'Mounzer'* (2003), and *'A Day from Home'* (2009) and the video installation *'Tekelian: An Allegory of a Place Undone'* (2009). In 2011-12, she participated in the inaugural Home Workspace Program launched in Beirut by Ashkal Alwan – The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts.

Samar Kanafani reflects on **North... The Fourth Direction** (2009, video, 15 min., Kurdish with English subtitles) by Juan Hamdo. Set along Syria's northern border, in a Kurdish hamlet where most men have been detained, **North** depicts the tales of its women. A solitary place with multiple contradictions, **North** is the north of non-place, of harsh elements yet legendary anecdotes, of age-old traditions yet darting modernity.

In a small farming hamlet in northern Syria, the men are imprisoned and the women await their return. Detained for various lengths of time, we only briefly see these men in photographs. A woman's voice-over tells us this one is her brother who committed suicide shortly after his release, that one an uncle still behind bars, and this, her husband, who was unrecognizable to his children when he finally came home. He was put away again.

Juan told me that the men were captured in a decades-long campaign of mass-detentions instigated by a feud with a state-backed *Agha* (a Kurdish landlord ruling over his kin peasants). The Agha allegedly took control of land the peasants had cultivated for generations, denying them rights to farm there, their principal livelihood. The peasants had rented the land from its absentee owner, an Armenian. The Agha's claim to the land was contested. When the peasants protested, he quashed their rebellions with recourse to state military and legal coercion, sometimes using allegations of petty crimes against them when their protest was not sufficiently incriminating. The backdrop to this particular tale of dispossession is the systematic persecution of Kurds in Syria, where an official Arabization campaign has sought to suppress national minorities since 1973. Policies particularly targeting the Kurds – its largest minority – have prevailed at least since the mid-twentieth century. The location of the Kurdish villages, so close to the country's northern fringe, and their historic and cultural ties to other Kurdish communities and kin across the border in neighboring Turkey, make them all the more suspect from the perspective of national homogenization, particularly due to the continuation of age-old cross-border trade, which evades state regulation.

Juan's own life story and his travails shooting the film connect intimately with the situation he constructs in *North*.



He remembers growing up in a Kurdish village where most men were either fleeing or detained, though not his father. He himself was detained and questioned after shooting the film; the principal footage confiscated. He had other aspirations for this film, which he continues to pursue elsewhere and always. This movie is the curtailed alternative, a sliver perhaps of his initial idea, which he originally called, *A day in the north: story of the lonely women*. That's the title in the credits.

When he was shooting, all the men of this village were imprisoned except for an elderly man and two adolescents. In his movie, Juan lets three women speak in turn: a grandmother, a mother, a daughter. This is an unusual genealogy to give voice to in a context where patrilineal and patriarchal tribal ties define most social relations, and where official structures of governance primarily recognize men: their "crimes" and complicity alike.

For all three generations of women, times are hard and uncertain without their men and with nothing but meager and interspersed sources of income: they live hand-to-mouth, their mobility restricted by the keen eye of the police and the keener eye of gossiping neighbors who deem their gendered solitude proof of certain ill-repute.



“Our problem in this village revolves around the land,” says the grandmother, bemoaning their lot. Being poor means defeat and imprisonment in the face of the wealthy and powerful Agha. Nobody comes to your defense when you are poor. “Who will you show this film to?” she snappily questions Juan who reassures her teasingly, “Are you scared?” “I’m scared of no one!” she retorts.

The mother speaks of communal abandonment, loneliness and isolation. Being without men, the women are vulnerable to abuse by “other” men. The suspicion and moral judgment of neighboring communities render them exposed, unaccounted for. Installed under the pretext of protecting the women’s honor, the policemen instead bully them and demand cooking and cleaning services from them all day, every day. Juan says the police would never harass them sexually: “They know there would be blood if they did.”

The daughter has frustrated dreams. She wanted to continue her studies. She recalls being excellent at school. She wanted to read more of Marx and the classics. She loves to write poetry and prose. Everyone in the village knows that and she shares her writing with them frequently. But because all her close male kin are in prison, there are none to accompany her to the city where she could have attended university. “A girl can’t go alone.” When someone gets sick, she wishes she were a doctor so she could treat them. Most of all she wishes she were a lawyer so she could defend her male kin against the unjust charges forged against them. Unsure of what could have become of her dreams, she remains in the folds of this feminine home, forever wondering what might have been and what will in fact come to pass.

Rarely centered as they speak, the women edge towards that liminal zone, between representation and extra-

diegesis. In one instance, Juan positions the mother alone, in close-up; a chalky arid flatland extends beside her. Elsewhere, he situates the daughter at the rim of the frame in a row of women – attentive, solemn, consenting and consensual. Parts of the girl slip off the screen. This must be the margin of the margin. You anticipate the film to tilt to one side from the sheer weight of the women’s words and the singular burden of holding up a village alone. You expect the frame to tilt away from that vacant arid spot where a man might have sat beside her shoulder to shoulder. Would he then have spoken instead? In his presence, what could she have said?

Seated on that parched earth, under the scorching sun, in the shade of a solitary tree, the women lament. This is a *Dirog*, a particular genre of Kurdish chant that Juan hopes to make another movie about some day. In the northern region and villages, *Dirog* has served as a repository for oral history and takes on one of seven standards in melody and rhyme. Passed on through the generations, the chants typically tell of war, loss, longing and love. Lamenters typically improvise new tales, weaving personal anecdotes with communal histories. In the closing scene, a row of women flanks the mother



on both sides, forming a three-quarter circle, the gaze of Juan's own camera closing the circle at one end. Her head bowed toward the earth, she delivers her Dirog in drone, her voice quivering as she sobs and snivels with a heaving chest, the women weeping noisily beside her.

What do they lament? The subtitling suddenly goes mute. One imagines lamentations of longing for their men, for the hardships of rural living in an age of agrarian dispossession, for the general inconstancy and bareness of land and life when half a village has been locked away.

The men are absent. But present in their absence is patriarchy, power vested in senior men, a structure that needs women for its social (re)production but rarely affords them the opportunity to decide their own fates. And so when they aren't toiling for a meager living or serving state agents, they improvise lamentation; for their men, yes, but for themselves too, and for their hearts, which have been broken.

With the men all gone, did this village turn matriarchal? Of course not, but with this movie comes the fantasy of this possibility, drenched in women's tears.

# BETWEEN SPACES

## by Saba Innab

**Saba Innab** is an artist and architect, reflecting her interest in urbanism and the production of space through her work. Born in 1980, Innab graduated with a BA in architecture from the Jordan University of Science and Technology in 2004. Innab joined the team of the reconstruction of Nahr El Bared camp in Lebanon in 2009. Her artistic practice has been heavily influenced by her work in architecture, in addition to her critical examination of cities. Innab has taken part in a number of regional and international exhibitions, including the Rotterdam Biennale for Architecture (2009), a solo show at Agial Gallery, Beirut (2011) and most recently a solo show in Darat al-Funun in Amman. Innab was awarded several grants and residencies including a production grant by the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (2009) for her project *On-longing*. Innab is participating in the inaugural 2011-12 edition of the Home Workspace Program, Beirut.

Architect and artist Saba Innab studies the manifold ways that shifts of power are inscribed in the city of Amman, Jordan. Her maps and drawings come together in a critical overview of transformations that span a century of tumultuous regional events and contestation over the writing of national history in urban space.

The urban realm no longer accommodates the aspirations of individuals and the collective experience. Those aspirations have been subsumed by the increasing demands of accumulating capital and the extreme materialization and predominance of spaces of consumption, leading the experience of place, and places of experience, to retract into an image, reduced to commodity signs promising us the contemporary “good” life. A question poses itself: for whom is the city being planned?

Cities in this region grow in accordance with patterns of urban living, which are centered around capital accumulation derived from their capacities for consumption. Those patterns showcase the city as a field of opportunities by creating a free market, liberated from the state, and generating a fully commoditized form of social life through large-scale development practices and regeneration projects. These projects adapt procedures enforced from “above,” targeting highly significant and meaningful places in the city, and promoting a “theme” that exceeds their intended design. They impose the appearance of privatization onto public landscapes, rendering them hospitable only to customers.

Gradually, the city turns into a commoditized experience, an image that triggers an excessive degree of marginalization, gentrification and dislocation, and increases the spatial/social segregation of the city.

In a city like Amman, a city that portrays itself as a temporary/permanent reality, such development practices enhance the dramatic schism between the domestic and urban. The temporality factor here plays a significant role in how people “domesticate” their urban experience by limiting it to their basic needs of dwelling, and restricting their movement to boundaries of inclusion and exclusion imposed from above.

This relation is further complicated by how Amman has grown and continues to grow. This growth has always been determined by regional economic and political conditions and events, which were reflected in the morphology of the city, early in its formative years, through abrupt urban explosions. Urgent needs called for rapid, arbitrary solutions that sowed confusion in the city's structure, and were followed by efforts to remedy the fallout: a reaction and a counter-reaction. The city was shaped by these reciprocal actions, creating an infinitely shifting multi-centered spatial reality.

The point here is not to criticize such projects and the repercussions of gentrification and displacement, because they are natural consequences of capital accumulation everywhere. However, in the case of Amman, a political dimension runs through these practices: a layer of “targeted” gentrification –a way of reclaiming place, particularly public spaces, after their abandonment.

To understand the failures of the “public” realm to fulfill the aspirations of a specific era, we have to map history onto places and understand the genesis, the shifts, the abandonments and the resurgences. Those patterns explain or chart the relationship between the political or ruling power, on the one hand, and the spaces, their representations and identifications, on the other. By mapping history onto space, we come to recognize the centrality of cities to the process of nation-building, as well as other forms of political domination.

If we look at al-Saha al-Hashemiyeh (Hashemite Plaza), we find a political plaza that seals off downtown Amman from the east, embodying a monumentality that competes heavily with its surroundings.

If you stand in the plaza – amid what looks like an endless expanse of pavement – you'll be facing the citadel, with the Palaces Mountain (where the first royal palaces were built: Raghadan Palace in 1927, which was then followed by two smaller palaces), the Amphitheatre to the left, and the Raghadan bus terminal to the right, a bus terminal that links downtown to the surrounding mountains, to other areas of the capital, as well as other cities; three “public” spaces on one axis, each defining and representing a different “public.” Since the early years of the city's formation – in 1909, to be specific – Amman was placed on the Hijaz railroad line, connecting it to other strategic cities: the line from Damascus to Medina. With this, Amman gained unprecedented strategic importance. After the declaration of Trans-Jordan in 1921, Prince Abdullah turned what was already becoming a city center, the area around the Amphitheater, into an institutional/governmental square and, in 1924, designated the mountain overlooking the Amphitheater as the location for the royal palaces. This resulted from the fact that a fabric had already been growing around the first settlements, corresponding to the different resources and topography. In the late nineteenth century, Circassian troops were encouraged by the Ottoman Empire to settle the lands of Bilad al-Sham<sup>1</sup> and connect them to the Arabian Peninsula so as to extend and substantiate the Ottoman presence in the territory.

The first troops settled around the Amphitheater, the topographic formations around it and al-Seil (the stream). Organically, a fabric began extending in response to the arrival of more Circassian troops, who positioned themselves along al-Seil and sometimes spread out towards the mountains. Another center flourished in parallel to that spot – al-Omari Mosque and its square located on the *Cardo*<sup>2</sup>. The presence of the mosque and water (the stream runs behind it) inspired the growth of an organic tissue of

exchange and trade around it. The mosque and its square gained additional importance by being situated on the major regional thoroughfare, linking al-Mahatta (train station) and the ancient town of Salt to other neighborhoods and cities.

From the early '70s, this downtown area entered a phase of numbed relations with the rest of the city, causing spatial and socio-economic segregation between the city center and its surroundings (east Amman) on the one side, and a fragmented growth towards the west of the city, on the other. From a physical point of view, this segregation resulted from uneven patterns of growth, abandonment and sprawl, as well as gaps in the urban fabric due to the city's multi-centrality. This was exacerbated by the different patterns of movement and the distribution of public transportation between east and west Amman. However, we cannot but read the current morphology of Amman as a cumulative struggle over places and their representations. It is clearly visible in the withdrawal of power from certain centers or places, or in the reduction or elimination of their influence, in an attempt to eschew the specific and usually unspoken history or memory of a place. It is equally evident in the “return” to those selfsame abandoned or avoided places within the framework of revival. This is nothing more than a continuation of this strategy of “avoidance:” subverting the meaning of particular parts of the city.

Take al-Saha al-Hashemiyeh and Raghadan bus terminal at the eastern end of downtown, the city hall building in Ras el Ain at the western end of downtown, and al-Abdali bus terminal at the end of Salt Street, linking downtown to west Amman and other places in the city. This triangle, which has come to define, or *confine*, the downtown area, represents the revival or reclamation of these centers by

<sup>1</sup> Greater Syria, containing Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine up until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918.

<sup>2</sup> The north-south primary street, considered an essential element in Roman city planning. Perpendicular to the *Cardo* it runs the *Decumanus*, a secondary street, usually commercial. At their intersection lies the forum.

political power, in a way that emphasizes the wholesale denial of the accumulation of other stories and representations. This “return” is constructed through three development projects and large-scale urban regeneration projects, which focus on the idea of “heritage” as a frozen material image and avoid dealing with the space as a social product.

With its empty squares, overstretched streets and stuffy shopping malls, Amman suffers from inconsistencies of scale, ego and representation, which are all emphasized in their paradoxical nature: the temporary-permanent, the imagined-real, the rural-inflated; a claim to the city vanishes in people’s minds, even before it does so in the mind of the investor, the planner, the state.



Map #1



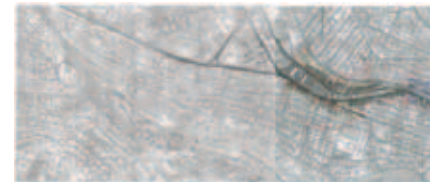
Map #2



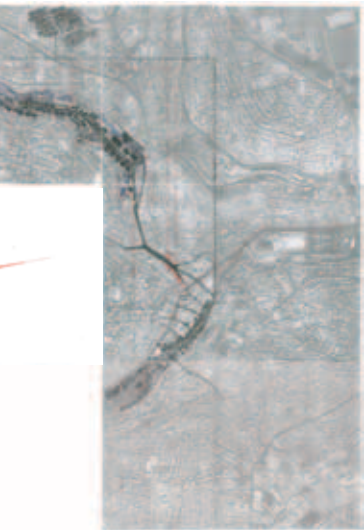
Drawing #2



Map #3



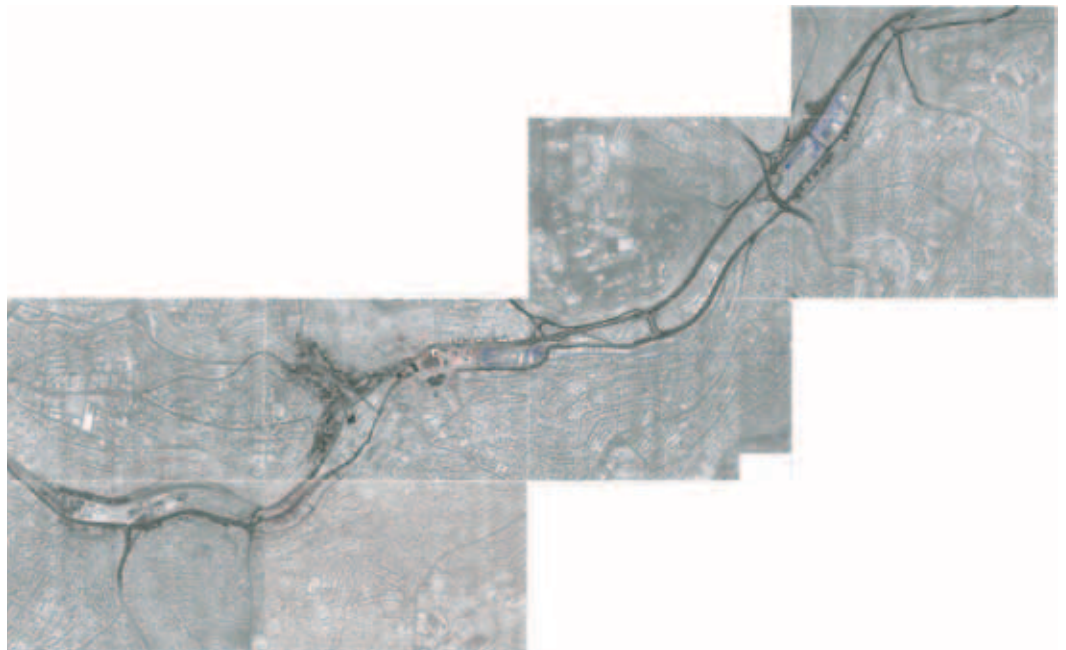
Drawing #3



Map #4

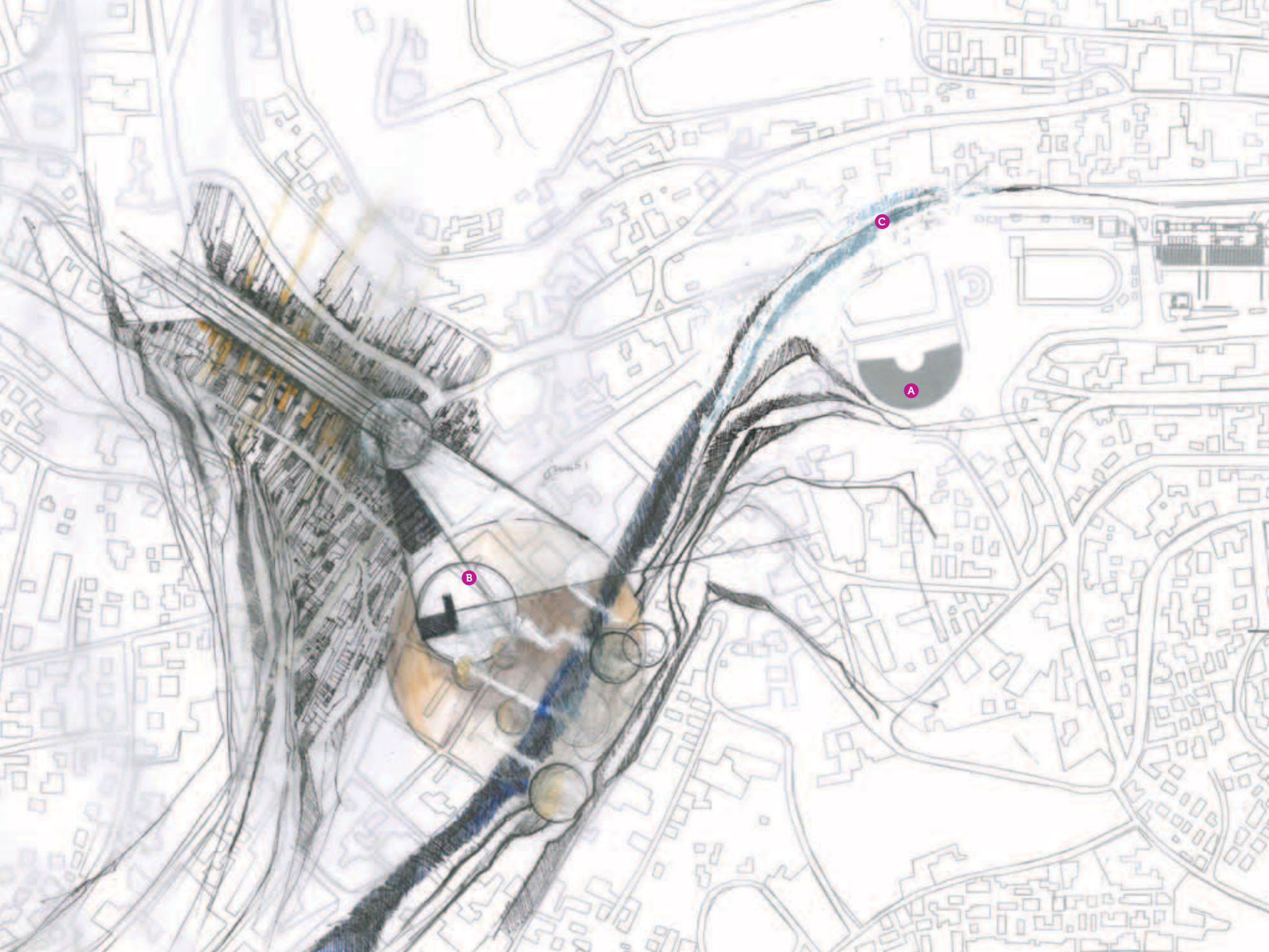


Drawing #4



Map #5





## Map #1

The situation in the region was very complicated and tense in the 1940s, even after the end of the British mandate in Jordan. The treaties between the two countries played a significant role in determining the “East Bank’s” reactions to events in the region, particularly in Palestine. The Palestinian “being” was scattered after the Nakba in 1948<sup>1</sup> and distributed among the adjacent countries: the West Bank was conjoined with Jordan, the Gaza Strip with Egypt, and the Golan Heights with Syria.

But the Palestinian-Jordanian dilemma predated 1948, as the Palestinian presence was pervasive on all levels in the East Bank. Moreover, all the demonstrations that took place in Amman in 1947-48 were suppressed violently by the *al-Badia* force<sup>2</sup> when the army was led by Glubb Pasha,<sup>3</sup> which led to a big rift between the two sides.

- .....
- A ROMAN THEATRE** *The first settlements emerged around the Roman Amphitheater and extended toward the east, along al-Seil (the stream) and to Jabal al-Qal'a (the citadel).*
- .....
- B AL-OMARI MOSQUE SQUARE** *(now named al-Husseini mosque) gained great importance as it lay on the intersection of two regional roads. A certain tissue grew around it and around al-Seil.*
- .....
- C AL-SEIL**
- .....

<sup>1</sup> Meaning ‘catastrophe’ in Arabic, *Nakba* refers to the dispossession and displacement of thousands of Palestinians from their lives, land and homes upon the establishment of Israel on Palestine in 1948.

<sup>2</sup> Arabic for The Desert Force, refers to a paramilitary force of Transjordan. Also known as Desert Patrol, its main task was to guard Jordanian borders with neighboring Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

<sup>3</sup> Lieutenant-General Sir John Bagot Glubb known as Glubb Pasha (born 16 April 1897, Preston, Lancashire – died 17 March 1986, Mayfield, Sussex), was a British soldier, scholar and author, best known for leading and training Transjordan’s Arab Legion as its commanding general from 1939-1956.

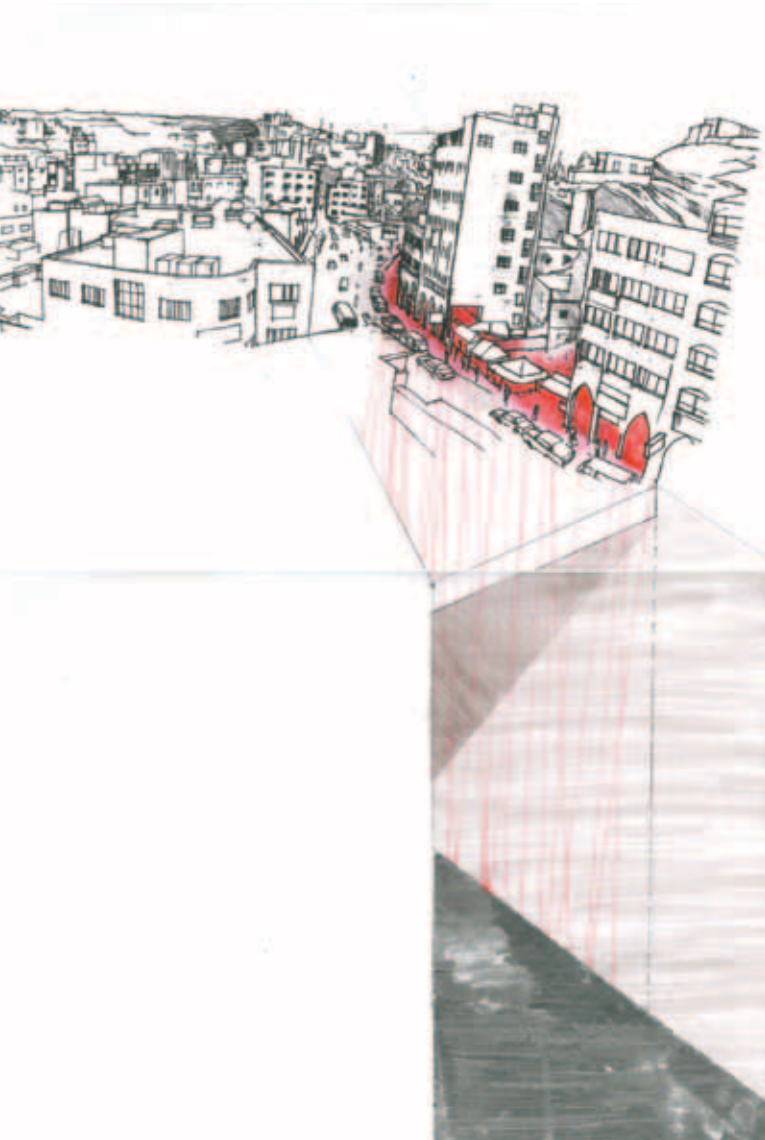




## Map #2

Urgent need prompted rapid arbitrary solutions, which caused disarray to the city's structure, and were followed by further efforts to remedy the fallout. The city was thus shaped by these reciprocal actions, creating a multi-centered, infinitely shifting spatial reality.

- A SAQF AL SEIL** *Replacing natural elements with a stream of motor vehicles.*
- B AL HUSSEINI MOSQUE** *When urban public spaces are voided of their activity, they no longer function as zones of influence. As al-Seil was buried, the whole urban milieu around al-Husseini mosque began to recede at a new pace that was born out of **Saqf al-Seil**, which is an informal street term meaning "the roof of the stream."*



## Drawing #2

The erasure of the natural element of al-Seil due to rapid growth, and the resulting architectural filling of a massive empty space, was little more than shock treatment and a facile accommodation of specific social needs, which could never redeem the "destruction." An entire street level was "buried," and new floors built. The abrupt build-up produced a monotonous architecture along the stream's former contours (the feature of linear continuous arcades). It created a massive void along the mountain, where locals had previously conducted their lives with ease by accommodating the element of al-Seil.



Royal Palaces

The size of the city and its population doubled between 1948 and 1949, and again by the end of the 1960s, as the administrative limits of Amman kept expanding with every growth explosion.

Another royal palace – a fourth one – was built in 1957 to the west of downtown (in the Zahran area), deserting the existing administrative center and declaring a new one.

In a city that is constructing itself within the framework of nation-building as a whole, every “ruler” has come with a new palace location, a mosque named after the late king, a public plaza and even a museum. The most recent shift saw the seat of power relocated to the far west of the city (Hummar), effectively turning its back on the whole city. Its location defines the class caliber of the residents nearby. Close to the latest palace, a new center has emerged that revolves around extreme patterns of consumption.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The most recent location of the palace is in the very far northwest of the city. Around this new location, a new commercial center with a number of malls has sprung up, and a theme park with various museums in the name of the late King Hussein.

.....  
*Map highlighting the official and non official camps surrounding the Royal Palaces.*  
 .....







## Map #3

The return of power to this context came in several forms. The relation of al-Saha to the royal palaces represents an attempt by the throne to affirm itself in contradistinction to another more popular representation of power, which the majority of people in downtown and the surrounding mountains identified with. In the 1960s, King Hussein's recommendation that the Jordanian government acknowledge and support the "Palestinian Liberation Organization" contradicted his persistent opposition to any form of Palestinian organization that could compete with the exclusive "right" of the Jordanian throne to represent the Palestinians since 1948. For a variety of reasons, 1967 marked a turning point in Palestinian-Jordanian dynamics, mainly due to the complete loss of Palestinian territory to Israeli occupation, which reinforced the Jordanian entity and its existence. But the most important consequence of the 1967 War was the growth of the Palestinian resistance movement. In March 1968, an event contributed to the already charged atmosphere between the Palestinian resistance and the Jordanian government: the battle of Karamah.<sup>5</sup> The general public's celebration of Palestinian *fedai'yeen*<sup>6</sup> as the bearers of victory, contrasted with the complete lack of recognition of the role played by the Jordanian army in this particular battle, and exacerbated existing conflicts. The

implication of a separate Palestinian identity shook the legitimacy of the Jordanian throne, and presented itself as a form of political identification and allegiance for Palestinians in the kingdom that went against the throne's aspirations. This manifested itself strongly in the spatiality of the city. The visible presence of *al feda'i* in the streets of downtown, and the proximity of their bases to downtown Amman, carved a zone of influence and popularity between the residents of these areas. Add to this the proximity of the two major Palestinian camps – al-Hussein and al-Wehdat – to the center of town and to the royal palaces.

In an attempt to reclaim the center, a celebration was staged in the Hashemite Plaza, overlooking the Raghadan royal palaces, marking the Jordanian army's triumph over Israel in the battle of Karamah. Gradually, tensions built up to the events of Black September in 1970. After the Palestinian resistance left Amman and Jordan entirely in 1971, the political void was filled by the rise of the Hashemite throne as the sole political representative of Palestinians in Jordan. The Hashemite Plaza was thus officially designated in 1986 as a birthday gift to the king.

<sup>5</sup> The Battle of Karamah was fought on March 21, 1968 in the town of Karamah, Jordan, between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and combined forces of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Jordanian Army. It was planned by Israel as two concurrent raids on PLO camps, one in Karamah and one in the distant village of Safi, but the former turned into a full-scale battle when the Jordanian Army engaged the invaders. On a tactical level, the battle did end in Israel's favor and the purpose of the mission was achieved. However, for the Palestinians it became a mythological victory that established their national claims.

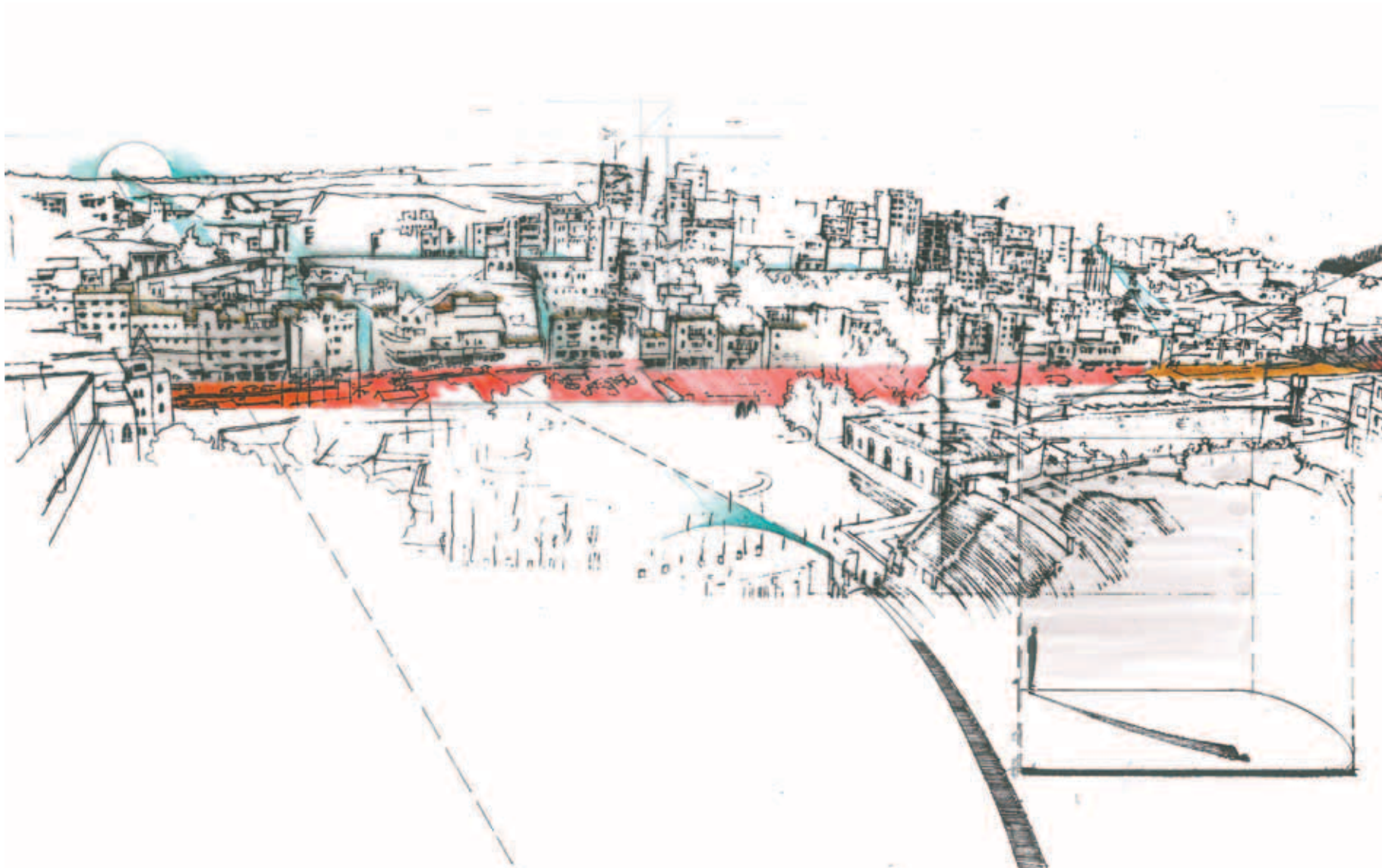
<sup>6</sup> The vernacular plural, for *fedai'yi*, which translates literally from Arabic to "one who sacrifices himself (for his country)." *Feda'iyeen* refers to Palestinian resistance fighters.

A THE CITADEL

B ROMAN THEATER

C SAHA HASHEMEYYEH

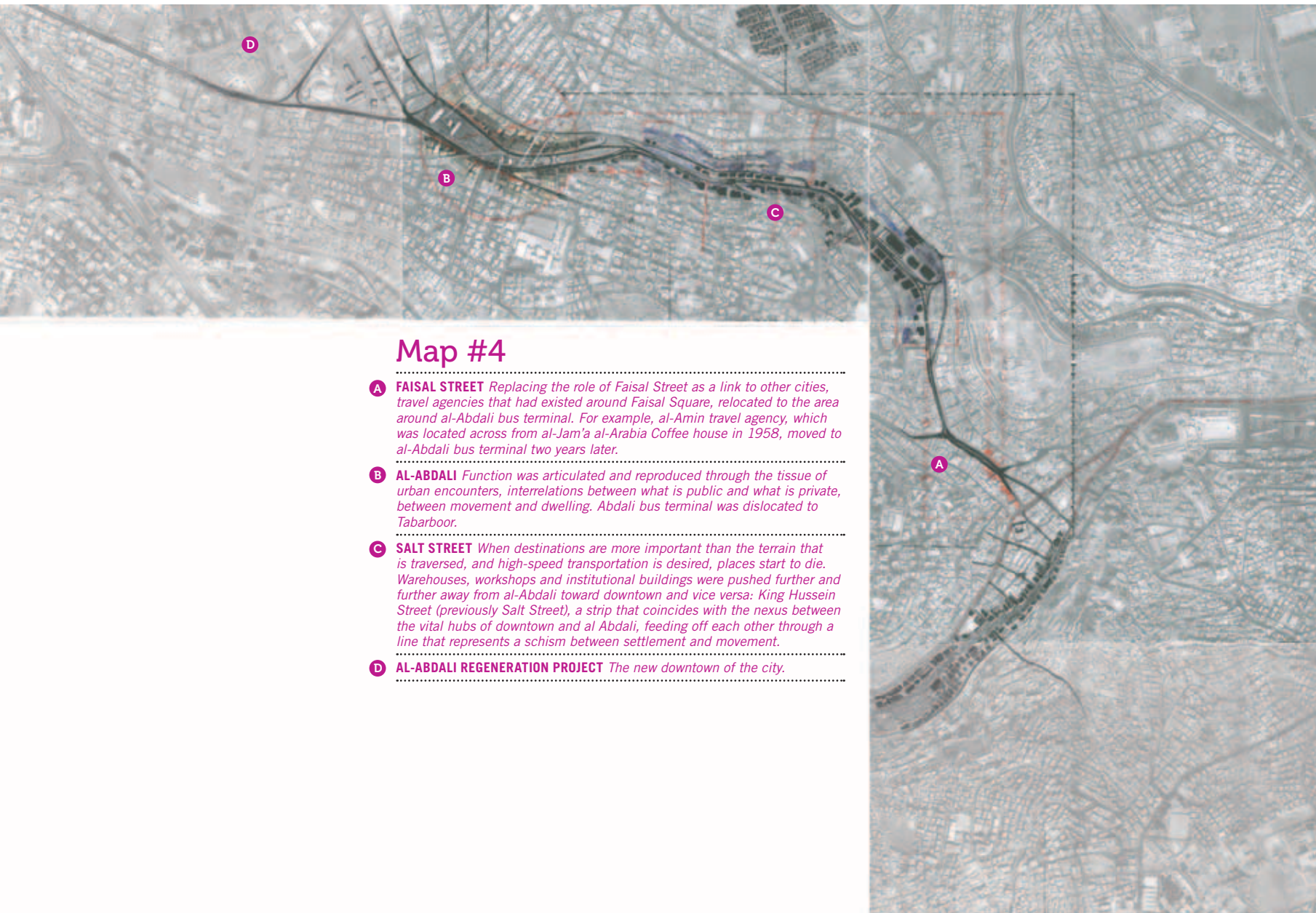
D ROYAL PALACES



## Drawing #3

The spatial inscription of the relationship between the “ruling” powers and public space: the Roman temple and the Agora, the royal palaces and the Hashemite Plaza.

