HERE WE STAND: PERFORMANCES OF PALESTINIAN RESISTANCE IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

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In this study, I explore three performance-based practices—theatre, dance, and music—in which Palestinian artists nonviolently address their experiences under the Israeli occupation and its settler colonial violence. By way of qualitative analysis, I survey and highlight contemporary examples of theatrical production in the Gaza Strip (Chapter I), examine the history of Palestinian protest song and attend to its recent development including the employment of folk dance *dabke* (Chapter II), and critically consider the ways in which the lived experiences of Palestinians in Israeli prisons are both performative and reflected in dramatic literature (Chapter III). Throughout, my review of the included work of Palestinian artists and culture makers is interdisciplinary, drawing on literature from theatre studies, performance studies, musicology, and critical dance studies, as well as histories and cultural studies about occupied Palestine. In addition to a critical and close reading of the example performances, each practice that I consider is contextualized within broader social constructs, cultural perspectives, and the history of legal and political maneuverings that have shaped Palestine. In the end, I argue that the Palestinian reliance on nonviolent action against colonial oppression helps subvert the dominant and dehumanizing Israeli narrative, which is perpetuated by a lack of serious global attention to the contributions of Palestinian artists. In doing so, I ensure that their voices are present in Western theatre and performance scholarship.

This is dedicated to my Palestinian people. And to all the family that I have lost during the Israeli genocidal war on the Gaza Strip since October 2023. I am sorry that this is all I could do.

Humanity has failed us.

Fatima Abukhadra-Abusultan (grandmother)

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Sabah Mustafa Mahmoud Abusultan-Abukhadra (aunt)

Huda Mustafa Mahmoud Abusultan (aunt)

Sahar Alhoor-Abusultan (aunt-in-law)

Omar Mustafa Mahmoud Abusultan (uncle)

Mazen Khamis Abukhadra (uncle-in-law)

Areej Imad Naeem Abusultan-Alhabeel (cousin)

Madeeha Medhat Zaid (cousin)

Khalil Abdelkareem Mustafa Abusultan (cousin)

Mohammed Abdelkareem Mustafa Abusultan (cousin)

Ahmed Omar Mustafa Abusultan (cousin)

Mohammed Omar Mustafa Abusultan (cousin)

Mahmoud Omar Mustafa Abusultan (cousin)

Abdallah Omar Mustafa Abusultan (cousin)

Shahid Omar Mustafa Abusultan (cousin)

Kamal Faris Kamal Abusultan (cousin)

Mohammed Mazen Khamis Abukhadra (cousin)

Mahmoud Mazen Khamis Abukhadra (cousin)

Omar Mazen Khamis Abukhadra (cousin)

Moatz Mazen Khamis Abukhadra (cousin)

Mustafa Mazen Khamis Abukhadra (cousin)

Ihab Imad Naeem Abusultan (cousin)

Sahar Ahmed Omar Abusultan (second niece)

Yusuf Rami Khalil Alhabeel (second nephew)

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#FreePalestine

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INTRODUCTION. AN ISRAELI HISTORY OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE & PALESTINIAN RELIANCE ON NON-VIOLENCE

Desperately needed and life-saving aid is yet to reach Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. As the Israeli war atrocities continue, the world fails to adequately support suffering civilians in the historically besieged territory. This moral failure includes many prominent political and cultural figures across the globe, some of whom claim ancestral ties to Palestine. This is, however, not the case with US-based Palestinian-Canadian rapper Ahmad Balshe, known as Belly. In a rare and biting response to the brutalities of the ongoing Israeli war, the Jenin-born Belly released an album on May 30, 2024, titled *96 Miles from Bethlehem*. Consisting of nine tracks that reflect on the horrific circumstances under the never-ending and indiscriminate Israeli attacks, it is, as hailed by *Complex*, "[a] deeply personal listening experience, and one that's notably billed as both an ode to Palestine and an artistic exploration of its current struggles" (Cowen). The *Complex* review is also a reflection on the manner in which Belly delivers his lines; a slower, more poetic reading than his usual rap delivery. As is often the case in hip-hop, Belly works with a number of collaborators, including Palestinian-Chilean singer and songwriter Elyanna, 15-year-old Gaza-born rapper MC Abdul, and Jerusalem-born multilingual artist Saint Levant. Aside from the fact that all four musicians are signed to the same record label, Universal Arabic Music, they all are also verbal about their Palestinian heritage and together stand against the Israeli war crimes committed against Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip.

The track titles in *96 Miles from Bethlehem* lay the groundwork for its critique of how people in Palestine are being mentally, emotionally, and physically abused by the Israeli military machine. For example, one of the tracks is called "Metal Birds," referencing the Israeli fighter

jets and swarms of drones populating the sky all over the Gaza Strip. Belly thus begins the song by painting a bleak picture inspired by a recurring Palestinian war-time experience:

> Imagine waking up to metal birds, blocking the sunlight,
>
> Everybody trapped now, black clouds made it become night,
>
> In the holy land, how you got us living the slum life?
>
> My god, look at what it's become like,
>
> Mothers in Falasteen [Palestine] gotta carry their sons twice,
>
> Gunfight! (Belly, "Metal Birds")

Initially, the verse reflects on the dark atmosphere of destruction brought by the Israeli military machine and its excessive use of air force, constantly launching massive aerial attacks on civilian neighborhoods in the Gaza Strip. Further into the track, it becomes more about the tragic reality of Palestinian life under the Israeli occupation, where mothers are forced to bury the bodies of their killed children not too long after having birthed them—hence carrying them twice.

Not surprisingly, this is not the first time that Belly spoke against the Israeli military and colonial violence. In fact, his first album, *The Revolution* (2007), featured one of his most recognizably critical tracks, "History of Violence." Considered by many a masterpiece of the activist rap genre, the song explicitly criticizes the Israeli occupation for its merciless treatment of Palestinians by recounting tragic moments of Belly's childhood in Jenin and having to flee war with his family.

> Ain't a fool, I was born on a war-torn corner,
>
> Jeneen [Jenin], Falasteen [Palestine], full of steam where the bombs stormed on us,
>
> Tried to escape but they never fore warned us,
>
> We'd end up with the weight of the whole world on us. (Belly, "History of Violence")

And despite now living in diaspora (Los Angeles, California), Belly continues to be openly concerned and visibly and vocally engaged with the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation. In 2016, Belly meant to have his television debut in the United States performing alongside The Weeknd on Jimmy Kimmel Live. Upon learning that Donald Trump, the Republican Presidential candidate at the time, was also to be featured as a guest on the show, the two musicians decided to cancel their appearance refusing to share the stage with a figure with "beliefs that majority of us don't agree with" (Zorthian). To many, this bold decision might have cost Belly a moment of prime attention (and correspondingly, perhaps, increased sales of his records); yet, it reflected his credibility as an artist committed to social justice, and solidified his integrity as a Palestinian public figure deeply affected by the struggles of his people.

In his interviews, Belly often talks about being silenced and opposed by many individuals and organizations within the music industry, whether in Canada or the United States. More than anything, this form of covert censorship often haunts him for advocating the human rights of his Palestinian people. In a recent interview with MSNBC's Ayman Mohyeldin, Belly was asked about the price paid for being verbal about his Palestinian roots. His answer is inspiring to me as a Palestinian scholar.

> Mohyeldin: Do you find that there is a pressure on you to not talk about Gaza, to not speak up on behalf of Palestinians?
>
> Belly: Yeah, I think that pressure is felt by a lot of people and that's saying something. Like if there's actually a question, if this is happening, then how come when I was making this project, like a lot of the people that I know were like, oh, you're brave for doing this. I was like, why am I brave for highlighting something from a place where I'm from and a place where atrocities are taking place, where humans aren't treated like

> humans and I'm making a project about it. There's nothing courageous about that. That's what I should wake up and wanna do. (Belly, "Thank you")

In that same vein, this dissertation is about Palestine and my fellow Palestinians, originating in our shared painful stories and experiences under the Israeli occupation. It is an effort to expose the Israeli history of violence and to highlight the often-ignored Palestinian interest in nonviolence and how that can be revealed and studied in different performance-based contexts, including and not limited to theatre. To be clear, this is not an attempt at understanding the ongoing Israeli invasion and bombing of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Rather, it is to understand how we have arrived here and the history of the Israeli violent and colonial practices in Palestine. The ongoing Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip is not an isolated period from that history. It is a continuation of a longstanding Israeli colonial tradition of targeting, demonizing, and attacking Palestinians.

Where Do I Belong? The Perspective of a Palestinian Scholar from the Gaza Strip

As a Palestinian, all my work is dedicated towards a representation of my people in their struggle for justice and liberation. My hope is that this study gives voice to Palestinians who are often ignored or silenced by the Israeli dominant narrative, inspiring more investigation into the Palestinian culture of nonviolent action and how it is embodied and performed. In terms of existing scholarship, there is scant academic research on Palestinian performance culture and what it can mean, include, or become. My aim thus is to redress the absence of such scholarly efforts by highlighting some of the often-inaccessible Palestinian cultural works and artforms that can potentially lend themselves to different modes and types of analysis. My academic training in theatre and performance studies leads me to engage with performance-based contexts and to explore how those might further serve the Palestinian people in subverting the Israeli

settler colonialist and demonizing practices of control. More precisely, it guides my exploration of the theatrical enterprise in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian employment of music and dance as means of individual and collective expression, and the performative responses born from the lack of regard for the life of Palestinians in Israeli prisons. But I must also admit that my investment in this dissertation goes far beyond that.