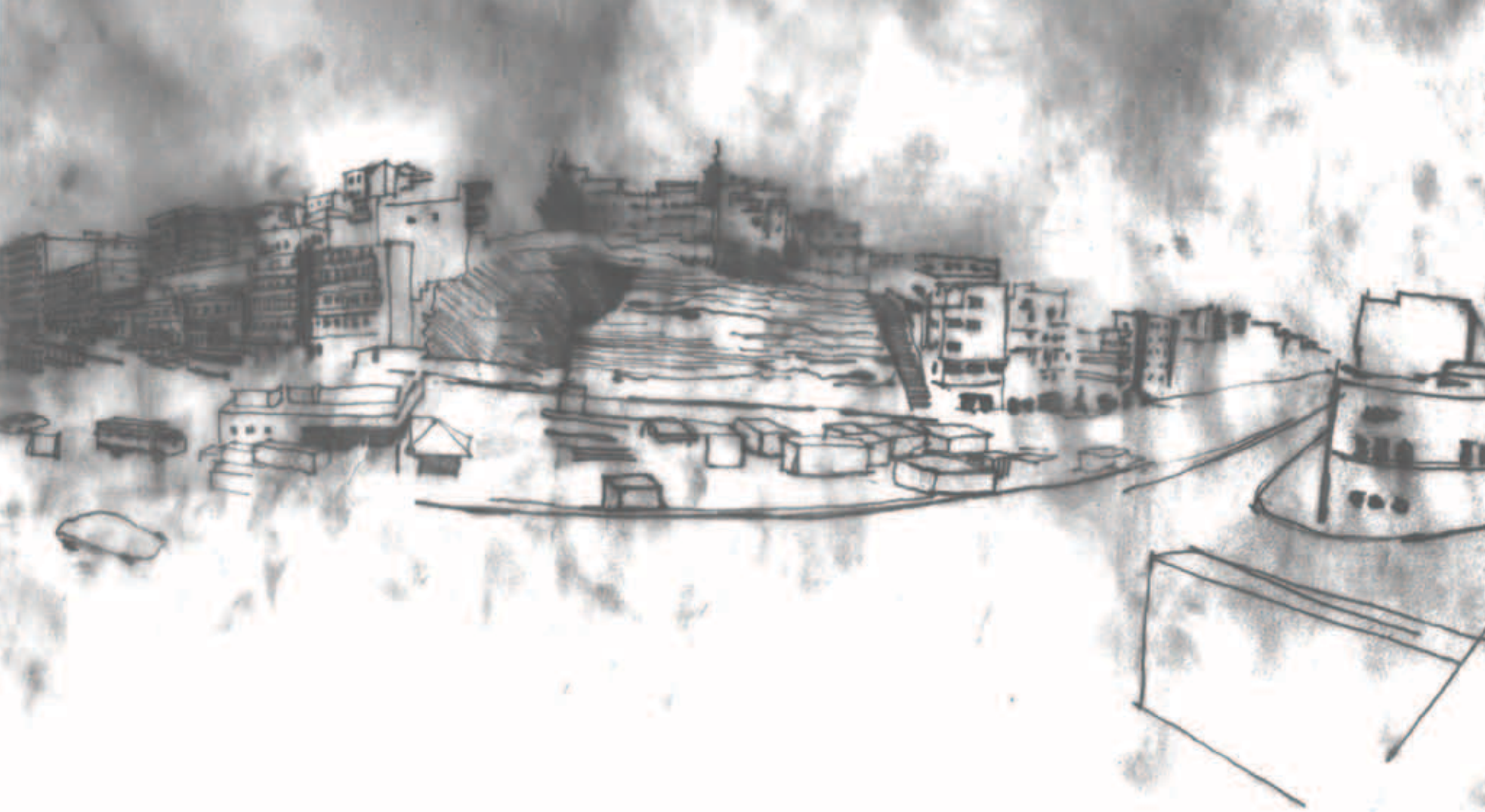




## Map #4

- A FAISAL STREET** *Replacing the role of Faisal Street as a link to other cities, travel agencies that had existed around Faisal Square, relocated to the area around al-Abdali bus terminal. For example, al-Amin travel agency, which was located across from al-Jam'a al-Arabia Coffee house in 1958, moved to al-Abdali bus terminal two years later.*
- B AL-ABDALI** *Function was articulated and reproduced through the tissue of urban encounters, interrelations between what is public and what is private, between movement and dwelling. Abdali bus terminal was dislocated to Tabarboor.*
- C SALT STREET** *When destinations are more important than the terrain that is traversed, and high-speed transportation is desired, places start to die. Warehouses, workshops and institutional buildings were pushed further and further away from al-Abdali toward downtown and vice versa: King Hussein Street (previously Salt Street), a strip that coincides with the nexus between the vital hubs of downtown and al Abdali, feeding off each other through a line that represents a schism between settlement and movement.*
- D AL-ABDALI REGENERATION PROJECT** *The new downtown of the city.*



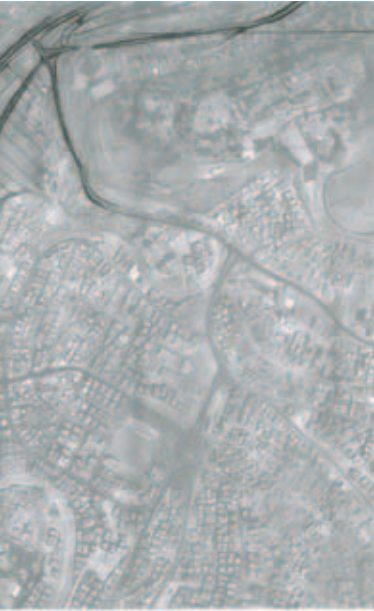


## Drawing #4

In this machinery of place, informalities begin to overshadow planned space, cultivating a public sphere, which becomes a dialogue circulating around the city as a result of multi-layered connectivity: the influx from all directions, the points of arrival to the city, the mountain dwellers' arrival point in the valley, drivers, students going to university. All these made al-Abdali a locus of unfolding potentials, enforced happenings, increasing informalities and accommodations that made events such as the Friday Market (open air, second hand clothing stalls and a vegetable market) possible.







## Map #5

Jordanian anthropologist Seteney Shami once wrote, "Planning for modernity seems to be predicated on the necessity of the displacement of the poor from the urban fabric."

- A RAS EL-AIN** *The Municipality of Amman Complex. The city turns into a field of interest: the sheer scale of the project subconsciously drives people to talk about its outcomes in terms of stakeholders' intentions and the vision of the city these promote. Unaware that these intentions wipe out places dear to them, inhabitants are subsequently overwhelmed by their disappearance.*

*The municipality (icon) represents the egos of the state, the mayor, the architect, etc.*

- B RAGHDAN** *Speed and power emphasize the separation between the hundreds of people passing through every day and those mountains where the city had already receded.*

*The temporary relocation of Raghadan bus terminal to al Mahatta in 2003, during the former's redesign, was part of a larger regeneration plan aimed at vitalizing the center for tourism. The temporary shift became permanent and the detours more severe.*

- C MAHATTA** *Users of the old Raghadan and al-Abdali bus terminals were spatially excluded and pushed further away from the inhabited city, to al-Mahatta bus terminal and to Tabarboor, creating huge detours for locals and residents of downtown's adjacent mountains.*





# 03 POETICS OF PASSAGE





# SPACES OF CONTAINMENT AND DISPLACEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by Julie Peteet

**Julie Peteet** is professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology and director of Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Louisville. Her research has focused on Palestinian displacement, space and identity. She has published extensively, and is the author of *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (1991) and *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (2005). She serves on several boards, including on the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP).

This article critically engages the concept of the refugee in contemporary Middle East displacement projects and argues that there is an emerging contraction in the spaces and legal status of refugees. The cited examples are the silence about the Iraqi displaced and their non-categorization as refugees, and the fact that during the recent war on Gaza, Palestinians were not allowed to cross an international border to seek refuge. Projects of dismantlement are attempts to re-write local and regional geographies, craft ethnic-sectarian and national spaces, impose external dominance, and squash the idea of resistance. The research explores whether, without camps, the displaced will become atomized, de-nationalized exiles, rather than a self-conscious aggregate with a voice and identity. Will the production of an invisible and voiceless subject eventually result in compliance and subordination?

Large-scale involuntary displacements and the politics of (im)mobility illuminate the demographic and cartographic violence imposed on the Middle East over the past century. An examination of mass displacements suggests an implicit and, at times, explicit vision of the region in which imagined ethnic-sectarian and tribal contours of social organization are isomorphic with specific geographic locales. These imagined geographies give a new twist to the anthropological formula that space, identities and cultures do not necessarily correspond in the global era, if indeed they ever did. Military invasions, occupation and the dismantlement of local military and state orders in the region can be understood as attempts to re-write local and regional geographies, carve out ethnic-sectarian and national spaces, impose external dominance and squash the idea of resistance. These projects are well underway in Iraq and Palestine, each with its local variant and particular forms of violence and consequent mass displacement. They point to the human side of foreign occupations, which impose imagined spaces, boundaries and social entities. Indeed, both cases have produced a humanitarian disaster.

This chapter is an initial probing of the intersection between the imposition of ethnic-sectarian projects and imaginaries, and mass displacement. In addition, it explores the ever-expanding repertoire of spatial devices of containment.

In Iraq, the concepts of sect, ethnicity and tribe were mobilized by the occupying forces as unquestionably self-evident socially coherent entities, with little regard for historical fluidity and these concepts' contingent nature.<sup>1</sup> Usually, refugees take flight or are expelled and subsequently prevented from returning because they do not fit the national boundaries of inclusion as iterated by the state. These displacements can serve as a diagnostic of the parameters of national inclusion and exclusion, and the arrangement of social space. In other words, displacements are a lens through which to track imaginaries (and their often violent realization) of the social composition of place. In Iraq, the displacement resulting from the US invasion and occupation seemed to be part of a project to dismantle and refigure the Iraqi state, and sort out and re-locate its population along ethnic-sectarian lines; in the case of Palestine, displacement was designed to dilute the indigenous population and make way for an exclusivist and expansive Jewish state. Current, nearly unparalleled regional refugee flows are occurring at a time when the internationally recognized category of refugee continues to shrink (Zetter 2007).

<sup>1</sup> This is what Aiden Southall (1970, 45) refers to in the African context as "definition by illusion" or the false application of the label "tribe," usually to "a large scale, which becomes permanently adopted for administrative convenience and ultimately accepted by the people themselves."

L. Malkki (1995) draws on Mary Douglas' classic work on human classification, particularly "matter out of place," at the level of state, citizenship, and categories of belonging. The refugee both emerges from the violent process of manufacturing and assigning space and belonging, and represents a refusal of categorization and its spatial articulation. Malkki distinguishes between "matter out of place" in the natural and human worlds: "people categorize back" (1995, 8). It is imperative that we ask about Iraq's minorities – the Mandeans, the Yazidis, and the various Christian communities among others. What has happened to them and where do they fit or not fit in the new Iraq? A critical arena for further investigation continues to be the production of knowledge on Iraq.<sup>2</sup> What body of texts is referenced in US policy and planning? Ethnographic work with Iraqi refugees could help to clarify the decision-making process about departure, as well as sentiments about primordial identities and affiliations.

The Middle East has long been a major producer of refugees.<sup>3</sup> By the beginning of 2009, the Middle East was generating 6,343,800 refugees out of a global total of 13,599,900 (USCRI 2009, 33, Table 2). The region has the distinction of being home to one of the most protracted refugee crises, resulting from the dispossession of the Palestinians. The displaced have left indelible marks, radically transforming urban space and politics, identities, notions of citizenship and categories of belonging.

Displacement is hardly a historical novelty in the region. Some states have complex histories of generating substantial waves of refugees or being built by the displaced. The Greek-Turkish population "exchange" and the Armenian massacres and expulsions marked the early decades of the last century. In 1948, the establishment of the state of Israel created over 750,000 Palestinian refugees. Jordan has hosted several influxes of the displaced from the late nineteenth century Circassians to Palestinian refugees in 1948, 1967 and 1991; and more recently, an estimated one million Iraqis. During the Algerian war of independence, over two million were forcibly displaced by the French. In Lebanon, the civil war and periodic Israeli invasions over the past several decades have produced hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Partition along sectarian lines was a prominent theme in Lebanon's civil war.

Over the past few decades, Iraq has hardly been a stranger to forced displacement. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds fled the violence and turmoil of the Iran-Iraq War,

<sup>2</sup> See Rochelle Davis (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Over the past century, not just conflict but development projects, environmental disasters and sedentarization projects have precipitated displacement (Shami 1994). The region is also heavily implicated in another kind of displacement or migration; it imports hundreds of thousands of workers. Within the region, some countries export local labor (for example, Yemen and Egypt) to oil-producing states. North Africa and Turkey have significant histories of exporting labor to European countries.



the Gulf War, and murderous campaigns by the Iraqi state. In an attempt at demographic engineering, the Baathist regime destroyed thousands of Kurdish villages and expelled Kurds from the North. They then moved Arabs into Kurdish regions. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have fled the country in the past two decades to escape wars, sanctions and state-perpetrated violence. However, the US occupation and cycle of sectarian and ethnic violence it precipitated have given rise to unprecedented displacement (both refugees and IDPs) with identifiable sectarian dimensions.

What stands out in the contemporary era of mass displacement and re-landscaping is the discursive, the spatial, the classificatory and organizational: the silence about displaced Iraqis and their non-categorization as refugees; the absence of refugee camps and thin humanitarian assistance; and the simultaneous imputation and crystallization of sectarian and tribal affiliations, spaces, leadership, and identities. On Palestine, there is silence about the confinement and immobility of Palestinians under the Israeli policy of separation and closure and the economic devastation this has wrought, which is intended to further dilute the population and thus, facilitate the expansion of the borders well beyond the 1967 Green Line. What remains constant throughout this period is the imagined and actual “enclavization” of the region along what are often referred to as primordial divisions: ethnic, national and sectarian lines.

This chapter explores the Iraqi refugee crisis and then turns to Palestine in search of intersections and emerging regional patterns. The current Iraqi displacement crisis and lack of a significant international response may presage a re-conceptualization of the refugee, the spatial and administrative device of the camp, and humanitarian responses to large-scale emergencies. Israeli policies severely obstruct Palestinian mobility and have had deleterious effects on the economy, health care and education.

### Enclaves

It bears noting that Iraqis constitute the largest group of the displaced since the Palestinian refugee crisis began in 1948. In the fragmentation of Palestine and Iraq, an ethnic-sectarian untangling and an assignment of space, mobility and rights are apparent. In the new geography, control of resources – underground (oil and water) as well as superterranean surfaces (space for military bases, settlements, and control of the skies, waterways, and borders) – has been critical for the occupying authorities’ inscription of power. Most significantly, both Israeli and US actions

(in Iraq) have produced a staggering number of the displaced, who remain marginal, if not invisible, in the narratives of these conflicts outside the region. Underlying both projects is a vision of national and ethnic-sectarian space. The twentieth century notion of *a state for everyone and everyone in his state* is being violently re-written in Iraq and Palestine as *everyone in his enclave and an enclave for everyone*. The imaginary Middle East mosaic in which ethnic and sectarian groups are assigned to particular spaces and conceptualized as bounded, coherent, nearly corporate groups, harks back to Orientalist and early anthropological accounts of the region and a Zionism that casts doubts on co-existence in a plural social order, in favor of segregation and demographic superiority. In both Iraq and Palestine, separation enacted through the violence of sectarian/ethnic cleansing and the erection of physical barriers to mobility and interaction are giving material form to these erstwhile imaginary spaces.

Ethnicity, sect and tribe are not given categories; rather they emerge through a historical process of configuration and re-configuration. Displacement, war, state-religious relations and external interventions, among others, figure prominently in these processes. In the US media and official discourse, sect, tribe and ethnicity have been strategically and discursively circulated as defining components of the Iraqi social order. Increasingly in the US, the word “tribe” was appended to “Sunni.” US forces coordinated with, mobilized, armed, and distributed funds to “Sunni tribes” as a counter-insurgency force (e.g. *Awakening Councils*). They granted power, military and financial resources to groups and leaders that were hardly self-evident social or political entities. These social categories are framed as “age-old,” “timeless” and the sources of “ancient hatred.” Re-invigorating scholarship on sectarianism and its historical manifestations is certainly called for at this time, as is the concept of tribe. In the 1970s, explorations of sectarianism peaked in the region and then declined. Lutz (2006, 594) calls attention to the “cultural making of value” to give recognition to the human face of empire, rather than concentrating chiefly on its political-economic underpinnings.

In Iraq, a country with prior subterranean sectarian tensions, but without a history of open, prolonged sectarian conflict, the fault lines exposed by the occupation that exploded in the form of well-calibrated sect based violence, as well as the continuing violence of the occupation forces against Iraqi civilians, have propelled millions of people to flee their homes and seek shelter and safety either outside of Iraq or

within its borders (UNHCR 2009).<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, the level of violence necessary to craft sectarian space may be an indication of how fluid and cosmopolitan pre-war Iraq was.

Then US Senator Joe Biden's 2007 non-binding resolution to divide Iraq, approved by a 75-to-23 vote in the US Senate, evoked the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided the region between France and Britain. Partitioning Iraq into three semi-autonomous zones indicated a willful ignorance of the history of partitions (India-Pakistan, Palestine-Israel and Ireland, among others) and their demographic upheavals, as well as the human toll and the long-term instability they have caused. The proposed sectarian and ethnic spaces re-affirm the vision of a regional mosaic and cast doubt on the notion of a more encompassing Iraqi identity. Recourse to primordial explanations of "age old hatreds" lends the potency of timelessness to framing conflict, de-contextualizing and casting it as inevitable. Iraqi displacement vies with that of Armenians, Palestinians and Kurds as human tragedies that re-write the demographic, political and geo-social map of the region and contribute to the fashioning of an ethnic-sectarian reality.

There were waves of Iraqi displacement. First precipitated by the dismantling of the state and the de-Baathification process, combined with pervasive lawlessness, thousands of people were left unemployed and military personnel were de-commissioned. In 2004, the second wave – to avoid violence – was sparked following US counter-insurgency operations. In 2005, a third wave could be discerned: those fleeing ethnic cleansing and death squads.

By the spring of 2007, the number of Iraqi refugees was staggering: an estimated two million Iraqis had sought refuge across the border in Jordan (around 750,000-1,000,000, about 15 percent of Jordan's population) and in Syria (1.5 – 1.6 million, about 10 percent of its population). Further tens of thousands sought refuge in Egypt (100,000), Lebanon (40,000), Iran (54,000), the Gulf states (200,000) and Turkey (10,000) (UNHCR 2007). About one in six, or about 15 percent of the population, were displaced. Neighboring host states increasingly sealed their borders off to Iraqis seeking asylum, in contravention of international law on the right to asylum. Within Iraq, over two million people are estimated to be IDPs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Estimates are that 4.7 million Iraqis are displaced; 2.7 million are IDPs and more than 2 million are refugees in neighboring states.

<sup>5</sup> In the global politics of displacement, IDPs, those who flee their homes but do not cross an international border, mushroomed from 1.2 million in 1992 to over 20 million in 2006, significantly outnumbering refugees.

As brutal ethnic/sectarian cleansing escalated, people sought refuge in neighborhoods with a prevalence of their own sect. Once mixed neighborhoods became homogenized spaces. The extreme violence – threats, torture, kidnappings, murder – it takes to forge such ostensibly homogeneous spaces is an indication of how alien the very notion is. Like Rwanda and Bosnia, Iraq has a fairly substantial rate of inter-marriage among its constituent groups – in this case, Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds. What happens to these now transgressive families when the concept of sect is politically mobilized and becomes a means of allocating space, resources, identity and protection?

### Spatial Containment

Less than 1 percent of the displaced took refuge in camps.<sup>6</sup> With scant services, the International Office of Migration called the desolate desert camps “the last resort.” Outside Iraq, refugees concentrated in capital cities: Amman, Damascus, Beirut and Cairo. As states of first asylum, Jordan and Syria received the bulk of Iraq’s refugees with little assistance from the US and the international community. Infrastructures have been unbearably stretched as the crush of refugees overwhelm limited water, electricity, housing, education and health care resources, not to mention employment.

While the displaced reverberated regionally, outside they were largely invisible and voiceless. This raises the question of the socio-spatial and narrative place of the camp as a spatial device. In camps, refugees can potentially constitute an aggregate, spatially legible population, where national identity is reproduced and takes on new contours (Peteet 2005). Like Palestinian refugees in the first decades of exile, the Iraqi refugees are barely visible on the international scene. Most significantly, in the face of this nearly unparalleled flow of refugees, the US and the international community has largely been silent, refusing for a long time to even acknowledge a humanitarian emergency. This raises an interesting set of issues that will have to be explored in studies of displacement. For example, humanitarian organizations consider the near absence of refugee camps for Iraqis a positive development. Perhaps camps will be subject to re-thinking in future refugee crises, particularly in heavily urban areas of the world, as more refugees are generated by urban warfare.

While millions of Iraqis have crossed international borders, the absence of Iraqi refugee camps in host countries Syria and Jordan may be an indication of a shift in the policy and practices of international refugee regimes. This raises a plethora of

<sup>6</sup> Most of these camps are temporary affairs – often operational for just a few weeks or months until they close, as residents find more suitable accommodation. Some are spontaneous sites created by IDPs in large buildings or schools, and house very small numbers, often ranging from 30 to 100 families. UNHCR’s sites (around seven in Iraq) provide aid, shelter and legal advice, but they have not set up camps.

new questions that will guide displacement research. It is worth noting that civilians make up about 90 percent of the casualties of contemporary warfare, compared to a hundred years ago when the civilian/non-civilian ratio was reversed (Turner 2006).

Spatial devices to protect, shelter, manage and provide relief to the displaced have ranged from camps and safe havens to transit centers and open-relief centers. Iraqi refugees have sought refuge, by and large, in urban areas. Refugee organizations and NGO publications fairly consistently report that Iraqis will not go to camps. Although camps are not default spaces for the displaced and have been duly criticized for warehousing refugees within those spaces, refugees can and often do re-inscribe their meaning. Camps make refugees spatially legible but not necessarily visible in the global consciousness or memory. If states are increasingly unwilling to provide asylum and are closing their borders, and the UNHCR remains opposed to setting up camps because they are costly and may become permanent, might camps altogether disappear? If they do, will refugees become illegible as well? Without camps, do the displaced run the risk of becoming invisible, atomized exiles rather than a self-conscious aggregate with a potential voice and identity? It is important to note that while camps can contain and govern refugees in repressive ways, these small spaces are also imprinted by refugees and provide spaces for formulating new subjectivities as well as places from which to organize politically (Peteet 2005). Another reason, perhaps, for the absence of camps is the fear that they would be interpreted as an admission of the long-term nature of the refugee crisis. Yet we must acknowledge that the living conditions of the urban refugee are often much better than that of a camp dweller, and communal life is evident. In Jordan and Syria, Iraqi refugees are relatively integrated into the urban fabric, especially the labor markets. In Syria, Iraqi refugees have a communitarian life replete with restaurants, social clubs and religious shrines. Refugees form social networks with family and friends at home via communication technologies such as Internet and cell phones. These networks challenge our previous, but now-outdated, conception of refugees as being cut off from home. But as Iraqi refugees' funds run out and employment is hard to find, they increasingly reside in urban slums with food, medical care and education beyond their financial reach.

While the Iraqi refugees may be forming "little Baghdads" or areas of heavy concentration, we need to examine to what extent these embody the potential to recreate geo-social worlds and yet be radically transformative in the process. When refugees

are concentrated in urban area such as Amman and Damascus, they may transform the urban geography of these cities, just as Palestinians have had an indelible impact on the urban geography of Amman and Beirut. Unlike camps, Iraqi refugee concentrations in urban areas are not delineated from society at large. We must also probe how sectarianism plays into refugee reception and whether the provision of aid by sectarian organizations has engendered or reinforced sectarian affiliations and identities. For example, Shiite refugees have reported being refused entry at the Jordanian border on the basis of sectarian identity. In Lebanon, Christian Iraqis were encouraged to seek shelter and aid in predominantly Christian East Beirut. In some cases, sectarian aid organizations provide more access to relief than the UNHCR.

The absence of camps must be contextualized in a set of global processes and practices relating to the containment of refugees. In the 1990s, a more restrictive state-centric global consensus to prevent refugee movements materialized. As states closed their borders to refugees, new spatial devices to contain the displaced arose: safe havens, safe corridors, preventive zones, safe spaces and protected zones. Will refugee camps become an artifact of the twentieth century? What spatial forms, if any, might take their place? What will be the role of “securitization” policies and discourses, which have dominated formulations of state policies in the region and globally? Camps are expensive to run, unduly burdensome to receiving states, and symbolize the potential de-stabilization of host countries. As compassion fatigue and the recognition that refugee aggregates can destabilize neighboring countries took hold in the West and across the globe over the past two decades, UNHCR shifted its focus from resettlement and integration to repatriation. Yet for Iraqis, resettlement is presented by the UNHCR as a preferred option. This is despite the US and Europe’s unwillingness to accept any significant number of refugees. Why is repatriation not on the agenda for Iraqi refugees and where are they to resettle?

In the current colonial cartography of Palestine and Iraq, containment can be juxtaposed with strikingly uneven mobility. We need to probe the way (im)mobilities are produced, their complex unevenness and how they intersect with containment. Palestine and Iraq represent two sides of the (im)mobility coin: millions of Iraqis are being forcibly displaced, which contributes to the creation of sectarian space, while Palestinians are subjected to enforced immobility or containment intended to eventually compel some level of emigration from Palestine or at least from some areas – probably the rural – to urban centers.



The freedom to move and the hierarchies built around its possibilities are nowhere more apparent than in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where mobility is exceedingly circumscribed. The wall/fence, checkpoints and terminals, roadside barriers, barbed wire, watchtowers and the permit system are all measures to reduce and control mobility and separate populations. The serpentine wall, which sneaks deep into the West Bank encloses Palestinians in an archipelago of enclaves, cut off from others in what they refer to bitterly as “open-air prisons.” Mobility is a scarce right accorded along national, ethnic-sectarian lines, nearly every dimension of which is under Israeli control. Mobility is a tangible granted to some and not others. Israeli cars proceed easily along by-pass roads forbidden to Palestinian vehicles.

The Israelis have not pursued a temporally-bound mass expulsion from the West Bank or Gaza, which would constitute further Palestinians as refugees, and instead have resorted to strategies such as closure to encourage slow or incremental demographic changes to encourage migration. Migrants are less legible as an aggregate than refugees; they have no shared legal status. This coincides with a global move to deny refugee status and its attendant benefits to all but a select few. Closure and enclavization are strategies to dismember the remnants of Palestine and obstruct geographic contiguity.

In Iraq, new spatial imaginaries to contain those who fled violence were evident in initial US proposals for buffer zones and refugee collection points. These would function as “catch basins,” intended as non-places for refugees, as well as for a new non-subject: the illegible refugee. Non-places are spatial expressions of liminality or suspension. V. Turner pinpoints the character of liminal people: “They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (1967, 96). Two US policy analysts, D. Byman and K. Pollack, called for setting up buffer zones within Iraq to “serve as... catch basins,” which would prevent “spillover” of the displaced into neighboring countries and their potential destabilization (2007, 44-45). They also note that if camps were set up outside of Iraq, the refugees could be “armed and manipulated” by those host states. Containing the refugees inside Iraq also withholds the legal rights they would acquire if they crossed an international border.

While water metaphors to describe the potential impact of mass displacement can be difficult to avoid in refugee and immigration studies – waves, flows, floods, tidal waves, inundations, a sea of people, etc. – in Iraq they have taken a new twist

with the hydraulic “catch basin” concept and the “spill-over effect.” Catch basins are “a sieve-like device at the entrance to the intersection of a sewer, for retaining solid matter likely to clog the sewer.” In this hydraulic metaphor, Iraqis are the equivalent of sludge. The catch basins were to be located in border areas close to airfields in Iraq and thus easily supplied by US forces. Within them, refugees would have neither been afforded international protection, nor would an international body necessarily have taken responsibility. The goal of a catch basin was to prevent cross border movement and, most significantly, to enable US forces to contain, disarm and pacify the displaced. As non-refugees, akin to an ecological by-product, they would constitute a non-political issue and hardly even a humanitarian one.

### Security

Refugees today are no longer iconic figures of compassion in dire need of aid. They arouse little sympathy, particularly when they are increasingly conflated with criminal elements, a perception that is magnified if they are Muslim. Displaced Iraqis appeared at a time of dramatically changing conceptions of refugees – the subordination of refugees to security concerns has certainly been exacerbated by 9/11 – and novel forms of containment. In the political orbit of the post-Cold War world, refugees were no longer welcomed in Europe and the US as living proof of an ideological victory over communism. Public opinion began to agitate for limits to immigration and the doors of asylum inched closed. Refugee flows were obstructed by tightening entry and asylum procedures on the one hand, and by introducing new measures of containment in refugee producing sites on the other. With wars in the 1990s in the Balkans and Iraq, containment emerged as the new approach to displacement. Containing the displaced within the borders of the state in safe havens (and classifying them as IDPs) protected potential host states’ sovereignty and minimized the potential for regional de-stabilization. In addition, containment diluted the need for an international response.

Should we conceptualize the displaced as “refugees,” “forced migrants,” or diasporic populations, as academics increasingly do? What are the legal, humanitarian and political consequences of such reconceptualizations? Does classifying refugees as forced migrants dilute international commitments to them? “Forced migration” may aptly describe the current situation in which the categories of refugee and forced migrant overlap, but it does not confer the capacity to instigate action or intervention on behalf of the displaced. This is a period of ambiguity as extant terms

are challenged by novel situations of displacement. On the one hand, the modern twentieth century concept of the “refugee” arose from displacements following war and exclusivist nationalisms; and, on the other, from the subsequent emergence of administrative regimes which observed, enumerated and governed the displaced, constructing them as a legal category and as subjects of intervention. In its very usage, “refugee” once called for international intervention and solutions. Will “forced migrants” eventually infer a similar call for intervention?

In the broader context of the post-9/11 world, the displaced are conceptualized less in terms of their rights under international law and in humanitarian terms, and more as a security concern. Esmeir reminds us that security can be a “Black Hole” in which things “collapse and disappear,” a “magical term able to absorb any and all content” (2004, 3). Pollack and Byman referred to the difficulties the US faced in stopping the “flow of dangerous people across Iraq’s border... refugees, militias, foreign invaders and terrorists” (2006b, 7). In other words, refugees are now the equivalent of terrorists. They also refer to Iraqi refugees as “carriers of conflict” (2006a). “Carrier” evokes a pathogen, bringing disease in its wake. Once objects of concern and assistance, refugees risk becoming indistinguishable from potential criminals and terrorists that may sow instability – much as Palestinian refugees in the 1950s were seen as “ripe for recruitment to communism,” then as subversives, and eventually as terrorists, which successfully deflected recognition of a refugee crisis (Peteet 2005, 67). In Lebanon, camps have been referred to as “security islands”: lawless places outside the bounds of the state, and thus, challenges to state sovereignty. Palestinians were deemed a security issue decades before refugees began to be equated with criminals and policy became “securitized.”

Large urban formations – the new global cities – are characterized as globally connected yet locally disconnected. Refugees might dwell in the city but can remain spatially, as well as economically and socially, marginalized. They embody a stigma similar to that of the urban poor in cities such as Los Angeles, where gated communities lock out the disadvantaged.

In coding refugees as potential subversives, they join the overlapping and also indistinguishable categories of Islamists, terrorists, and criminals. Or Iraqi refugees are simply invisible, hardly calculated into the human costs of war. John Bolton, a former US ambassador to the United Nations, stated that Iraqi refugees had “abso-

lutely nothing to do” with the US invasion and occupation. Furthermore, he boldly asserted, “our obligation was to give them new institutions and provide security. We have fulfilled that obligation. I don’t think we have an obligation to compensate for the hardships of war” (Rosen 2007, 74-78).

The category of refugee is shrinking and is available to only a select few. Proposals to un-classify Palestinian refugees and suspend or curtail UNRWA operations have been floated for decades. Resolutions introduced in the US House of Representatives and the Senate to include Jewish refugees in every mention of the Palestinian refugee situation intentionally cast Palestinian dispossession as a bitter consequence of an exchange of populations, ensuring that any discussion of reparations or repatriation is counter-balanced by Jewish “refugee” demands.

The specter of Palestine, what is known in the world of humanitarian assistance as “Palestinianization,” in part underwrites strategies and policies toward refugees and the shrinking of the refugee category in the Middle East. Locally, the collective memory of 1948 and 1967 nuances the reception, treatment and labeling of the displaced. Governments also fear losing control over the process. Jordan and Syria have not labeled the Iraqis crossing their borders seeking sanctuary as “refugees;” both host a substantial Palestinian refugee population. As paradigmatic refugees, Palestinians provide lessons for the international management of displacement. Aid workers refer to the “Palestinianization” of a refugee crisis when its prolongation is feared and when durable solutions seem unattainable. Palestinian refugees provide a valuable lesson in the long-term human cost of remapping regions and dismantling place to make way for new political spaces and projects. Iraqi refugees may have embodied the potential to become a new “Middle East crisis” in much the same way Palestinians were, for decades, a rallying point for mobilizing political opposition. If there were camps and they became militarized and politicized like the Palestinians refugee camps once were, they could pose a threat to regional stability. In Palestinian camps, as well as Afghan camps in Pakistan and those in Central America during the 1980s, refugees organized, and mobilized politically, and recruited for militant resistance; the camps could, but did not always, serve as bases for training and launching militant actions.

In her award winning book, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, Fiona Terry carefully lays out how refugee camps or humanitarian sanctuar-

ies, with their connotations of being “civilian, public and neutral,” can “provide advantages to guerrilla factions over purely military sanctuaries,” which are “militarized, secret and political” (2002, 9-10). While she is certainly not suggesting to do away with refugee camps, her observations could be wielded in support of such arguments. Along with the fear of “Palestinianization,” Terry’s observations may underlie the apparent interest in spatial or non-spatial alternatives to camps, themselves an acknowledgement that displacement will be long-term.

Agier (2002) argues that refugees are constituted by the wars that create them as well as by the humanitarian responses elicited by their displacement. He notes that “officially designated camps are reported to contain altogether 87.6 percent of the refugees assisted by UNHCR.” Interestingly, he points out that camps and UNHCR assistance are “unequally distributed around the globe” with camps being “more common in Africa and Asia” (320). In the absence of camps, where are the spaces of humanitarianism? How is humanitarian aid being distributed and is protection being provided?

A critical question concerns the role of relief agencies and the set of experiences they produce. Elsewhere, I have argued that UNRWA played a pivotal role in the production and reproduction of a Palestinian identity in Lebanon (Peteet 2005). UNRWA was a pivotal and transformative institution, shaping Palestinian refugee identity in manifold ways. For example, receiving rations as an aggregate population made rations a medium for affirming identities.

In the absence of camps, will refugeehood become an individual experience of life or does it have the potential to be a condition that shapes the contours of a new and shared identity? How will categories of difference play into local and regional politics? When refugees settle among citizens, distinctions between the two can become sources of tension; refugee influxes can drive up the cost of housing and food and put pressure on services; humanitarian agencies assist refugees but not citizens. The categories don’t reflect need, only one’s relation to a state and legal identity.

How will humanitarian spaces be reconfigured under these new global conditions of conflict? How will the Palestinian and Iraqi experiences affect conceptualizations of refugees, IDPs, camps and humanitarian assistance? Humanitarian space nearly disappeared in Iraq because of the security situation. Humanitarian organizations in

Iraq and elsewhere may be increasingly losing their label of neutrality, often viewed by their intended recipients as complicit with the occupying forces. In Iraq, US forces and private contractors have presented their activities as humanitarian, thus obfuscating military-humanitarian lines of distinction. This puts actual humanitarian agencies and their personnel at risk as their proclaimed neutrality becomes suspect. Attacks on aid organizations and their staff have had a definitive impact on the way NGOs operate in Iraq and will govern future directions. In the face of attacks, international humanitarian organizations have moved their offices and higher-level staff to neighboring Jordan and Kuwait where they operate by what is now commonly referred to as “remote control.”

The term “humanitarian” itself can be a subject of critique. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Palestinian activists insisted that the refugees were not a humanitarian issue but a political one; humanitarian interventions, often conflated with charity, were disparaged as de-politicizing what was in essence a political question. However, to this day, Palestinians insist that UNRWA registration and ration cards symbolize international responsibility for them and are recognition of their loss. With the US occupation, there was an unsettling silence about Iraqi refugees, amounting to one of the least media-covered humanitarian crises in decades. Malkki contrasts the widespread circulation of “visual representations of refugees” in the twentieth century – a sort of “mobile mode of knowledge” and “key vehicle in the elaboration of a transnational social imagination of refugeeness” – with the paucity of refugee narratives (1996, 386-87). Yet in the US, there were few visual images or voices of displaced Iraqis or Palestinian refugees, or those confined in enclaves. Mamdani (2007) compares the displaced Kosovars, the Iraqi Kurds displaced in 1991, and more recently the displaced in Darfur, which has been treated as a classic twentieth century refugee crisis. There is little risk that Darfuris will emigrate in large numbers to the West, and within the discourse of the “war on terror,” the Sudanese regime (“Arab” and “Islamic”) is cast as solely responsible. Silence has descended over the Palestinians behind the wall and the dismantlement of Iraq, the displacement of a significant portion of its population, and the re-mapping of its social geography.

### Conclusion

The US, Israel and the Arab states have acted in ways to reduce refugee numbers, voices and images. Israel’s policy of closure may be producing migrants and/or IDPs



who, it will be claimed, left of their own volition. Displaced Iraqis remain largely unrecognized as refugees. Over the past two decades, UNHCR has shifted its focus from resettlement and local integration to repatriation as the preferred solution to refugee crises. Yet in the Middle East, the international community has never seriously considered the repatriation of Palestinian refugees. UNHCR talks about resettling Iraqis, yet it is clearly not on the horizon. Without a massive infusion of aid, the absorptive capacity of Jordan and Syria may have reached its peak. Then there is the question of the countries' political capacity to absorb a new population. The US has resettled only a paltry number of Iraqis.

Displaced Iraqis are emblematic of the imagined regional mosaic and the associated violence. Analyses and practices of spatial configuration of displaced Iraqis may signal future trends in refugee policy that diminish the right to asylum, protection and assistance. In other words, fewer and fewer people will be able to claim refugee status. Zetter argues that the shrinking category of refugee is becoming "a highly prized status" (2007, 16). New spatial devices seem to be in the works. Or perhaps there will simply be non-places for the displaced, as they merge into the surrounding urban areas with little if any recognition. The lack of a concerted response to the Iraqi humanitarian crisis may be indicative of a gradual shift from concern with refugee rights to increasing invisibility and exclusion on a selective basis.

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# A JERUSALEM BEDROOM STORY

by Rasha Salti

**Rasha Salti** is an independent film and visual arts curator and writer, based in Beirut. From 2004 until 2010, she was the film programmer and creative director of the New York based ArteEast where she directed two editions of the biennial *CinemaEast Film Festival* (2005 and 2007) and co-curated *The Road to Damascus*, a retrospective of Syrian cinema, and *Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s until Now*, showcased at the MoMA in New York. She collaborates with the Musée Jeu de Paume in Paris, SANFIC in Santiago de Chile, and The Tate Modern in London. In 2009 and 2010, Salti worked as a programmer for the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, and in 2011 she co-curated the tenth edition of the Sharjah Biennial for the Arts. In 2011, she joined the team of programmers of the Toronto International Film Festival. Salti's writing about artistic practice in the Arab World has been published in *The Jerusalem Quarterly Report*, *Naqd*, *MERIP*, *The London Review of Books*, *Afterall* and *Third Text*. She edited *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Filmmakers* (2006) and collaborated with photographer Ziad Antar on an exhibition and book titled *Beirut Bereft, The Architecture of the Forsaken and Map of the Derelict* (2009).

In *A Jerusalem Bedroom Story*, Rasha Salti takes us back and forth in time, from 1936 to 2009, juxtaposing research abstracts, which reconstruct the journey of a Palestinian family that fled Jerusalem in 1948 with the latter-day emails of their granddaughter, chronicling her attempts to ship the family's bedroom furniture to her apartment in Beirut.

**1936. Jerusalem.**

Mariam was a mere seventeen years old when she was engaged to Issa. She was a beauty, a real looker, the sort that earned her forgiveness for her vices, prejudices and proclivities. Her black and white portraits exude the aura of a movie star. Ironically, it was her sister, Latifeh, quite attractive but not as stunning, who would end up making a life in California, not far from Hollywood.

Issa was smitten with Mariam. He was handsome, but his kindness was his most striking feature. It showed on his face when one first came across him. One remembered that kindness every time his name came up. He was also an astute and resilient businessman. Mariam was the daughter of one of Jerusalem's most prominent Greek Orthodox priests. He was something else. His face was strikingly gentle, his gait prominent and his voice went straight to the heart. Before he became a full-fledged priest, he used to supplement his income singing and dancing at wedding parties and celebrations. He was also a painter. Once he settled into priesthood, he stopped dancing and singing, but continued painting: icons only. He was poor, though his situation improved somewhat once he became an employee of the church.

Issa was an only child. His father, Jeryes, had escaped conscription into the Ottoman army on the eve of the First World War. He is said to have taken a boat with eight other men, and rowed all the way from the Palestinian coast to Cyprus. There, he boarded a ship to Marseille, landed in France and ended up six months later at Le Havre, soon boarding another ship to Manhattan, where his cousins had settled and started a business. Jeryes did not take to Manhattan; within months, he boarded yet another ship to Port-au-Prince, Haïti. One of his travel companions from Jerusalem, Ibrahim, accompanied him there. Once they

landed, they, like a great deal of Arab immigrants in the Caribbean and Latin America, worked as traveling salesmen, selling notions, lotions and haberdashery. They saved up money and eventually rented a shop. Years later the shop would become a department store. They called it "Tout va bien"!

**From:** mariam123xyz@gmail.com

**Subject:** Moving in!

**Date:** December 1, 2007 5:11:08 PM GMT+03:00

**To:** rasha123xyz@gmail.com

Dear Rasha,

I hope this email finds you well. I am finally moving into the new apartment in Beirut. It's not really new, but I love it and it does not seem to require any fixing, except for a coat of paint and a new water heater. I can finally open the cases from New York. I feel as if my life itself has been in storage since I left, and will only begin when I move in.