My scholarship, including this research, acknowledges its moral obligation to represent Palestinian people adequately and justly. Being a registered refugee with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) whose entire family also belongs to that category, I have experienced war, displacement, and systematic dehumanization by the Israeli occupation. More tragically, I have suffered the loss of many family members, neighbors, and friends, whether in previous Israeli military aggressions against the Gaza Strip, especially in Jabalia Refugee Camp in the North, or during the ongoing invasion since October 2023. All my painful experiences are inseparable from those of my people. As such, I recognize a need for pro-Palestinian voices within Western academic institutions and publishing domains that can help share and preserve core elements of Palestinian heritage. To that end, this dissertation is my personal act of cultural resistance and my contribution to my people's *sumud* (steadfastness) in the face of colonial erasure and domination.

With this, I aim to contribute to scholarship on Palestinian performance culture and help introduce to Western scholarship some of the cultural performance practices that Palestinians rely on when navigating the various issues facing them. On one hand, continuing the efforts started in my M.A. thesis, this will include a consideration of the theatrical enterprise in Gaza Strip and how theatre-makers in the besieged territory comment on their reality under Israeli occupation—a topic suffering from an extreme lack of scholarly attention. The existing

scholarship on theatre in Palestine, for example Gabriel Varghese's *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces* (2020) and Reuven Snir's *Palestinian Theatre* (2005), tracks the Palestinian theatrical movement almost exclusively in the West Bank. While the work of Varghese (and others like him) is undoubtedly valuable, for various reasons, his study (and others as well) does not extend to other geographies in Palestine, including the Gaza Strip. Therefore, one of this study's objectives is to provide an analysis of recent theatrical productions in the Gaza Strip and to highlight how people's struggles are represented on the theatrical stage. In doing so, I provide scholars and practitioners of Palestinian and world theatre access to theatrical efforts in a Palestinian territory that remains under blockade.

Additionally, I aim to study other performance practices that Palestinians engage with in an effort to exist and resist, principally dance and music. In recent years, several Palestinian artists working in these mediums in and outside of Palestine, like 47Soul and Shabjdeed, have carved spaces of musical expressions in the form of subgenres that became popular for blending spacey and nostalgic melodies, Hip-Hop, folk dance, and electronic instruments. These contemporary iterations of Palestinian music address a range of themes and issues dealing with life under colonial oppression, living in exile, violations of human rights, internal political divisions, and the struggle for sovereignty and self-determination. Palestinian music is now considered a major force of Palestinian nonviolent resistance. More precisely, it is viewed as a means of Palestinian protest employed by artists to reflect on their lived experiences as displaced and stateless people. While there are a few accounts that address Palestinian music and dance, such as David A. McDonald's *My Voice Is My Weapon* (2006) and Nicholas Rowe's *Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine* (2010), there is still need for research dedicated to highlighting the performative capacities of these forms in relation to nonviolent action.

By studying the work of contemporary Palestinian artists and activists and the multiplicity of their creative and cultural activities in and outside of Palestine, I aim to provide evidence on my culture's interest in nonviolently reclaiming its human status despite the hegemonic, violent strategies of the Israeli occupation. While I am usually concerned with how nonviolent resistance functions as a mode of being, I recognize it is essential for this study to equally examine the meanings that arise from engaging it. This is to indicate that to explore the concept of resistance as a central object of analysis, local and specific meanings of nonviolent action must be identified depending on their context and consequences. Put another way, Palestinians are scattered around the world, and they exist under different circumstances, which requires investigating imbued performances of resistance in consideration of these conditions. Performing nonviolent protest through music and dance in exile brings to bear stakes that are different than those of steadfast perseverance under siege in the Gaza Strip or Palestinian graffiti painted on the apartheid wall in the West Bank.

In addition to including Palestinian artists and their work, I also aim to access the plight of Palestinians in Israeli prisons analyzing the performativity of their resistance efforts. Trapped in appalling conditions, Palestinian prisoners suffer from physical, emotional, and psychological abuse by the Israeli settler colonial apparatus of confinement. In terms of the existing scholarship dedicated to the subject, there are many accounts that discuss the Israeli prison and court systems that fundamentally disadvantage Palestinians, such as Lisa Hajjar's *Courting Conflict: The Israeli Military Court System in the West Bank and Gaza (2005)* and Stéphanie Latte Abdallah's *A History of Confinement in Palestine: The Prison Web* (2022). But there are almost no studies on how Palestinian prisoners employ nonviolent means in their struggle for freedom, i.e., hunger strikes. A notable exception is the recent study of Palestinian sociologist Ashjan Ajour,

Reclaiming Humanity in Palestinian Hunger Strikes: Revolutionary Subjectivity and Decolonizing the Body (2021). By paying attention to the traumatic experiences of Palestinian prisoners and how they nonviolently respond to their cruel situation, I seek to achieve two objectives; to contribute to the scholarship on Palestinian hunger strikes by building on the work of Ajour to highlight the performativity of these resistant techniques, and to examine and highlight the representation of Palestinian prisoners in Palestinian drama by offering a close reading of a theatrical script that addresses their circumstances; Imad Farajin's *603*.

Going Beyond Theatre in Palestine: Surveying a Fragmented Cultural Landscape

Is there such thing as Palestinian theatre and, more broadly, Palestinian culture? What does it communicate and to whom? More importantly, how does it function? My attempt at answering these questions began a few years ago with my efforts in my M.A. thesis to survey Palestinian theatrical production in three different contexts: the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Palestinian diaspora. The purpose then was to identify key elements that Palestinians theatre-makers highlight in their practice and link those to the national liberation movement. As people living under Israeli occupation, or in exile, Palestinians, including me, face many social, cultural, political, and economic challenges marked by human rights violations and legacies of colonialism and discrimination. Therefore, Palestinian creative projects under study, whether in my work or that of other scholars, including Rania Jawad and Gabriel Varghese, are often examined in view of how they transmit anti-colonial ideas and techniques of resistance. While not diminishing the significance of armed resistance (a human right recognized by International Law for people under alien occupation), my focus in that early work and in this one as well is on Palestinian iterations of nonviolent action/resistance, particularly within the arts.

The goal of this dissertation is to continue foregrounding the perspective of Palestinian artists and cultural activities regarding nonviolent resistance; more specifically, to examine how they respond to their political and socio-cultural contexts, and in turn, how they contribute to the national liberation movement. I am concerned with how Palestinian creative efforts translate into nonviolent, anti-colonial practices. In my M.A. thesis, I specifically focused on theatre as a potential site of locating Palestinian performances of resistance. With this research project, however, I go beyond this limited scope by considering other performance-based cultural practices and artforms. Using my disciplinary perspective as a theatre and performance studies scholar, I aim to reveal how Palestinians perform a nonviolent self in spaces where violence is expected. My research includes close readings of the performative capacities of theatre, dance, music, and hunger strikes to highlight how major elements of Palestinian culture are used in pursuit of these nonviolent techniques.

In the chapters that follow, I study how Palestinian interest in nonviolence is evident in a range of creative practices and techniques that can potentially inform the scholarship on Palestine and Palestinian culture considering the lack of critical attention to these activities. By and large, my dissertation addresses the following questions: How do Palestinians understand and define resistance given their context? What does it take to nonviolently resist? What are Palestinian artists resisting exactly? What is gained or lost when Palestinians commit to nonviolently reclaiming their human status? How and to what extent do performance-based cultural activities contribute to the Palestinian liberation movement? Why is it a challenging task to track the emergence and development of these practices? How does misrepresenting the Israeli settler colonial war on Palestine as “the Palestinian-Israeli conflict” perpetuate the colonization of Palestine and its history? Why is there a lack of international engagement with the Palestinian

interest in nonviolence? What are some of the potential commonalities between the Palestinian experience and that of other people under oppression, especially in regard to resistance? In what ways can scholarship on Palestinian performance culture aid in de-colonizing the study of Palestine? In sum, I seek to uncover how varied experiences of colonial oppression influence Palestinian renderings of nonviolent action that involve performance or are performative.

It is Not a Conflict: Understanding the Israeli Settler Colonial War on Palestine

Both in this introduction and the chapters that follow, a certain level of contextual framing is required. The performances and performativity that are my focus cannot be separated from the material and historical realities of Palestine and of Palestinians. Indeed, as I write this, the Israeli colonial machine and its military apparatus have been attacking for more than a year all that is Palestinian, especially in the Gaza Strip. While the Palestinian territory has always been under suffocating blockade, the Israeli occupation used the 2023 Hamas-led attack as a pretext to advance its colonial agenda by demonizing and targeting all Palestinians, including those innocent and defenseless civilians. This has prompted multiple investigations by international human rights organizations into the Israeli willful disregard of international law, especially after South Africa's decision to try the Israeli occupation at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in December 2023. In a more recent development, on July 19, 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) published, at the request of the ICC, an advisory opinion regarding the Israeli violent practices in Palestine:

> With regard to the Court's finding that Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is illegal, the Court considers that such presence constitutes a wrongful act entailing its international responsibility. It is a wrongful act of a continuing character which has been brought about by Israel's violations, through its policies and

> practices, of the prohibition on the acquisition of territory by force and the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people. Consequently, Israel has an obligation to bring an end to its presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory as rapidly as possible. ("Legal Consequences" 73)

As the Israeli occupation continues to dismiss all legal efforts to end its colonial control over the life of Palestinians, there is a high reliance on weaponizing antisemitism as a response to all allegations of violating international law. But no matter the Israeli justification, the horrific, unbearable human suffering caused by their military machine during the ongoing war on the Gaza Strip cannot be overlooked or taken lightly.

A quick survey of the unfolding events in Palestine since October 2023 reveals tragic and demoralizing consequences, especially in regards to human rights: a catastrophic global failure to morally support Palestinians and thus perpetuate the Israeli narrative that misrepresents them as terrorists and/or sub-human beings; killing, arresting, and torturing defenseless unarmed civilians (children, women, and journalists); domicide (systematic destruction of Palestinian housing and infrastructure); and the creation of conditions that lead to a high risk of famine.[1] In an alarming statement issued recently by Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, she warns that:

[1] In the following statement, published on July 18, 2024, Amnesty International documents and condemns the Israeli "indefinite incommunicado detention of Palestinians from the occupied Gaza Strip:" https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/israel-must-end-mass-incommunicado-detention-and-torture-of-palestinians-from-gaza/

> Time is running out. A genocide and a man-made humanitarian catastrophe are unfolding in front of us and in Gaza. I regret to see so many member states are avoiding acknowledging the suffering of the Palestinian people and instead look away. ("The Long")

Albanese belongs to a large group of human rights and international law experts who consider the Israeli war on the besieged Gaza Strip a genocide that reflects on a long history of settler colonial practices in Palestine. Since this dissertation aligns with Albanese's assessment, I find it crucial to chart how we have arrived at this point in the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation, and to engage with some of the accounts that reveal the definition, aim, and mechanisms of settler colonialism in general as well as the Israeli occupation as a specific case.

By exposing the Israeli settler colonial war on Palestine, I aim to highlight the Israeli perpetuated ecosystem of despair that Palestinians are forced to endure. In the introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (2020), historian and settler colonial studies expert Lorenzo Veracini explains that:

> Settler colonialism is a relationship. It is related to colonialism but also inherently distinct from it. As a system defined by unequal relationships (like colonialism) where an exogenous collective aims to locally and permanently replace indigenous ones (unlike colonialism), settler colonialism has no geographical, cultural or chronological bounds. (Cavanagh and Veracini 4)

The Israeli system of domination is manifested in a range of colonial practices that include controlling borders, establishing an apartheid wall in the West Bank, forcing an ongoing siege on the Gaza Strip, and stripping Palestinians from any form of sovereignty, self-determination, and political recognition. To that end, there are a number of scholars dedicated to exposing the Israeli

settler colonial war on Palestine and whose work I find invaluable to my research, among whom Palestinian American professors and activists Joseph Massad, Noura Erakat, and Rashid Khalidi.

In an opinion piece for *Middle East Eye*, published in December 2023, Massad comments on the horrific situation in the Gaza Strip following the Israeli miliary operation and its apparent and deliberate targeting of civilians. He situates the Israeli war within the history of Western colonialism and its constant goal to occupy native land and kill its people. In his view:

> For the last 140 years, and more dramatically in the last 75, the indigenous Palestinians have similarly [to many other nations including Indigenous Algerians, South Africans, and Vietnamese] been the victims of this ongoing legacy of European settler-colonialism that is premised on Jewish supremacy and the defense of western civilization. (Massad, "How Israel's")

Massad has long been a critic of those colonial legacies and the Western support of Zionism as a means to establishing and sustaining the Israeli settler colony in Palestine. In his 2006 book, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*, he argues that:

> In order to transform Jews into Europeans in Asia, Zionism sought to make available to them a battery of professions intermittently denied them during their residence in Europe, namely in the fields of agriculture and soldiery, thus making them productive laborers and manly conquering "sabras" in one sweep. What would afford them these opportunities was an Asiatic land "reclaimed" by Zionism as the inheritance of modern Jews from what it posited as their "Hebrew forefathers." (Massad, *The Persistence* 169)

As expected, an overwhelming military force was used to squash any Palestinian objection to this Israeli expansionist project. More importantly, suspicious legal frameworks were created to justify the existence of foreign occupation on native Palestinian land.

In like manner, Noura Erakat, legal scholar and human rights attorney, investigates those questionable legal pretexts used to dominate and colonize Palestinians, whether by the Israeli occupation or its allies, mainly the British Mandate.[2] In *Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine* (2019), she argues that:

> Upon its establishment as a state and for eighteen years afterwards [post-1948], Israel institutionalized [an] emergency regime under the thinly veiled pretext of security in order to dispossess, remove, and concentrate Palestinian populations that remained in Israel. From its inception, Israel securitized the presence of Palestinian natives and perpetuated the legacy of repression established by Britain in Mandate Palestine. (Erakat 26)

The use of a system of emergency was meant to impose a permeant seizure of Palestinian land. Following the war of 1967, order in the West Bank and Gaza was established for the sake of keeping the Israeli political and military apparatus of control. As Erakat points out:

> This legal framework represents a colonial continuity. Israel's martial law regime had enabled it to similarly dispossess, remove, and contain Palestinian natives within the 1949 armistice lines, from the time of its establishment in 1948 until 1966. Whereas Israel had used sovereign authority within its own undeclared borders to proclaim an emergency, in the West Bank and Gaza it now used the veneer of occupation law to establish an exceptional regime based on security. (Erakat 63)

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[2] After World War I, specifically in 1920, the League of Nations established the British Mandate for Palestine, which granted Britain the authority to administer the territories of Palestine and Transjordan (now Jordan) until the establishment of the Israeli occupation in 1948.

The Israeli occupation has always used the argument of security to demonize Palestinians and dismiss their efforts towards peace, especially those that are nonviolent in nature—another reason to call for an end to describing the Israeli settler colonial war on Palestine as a "conflict."

Highlighting the effects of the Israeli settler colonialist ideologies in Palestine, historian Rashid Khalidi establishes a clear position on what is often falsely referred to as the "Palestinian-Israeli conflict." In *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance* (2021), Khalidi weaves in his family's long history of living in Jerusalem since the thirteenth century to focus on key historical events (framed as declarations of war) that reveal the progression of Israel's settler colonial project: Balfour Declaration (1917–39), UN Special Commission on Palestine and the Nakba (1947–48), Israeli conquest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (1967), aftermath of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), First *Intifada* and Oslo Accords (1987-95), and Second *Intifada* (2000-05) followed by three deadly wars on the Gaza Strip (2000-2014). In doing so, he concludes that:

> Throughout the intervening century, the great powers have repeatedly tried to act in spite of the Palestinians, ignoring them, talking for them or over their heads, or pretending that they did not exist. In the face of the heavy odds against them, however, the Palestinians have shown a stubborn capacity to resist these efforts to eliminate them politically and scatter them to the four winds. (Khalidi 250)

Khalidi's self-reflective conclusions represent how Palestinians view the establishment of the Israeli occupation as settler colonialism and its ongoing strategies of displacement and abuse. In my effort to help expose the Israeli settler colonial war on Palestine and its horrific ramifications on the life of Palestinian people everywhere, I turn next to how Palestinians resist this Israeli colonial violence using techniques grounded in nonviolent action.

The Palestinian Epistemology of Resistance: Nonviolent Action is a Dismissed Reality

In discussing violence and nonviolence, this study focuses on the Israeli settler colonial violence that deprives Palestinians from their human rights and the Palestinian creative counter tactics that are found within the arts. The aim is not to establish a false dichotomy where one side is depicted as exclusively violent and the other as nonviolent. Rather, it is to accomplish the following: to trace a history of settler colonial violence that originated from the Zionist project to establish a Jewish state in Palestine and to highlight a profound Palestinian interest in nonviolent action, which is often met with an international disregard, as I discuss later in this section. Regarding the first, there are many accounts across various fields that view the Israeli occupation as a form of settler colonialism. For example, Sociologist Areej Sabbagh-Khoury contends in a 2022 article for *Politics & Society* that:

> Until recently, most Israeli academics engaged in discussing the nature of the state ignored its settler colonial components ([Oren] Yiftachel's significant work is a notable exception). Their argument that the Jewish people, like other peoples, are entitled to a nation-state of their own has ignored the granting of preferential status to Jews, even those who do not live in Israel, and the simultaneous denial of the collective rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel and of the refugees who were expelled from Palestine. (Sabbagh-Khoury 54)

As for Palestinian academics, Sabbagh-Khoury mentions some reluctance on their part to view the Israeli occupation as settler colonialism. She explains:

> Although the case of Palestine/Israel bears similarities to other cases of settler colonialism, until recently many Palestinian researchers avoided drawing such comparisons, possibly because in other cases, groups of settlers allegedly "succeeded" in

> eliminating the vast majority of indigenous peoples. Usually, remaining indigenous groups became (over the course of centuries) dependent sovereigns with distinct polities and (limited) rights to self-determination. (Sabbagh-Khoury 57)

In the case of this study, it aims to highlight the Israeli settler colonial framework under which Palestinians are met with violence, in multiple shapes, forms, and degrees. This is crucial to understanding Palestinian performance culture and its reliance on nonviolent action.

Observers of the ongoing Israeli war on the Gaza Strip will notice that Palestinians often refuse to evacuate or leave their land despite all the atrocities committed against them. Some argue that these acts of defiance are trauma responses, driven by the fear of repeating the catastrophe of 1948, known as *Nakba*, where Palestinians were expelled or forced to flee their homes and villages in order to survive the violence of the Israeli occupation around its establishment in Palestine. Others contend that Palestinians are trained to resist and endure colonial violence by consequence of the never-ending Israeli aggressions and military operations in the occupied Palestinian territories, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This study, however, supports the opinion that Palestinians show an unwavering determination to remain rooted in their land. In an opinion piece published in *Al Jazeera*, first-generation Palestinian American law student, Ahmad Ibsais, provides a nuanced explanation of such relationship:

> The question of why Palestinians refuse to leave their homes and ancestral lands, even in the face of relentless bombardment, raids, settler encroachment and economic dispossession, is one that is deeply personal and fundamental to Palestinian identity. It is not simply a matter of geography or property ownership but a profound connection to the land that is woven into the fabric of Palestinian history, culture and collective memory.