I met a man; he's Tunisian. He works as a set designer. So far we have been going between here and Tunis to see one another. He has amazing carpentry skills, which is totally fascinating to me. We have been scouring the backyards of antique and second-hand furniture shops here, picking the beat-up pieces for cheap, and we plan to fix them ourselves. I cannot wait to have enough money to ship the bedroom from my grandparents' house. I cannot describe the intense emotions I feel when I think that I will have something from the Jerusalem family home, something that predates the *Nakba*. When you come to visit, you will sleep in that bedroom. I cannot wait to host you. Your news?

Missing you, Mariam.

### 1928. Jerusalem.

Once he could afford it, Jeryes traveled back home to Palestine, where he married and fathered a son, Issa. He went back to Haïti and wanted to take his family with him. His mother, fearing he would never return to Palestine, kept his son with her, to raise him an Arab. This worked as she intended. Once Jeryes prospered enough, he sold the business in Haïti and returned home. Ibrahim accompanied him back to Palestine. They bought property and started a new business, selling metals.

Palestine's economy was booming. Cities were expanding; there was a lot of construction. Their business prospered. Jeryes and Ibrahim each built homes in Baqa'a. Jeryes's home was on Bethlehem Road. It attested to his wealth but was not ostentatious. It had a red-tiled roof as well as a front yard containing rose bushes and a lemon tree. His son Issa attended the Ramallah Friends School. He was a prominent soccer player and swimmer.

Ibrahim and his wife Julia's home was more opulent. They did not have children. Julia's beauty was striking, especially her bright blue eyes. She traveled to Europe to buy her gowns and jewelry, and is said to have attended the Exposition Universelle in Brussels. She was Jeryes's cousin. When Issa married and fathered children, she spoiled them with gifts.

### 1938. Jerusalem.

Issa and Mariam married two years after their engagement. Being an only child, Issa decided to live with his wife in his father's large house. It was neither uncommon for a bride to live with her in-laws, nor a prospect she looked forward to, as it potentially undermined her standing at the helm of the household. Issa's kindness must have quelled her apprehension. He must have sensed it. Before they were

married, he ordered a new bedroom from the best carpenters in Jerusalem, and bought her a piano. Mariam was very proud and fond of that bedroom. Her four children were conceived in it. She even gave birth to her first two there.

Issa and Mariam were married on May 15th, 1938.

#### **April 1948. Jerusalem.**

Fadwa, Mariam's oldest daughter and first-born, recalls that they left Jerusalem in a panic, after news of the Deir Yassin massacre reached them. That was on April 22, 1948. Her father hastily packed up the family and a few basic essentials, and dispatched them to Beit Meri in Lebanon.

Abla, Mariam's second daughter and third child, recalls the moment as distinctly as one would a recurrent nightmare. She repressed the memory for a very long time. It came back to her as an adult, "out of the blue," she says. One night in April, after the massacre had taken place, past midnight, she remembers being awoken by loud knocks on the door. Her parents rushed from their beds to the front door. They slid the living room doors shut to avoid waking up the rest of the household. Abla tiptoed to those doors and opened them a sliver to peak. She saw British soldiers barge into the house and force her parents to kneel at gunpoint. Two soldiers lifted the panes of the window that looked onto the street. When a bus drove by, minutes later, they fired shots with their guns. The bus carried Jewish passengers. It sped up on Bethlehem Road. Once it seemed far away, they pushed the window back down and left. The house was thus "marked." As soon as the sun rose, Issa went to fetch a pick-up truck. It was a matter of time before retaliation could be expected. The pick-up could barely fit the large household of children, adults and elderly, in addition to basic essentials. It drove to Lebanon. Mariam, her children, in-laws, Latifeh, her

husband and children, all settled in a single house in Beit Meri, where each family occupied a room. They thought it would be a matter of a couple of weeks. They stayed in that house for a few months, during which Mariam contracted typhoid and was hospitalized for two months. On the tenth anniversary of Mariam and Issa's wedding, the State of Israel declared its independence.



**From:** mariam123xyz@gmail.com  
**Subject:** Re:Traveling, rambling, missing you...  
**Date:** July 5, 2008 5:11:08 PM GMT+02:00  
**To:** rasha123xyz@gmail.com

My Sweet Rasha,

I am always delighted to hear from you. Damn you travel, girl! How can you cope with so much moving about? When will you make time for Beirut?

Things are okay here. The apartment is marvelous. I am doing things I find interesting, fulfilling. M's financial situation is precarious. There is not much work in theater, and the time he spends in Beirut is idle time and I can't spend as much time in Tunis because I need to be here for my own work. For now, I am the "breadwinner" of the couple. He wants to get married. I am a little daunted by the prospect, but I so love our private everyday life together that I have said yes. Now I have to win over my parents. They are extremely sweet and supportive, but they worry about our "future." Our social life is complicated. It's as if all that "separates" us becomes obvious or visible when we are out with friends.

M. is easily frustrated with my enthusiasm with other people's work. I don't know how true his criticisms of me are, but if he is right, then I really need to work on myself. I know he feels undermined because I get more attention and acknowledgement. It's Beirut, my city – we see people who have known me for years. The fact that I provide for us makes him passive aggressive. I don't know what to make of these prob-

lems. They don't plague us, but when we are alone at home, reading, watching films, cooking, making things, it's really, really wonderful.

I finally finished a big project and I will be able to ship my grandparents' bedroom! I am surprised you still remember that story... It means a lot to me. Come up and see me some time, honey!

Love, and missing you, Mariam.

**1948. Ramallah.**

The summer season had come. War was raging in Palestine. Jeryes was devastated. Fadwa, his eldest granddaughter recalls hearing him cry in despair in his room, repeating, heartbroken, that his life was lost, that the years he had sacrificed in exile were lost. Jeryes wanted to go back to Palestine. Their house in Jerusalem was under the aegis of the Israeli state now, so he decided to rent a house in Ramallah. The family settled in Ramallah into a humble but pleasant house. Issa bought cheap, lightweight wicker furniture. They insisted that their stay would be temporary, but they wanted to have a modicum of comfort. The kids were enrolled in schools in Ramallah. Fadwa, the eldest and Jeryes, her brother, went to the Friends School.

By then, all the family who had been living in Jerusalem had resettled elsewhere except for Mariam's father the priest, her uncle Basseel, and Issa's uncle Sami and his family. Ibrahim and Julia were in Beit Hanina; Mariam's brothers and sister were all in Beirut; other cousins in Ramallah, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour or Lebanon. The return to Palestine brought only one element of solace – the ability to reconnect with the larger family and watch over property and business, albeit from a distance. Sami, Jeryes's brother, and partner in the family business, had stayed back in Jerusalem, supposedly to guard the houses for the rest of the family, the shop in the old city, the depot on the outskirts of the city, and other commercial property Jeryes owned on Ben Yehuda Street. The Israeli army seized everything; the depot filled with merchandise was also looted. Sami's name made newspaper headlines because he brought a lawsuit against the Israeli army for looting private property, and won. The merchandise was never returned. The newspaper report was brief, but it was kept among the various family documents.

**1949. Ramallah-Jerusalem.**

After they settled in the house in Ramallah, Mariam mourned her glorious house on Bethlehem Street. She was especially upset about the bedroom, the piano and the radio set. To console her, Issa wrote to Sami and asked him to go to his house, dismantle the bedroom with the help of a carpenter, and carry it to a spot at the border between Jerusalem and the West Bank where the barbed wire was low and army surveillance elusive.

Sami recalls in his diary how distraught he was to receive Issa's request. It seemed like a selfish caprice that put his health and safety at risk for no reason. It was impossible, however, for him to refuse the request; Issa was Jeryes's heir and the most successful and courageous businessman in the family. He asked the neighbors' sons to help him. They were able-bodied young men and more dexterous with their hands. He sent a note to Issa to fix a date and time to meet at the border point. They met shortly before dawn, right before road traffic began. Sami was so frightened that he felt like he had aged a few years. Meanwhile Issa drove to his wife in Ramallah, feeling he had accomplished a miracle. Mariam was ecstatic.

**From:** mariam123xyz@gmail.com

**Subject:** The bedroom saga...

**Date:** July 15, 2008 5:11:08 PM GMT+02:00

**To:** rasha123xyz@gmail.com

Habibti Rasha,

I have to write you about the bedroom saga. It's just too insane to believe... You of all people would understand the madness of the connections and references...

So the bedroom was dismantled and stored in my uncle's basement. I had so much trouble shipping furniture from New York, mostly because my shipper was the least astute fellow, that I decided to work with an international courier company that would pack well, deliver with expediency and do all the paperwork – and bribes – so I would not have to run from office to office. I explained that to my cousin, and he looked into companies in Amman, and we found the best option. It was going to cost me an arm and a leg.

So last Monday the bedroom was packed and shipped by air, and I was informed that it would remain at airport customs for two or three days and I should expect it on Thursday. Tonight, just a few hours ago, at around 9:00 pm, I get a phone call from a guy who claims to be from the international shippers. He informs me that the shipment has arrived and that it's at customs but that they are having trouble processing the papers because some documents are missing. "What documents?" I ask. He says he needs a receipt for the furniture.

A receipt! What am I going to tell him: that this is from before the Nakba, furniture made by the masterful hands of carpenters who are long dead, their shop confiscated? I don't know why I became dramatic and almost choked when I told him that the furniture is basically what I inherited from my grandmother who just passed away; that it's very old and there is no receipt. He apologizes for distressing me. Then he gives me the speech that they are a respectable company with very stringent "international regulations" and that every shipment's dossier has to be "straight." I am dumbfounded. He sighs and tells me that he can recommend another company that specializes in these "difficult" cases; would I be willing to work with them? I felt helpless. The phone call felt surreal. So he explained there would be additional expenses, that I should email his boss and say I want to work with that other company, and send a scan of my ID card to this other guy... I take note and promise to follow up the next morning.

My mother thinks it's total folly for me to ship the bedroom. She's angry at the "waste" of money. What do you think I should do? Can you Skype now?

Kisses, Mariam.

**From:** mariam123xyz@gmail.com  
**Subject:** Re: The bedroom saga...  
**Date:** July 16, 2008 5:11:08 PM GMT+02:00  
**To:** rasha123xyz@gmail.com

A quick note to follow up on chapter two of the saga... The second shipper called at 8:00 am this morning to tell me that I have to send the email to the first shipper and explain that I no longer wish for them to handle my business. And he wants a scan of my ID asap. And he wants \$500 just to make a fake receipt for the furniture.

You will be angry with me but I agreed to all this...

I am now waiting to hear back from him. It's close to 8:00 pm. Will keep you posted.

Your sentimentally foolish friend, Mariam.

### 1952. Amman.

In 1948, Issa could barely find work; he lived on his savings. He also took care of relatives who were entirely destitute. By 1949, his savings were almost entirely spent, and he desperately needed to work. His class peers had resettled in cities in the West Bank, chiefly Ramallah, but also in Beirut and Amman. The small dusty train station on the Hejaz railway that had become the capital of the Hashemite kingdom was growing fast. A great number of his clients were building there. His suppliers, who delivered merchandise to Jaffa and Haifa, were no longer accessible. When he went to Lebanon with his family, he visited an old friend who worked in the same trade in Beirut. The man was the son of survivors of the Armenian genocide who had settled in Lebanon. He offered to supply Issa with merchandise and defer payment for a year or until Issa would be able to settle his debt. From 1949 to 1952, Issa drove from Ramallah to Beirut to Amman day and night, tirelessly, sleeping only a few hours, lodging in dingy hotels, saving every penny he could. In the beginning he went from construction site to construction site, selling his merchandise. Amman was hosting an increasing number of Palestinian refugees. Issa eventually rented an office there, and shortly thereafter a storage depot. Eventually, he saved enough money to repay his debt to his Armenian friend, and to rent a house in Amman to relocate his family.

In 1951, Jeryes's heart gave out. His grandchildren all concur that he died a man exhausted by sorrow and broken by humiliation. He was buried in Ramallah. In 1951, Sami was forced to leave Jerusalem and moved to Ramallah. The following year, he died as well. Soon after, three of Sami's sons followed Issa to Amman.

The wicker furniture was sold, the bedroom, other effects; children, the elderly grandmother and aunts, were packed in a truck and resettled in a rented house located between the First and Second Circles in Amman.

**From:** mariam123xyz@gmail.com

**Subject:** Re: The bedroom saga...

**Date:** July 17, 2008 5:11:08 PM GMT+02:00

**To:** rasha123xyz@gmail.com

Okay, sit down before you read the almost final chapter in the saga... Shipper number 2 did not call back yesterday. This morning, he wakes me up at 8:00 am. Apparently, the bedroom weighs one ton and one hundred kilos, and shipments weighing over a ton cannot be “imported” by individuals. “Whaaaaah?” I say... He says it’s an oddity in the law, but that what people do is “register” a fake company at the ministry of finance for that purpose and dissolve it 24 hours later. It’s a common practice he explains... And will cost me \$600 to do. That’s why he’s calling early, he said, because it’s Saturday and he has only until noon to do the paperwork. He reassures me that he did the fake invoice. I was dumbfounded – which I seem to be often – but I had no idea what else to do, so I gave him the go ahead. That was 8:00 am.

At around 1:00 pm, I get a phone call from a man who claims to be the managing director of the first shipping company. He asks me why I no longer required their services. I was a little discombobulated, but I explained that I did not have a receipt for the furniture and that I could not produce one. He then asked me if someone from his office had called me during off hours and suggested I work with shipper number 2. I confirmed what had happened. So he said that they have been monitoring this employee and that he had been working for shipper number 2, misleading clients and divert-

ing them to him and getting commissions. I was walking on the street when I received that call and when I heard that last bit, I felt a blood rush and almost passed out, right there. Then he asks me if my father's name is Jeryes. I confirm. Next he asks if my father was still practicing medicine. I confirm.

He took a deep sigh and repeated his own name, which was the first thing he had said when I picked up the call, but I was not very attentive. It did not ring a bell. He said that just about two decades ago he was the private bodyguard to one of this country's presidents, and that he remembered how much the man was fond of my father. That he did not trust a single doctor as much as he trusted my father. The man felt a debt to my father and said he would clear the shipment for free. And that it will be delivered on Monday. I thanked him profusely and he hung up.

Rasha, that former president was a man who was a right-wing elitist head of a clan who hated Palestinians. The political movement he founded was actively involved in massacres against Palestinians. I asked my father and he said, smiling whimsically, that indeed, during the war, he would be whisked away, "secretly" to the "other side" of Beirut to check on the former president. "Did he know you were a Palestinian?" I asked. "Absolutely," my father replied, his smile more pronounced. "And he trusted you?" I continued. My father replied that he trusted him enough to seek his diagnoses and treatment repeatedly. My father remembered the bodyguard because he was the one dispatched to fetch him from west Beirut.

Please tell me you are dumbfounded, awestruck, mystified... Okay, I hope the final chapter will be a happy one. Monday...

Missing you, Mariam.



**1963. Amman.**

Years passed, Amman's urbanization expanded steadily, and demand for construction materials kept growing. More and more Palestinians were moving to Amman. Issa and Mariam's beautiful house on Bethlehem Street had been occupied since 1949. Every once in a while, they received information about its "occupants." First an Ashkenazi family was settled there, and then replaced by two Moroccan families. Visits to the West Bank were not as frequent as Issa and Mariam would have liked.

Their two eldest children were enrolled at universities in Beirut. Fadwa was at the Beirut College for Women and Jeryes was at the American University of Beirut. He had lied about his age, passed the entrance exams and enrolled as a freshman at age fourteen. Abla and Issam were in school in Amman. Abla, a stunning beauty, was courted by a wealthy socialite from Bethlehem.

Issa and Mariam knew in their hearts that they would not return to Jerusalem until Palestine was liberated. Issa bought land between the Fourth and Fifth Circles and built a house. It was very similar to the one in Jerusalem, minus the red-tiled roof and lemon tree in the front.

**From:** mariam123xyz@gmail.com

**Subject:** Christmas in the Jerusalem bedroom?

**Date:** December 16, 2008 5:11:08 PM GMT+02:00

**To:** rasha123xyz@gmail.com

My Dearest Rasha,

I have not heard from you in ages... since we last saw each other in New York. I am fantasizing that you might be "inspired" to come here for Christmas or New Year's. The bedroom is now set up and "fully operational." If missing me is not enough, I am hoping you might be at least tempted by the bedroom!

Send me your news. M. is not coming for Christmas. He is working on a play he seems very happy with. He will catch a flight on the 31st of December. We decided to set a date and plan for our forthcoming wedding. I just want to get pregnant. He would love to have a kid, too.

My warmest wishes to you. Love, Mariam.

**2005. Amman.**

Issa died in 1988, Mariam in 2005. Their children decided to sell the house. Fadwa and Aba packed its contents and divided them among their siblings and their children. Over the years, the bridal bedroom from Jerusalem had been moved to the guest room. Everyone who visited Issa and Mariam in Amman from abroad slept in the double bed, stacked their effects in the drawers and hung their clothes in the generous closet. After graduating from the American University of Beirut, Jeryes, Issa's son, decided to settle in Beirut. He married a Lebanese woman. Fadwa was married in Beirut as well. They each had two children by the time the civil war broke out. Jeryes decided to stay while Fadwa moved to Paris. They visited Amman every year, at least once, with their families.

When the personal effects were divided, the two daughters decided to sell the furniture. What could not be sold was given to charity. The Jerusalem bedroom was too old and too bulky to be sold or given away. They asked Issa and Mariam's grandchildren if anyone wanted it in their house. Mariam, Jeryes's eldest daughter, who was named after her grandmother, said she would take it. The bedroom was dismantled and stored. At the time, Mariam lived in New York but was planning to return home to Beirut and settle down. When, in 2008, she finally did settle and could afford to ship the bedroom, she called her aunt and uncle in Amman to arrange for the shipping. After some investigating, they recommended she use a very well-established international shipping company with expedient, door-to-door delivery service. Some weeks later, the dismantled bedroom was assembled in the guest bedroom of her apartment. She called the carpenter to help her put it together. The Jerusalem bedroom was in Beirut. Part of the beautiful house on Bethlehem Street had traveled against time and catastrophe and found a home for itself in Beirut.

**From:** mariam123xyz@gmail.com

**Subject:** Re: The bedroom saga...

**Date:** April 10, 2009 5:11:08 PM GMT+02:00

**To:** rasha123xyz@gmail.com

My Dearest Rasha,

M. and I broke up a couple of days ago. It was very strange and I am not sure the full significance of the breakup has quite sunk in. It will. I think I am probably in shock. We have been fighting quite a bit, so maybe I should not be surprised. Everything went downhill since New Year's Eve. He was extremely angry with me for no apparent reason. He was mean and I could not understand what I could have possibly done to deserve it. Then, we "mended" things. He came back to Beirut in February, and we spoke with my parents about setting a date for the marriage... In between moments of quiet, we fought a lot, or rather, we fought intensely over the most mundane things. He picked fights incessantly. Something has changed in him. I cannot pin it down. My intuition tells me he has someone else. When I mention that he goes crazy.

Two days ago, I was in Damascus, I called him on his mobile at night as we had agreed, but he could not talk and asked me to connect with him later. When I tried later, his phone was off. I tried until 2:00 am. Then I fell asleep. In my heart I was sure he was with someone else. I called him at 8:00 am the next day. He picked up; he was groggy. He refused to tell me where he had been the night before. I asked him straight up if he wanted to break up. And for the first time, he said he did. I was struck by the calm and serenity of his voice. We hung up. That was it. I took the taxi back to Beirut

the next morning in shock. I am writing you because I need to tell the story, to read it, to believe it.

I don't want to tell anyone. I don't want to fall apart, I don't want to weep in the arms of my girlfriends, gay male friends or other men. I don't want to have a meltdown. I just want to stop feeling, feeling the pain, the horror. On the drive back from Damascus, I was thinking about the motif of catastrophe and loss, and how these two notions had marked my family.

This morning I woke up and was scared to be in the apartment. He's all over this place. We transformed this apartment into our home. I needed to reclaim it from our failed relationship, reclaim my body, my heart, myself.

If I am going to write a new chapter in my life, then it should start from the closure of the previous chapter. I do not know how to find either point – the closure or the new chapter. I feel lost for words. I lost my words, to him, to our story. This morning I decided that I should go on a trip, travel to the place where all the sorrows in my life, my family's life started. I decided to travel to Jerusalem to see my grandparents' house, their lost pride and joy.

I mapped my journey. I will take a taxi from Beirut to Damascus, and from there another one to Amman, and from there a third one to the Allenby bridge and finally, from there to Bethlehem Street. I will write to the cousin who knows the address exactly. I will not tell anyone that I am going. You will keep my secret safe, won't you?

Love, Mariam.

**From:** mariam123xyz@gmail.com

**Subject:** Re: The bedroom saga...

**Date:** April 31, 2009 5:11:08 PM GMT+02:00

**To:** rasha123xyz@gmail.com

Rashroush,

I am writing to you from the American Colony hotel in Jerusalem: I AM HERE!!!! I am so happy. I have tears in my eyes all the time.

More from me soon. Love, love, Mariam.

# THE VILLAGE INDIAN

by Abbas Khider

translated from the German by Donal McLaughlin

**Abbas Khider** was born in Baghdad and has lived in Germany since 2000. He fled Iraq in the 1990s after a two-year imprisonment on political grounds. He lived as a so-called “illegal refugee” in numerous countries. In Germany, he studied philosophy and literature. He has published Arabic poetry in various volumes. His first two novels, *The Village Indian* (2008) and *The President's Oranges* (2011) were published in German by Edition Nautilus. *The Village Indian* was translated into several languages and will be published in English by Seagull Books in 2013. Khider has won several awards for his work, including the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize.

A mysterious manuscript, written in Arabic, is found on an Intercity train from Berlin to Munich. A manuscript that doesn't appear to belong to anyone, and that tells the life story — in eight different ways — of Rasul Hamid, the person who happens to find and read it.

Abbas Khider's first novel, *The Village Indian*, tells the story of a young Iraqi, imprisoned under Saddam Hussein, who — upon his release — flees from war and oppression in Iraq. He ekes out a living, in various countries, as a private tutor, a casual laborer and waiter; seems to be dogged by bad luck; but is saved - in wondrous fashion - time and again, until he is finally arrested on a train and granted political asylum in Germany. On his journey through North Africa and Europe, he encounters refugees from all over the world. Khider interweaves their voices and destinies with his own story to create a modern, realist fairytale that merges the grotesque with the everyday and the tragic with the comical. The 'Village Indian' is the first chapter of the novel.

When, in the year 762, Caliph Al-Mansur was traveling through the vast expanses of the Orient in search of rest and calm, his eyes fell suddenly on a landscape that lay idyllically on the banks of two rivers. Without hesitation, he ordered his soldiers to dig a large ditch around this piece of land, to fill it with wood and, at dusk, light a fire. As the flames flared, he looked down from a nearby hill and announced, "Here is where my city shall be founded." And he named the city Madinat-A'Salam, the city of peace, known nowadays as Baghdad. The city of peace has since never known peace. Again and again, yet another ruler has stood on the hill and watched it burn.

I was born in this fire, in this city, and possibly that's why my skin is this coffee color. I was well-grilled – like mutton, so to speak – over the fire. For me, the ghosts of the fire were ever-present; throughout my life I've seen the city burn time and again. One war embraces another; one catastrophe arrives hot on the heels of the next. Each time, Baghdad, or all of Iraq burned – in the skies and on the ground: from 1980 to 1988 in the first Gulf War; from 1988 to 1989, in the war the Baath regime waged against the Iraqi Kurds; in the second Gulf War in 1991; in the same year again, during the Iraqi uprising; in 2003, in the third Gulf War; and, in between, in hundreds of smaller fires, battles, uprisings and skirmishes. Fire is this country's fate, and even the waters of the two great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, are powerless against it.

Even the sun in Baghdad is friendly with the fire-ghosts. In summer, it never wants to set. It rolls powerfully through Baghdad, like a chariot of iron and fire, lacerating the horizon's face, shunting its aimless way through the streets and houses. Maybe this merciless sun is the reason for my burnt and dusty appearance. Yet my birthday is on March 3rd, and thus long before the hot Baghdad summer, with its temperatures of up to 50 degrees. That's why I think the heat of the kitchen is to blame for my dark color. If – as she herself always maintained – I really did drop from my mother's belly in the kitchen, then I must have spent many hours there, even as a newborn, right next to the stove where black beans and eggplant were often cooking. It's my suspicion, also, that the stone oven, in which my mother baked our bread, did its part. How I loved to watch, when I was little, as my mother took the bread, when it was ready, from the oven, and threw the fresh pita breads onto a large palm-leaf plate at her feet. Each and every time, I'd sneak up to the hot bread. Each and every time, I'd feel the irresistible urge to touch it, only to burst out crying when I'd again burned my fingers. And each and every time, I'd remain sitting, as close as I could get to this fascinating stone-oven fire.

So I have several possible explanations for my dark skin. The rulers' fire and the Baghdad sun, the heat of the kitchen and the stone-oven embers. They're all crucial to the fact that I go through life with brown skin, the darkest black hair, and dark eyes.

But if these four factors really are the cause of my appearance, shouldn't most other inhabitants of this two-river country look like me? Many do, but I look so different that people doubted my Iraqi origins. In Baghdad, the bus conductors addressed me in English on several occasions. Most of the time I just laughed and answered using the vernacular of southern Iraq, which left them staring at me, baffled, as if they thought they were seeing a ghost. The same thing would happen to me, occasionally, at police checkpoints. Each time, I'd have to answer long lists of questions – questions like: What do Iraqis like to eat? What songs are sung to Iraqi children? Tell me the names of the best-known Iraqi tribes! Only when I'd answered all these questions correctly, and my Iraqi origins had been proven, was I permitted to carry on. The boys in my part of town called me "The Red Indian" because I looked like the Indians in American cowboy films. In middle school, my Arabic teacher and the other pupils nicknamed me "Indian" or "Amitabh Bachchan," after a famous Indian actor I really did look a bit like: a tall, thin, brown fellow.

My father was the only person who had a completely different explanation for my appearance. He claimed something really exciting. He took me aside one day – I must have been about fifteen at the time. "Son," he said, "your real mother's a gypsy. That's why you don't look like your brothers!" He kept it short, but as far as I could gather, he'd been together with a gypsy a good while back. It was just an affair. She was called Selwa. "One of the most beautiful women in the world, she was," he claimed, proudly. "Had a butterfly ever landed on her, her beauty would have caused it to wilt." The story began in Baghdad, in the part of town called al-Kamaliya, close to ours. A dancer, she was, and a woman of the night. My father was her best customer. She'd loved him, wanted a child by him, and then had that child. My father, though, didn't want a gypsy as the mother of one of his children. So, together with the men of our tribe, he decided to drive her, and her entire family, out of the district, first taking the baby from her. No sooner said than done. I was accepted into the tribe, and the gypsies were chased away. Later, it was rumored that the gypsy had moved with her clan to northern Iraq, but had then left her family to emigrate, alone, to Turkey, and on to Greece. She'd worked there, apparently, for an Egyptian in a dance club, before killing herself in the end. My stepmother never spoke about it. She brought me up as if I were her own.



The funny thing, though, about this story is that both my mothers have the same name: my gypsy mother was called Selwa, and my non-gypsy mother is also called Selwa. My non-gypsy Selwa claimed my father was a liar, and I her flesh and blood. Once, she even brought an old lady home with her who testified to being present at my birth. She swore on all the saints that my non-gypsy Selwa had indeed given birth to me in the kitchen. The gypsy story I only ever heard from my father. I even went once to the al-Kamaliya part of town, also known as the “Whore and Pimp District,” where there really was no shortage of brothels. I asked whether they knew a gypsy there called Selwa, and her people, but no one had the faintest idea. And that’s why I doubt there’s anything at all to the story. My father just told me it, I suppose, to punish me. Because I couldn’t stand him.

I didn’t see the story as punishment at all, though. Why should I? What was wrong with gypsies? Beautiful women, full of fire and passion, whom every man desired. In the past, when I was still a child, boys tussled to get a better look of the women dancing in their skimpy, colorful skirts, half-naked, at weddings and other parties. I remember all the men’s hungry eyes devouring them. The male gypsies, too, were so handsome that the men in our part of town thought they’d have to lock their doors to stop their women smiling at them. I think that whenever the gypsies had been at one of our weddings, the women round our way reveled for weeks in the memory of their black hair; their deep, big bull-eyes; their firm muscles and brown bodies, glistening with sweat beneath the blazing lights of the wedding party, and wished they could secretly feel them beneath the covers at night, as their hands tried to satiate this unfulfilled desire. It will hardly have been any different for the men, thinking of those gypsy women, so full of temperament.

I really was one of the best-looking boys in our part of town. It’s possible that I inherited my looks from my gypsy mother. Possibly also the color of my skin; my long, dark curly hair; and my big black gentle eyes. I adored the gypsies, after all, and the songs they sang. For a long time, I even kept a picture of a dancing gypsy woman in my pocket. Nonetheless, I decided to accept my non-gypsy mother as my “proper mother.” She was my guardian angel. She loved me more than all my brothers and sisters, her biological children.

The question of whether gypsies are really originally from India, as some scientists claim, has always passionately interested me. I hoped, secretly, that the theory was

true. I could then present myself as an Indian-Iraqi gypsy, and put an end to all my existential questions! If not, then there must be some other concrete link between me and India, for that country has always haunted me, always played a role in my life.

When, after the second Gulf War in March 1991, the Shiites revolted against the regime, the Iraqi government claimed in its media outlets that these were not real Iraqis, but Indian immigrants. They'd come to Iraq in the eighteenth century and stayed. The problem was: the theory was rejected by all notable historians as there seemed to be no scientific proof whatsoever for it. But then they didn't know me; living proof that the Shiites perhaps *could* have come from India.

In the first years of the third decade of my life, I fled from the endless fire of the rulers, and the merciless Baghdad sun. My path took me through various countries. I lived for a while in Africa, mainly in Libya, with the result that words in the Libyan vernacular began to mix with my Iraqi words. That led to the next problem: I spent a while in Tripoli, where I met a few Iraqis in a café on the beach promenade. When I introduced myself, they responded angrily. "Do you think we're stupid? You're not Iraqi! You don't look Iraqi, and the way you speak isn't right either." When I later arrived in Tunisia, it was very different. In the capital, I noticed from Day One that the women were drawn to me like bees to jam on toast. In the city center, on Avenue Bourguiba, a bunch of girls followed me with their flirtatious eyes, blithely calling out, "Hey, check out the good-looking Indian!" For a whole month I had great fun with the most beautiful women in the streets of Tunis. I pretended to be an Indian tourist, looking for a guide. And that's how I found a short-lived love. Her name was Iman; and for her, my hair was the eighth wonder of the world.

In Africa, no one had a problem with my appearance. I wasn't blond, and the children didn't crowd around me, clapping, like they did with European tourists. In Africa, the color of my skin was an advantage. Compared to the locals, I was regarded by some as being white, even. Everything else, though – life itself, every aspect of it – was in no way easy there, which is why I was soon planning to head to Europe. But the journey was only possible using illegal routes.

In Europe, my appearance again attracted trouble. It started in Athens. At first, I fortunately had no major problems there. I hardly had to worry about being arrested. There were so many refugees in the country, they would have needed millions of

prisons to lock them all up. From time to time, nonetheless, the police culled a few – probably to at least *look* like they were tackling the refugee problem. Once, while they were at it, they caught me. For a few days, I was stuck in prison as they tried to arrange a refugee ID card for me.

On the final day, something tragic happened: I needed to go to the can. A policeman accompanied me. When I wanted to leave again, he blocked my path and, in a rage, started thrashing me. I didn't understand what was happening, and began to shout as loud as I could. Hearing the noise, a few other policemen ran over and saved me from the blows of my escort, who had gone wild. Some of them were grumbling and arguing with him. Commotion *à la grecque*, it was. I didn't understand a word, but guessed they were angry with him for setting upon me. Suddenly, the raging policeman was cowering on the floor, hitting himself in the face, and howling his head off. It all seemed absurd; I couldn't make any sense of it. A blond policeman brought me back to my cell. I sat there, fed up with the world, massively disappointed and sad. I couldn't believe that in Europe, too, the police kicked and beat people for no reason. I could never have imagined it. What a horrible surprise! In the evening, the door opened, and an officer in a smart uniform entered my cell. He had masses of stars and other insignia on his chest and shoulders. He spoke English and explained that the raging policeman had lost it because he thought I was a Pakistani drug dealer the Greek police had been after for a long time. The raging policeman, apparently, had lost his youngest brother to an overdose. And because he thought I was this drug dealer, his rage had boiled over and he'd lost all self-control. The officer showed me a photo of the dealer. It was hard to believe! We really did look like two peas in a pod. I was confused, myself.

Half an hour later, the no-longer-raging policeman returned and pointed at me.

"Are you from Iraq?" he asked, in English.

"Yes!"

"Sorry!"

He closed the door and left. Fifteen minutes later, a different policeman came, handed me my ID, accompanied me to the front door, and said, this time in English, "Go!"

I left Greece and its police, and fled to Germany. In Germany, though, things continued the way they'd gone in Greece, just differently. The overzealousness of the German police brought my illegal journey to an abrupt end – in the middle of Bavaria. Actually, I wanted to continue on to Sweden, for I'd heard from many fellow refugees that the Swedish government offered support – for language programs and university study. Nothing like that existed in Germany, apparently. When I set out to take the train from Munich to Hamburg, and from there, via Denmark to Sweden, the train stopped in the station of a small town called Ansbach, and two Bavarian policemen boarded. They didn't ask any of the many blond passengers for their ID; just came straight to me. Was it my Indian looks?

Them (in English): "Passport!"

Me: "No!"

They arrested me. At the police station, my appearance sparked another drama. The officers simply wouldn't believe I was Iraqi, thought I was Indian or Pakistani claiming to be Iraqi to get asylum. A fraud, in other words. Given the dictatorship in their own country, Iraqis, at the time, were eligible for asylum in Germany. Citizens of many other countries, though, were not, e.g. Indians and Pakistanis. It took a long time for a translator and a judge to arrive from Nuremberg to test me with a whole host of questions. They wanted to know, for instance, how many cinemas there are in the center of Baghdad. I even had to name some. Child's play, for me, of course, and my Iraqi origins were soon confirmed. I had to give up, however, on the idea of getting to Sweden. The German police had taken my fingerprints and explained these would now be forwarded to all other countries offering asylum. No longer could I claim asylum anywhere else – only in Germany. Any attempt to leave would be a criminal offense. So I've been stuck here since.

If it had remained at that, life would be bearable, really. Worse, though, was to follow. A lot of people here were simply afraid of me. Yes, afraid! I haven't beaten anyone up, or joined Al Qaeda, or the CIA, even, overnight. It all began on 11 September 2001. From that day onwards, the Arabs in Europe lost their smiles. The media spoke of nothing but Evil from Arabia. During that tense time, I flew from Munich to Berlin for a few days. The old lady next to me, a Bavarian – no prizes for guessing, with that accent! – smiled at me.

“Are you Indian?”

Smiling back, I answered, “No, I’m from Iraq.”

The smile on her lips froze, turned into a grimace distorted by fear. She averted her eyes quickly. For the rest of the flight, she sat, pale and silent, glued to the seat beside me. You’d have thought she’d seen the devil. One more word from me, and she probably would have had an instant heart attack!

Thinking back to the names I was called, in the East or in the West, as a result of my appearance, they always seem to have had something to do with India. India – where I’ve never ever been, a country I don’t know at all. The Arabs called me the “Iraqi Indian;” the Europeans, just “Indian.” I can live, of course, with being a gypsy, an Iraqi, an Indian, an extra-terrestrial, even – why not? What I can’t live with, to this day, is that I don’t know who I really am. I only know that I was “burned and salted by many suns of the earth,” as my Bavarian lover, Sara, always says. And I believe her.

I’ve realized, meanwhile, there could be a concrete link between me and India, after all – my grandmother. This has a historical context: when the British came to Iraq at the start of the twentieth century, they were also, at the time, the occupying force in India. Accordingly, they brought a good many Indian soldiers with them, who set up camp in the south of our country, where there are extensive palm forests. Who knows, maybe my grandmother – from the south, originally – met such a soldier in the forest once. And I, accordingly, am perhaps the product of the union of two British colonies.

# IRAQI ODYSSEY

a working title for a documentary feature film in progress

**by Samir**  
director, writer

**Samir** was born in 1955 in Baghdad and grew up in Switzerland. He is well known for his unique work in video and digital cinema in over 40 films, such as *Morlove – an Ode for Heisenberg* (1986), and the docu-essay *Babylon 2* (1993). He co-founded Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion and directed several features and series for German broadcasters and the French-German ARTE. Samir teaches at the Kunsthochschule für Medien (KHM) in Cologne and at the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie (dffb) in Berlin. In 1997, he received the Zurich Film Prize for his work as a producer, and was honored with the Swiss Film Prize for his short film *Angelique* in 1998. His documentary *Forget Baghdad* earned the Critic's Week Award at the Locarno Film Festival (2002).

*Iraqi Odyssey* is a film in the making. Samir, its director, generously shared excerpts from the dossier conventionally compiled for producers and grant-making institutions, lending rare insight into his approach, style and characters.





© Samir

### Synopsis

Car bombs. Tortured prisoners. Angry declarations of war made by bearded men. Sobbing veiled women. Dusty, decimated landscapes and cities. These are the images from the present Iraq seen in the West. These stereotypes contrast with the memories of an Iraqi middle-class family during the 1950s and 1960s in Baghdad, a truly modern city. How was it possible for the once so modern Iraq to change so dramatically? *Iraqi Odyssey* tells the story of my “globalized” middle-class Iraqi family, scattered between Auckland, Moscow, New York and London.

In contrast with western stereotypes of a backward Arab world stand my memories of my family from the 1950s: women dressed in fashionable western clothes, studying medicine at university, escorted by gentlemen in elegant suits and ties; red double-decker buses cruising through a bustling city every five minutes; the first modest skyscrapers being erected and parks blossoming on the shores of the Tigris. Modern Arabic music by well-known singers from Lebanon and Egypt heard everywhere. American, Indian and Arab movies screened in theaters without cen-

sorship, and spectators disported with social critical dramas, cheeky comedies and frivolous musicals. Of course, people in the countryside endured despairing poverty under the old feudal system; landless farmers moved to cities, where they tried to survive as day laborers, handy-men and workers. Many of them became engaged in political activity for the first time against the colonial-installed government and king. However, in spite of demonstrations and criticism of the colonial traditions of the West, there was a refreshing mood in the air: faith in progress and being part of the modern world.

### Migration - Exile - Diaspora

Now, fifty years later, nothing of these dreams remains. Forty years of dictatorship, thirty years of war, ten years of embargo and the exodus of the entire educated middle class led to the country's ruin, transforming it into a playing field for religious radicals, terrorists and warlords. The first political refugees of the early 1960s thought that the situation would be rectified quickly and they would be able to return in a few years. Soon however, some of this first

generation of exiles had to admit this would not be the case. And their children had already adapted to the new countries they were living in. Others seized the opportunity to return in the 1970s, when the regime needed specialists and experts. They went back to Iraq on the condition that they would not get involved in politics again. In the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of middle-class families were driven to exile again because they could no longer face the pressure and dangers resulting from the dictatorship, wars and embargos. The last Gulf War of 2003 and its aftermath destroyed whatever hope of returning remained. No one knows the exact number, but an estimated four to five million Iraqis live outside of Iraq today. Some of them are members of my family.

#### Family Story, Research and the Internet

All my family members who lived close to each other in Baghdad, are now spread across the globe, in Auckland, Sydney, Los Angeles, Moscow, Paris, London. Almost all of them have comfortably settled down and integrated well in their new communities. Paradoxically, there is now a closer contact among these family members, because all of us have created a closely intertwined network with the help of the Internet. Even a homepage with a digital family tree has been created. All information is exchanged via this platform. By now we know more about each other than we ever did in Iraq... . With the help of my “globalized” Iraqi family, *Iraqi Odyssey* will tackle relevant questions concerning the complex history of this nation in its global context. And it will explore how the shared dream of transformation into a modern world was crushed so brutally. Is there a chance to rebuild this dream?