> There is a stubbornness to this decision, yes, but also a deep understanding that to leave would be to sever a connection that has been in place for generations. (Ibsais)

This unbreakable bond between Palestinians and their land serves as the impetus for the title of this dissertation, *Here We Stand*. It is the driving force that shapes my analysis of Palestinian cultural resistance and its rendering of nonviolent action within performance-based contexts.

The topic of Palestinian reliance on nonviolence is thoroughly explored by international law experts Victoria Mason and Richard Falk. In a co-authored article published in 2016, they reflect on the Palestinian history of practicing nonviolent action and the international failure to acknowledge it, especially neglecting to address the Israeli violations of human rights in Palestine. In their words:

> In reality, however, Palestinians have a long history of utilizing nonviolence in their resistance to oppression. Yet this nonviolence has often been brutally repressed by Israel and the international community has, for the most part, failed to acknowledge and support Palestinian nonviolence. This disregarding of Palestinian nonviolence, alongside the wider lack of action to uphold Palestinian rights, threatens the viability of this politics of nonviolence. (Mason and Falk 163)

Examining the factors contributing to this disregard of Palestinian interest in nonviolence, Mason and Falk address how violence and nonviolence have both contributed to the Palestinian complex reality. In doing so, the international law experts provide multiple access points to the debate on Palestinian rights and how they can be acquired via nonviolent means—they regard such avenues as often-missed opportunities. By charting some of the contributing factors to the unjust Western depiction of Palestinians as violent, including issues of translation and misrepresentation by mainstream media, Mason and Falk also affirm the centrality of nonviolent action as an essential

component of Palestinian resistance. In that same vein, their work takes issue with how no critical response or attention has been paid to the Palestinian reliance on nonviolence, whether by the Israeli occupation or the international community.

To set the context for my study of the Palestinian practice of nonviolent action, attention must then be paid to some of the ways in which Palestine and Palestinians have been mis/represented. In *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Endowment* (2010), Palestinian scholar and activist Mazin Qumsiyeh argues that Palestinians, along with their ideas on resistance, are constantly misunderstood within the Western world. He comments on the way leading figures in the Unites States address the Palestinian situation by asserting that:

> They [Barack Obama and Jesse Jackson, Sr.] fail to understand the true nature of the struggle by reducing the message to a statement about the undesirability of violence on the part of an oppressed people. Both ignore the rich history of precisely such nonviolent struggle while failing to appreciate what Palestinians really want: freedom and the right of return, not a flag over a canton called a state. (Qumsiyeh 1)

For Qumsiyeh, Palestinian resistance is inherently nonviolent and it dates back to the Ottoman Empire. Reflecting on the history of colonial violence in South Africa, India, and French colonies, he proposes the term "popular resistance" as a way to describe Palestinian efforts against the Israeli occupation:

> In Palestine, resistance is made up of popular resistance (strikes, demonstrations, etc.), organized resistance in the form of committees and political movements for self-determination, and building economic and social self-sufficiency and independence in all spheres of life. These forms of popular resistance are supported by local religious and philosophical traditions that go back hundreds of years. (Qumsiyeh 30)

By tracking its development during the Ottoman rule (pre-1917), Zionist build (1917-35), Revolt of 1937, catastrophe of 1948 (*Nakba*), war of 1967, two Palestinian uprisings (*intifadas*), and Oslo Accords, Qumsiyeh insists that "popular resistance in Palestine developed indigenously, organically, naturally and beautifully" (1). This dissertation draws inspiration from Qumsiyeh's definition of Palestinian resistance and its regard of cultural activities aiming to highlight how Palestinians have been dehumanized, censored, and demonized in favor of the Israeli occupation.

How Is This Study Possible? From Methods to Limitations

The foundation of this dissertation is post-colonial theory furthered by anti-colonial ideas and practices. Given that post-colonialism and anti-colonialism are closely related, I advance a position that captures my explication of the two terms drawing on the inherently shared qualities in how they function against colonialist ideologies. As defined by D. A. Wood in *Epistemic Decolonization: A Critical Investigation into the Anticolonial Politics of Knowledge* (2020):

> 'Colonialist ideology' signifies the idealist obfuscation or inversion of the actual bearing of historical-material processes on the formulation and flow of ideas in such a way that only the ideas of the ruling colonial classes are legitimated and sanctioned. Ideologies, in this sense, constitute particular, shared propositional attitudes and discourses that are neither justifiable nor true, and which bolster colonialist ends. (Wood 6)

In view of this, a post-colonial reading or treatment, as described in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2013), relies on a body of theories concerned with deconstructing "the profound and inescapable effects of colonization on literary production; anthropological accounts; historical records; administrative and scientific writing" (Ashcroft 173). When combating colonial legacies, post-colonialists find their inspiration in the writings of Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Michel Foucault, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to name a few. Their

philosophy recognizes that colonization is an on-going multi-dimensional ideological process, operating in both overt and covert ways, and centering around but not limited to political, cultural, social, and economic exploitation of colonized communities.

Operating on the basis that colonization is a globalizing project, Peter Child and Patrick Williams in *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (2013) identify six major meeting points where there is an "overlap between postcolonial studies and other conceptual and theoretical areas": Race, Language and Literature, Gender and Feminism, Postmodernism and Post-Structuralism, Culture, and Diaspora and Globalization (248). In providing a detailed discussion of these intersections, notably those concerning national and popular culture, Child and Williams tackle the complexities of studying nationalist and resistant ideas against colonialist agendas. They propose: "Anti-colonial nationalism is a diverse and complex network of cultural signifiers, partly because it faces two ways, selling itself as a forward-looking, emancipatory, modern project and as a reaffirmation of collective customs, cultural practices, and histories" (271). This is an understanding of anti-colonial existence that resonates with my efforts in this dissertation to track and highlight the work of Palestinian artists and performers who employ nonviolent techniques in their struggle for human rights against the Israeli settler colonial oppression.

To further explain this study's definition of anti-colonialism, I turn again to *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts.* Included in this lengthy account of issues and concepts within post-colonial studies is the following description of anti-colonialism:

> The political struggle of colonized peoples against the specific ideology and practice of colonialism. Anti-colonialism signifies the point at which the various forms of opposition become articulated as a resistance to the operations of colonialism in political, economic

> and cultural institutions. It emphasizes the need to reject colonial power and restore local control. (Ashcroft 11-12)

Given that this dissertation regards Israel as a settler colonial enterprise aimed at removing any native Palestinian existence, it considers included performances of Palestinian resistance part of the political struggle against the Israeli colonialist ideologies. Theatre productions in Gaza Strip, Palestinian iterations of music and dance, and hunger strikes by Palestinians in Israeli prisoners are all forms of resistance that reject life under the Israeli occupation where Palestinians are denied the right of sovereignty and self-determination. In that sense, all these cultural activities are rendered from the perspective of this dissertation as anti-colonial practices.

In terms of research methods, I mainly rely on literature review and content analysis in a qualitative approach that allows access to different theoretical fields highlighting the origin and development of the study's key concepts: resistance and nonviolence. I draw on and cite on an as-needed basis anti-colonial and post-colonial theory, Palestine studies, Indigenous studies, resistance and nonviolence studies, critical dance studies, ethnomusicology, and sociology under the interdisciplinary guidance of theatre and performance studies. In my M.A. thesis, I provided a historical overview of the Palestinian theatrical activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip drawing on the limited extant research and meager documentation of production history. For this study, my focus is on contextualizing my analysis of included performances in view of the colonial circumstances that inspired their creation. When examining theatre productions in the Gaza Strip, for example, I aim to highlight the reality of the Palestinian territory as an open-air prison where people experience restrictions on all aspects of daily life. To address how they carry within them techniques of resistance, I offer a close reading of two recorded theatrical performances, *Barzakh* and *The Grey People*, grounded in anti-colonial theory. As for

Palestinian music and dance, my approach relies on examining content (mainly video clips) of 47Soul and Shabjdeed to highlight their use of cultural elements that speak against colonial violence. The overarching goal is to highlight how Palestinian politics of existing, art-making, and socio-cultural conditions inform each other.

While I have aimed to be thorough and thoughtful in my analysis, this study, which has been under conceptualization for a few years now, is undoubtedly defined by a number of limitations. First, the exploratory nature of the research marks its cultural and geographical boundaries by its reliance on finding work that has been documented, in this case Palestinian productions and performances, and examining their significance in representing the key concepts and research questions of the study. Sadly, evidence of documented work from Palestine is often meager and/or difficult to access, made all the more so by the ongoing events. Secondly, and in addition to the lack of access to Palestinian performers and their work, finding credible academic sources (in Arabic or English) to engage with is a big obstacle for any scholar. This marks my study's historic and linguistic limitations since tracking the origin and development of these forms and the language used to facilitate their creation is only accessible through the work of a small group of scholars whose work is also defined by many obstacles. Third, this study and the manner in which it is conducted admits to its shortcomings in addressing women rights in Palestine and their activist perspective on nonviolent action and its role within the national liberation movement. Likewise, I have not addressed the work of Palestinian queer performance artists and their contributions to the Palestinian liberation movement by exposing the Israeli exploitation of LGBTQ rights to advance colonial agendas—a strategy referred to as pink-washing. To include Palestinian feminist and queer epistemologies would have required substantial ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with artists who occupy those identify

positions. Again, circumstances in Palestine at this point prevented this from occurring. Finally, I must note that my scholarly efforts in this dissertation are shaped by my Palestinian identity and the experiences of colonial violence that I have experienced prior to arriving in the United States. This is to say that I bring to the work my particular cultural perspective, which has undoubtedly influenced my understanding of the included Palestinian cultural activities and their varying meanings and functions.

The Organization of the Study: Chapter Breakdown

Following this introduction that sets out the parameters of the study, Chapter I focuses on the Palestinian theatrical enterprise in the Gaza Strip and how it is informed by nonviolent, anti-colonial practices. As indicated earlier, studies of resistance and nonviolence often do not have access to any creative efforts by Palestinians in the besieged territory. Moreover, there is a serious lack of attention or constructive response to any theatrical activities there. In my attempt to fill in this gap in the literature on anti-colonial theatre in Palestine, I address the situation in the Gaza Strip and its reality as an open-air prison where Palestinians are isolated and abused, both physically and mentally. With access to full video recordings in Arabic, I engage two theatre productions: *Barzakh* (2021) and *The Grey People* (2022). Performed as part of Barzakh Performing Arts & Music Festival (2021), the first play addresses the ongoing struggles of the Palestinian people living under Israeli blockade in Gaza Strip exposing the Israeli war crimes and constant aggressions against the Palestinian occupied territory. Written around the 2021 Israeli attack on Gaza Strip (May 10-21), the story attempts to capture the pain of defenseless Palestinians who lost their loved ones in Israeli air-raids on their homes. Following the journey of a Palestinian martyr as he crosses to the afterlife, *Barzakh* offers rare glimpses into the power disparity between the Israeli settler colonial military and the Palestinian people, the Palestinian

will to exist and resist military occupation, and the need for unity among Palestinians. I will thoroughly investigate the production in search of specific meanings of human resistance and perseverance.

Produced by Theatre Day Productions, *The Grey People* attempts to access the Palestinian dilemmas of home, identity, belonging, power dynamics, individual privileges, and conformity. It addresses the many every-day challenges, or disturbances, that Palestinians in Gaza Strip must endure. Depending on one's wealth, social status, political affiliation, among other things, an individual is assigned a room, which represents the reality of the Gaza Strip as a besieged territory or open-air prison. Highlighting the interactions that take place among the staff and residents, the play also calls attention to issues of labor and un-employment in a world where Palestinians are rendered as stateless and unbelonging. Along with *Barzakh*, I aim to analyze *The Grey People* to highlight how theatre-makers in the Gaza Strip utilize theatre to creatively translate and withstand their experiences under the Israeli occupation. By offering a close reading of these performances in relation to the circumstances of life under blockade in Gaza Strip, I will engage with issues of colonial control, surveillance, sovereignty, and movement restrictions. I argued in M.A. thesis that Palestinians in Gaza Strip employ a form of resistance referred to as *Sumud* (steadfastness) to combat the Israeli imposed ecosystem of despair. For the sake of this study, I aim to further nuance that argument by introducing these theatrical practices to Western scholarship as examples of anti-colonial work.

In Chapter II, I include two case studies of Palestinian music: Shabjdeed and 47Soul. Based in Ramallah (the West Bank), Shabjdeed is a popular Hip-Hop artist whose style and lyrics have been hailed as representative of the Palestinian experience under occupation. I am most concerned with his depictions of Palestinian daily life under the Israeli colonial violence

and how it is creatively translated to subvert dominant narratives about Palestinian culture. Based on David A. McDonald's ethno-graphic/historical work on Palestinian protest music, I focus on three songs (video clips) by Shabjdeed: "Amrikkka," "Kohol w 3atme," and "From Ramallah to Jerusalem and Back." In doing so, I highlight the work of the Hip-Hop artist and his reliance on the form to challenge false narratives about Palestine.

As for the group 47Soul, the purpose is to analyze how they re-adapt and employ folk dance (*dabke*) and music to create a politically conscious genre referred to as *Shamstep*. This is done by offering a close reading of three of their most popular videos: "Intro to *Shamstep*," "Dabke System," and "Border Ctrl." A prevalent theme in almost all of their video clips, and live concerts around the world, is *dabke* dance, choregraphed in different ways and performed by a collective of people (mostly Palestinian performers). Based on Randy Martin's theory of mobilization, I will view their creative work as "a practical activity" where "demands for space produce a space of identifiable demands" (4). Mobilization in dance, holds Martin, is "what moving bodies accomplish through movement," in a way that emphasizes "the practical dynamic between production and product" (4). Whereas production here refers to the potentiality of movement, product is what can be achieved through the process. 47Soul's *Shamstep*, I argue, is a mobilization of dance, music, and lyrics, where *dabke* is used to constitute an "immediate context for movement," motivated by its socio-political context to create spaces where "bodies display as their identity the practical effects of dancing" (Martin 4). Overall, the chapter investigates how Shabjdeed and 47Soul use their music to assert their Palestinian identity and, by extension, withstand colonial erasure. The goal, however, is not to reconstruct their intentions or offer biographical research. Rather, I examine how their work can contribute to nuancing the Palestinian understanding of nonviolent action and cultural resistance.

Chapter III pays attention to the injustices committed against Palestinians in Israeli prisons. While this focus might seem a radical departure from the first two chapters that are more clearly focused on performance in the arts, I am confident that addressing the performative capacity of hunger strikes illustrates the far-reaching value of the mode of analysis that rests at the heart of my study. As such, in this chapter, I first aim to highlight how Palestinian prisoners go on hunger strikes to protest administrative detention by attending to the performative aspects of these nonviolent techniques. In *Reclaiming Humanity in Palestinian Hunger Strikes*, Ashjan Ajour interviews former political prisoners, offering rare insights into their existential struggles and the formation of subjectivity during hunger strikes. Ajour's ethnographically informed account builds on Frantz Fanon's revolutionary humanism and Michel Foucault's concept of the technologies of the self to showcase how Palestinian prisoners rely on corporeal nonviolent action to challenge colonial technologies of power. Aiming to reclaim their human status by asserting their agency over their body and soul, Palestinian prisoners engage in self-starvation and experience a level of pain that represents Palestinian life under the Israeli occupation. I engage Ajour's theorization of the experiences of Palestinians prisoners, along with the work of Lisa Hajjar and Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, to examine the cases of Maher Al-Akhras and Khalil Awawdeh, who both were on long hunger strikes before reaching concession. My goal is to achieve an expanded view on hunger strikes and human agency within colonized spaces based on how Palestinians prisons utilize nonviolent means to reclaim their humanity.

In the second part of Chapter 3, I return to the field that is more clearly my own: theatre. Here, I address the representation of Palestinians in Israeli prisons in drama by offering a textual analysis of Imad Farajin's *603*. Steering aways from superficial renderings of heroism, this tragicomedy tackles the painful experiences of four Palestinian prisoners, each with his own

story and jail time. After catching news about a potential prisoner swap deal, they start dreaming of freedom while narrating their hopes and fears. While three of them are optimistic, the leading character (Snake) is highly doubtful given his life sentence in Israeli prisons, where he has suffered for years from physical and mental torture. The stories of those four detainees reflect on a long history of Israeli imprisonment of Palestinians, separating them from their families to lock them away without any right to freedom or legal representation.

My Conclusion draws on all the studies included in the three chapters to offer a critical overview of Palestinian resistance and nonviolence. More importantly, it reflects on the ways in which Palestinian cultural activities serve anti-colonial purposes, which helps me establish a link with the global context of post/anti-colonial art-making. This allows the study to offer a Palestinian perspective on combating colonial domination—an experience shared by many communities who still suffer from the consequences of universal colonialist agendas and desires. In addition to summarizing my findings and reflecting on them, in my conclusion I offer scholars and practitioners of Palestinian and world theatre an opportunity to critically assess how the Palestinian experience is being translated into cultural practices by mapping how these activities interconnect and inform each other. This is especially true when considering that access to theatre in the Gaza Strip has always been extremely limited.

CHAPTER I. THEATRE IN GAZA STRIP: DRAMATIZING COLONIAL ABUSE IN THE WORLD'S LARGEST OPEN-AIR PRISON

I begin this chapter with a story:

> In 2014, the war in the Gaza Strip lasted for 50 days. Our home was no longer safe, so my family and I moved to a relative's house. I was eight years old at the time and I felt very scared. To distract me from what was happening outside, my mother would bring me coloring pencils and encourage me to draw. At first, scenes of war and the terrible things we witnessed were all that I drew.
>
> But as time went by, I began to draw beautiful things, like flowers and children playing at the park. Drawing helped me to forget about fear. This is one of the first drawings I made and it represents the start of my artistic journey. Since then, I have entered several drawing competitions at my prep school. I hope I will be able to develop my drawing skills further and become a painter one day. (qtd. in "Stories From Gaza")

The above is Aisha's story, a Palestinian girl from the Gaza Strip. Featured in the War Childhood Museum (2021-2022), it documents one of the ways in which Palestinian children cope with the harsh circumstances under the Israeli occupation and during wartime. Accompanying Aisha's words is a colored pencil-drawn picture that depicts life in the Gaza Strip: Israeli bulldozers and fighter aircrafts, broken trees, a razed home, dead bodies lying on the ground, and a child in tears hiding ("Stories From Gaza"). Like many other children in the occupied territory, Aisha suffers from war-related traumas that she translates into her paintings. It is uncommon, however, that Palestinian stories—those of children and adults—are shared and highlighted. The Israeli aggressive control over historical and cultural narratives makes it

difficult to learn about the situation in the Gaza Strip for those interested in doing so. This is also exacerbated by the fact that the Palestinian enclave has been under an Israeli siege since 2007.