#### Why this Film?

Even though I was surrounded by Arabic music, literature and movies during my childhood in Baghdad, I also learned

everything I needed to know about Western culture. Because of my father's involvement in the communist party of Iraq, we had to flee in the early 1960s. Funnily enough we went to Switzerland, where I grew up and went to school. As a child I was surprised to find that I knew many European artists while my classmates did not know anything about the Arab world. At that time, I did not understand that this Eurocentrism was systemic and had nothing to do with people being intelligent or not. After I became involved in the world of cinema, I decided to build a bridge between the Arab world and the West using my skills. This already worked well six years ago with my last documentary *Forget Baghdad – Jews and Arabs, the Iraqi Connection*.

In this context, *Iraqi Odyssey* will pose important and universal questions on social justice, civil liberties, human rights, post-colonial structures, political engagement and the relationship between men and women. The film cannot and will not offer an answer to all these questions, but it will surely reflect with empathy on the experiences of a handful of interesting people. *Iraqi Odyssey* will furnish a strong contrast and antithesis to the so-called *clash of civilizations*.

When I was working on my documentary project *Forget Baghdad*, I encountered strong opposition within my family, mostly from relatives who were still living in Iraq under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. They were upset because they feared that my undertaking could endanger them, especially if someone learned that I was making a film about an Iraqi-Jewish communist, and that I planned to go to Israel for that. *Forget Baghdad* was completed in 2002 and became a great success internationally. The family was not at risk, since most of them had fled Iraq earlier, and the ones who stayed behind knew that they would only have to wait a few months before Saddam was overthrown by the Americans. Only one aunt and some cousins had

stayed, and they had far bigger problems than my film. The other family members learned in exile about the success of *Forget Baghdad* and teased me that I preferred to make films about “Jews,” instead of making one about my own family. The time for turning attention to my family and making a film about them had come.

### *Treatment, Structure and Narration*

A documentary usually evolves at the editing table. Nevertheless, given a certain wealth of experience, a complete structure can be envisioned from the beginning of the production process. The dramaturgy and the structure should accommodate the fact that the western audience is characterized by minimal historical knowledge of the Middle East and a maximum of stereotypes about the Arab world.

### **Prologue**

I want to confront the spectator with his prejudices. In a short confrontation, archival footage from the latest conflict in Iraq will be contrasted with footage from Arabic films, which represent the modernity of Iraq and the Arab world in the 1950s.

### **Introduction**

After the unexpected and surprising prologue, which will playfully circumvent the expectations of the spectator, the introduction will introduce the protagonists and their individual living conditions. The localities will not yet be stated explicitly, but the differences between the images of snowy Moscow or Buffalo (in upstate New York), rural Auckland or vernal Paris will create a contrast by themselves. At this stage of the film, it will not yet be clarified that the representatives of the two generations of Iraqis living in exile know each other.

The spectator will only be aware that the filmmaker knows these people personally and that he knows them very well. The spectator will not realize that all these different persons belong to the same family until a later stage of the film, at a family reunion. The shared memories, archive material from newsreels, and contemporary Arabic movies and music represent a source of cross-generational identity and they illustrate the thesis that Iraq was an enlightened and changing society in the 1950s.

### Main body

While shedding light on the different fates of each protagonist during the main part of the film, the family bonds will be illustrated through the Internet activities of each member. Internet and mobile phones have become an integral component of their communication. The family members have created their own online platform to exchange information. In this part of the film, aside from questions about the relationships between the protagonists and the quandary of integration into Western society, prejudices against the Arab world, the contradictions between ideology, religion and politics, the relevance of family structures and the relationship between the family members and their mother country will be picked out as main themes.

### Final Act

During a family reunion (e.g. in London or Switzerland) all family members will be brought together to watch a first version of *Iraqi Odyssey*. By this stage, the audience will have understood that all protagonists are members of the same family. Due to my family history, it is already clear that the presentation of the first version of the film will lead to a lively and serious discussion amongst the family members. The résumés of the protagonists will lead to the closing words of the film.

### Composition

The most important elements of the film are the extraordinary stories of different human beings, who had never imagined that they might end up “at the end of the world,” that they might continue their existence far from their family and their home country, or that they might even live the rest of their lives abroad.

With the aid of an explicit draft, the conversations with the protagonists will be filmed in the comfort of their own

environments. The places where they live and work will be central to the realization of the concept and the subjective camerawork. These scenes will represent the basic structure of the narration. In addition, the rich photographic archive, which documents the family history, will revive memories of the “old days.” These photographs will be enhanced cinematographically with the aid of computer animation. *Iraqi Odyssey* will contain not only the compelling account of lived narratives, but will also be enriched with musical and cinematographic excerpts from the history of Arab cinema, especially as the protagonists will talk about their memories of musical and cinematic experiences. Use of Arabic letters furthermore will enhance the picture composition. As an animated calligraphy it will contrast to Latin scripture and add yet another important element to the film.

### *The Protagonists*

***Samira Jamal Aldin, the aunt in Auckland:*** Samira was born in 1938 in Mendir, a small Iraqi town near the Iranian border. During her youth she had to move countless times as her father, Ahmed Jamal Aldin, was a judge who refused to be bribed, so he was “displaced” by the corrupt authorities over and over again. Although Ahmed Jamal Aldin came from a Shiite family of religious dignitaries, he allowed his daughters the freedom to choose what they wanted to study, and decide for themselves who their life partners would be.

Samira married a fellow student enrolled at the faculty of medicine. After she graduated with a medical degree from Baghdad University, she became involved with the communist party in 1958, at a time when the Iraqi revolution was concentrating on the rebellion against British colonial control over the Iraqi royal family. After the Baathist putsch in 1963, during which tens of thousands of intellectuals and unionists were murdered, she fled with her husband to Baku, in Azerbaijan. There she was able to further pursue her studies. After that, she lived in Kuwait and later in Lebanon.

During the early 1970s, she returned to Iraq, where she was able to lead a trouble-free life with her husband and three children until the mid-1990s. Under the embargo following the 1991 Gulf War, living conditions became increasingly difficult and Samira had to leave Iraq once again. In the meantime, her two daughters had emigrated to New Zealand. They could not afford to support their parents financially, so Samira applied for a job at a hospital in Oman, where she worked as long as it took to save enough money and follow her daughters to New Zealand. The immigration authorities eventually granted her an entry permit and she has lived there ever since. Shortly after her arrival, her husband also managed to travel to

New Zealand, but both of them weren't able to find work and thus had to get by on a modest national pension. Frustrated by this new and somewhat hostile environment, Samira's husband died a year later.

***Sabah Jamal Aldin, the uncle in London:*** Samira's brother, Sabah Jamal Aldin was born in 1934 in a southern Iraqi town called Amara. He studied medicine in Baghdad. For political reasons, he emigrated to the Soviet Union, and settled down in Moscow where he studied to become an eye specialist. As Sabah was known as the anarchist rebel in the family, he had little chance of returning to Iraq during that time. However, he didn't get along with the Soviet authorities, so he left for Kuwait in 1965, where he married a cousin from Iran. She gave birth to a son.

Between 1970 and 1975, the political circumstances in Iraq stabilized slightly due to a ceasefire agreement between the ruling Baath party and the communist party. Sabah returned, and lived and worked in Basra (to where he was banished by the regime). In 1975, he received a tip off that his arrest by the regime was imminent, so he quickly crossed the border to Kuwait, where he lived until 1987. There, he became a religious fundamentalist and had close contact with the Shiite resistance. The Kuwaiti authorities captured and tortured him and his whole family. With a lot of luck, he was able to escape to Syria. He had to leave behind his family, but they later managed to flee to London as asylum seekers.

Sabah lived in Oman, where he worked as a doctor and earned the trust of the Sultan. He was even given the Poet Laureate prize. As time passed, he increasingly retreated from politics and devoted all his time to caring for his wife who was afflicted with cancer. She died in London in 1993.

At the beginning of 2000, he was granted a permanent residence authorization in the UK and finally moved to London, where his children – by then adults – lived. To their astonishment, he joined the Iraqi resistance during the Gulf War in 2003. Since then, he has been only moderately religious. Now he lives with his second Iranian wife and his nineteen-year-old son in the suburbs of London, not far from Heathrow Airport. He still travels a lot, working as an activist for an Iraqi cultural organization.

***Najah Jamal Eldin, the uncle in Paris:*** Najah was the shining revolutionary in the family. Born in the south of Iraq, the son of Ahmed Jamal Aldin, he began participating in illegal communist activities at the young age of fifteen. He would spend most of the time teaching the poor rural workers of the south how to read and write. At the age of eighteen, shortly after finishing high school, he was arrested and thrown into the infamous Abu Ghraib prison. He was released, with the intervention of his father who made a personal plea with the prime minister for his son's release. Najah fled to France via Turkey, where he took refuge. He studied sociology at the Sorbonne University in Paris, and became a passionate follower of the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. During the rebellion in May 1968, he joined the Maoists and decided to work as an Arabic teacher in the Parisian suburbs. He married a Frenchwoman who gave birth to a son. Frustrated by the political left, he turned towards Islam at the beginning of 2000, and his views became increasingly conservative.

***Jamal Al Tahir, the cousin in Moscow:*** Jamal Al Tahir was born in Baghdad in 1944. He is the son of Ahmed Jamal Aldin's oldest daughter Fatma. After a stay in France in the late 1930s, fun-loving Fatma married Iraq's first sociologist. In the middle of the 1950s, her husband had to leave the country, because his lectures had become too radical for the king's adherents. He was offered an avocation at the University of Chicago, where Jamal grew up perfectly bilingual. After a long stay in Benghazi, Libya, Jamal decided to pursue his studies in geology and oil engineering in Moscow, where he graduated and met his future wife. In the mid-1970s he went back to Iraq, where his mother had also returned after the death of her husband. Although he was constantly under surveillance by Saddam's accomplices due to his non-conformist views, he raised his two sons in Baghdad and they stayed in Iraq until the beginning of the Gulf War in 2003. In 2004, he moved back to Moscow with his wife Jana, where he now lives and works as an interpreter and consultant for foreign oil companies.

***Ali Adnan, the cousin in Milton Keynes:*** Ali Adnan is Samira Jamal Aldin's son and was born in Baghdad in 1962, shortly before his mother's escape to the Soviet Union. He grew up in Baku and Lebanon, and returned to Baghdad with his parents in the early 1970s. In the 1980s, he studied mechanical engineering at the Technical University of Baghdad.

He has always been a total cynic, intuitively opposed to all authority. Astonishingly, he lived relatively unchallenged under the dictatorship, because he managed to get out of tight spots over and over again due to his charm and his humor. Later on, in the late 1980s, he married a schoolmate, and during the embargo they moved to Amman, Jordan.

For two years he and Hind, his wife, lived under miserable conditions until he was finally granted authorization to take up residence in New Zealand. He worked as a car mechanic, while his wife finished her studies in psychology. After graduating, she found a position in a general hospital in Milton Keynes, in England. Ali had to wait for two years in Auckland until he was permitted to take up residence in Great Britain as well. Ever since, the two, who remained childless, have been able to enjoy life to the fullest. Ali's greatest passion is his Mercedes Benz sports coupe. He dreams of one day driving on the infamous German highways without any speed limits.

**Tanya Uldin, the cousin in Geneva & Basel:** Tanya is the daughter of Yahya Djamaluldine (Samir's deceased uncle) and was born in 1966 in Lausanne. Her mother is German. Her family moved to Algeria in 1970, which at the time was something of a model country for Arab socialism.

She spent a happy childhood in Algiers, picnics in the park in front of their house, with *merguez*, baguettes and *Orangina*. She also took ballet classes.

Tanya was sent to school in Germany where she lived with her grandparents, as the daily walk to the German school in Algiers would have been too far. Later, when Tanya was in fifth grade, her nuclear family moved to Germany and they all lived together in the Black Forest region. Those first years in Germany were overshadowed by her father's struggle at work. He was mobbed and confronted with xenophobia. Part of the time, he was entirely without employment and plagued by existential fears. Tanya first majored in Islamic Studies and later switched to Biological Anthropology. After completing her studies she worked as an anthropologist, but also started her own restaurant. In the day she was busy with skeletons, and from the evening

until late into the night, at the restaurant. At the end of 2002 she was forced to close the restaurant because she could not afford the rent anymore. Today she lives in Lörrach (Germany), across the border from Basel, and works as an assistant at the Centre Universitaire Romand de Médecine Légale in Lausanne – Genève, where she is pursuing a doctorate in anthropology.

**Souhair Ahmed, the half-sister in Buffalo, NY:** Souhair was born in Baghdad in April 1982, during the Iran-Iraq war. Her father, Riadh Jamal Aldin (Samir's father), died in a car accident when she was four years old. Only six months later, her mother lost her battle against cancer and passed away. She was orphaned and raised by her mother's family.

In April of 1991, the United States and 34 other nations declared war on Iraq. Souhair, then 9 years old was among the very few students attending school, as everyone else was leaving Baghdad and fleeing to other cities. Her uncle took her to Najaf, which was a lot safer. Only one month later, they returned to Baghdad, only to find that nothing was as it used to be.

In middle school, Souhair felt totally different from her female school friends, as they were only interested in boys and love, and she was fascinated with philosophy, history, religion and human rights. She spent the next 10 years fighting for her rights as a woman. On the 8th of April, 2003 – her birthday – the allied forces invaded Baghdad. One year later, she graduated from university with a degree in electrical engineering. But in 2006 everything became worse: as bombings, kidnappings and rape increased, Souhair woke up every morning not knowing if it would be her last. She was forced to flee. She went to Amman, Jordan, and was taken in by the family of a friend. Her half-brother Samir tried to bring her to Switzerland, but



Swiss bureaucracy prevented it. Souhair decided to register herself as a refugee at the UN and was able to move to the US. Today she lives in Buffalo, in upstate New York. After a rough first few years, due to the economic downturn and lack of work, she now works as a social worker for young refugees and has her own apartment with a living room painted all in red. Finally she can enjoy her freedom.

### Script Excerpts



One of the first pictures of my mother, my sisters and I in Switzerland © Samir

*By that time we had settled down in Switzerland. My siblings and I went to school in a working-class suburb of Zurich. It was the late sixties and there was no longer any question of us returning to Iraq.*

*But in the early seventies the xenophobic Nationale Aktion grew more influential in Switzerland. There were several federal referenda geared towards deporting foreign workers from Switzerland. And we were refused naturalization although my mother was a native. Through her marriage to a foreigner she had lost her citizenship.*

*I did not care about any of this. The daily rejections evoked defiance in me and I claimed not to like Switzerland anyway. But my father suffered more and more, probably due also to the fact that everyone else had returned to Iraq and*

*was practicing their profession. This was the case with his younger brother Sabah, who had moved back to Iraq from Kuwait and opened a practice in Basra. My father, meanwhile, with his degree in electro-engineering, was able to work only as a draftsman. We were living in a simple workers' colony, with little hope of improving our social and financial situation.*

**Sabah:** I did what everyone else did and returned to Iraq, under the nearly inconspicuous surveillance of the secret police. Things went well for a while. I opened a practice in a traditional district and was soon a popular doctor among the simple people because I didn't insist on being paid with money if they couldn't afford it. Instead I would accept vegetables, chickens or other items. We had a good time. The children all went to school; we were doing well. In those days the Iraqi dinar was worth something and for the summer holidays I would pack my children into the Volvo and we'd just set off without a particular destination. Once we drove through Iran all the way to Pakistan. Another time we drove through Syria and Turkey as far as Bulgaria.

**Sabah:** But at the beginning of 1975, I learned from a friendly policeman that the secret police were going to arrest me the next day because my independent attitude was a thorn in their side. I left in the middle of the night, crossing the border into Kuwait where I had some friends. I couldn't tell my family anything because it would have put them in danger. They didn't know where I was. This was a difficult time for the children because they didn't understand why I had left without a word. A year later I found a way to bring them to Kuwait through a clandestine operation. In Kuwait, I was working at a hospital again, earning decent wages. Kuwait was an autocratic state, of course, but you were

left alone if you kept your mouth shut. But then something entirely unexpected happened.

*(Archival film footage of the mass rebellions against the Shah in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini is forced to leave Iraq for Paris. The Shah is overthrown and Khomeini returns triumphantly to Tehran, to his homeland.)*

**Sabah:** The success of the Shiite revolution made a big impression on us. We were still cautious, but now the sectarian counter-propaganda in the Gulf States was rampant. Because Kuwait, like Iraq, had a large Shiite minority, the Emir of Kuwait began to fear for his power. The Saudis also started speaking out against Iran, claiming that Shiites were heretics and not real Muslims. Women everywhere started wearing headscarves to show that they were "truly religious." Even my eldest daughter put on a headscarf when going to university, and so did my wife later.



The religious part of the family. Uncle Mustafa at a seditious poetry reading at the end of the sixties in Najaf © Samir



One of the last family pictures in Dübendorf (Switzerland) shortly before my father returned to Iraq © Samir



Samir as a child in Dübendorf near Zurich © Samir

*I told Sabah how the family members here in Europe were saying that he had become religious. One of his daughters told me that she wore mini-skirts in the seventies, but that he would no longer allow it; that he had become conservative.*

*Sabah defends himself, pointing out that the political situation was a difficult one. But he cannot hide the fact that he sympathized with the revolution at the time.*

*(An Iraqi propaganda film about the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980.)*

*For me, the Iran-Iraq war came as a surprise. I think it was the same for everyone. Just a year before, I had gone to see my father in Baghdad and heard no talk of an imminent war, nor did my family express any concerns. Our topic of discussion was more along the lines of my father's reasons for leaving Switzerland in 1976, although I was quite aware that he could no longer bear the prevailing xenophobia at the time.*

*(Archival TV News about various Schwarzenbach initiatives 1971-1975.)*

*Xenophobia is not necessarily a reason to leave one's family. I wanted to know the real reason why he had returned to Iraq.*

**My father:** I would leave for work at six in the morning and come back at seven in the evening, and you kids went to bed shortly after that. Look at you. You grew up without my noticing it, until it was too late. I lived in that country for fifteen years. You know me: I'm a cheerful, outgoing person and we have many friends in Switzerland. Have you noticed how many of them are Swiss? (...) Right. None. Here I am well-respected,

this is my home. I don't ever have to justify myself. And after your mother divorced me, I even found a new wife here!

*My father married one of his cousins and moved to Basra with her.*

*His decision to move from Baghdad to Basra was made before the war. I think he also wanted to escape the familial duties that come with being the eldest son. My grandmother had a reputation as a tyrant. I also know that my father preferred the seaport of Basra to Baghdad, because of its openness.*



My cousin's wedding in Baghdad at the beginning of the 1980s © Samir

*Apart from the dictatorship, living conditions seemed rather pleasant to me during my visit at the end of 1979. The road system was good, the busses ran according to a regular schedule; all families, including the poor ones, had a phone, a refrigerator, a car and a television. Life did*



Fatma, my favorite aunt, as a teacher at the end of the 1930s in Iraq © Samir

*not differ much from Italy, Greece or Spain. And except in Najaf and Kerbala or in the Baghdad district of Kadhamyia, the women did not wear headscarves or abayas, the black over-garments.*

*After the visit to my father in Basra, I stayed with Jamal's mother, my aunt Fatma, in Baghdad. When she returned from Libya, her husband built a house for each of their sons, Jamal and Minhal, right next to his own. Shortly thereafter he died of a serious illness. But my aunt wasn't a mournful type and my stay with her and her son Jamal was a happy one. Most importantly, I got to know her daughter, my cousin Thikreat, who was born in Libya, which is why I had not met her before.*



Fatma in 1993. She kept her serenity, even during the embargo © Samir

# ONE EXILE, MANY EXILES

by Ali Bader

translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

**Ali Bader** is an award-winning Iraqi novelist, essayist, poet, scriptwriter and journalist who has written eleven novels, winning five Arabic literary awards, several works of non-fiction and two poetry collections. He is author of the novels *Papa Sartre* (2009), published by AUC Press, and *The Tobacco Keeper* (2012), published by Bloomsbury London. Ali Bader also covered the Middle East as a war correspondent and currently lives in Belgium.

From his exile in Brussels, Ali Bader explores the manifold feelings that accompany the passage from home to an existence that is characterized by not belonging. The question he asks in this essay is whether the exiled will forever remain in a state of limbo, or whether there is ever the possibility of return.

There is no first day of exile; rather, there is a moment when you realize you *are* an exile.

When I came to this realization, I felt a lump in my throat like a stone. I felt like Peter Schlemiel, the man who sold his shadow to the Devil for an empty wallet.

The story of Peter Schlemiel, written by the French author Adelbert von Chamisso in 1814, was the first symbolic account of the alienation suffered by the artist and the scientist. Schlemiel is rejected by society and cast out; even the woman who loved him turns him away. He spends his life wandering the earth trying to make up for the loss of his shadow, for his privation and homelessness, with scientific inventions. The genius of Von Chamisso lay in his keen understanding of the distress that springs from the symbolic expulsion of exile. Inspired by his imagination and his own experience, he gave shape to the issue of displacement, and the resulting sadness and grief for which there can be no cure, save for writing and invention. Now more than ever, I understand that my passion and zeal for writing was a way of beating the drum of my dispossessed self.

There is no word more apt to describe exile than *dissemination*, a term that Jacques Derrida, an Algerian exiled in France, saw as antithetical to the term *nation*. Drawing on that, Homi Bhabha, that Indian exile in America, suggested that exile is a form of dissemination of one nation among others, yet also the dissemination of one self in the selves of others. Bhabha owes his inspiration for this notion to Hobsbawm's research into national histories, but he approaches it from a different perspective – that of immigrants, exiles and refugees. Those living with the memories of backwardness, divisions, arrests and enslavement on the margins of another culture, equipped with only half a foreign language: might the dispossessed not be found amongst them, too?

The historical fact that exile only came into being with the emergence of the nation-state is uniquely significant and yet – irony of ironies – it was the nation-state that spawned mass migrations. Ironic indeed. The concept of the nation strengthened the idea of clinging to one's "first land," what the French call *le pays natal*, and what the Iraqi poet Saadi Yousef, who spent forty years exiled from his country, calls the "first sky."

There can be no doubt that personal feelings of exile emerge from symbolic discourses and literary works about the land of a mythic, legendary nature. Be that as it may, we once lived like prisoners, with massive waves of arrests closing in on us; once citizens become immune to the appeal of these mythic national discourses, they attempt to flee to another country. But there, in the dark and cold, in cheap bars and railways stations, on fog-bound platforms and bleak winter streets, all that is mythical in that distant land returns to the fore, and through the darkness, the exile senses a city illuminated, out of reach, utterly invisible to the eye and desired like only something that can never be attained.

In exile, the country we have fled becomes an Atlantis. More than an ultimate goal, it is closer to an impossibility. The country transcends geographical terms like Asia, Africa or the Equator and is transformed into a kind of tragedy, a profound expression of feelings of loss, absence, dispossession and shattered dignity. From this loss, a strain of external, divergent history arises and releases a flood of resentful prose; a lively, explosive prose that highlights, somewhat despairingly, the absurdity that arises from disenfranchisement. You feel that you will forever remain trapped in a state of migration and departure. You have



no time. Your time has been disseminated amongst the times of others. As for the country where you once lived, it will change on you; and your time will not be your own – it, too, will transform and slip away from you.

That's how it was when I returned to Baghdad to write *The Tobacco Keeper*, a novel about an Iraqi composer killed in 2006 at the height of the sectarian violence. Despite the night's dangers, the killings and militias lurking in the streets, I snuck into the house where I had once lived. The moment I entered, I felt as if this house that I knew so well had, in some strange way, become something else; the property of strangers. As I entered, it seemed to me that it had been dissolved and scattered into the void. Here was a room, here another, and here a veranda utterly unconnected to these rooms. As for the stairs that I had tripped down in my childhood and which had been warm and deeply familiar, now, as I moved through the darkness like blood pulsing through a vein, they were cold and narrow. I floundered as though I were in an empty space, unconsciously, without desire or pleasure, defenseless. I softened my voice and the sound of my footsteps as I tried to think of anything in the house that may have remained untouched by change. Nothing. And yet when I returned to my exile, I felt drawn to that far-off, utterly transformed place. Violently drawn, like a flood of memories and strange dreams defying time and death.

"Exile, not a refusal to belong, is what caused this grief."

I repeated this line to myself, without ever heeding what it meant. It was a line by Paul Celan, the Romanian who wrote in German and who committed suicide as an exile in Paris in 1970. Maybe I was repeating these words to sum-

mon the presence of other exiles, all saying things about exile, the meaning of which I had paid no mind: separation, the loss of one's roots, dislocation. It never left me, this insistence on reciting the terminology of exile without ever attempting to penetrate its meaning. They were just words; bits of vocabulary intoned.

But what about these feelings of broken dignity?

A strange sensation, sometimes mixed with despair. Yes, I say, exile is a lived experience that cannot be reduced to single terms. It is a sensation that descends upon you suddenly and at inappropriate moments, sometimes for no good reason, impelling you to run from anyone you suspect might ask from which country you have come. A strange feeling, for which you'll never find an explanation, no matter how hard you try: how you feel when you are invited to a party, say; you feel the place in which you're sitting isn't yours, that it belongs to someone else, and instead of the anticipated enjoyment, you pass the night agitated and confused.

This is because the exile permanently feels extraneous, a surplus to the world's requirements. He exists on the margins of the world; he is not *of* the world. He knows this, he wants to become one with others, to become one of them. But how? As I look back over those early stages of my own exile I can find no expression more apt for my condition than the following lines from Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*: "One may lead a horse to water, Twenty cannot make him drink."

I believe, without knowing anything of the road that brought me to this place, that exile is a gift of that road, just as Egypt is a gift of the Nile, as Herodotus said in his



*History.* The road to exile is long – that is certainly true – just as it is tough and unforgiving. Perhaps that is why many never complete their journeys, and drown, starve, or die of thirst, or their road closes in on them.

Once, I was sitting near Beaux Arts station in Brussels, in an immigrants' bar overseen by an indolent Brazilian waitress, her skimpy clothes defying her corpulent build.

'If exile is such a curse to you all, then why did you come here?' she snapped at us.

Clearly she had overheard the lamentations of her customers. They were many: a huge, deaf old man from Ethiopia; a fellow from Iraq who had been lifeless for a long time; and a very mysterious Moroccan lady, her gaze turned idly to the street, as though she had been sold and was now awaiting being weighed for her worth.

Now I remember being with those two Iranian journalists all those years ago, fleeing through the Turkish deserts to Europe. We took a bleak and treacherous road until we reached the point of no return: either we died or we persevered. We summoned our courage and made it. Years later I asked them if they had any desire to sneak back into the country they had fled from, back along that same harsh and perilous route and neither hesitated for a second at my question.

And now I ask (myself, at least): is the road from your country to exile the same as the road that leads from exile back to the country?

Both are roads, each like the other, and yet not identical. For the first is like the road taken by those journeying to the underworld in Babylonian legends; there is something mysterious about it; there is the arrival in another world. And then there is the road of those journeying from the underworld back through a cheerless, narrow passage to the homeland. But your arrival is poisoned... . You carry the underworld in your heart, in your innards. Exile is a curse you will never shake, like a disease. You will carry it wherever you travel, even when you return home.

And now, as I am among those who has entered the underworld, I realize that the roads we set out and return on are one and the same, that I will never shed this curse, that the exiles squeezed in beside me, into a few square meters in that container, were speaking of their wives with great tenderness and recalling love stories they had left behind. Now I recall and, more than ever before, I know that the road to exile is paved with stories, stories which the exiles never stop reciting. But even now it is the road that traverses many borders, manifold obstructions, checkpoints lit up by countless lamps, barricades erected by border guards and the police. These roads will always lead you to exile. They may differ a little, these roads; they may vary, but paved or dirt, long or short, broad or narrow, they always lead to the same point. Their ends are one; and your destination, be it at daybreak or in the afternoon, in the evening or at night, shall be nowhere but exile.

# EMBEDDED FIELDWORK AND GLOBAL OIL CIRCULATION: BLACK SEA FILES by Ursula Biemann

**Ursula Biemann** is a Zurich-based artist and curator working on geopolitical displacement and migrant labor, and a researcher at the Institute for Critical Theory, Universities of Art and Design Zurich. She initiated the collaborative project B-Zone (Kunstwerke Berlin, 2005), which includes Black Sea Files on Caspian oil geography, and *Sahara Chronicle* (2006-2007), an investigation of the trans-Saharan migration system from Niger to Morocco. She is also curator of the exhibitions *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, and *The Maghreb Connection*. Her video essay *X-Mission* (2009-2010) examines the discourses on Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East. She has published extensively, including a monograph of her video works, *Mission Reports – Artistic Practice in the Field* (2008). She received an honorary doctorate in the humanities from the Swedish Umea University in 2008 and the 2009 Meret Oppenheim Prize, the national art award of Switzerland.

Artist Ursula Biemann reflects on her fieldwork research methodology and artistic practice during the making of the multimedia video installation, **Black Sea Files**, which tackles the geopolitical, social, economic and demographic disruptions wrought by the oil pipeline from the Caucasus fields to Europe.

While most of my previous video essays have been concerned with globalization processes in broad extraterritorial zones and along borders, in *Black Sea Files* I turned my attention to a specific transnational infrastructure: the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. Passing through the Southern Caucasus and Turkey, the recently built pipeline pumps large quantities of new Caspian crude oil from Azerbaijan to world markets. In the mid-1990s, representation of the region changed from that of a politically unsettled and impoverished post-Soviet periphery, hosting a million displaced people, to a space where energy and capital flow at a rate that is remarkable even by global standards.

Although the consortium includes American oil companies, the BTC is a predominantly European enterprise, securing energy for the European market. This giant project is the first manifestation of an ambitious European plan to not only traverse the Caucasian corridor and access Caspian oil reserves, but also to expand further into post-Cold War territories, particularly landlocked majority-Muslim states along the southern rim of the former Soviet Republic. A veritable super-silk highway is the long-term vision behind this scheme, which will grow to encompass a fully integrated transportation and communication corridor linking Europe with Central Asia. The overall focus of my two-year video exploration was the spatial and social transformations brought about by this gigantic infrastructure project. During my fieldtrips in 2003 and 2004, the pipeline was still under construction, displaying the material efforts necessary to bury the conduit underground and render it forever invisible.

International media coverage of the Caucasus features images of political elites signing contracts, rubbing new oil between their fingertips or cutting ribbons at inaugurations. My work does not prioritize such corporate images,

which consolidate power into a master narrative, because they offer little insight into complex regional relations and local textures. My intention was to dispel the predominantly US-centric perspective of current oil discourses and present an alternative.

The pipeline is a geostrategic project of considerable political impact, not only for the powerful players in the region but also for a great number of locals: farmers, oil workers, migrants and prostitutes, for whom the meaning of their living space will be transformed. These are the subjects who populate these video files, turning the pipeline corridor into a complex human geography. This is not the top-down view corporate planners favor when they decide on the course of the pipeline trajectory, but an engagement with the people who relate to this piece of infrastructure. The closing of big deals on a macro level entails a million small contracts and negotiations on the ground. If we want to reformulate the cultural construction of oil, it is on these subjects that we need to concentrate. Particular attention is therefore given to those instances when the power line is incomplete, ambiguous or interrupted by local actors.

Some of the files deal with the corporate politics of land use, documenting encounters with some of the thousands of farmers who had to sell their land for the pipeline. In other files, I stray around the wasteland of abandoned oil extraction zones near Baku, or sit down for tea with Kurdish nomads who have set up their summer camp near the pipeline terminal on the Mediterranean coast. While the pipeline runs through like a central thread, the video does not provide a linear narrative but visits secondary scenes, unfolds side events and roams around the lesser debris of history. The *Black Sea Files* explore Off-Broadway geopolitics.

I do not claim to grasp the totality of the complexity of the region in its overall political and cultural dimensions. Nonetheless, I attempt to shed light on a subjective, but interrelated, series of scenes and plots. Varying in scale, the files reveal grand ideas and sordid conspiracies, remote ordering systems and their prosaic local upshots; they uncover schemes within schemes, seeking to illuminate their strategic purposes and operational failures, and the meaning they have in terms of the human experience. It is the ensemble of these files that explore their interconnectedness.

The video writes a fragmentary human geography through a rather heterogeneous collection of videographies made during three trips to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, later supplemented with extensive text research, media clips and reflections. All this material needed to be organized, and I opted for files because they are an open structure, referencing a work in progress, which tend to contain idiosyncratic combinations of documents the logic of which is often determined entirely by the author. This project foregrounds the ordering system, and the ordering process itself, through the use of files as a metaphor for categorizing information.

In the case of transnational politics, data can come from geographically disparate sources, linked only through a political relationship that is not always obvious to the uninitiated. The relations reveal themselves during the investigative process and through the role of the researcher. While generally my practice can be understood as a cognitive method akin to those used by geologists, journalists and anthropologists, this was a very subjective way of organizing knowledge, which, in my view, is more closely related to intelligence gathering than, say, anthropology, because of its inherently transnational procedures and the pursuit of classified and restricted knowledge. With Black

Sea Files I make a decisive attempt to insert myself into the range of investigative practices performed in these different spheres of knowledge.

Before I go on to discuss the content of some of these files in more detail, let me comment briefly on the format of the presentation of this piece. Black Sea Files consists of ten synchronized double video files. In some of the files, the image on the left stands in contrast to the one on the right, as in File O, where the empty plaza in front of the government palace in Baku is juxtaposed with the massive public demonstration that brought down the Georgian regime in the main square of Tbilisi. In many files, however, both videos complement each other, saturating the short scenes with glimpses of local particularities, while creating a dynamic view by mixing medium-range shots and close-ups. In the case of the Azeri farmers, Kazakh tailors and Kurdish farm hands, the doubling-up of synchronized images works in choreographic terms. In a region where verbal communication is kept to a minimum, gestures and abstract sounds become the main means of interpreting a situation.

At Kunst-Werke Berlin, where Black Sea Files premiered in December 2005, the piece was installed on synchronized sets of video monitors, lined up on a long black plinth, which ran diagonally across the entire space. The file names and contents were displayed on a dark purple wall in the exhibition space, where the file structure and content was replicated typographically. A separate video of Azeri oil workers was projected onto one of the walls, contributing to the sonic atmosphere of the installation, and a large oil cartography, which I had devised together with an architecture bureau in Zurich, was pasted onto another wall. The decision to turn my video work into a large complex installation was a strategic one. I recognized that, although my video essays had been shown in a wide



variety of venues, they had not been taken too seriously by the art world. I felt that I could gain greater recognition in this context if my presentation was more sophisticated or simply took up more space. It seemed to me that the content of this video justified employing a common geopolitical strategy for gaining ground, in the realm of the art world.

In imaging migration, one of the aesthetic strategies I have insisted upon in the last few years, is that migration should not be conceived as a singular phenomenon, but rather as one among many strands of interaction between regional and national spaces. Black Sea Files investigates the correlation between the flows of people and fossil resources,



investments, information and images. Given the importance of energy in our society today, it is surprising how few cultural analyses are available on the subject, in comparison with research topics such as technology, virtuality or velocity. This lack of theoretical discourse makes it all the more difficult to discuss the circulation of oil in the context of a cultural-theoretical consideration of identity and migration, which meant I had to do a great deal of groundwork.

The first task was to draw spatial connections and find the coincidences between the flow of persons and resources. One particularly striking site for this confluence is Istanbul. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the importance of the Turkish Straits has greatly increased, as large parts of the vast oil reserves of the Caspian region must be transported on tankers across the Black Sea to reach external markets. The Bosphorus, connecting the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, is among the world's busiest and most dangerous waterways, cutting through this mega city of

twelve million inhabitants. The straits' capacity for large oil tankers is practically exhausted – hence, the necessity to build the BTC pipeline.

This bottleneck of global oil circulation is also the site of the highest concentration of human migration in the region. Turkey is considered to be one of the main transit countries in the modern world for irregular migration. Tens of thousands of migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Moldova and Russia arrive in Turkey every year, two thirds of them passing through Istanbul. The liberalization of post-socialist countries had a particularly noticeable impact on female mobility and marketability, and the Black Sea basin is known as a major trading place for women. Female migrants, trafficked from the former Soviet republics to Turkey, frequently use the route through Azerbaijan, which has become another regular transit country for illegal migration. In Azerbaijan, the massive oil field revenues do not easily trickle down to ordinary citizens; young



women have to look for opportunities abroad, and they too travel westward like the oil.

As important as the connections between oil money and sexualized female labor migration are, they are often difficult to render conceptually, because these issues are discussed in very different cognitive fields. In the visual world of video space, and particularly in the practice of the video essay, there is a possibility of bringing them together. Certain events in the Black Sea Files, like the scene I am about to describe, involving Russian and Azeri prostitutes, may indeed seem unrelated or coincidental. During fieldwork, however, the essayist is not always in the “signifying mode,” hot on the tracks of her research topic. The situation sometimes requires a spontaneous decision to pursue an unexpected narrative thread.

When I arrived in Trabzon, in northeastern Turkey, towards the end of my research trip through the Caucasus, I was already aware of the booming sex industry in the region, but it was not my explicit intention to tie it into my video project. I had taken a bus across the Turkish border from the Georgian port of Batumi and planned to spend a couple of relaxing days in this lively old trading city. After taking a bath at the ancient hamam and watching a Lara Croft movie at the only cinema in town, I took a stroll down to the port. Behind the indoor Russian market, where cheap plastic articles, textiles, and electronics are for sale, the filthy street was lined with brothels, hotels and bars, crowded with women from Russia, the Ukraine and the Caucasus republics. Even though this was supposed to be my time off, I made contact with people working in this milieu that very same day. In a local hotel room, I subsequently filmed an encounter with three young prostitutes – two from Moscow and one from Baku, Azerbaijan, who had recently arrived in Trabzon – in the presence of their





pimps, as well as an agent who introduced me to these shady characters and a translator, all of whom remained behind the camera.

The disproportionate male presence in the room made a candid conversation impossible; in terms of factual information, the encounter would prove to be entirely fruitless. In addition, simultaneous translation was so minimal and fragmentary that I felt compelled to provoke a situation in which the prostitutes and pimps would start acting out their relations in front of the camera rather than narrating them to me. When a more thorough translation of the taped conversation was performed several months later, during the editing process, it revealed that the prostitutes had been misinformed about my project – they were not told that I was working on a video about resources and migration, but assumed instead that I was making a “home movie.” This made it seem like they were forced to speak with me – a strictly unacceptable condition according to documentary ethics. Yet, the fact that we had both been misinformed, and that acceding to the power terms dictated by the pimps was the only way to reveal the coercive character of the situation, made it a very valuable document for me.

While waiting to begin the interview, I filmed the nervous way in which the three women moved around the room – getting up, sitting down again, reclining, hiding behind each other, constantly reshuffling their positions on the queen-size bed in an effort to place themselves in the best, or possibly the least, favorable position in front of the camera. For the longest time, they rearranged their bodies in new positions, gradually becoming conscious of the humorous manner in which they were simultaneously hindering my task as a camerawoman and undermining the pimps’ authority. It is this awkward choreography that tells us more convincingly than any verbal statement about



the women’s discomfort with their labor and with exposing themselves in this intimate, transitory space determined by capitalist relations. With their pointless moving around the room, they were able to appropriate the space in an anti-productive, playful and resistant way.

It is this unspectacular and unassuming form of resistance – discovered through a process of minute observation – which I have often chosen as my object of representation. This is not because it has any real power to change economic relations, but because – in representation – the momentary but highly symbolic agency of women hardly ever comes into view. In the end, hard facts always veer toward a discourse of exploitation, rarely revealing strategies of mobility, slyness, and inventiveness, which are ultimately required in these geographies of survival.

There is another section I want to comment on briefly – File Four, in which I raise a number of questions concerning the status of images, the gathering of visual data, the capturing of events and my own role as an embedded artist. On a spring morning in 2005, I filmed the Turkish police evicting a thousand Kurds from the vast recycling area on the periphery of Ankara, which was the existential basis for an entire community. The massive attack by armed forces came out of the blue: in no time at all, the area was turned into a war zone filled with smoke, screams and tear gas. Recyclers desperately tried to salvage mattresses and huge bags of other precious recycling materials. Others defiantly set stacks of paper, cardboard and PET bottles on fire rather than leave them for the enemy. Several bulldozers razed their shacks to the ground and tankers rolled over the debris, spraying water in all directions, to try to keep the crowd at bay. These were difficult filming conditions and the dramatic video material was no less difficult to insert into a piece that was otherwise a slow-paced encounter with places and people. The scene is not in the immediate proximity of BTC construction sites, but it is not entirely unrelated to the pipeline project since its trajectory had to circumvent Kurdish areas for fear of sabotage, and the eviction in Ankara could be interpreted as a signal from the authorities to keep a rebellious community in check. For my part, I was most concerned with the risk of turning this scene of desperation into a media spectacle. This prompted me to introduce a strong reflexive element by showing webcam images of myself sitting at a desk viewing film footage and speaking into the microphone. My voiceover questions the role of the embedded artist and the value of images produced under dangerous conditions. I am not usually in favor of the kind of self-indulgent artistic practice that making a personal appearance in my video would suggest, but in this instance there was a need to counterbalance the drama of the scene.

The glimpse into my work environment, where the video material is viewed, manipulated and given meaning, is one way of breaking up the immediate thrill that dramatic images can produce. It is an expression of my vacillation between the urgency of documenting conspicuous injustice, inherent in the violent act of eviction, and the reluctance to represent human crisis as a spectacle. Ultimately, spectacle is produced through editing and commentary as much as in framing decisions. So, File Four is a record of people's displacement, their urban struggle and their loss of land; at the same time, it is also a reflection on the practice of, and conditions for, image-making in the drama of a moment in which a thousand citizens lose their existence before our eyes.

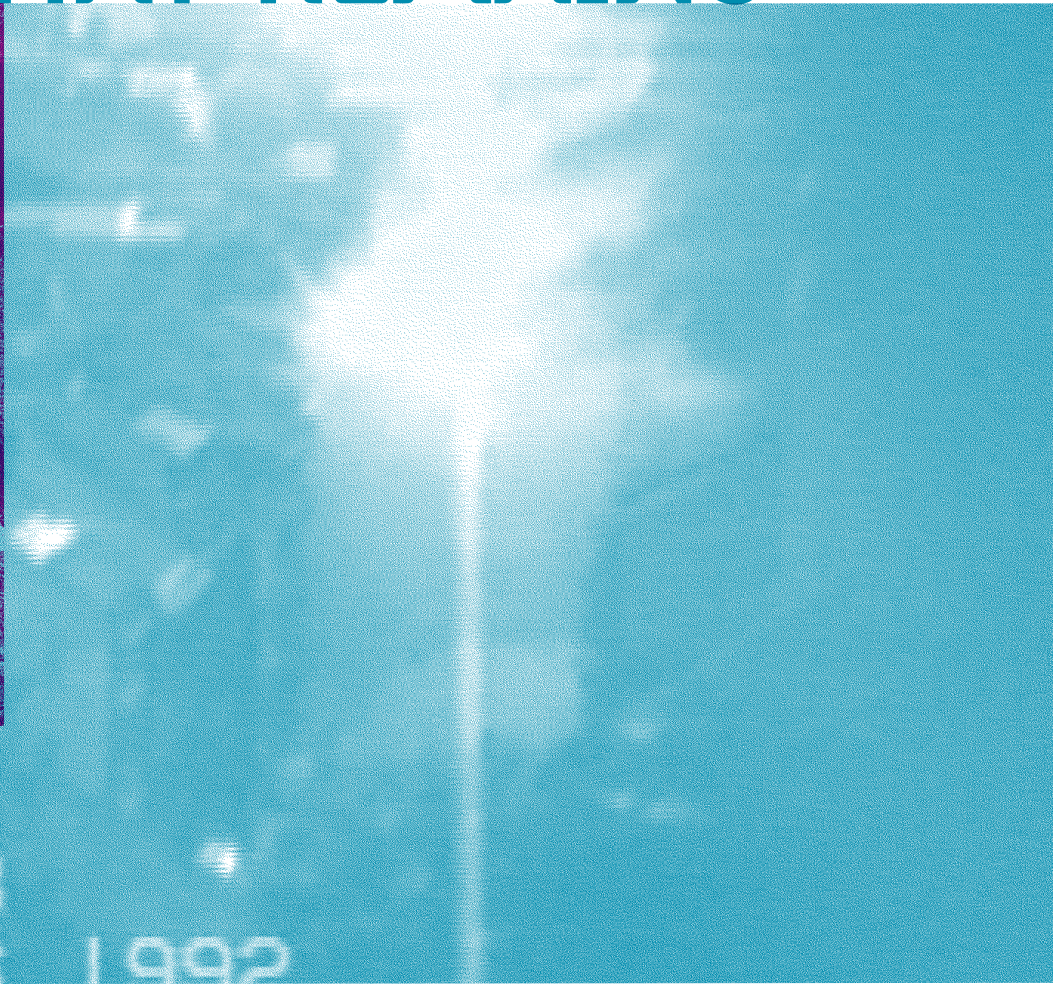
The images of the battle in the recycling fields of Ankara serve another vital function in the video; they stand for the countless violations accompanying the construction and maintenance of the oil facilities which neither I, nor anyone else, was able to document. It is as if the violence of the Ankara footage performs an emotional transfer onto those peaceful images of the pipeline, lying innocuously in the grass, waiting to be buried, which alone do not adequately represent the pipeline project.

A massive foreign incision into a fragile region in historical transition is bound to trigger psychosocial dynamics, provoke social reconfigurations, reshuffle economic privileges, reconnect old ethnic ties and create new affiliations across the board. It is the tireless representation of these micro-political adjustments that can begin to illuminate the meaning of these fundamental geopolitical transformations.





# 04 ALL THAT REMAINS





# DO YOU REMEMBER

by Thomas Keenan

**Thomas Keenan** teaches human rights and literary theory at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where he directs the Human Rights Project. He is the author of *Mengele's Skull* (with Eyal Weizman, 2012), *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (1997) and co-editor of *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* (with Wendy Chun, 2006).

Thomas Keenan reflects on *Do You Remember Sarajevo* (2002, video, 52 min., Bosnian with English subtitles) by Sead & Nihad Kresevljaković, which was created from video material shot by residents of Sarajevo during the siege from 1992 to 1995. When violence broke out in the city, an officer in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian army is said to have made an appeal to residents to use video cameras and start filming, in an attempt to influence the course of events. A few hundred video cameras were switched on by their owners to document everyday life under siege.

*“Do You Remember Sarajevo”* (Sjećaš li se Sarajeva) asks a question but withholds the question mark.

Without it, the question about remembering becomes itself a sort of reminder, a provocation or a call to memory. It is phrased gently, openly, but it speaks with the insistence of a demand.

In that sense, it is something like a rhetorical question, a question to which the answer is so obvious that it goes without saying. One would ask this quasi-question in the mode of reminiscence, recollecting a time gone by, perhaps even with fondness while leafing through a photo album or watching home movies. The phrase seems either to take for granted the possibility of the memory it seeks to provoke, or to urge that it come to light.

But the answer is not so obvious. The title also questions the obvious, the self-evidence of the answer – and indeed of self-evidence in general, especially that of the visual. The film presents an archive of evidence, and asks what became of it.

*Do You Remember Sarajevo* explores this evidence in order to confront us with the tensions and contradictions that emerge within it. Is it for memory? Or was it for putting an end to what it recorded – in which case its memorial status is little more than a consolation? And what sort of memory is it?

The film concludes with the oft-repeated motto of the eighteenth-century Sarajevo historian Mula Mustafa Bašeskija: “What is written remains, what is remembered fades.” What are we watching – writing, or memory?

First we see the blood. Then the story begins: with a lie, a report of a lie, and its exposure as it’s being reported. Two claims enter into conflict. There is a dispute about what’s happening, as it’s happening. It is not simply reported by the film; it happens in the film. In the image, the event and its description intersect, and diverge, at the same time.

It’s the 9th of April, 1992, according to the date stamp on the videotape, a Thursday, and the artillery of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) is shelling Sarajevo. What would soon come to be understood as a war had broken out a few days earlier. The European Community had recognized Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state that week, and Serbian fighters and the JNA had started shooting. Arkan’s Tigers had just taken Zvornik, and there were already clashes – and death – in Sarajevo.

In a shelter, people are listening to the radio: JNA commanding officer General Milutin Kukanjac has been reached on the phone and is assuring his interviewers that “the soldiers are not shelling from the Yugoslav Army barracks.” Someone shouts, “How can he lie when we all can see that they’re shelling?”

Then, outside, the camera captures a man in a beret pointing to the place from which the shells are coming. “It’s obvious who’s shooting. There they are, in the Jajce army barracks.”

Indoors, a woman reports having heard the “colonel, or was he a general, I’m not sure. He said that they were not shooting, actually, that shooting has stopped, and at the same moment I heard shots. I called the television and radio, asking them to require for something to be done. But nobody is doing anything.”

At that moment, there is an explosion. The decisive sound is registered visually in the sag and flinch of the woman's shoulders.

"It's obvious who's shooting... but nobody is doing anything." As it happened, Sarajevo became a metonym for the phenomenon of a slaughter that was thoroughly reported on as it occurred, that was lied about and the lies rebutted, and that simply continued to happen even as all this was documented. The story of the failure, or rather the refusal, to stop these open assaults on civilians and their city has been generalized and idealized into nothing less



than a fundamental paradigm of human rights violations in the post-Cold War West.

This film, though, tells the story in a very different way – as a matter of an experience, of lives that are lived, as what ought to be stopped isn't. It chronicles the passage of time in Sarajevo for those who were subject to the siege and who continued to document it. Objects of both attack and documentation, they also recorded the story themselves. "Sarajevans," the film concludes, "lived in a film of their own."

"*Do You Remember Sarajevo*" makes this claim on two levels, which would be tempting to distinguish in terms of literal and figurative.

Figurative. *Sarajevo* was *like* a film. It had little precedent in reality, but what happened there was uncomfortably similar to things that had been previously imagined in films. It was as if one had to turn to film in order to get a sense of what was happening in reality, that understanding had to pass by way of film in order to return to the city. As one of the most remarkable documents to emerge from the siege put it: "*Sarajevo is the city of the future and of life in the post-cataclysm. In it on the ruins of the old civilization a new one is sprouting, an alternative one, composed of the remains of urban elements. Sarajevo lives a life of futuristic comics and science fiction movies.*"<sup>1</sup>

Literal. A minute or so later, the film begins again with another official voice, this one broadcast on television. Dragan Vikić, commander of a MUP (special police) unit in Sarajevo, also sends a message to the citizenry through an interviewer: "I would really like to ask you to appeal, if you can, to all citizens who own video cameras to start filming, as their material will definitely have an effect."

<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Prstojevic, Zeljko Puljic, Maja Razovic, Aleksandra Wagner, and Bora Cosic, *Sarajevo: Survival Guide*, (Sofia: FAMA Publishers, 1993), 89.



It was the moment of the camcorder, the dawn of a new citizens' videography, and what we see in the film is the result of their response to this appeal: "The film was recorded by the video cameras of the citizens of Sarajevo."

This civil imagination, to borrow a phrase from Ariella Azoulay, was not just the documentation of a life but itself a way of living. "Lived in a film of their own" suggests that videotaping was not just something people did in order to record what was happening to them, but that it was a sort of structuring principle of the siege experience. Because nothing and no one stopped the shelling, least of all the film they were shooting and the world that was watching, life became a film.

Writing from Sarajevo in 1996, Elizabeth Rubin told the story of Kristijan Ivelic, a radio host she had met there during the war, who had become unusually alert to figurative language:

*Then he went off again about the inadequacy of language, how simile and metaphor had been vitiated in Sarajevo under siege: it was not like a nightmare, or like a shooting gallery, or like a killing ghetto, or like a zoo. When a man recovering from a shrapnel wound in the hospital is shot dead by a sniper through the hospital window, what is there to say? Or a boy runs from the bomb shelter to pee upstairs and is shot in the neck by a sniper hundreds of yards away? Or a Serbian woman living in Sarajevo returns to her apartment and finds her complete works of Serbian literature burnt up by a mortar fired by the Bosnian Serbs? As Kristijan was fond of saying, "Sarajevo is easier to survive than to understand."<sup>2</sup>*

"Do You Remember Sarajevo" is a document of survival precisely in this sense, of a survival that frustrates understanding, that resists being made sense of, that undoes the



reassuring distinctions about representation and documentation that usually guide us through perplexity.

Whether this survival is a sign of success or failure is hard to say: that is exactly one of those distinctions, which seem no longer pertinent in a film like this.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, "Surviving Sarajevo," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1996, 44-57.

# THE LEAKED IMAGE: WEAPON IN THE HANDS OF REVOLUTIONARIES OR DOCUMENT OF PAIN?

by **Mohammad Al Attar**

translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

**Mohammad Al Attar** is a Syrian playwright and drama practitioner. He graduated with degrees in English literature from Damascus University and applied drama from Goldsmiths, University of London. In 2006, Al Attar joined the Studio Theatre Company in Damascus, participated in several interactive projects in rural areas, and was the dramaturge for some of the company's plays, including an improvisational performance with juvenile prisoners in Damascus. Al Attar worked as a dramaturge for productions directed by Omar Abusaada, Yaser Abedlilatif and Bissan al-Sharif. His play *Withdrawal* was performed in London, New York, New Delhi, Berlin, Tunis and Beirut. His play *Online* was premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London. His most recent play *Look at the Camera* was premiered in Brussels and Berlin. Al Attar has published numerous texts for performances and critical contributions in several Arab newspapers and magazines.

Through the recurrent agonies of the city of Hama, Mohammad Al Attar interrogates the common assumption that the proper documentation of violence helps to prevent it from happening again. The essay explores why images of the brutal crackdown on the city, which exist today while they were lacking thirty years ago, have not yet succeeded in deterring the Syrian regime from repeating its crimes. This article first appeared in April 2012 in the Egyptian weekly newspaper, Akhbar al-Adab.

*To Rami al-Sayed, Mazhar Tayara and all those who have made, and continue to make, sacrifices in order to document the revolution.*

### **Naser al-Shami: The Hero's Tears and a City's Tragedy**

It was in 2004, during the Olympic Games in Athens, that Syrians first became acquainted with golden boy Naser al-Shami, the young boxer who managed to bring home only the third Olympic medal in Syria's history. He had won a bronze, but more important than the medal itself was the fact that this young man from Hama was completely unknown at the time of his extraordinary achievement. It was said that he had worked as a butcher to support himself. I have yet to verify that claim, but the fact is that I believed it, influenced no doubt by the undying image of young Rocky Balboa working in a slaughterhouse to earn his daily crumbs.

What I remember best about al-Shami is not the tears pouring from his eyes as he prostrated himself in the ring after beating his Azerbaijani opponent and securing the bronze, but rather his performance in the semi-finals. I remember the smile that never left his face, under a rain of blows from his opponent Odlanier Solis-Fonte, a former world champion and exponent of the Cuban boxing style, which traditionally holds a monopoly on gold medals at the Games.

Solis-Fonte went on to win the gold with ease, but it made no difference to myself and other Syrians, for whom there was only one hero: Naser al-Shami, the poor, anonymous young man from Hama, semi-professional like all athletes from Syria. His tearful eyes swollen like a child's, he danced around the ring emblazoned with his national flag, beside himself with his all-but-impossible achievement: as Solis-Fonte battered away, al-Shami knew he had surpassed expectations just by reaching this advanced stage.

That was Athens in the summer of 2004.

A few weeks ago, Naser al-Shami returned to the spotlight, though under quite different circumstances. By chance I found myself watching footage of al-Shami on an Arabic-language news channel, hobbling around on crutches and unable to move one of his legs.

This time, he wasn't in a boxing ring, but a modestly furnished room. There were no tears in his eyes as he spoke to the camera, explaining how the sniper's bullets had penetrated his leg as he tried to stop a taxi. He told us how he had left his training camp in Damascus a few days earlier and returned home to Hama, after refusing to participate in the suppression of protestors in the capital's al-Qaboun neighborhood. The childlike glee had vanished from his face. His defeat seemed to weigh heavily on him, as though he could not quite fathom it: how had he, a boxer, become a cripple? Whose bullet had done this to him? There is no shame being beaten in a fair fight inside the ring, but where's the justice in this defeat?

Naser plays with his daughter sitting in his lap. Gloom pervades his features as he tells of how his father was killed in the early eighties, during the massacre in Hama. He was not even a year old at the time. Hafez al-Assad had made this tiny infant an orphan twice over: his father murdered and his city destroyed and stripped of its spirit. Now Hafez's son Bashar had made Naser the boxer, Naser the defiant, into a cripple, who shared a tiny fourth-floor flat without an elevator with a group of friends who together had fled the doomed city of Hama for Amman, Jordan.

### **The Role of the Image in the Revolution: Is it Truly our Most Effective Weapon?**

The tragedy of Naser al-Shami's story transcends the

double horror visited on the man and his hometown; it is a savage reminder of how in Syria, history reproduces brutality. The victims of the past are shown no mercy by this repetition, but are punished anew, as though their first, barely-healed wounds do not suffice.

By this reckoning, Hama is a torment to all of Syria's revolutionaries. The city's suffering over the course of the last year embodies the broken hopes and lost dreams that made us believe that our best weapon in this new and modern revolution was "the image." The image would prevent the regime from reprising the criminal acts of past decades, symbolized by the massacre that took place in Hama in 1982.

From the outset, the image gave us our victories. In Deraa and Douma, then Baniyas, Homs and Salamiya, then throughout Syria, images were leaked to the global public. Blurred, shaky and confused they may have been, but they were enough to give us a clear picture of a people revolting at long last for the sake of their dignity.

They also showed us how the security forces dealt with those calling for freedom from the first days of the popular movement, before the militarization of the revolution was ever considered even by the demonstrators themselves.

The leaked images were our strongest support, our evidence of the regime's lack of morality in its confrontations with the peaceful protests. They were our scream to the world, our voice finally restored. But first and foremost, these leaked images were our gamble: our hoped-for immunity against the vengeance of the authorities. No matter how much the regime tried to hide or deny its crimes, to cut off communications and lie, we lay in wait. This was our time and these were our tools. We weren't in

the Syria of the 1980s any more: the regime wouldn't dare repeat its crimes.

At least that's what we thought at the time.

Now, more than a year after the outbreak of the revolution, with thousands of leaked images and reports documenting the strategies of organized repression employed by the regime, it seems clear that we have lost our gamble.

A whole year has passed since footage was leaked of soldiers and *shabiha* gangsters trampling on the backs of young men in the village of al-Baida, near Baniyas. When it was released, the footage shocked the world; and the regime, uncertain how to deny the veracity of the film, came up with lies, excuses that were glaringly contradictory, before giving up and implicitly conceding that it was real. At this juncture, both sides seemed to recognize that this would be the new decisive battleground: demonstrators brandishing camera-phones versus authorities who for decades had monitored, censored and controlled the media and all forms of communication.

The authorities were incapable of rising to this new challenge. They panicked, first telling flagrant, transparent lies, then broadcasting images of their own to counter the narrative of the revolutionaries and their sympathizers. Of course, this was accompanied by the arrest and maltreatment of anyone who was found taking pictures or in contact with the media. When the security troops were sent in to break up demonstrations, the "mobile phone militia" knew they were the primary targets.

For a long time, this new dynamic convinced us that the image was going to make the difference and force the regime to abandon its excessive use of violence. The image

would deter the government from returning to the dark arts it practised in the 1980s.

### **From a Safeguard against Violence to a Document of Pain**

We had grown up paralyzed with fear; our young minds shaped by tales of torture and mass murder. Perhaps the most striking of all these horror stories was the tale of what happened in Hama in the early 1980s during the struggle between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Every Syrian of my generation or younger is familiar with the ambiguous, even misleading, term we use to refer to this massacre: “the events of Hama.” We have no documented proof to help heal this wound and purge our pain, just whispered stories and the unshakeable conviction that if people inside Syria and abroad had known what was taking place in the city over the course of twenty-seven days in 1982, it would never have happened in the first place.

But what a terrible coincidence! In 2012, despite the images, audio, and occasional live feed, the district of Bab Amr in Homs was besieged and bombarded for twenty-six days straight. And as if this were not tragic enough, on the third of February, 2012, the first ever commemoration of the 1982 Hama massacre, another atrocity took place in Homs’s al-Khaldyia neighborhood, but this time captured in photographs and video footage.

And yet, the very people who seemed capable of closing their eyes to the images of daily destruction and death in Homs and elsewhere, could not look away when American journalist Mary Colvin and French photographer Remi Ochlik were killed during the vicious assault on Bab Amr. Foreign blood had mixed with the blood of Syrians (which, by the way, does not seem to be worth much on the world blood markets these days).

As these lines are being written, the government’s army is targeting Homs and the surrounding countryside – not to mention a number of other places in Syria – with mortar fire and heavy artillery. Images of corpses and refugees have become our daily bread. Not that they are confined to the Arabic language media: these pictures appear in international news broadcasts every day and sometimes on the front pages of respected magazines and newspapers. And it isn’t just Syrian activists and revolutionaries who are responsible, either. Foreign reporters have entered the country, most of them smuggled in, such as British photographer Paul Conroy, French journalist Edith Bouvier and Spanish reporter Javier Espinoza. There is even a French doctor, Dr. Jacques Beres, one of the founders of Médecins Sans Frontières.

This time, there is no shortage of documentation, no scarcity of the glossy images that were lacking in the Syria of the 1980s, when Robert Fisk was the lone witness to a city reduced to rubble.

But pictures did not stop the torture, nor did they deter the regime’s killing machine as we had hoped. Some might say there can be no comparison: estimates of the victims of the Hama massacre range between fifteen and forty thousand. The current crisis has yet to reach such numbers. Documentation of Hama-like casualties would make it impossible for any country (even those complicit in the regime’s activities) to keep silent or make do with international monitors. Others point out that the regime, for these very reasons, has yet to deploy its full military arsenal. It has hardly used the air force, for example.

Such observations are valid as far as the extent of the destruction goes and the number of victims. However, after a year-long brutal crackdown, I regard this argument as

weak, quite apart from rejecting the premise that atrocities can be quantified by counting up the dead, as if a single Syrian killed by a soldier for demanding freedom cannot be considered a significant event in and of itself. If we recognize its significance, then what are we to make of thousands murdered for this very reason, plus twice that many driven from their homes or detained? How do we reckon with the torture and abuse suffered, when people are arrested and torture continues as I write, despite the thousands of video clips and photographs exposing the practice?

Today, over a year into the revolution, the impact of the image seems to have undergone a tragic shift. Many Syrians now avoid browsing through pictures and clips of martyrs, murders and massacres, just as they lower the volume on their television sets when they hear pleas for assistance from Khaled Abou Salah, Hadi Abdullah and others, who continue to document and broadcast these tales of death and terror. Their testimonies, which once thrilled us as victories over the regime's media blackout, have become proof of our impotence.

Can we forget that some have paid for these images with their lives? Can we forget the astonishing example of the Syrian citizen reporter, Rami al-Sayed, who documented the siege of Bab Amr until he too fell victim to the merciless artillery bombardment? I am prepared to bet that those of Rami's comrades who are still alive and on the run know full well that their phone cameras and Skype connections cannot save them from a sniper's round fired from a rooftop or some half-rusted artillery shell that has made its lethal way from an army depot to a crater in a village or urban neighborhood. Yet despite this certainty, they keep going, unflinchingly moving towards their ultimate goal.

Are they even aware that their images and live reports have not, and will not, deter the murderous regiment of the Syrian regime? Most likely, they are. Do they cling to an increasingly unfounded hope? Perhaps. Yet without a doubt they also know that they are documenting our pain and impotence, and with it the failure of the rest of the world, whether lackluster or actively complicit. They know, too, that they are forging a document for the future, for the generations to come that will live, or so we hope, in a different Syria. These citizens will learn how Syrians sacrificed themselves in great numbers, how they paid a heavy price for the future that for now remains their present.

### **The Leaked Image: Utopia versus Reality**

When we assume that documenting events and broadcasting them abroad will deter the regime from repeating its past actions, we are not talking about the image in isolation, but rather depending on the political and popular response it provokes. In other words, we were dependent on the moral conscience. During this time of Arab uprisings, we have started to reconsider whether this moral conscience can play an effective role.

This is the heart of the problem; our utopian error, if you will. It seems clear enough now, that the shaming effect of these images – their power of deterrence – has a negligible impact compared to a phone call from Moscow, Tehran or Washington and other capitals. These centers of power do not seem overly interested in our images, though they have naturally treated them differently from the Syrian regime, which rejects them wholesale. Even if leaked testimonies and irritatingly insistent witnesses have influenced the decisions of these powers, such influence remains far weaker than their own national interests and the pragmatism that governs all their policies.

The image's failure to deter the regime is thus a failure for which the image itself (often spattered with the blood of its author) is not culpable. It is more fitting to call it a catastrophic moral failure of all those who ignored it when they were in a position to stop the river of blood. For this reason, I believe today that our tendency to entertain the idea that the regime could not commit certain acts in the age of the image stems from our reliance on the exaggerated claims of past narratives, in which past atrocities were thought to have been possible only because there was no way of proving their occurrence. Yet this is to ignore the other reasons: international and regional complicity and alliances, even the collaboration of a segment of Syrian society.

This reminds us of the possibility that other actors share responsibility for keeping the dark deeds of the 1980s under wraps, as neither the Syrian regime, nor any foreign government, has ever made a concerted effort to draw attention to these events. In light of current events in Syria, it is hard to believe that politicians and leaders around the world knew nothing of what was taking place in Hama in the early eighties. In that same vein, there must have been those in Syria who knew. Of course, it would have been impossible to have as exact an idea of the horrors that were taking place as we can today, courtesy of the leaked image and modern communications technology. At the same time, however, we also exaggerated in attributing all the brutal acts to the iron curtain with which the regime prevented any flow of information. Today we know for a fact that such acts can only take place with the complicity, and sometimes the blessing, of others.

Having lost our gamble that the image could effectively deter the recurrence of the excessive, organized violence perpetrated by the regime against its people in the past is evidence of nothing more or less than the moral failure of

international political will. It is the moral failure of regional and international actors who supported the regime, secretly or openly; furthermore, it is the failure of certain segments of Syrian society who apathetically stood by and let it happen. But it is not the failure of Rami al-Sayed, Hussein Gharir, Mazen Darwish, Dani Abdel Dayem or any of the other thousands of journalists, bloggers and citizen reporters who have either lost their lives, been detained, or still place themselves at risk every day.

### **Between Inspiration, Hope and the Memory of a Wound That Will Not Heal**

We had hopes of forcing the regime to abandon its violence by leaking images and reports and defying the media blackout. These hopes have mostly come to nothing and we have no choice now but to approach the situation with a more realistic eye.

Slogging through reams of regime propaganda and documenting every last incident in Syria is an ambitious task, the purpose of which far outweighs its current impact: it looks to a future time, a time that Syrians pray is near, when such images will come into their own.

Stories and films play a pivotal role in writing the history of a country at such a critical juncture. Despite the savagery and pain they contain, they may help in drawing up a new social and civil contract for a new Syria. The challenge here is a formidable one: can this visual memory – this memory of shared pain – constitute the necessary step to finally salving our deep wound, or will we carelessly draw on the bitterness it elicits to ensure that this same wound never stops bleeding?

In the past, the enforced absence of the image meant the absence of justice. It allowed crime and evidence to remain



concealed, and the dictator to distort memory and history to his own ends, though not forever. The current ubiquity of the image, though often a document of pain and a witness to our impotence, nevertheless paves the way for a future free of all constraints. The insistence on sending images abroad – documenting suffering and breaking through the rusted iron curtain – symbolizes the fall of a regime that belongs to the past; an intimation of history's inevitable tidal pull against a regime that owes its survival to the excessive use of force and regional deal-making. Continuing to leak these images, with all the noble sacrifices that make it possible, is a victory for the spirit of this young, ambitious, contemporary and courageous revolution.

A part of our memory lies lost in a black hole. The agonies of Hama are buried in silence; images of Naser al-Shami's father and thousands like him who fell before the barbarous machinery of repression never saw the light of day. Today, the image has failed to prevent a recurrence of that city's sufferings. It has failed to protect the tottering orphan, Naser al-Shami. The wound is still open.

Yet the true gamble, the true hope, is that this visual memory can slip from the executioner's grip to create a future in which we will never again permit such systematic violence to occur, a future free of despotic, tyrannical authorities that act above law, rather than to continue to act as a document of endless pain, nourishing bitter resentment that may do away with what little remains of Syria's social cohesion, which is already frayed by long decades of totalitarian and despotic state policies.

The hope is that Syrians will keep making the sacrifices and investing the courage necessary to leak this visual testimony. In today's Syria, such documentation and testimony derives its value first and foremost from the selfless-

ness and bravery of those who record it. We are indebted to them and we must not forget it, despite the horror of what their images contain.

The hope remains that Naser al-Shami's father can rest in peace, knowing that his granddaughter has inherited a Syria better than the one bequeathed to his orphaned son. It is the hope that she will live in a city that has buried its pain alongside its torturers and now moves forward, its wounds healed.

# ONLINE

by **Mohammad Al Attar**

translated from the Arabic by Clem Naylor

[Mohammad Al Attar](#) biography on page 208.

The play **Online** premiered in August 2011 at the Royal Court Theatre, as part of **After The Spring** directed by Simon Godwin. Written four months after the outbreak of the Syrian uprisings, the play is set some three months earlier in April 2011, and takes the form of a week-long email exchange between three young Syrians separated by geography and complex circumstances. Through their letters, the friends reveal their fear and uncertainty, their feeling of impotence and overwhelming desire to take some kind of action. The letters also speak of their friendship, their developing relationships and how their personal lives are affected by the seismic tremors of the uprisings. By focusing on the correspondence between the three, the play attempts to explore the new language created by modern forms of communication and how it affects our daily dealings with others and even the way we think. This new language has imposed its peculiarities and aesthetics on traditional literary forms. The play also examines the role of cyberspace in the lives of young Syrians: an alternative, free space that offers some respite from the stifling restrictions of the real world. The characters are engaged in an exhausting, internal struggle over the possibilities for action in both worlds. Though it seems certain that the real world offers the clearest, surest path to change, what will be the consequences of such action? Are we brave enough to find out?

### Characters

- Salma:** 25, finishing her postgraduate studies in architectural engineering in Paris.
- Sharif:** 26, a pharmacist working for a pharmaceutical company in Damascus.
- Amer:** 26, a freelance graphics specialist and designer.

### 11:06 pm, Friday 15<sup>th</sup> April 2011 ("The Friday of Persistence"), Damascus.

*Sharif's bedroom. Sharif sits on the single bed in his small room and puts a laptop in front of him.*

**Sharif:** Salmaaaaaaa!

Where are you? I need to speak to you. I don't have any credit so I can't call you and the Internet here is so shit that I can hardly get online.

I'm ashamed at what I've done. It makes me sick. I saw my friends getting beaten up right in front of me and I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't say anything, I didn't make a sound. All the words inside me just dried up.

Seven or eight of them attacked Samer and started pounding him like barbarians. People in the street were standing there watching. They didn't come close, though, like they were watching a soccer match. Then they took him away. They dragged him off with his eye all swollen and blood streaming out.

And it wasn't just Samer – they took Shadi and Reem too. Sorry to be bringing such bad news but I really don't know what other news I can bring you from Damascus.

I can tell you, for example, that today was the best Friday we've had – only three killed, that's what they're saying. Do you see how the dead just turn into numbers?

What I saw today was uglier than bullets, though. There were people there who were totally crazed, complete animals. It's true that bullets kill people straight away but at least they save us from seeing the eyes of the person who's shooting. Today I saw real, living faces. Where do people get all that cruelty from?

But the ugliest thing I saw today was my fear and my helplessness. When the guys decided to set off on the march and start chanting, I couldn't go with them. I watched from the distance when they were getting beaten up and it was as if I didn't know them. Fear turns out to be a bigger obstacle than I expected. Or am I more of a coward than I thought? Maybe both. Maybe it would have been more noble of me not to go out at all.

*(We hear the voice of his mother offstage: "Sharif? Where are you?")*

Of course my family didn't know that I went out. My mom would have had a heart attack. I mean, why not just watch and support, you know. We don't actually have to be with them. We like them and we pray for them but we do wish they'd stay away from us. My dad definitely knows but he pretends not to. I mean, why else would I leave the house on a Friday morning? It's a sort of pact of silence and it's better like that. Fear has taken hold of all of us.

*(Sharif's mother again: "Sharif sweetie, come and say goodbye to your nephews.")*

I've got to go.

What about you, how are you? What have you been up to? Staying out late, I bet. I really miss you, by the way.

Lots of kisses.

**2:21 am, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2011, Paris.**

*Salma's bedroom. She is sitting in front of a small table with a laptop on it. Next to her, there is a big mug of tea.*

**Salma:** I just got your email. I wanted to call but then I realized you'd be asleep. I've been so worried about you and I can't stop thinking about Samer and Shadi and Reem.

You shouldn't blame yourself, though. What could you have done anyway? I don't think they would be any better off if you were with them now. I know how you must be feeling – if I feel like I'm suffocating here then how must it be for you? Sometimes I do think, though, that, in spite of everything, things are better for you. Being far away makes you feel twice as helpless and twice as sad.

Promise me that you'll be alright.

I wish you were here.

Look after yourself.

**10:34am, 16<sup>th</sup> April, Damascus.**

*Amer's bedroom. Amer is sitting at his desk, which is a complete mess. Next to him is a plate covered with cigarette butts. He is smoking and drinking instant coffee.*

**Amer:** Hello lovely people,

We've done some pages for Samer, Shadi and Reem, and people have started sharing them. Salma, please can you translate them into French? If you could do it today, that would be great. Send them to my other email.

I'm still not that worried about them going into our emails and Facebook messages. I don't think they can do it very easily unless they're really bothered about a particular person. And to be honest, the easiest way for them to deal with someone they're really bothered about would be to take them in. Then of course they'd inevitably realize that that they'd got the one who murdered JFK. Basically, the same old way of doing things still works – if it ain't broke why fix it.

Personally, I'm going to carry on as a cyber warrior until further notice. It's all I can do.

Salam everybody.

**2:14am, 17<sup>th</sup> April (Syrian Independence Day), Damascus.**

*Sharif's bedroom. He is sitting on his bed.*

**Sharif:** Hi Salma, you're not online. Where are you?

I just wanted to thank you for calling today. I liked the language that we made up. Maybe I'll work on it and make a dictionary out of it – it looks like we'll be using it a lot more.

I wonder where they are now and what's happening to them. Actually, maybe it's better that I don't know – my imagination really runs away with me.

The most horrible thing isn't just thinking about where I am now compared to where Samer and the others might be, it's that there are moments when I forget that they're there. It feels like sympathy and sadness are emotions that are dishonest, hypocritical, even selfish. I mean, we get angry just for the sake of doing something when there's nothing else we can do. It makes me sick that we sometimes forget that we have friends who are inside. We laugh and we eat nice food and we

go out and then we get back to being angry again, and sometimes to crying, too.

Maybe reading this will make you upset with me, but I'm really just saying what I feel and you really are the only person I can say this to. Sometimes I think it's good that you're not here – it means I can say what I actually feel. Maybe if you were here then I wouldn't be able to say anything to you. Sometimes I'm relieved to see you're not online, because I know that I'll be more honest when I don't actually speak to you. Can you see how being apart sometimes has its advantages? Anyway, I don't know if I'm close to what's happening. I mean, think about it: you're on the other side of the world and I'm here in Damascus, but both of us are the same distance from Samer. I don't even know where he is. What's the difference between you and me? Nothing. I don't agree with what you said yesterday – sometimes I think that when you're close, you feel a lot more helpless.

Sorry for sending such a depressing message. You see, even wanting to open up can be a selfish feeling.

We're going to try to do something today. I won't go into the details now but we're definitely going to try, that's for sure.

Thank you for being there and for being so close.

Bye.

**3:45pm, 17<sup>th</sup> April, Paris.**

*Salma's room.*

**Salma:** Where are you, Sharif? I'm worried about you.

You hung up when I called earlier and you haven't had any reception since then. I spoke to Amer and he said he couldn't get through to you either because your mobile's off. Please call me or send a text when you can.

I read your message again and it made me even more worried, and I don't agree that it's selfish or dishonest of us to be worried and afraid. Life goes on in spite of everything.

Happy to hear that me being away makes it easier for you to tell me how you really feel about things. Sounds like a good reason for me not to come back, don't you think?

No, not really. Not true. I really miss Damascus – every bit of it, every street in it, everyone there. I'm with all of you all the time, through the TV and through Facebook. My life here has ground to a halt. There are only two solutions – either I come to be with you or all of you come here.

Let me know you're ok quickly... please. I need you to.

**12:47am, 18<sup>th</sup> April, Paris.**

*Salma is lying on her bed.*

**Salma:** Where are you????????????????????

**2:47am, 18<sup>th</sup> April, Damascus.**

*Sharif's room. He is sitting on the floor, his back against the bed.*

**Sharif:** I'm sorry I couldn't speak to you and didn't pick up when you called. There was no way I could speak. I hope you got the message I sent you.

Anyway, there's no reason to be worried. Nothing happened to us. We went to a café and had tea and coffee and juice and every other drink they had. Unsurprisingly, half the people who promised they'd come didn't show up so there were so few of us there that it would have been pretty much suicidal to do anything. I think it's right that you can't blame people or expect too much of them in these circumstances but I do feel like we're too scared – if we don't stand up for the things we've spent our whole lives talking about now then when will we? To be honest, I wonder if things would have been ok today, whether I would have marched or I would have just carried on watching. To tell you the truth, I couldn't hide my relief when I realized we weren't going to go.

Then I went to Samer's to visit his family. His dad either wasn't there or didn't want to see me. You can imagine how his mom was. I obviously didn't admit that I was with him when he was taken. She doesn't even know how he was taken or how he was beaten up in the street. I spent half an hour making up all sorts of optimistic stories and scenarios. The poor woman hasn't slept for two days.

By the way, tonight will be Samer, Shadi and Reem's third night in... who knows where!! It's not just that we don't know what's happening to them, we don't even know where they are. When I picture this unknown location, this location which must really exist, it's always dark and gloomy. I don't know whether that's the influence of films and books, but everything that comes to my mind is dark.

I came out of Samer's house feeling like I was being strangled and I was about to stop in the street there and scream when I started thinking about what they would say if they took me: "You took part in a demonstration?" What, was there no-one else? "Saboteur?" I didn't sabotage anything. Unless they've started arresting people because they can't sing, in which case

they'd have every right to take me because I've got such a terrible voice... . Then I came back to my senses and stopped being so unrealistic – they don't need any excuse for taking someone. So I stayed quiet, took a deep breath, and walked on. You see what being realistic does to you?

I understand everything you said and how you feel when you're so far away. Maybe it's easier for you if we all to come to you. Fine, I'll get everyone together and we'll come over. I'll bring you some stones, a bit of soil and a handful of memories from Damascus, and some photos, naturally. What do you think about that? Good plan?

Damascus really misses you too. It really does. And so do I.

Sorry again.

**1:50am, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2011, Damascus.**

*Amer's room. Amer is sitting at his desk, which is a complete mess. He is smoking and drinking beer.*

**Amer:** Hello my friends, I hope you're better than me, because I'm pretty shit.

Before I forget – thank you for doing the translation, Salma. Samer's page has got over 1,300 members and Reem's has over 1,500, and it's only been three days.

I'm sure you all know about what happened to Bilal and how they took him from his house for no reason. What am I saying!? As if they usually have a good reason! But the strange thing about what happened to Bilal is that they took him from inside his house, and as far as I know he wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary.



The pictures and the news coming from Homs really are frightening this time. I can't take it any more – I can't see one more video. I'm afraid of desensitizing myself completely, or of getting addicted to them and needing my fix of blood every night before I go to sleep, or something.

I'm seriously considering going to stay with my brother in Doha or with my aunt in Beirut. I haven't decided yet but I'm definitely leaving soon.

Salma, I've done a page for Bilal and I was hoping that you would help us by translating it into French. Looks like we're not going to be able to keep up with the number of pages we need... We'll see.

Salam.