Realizing this difficulty of accessing the cultural sector in the Gaza Strip considering the persistence of Israeli restrictive policies, this chapter addresses the issue by exploring recent theatrical activities in the enclave that reflect the Palestinian reliance on creative interpretations of their appalling reality. After providing a brief account of the situation in the Gaza Strip as a besieged territory under Israeli abuse, I engage two corresponding theatre productions: Ashraf Al-Afifi's *Barzakh* (2021) and Theatre Day Productions' *The Grey People* (2022). With access to full video recordings in Arabic, I seek to accomplish two objectives; to document these often-inaccessible performances by offering a critical summary of the scripts and to examine how they address the challenges facing Palestinians in the Gaza Strip who live under an Israeli blockade developing a severe sense of isolation from the world. The analysis draws on various reports by globally recognized organizations documenting the Israeli violations of international law and human rights, and it includes published testimonies of Palestinians who have experienced the consequences of these Israeli practices. In doing so, I highlight the perspectives of theatre-makers in the Gaza Strip and the significance of their work in exposing the Israeli violence and how people nonviolently respond. By explicating an expansive understanding of Palestinian *sumud* (steadfastness), I view *Barzakh* and *The Grey People* as two examples of theatre-making that emphasize anti-colonial ideas of rootedness, resilience, and endurance.

The Israeli Ecosystem of Despair in the Gaza Strip

A constant scene of war crimes, extensive destruction, and human suffering, the Gaza Strip has become an isolated poverty-stricken territory where Israeli never-ending processes of control and military operations devastate Palestinian life. For more than 17 years now,

Palestinians in the coastal enclave have been forced to live under siege—land, sea, and air—suffering from various significant humanitarian challenges. These grave circumstances deprive people in the war-ravaged Gaza Strip, especially vulnerable groups such as Palestinians with disabilities or chronic conditions, of access to essential public services or adequately functioning infrastructure causing detrimental effects on all sectors of life and, in turn, all dimensions of their well-being. A recent Human Rights Watch (HRW) news release reveals that: "The closure [Israeli blockade] has devastated the economy in Gaza, contributed to fragmentation of the Palestinian people, and forms part of Israeli authorities' crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution against millions of Palestinians" ("Gaza – Israel's"). Like many other reports, especially those by various bodies and organizations working under the United Nations, the HRW statement cites numerous human rights violations in the Gaza Strip. Its main focus, however, is the imposed Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement and travel from the enclave to other Palestinian territories (i.e., the West Bank) and abroad. In highlighting these Israeli repressive measures and policies, the occupied Palestinian territory is accordingly referred to as "an open-air prison" ("Gaza – Israel's"). But this was not the first time the term is used. In fact, Gaza has long been described as an isolated war zone subject to Israeli terror and punishment.

In her brief study of the historical circulation of the term and how the Gaza Strip has come to be called an open-air prison, anthropologist Ilana Feldman explains that:

> Observers have been regularly describing Gaza as an open-air prison at least since the late 1990s. The term has been used by activists in the Palestinians' corner (such as Noam Chomsky and Ralph Nader), by not-so-sympathetic officials (such as former World Bank head James Wolfensohn), by humanitarian and human rights organizations (such as

> Médecins Sans Frontières and B'Tselem), by reporters writing for a range of outlets and, perhaps most importantly, by Palestinians themselves. (Feldman 12)

More significantly, Feldman proposes that there are two major aspects that define such term: Israeli practices of controlling and restricting Palestinian movement and the consequent absence of Palestinian independence (Feldman 13). In this view, Israeli settler colonialism operates as the prison warden whose main job is to perpetuate the entrapment of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and to isolate them from the rest of the world. While this might sound contradictory to the primary function of settler-colonialism—to remove Indigenous people from their land—it is a colonial method of control aimed at devastating the life of those refusing to leave. That is, so long as this Israeli siege exists, daily life in the densely populated enclave will continue to deteriorate reaching an unimaginable extent. With approximately 2.3 million people living in the Gaza Strip, the consequences that Palestinians might potentially be forced to endure are too overwhelming to grasp.

The coding of the Gaza Strip as an open-air prison finds its roots as well as evidence on the implied mechanics of violence across various historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural circumstances originating from or aggravated by the Israeli settler colonial agendas in Palestine. Since 2007, following the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip and the subsequent Israeli blockade, Palestinians in the besieged enclave have witnessed several major Israeli military assaults killing and injuring thousands of innocent civilians. Moreover, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the all-around Israeli restrictions have severely impacted Palestinians' access to the world and vice versa, the Strip's economy, and entry of goods and materials raising concerns "about collective punishment and other possible violations under international humanitarian and human rights law" ("Gaza Strip"

2022). In response to these unbearable living conditions, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip held a series of border protests, referred to as the Great March of Return (March 2018 - December 2019), calling for the end of the Israeli blockade and the return of Palestinian refugees to their land. These civilian demonstrations were met by an Israeli excessive use of force "shooting tear gas canisters, some of them dropped from drones, rubber bullets and live ammunition, mostly by snipers," killing 214 Palestinians and injuring more than 36,100—1,200 of whom "require long-term and expensive rehabilitation" ("Two Years"). Israeli violence in the Gaza Strip is traced and studied by only a few researchers across disciplinary fields who mostly aim to highlight the atrocious nature of the imposed atmosphere of an open-air prison.

Focusing on the Palestinian health sector under Israeli blockade, in a co-authored article for *Annals of Global Health*, Theresa Farhat and three other health and conflict experts examine the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and the ramifications of Israeli disruptive interventions on developing aid and emergency programs that can address the Palestinian needs. In their view, the situation in the Palestinian territory "serves as a spatial representative of the settler colonial dream of Palestinian nonexistence," especially that "approximately 75% of Gaza's population is registered as refugees, most of whom rely on humanitarian aid" (Farhat et al. 1). After examining how Israeli forces target Palestinians during military assaults or civilian protests such as the Great March, they argue that a "biosphere of war" has been created where:

> The residents of Gaza endure not only physical traumas, but also psychological and social wounds linked to the combination of military occupations and the sealing of its border by Israel and its consequences (i.e., a lack of jobs, a collapsing economy, an altered living environment, a feeble health system, and lack of hope for a better life). (Farhat et al. 2)

This points to the violent characteristics of the Israeli blockade and how it operates to repress life in the Gaza Strip and hinder people's ability to cope and heal. To that end, Palestinians are trapped in a "forever emergency" condition with "high dependence (80% of the population) on food subsidies from international organizations, severe poverty, malnutrition, and a lack of vital supplies (such as water and electricity)" (Farhat et al. 4). As indicated, the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip is exacerbated by profound economic challenges caused by the Israeli blockade and its restrictive policies that deny Palestinians their most basic needs.

The economic misery that people in the Gaza Strip must endure is marked by massive disruptions and fluctuations resulting from longstanding colonial practices of exploitation and de-development. Examining the political history of the enclave's economic circumstances in *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-development*, Sara Roy investigates Palestinian life during the British Mandate (1920-1948), Egyptian military administration (1948-1967), and Israeli military occupation (1967-1987). In discussing the latter, she maintains that:

> During Israel's occupation, Gaza's economic de-development has been shaped and advanced by a range of policies, themselves a reflection of the ideological imperatives of the Zionist movement, […] which have contributed to de-development by dispossessing Palestinians of critical economic resources or factors of production needed to create and sustain productive capacity; by creating extreme dependency on employment in Israel as critical source of GNP growth; and by restricting the kind of indigenous economic and institutional development that could lead to structural reform and capital accumulation in the industrial sector, in particular. (Roy 130)

This Israeli history of violently crushing the economy in the Gaza Strip and any attempts at creating an enabling environment or sustaining a considerable growth persists today with the

imposed siege. In the latest edition of her book, published in 2016, Roy reflects in her elaborate introduction on the devastating impact of the ongoing Israeli blocked calling it “the acute closure that ended the functioning of the formal economy, especially trade” (Roy xxx). To her, the Palestinians enclave has reached “unviability” due to the “ongoing Israeli restrictions, sectoral distortions, decline of the productive sectors and high unemployment,” which warns of catastrophic implications for the Palestinian youth (Roy xxiii).

Most readings of the situation in the Gaza Strip, including the aforenamed accounts, describe the Palestinian territory as isolated and war-torn by the violence of the Israeli military operations and the all-around blockade. What is rarely studied or highlighted is how Palestinians withstand or aim to survive those atrocities despite the imposed ecosystem of despair and suffering. One of the hardly introduced or theorized practices within the Palestinian culture of nonviolent action in relation to the situation in the Gaza Strip is *sumud* (steadfastness). It is my goal in this chapter to further explicate the concept and contextualize its meanings and functions when expressed in the work of theatre-makers in the besieged territory. In particular, I focus on how *sumud* is presented as a Palestinian anti-colonial technique of resistance against the Israeli blockade. However, it must be noted that *sumud* is not exclusive to the struggles of people in the Gaza Strip, and that it is practiced by many Palestinians around the world and particularly shaped according to the context in which they exist.