**5:42pm, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2011, Paris.**

*Salma's room. She is sitting at her desk.*

**Salma:** How are you?

This isn't easy – I'm really having to force myself to write to you. I still don't understand why you didn't pick up when I called and why you didn't even try to get hold of me when I was tearing my hair out, desperate to find out what was happening to you all.

I'm really not happy. I'm fed up of being scared about people all the time. Sometimes I'm optimistic but sometimes I think that the price is going to be so high that it'd be better for us not to pay it. I feel so confused right now, and what happened yesterday really hasn't helped.

Why don't you go to Beirut with Amer? He told me that he's going to go to Beirut first and then he might go to Doha. Give it some thought.

Let me know if we can Skype today.

We really need to talk. I'll stay online all day.

I miss your voice... I miss you.

Be strong.

**1:49am, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2011, Damascus.**

*Sharif's room. He is sitting on the bed and puts his laptop on the table.*

**Sharif:** Salam.....

I'm so sorry – I haven't had Internet since yesterday morning. For some unknown reason they completely cut off 3G. I've had to resort to dial-up. It's a real pain, as you can imagine.

Still, it's good training for going back to the middle ages. Maybe soon we'll wake up and there won't be any phones, and maybe no electricity either.

I don't know what to say to you about being optimistic or pessimistic. I wanted to say that everything would be ok soon, but I can't say that. What I do know is that you've just got to decide to be optimistic at the moment – there really isn't any other option. Do you have any other suggestions?? Maybe if you were here you'd have a better feel for how brave and noble people are, you'd see how people are making us reconsider what's going on around us. Today I saw a guy who was inside and came out a few days ago. I hardly know him – he's a friend of a friend. I was hoping that he would have some news

about Samer and the others but unfortunately he hadn't seen them and didn't know anything about them. But the most important thing was his spirit. He's just a normal, average guy but his bravery and his tenacity are amazing. Even after being inside for more than 20 days, do you know what he said to me when I asked if he was optimistic? He said: "I am... because the fear inside me was shattered... It's gone now. When I was inside I kept saying to myself that this was as bad as things could get."

Hearing him saying that was like being smacked on the head. Maybe I needed that.

I'm reading your email again now. I must have read it a hundred times now. I could say it to you off by heart. When I read it I see you sitting beside me and whispering into my ear so that no-one can hear.

I've started to understand why people used to cherish letters and hide them away and lock them up. Obviously we don't write by hand or buy stamps and stick them on envelopes, and we don't have to go out to post them, but we wait for each other's messages with the same worry and the same yearning. Isn't that enough?

I'm better now and I want you to be good and strong too, for your own sake and for mine and for Samer's and everyone we love, for tomorrow, for every good thing that's going to happen... that has to happen... Promise me...

Lots of kisses.

**8:11am, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011, Paris.**

*Salma's room. Salma is sitting at her desk.*

**Salma:** Good morning, monsieur.

This is the most beautiful morning for a long, long time. The weather's nice too – the sun's shining but it's still a bit chilly.

I'm happy and optimistic and full of energy and ideas. I don't know how to start...

It's because of your message which, by the way, I'm going to print out and put in an envelope and keep. I can't promise that I'll stick stamps on it but I will put it inside a book.

What's going on with the Internet? I realized that they'd stopped the 3G because I couldn't get hold of anyone in Damascus. It wasn't exactly surprising, though.

I don't know whether you can still talk on Skype with dial-up. If not, send me a message and maybe I'll call you this evening.

I've got to go to the department now. We're organising something this evening, I'll tell you about it when we talk... I wish you were here.

Got to go. I'm late.

I love you.

Lots of kisses.

**12:21pm, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011, Damascus.**

*Sharif is sitting at his desk at work.*

**Sharif:** I love you... soooooo much.

**1:26pm, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011, Paris.**

*The university library. Salma puts earphones in her ears and writes.*

**Salma:** Where are you? Can you come online at 3 o'clock your time?  
Let me know.

**10:48pm, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011, Paris.**

*Salma's room. She is sitting on her bed.*

**Salma:** Where have you gone? Is the Internet working?

I called you just now and you didn't pick up. I really want to hear your voice before I go to sleep.

Let me know if you can. Call me whenever. Anytime you like.

**6:07pm, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2011 (known in Syria as 'Good Friday'), Paris.**

*Salma is in the university library.*

**Salma:** I don't know if my messages are getting through to you or not and your mobile hasn't had any signal since this morning. I can't get hold of anyone in Damascus.

I can barely breathe. I haven't moved for two hours – I've just been skipping from channel to channel. What's actually going on? How far are they going to go? They've already killed 130.....

I feel so alone...

I love you so much.

**10:33pm, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2011, Damascus.**

*Amer's room.*

**Amer:** Good evening, Salma.

I'm sorry, I don't have the guts to call you.

They took Sharif today. I wasn't with him so I don't know much in the way of details, but I'm afraid it's definitely true. He was in al-Midan with a whole group of people, that's where they went today. I still don't know exactly what happened. I heard about it at midday but I didn't want to tell you or anyone else, even his family, until we were sure, because sometimes people are released after a few hours.

I didn't want you to find out from Facebook or something. We don't know what we're going to tell his family. Maybe it'd be better to wait till tomorrow. What do you think?

I'm fed up. I feel like I'm suffocating...

Call me whenever you like. I don't want to go away anymore. I'm staying here. If they want to take everyone then that's fine, they can go ahead.

Stay strong and look after yourself... We've got a long way to go.

Salam.

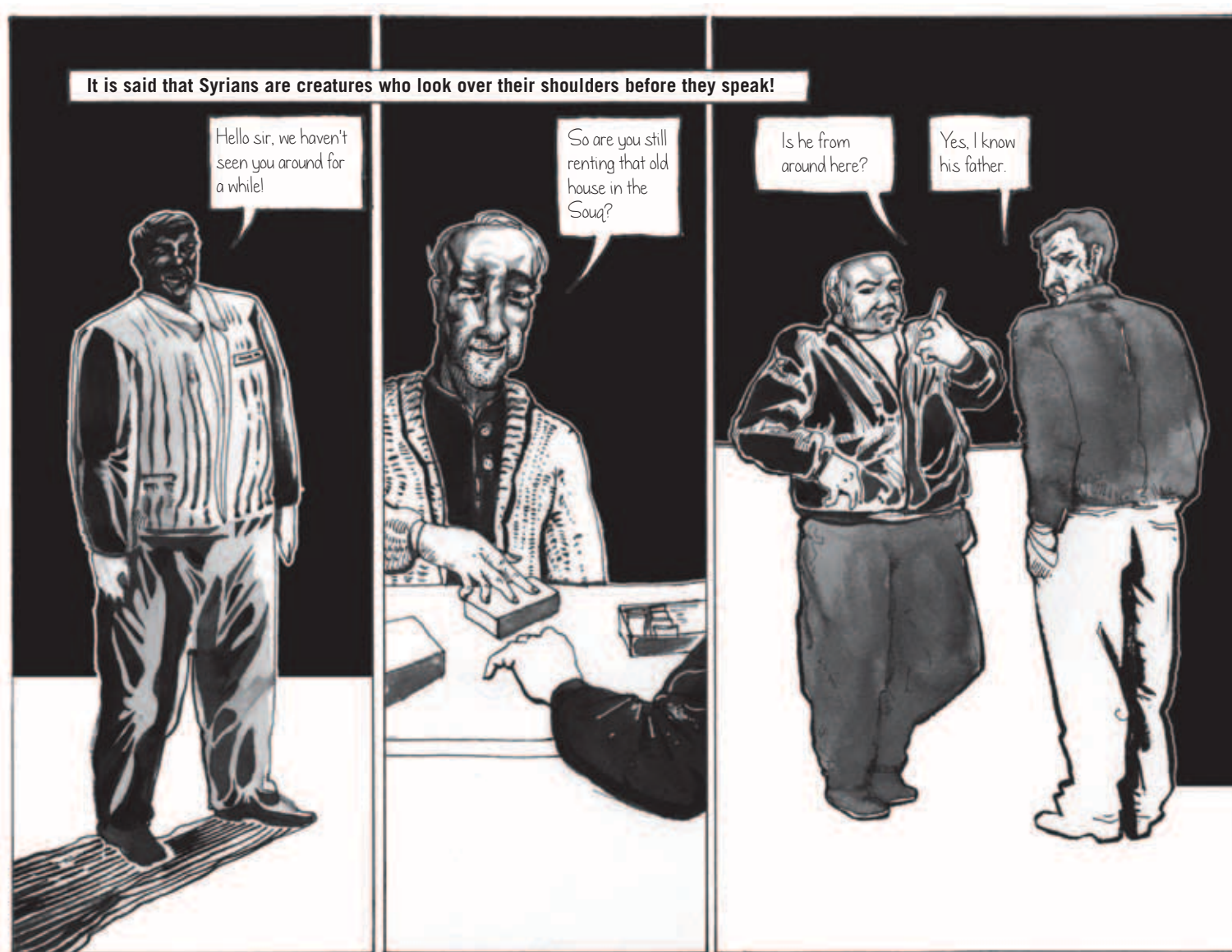
**THE END**

# THE TAXI DRIVER

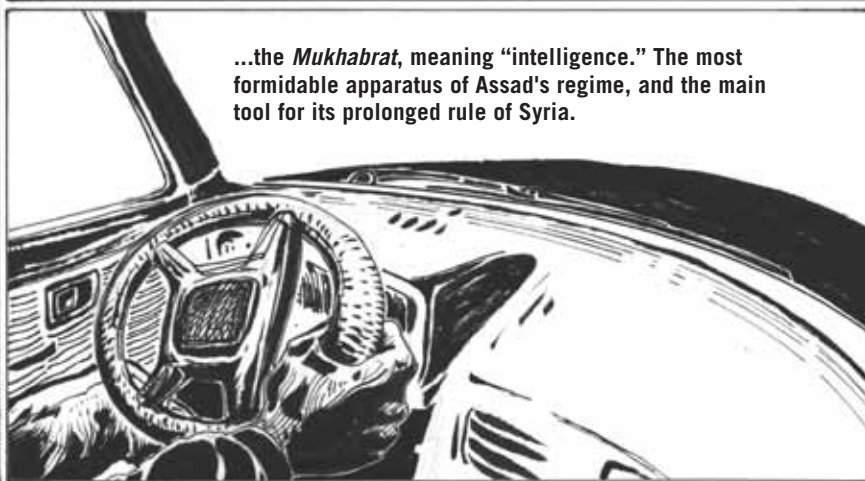
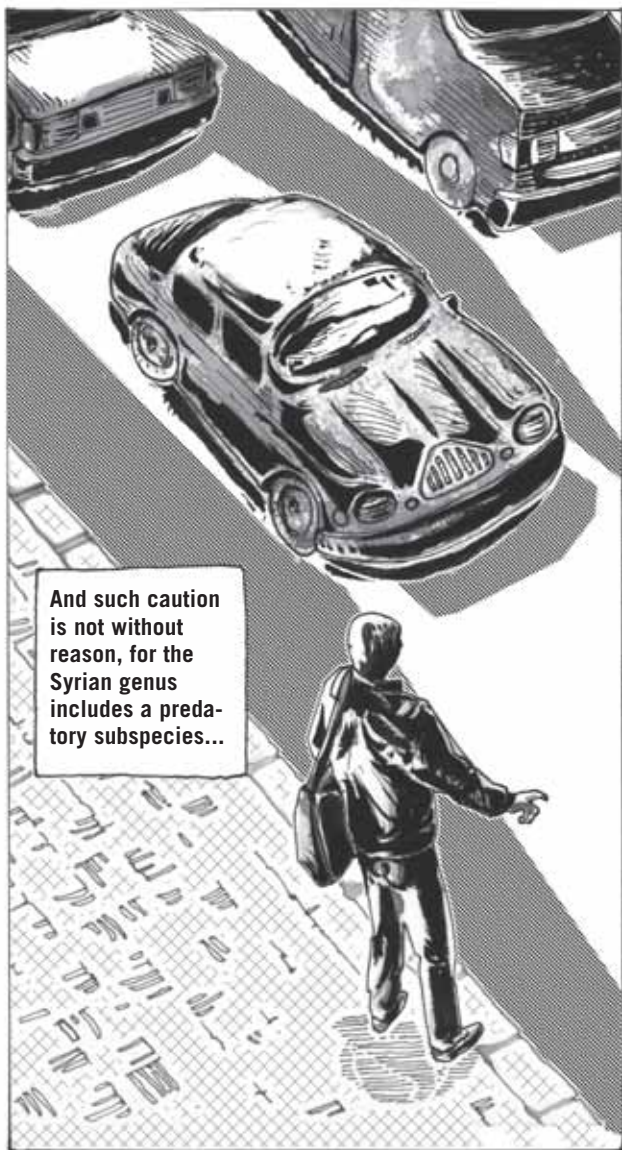
by Fadi Adleh

**Fadi Adleh** was born in 1978 in Hama, Syria, and obtained a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Damascus University in 2005. He currently lives in Damascus and works as a freelance artist. He participated in several children's literature workshops in Syria, Lebanon and Slovakia. His work as an illustrator and author of children's literature is being published by the Syrian ministry of culture, as well as by Dar Onboz and Dar Alhadaek publishers in Lebanon.

Syrians above the age of twenty-five know all too well the colorful jargon of secret policing: somebody with "fine handwriting" is understood to be a part-time secret agent, a rat. A "report writer" is a full-time agent and therefore not undercover. Overall, you learned not to talk straight about any writing. You never ask someone how the "report writing" is going. You just watch your mouth and say the right things. Fadi Adleh depicts episodes from a taxi ride he took in Damascus on Christmas Eve 2010, shortly before the popular uprising began in Syria.









And like in any other predatory interaction, time serves the perfection of manoeuvres for both parties: the lion and the gazelle, although on the part of the prey, the action is always a response, with no choice but to learn how to evade the claws of its executer, all eighteen branches of them.

This job sucks, look at the traffic! It might take us hours.





What do you do for a living?



I make books, I write and draw.



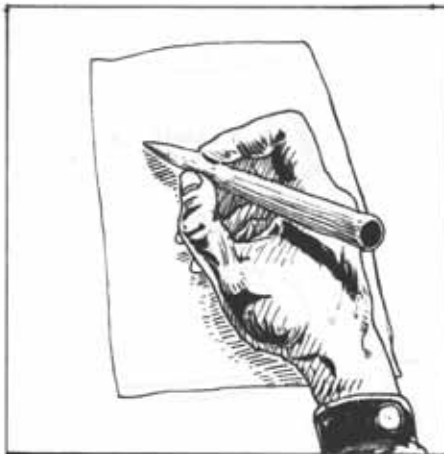
Nice occupation! I write as well.



Not for a second did I consider the possibility that he might be a journalist at the *Althawra* newspaper.

Because all of us Syrians have learned the colorful dictionary of secret policing...





...someone who is a “reports writer” or has “fine handwriting” is in actuality a secret agent.

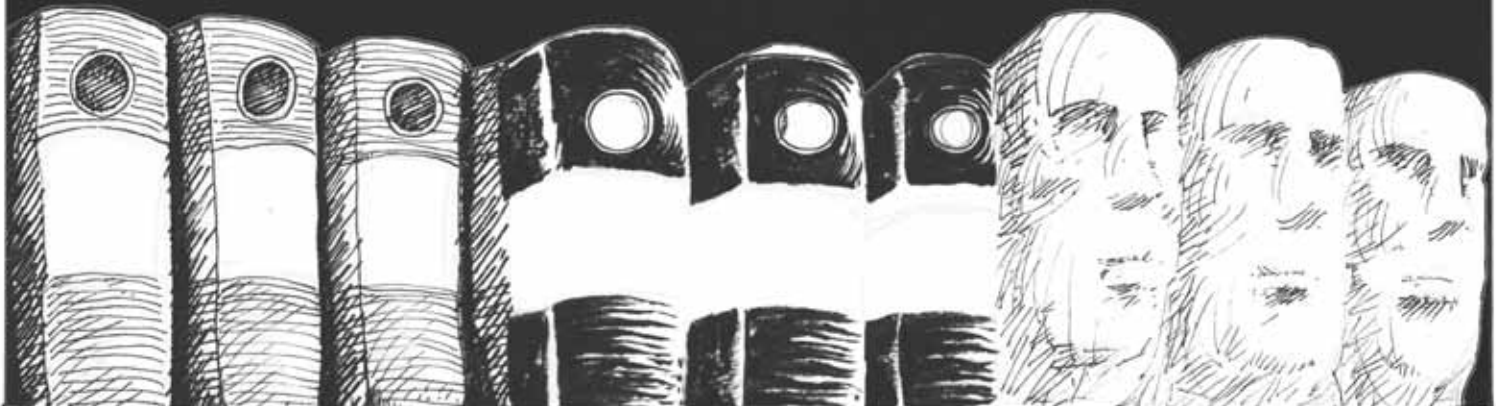


It could be your colleague at work, or your friend in school, or even a family member!

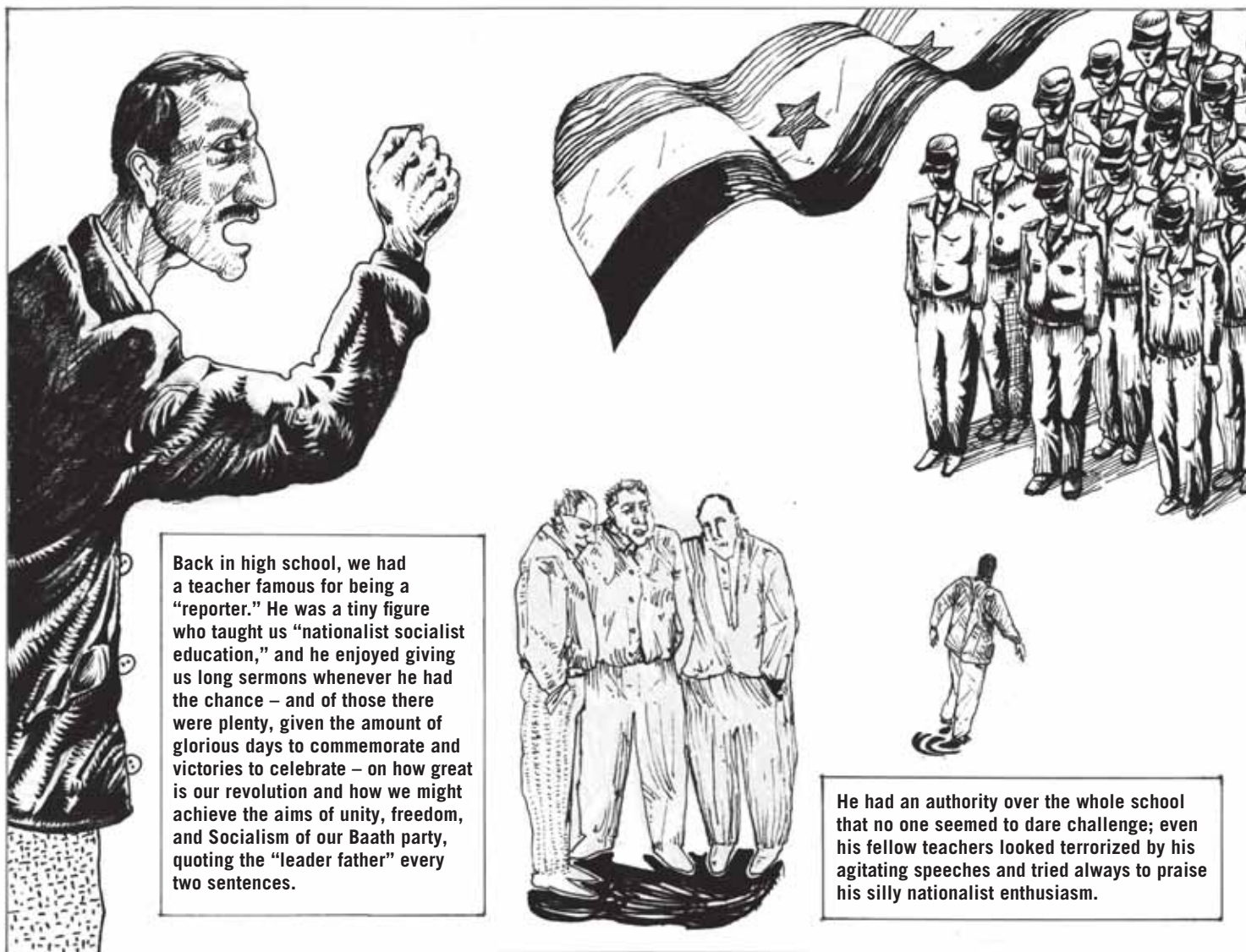


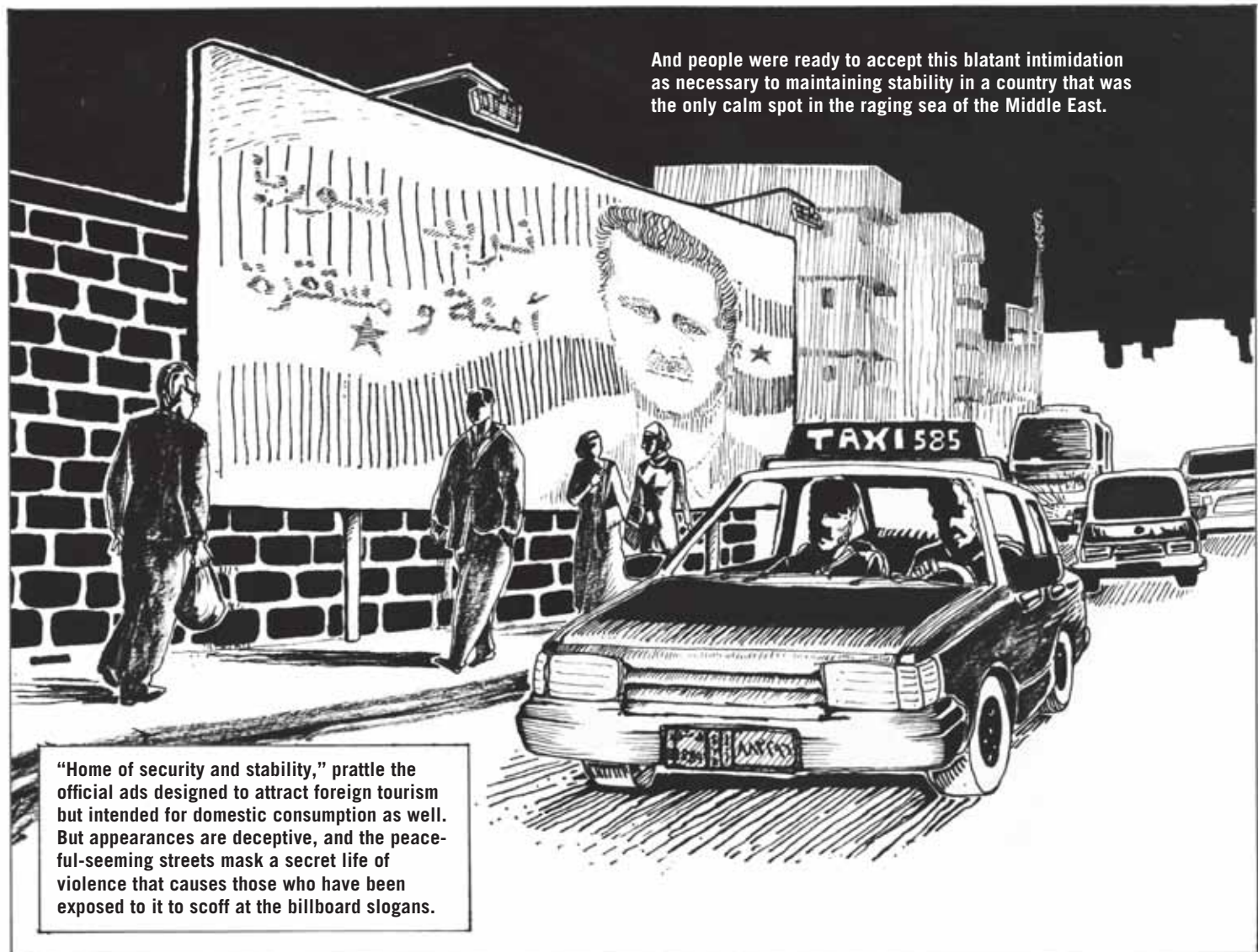
And the “crime” can vary from mocking the president to challenging his role.

A malicious report, with your name on it, finds its way through the cobwebs of the security branches till it reaches the “right hands,” and if “they” categorize you as a bad apple, then you are done for.









And people were ready to accept this blatant intimidation as necessary to maintaining stability in a country that was the only calm spot in the raging sea of the Middle East.

"Home of security and stability," prattle the official ads designed to attract foreign tourism but intended for domestic consumption as well. But appearances are deceptive, and the peaceful-seeming streets mask a secret life of violence that causes those who have been exposed to it to scoff at the billboard slogans.

**Tens of thousands of Syrians have been deprived of their freedom without a lawful trial, and their only crime was to oppose the security state.**



Anwar Al Bounni: arrested in 2006 and held until 2011.



Hasiba Abd al-Rahman: arrested three times for a total of 7 years.



Mustafa Rustom: arrested in 1971 and spent 23 years in prison.



Salah Jadid: imprisoned from 1970 till his death in 1993.



Diab Siriye: imprisoned from 2006 till 2011.



Abdul Sattar Qattan: served three terms of prison for more than 20 years between 1975 and 2007.

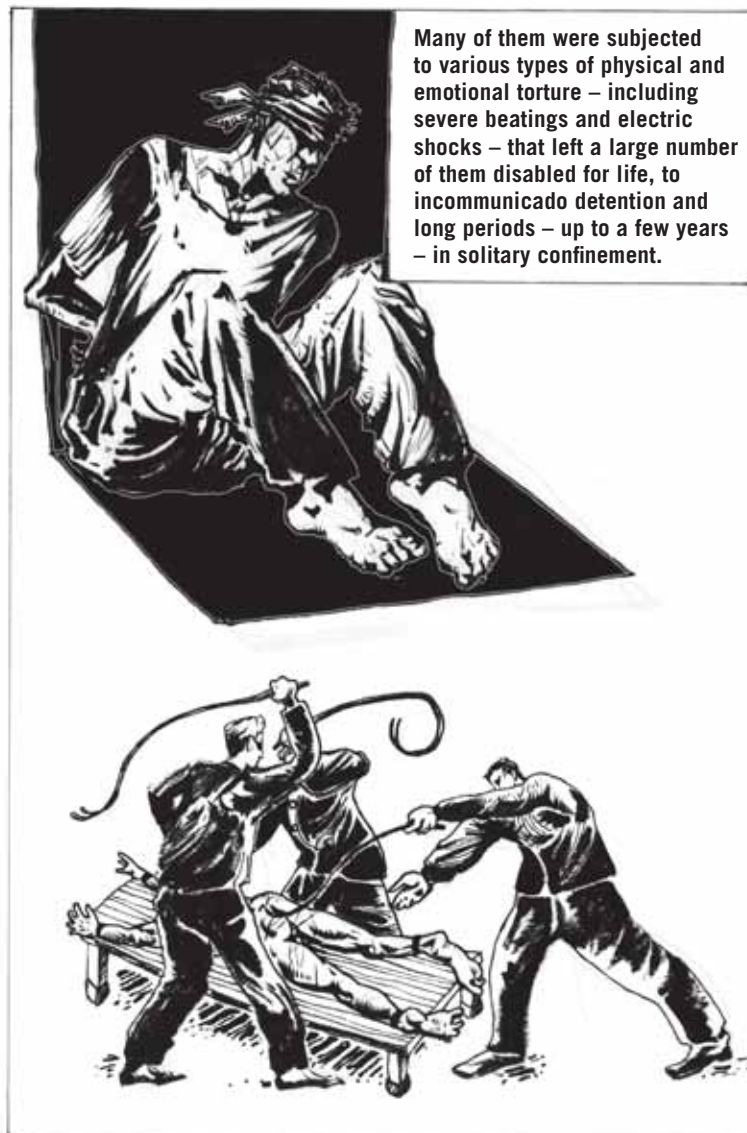


Abdulaziz al-Khair: arrested in 1992 after 11 years of hiding, released in 2005.



Manal Ebrahim: arrested in 2009 and held until 2010.





Between 1979 and 1982, clashes erupted between the regime of Hafez Al-Assad and the banned Muslim Brotherhood movement, which resulted in the horrific Hama massacre. Thousands of Syrians were subjected to arbitrary arrest, some of them family members of people belonging to the Brotherhood, some of them only sympathizers, and many people who were wholly unrelated but had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. From those unlucky Syrian citizens, an estimated 17,000 disappeared forever in the prisons of the Syrian security state.



Naser Sfai: from Hama, arrested in 1982, age 47.



Zuhair Debsawi: from Hama, arrested in 1982, age 32.



Abbas Zaki el Najib: from Homs, arrested in 1980, age 55.



Abd el Rahman Farah: from Aleppo, arrested in 1980, age 16.



Mustafa Hamidh: from Idlib, arrested in 1983, age 48.



Seddik el Queqah: from Latakia, arrested in 1980, age 35.



Saad Nabelsi: from Tartus, arrested in 1980, age 23.



Farouk Eljamil: from Damascus, arrested in 1980, age 33.

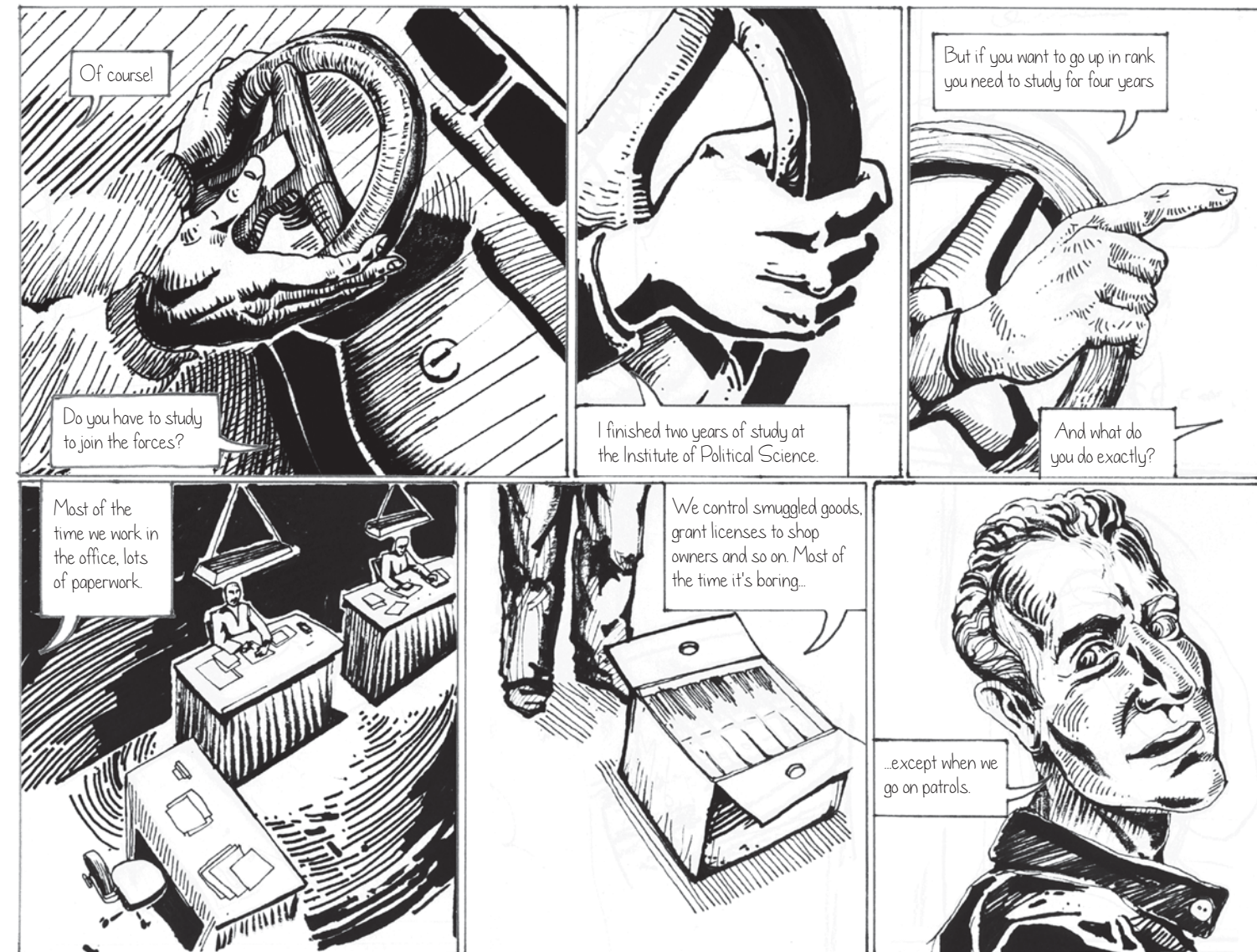


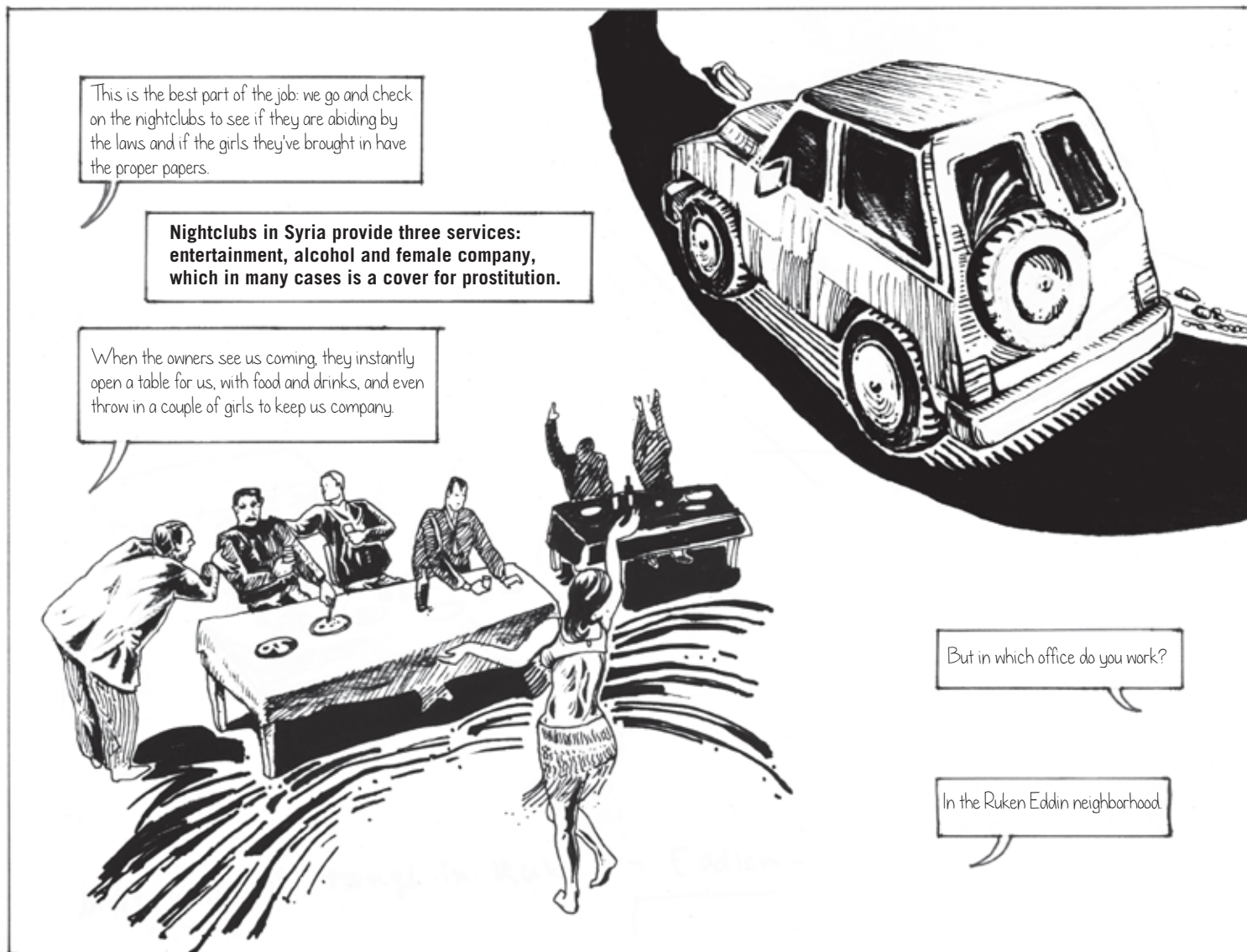
And in order to reinforce the notion of a “secure” country, Syrian streets are littered with security agents. In posts or in patrols, in uniform and in plain clothes, full-time workers and freelancers, they lurk around like sleepy jackals waiting for prey.

But my driver does not look anything like a predator; he greets a group of colleagues at a traffic light and tells me he works for the political security branch.









This is the best part of the job: we go and check on the nightclubs to see if they are abiding by the laws and if the girls they've brought in have the proper papers.

**Nightclubs in Syria provide three services: entertainment, alcohol and female company, which in many cases is a cover for prostitution.**

When the owners see us coming, they instantly open a table for us, with food and drinks, and even throw in a couple of girls to keep us company.

But in which office do you work?

In the Ruken Eddin neighborhood.



Ruken Eddin is a suburb of Damascus on the slopes of Mount Qassioun, a mixed neighborhood and host to many Kurdish activists, foreign religious students, and smugglers...



I wonder if on some wall at the Institute for Political Science there is a billboard that lists all possible enemies of the state.



It is a tough job there.

It is fine most of the time, except for those Muslim Brothers.



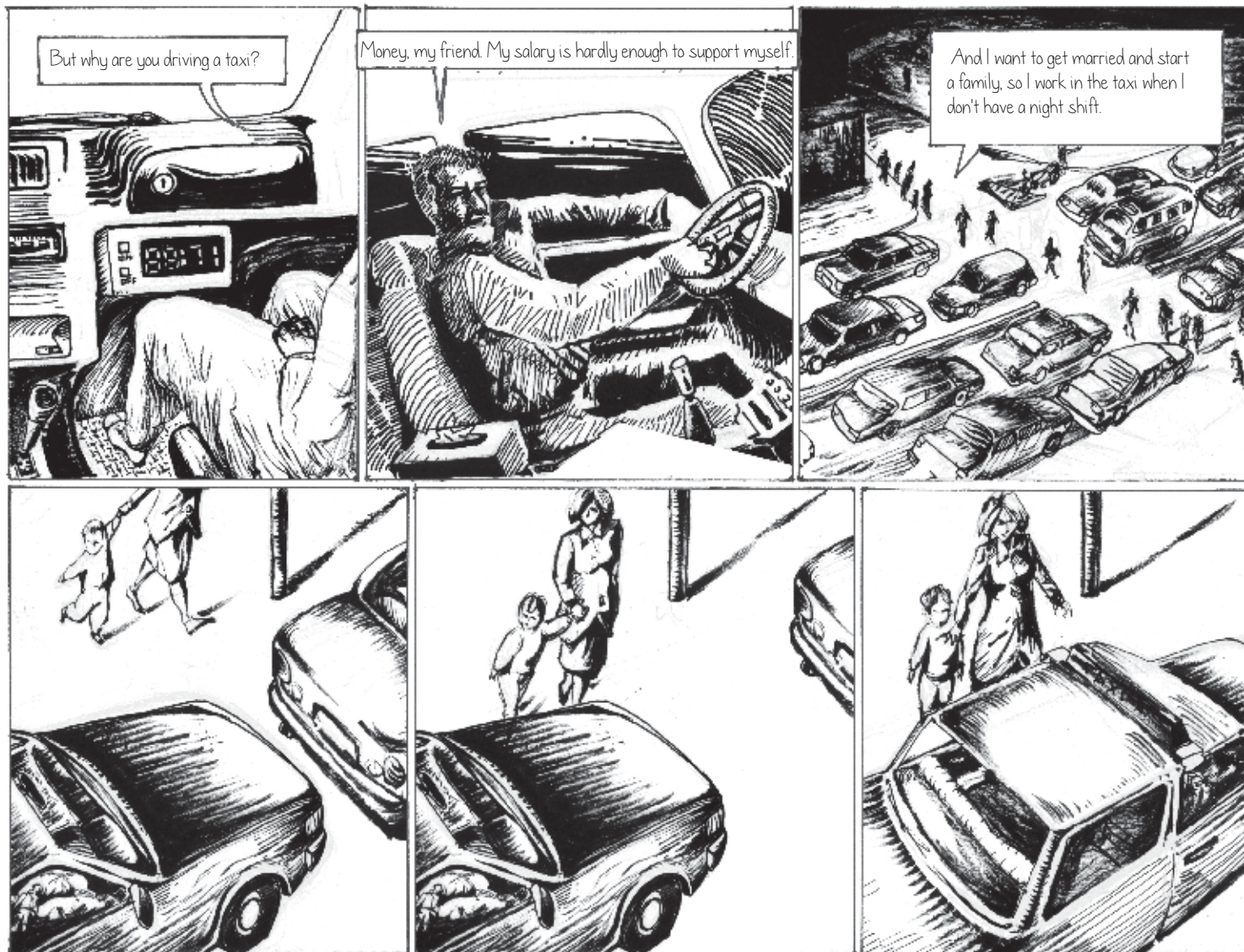
There is no difference. All of these radical movements should be uprooted.