Sumud **as Anti-Colonial Practice: Resisting Isolation & Enduring Time Under Siege**

As often defined, *sumud* is the Palestinian determination to exist on their native land and to withstand all Israeli attempts at taking over and displacing them. In celebrating the publication of his book *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror* (2017), geographer Gary Fields shares with the University of Californian Press blog a story about Palestinian *sumud* that

captures to a large degree how it is practiced, in its own context. The story concerns two Palestinian farmers, Mona and Fayez, from a village in Tulkarem (the West Bank), whose land and farming operation has been subject to systematic destruction, specifically from pollution caused by Israeli plant waste, the crossing of the Israeli apartheid wall through their farm, and the constant harassment by the Israeli army and its bulldozers (Fields). After having met them for the first time in 2004, Fields visits the Palestinian family again in the summer of 2017 to find that:

> They have implemented an intensive program of water reclamation, energy conservation, and heirloom seed preservation in an effort to transition their land to organic farming. As a result, Mona and Fayez are now two of the most celebrated organic farmers in Palestine cultivating a wide variety of fruits, field vegetables, and nuts. (Fields)

Mona and Fayez's refusal to be defeated and dismissed as humans with hopes and dreams is at the core of how *sumud* is understood and practiced. It is a culture of resistance based in nonviolent action and stemming from the deeply held belief that Palestinians are earth-bound. In Mona and Fayez's words: "When we cultivate crops, we plant ourselves in our land. We will not be moved" (qtd. in Fields**).** But as this chapter makes evident, *sumud* is not only about rooting oneself to their land and rejecting displacement. It is multi-faceted with various renderings and consequences. In the context of life in the Gaza Strip as an open-air prison, *sumud* must be presented as analogous and closely tied to resilience (mental and physical) employed by most Palestinians in the face of myriad types of isolation and abuse. It is thus imperative to highlight the genesis of this correlation between the two terms, *sumud* and resilience.

In 2016, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of Palestine held a first of its kind conference in Amman, the capital of Jordan, called From *Sumud*

to Transformative Resilience. This conference brought together experts and representatives from different organizations and sectors to discuss effective aiding strategies that could enable Palestinians to feel less exposed. One of the publications produced out of the conference draws on various studies to highlight three key ideas often-mentioned when defining resilience: endurance, preparedness, and flexibility ("*Sumud*" 2). Furthermore, and taking into consideration that most understandings of resilience-building require the existence of functioning structures in place, which "removes the individual from the center of discussion," the document suggests that critical attention must be paid to "the ability of individuals, households, and communities to become resilient" ("*Sumud*" 2). It should be noted that the goal of the conference was to reach a framework, coined Transformative Resilience, which would inspire innovative interventions by reforming humanitarian aid strategies in Palestine. Though that is not necessarily the goal of theatre-makers in the Gaza Strip whose work I explicate below, there is nonetheless shared faith in the interconnectedness of resilience and *sumud* and the view of how they inform each other.

Participants in the Amman conference view Palestinian *sumud* as "an ideological theme and strategy," which has undergone several conceptual re-framings extending itself from merely meaning to stay on one's land to now include the following dimensions: steadfastness, working towards self-sufficiency, thriving for a life of dignity, and conscious everyday efforts ("*Sumud*" 6-7). By definition, adherence to these principles of *sumud* requires all three aspects of resilience: endurance, preparedness, and flexibility. Regardless of its goal (transformative or not), resilience implies an ability to endure and adapt despite hardship or life of isolation and abuse under colonial violence as the case with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, in examining the conceptualization of *sumud* as a thematic practice, it becomes clear that resilience, individual and collective, is engrained within its fabric and any understanding of Palestinian

perseverance to sustain themselves against the Israeli processes of domination and erasure must treat both terms as interdependent. This chapter relies on this expansive definition of *sumud* in its exploration of the theatrical enterprise in the Gaza Strip since it renders Palestinian steadfastness as a fluid concept of nonviolent action that can help situate the work of Palestinian theatre-makers in the besieged enclave within the global context of anti-colonial practices.

To better understand how *sumud* functions as an anti-colonial practice within the realm of performing arts, I draw on ideas set forth by Sandra Ruiz in *Ricanness: Enduring Time in Anticolonial Performance*. In this study, Ruiz examines the ineliminable effects of colonialism on the life of Puerto Ricans who are forced to experience its violence. As she explains in her introduction:

> The history of Ricanness embodies colonialism's global desires—an everlasting conquest of land, resources, cultural and social practices, and native peoples themselves—that began even before it started in 1492. […] As we wait for colonialism's eternal death, its enterprise is invigorated by the violent friction both sustaining and destroying subjects; its violence is the most common thread in and constant pulse of the human. (Ruiz 2)

Using performance studies as her vehicle of exploration, Ruiz tracks this living colonialism and its ongoing desires by focusing on durational art—theater, street performances, video recordings, and photography. She examines the work of Rican activists and artists, such as Lolita Lebron and ADAL, to highlight how Puerto Ricans as colonized subjects, even in death, embody a constant state of endurance as their tactic of survival. For Ruiz, "Endurance […] is about laboring to eventually stare past the horizon with apprehension, longing, pain, and pleasure—no feeling invalidated by another in the long pursuit of liberation and continual existence" (12). Given this linguistic and philosophical proximity between Ricanness and Palestinian *sumud* in that both rely

on endurance and indicate a high level of resilience, I refer to Ruiz's explication of endurance as an anti-colonial practice in my exploration of theatrical productions in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli settler colonial machine in Palestine develops and shapes itself within parallel parameters of violence indicated by Ruiz in her study. Its aggressive treatment of the different aspects of Palestinian life continues to manifest countless atrocities perpetrating crimes against humanity and establishing dehumanizing processes of control and manipulation. This chapter finds its inspiration in how Ruiz contextualizes endurance as a practice of self-preservation where "the philosophical and political quests of these [Rican] artists produce an aesthetic event whereby existential concerns meet performative ways of being-different-in-the-world" (Ruiz 34). Within the context of theatre in the Gaza Strip, I engage *sumud* as an umbrella term that entails rootedness, resilience, and endurance. As I offer an analysis of *Barzakh* and *The Grey People* to highlight how Palestinian artists in the Gaza Strip understand and translate their isolation and abuse, I refer to Ruiz's theorizing of endurance, while taking in consideration that it is enacted during and beyond aesthetic performances through different measures and periods of time, to further discuss their work as anti-colonial since it operates against Israeli processes of erasure in corresponding ways to the work of Rican artists explored in Ruiz's study.

Where Are We? Subverting the Palestinian Non-Existence in *Barzakh*

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip suffer from a deep sense of isolation that permeates all their social and cultural activities. Being separated from the world and subjected to numerous abusive violations and restrictive policies by the Israeli occupation, they are forcibly placed "under a suffocating blockade, which constitutes an unprecedented form of collective punishment in a stark violation of international humanitarian law" ("Suffocation"). This Palestinian separation is also exacerbated by the fact that the international community does not exercise enough influence

on the Israeli government to end its system of domination and cruelty. As human rights attorney Noura Erakat points out, "The global community seems unfazed by the unlivable conditions in the Gaza Strip or the fact that an entire generation has grown up isolated from the world - save for its contact with advanced weapons technologies raining down on them from Gaza's skies" (qtd. in "Suffocation"). The current Palestinian generation in the besieged territory is not only forced to survive the Israeli military machine and its destructive force but also its devastation of the economy and all resources that Palestinians rely on and need. These circumstances and their toll on Palestinian life during wartime serve as the inspiration for artists in the Gaza Strip, including Ashraf Al-Afifi and his creation of *Barzakh* Performing Arts & Music Festival (2021).

Barzakh derives its name from the atmosphere of imprisonment looming over the Gaza Strip in the shape of an Israeli all-around blockade. In Arabic, the term translates to a barrier, usually indicating an Islamic view of "a barrier between two things," or "a barrier between paradise and hell" (Karbassian 86). This place of in-between finds its parallel in some Christian beliefs as purgatory or limbo, where souls await in uncertainty for their salvation—it is a life of oblivion. By evoking this state of non-existence, *Barzakh*, which is the title of the performance piece as well of the larger festival of which it is a part, addresses the constantly growing Palestinian sentiments of entrapment and isolation under Israeli occupation and its control over Palestinian land and ways of existing. This is echoed in the short statement featured at the beginning of the video recording of the performance:[3]

[3] I have access to a video recording of *Barzakh*. I transcribed and translated relevant sections. All translations of direct quotations are mine and all subsequent references to the production are drawn from the same source.

> In 1917, the British Government issued the Balfour Declaration in support for a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, which paved the way for the establishment of Israel in 1948. Since then, Palestinian people have been displaced from their homes and forced to live as refugees across the world. Many of them reside in a small part of Palestine called the Gaza Strip, where they have been living under an Israeli blockade since 2007. This is one of their stories. (*Barzakh*)

The performance *Barzakh* begins with a 10-minute *dabke*, a Palestinian folk dance form that will be the focus of Chapter II. Dancers begin the production by lining up on stage appearing from behind rectangular wooden boxes placed vertically to represent Palestinian homes. Joined by a small music group (an *oud* player, a flautist, and a singer), the dancers initially stand side by side twirling a string of beads called a *misbaha* (similar to a rosary) and stomping the ground with their feet as another group of performers deliver a statement addressing the current situation in Palestine. Following this, the *dabke* starts, which aims to prepare the audience for the theatrical performance that follows. Once the dance ends, the lights fade to black, allowing the dancers to leave the stage and signaling the imminent beginning of *Barzakh*.

The balance of the piece lasts approximately one hour. In the first scene, the group of dancers gradually return to stage as lights fade up. They perform another wave of ground stomping, complemented with double handclapping. This time the dancers are accompanied by a *tabla* (hand drum) player. It is louder than ever. The daunting beats create an atmosphere of discomfort, further intensified when one of the dancers starts knocking down the wooden boxes. Screams are heard as the musical epilogue turns into a standoff between the *tabla* player and a group of performers sitting on top of the boxes who continue the transformation of the stage into a wreckage site; the boxes (i.e., houses), once vertical, are now all horizontal and strewn about

the stage. To signal the end of this opening segment, the dancers and *oud* player stand up and face the audience while repeatedly snapping their fingers in what seems to be a warning; there is a palpable sense that things are about to get very uncomfortable. The dancers and *oud* player leave the stage by driving the *tabla* player out of sight.