You mean jihadists; I thought we didn't have Muslim Brothers anymore.









# IMAGE AGAINST IMAGE, SHOT REVERSE SHOT

by **Ossama Mohammed**

translated from the Arabic by Rasha Salti

**Ossama Mohammed** was born in Latakia in 1954. He graduated from the Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in 1979. His graduation film was a short documentary titled *Khutwa Khutwa (Step by Step)*, 1978). After he returned to Syria, he directed the short documentary *Al-Yaom Koll Yaom (Today Everyday)*, 1980) and his first fiction feature *Nujum al-Nahar (Stars in Broad Daylight)* in 1988. It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival's Quinzaine des Réalisateurs and earned the filmmaker great critical praise, including the Golden Olive at the Valencia Festival in the same year. His second feature titled *Sunduq al-Dunya (Sacrifices)* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival's Un Certain Regard in 2002.

Syrian filmmaker Ossama Mohammed selected three frames from a video, which circulated on the Internet very early in the Syrian uprising, to reflect on the production of images, violence and the ultimate outcome of the insurgency. The video depicts a young man's interrogation and torture in a police station, where he is stripped to his underwear, slapped and taunted, and eventually, in the nude, asked to kiss an officer's boot. The recording is presumed to be from Deraa.





"The train to Deraa left the station. My uncle helped our neighbor. Sami has watches in his shop."

*A reading lesson for a primary class.*

"The young boy kissed the officer's boot!"

*A reading lesson.*

The young boy, a teenager from Deraa, kissed the soldier's boot, or maybe it was the intelligence officer's or the adjutant's. He is yet unidentifiable. The only clue we have, captured on camera, is the boot in which he grounds his sense of security. The camera films from overhead, above the teenager who kneels, kissing the boot that could take his life.

A life sentence shoed in a boot.

There are two protagonists in this sequence: the teenager and the boot.

The teenager appears acutely, clearly, bare bones. He is... he is... I don't know his name. The second protagonist is the boot, at least this is how he cast himself in his film.

We are unable to know from the teenager: what were his day-dreams? Or what he dreamt the night before he came into this sequence? Or when the last time he attempted sleep before slipping into this hell?

Did he see himself kissing his beloved, as we all kissed our own?

We cannot ask him this question, nor can he disclose the kisses he yearned for in secret. For whom was that first kiss intended? A teenager... bare, save for his terror, his pleading, his disbelief... . As if he had survived Hiroshima... . Looking for new premises, another life, hoping this time, it would not end here... .

When the teenager rests his head on the pillow, his yearnings for kisses awaken. He is not likely to dispense with them casually.

And if he were imbued with moral codes and cultural mores, fancying himself chivalrous and noble, like the heroes of Arab poetry, he is most likely to be saving that first kiss for love, the one he loves, loved, or will love.

In that kiss, he will discover life gushing and love... .

The teenager could never imagine that he would come to betray life, love and his beloved by delivering that first ever kiss to the boot; the very first time, in the nude.

His nails clutching the boot as he kisses, naked.

The second protagonist in this sequence is that boot receiving the teenager's kiss. It abducts the kiss; and the teenager's daydreaming... . Code for the second protagonist, the boot is the abstract of security and diktat.

His earnestness despoiled, the teenager surrenders his kiss to the boot that stands for security. And when he retreats to the corner of the room crouching, he forfeits his kiss for good; and will remain without it... .

When I saw what I saw, I saw him, me... I saw myself in the boy and kissed the boot with him... . In compliance



with the first rule of the kind of cinema manufactured to appeal to the masses, intended to enrapture the spectator's heart, soul and senses... .

The kind of cinema charged with allegories charged with images that generate more images and drive home a single question, or single message, in a single seamless instant.

Isn't that how it works?

The message got to me. This moment, widely referred to as the awakening of conscience, has come to every Syrian, every one of us, from Deraa to Qamishli, from Douma, Homs and along the coastline.

I am sure that, with the exception of a few boots, all feel shame and dread witnessing this crime. That image is enough to drive people out into the street to protest against all the boots.

Is it conceivable that a group might split apart, a family and its neighbors might clash, two beings fall into discord, that a woman and a man may be made ambivalent, over the shamefulness of the image?

This moment is a true referendum, every day at the end of the day, when Syrians lay their heads to rest on pillowcases laced with anxiety – might they still vote for the boot?

This is my waking nightmare... the vote on the pillow.

Is it possible that Syrians might split apart on this point? Can they forget this episode?

The answer is yes. I myself have forgotten it. True, it woke me up at three in the morning and compelled me to write this text, but I have already forgotten it. Even if I, too, have kissed the boot, I have forgotten it.

The next sequence: rendez-vous with murder.

The teenager is carried aloft, as if in flight surveying the surface of the planet, his arms and legs stretched out, like the gladiator from the movie *Gladiator*. In the movie, the gladiator does not die, because... it's a film.

The earth recoiled on the back of the flying Syrian. He wonders... and does not wonder.

He was stunned, dumbfounded... . It was the first time he died this way in Syria. The first time he was protesting, seeing the other, seeing death.

He appeared in protest for the sake of living... not for the sake of dying. In the end he appeared dead, in the midst of protests... . He died a martyr... he died.

All that those who carried him could do now was urge him to don his new identity.

Through the lens of the universe's camera, he exhaled his soul... towards us.

None of the sequences were broadcast on the national news. The national television screen did not broadcast the teenage martyr's soul.

The teenager lay within the broadcast, forsaking the nation and abandoning it for good.

Can Syrians fall into discord over this point? Can they forget this episode?

The answer is yes.

I, myself, have forgotten it... .

I saw him alive at his funeral. From amidst the crowds chanting “peaceful” on YouTube.

From amidst the crowds chanting “freedom” on YouTube.

Freedom is the image of the living martyr.

Peaceful is the image of the living martyr.

Never an image of the martyr “...” on the national television broadcasts.

In those news broadcasts, the teenager was killed by “unknown gangs,” in the plot against the Homeland.

The murderer remains “unidentified,” so the murdered also remains unidentified.

The murdered was dismissed from the episode, replaced by the murderer. But the murderer is out of focus in the frame, he is without image.

He is represented by words, they come in lieu of image, a common device in mediocre cinema. The cells of the words multiplied and formed an imaging. Imaging without images, identified as “The Gang.”

In the official national broadcast episode, the coals of the collective imaginary were stoked by his own fear in order to spread collective fear... .

The image against the other image.

Fear against freedom.

The image of the teenager was swept away and in its stead the imaging of “The Gang” was staged. One kind of fear replaced another kind of fear... the latter laid to rest on a pillow.

Is it possible to bury into forgetting the image of that Syrian teenager’s soul, exhaling its last breath, his body laid in the soil of that – vexingly ambiguous – notion of nation?

It is possible... for anyone.

It is possible because “The Gang” fires bullets on daydreams.

It is possible because daydreams are yet shackled; they will only be emancipated when their dreamers are free.

What will happen to the referendum when Syrians raise their heads from their pillows?

Will they vote for the murder of a young Syrian crying out for freedom, peace and unity?

Will they vote “yes” on Facebook?

What will the majority of the country say before surrendering to sleep? Will they agree to the teenager’s murder?



The teenager's image has to amplify and undercut "The Gang" for the conscience of the many to be roused.

In order to preserve his own image, the murderer had to cut out the murdered teenager's image... the contours of his body... his name... his beloved's name, his stories, secrets... the lightness of his being... the color of his eyes... his favorite singer... .

Did he do his military service? Where might he have served? Did he make friends from across the country?

Perhaps he has been the one calling for the unity of the country? Has he called them? Do they miss him? Does he trust them?

This is why The Gang made sure he does not appear on television screens, so he would not tip the referendum in his favor.

Censors erased his image and all the other images of peaceful chants for freedom. They replaced them with their word-image schemes about an unknown evil that shoots to kill anything that breathes.

In official newsreels, the martyrs don't appear.

Neither do the murderers.

Language creates their imaging.

Images of fear.

The peaceful protestors annihilated their own fear. They buried it with the bodies of their martyrs.

Fear, however, has not accepted its own end. It lives by multiplying massacres. Massacres are the work of fear. Fear fears the referendum... . It does not want pluralism made by individuals (one by one by one). It wants a single frightening "other," the one single man and the boot.

Murder organized in cluster schemes, plural and pluralistic, harvesting plural victims and plural fear.

Murder kills the referendum... the referendum for all: those demanding freedom and those who fear it. The loyal, the dissenting and those who hesitate. The referendum will determine our tomorrow, no matter its outcome.

Corruption does not want a peaceful referendum on corruption. Security forces don't want a peaceful referendum on impunity, live bullets, jail sentences and the torture of the wounded.

A peaceful referendum will draw a majority with the full range of its plurality to the unity of the country, a state of law.

Murder wants a preemptive killing of the referendum.

Murdering anyone allows the murdering of anyone.

The perfect crime does not exist.

The image of the murderer is invisible, and its multiple reproductions invisible.

This is the audio-visual language of the official television screens.

Censored sequences...

Lone citizens, martyred.

Smoke screens... Official broadcasts hard at work to make sure all the Syrian martyrs don't become all the martyrs of Syria. The screens of official broadcast hold captive the bodies of the martyrs of the first referendum... in their dark chambers.

# MILK, CARNATION AND A GODLY SONG: A FORAY INTO A FILM-IN-PROGRESS

**Nigol Bezjian**

interview by Rasha Salti

**Nigol Bezjian** was born in Aleppo. He is a graduate of cinema studies from the School of Visual Arts in New York and UCLA. His filmography includes *Chickpeas* (1992), *Roads Full of Apricots* (2001), *Muron* (2002), *Verve* (2003), *Home/Land* (2008), *Milk, Carnation and a Godly Song* (2012), and *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul* (2012). He is also a senior TV producer based in the Middle East.

In March 2010, Nigol Bezjian had returned from his first ever visit to Istanbul, where he interviewed Marc Nichanian for his film about the Armenian poet Daniel Varujan. Bezjian first met Nichanian in Beirut, during the **Anywhere but Now** conference in April 2009.

**Rasha Salti:** How did you decide to make a film about Daniel Varujan, and what was Marc Nichanian's role in it?

**Nigol Bezjian:** For many years now, I have been thinking about making films, or something visual, working with images, inspired by the works of two poets, Daniel Varujan and Baruyr Sevak. After the assassination of Hrant Dink, I remember sitting on a plane returning to Beirut from Yerevan and I began to wonder if Turks were aware of Armenians – I mean of our letters, our cultural heritage. I wondered if Varujan had been translated into Turkish. I had met Marc Nichanian in person and was familiar with his work – when we met in Beirut we talked mostly about Oshagan's archives. Marc had worked a great deal on Varujan and proposed a new approach to reading poetry, at once international and unique to Armenians. I attended his lecture at the *Anywhere but Now* conference and asked him if he might be available for the film I wanted to make about Varujan. "How can you make a film about Varujan?" he asked. Marc lived in Istanbul at the time and proposed I meet him there, and then things simply fell into place. Obviously, I did not go the conventional route, drafting a dossier and budget. I just started working.

I pursued the question of translation further. A former classmate of mine, who stayed in Aleppo, owns a publishing house there. I contacted him and asked him for the contact information of Armenian publishers and translators in Istanbul. He led me to Robert Hadedjian, an 80-year old publisher, who found one Armenian poem translated into Turkish, titled *Andastan, The Four Corners of the World*. In Armenian it means open, endless fields, but it could also refer to paradise. There is an old prayer known as the *Andastan*, which is recited once a year. Originally, it was recited outside the edifice of the church, in the four coordinates (north, south, east and west), but over time, people

began to pray inside the church turning to the four coordinates. Varujan had a religious upbringing; with this poem, it is as if he created his own prayer, a wish of wellbeing to people in the four corners of the world. This is maybe his only poem translated and published in Turkish.

**RS:** That was your first trip ever to Istanbul. How did you sort out filming and figure out your way around the city?

**NB:** From my days at UCLA, I was very close to Kutlug Ataman. I contacted him and asked him to help me find an assistant. He put me in contact with a very nice film student. And that's how the process started. I landed in Istanbul with the intention of filming Marc. I had very little time to do location scouting in a city I did not know, so I was a little anxious. I did not know what to expect, so I avoided packing books in Armenian. I just carried my camera so I didn't need to rent one there. Obviously I had no permission to shoot in the streets... but nothing happened. I also planned for the trip to be short so as to force myself to focus on what I intended to do. I wanted to avoid slipping into making another, or other films. I was not interested in reconstituting the biography of Varujan and did not want to be tempted down that path. I was really intrigued by the poems: what compelled him to write them? Varujan was a prodigy. He published his first poem at age nineteen and was killed at age thirty-one, and in those twelve years he was extremely prolific.

On the first day, my assistant and I went scouting for locations. He took me to the campus of Boğaziçi (Bosphorus) University, and we walked all the way to Galatasaray. I did not know what I was looking for. When we met with Kutlug that night, I went to his apartment in Cihangir, which is spectacularly beautiful. After talking about the film, he proposed I film Marc in his apartment the next day.



**RS:** Did Marc know Kutlug Ataman? What did you want him to do in front of the camera?

**NB:** Marc did not know Kutlug. He was stunned by Kutlug's generosity and how close Kutlug and I were. I explained to him that we went to film school together, and that I had produced one of his student films. We were immigrants, foreigners, and, on top of it all, from "enemy" countries, so we became very good friends. Obviously, in another context, I might have been harassed for being friends with him. We picked up Marc on Istiklal and as we walked to Kutlug's apartment, Marc asked me about the film. I explained that I felt the urge to make it and just threw myself into the process: I had no budget, no producer, I was not really sure where I was going, and I did not have

a script. I was making the film for myself. Marc seemed intrigued; we agreed that I would not ask him questions – I just wanted to turn the camera on and film him talking. Once in the apartment, we quickly realized that the traffic of boats facing the apartment was so intense and noisy we could not film on the balcony. So we had to film him inside. Once the camera was ready to roll, Marc asked me which language I wanted him to use...

He decided to speak in Armenian. Marc sat with his back to the sea; there were Turkish flags far off in the distance and Coca Cola ads, and both are the same color red, and not too dissimilar. He did not want to be filmed with the flags in the background, but he eventually relented and let me be the director.

**RS:** What did he talk about? Varujan?

**NB:** He actually talked for hours. You will see the film. At some point, he asked me if he could read poems; I agreed. When we were done, we stood on the balcony and he noted with irony that Varujan had lived in Istanbul from the age of thirteen. He was sent to his death by this city, and yet there is no trace of him. The Turks don't know him. He does not even have a grave. Varujan had traveled to Venice and spent some time there, but returned to Istanbul. Both cities have a strong water element.

We went to lunch, and on the way, I told him that the only Varujan poem published in Turkish was *The Four Corners of the World*, the one referencing the prayer. Marc also recommended I meet some of the Armenian publishers in Istanbul. He gave me a few contacts. When I eventually called them up and met with them, they were very excited to hear my family name. They gave me a biography of my great granduncle, Artin Bezjian, who occupied

the highest post ever acceded to by an Armenian in the Ottoman administration, at the Ministry of the Mint. He had a museum and school named after him and was even honored with a statue. They asked me what I was doing, I explained, and they told me they were collecting donations to build a statue for Varujan. I did not film them. They will be part of another film...

After the visit, Marc left, and the assistant and I filmed shots of Istanbul.

**RS:** It must have taken a lot of discipline not to film every minute of your discovery of Istanbul. How was discovering the city?

**NB:** I had taken the early morning flight, landed and hit the ground running, trying to figure out how and where I was going to film Marc. Until I returned to my hotel that night, I had not paid attention to the neighborhood around the hotel. You can call it a coincidence, but my hotel was a mere hundred meters from where Hrant Dink was killed, and that was a mere hundred meters from where Varujan had lived. I walked around the city, taking in the sights and sounds...



and then I realized the strangest thing: I was not a stranger. I felt I was not seeing the street, people, buildings, shops, for the first time. It was my first time in Istanbul, but there was an uncanny familiarity to everything. It was not the familiarity from watching films or news, not that sort of *déjà vu*; the familiarity was more intangible, immaterial. They were familiar from my Armenian schoolbooks in Aleppo. You see, we Armenians of the diaspora have been reared on a cultural patrimony created by the Armenian intelligentsia of Istanbul. Yerevan was neither a metropolis, nor even a major city at the turn of the twentieth century. It was actually a small, dusty, poor town where the first photography studio opened in 1920. Istanbul and Tbilisi were the two big cities where the best and brightest of the Armenian intelligentsia lived and produced work; those who lived in Istanbul spoke Armenian with an Istanbul accent or inflection, and those in Tbilisi spoke a more Russian-inflected Armenian. The diaspora, the survivors, carried with them and transmitted the culture of Istanbul to subsequent generations. There I was walking streets the names of which I knew from poems and novels. I could understand the language itself.

In fact, when I am in Yerevan, some things are familiar, but the streets, the cuisine, even the language don't ring of home, as they did in Istanbul.

I wondered which would be the place I would call home: Aleppo? Beirut? Istanbul? When I went back to the hotel, I left the camera bag downstairs in the lobby. When I went back to fetch it, I spoke with the receptionist in Turkish. He asked where my accent was from; it sounded Arabic to him. Then I asked him if he spoke Arabic – he did, but his accent was heavy. He explained that his grandfather was from Alexandretta. There I was, wondering about home, speaking my grandmother's Turkish with a man who answered back in his grandfather's Arabic.



**RS:** That's intense. How could you go to sleep after this?

**NB:** I couldn't. I needed a drink and I did not want to go to a bar. The mini-bar in my room was "dry," because, as it turns out, the owner of the hotel was a *hajji*, or that's what the receptionist explained. I was scandalized; how did they expect to receive tourists? The hotel was in a historic area (Osmanbey) that lived off tourism. The receptionists guided me to a liquor store close to the hotel. After many tribulations with the credit card and ATM machine, which only aggravated my need for a drink, I finally returned to the hotel room with alcohol. I told the receptionist to make sure to report back to the *hajji*, that an Armenian *kafir* (heathen) had consumed liquor in his hotel! The experience remained with me...

**RS:** You don't see the Armenian publishers as an important element of your film?

**NB:** I was extremely troubled by those encounters. But I think they belong to a different film that I will surely pursue in the future. There is something in their eyes, their gait and disposition. Surviving, enduring as an unwanted minority is written all over their bodies. Their perseverance in Istanbul has come at great cost. When I called up the publishing house and introduced myself, the man who spoke to me apologized at length for not knowing who I was, not knowing my films.

When I went there, he seemed anxious, constantly on the lookout. I had not brought any of my DVDs with me, and he immediately cut me off and said it's better to be cautious, one never knows. I will never forget the look on his face when he said that.

**RS:** What else did you film in Istanbul?

**NB:** The next morning, I decided it might be interesting if I were to film someone reading the poem in Turkish. I asked the assistant to find a "typical" young Turkish woman. I decided to film her in Kutlug's apartment, in the same set up as Marc, with the flags, the Coca Cola ads... He found Zeynep; she showed up late with her German boyfriend. She was tiny and he was very tall. The contrast struck me. She read the poem at the Beyoğlu wharf. I filmed her by the water.

When I came back to Beirut and looked at the footage, I found the driving theme of the film. I selected cities where water is prominent, and filmed a person reading a poem by Varujan in each of them. Venice, Paris, Boston, New York, Padova, and Beirut. Varujan's native village in Sivas was on the Alice River. Water became a motif. The poem would be read in the native language of the city, while the people I would interview, being Armenian, would have to speak in Armenian. Flags became a prominent motif as well.

**RS:** In which language do you feel most comfortable?

**NB:** I travel between languages. You know, when you get really angry, you don't use your mother tongue to curse; we use another language to make the curse more resounding. Armenians curse in Turkish.

When I researched Varujan's papers, I discovered that he almost never used another language, even though he could have, especially given that he lived in Gent, Belgium and in Venice, Italy. In one letter to a friend, posted from Italy, he uses the expression *solo e soletto*, describing the feeling of loneliness. Varujan experienced loneliness quite a bit. A friend told me that the young Turkish woman reading the poem felt like a provocation: "How could you put Varujan in a Turkish mouth?" he asked.



**RS:** Will you film in Armenia?

**NB:** I already did. I traveled there and looked for the right person to interview. There are a few scholars who have written about Varujan. Some are dead, others very old. I did find a university professor who was trained at a Soviet academy. In Armenia, the reading of Varujan is uninteresting; he is only seen as a national hero, an icon. They have trouble imagining the Ottoman world of the turn of the twentieth century. It was such a rich period, rife with social and labor movements, the emergence of new artistic movements, and Armenians were at its heart. I found a young woman to read the poem. I was advised to find an actress for “proper” elocution. I did not want that. I wanted the spontaneity of an untrained voice.

**RS:** Where else have you filmed?

**NB:** I filmed in Paris, Padova and Venice. I plan to film in New York, Boston and Aleppo. In Beirut, I filmed a classroom where a teacher is explaining a poem and talking



to her pupils about Varujan. In Aleppo and in Beirut, the poem will be read in Armenian and in Arabic.

**RS:** Why Aleppo? It's not on the water.

**NB:** First of all, it's where I heard about Varujan and learned of his poetry for the first time – at the school I attended. It's now a museum. And secondly, there was a river, but it's all dried up now. Anyway, homes in Aleppo used to have fountains. The element of water was key to the lived space.

Yerevan is also on a river that's all dried up now. Water is nonetheless everywhere in the city.

**RS:** And the poems, can you tell us more about them?

**NB:** It is in a book of poems titled *The Song of Bread* that Varujan was never able to finish, because he was killed before its completion. In the book, there is a palpable sense of nostalgia for his native village, the countryside,

and for peasant life. He relocates the homeland – Armenia – to the village, which he paints in idyllic colors, interestingly, it's neither Istanbul nor Yerevan.

*The Song of Bread* is a powerful cry of protest, stating that poetry, the letters and the arts can never be eradicated. At the time, Varujan was in Istanbul, and the situation was alarming, but he was the first intellectual to be arrested, and the event was impactful among the community and intelligentsia. He was charismatic and a captivating orator. He was arrested on the night of his birthday (on April 23<sup>rd</sup>), but he was not killed immediately. The intellectuals were detained in two different jails in Ankara. He was jailed for six months and eventually executed. The prisons were actually army barracks. Families of detainees sent the prison administrators money to pay rent for the detainees' lodgings. Only a few of the detainees survived – one was a former student of Varujan's who wrote his memoirs. He, like others, claimed that Varujan did not speak during his internment, but filled six notebooks, and that he had faith that the crisis would be over soon. When the executioners came to take him, they took those notebooks. The Turkish army archives might still have them.

**RS:** How do we have *The Song of Bread*?

**NB:** When he was arrested, everything in Varujan's house was confiscated, including the notebook in which he was writing *The Song of Bread*. The notebook was kept by Vahe Ihssan (born Yesayan), an Armenian operative who basically identified the intellectuals to the Turkish authorities. In 1919, Varujan's wife bribed Yesayan to get the notebook back. That's how Varujan's poetry was preserved and disseminated. That is how these poems remain with us. The book was published in 1920.

As for the prison notebooks, the Ottoman obsession with archiving everything guarantees that they have been kept. However, no Armenian scholar or institution has attempted to investigate their fate. On the one hand, access is complicated and cumbersome. At this stage, they might be damaged and thus no longer legible.

**RS:** Do you feel a personal connection with Daniel Varujan?

**NB:** We had very different lives, but we were both exiles. I have a subjective, singular reading of his poetry about loneliness, falling in love and poverty. I do feel a special connection.

His real name was Daniel Chiboukiran – Varujan was his pen-name. The descendants of his relatives, from his mother's side, are in Bourj Hammoud today. They were in the same deportation group as my grandmother's family, a group that made it to Deir el-Zor alive. They resettled and stayed together in Aleppo, in the same house.

# MELANCHOLIA PHILOLOGICA

by Marc Nichanian

Marc Nichanian biography on page 59.

Who can be said to have lost something once empires have supposedly disappeared? Who is unable to overcome his/her loss: the native or the philologist? Today, the former colonialist shows his infinite benevolence when he invites the native to speak for himself. And suddenly the native does so. Speaking the language of the colonialist, he is even able to articulate his loss. Eventually, victims and perpetrators will become one and the same, united in the rehashing of their common loss. This confusion is unavoidable. It is what philology wants to make unavoidable. But the dead strive for recognition and force us to ask whether there is a difference between the disaster of the native decreed by philology and the Catastrophe. How to mourn after a catastrophe, if the catastrophe befalls the very capacity of mourning? What memory of the Catastrophe, if the Catastrophe is the catastrophe of memory? What remains when everything is lost, even the capacity for articulating the loss?

### Abstract

“Postcolonial melancholia” has recently become a catchphrase, though to whom it refers is not entirely clear. Whose melancholia is this – that of the earlier colonizer or the former colonized? Who is it that lost something when colonial empires (and other types of empire) allegedly disappeared? Who is it that is unable to overcome their loss? The native or the philologist? This last formulation presupposes at least two levels of comprehension. It supposes first that we have understood the relationship between the colonial enterprise (its project, its philosophy, its mindset) and the phenomenon of Orientalism; and second, that we know how to read Orientalism in terms of what Renan called the queen of all sciences, namely philology.

Today the former colonizer shows his infinite benevolence when he invites the native to speak for and by himself. And suddenly – what a miracle – the native speaks, all by himself. He speaks the language of the colonizer. He is even able to speak about his loss, his own disaster. The survivors of Troy speak the language of Achilles; does anyone know which language the Trojans once spoke? In the end there will remain only one language, the language of melancholia. Victims and perpetrators will become one and the same, reunited in the reiteration of their common loss and their common mourning. We will all become grieving brothers and sisters. This confusion is unavoidable. Or rather, it is what philology wants to make unavoidable, as though this was our destiny in the global theater of reconciliation.

But the dead strive for recognition. They do not want to be “confused.” They come back. They force us to ask whether there is a difference between the disaster of the native decreed by philology and the Catastrophe. They oblige us to think again and again about mourning: How to mourn after a catastrophe? How to mourn when that catastrophe befalls the very capacity for mourning? What memory for the Catastrophe, if the Catastrophe is the catastrophe of memory? What is it that remains when everything is lost, even the capacity of speaking the loss? Philological melancholia?

### Becoming a Nation

I will first say a few words about the personal context of this lecture. During the academic year 2007-08, I was teaching at Haigazian University in Beirut. One course was on Armenian literature and the other on the philological invention of myth in the nineteenth century. While preparing this lecture one year later, I sincerely asked myself which side of the Armenian story I should dwell on: the experience

of survival and displacement in the twentieth century, or the experience of becoming a nation with the complicity of philology in the nineteenth century? Should I embrace the Armenian experience of exile, of settling down and beginning a new life under new skies, or offer one more socio-historical account of what the survivors had to endure? On the one hand, the Armenians needed to come to terms with their catastrophic loss. On the other hand, coming to terms supposes a certain will to put up with the new conditions of life, to forget the Catastrophe, to transform it into something manageable, all the way down to the very denial of the fact that what happened *was* a catastrophe. We shall keep this in mind as we go on.

Later, in the spring of 2009 I gave a series of public lectures in Istanbul. It was the first time that an Armenian intellectual from the diaspora spoke to a Turkish audience on Turkish soil. Never in my life, prior to receiving the invitation to this lecture series, had I imagined that I would one day set foot in Turkey. The lectures had a general title, “Literature and Catastrophe.”<sup>1</sup> I wanted to explain that only literature could speak about the Catastrophe. But in order to do that, I first needed to explain the difference between genocide (a common noun) and Catastrophe (a proper noun, duly capitalized). I needed to explain that at the core of the genocidal will, there was the erasure of the fact, of the factuality of the fact,<sup>2</sup> and therefore the elimination of the witness as such. I also needed to explain what it means to eliminate, to obfuscate, to obliterate the witness in man and therefore to produce this hybrid being called “survivor,” who has to live on as a ghost, as the ghost of the dead witness, who has no place for himself on this earth any more unless he denies being the ghost that he actually is. And consequently I needed to explain that if the core of the event is the elimination of the witness, there can be no bearing witness for what happened to the victim or to the survivor. There can be no humanist account of the Catastrophe.

The background of that lecture series, at least in the minds of those who extended their invitation to me, was the project of reconciliation. This opened an entirely new perspective for talking about “mourning.” The relevant question was now the following: how does the project of reconciliation deal with mourning, and more precisely, with the interdiction of mourning at the core of the catastrophic experience?

Beyond the personal context, the historical background has to be taken into account. In 1914, for a short period of no more than seven months, which lasted until hostilities started in Europe, a group of Armenian writers in Istanbul published

<sup>1</sup> The text of these lectures has appeared in Turkish translation under the title *Edebiyat ve Felaket* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> See the first pages of my book, *The Historicographic Perversion* (2009).



a literary journal called *Mehyan* (“Pagan Temple,” in Armenian). The names of these writers are worth remembering: Hagop Oshagan, Daniel Varujan, Constant Zarian, Kegham Parseghian, and Aharon. Zarian, who was an Eastern Armenian and consequently not an Ottoman citizen, left Istanbul in the fall of 1914. Varujan and Parseghian suffered atrocious deaths in August 1915. Aharon was not on the list of round-ups in 1915 in Istanbul. Between 1909 (the year when he returned to his fatherland from Belgium where he had been a student for five years) and 1914, Varujan became a recognized poet, acclaimed by his peers and by the general Armenian readership. He was the one who dictated the tone of the journal and inspired its title.

After 1920, the survivors of the group – Zarian (who lived in Italy and the United States), Oshagan (Cyprus and Palestine), and Aharon (Prague and Paris) – became the most important, if not the most influential, writers of the Armenian diaspora. Their gathering in 1914 remains fascinating. I will try to briefly explain the reasons for their coming together, in spite of their differences, or, in some cases, personal enmities. These reasons are essential to understanding what they expected from themselves, from art, from being artists, at a time when their language was one of the nation-to-be.<sup>3</sup> 1) The generation of writers that gathered around the journal *Mehyan* were not satisfied with the literarization of that very language, the one that presided over the entrance of Armenians into modernity (the national and already nationalist modernity) in the middle of the nineteenth century. 2) They sought to bring about a change of status of all that previously belonged to the oral tradition (myths, legends, songs, dialects), a change that in their mind and in their practice was tantamount to a “nationalization” (a becoming-national) of these popular sources. 3) That change of status, in any event, was a natural or artificial transfer of those popular sources into the realm of art. The dialects for instance had to be integrated into the literary language. For them, this process of integration constituted an “aestheticization.” This is why we read this fabulous sentence in the manifesto of *Mehyan*, signed by the whole group in January 1914: “We want to establish an aesthetics of language.” Thirty years later, in 1944, Oshagan (who, in the meantime, had become the greatest Armenian novelist of the twentieth century) was still revisiting this central expression of his generation while living in Jerusalem. By then, he had embarked on the philological enterprise of writing a history of the three or four generations of Armenian writers who had lived in Istanbul. (That enterprise demanded eight years of his life, five thousand pages in ten volumes, as though the

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account I refer the reader to *Le Deuil de la Philologie* (2007), the second volume of my French series on twentieth century Armenian literature, which also offers an appendix with French translations of all the Armenian texts that I am quoting and commenting upon in this section. An English translation is forthcoming (2013). In the meantime, an English version of the concluding chapter is available in *Deviation: Anthology of Contemporary Armenian Literature* (2008).

whole of modern Armenian literature – his own work included – needed a philological reconstruction in order to become what it was, or what Oshagan wanted it to be: a nationalizing project; as though the nation, the aesthetic nation, the nation as an aesthetic phenomenon, could not come to completion without the help and intervention of philology.) He tried to make their nationalizing project explicit as such in the following way:

*This nationalization [of literature] consisted of the operation of bringing it back to its content, its real color, those of our people... . The Leftist [the group of Mehyan] believed in the motion and the beauty that characterized the unseen reserves of their race. To dig into that depth, to bring to light the treasures that were kept there! This meant to accept the fact that Western-Armenian literature was faulty, fragmentary, to widen the borders of that literature farther away than Constantinople, Smyrna, Venice, toward the East, toward the heart of our country. (1982, 9-13)<sup>4</sup>*

The nationalizing project was the project of “nationalizing” literature; simply put, of making it more national. But it was simultaneously a project about bringing past and hidden treasures to the light of art, of “artificializing” the popular traditions, the “heart of the race” (Varujan 1909).<sup>5</sup> Languages, expressions, myths, legends, songs: all of these were not artistic enough, not artful enough, not artificial enough, and this is why they were not national enough, or not national at all, prior to their aestheticization. Hence, the dissatisfaction of this generation with the historical terms of the literarization of their language. The more the “hidden treasures” would be transformed into art, the more they would become national. And obviously it was only through this process that the nation would become what it was, that it would finally come into existence, fully blossoming. At the core of that generation’s school of thought, we thus find a strange and mysterious coincidence between the “national” and the “becoming-national” on the one hand; and art, the artificial and artificialization, on the other. The “national” can only be produced through a process of aestheticization. Nationalization is aestheticization. The nation is a work of art.

Confronted with what they saw as the disintegration and the fragmentation – already the disaster – of their own people, their “race” (according to the vocabulary of that time), both Hagop Oshagan and Daniel Varujan believed the times called for the artist as opposed to the “philologist.” Here are Varujan’s words in 1913: “It would be

<sup>4</sup> Oshagan’s *Panorama of Western-Armenian literature* is a history of Armenian literature in the Ottoman Empire, approximately from 1850 to 1915, in ten volumes, of which the last one (the crowning of the entire enterprise) is devoted to Oshagan’s own view of himself.

<sup>5</sup> “The heart of the race” (*Ts’eghin sirtē*) is the title of a book of poetry published in 1909 by Daniel Varujan, the most prominent representative of the Mehyan generation.

absurd to think that this integral form of language (to which the Armenian poets and writers will have recourse with utmost benefit) will impose itself under the pressure of grammarians, philologists... . This is the task of the writers-aestheticians, and the success of the whole enterprise will depend on the talent and taste that they will display.”

Years later, in 1943, Oshagan wrote along the same lines that, “we need the efforts of philologists who would be at the same time philosophers and artists.” What becomes obvious through these statements and formulations is that the work of Varujan and Oshagan constitutes a profound engagement with philology as a fundamental form of reception and transformation (a receptive transformation of the tradition, where tradition has already come to an end within itself).

As their heirs and continuators, we have to understand what they meant not only in their critique of philology but also in their desire to complete philology’s nationalizing project. If credit for the principle of “nationalization” goes to art, then we might think that it should not also go to philology. But this very point should give us cause for doubt. For what if, in fact, just the opposite were the case? What if art and philology go hand in hand? What if art was actually only another name for the unfolding of philology? Let us, moreover, not forget that the history of the philological project can be understood only with reference to the gradual institution of the aesthetic nation. Thus, we have the kernel of the schema that will guide us here.

To repeat: the ideal of these writers was the *simultaneous* critique and completion of the philological project as a nationalizing project *avant la lettre*, a project that was operative in the constitution of the nation during the whole of the nineteenth century. Yet – and here lies the most amazing moment of this whole story – the idea that this nationalizing project could be accomplished, and the will to realize it, emerged only a few months before the deportation and extermination of the Armenians in the Ottoman empire. Yes, the Armenians finally became a nation. Where? In the Catastrophe. They became what they were (what they aspired to be) in the moment of their collective death. Their birth (as a nation through its aestheticization) coincided with their death. This simultaneous occurrence cannot be a coincidence.

### We, the Natives

But why philology? Why did the “philological project” present itself as a nationalizing one, and why was it implemented as such? And what does philology have to do with the Catastrophe, with our understanding of post-catastrophic mourning? These questions would have remained without any satisfying answer, indeed they would not have even appeared in this form, if Edward Said had not published *Orientalism* in 1978; if he had not opened an entirely new perspective on the history of the neo-nations. Consequently it is through the perspective of a reflection on Said’s work that I will now try to bring some insight to this issue of “philological mourning.” *Orientalism*, the book, came to me as a revelation, but a mediated revelation, and, to begin with, a revelation that needed some explanatory and analytical work. In fact, this was already a work of interpretation that went against the grain of Edward Said’s own humanistic self-interpretation. This is what I want to explain in the first place: *Orientalism*, in order to be understood and made fruitful on its own terms, in order to open up a horizon of hermeneutical/critical work and become an instrument of deconstructive or genealogical reading, needs to be read against Said’s most established and increasingly obtrusive understanding of his own work along the lines of a newly defined humanism. Why did I say a “mediated revelation?” Because I was coming from a different place in the world, and Said’s prose was not immediately accessible to me in its implications, despite the fact that I began to teach a course on Orientalism shortly after I arrived at Columbia University. The single most important reading that opened my eyes has been Stathis Gourgouris’s *Dream Nation*, and its fourth chapter in particular, “The Punishment of Philhellenism” (1996). There, Gourgouris explains the phenomenon of “autoscopic mimicry,” through which the Western gaze is adopted by the native in the process of the formation of the nation; in this case, the neo-Hellenistic nation. This also describes the general process of how in our so-called modernity the nationalization of the nation is entirely dependent on philology and, in fact, complicit with it. This autoscopic mimicry that gave birth to the nationalism of the neo-nations was philological in its very essence. This is how philology in its modern guise came into existence at the very beginning of the nineteenth century. It came into existence as Orientalism. It came into existence as knowledge, as a will to knowledge. By the same token, it created its object, the native.

The question then cannot be why the native consented to be the object of philology. Since I began to read the secondary literature on Edward Said and Orientalism,

I have frankly never understood this question of *consent*. Why does the native consent to become the object of philological knowledge? Simply because that is its very definition. The native is the invention of philology. The native is not a human being, you or me, or the concrete person who lived in Greece, Palestine or India. The native is a figure, and it is as a figure that he is the creature of philology. Andrew Rubin put the clearest emphasis on the fact that Said turned to Gramsci's concept of hegemony in order to explain the native's consent to becoming a native (Rubin 2003).<sup>6</sup> But everyone knows that this recourse is a purely rhetorical one. *Orientalism*, the book, is a Foucauldian machine of explanation. It does not need Gramsci and the latter's concept of hegemony in order to function perfectly well and to offer the most efficient description of how philology operates. And orientalism – this time the historical phenomenon of orientalism – did not need it either to be hegemonic. Philology had the consent of the native from the very first moment, because that is how the figure of the native was invented by philology, as the one who consents to a knowledge about himself, a knowledge about which he had no idea just a moment earlier. This is simply because in the moment prior to his invention, the native was not there in order to consent.

In 1784, William Jones created the Asiatic Society, whose aim was to bring together administrators and philologists in India. He for the very first time enunciated the idea of a kinship between Sanskrit and the classical languages of Europe, and in doing so inaugurated “modern philology” (Michel Foucault does not need to use the word “modern,” because to him philology is implicitly modern as the absolute science of man, the man of humanism; and Foucault did not need to read Ernest Renan in order to say this – Renan for whom philology was the matrix of all historicist sciences). This founding member of the honorable corporation of philologists was himself no more and no less than an administrator of the empire. He had been sent to India as a magistrate, a representative of law for the natives, (of civil and civilized law, of course); the law by which, from now on, the natives were going to be governed. But civil and civilized law did not govern the natives directly. They had to govern themselves. And in order to govern themselves, they had to discover their own law. This is the infinite hospitality of colonial power, the infinite hospitality of humanism, that same humanism of which Edward Said was an active proponent.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Rubin has announced another article to be published on these issues: “Philology and the Secular: Towards a New Humanism” (2012).

This is the infinite humanism of colonialism. The main task of this school of philolo-

gists was to translate into English the native books of law, in order to transform them into law. (This law did not yet bear the name of customary law; the law originated in the customs of the natives, which the colonizers read in their books.) This is how modern colonialism and colonization begin. They do not therefore need any hegemony. They do not need Gramsci for that. They need only philology. They begin with philology. The colonized, from that moment on, is no longer a raw body perceived as a sheer human resource, as was the case under the Spaniards a century before. This idea of a law originating in the native culture required a whole century, the eighteenth century, to spawn this prodigious invention, the modern invention par excellence: the invention of the native.

We know that the native is a creature who is unable to represent himself. As a figure, he is before everything else the correlate of the philologist, forever chained to him. In that sense, and in that sense only (there is no other valuable sense for the word “native” and for the reality of the native), he has no memory of himself, of his own past, of his own culture. He is supposed to be the product of a disaster – the disaster of memory, of the memory of himself, of the self. He needs the philologist in order to remember himself as a historical being. The philologist, therefore, not only reminds the native of his “own” (the native’s) past. He reminds the native of the fact that he, the native, has a past, that he is a historical being. The philologist brings about the historicity of the native; he makes it work. This is how, for the first time ever, he elevates humanism to its real meaning. But the native, simultaneously, is also the one who does not have within himself the knowledge of his own customs. Most fortunately, the colonizer is there in order to reactivate custom in (or into) the domain of knowledge, and give it back to the native in the form of law, of customary law, of culture. Who else could reactivate custom into the domain of knowledge, by means of translation if need be, into French or English, so that the native can afterward benefit from it? Who else, if not, once again, the philologist? This is how philology, the science of man, the science of humanism, intimately collaborates with the colonizer. For that to happen, there is no need for Gramsci and hegemony. There is no difference between the philologist and the colonizer. William Jones was both the proto-philologist and the proto-colonizer.

This powerful lesson in governance, which is also a lesson in how to fabricate the native, the notion and the reality of the native through philology and colonial power, was developed by the British in India after a long period of maturation during the



eighteenth century (or all of a sudden in 1784). It was later extended to the colonial world at large, in particular to Africa, where it enjoyed great favor during the whole of the nineteenth century. It informed many colonial practices. Thus, the citizen's civil law played the role of philology in its relation to customary law, which was the law of the native. The law of the native could function as law and as a system of representation (as well as a system of governance) only through the translation and knowledge established by philology. It was through the philology of the native that colonial governance took place – and still does. This is the way philological humanism works for the good of mankind, and this is why there can be no humanist critique of colonialism. Colonialism is nothing but the implementation of humanism. It is philology applied to bodies. But no, it does not work directly on the bodies but rather on a much subtler, though not more volatile, material: it is man as producer working on man as a product, on the native. Edward Said repeatedly and positively emphasized, in reference to Giambattista Vico, that this production of man by man is the very definition of his humanism. The native – to whom the Orientalist travelers, from Chateaubriand and Lord Byron to Lamartine and Flaubert, were paying a visit in the Near East, wishing to see firsthand this strange animal, which could not represent itself through the very decision of philology, or by philological determination – remains the same native as the one kept in the shackles of customary law by the French and British in their African colonies. The native of Orientalism, uncovered by Edward Said, and the native of the colonizer in Africa, so well described by Mahmood Mamdani, are one and the same.

### The Subject of Self-determination

Now, the next question is: why did Edward Said write two books, *Orientalism* and *The Question of Palestine*, instead of just one? (These two books were released almost at the same time, in 1978 and 1979.) But after what I have just said, it is apparent that there was no way to unite them in a single book.<sup>7</sup> Not because *The Question of Palestine* devotes its descriptions and considerations to a particular case of Orientalism and colonialism, or because it is more political (as though *Orientalism* were not political enough in its contents and implications). But because the book of 1979, beyond making public the plight of Palestinians and describing the specific conditions that cause their exclusion from themselves, their disappearance from the screen of Western consciousness, their treatment as less than humans, also makes it clear that Said is advocating self-determination. And advocating for self-determination did not enter into the framework of *Orientalism*, because what that expres-

<sup>7</sup> The argument developed in this section has been presented first at the colloquium on Edward Said, "Orientalism from the Standpoint of its Victims," organized at Columbia University by Gil Anidjar, Nadia Abu El-Haj, and Stathis Gourgouris, in November 2008.

sion designates can only be understood as national self-determination, in other words: the self-determination of the native. The neo-nations, whatever they may be – neo-Hellenistic, neo-Armenian or neo-Palestinian – and whatever the various circumstances of their emergence are, have been made possible by the very conditions of Orientalist philology. I explained this at length in *Le Deuil de la Philologie*, for the Armenian case, detailing how the philological revolution of the first decade of the nineteenth century triggered the whole process of becoming a neo-nation; that is to say, a philological nation, a nation of natives made philologists, made into the philologists of themselves. What I described here at the beginning of our talk about the “historical background” was only the last stage – the aesthetic stage – of the process. Now, as paradoxical as it may appear at first glance, the right to self-determination is inscribed in the very constitution of the native. It has been inscribed long ago in the constitution of the native by Orientalist philology (or philological Orientalism; they are one and the same). When one exercises one’s right to self-determination or when one enters into the discourse of self-determination, one still obeys the decision and the determination of philology. This is the conundrum of philology. This is not to say that the discourse of self-determination has to be dismissed or ignored. That is not the point. The point is to see what we are doing precisely when we adopt a “political” approach, as opposed to a deconstructive or a genealogical approach. Edward Said stopped short of recognizing this conundrum of the self-affirmation of the native, when he wrote in *The Question of Palestine*:

*To affirm a prior belonging, a long historical patriation, has involved for us a prolonged denial of what we have now become, disinherited outsiders. And the more we deny this, the more we confirm it...* (1992, 174)

Note the invention of this beautiful English neologism, the word “*patriation*.” Immediately recognizing the paradox of self-denial, Said adds the following:

*...unless we cease being outsiders and can exercise our national self-determination.*

The paradox is that when one formulates one’s right to exercise self-determination, one still obeys the old decision and determination of Orientalist philology. Whether one accepts or escapes this new paradox, the conclusion is, from a purely political perspective, the same. One has to make a cut, to open and maintain a distance

between two things, the native of philology and the subject of self-determination, in order for the subject of self-determination to fulfill his/her history. I am borrowing the expression from Said himself. In *The Question of Palestine*, he wrote: “An independent and sovereign Palestinian state is required at this stage to fulfill our history as a people during the past century” (175). Again, I am not saying that a Palestinian state is not required. I am only examining the conditions of possibility for a purely political discourse, one that is aware of the aforementioned paradox and nevertheless needs to keep open the possibility of self-determination and the resistance against a power that is overtly colonial in essence and in practice. One condition of possibility for this discourse is this small and imperceptible distancing, this necessary differentiation, between two aspects of the native: the native of philology and the native of self-determination. Only thus can the second become the *subject of his own history*, as they say. Since the publication of these two books over thirty years ago, a flurry of commentary has been published by writers who, without necessarily belonging to the field of political science, nevertheless followed the lines of this “purely political” approach and tried to imagine how resistance might be possible against the Orientalist determination of the national self, as well as against the Orientalist determination of self-determination. This Orientalist determination of self-determination is an event that escapes both historians and political scientists, because the historical discourse that we know as well as, for that matter, the “purely political” approaches, are made possible by that two-century-old determination. We should be capable of changing direction and working our way back through all the historically sedimented layers accumulated since that initial event. In sum, we should be capable of “replaying” the event of nationalization, the philological event that gave birth to the neo-nations. Foucault called this an “archeology.” I believe it is what distinguishes what I am saying here from all other critical theories of nationalism.

The other characteristic is that the event in question cannot be immediately, straightforwardly classified. It is obviously not a “political” event, nor is it “cultural.” Distinctions between the political and the cultural, which are found everywhere in the literature on nationalism – especially at those moments when it becomes absolutely indispensable to explain the primacy of the cultural model in terms of a failure to realize “political aspirations” – ignore all that has to do with nationalization as the philological event I am describing here; that event creates a supposedly political subject of self-determination at the very moment it expresses what is meant to

be culturally specific to this subject. Such, at any rate, is the explanation for why we have two books, *Orientalism* and *The Question of Palestine*. We have two books because of the gap that needs to be introduced between the philological native and the native-subject of self-determination, in trying to envision a politico-cultural resistance against Orientalism, instead of working our way back, archeologically, toward the defining event that established philology; and with philology the native; and with the native, the disaster of his own memory: a disaster that characterizes the native.

On November 4, 2008, a French chronicler who had to, as per schedule, submit the text for his column at 10 pm local time, turned in his daily chronicle of world events devoted to the American elections without yet knowing the outcome. His readers would read it the next day in *Le Monde*. The title was: *On ne sait jamais de quoi le passé sera fait*. One never knows what the past will be made of. Insofar as this was the chronicle's title, it was a pun. Insofar as this can serve as a title for what concerns us here, it is no longer a pun. One never knows what the past will be made of. This is why Derrida said that the structure of the determining event comes with a tense: its tense is the *future anterior*. It will have happened. It does not belong to our past – not yet. It will be our past in the future; it will be the past for those who come after us.

This should also be a lesson for historians. There are events that can determine our whole future but are structurally bound to escape our attention because they are still to happen in the past. The event that established philology, the native, and the disaster of the native is still to come in the past. We have to make it happen in the past, in order to understand what happens to us in the present when we speak of “self-determination,” and when our affirmation of ourselves and of our *patriation* involves “a prolonged denial of what we have now become, disinherited outsiders;” this being the worst possible denial: the victim's denial of his or her own Catastrophe. The Armenians are world champions in this category, though I suspect this is a very common way of being – moreover, an unavoidable one. The victim's denial (subjective genitive) is inherent to the structure of the Catastrophe. In French there are two words that can be invoked here, *déni* and *dénégation*. *Dénégation* is always the denial by the perpetrator. But *déni* is the denial by the victim. The disinherited outsiders always need to fulfill their history as a people, instead of working their way back to what made it possible – or rather, impossible, in the first place.

In 1931, Nicolas Sarafian, an Armenian poet of the fledgling diaspora, wrote from Paris of “these foreign countries” of his exile, which “have been our misfortune and, at the same time, our golden opportunity.” The misfortune of the disinherited outsider is not his “disinheritance.” That would be too obvious. His misfortune is that he is the one who needs to speak about self-determination. The ones who are on the side of colonialism or the perpetrators, those who conceived and carried out the sheer elimination of the native from the radars of civilized humanity, do not need to speak of self-determination, of course; nor do they need to advocate for their own self-determination. As for the golden opportunity, it consists of the fact that only the disinherited outsider can work his way back through the historically sedimented layers that separate him from the initial event, the philological revolution. Only the victim can say something about what obliges him to lay claim to self-determination. Only beyond Catastrophe can one archeologically “replay” the defining event of the establishment of philology and its radically perverse relationship to the native.

We have thus discovered why Edward Said wrote two different books on the same subject and why he was unable to distinguish between native and native, in the same way he would later explicitly distinguish between philology and philology, or between humanism and humanism.

### **Catastrophic Mourning**

I am not quite sure that my distinguished audience has paid enough attention to what I said about the relationship between the philologist and the native and about the supposed disaster of the native. It is structurally presupposed, a necessarily supposed disaster, and it is essential to the very definition of the native. The native is the heir of a disaster. If there is anything that we can call a tradition, his is a lost tradition. He needs the philologist in order to be reminded of it, to be reminded of his own tradition, which becomes “his own” only through the intervention of philology. He needs to become a philologist of himself, two beings in one; in sum, a monster with two heads, if he wants to be the subject of his own history. This is not a surprise. But if the native is the invention of philology, and if his is a lost tradition, then the loss of tradition is also the invention of philology. And finally if philology, while inventing the native, also and by the same token invented the disaster of the native, it thereby instituted the native as the one who has to mourn for this loss.

In the encounter between the philologist and his native, mourning is always assumed – and this in a number of ways. It is the mourning of the myth, discovered as lost by philology (hence the calls for a ‘new mythology’ already at the end of the eighteenth century; calls that were renewed a century later among the Armenian heirs of the auto-ethnographic movement, shortly before the Catastrophe that was to remove the entirety of the Armenian intelligentsia from the Ottoman Empire and thus erase once and for all the traces of the crime).<sup>8</sup> It is also the impossible mourning of the native, invented by philology as the result of a cultural cataclysm, as a monument in ruins. Be that as it may, possible or impossible, it is always the mourning of philology, by which I mean the mourning instituted by philology. In this sense, as I have said elsewhere and repeat here, *philology is the institution of mourning*. In this sense, it also possesses a monopoly on mourning. We have no other concept of mourning than that initiated by philology in its perverse relation to the native.

Daniel Varujan, in his 1912 collection, has a poem called “To the Dead Gods,” which contains the following lines: “Under the bloody-glorious cross / Whose stretched arms flow in sadness/On the whole world,/I, vanquished, from the bitter core of my art/I mourn your death, O pagan gods.” Mourning was still possible. It was mourning for the lost tradition of mythological religion. Art was essentially the space in which the mourning of mythological religion could find expression. But no one has seen any mythological god in his lifetime and life space. Mythological gods are essentially philological gods. Varujan, the greatest Armenian poet at the beginning of the century, was then simply reacting to philology in its most profound definition, to philology as an institution of mourning. From the very beginning, philology had decided everything about mourning as well. In 1803, more than a century before this poem was written, at the moment philology began to establish itself as a discourse, a phenomenon, a discipline, and a science, at the moment its object emerged from the void of knowledge, Hölderlin could speak in his poem *Mnemosyne* of a loss without pain; in other words, without mourning, without the pain of mourning:

*Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos,  
Schmerzlos sind wir und haben fast  
Die Sprache in der Fremde verloren.*

<sup>8</sup> The call for a “new mythology” in Schelling and the Jena romantics is described in the opening chapter of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (1988). Also see the “Discourse on Mythology” attributed to Schelling’s spokesperson by Friedrich Schlegel in his *Dialogue on Poetry* (1968). The same call for a new mythology was made by the group Mehyan, as I describe in my *Le Deuil de la Philologie*, chapters 1 & 6 (2007, 51, 216).



*(A sign we are, undeciphered,  
Without pain we are, and have nearly  
Lost our language in foreign lands.)*

Melancholia philologica: the native is a sign that has become absolutely impossible to decipher, since the key to his original language has been lost and the world in which he signified no longer exists. This sign is little more than a vestige, a monument, a Rosetta Stone that will never find its Champollion. It is a relic; a silent witness to the past; a monument standing defiantly erect in the midst of nature; an expression of the myth that is at once memorable and immemorial. It has been naturally conserved, thanks to some miracle, but it will remain mute for as long as the key to its cipher is not found. Hölderlin did not anticipate the philologists, of course; but did he really need to concern himself with philology? This sign that “we” are, as natives, is *deutungslos*. It is true that the hieroglyphic inscription has been preserved intact, or very nearly so; yet its meaning has been lost forever. (We cannot be sure: that is why we say that the native’s original language, the language of the original myth and of mytho-poetic power, which is also a capacity for mourning, has been “almost” lost.) Along with this meaning, the means of recovering it have also been lost. Most importantly, the loss has also been lost. Which native could ever have been aware that he was by nature a linguistic vestige, a relic, a silent monument preserved by nature, an archeological object, a mysterious palimpsest, had it not been for the philologists? Which native could ever have discovered and recorded his own disaster in himself, the disaster constitutive of his being (that is, his being as a native)? The loss in question is thus plainly a loss without mourning. That is why we are painless, *schmerzlos*, petrified in our turn. You see how Hölderlin reverses the whole structure that binds the native to the philologist, the structure responsible for the fact that they function in tandem from the outset. He reverses it and responds to it even before this structure has had the time to establish itself and produce historical effects. He even succeeds in bringing this structure into the light, in stripping it bare, in revealing the disaster of the native for what it is. He can do all this for a very simple reason that I need not elaborate and explain: he does not identify with the philologist. He identifies with the native in the nascent structure that no one had ever perceived before him (nor was it given to anyone to perceive, in the two centuries after him).

Finally, if we may say that the native is someone who has lost his capacity to mourn, there can be no question of restoring his own history to him, without first restoring that capacity. Was philology designed for that purpose? Such was the conviction of some poets and writers, who sought to compete with philology in nationalizing the nation and in taking charge of mourning; they failed to realize that the mourning they wished to assume was none other than the mourning of philology. The disinherited outsider, the victim of Orientalist philology, cannot even mourn his loss without encountering Orientalist philology, which defined mourning for him as the mourning of his supposed disaster, long before the Catastrophe even happened.

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# MELANCHOLIA PHILOLOGICA

## Q & A

**Marc Nichanian**

moderated by Walid Sadek  
transcribed by Hiba Haidar

**Marc Nichanian** biography on page 59.

**Walid Sadek**, born in 1966, is an artist and writer living in Beirut. His early work investigates the violent legacies of the Lebanese Civil War partially and inadequately experienced by a young Christian-born Lebanese. He later began to posit, mostly in theoretical texts, ways of understanding the complexity of lingering civil strife in times of relative social and economic stability. His recent written work endeavors to structure a theory for a post-war society disinclined to resume normative living. Concomitantly, a number of his art installations propose a poetics for a social experience governed by uneasy contiguity with the remnants and consequences of violence. Walid Sadek is an associate professor at the Department of Architecture and Design at the American University of Beirut.

Marc Nichanian delivered his paper **Melancholia Philologica** (see page 253) at the closing panel of the **Anywhere but Now** symposium, organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in April 2009. The panel was moderated by Walid Sadek and was followed by a Q&A with the audience.

**Walid Sadek:** I have the daunting task of asking a few questions of Marc Nichanian. Does anyone want to take my place? (*Audience laughs.*) I must say, as I try to speak: I cannot avoid the powerful sense of, almost, melancholy.

**Marc Nichanian:** That's exactly what melancholy is.

**WS:** If my question seems a little bit naïvely groping for hope, please excuse me. Maybe it will get more complex as the conversation develops. I would like to ask a question about temporality and another one about spatiality, and then try to challenge you on your understanding of philology as an almost divinely efficient machine. I think in your fourth section, you throw at us this incredibly hopeful sentence, and then you take it away – as you usually do in your texts. This is why I find your work so interesting. But when you do say to us that “we” – and this “we” is us poor folk here in this room – that we should prove capable of changing direction and working our way back through all the historically sedimented layers between us and that event, that disaster – it's an amazing, almost inhuman demand to make. But let me say that when I read this, I quickly imagined Walter Benjamin's concept of history but completely reconfigured. You and I, we will have to somehow walk backwards, hoping that we will stumble and fall upon that disaster which found us, and somehow sit there. And my question is this: Do what? Mourn endlessly? What do we do? If that was possible...

**MN:** Is it a question? (*Audience laughs.*)

**WS:** (*laughing*) Well, I'm not sure it's going to happen...

**MN:** It's an experience, the impossibility of mourning. But it is not an experience that is readable, visible; it is not an experience of everyday life. For sure, it's also not an experience

about which you can make people speak. Only the victim can recount this experience, but strangely he never says it because the victim is the one who is defined by his own self-denial. The denial of what? The denial of the Catastrophe. No victim can ever accept that what he or she or the collectivity has been put through was a catastrophe. Then you cannot *expect*, by gathering the testimonies, to have any *inscription* of the Catastrophe, and of the denial of the Catastrophe. So, where can you find it? In literature, in the limits of literature. Only literature can speak about the Catastrophe. The problem, you see, is that of course there is an experience of catastrophe; of course there is an experience of being unable to mourn after the Catastrophe. That's what the Catastrophe *is*. Because of losses, deaths, wars, destructions – there have been millions of these! But as long as the capacity for mourning exists, humanity exists. The Catastrophe's world – the humanity ceases to exist because mourning has been stopped. That's the *will* of the perpetrator. The perpetrator does not want to *kill you*. He doesn't want to *eliminate you*. He wants to eliminate the *capacity for mourning* in you.

That's understandable. But that was the first layer here, the first stage. The problem is that the Armenian writers of the twentieth century... when for instance Varujan, who I quoted almost at the very end, says: “I'm mourning your death, oh dead Gods” – the idea of mourning, the concept of mourning, or the practice of mourning that he means when he says “art is mourning” is, *again*, and that's what is terrible, inherited from philology. That was the topic of this lecture, but that's very difficult to understand, right? And it seems that what I explained is that in order to *really ask* the question, “What mourning for mourning?” We first need to understand that *everything* that we know about mourning has already been determined by philology. Even that our mourning is entirely occupied. It doesn't belong

to us. That's terrible. But you understand that that's what the Catastrophe is, again. The Catastrophe is the usurpation of mourning from the victims; for whom, I don't know. For the perpetrators themselves? I don't even think so. But that's what is terrible: the fact that we have no mourning left, no capacity for mourning left, either because of the will of the perpetrator, or because the concept of mourning that we have to even understand what happened to us is historically determined by two centuries of philology, and is not enough to understand what the Catastrophe is.

Thus, we have two things to understand – that's what I am explaining. We have to understand first what the Catastrophe is. That's already difficult: to understand that the Catastrophe is not the dead, the death. It is the impossibility of mourning; it's being deprived of the language for expressing the loss. It's the loss of the loss. That's already difficult to understand, but the other thing is also difficult to understand: the fact that we have to recuperate an idea of mourning, not only the capacity for mourning, but the capacity for *thinking* of mourning, in order to practice it. "Art is mourning," again. Why is art mourning? Why do the greatest Armenian writers of the twentieth century constantly say that art is mourning? Is it mourning, really? They have been unable, all, without an exception, to write a *line* about the Catastrophe. They have been unable, in spite of their most profound project, totally unable to approach the Catastrophe. *Nothing* has been written for about 90 years about the Catastrophe – the Armenian one, in this case. Nothing. There are hundreds of books, testimonies, but about the Catastrophe nothing has been written. Because the testimonies do not speak about the Catastrophe. They speak about the killing of my father, my mother. My grandfather was killed by Topal Osman, 90 years ago. So what? Is this the Catastrophe? I can write a book about that. That was the answer.

Walid, I apologize but I want to repeat this. Not a *line* has been written about the Armenian Catastrophe. I do not know if this is understandable. Hagop Oshagan, the greatest one of them, has written a 2,000-page novel called "The Remnants," an unfinished work published in Cairo between 1934 and 1936, which had – in his mind – three parts. The third part should have been called "The Hell" and should have spanned ten volumes, which means another 2,000 pages after the first 2,000 pages. He was never able to write them, not even a single line. We have the first two parts of the novel but we don't have the third. And the one writer who pushed farthest this project of approaching the Catastrophe was unable to enter into the Catastrophe. And one more aspect of the Catastrophe: I was lecturing about this in Istanbul, and the audience was partly Turkish and partly Armenian, and I began my lecture on the second part of Hagop Oshagan's series by saying that no one in this room has read the novel "The Remnants" – of course not the Turks, but also not the Armenians. Do you understand that? That we have a whole population of survivors all around the world, in Armenia and in the diaspora, in Armenia *worse* than in the diaspora, and the greatest novel of the twentieth century in the Armenian language, probably the greatest novel of the twentieth century (*audience laughs*), whose object was to approach the Catastrophe, has not been read by *anybody*! Which means, not by the first constituency of Hagop Oshagan, the Armenian readers. That's not the Catastrophe itself? The *very* Catastrophe?

**WS:** Has it been translated?

**MN:** It could have been translated if it had first been read (*audience laughs*). Okay?

**WS:** Okay.





**MN:** And because you can read – when you’re an Armenian, I mean – you can read only with the eyes of the other, which means the Western gaze. As long as it has not been translated you cannot read it yourself, and that’s *pure* paradox. Then you cannot read! Because in order to translate you have to read; but in order to read it, it needs to be translated first, so that the others can read it. Because you have to read with the eyes of the other, you understand? And that’s such a *profound* contradiction, that you are totally paralyzed, you are petrified, you cannot do *anything*. And it’s not a joke what I am saying about the native being the creature of the philologist, looking at himself through the eyes of the philologist and being this monster with two heads. This is the result.

**WS:** I am not done with time. Let’s say that the future anterior will have happened. Allow me: I haven’t read Armenian literature, but can we just for the sake of conversation bring in here the figure of French philosopher and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot for a moment? What Maurice Blanchot says is that for him writing happens only *après coup*, it happens *after* the actual event. But by writ-

ing belatedly, he turns around and he gazes at the disaster and does *nothing* else, except write belatedly. But to my question: from your point of view, it seems to me that we would have to look at the work of the great Blanchot with great caution and even skepticism, no?

**MN:** You know, Maurice Blanchot has this book published in 1980 called *L’Écriture du Désastre*, “The Writing of the Disaster” in English, probably. That’s why, for this three-volume series that I published in English, which is called “Writers of Disaster,” I couldn’t choose the French title *Les Écrivains du Désastre* because Blanchot had already written a book called *L’Écriture du Désastre*. I don’t like that book (*audience laughs*).

**WS:** I just wanted to hear you say that... (*laughs*)

**MN:** I will not be able to explain my discomfort with Blanchot’s *Disaster* today, in the present context. Let me only say the following: In 1948, in a short piece first called “Un Récit?” (and later republished under the title “The Madness of the Day”) Blanchot wrote this fabulous sentence: “Un récit? Non, pas de récit, plus jamais.” Derrida has written hundreds of pages on this madness of the day. He suggested that “récit” should be translated as “account.” “An account? No account. Never again.” This “Never again” has nothing to do with Adorno’s opinion on writing poetry after Auschwitz. Here the survivor responds to a command, an injunction. They want an account, they want what we today call a “testimony.” Who is the “they” in this story? Doctors, philologists, representatives of the law, historians, perpetrators, everyone and no one. I am myself, as a survivor, the source of the injunction. And in Blanchot’s story, what is the survivor’s answer to this injunction? It is a refusal. No account any more. No testimony any more. But the “no” comes from within. From

within the *récit*, he says “no” to the *récit*. From within the account, “no” to the account. This is one possible way of expressing the law of deconstruction. The survivor and the witness are not the same. Our modernity confuses the one with the other. The survivor can be his own witness, the witness of himself, only as one who obeys the injunction to testify, to be a witness. There is no witnessing that is not a response to this incredible command, which comes from within. Consequently we have the right to say “no” to testimony. It is a duty to say “no” to testimony, any testimony. This is the *freedom of not speaking*, as opposed to what we pompously call freedom of speech. But what happened is that years later, Blanchot entirely forgot what he had written in 1948. Or he had never understood what he himself had written. He slipped from the “impossibility of bearing witness” to the imperative of “bearing witness for the impossible.” At the end of his life, he had forgotten the freedom of not speaking. He had forgotten the Catastrophe. *The Writing of the Disaster* is a sad testimony to the fact that he himself had never understood what Catastrophe means, despite the “no” to testimony in *The Madness of the Day*.



**WS:** (*Audience wants to intervene*) Wait, I am not done yet, I waited seven months for this to happen. I would like to bring in the figure of Antigone – I know from other texts that you care greatly for that tragedy – to ask you if mourning requires a location. Let me ask you the question differently: when you speak of the disinherited outsider, and if you bring in the figure of Antigone – Antigone, in a sense, could not begin her mourning until she located the corpse and then marked the man with a grave. Is that another problem to be added, that we are unable as natives and/or as disinherited outsiders to actually *find* a location, which is not the nation? Because the nation is not a grave; it is a sarcophagus. It is an empty grave, right? I am talking about corpses, that kind of cumbersome evidence – is there a way to approach the issue spatially and say we need a location that is not the nation?

**MN:** Antigone, she is the one who reacts against the interdiction of mourning, because there *is* an interdiction of mourning on the part of the perpetrator. She reacts against the interdiction of mourning. The problem is that the brothers Eteocles and Polyneikes who are both dead – one is on one side and the other on the other side. The problem is that they reconcile with each other in their death. There is always a process of reconciliation between the enemies; and the one who is condemned, eternally buried in her grave, which means being mute forever, is Antigone. In the reconciliation of the brothers, the dead brothers, this interdiction of mourning disappears. Antigone disappears; she doesn't speak anymore. It is strange that the Greeks knew all this, because they represented this; they wrote this almost word for word. It is strange how the Greeks, 25 centuries ago, had an idea of what the Catastrophe is, of what the interdiction of mourning is, of how the Catastrophe can be *exactly* the effect of the interdiction of mourning by the perpetrator. And moreover, they also had the idea that

every political reconciliation can be undertaken only at the price of *forgetting* the interdiction of mourning, by forgetting Antigone, by burying her alive. Because she is buried alive.

**WS:** This is my last question and then the floor is yours, I promise. This concerns the way you present philology. It really seems like a bulldozer. I am not saying it's not – I don't know. But in the volume *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, to which you contributed, there is an essay by David Lloyd ["The Memory of Hunger"], who writes about the Irish hunger, the famine. He is speaking about, let me quote, the "surviving Irish" living under the weight of British imperialism, an imperialism that always seems like something that is almost incapable of catching up with modernity. He is saying that, "the relation to damage as loss is counter-pointed always by the persistence of damage as a mode of memory." There is something hopeful here. As if saying, there is a way to resist, in a sense, by making damage the *way* we remember, the way we think about the past. Does that evoke anything?

**MN:** This is melancholy. Melancholy is the only possible resistance.

**WS:** Please say more (*audience laughs*).

**MN:** That's what Walter Benjamin is saying in *On the Concept of History*, in thesis no. 7, the *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*. He says something very simple; it is also the thesis in which he has this very famous sentence on barbarism. But in this thesis no. 7 he says, "History is always the history of the victors." Which is wrong. Only a small mistake, a very small mistake. History is always the history of the perpetrators – *that's* the real thing. *Never* the history of the victim. Sometimes perpetrators can be defeated; the Nazis have been defeated. But history is

*always* the history of the perpetrators. There is only *one* history; it's always that. To speak about the Greeks again: Troy has been destroyed, *entirely* destroyed, *erased* from the surface of the earth. Do we know which language the Trojans were speaking? Did they speak Greek? The story, or the history, of the destruction of Troy, we know it only through the Greeks of course, and in Greek. And not only is this history the history of the perpetrators, it is also a reconciliation. After the disappearance of the Trojans, of course they could reconcile with the Trojans, and mono-lingually. Which means in one language, in Greek. History is monolingual; it's always the history of those reconciled, and it is always the history of the perpetrators. Okay, when you have understood that, you can begin to try to ask yourself: what do we have to do? That was your question, and it is to this question that I answered that the only answer is melancholy.

It is a two-sided answer, because in the same, exactly in the same thesis, Walter Benjamin tells us that this is precisely what melancholy is – this one-sided history, one monolingual history of the perpetrators. But again, that you can oppose only through melancholy, which is what? Which is to ask constantly, again and again, what *remains* when you have even lost the language for saying the loss? What remains when even we have lost the capacity for saying the loss or even the loss itself? This is only a possible question. But I don't even say that this is the *only* possible question. I am only saying: first, let us understand that history is always the history of the perpetrator. *Then* we can begin to ask questions. And that's what Jean-François Lyotard says... You remember Jean-François Lyotard? *Le Différend* – everyone has read *Le Différend*, or maybe philosophers write for no one. No one reads their books (*audience laughs*). He said, "Nazism... has been beaten down like a mad dog... It has never been refuted." That's exactly what I am saying: History is always the history of the perpetrators.

**WS:** Questions please.

**Nadia Latif** (*from the audience*): Thank you. That was a very important intervention and I am so glad that you have made it. I hope this is published so that I and other people can start to work on it, because it is a very important imperative that you placed before us, and I just want to be sure that I understood it correctly. If I understand it correctly, the problem is that we need to ask the right questions, right? And that takes time. What you are asking for needs a lot of time and the fact that the examples that you spoke of – you spoke of the Greeks, you spoke of Antigone, you spoke of that period, that they were able to do it, right? When we no longer live in a world of literature – over the centuries our world has come into a being a world of law – the language of law is inadequate. But we have to keep on trying; we have to keep on asking questions.

**MN:** But that's terrible!

**NL:** I know! (*Audience laughs*)

**MN:** We are no longer in the century of literature. Is that what you are saying?

**NL:** Yes! Yes! And the problem is: it's an inadequate, shitty language, and it is very dangerous, as you point out, to have hope.

**MN:** It is very dangerous to what, to have hope? *That's* what I said, thank you very much. (*Audience laughs*).

**NL:** Yes, to have hope. I am thinking that when you ask the question, you will get the answer. I think the point is, and you put it to us so well, that the imperative is to keep on persisting and asking questions without expecting to hit on

the right answer any time soon. I will keep on persisting in that, because there is nothing else that can be done.

**MN:** You know, Walter Benjamin repeated constantly this sentence that he inherited from Kafka, that “of course there is hope, there is even an infinite hope. But not for us!” (*Audience laughs*). That's number one. But there is number two. There is something at least which is clear in what I am saying: it is my *disgust*, yes, *disgust*, with the small solutions – the political ones. For instance, in the case of Armenians, this *immense* expectation of being recognized politically, okay?

**Nazan Üstündağ** (*from the audience*): I have two questions. One of them is: I remember very well when Hrant Dink was assassinated. And right after he was assassinated, for the first time in my life I witnessed that Turkish, even Turkish liberals who are bearers of the disgusting hope that you are talking about, that liberalism and pluralism will somehow bring about a good society, even *they* were saying in every speech that there is no hope. And it is the politics of *not* hoping, the politics of despair, that might bring something new to this land. That's what they were saying, and I find it very significant that it was after Dink's death. I mean the repetition of catastrophe, of genocide, whatever you want to call it, I mean it was repeated in history, it was repeated, and Turks had to encounter, at least the intellectuals, had to encounter that repetition. And there was a recognition that soon was forgotten. But for a moment, we saw *exactly* what you are describing. And I remember the whole rally and the hopelessness really, which was amazing. Maybe the *one* moment many of us felt at home in Turkey. This is the first thing, what do you think about this? And the second thing...

**Arzu Öztürkmen** (*from the audience*): May I add? This was the experience that you referred to.

**Someone from the audience:** There is no hope in this...

**NU (from the audience):** No, it was exactly the politics of despair, because he's lost and he will not come back. It is over! I mean it was the recognition that Armenians are really lost; they are not here anymore. And there will never be another... And it is over. I mean, what can you do? It's over. There is *nothing* you can do.

**MN:** Okay, I did not use the expression "politics of despair," but I like it very much. (*Audience laughs*).

**NU (from the audience):** The second thing I would like to say: Does philosophy, or philology, or sociology, or any social science, have to be the mourning subject? I mean there is the laughing subject, and we have seen this laughing subject in *all* the movies we have watched here. I think that's what has really touched us mostly: dwelling after mourning, I mean dwelling after disaster. People do dwell, and when they dwell, they laugh, and when they laugh, they also produce a form of knowledge. Does knowledge only come from mourning?

**MN:** It comes from the forgetting of mourning. Philology is an institution of mourning, I said. But by forgetting, of course, it is the fact that it is an institution of mourning.

**NU (from the audience):** But does knowledge always have to be related to mourning? I mean there is a knowledge that is dwelling in laughter. This shows in the documentary films that we saw yesterday. These Bosnians guys, when they shoot the "Mahmuts" on the island in *Do You Remember Sarajevo* [2001], and when the Iraqis in *Life after the Fall* [2008] make fun... I mean there is a knowledge in relation to humor, in relation to laughter. Do we have to be so rational?



**MN:** Yes, but I have nothing to add, to say to that. You're right in that. I am very much obsessed by this question: what mourning for mourning? But probably you are right: there are things like that.

But it was an affirmation. You are asking me, can knowledge only be received through mourning? But why knowledge then? Knowledge is always knowledge of philology, which is the knowledge of this particular... the queen of sciences, all powerful in our lives, which is called philology and which is *the* institution of mourning. Then forget knowledge! Forget knowledge! Maybe that is the question: forget knowledge? But this will not be the answer... We do not know what tomorrow will be made of, we don't know, very simply.

What I am saying here about philology would not have been possible without Said's *Orientalism*, which itself would not have been possible without Michel Foucault's

*The Order of Things*. The problem is that Foucault had not read *Orientalism*. Don't take this as a paradox or an anachronism. Do you remember how in the last pages of *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault was situating ethnology in the dimension of historicity, the nature of which he described in the following terms: "that perpetual oscillation which is the reason why the human sciences are always being contested, from without, by their own history?" After raising a quite banal objection to his own argument that ethnology is traditionally the knowledge of peoples without history, Foucault added that "ethnology itself is possible only on the basis of a certain situation, of an absolutely singular event... Ethnology has its roots, in fact, in a possibility that properly belongs to the history of our culture." What did he mean by this? The explanation comes immediately and it is striking: "There is a certain position of the Western *ratio* that was constituted in its history and provides a foundation for the relation it can have with all other societies... Ethnology can assume its proper dimensions only within the historical sovereignty... of European thought." For Foucault here, it is as if ethnology had traditionally taken upon itself the task of exploring this "sovereignty" exhibited by European knowledge in its rapport with the other. Truly, no one had even begun to take note of that before him. Besides, were one to believe the opposite, Foucault immediately corrects: "This does not mean that the colonizing situation is indispensable to ethnology." Ten years later, Edward Said would in turn correct such crude approximations. He would enable us to read together the historicity of the object and the Orientalism of the gaze. In any event, Foucault was also a bit too optimistic, because he thought that *man* – what he called *man* – would soon disappear and we would have a new something else tomorrow, which will not be knowledge, which will not be modernity, which will not be humanism. But it's not for tomorrow. And again I prefer what you said about this politics of despair.

**Arzu Öztürkmen** (*from the audience*): But also of laughter.

**MN**: Yes, but that I need to understand more.

**AO** (*from the audience*): Perhaps I will try to ask you: I am a folklorist, and folklorists deal a lot with language, with tales and storytelling, and this and that. But is language the only form, the only expressive form that we have now for mourning, for laughter, for many other things? I mean, we produce some other genres, especially during modernity and this post-modernity; and I don't think we have done what has enhanced the historical ethnography of the Armenian post-catastrophe world, where, of course, language was a loss. It is an ethnography of loss, which is very difficult to do perhaps, but it needs some kind of a conceptualization. Lately, I have been writing about how young Turks approach folklore, and that's where your philology comes in, on top of the hierarchy of disciplines, you know. And my question then is: in the nineteenth century there was a competition of these disciplines, where folklore, I believe, lost out to enlightenment-based language and history and other disciplines. Folklore, in the beginning of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, was utilized as a basis for the nation. According to Herder, for instance, it was "pure" and "peasants being close to nature," and giving more power to the native, in fact, rather than taking power away from the native. So when was this hierarchy sort of disrupted?

**MN**: Yes, but we have to speak about that (*audience laughs*). Because what I have affirmed here... my assertion was that even what you described, even the science of folklore – we know very well its history during the nineteenth century – is the science of the native. It is again a knowledge, of course, and it is again the knowledge of the native. It is again done by the philologists, *even* if it



is done by natives-turned-philologists. But maybe you are right: this is something to find out. But we will speak again. I need to better understand what you are saying.

**WS:** We need to end here and continue elsewhere. Thank you.



*A sign we are, undeciphered,  
Without pain we are, and have almost  
Lost our language in foreign lands.*

—Friedrich Hölderlin

Adapted from the German-to-English  
translation by Richard Sieburth

## ANYWHERE BUT NOW

How can we articulate the intangible sense of being and belonging, the rupture of apart-ness, and the paradoxes contained in the where and now of places east of the Mediterranean, a region in constant flux?

The book *Anywhere but Now* assembles creative inquiries into landscapes of belonging and loss. Scholars, writers, filmmakers and artists reflect on violence, siege and flight, capturing haunting echoes from the past, subtle tremors of fear and desire, and diverse yearnings for elsewhere.

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