Lights dim again. From under the rubble of boxes the Man rises, holding two empty glasses. He is severely injured; bloody gore has changed the color of his grey t-shirt to dusty red. Perplexed by the quietness and stillness surrounding him, he cautiously tries to rearrange the place by restoring some of the boxes to their original vertical position; in the end, his attempts are futile. Overwhelmed by the destruction, the Man directly confronts the audience explaining to them how he is no longer able to recognize his house, to find his room, or identify the window that usually brings in a nice breeze. He also recalls coffee time with his wife and the quiet atmosphere that was sometimes disrupted by his father who used to get angry at him whenever he broke a glass (something, we are told, he did frequently). These flowing bittersweet memories are sporadically interrupted by the following commentary from an *oud* player, who has re-entered and is now sitting stage left: “In war, fear reigns, and in fear, time stretches on” (*Barzakh*). Upon realizing that his house has been razed by a fighter aircraft, the Man starts to recall the incident highlighting the horrific conditions of war and questioning his reality under occupation. Questions pour forth from him: Why him and his family? Why his house? Is that why people leave the country? Are they looking for safety and stability? And what of his human rights? His questions go unanswered. The scene ends with the Man’s laying on top of one of the horizonal boxes. It is now evident that the Man died in an attack on his house, and his spirit, not his living physical body, has been inhabiting the stage since the beginning of the scene.

The second scene is equally provocative. The wooden boxes are still placed horizontally, but now in a configuration that evokes a graveyard. A Young Man with a backpack hesitantly enters the playing space. After reading Surah Al-Fatiha (a chapter in the Quran), which is the first thing Muslims often do when visiting a cemetery, he searches for a name on the graves that he might recognize. He pauses in front of one, and mumbles in a regretful tone: "Mother, I was wrong. Please forgive me" (*Barzakh*). As the Young Man reads Surah Al-Fatiha again, the spirit of the Mother silently rises from her grave along with five other figures buried next to her. The Young Man cannot see them. In a loud, angry voice, he suddenly starts to criticize his dead Mother for not saying goodbye to him when he left for Spain and for not picking up his phone calls. In the course of this, the Young Man also reveals that he has returned home after eight years away to seek her forgiveness. He is exhausted from blaming himself all these years and heartbroken by the fact that his Mother could not meet his wife or daughter who, he believes, resembles her. After the Young Man recounts his childhood memories, especially those with his Mother, he stands silently before the grave. At this point, the Mother and the other spirits break their silence and engage in a heated discussion over the validity of the Young Man's reasons for leaving or not visiting afterwards. Those hostile to his choice include the Mother, who is still angry at being abandoned, and a spirit revealed to be his Grandmother, who wishes he had stayed and fought for his country. The other four spirits however seem more sympathetic to his position: two other young men covered in blood, a Young Woman dressed in a Palestinian *thawb* (embroidered dress), and an Old Man fascinated with the idea of war. It is their contention that young people rarely get a chance to travel and seek a stable life, better education, or a successful career; existence for them in Palestine is akin to being trapped between life and death. They understand the Young Man's decision to leave.

In the third scene, the Young Man, exhausted from his travel, has fallen asleep on his Mother's grave. However, he is soon awakened by the chants of a group of people coming to bury a body—it is that of the Man from the first scene whose house has been destroyed by the air raid. Once the funeral is over, all the living leave the stage, including the Young Man. Only the spirits of the dead remain. Excited to meet the newcomer, the six cemetery dwellers wait on any sign from the Man to rise from his grave. Immediately after peeking up his head, they start asking the Man questions about the cause of death and the reality of the world today. The Man begins to realize that he is now dead and stuck in a world between life and the afterlife. Overwhelmed by the bizarre situation and the never-ending questions from the other spirits, he yells back at them seeking answers for why he is still conscious and able to talk with other spirits. The only answer they can provide is that those who are stuck in this in-between place still have a message for the world of the living and they need to find a way to deliver it. For the other spirits, the more important question remains: How did the newcomer die? At last, the Man explains to them that his home has been bombed by a fighter aircraft. News of the war as still ongoing shocks the other spirits. They believed (perhaps hoped) that the occupied land has been liberated and people now lived in peace.

Upon hearing that this is not the case, heartbreak, anger, and confusion erupt. Focus shifts to one of the other two young men, dressed in black joggers and white shirt with two bullet holes. This young man reveals to the other spirits that he was the first among many to cross the borders towards the occupied territories, driven by the belief that it had all been reclaimed. Even though he is now doomed to reside in a place of no-existence, the idea of this young man's attempt to liberate the land is regarded as a worthwhile endeavor by the other spirits. This young man, who comes to be called the False Hero, starts to recount the circumstances that led to his

death: many people gathered at the border, they charged towards the barbed wire fence, and as he dismantled the fence, two bullets penetrated his chest. Following the False Hero's telling of his story, the scene ends with a deep sense of disappointment as all of the spirits return to their graves seeking solitude away from each other.

The final scene in *Barzakh* focuses on the Man's endeavor to hear the stories of all those spirits whose time as living beings on earth preceded his. He first learns that the other bloodied young man was also killed in attack by a fighter aircraft. In turn, the Mother, Grandmother, and Old Man, each coming from different generations, relay how they witnessed various historical events, including World War II and the Oslo Accords (1993-95).[4] After hearing these stories, the Man again asks why some people are sent to this in-between world while others are allowed to cross over to the afterlife. This prompts an emotional review of recent Palestinian history told by all the spirits, focusing on what Palestinians have and still must endure reflecting on recent events in Sheikh Jarrah, the involvement of the US government in perpetuating the struggles of Palestinians, and the normalization agreements between Arab countries and the Israeli occupation that often disregard the right of Palestinians to exist on their land.[5] As the play draws to a close, the spirits are united by their circumstances and feelings of isolation and abuse. They face the audience, join hands, and speak together:

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[4] Oslo Accords are a pair of agreements between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli occupation, by which a limited self-governance for Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was established in the form of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

[5] In 2021, an Israeli court ordered a forcible eviction of many Palestinian families from their homes in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem, to be replaced by Jewish settlers.

> Calling all political leaders of the world: stop this absurdity before your hearts stop beating. Stop manufacturing weapons if you claim that you want peace. Why must children cry? Why must women die? Why must men suffer? Why must the young lose their way in war? Stop starting wars that have no meaning other than death. And remember that in the East there is a land whose people were dispersed and that as long as those who seek freedom breathe the cause will never be lost. This is the dream of the dead to the living. This is the message of the land to humanity. (*Barzakh*)

These words offer a final glimpse into the world of Palestinians. The message criticizes the leaders of the world for their complacency in brutalizing the innocent and for their constant search for more military power instead of creating opportunities for peace and prosperity. More importantly, it points to how absurd and ridiculous it is to expect Palestinians to live under these unbearable conditions while not diminishing the fact that they will always stand against Israeli colonial agendas; they will seek freedom for as long as they exist.

Barzakh concludes with a musical number that brings together all participants. Actors and dancers stand in front of the wooden boxes swaying and clapping their hands with the audience as a three-person band performs an original song that promotes hope and healing. This instance of collective gathering underscores a Palestinian determination to reject all forms of subjugation that undermine their constant search for a life of dignity.

Written and produced in the summer of 2021, *Barzakh*'s development was prompted by an Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, which followed weeks of tension caused by the Israeli unlawful eviction and confiscation of Palestinian homes in Sheikh Jarrah. Lasting for eleven days (May 10-21), the Israeli air attack targeted civilian residences across the besieged enclave, which resulted in killing at least 253 Palestinians, injuring more than 1,948, and displacing

thousands of families, most of whom took shelter in schools run by United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) (“Gaza Strip” 2021). Alaa Abu Hattab, a survivor from an Israeli bombing of his home in Al-Shati refugee camp (north of the Gaza Strip), recounted to Human Rights Watch:

> I left my house on foot at about 1:30 a.m. to go to some of the local shops that were open late during the run-up to Eid [the holiday concluding the holy month of Ramadan] to buy toys and snacks for the kids for the Eid festival and to buy some food, as we were hungry. Before I left the house there was no warning that anything would happen to our house. We didn’t receive a phone call and there was no drone strike that they sometimes do to warn people that they will target a building. At least that would have scared the kids and they would have fled the house in time.
>
> [After hearing an explosion] I ran back towards the smoke and saw it was my house. It was all rubble. I felt like everything was revolving around me. I was in shock and I fainted. When I regained consciousness, I saw rescue workers looking for bodies under the rubble and recovering body parts. The attack had shredded the bodies. Other parts remained under the rubble because they could not find them. There were no militants in or near my house and no rockets or rocket launchers there. I still don’t know why they bombed my house and killed my wife and children and my sister and her children. What sin did they commit? (qtd. in “Apparent”)

Alaa’s testimony is one of many recorded by the press and on social media platforms that speaks to the gruesome nature of Israeli attacks on civilian life in the besieged territory that stands without enough resources to overcome them. Watching family and loved ones take their final breath, screaming for help from under the rubble of their own homes, and collecting pieces of

their bodies are only three items in a long list of horrible conditions that Palestinians must endure during Israeli military offensives. The first scene of *Barzakh* I described above clearly reflects on the struggles of defenseless Palestinians in the Gaza Strip during times of military assault by the Israeli forces. As exemplified in the plight of the Man, the bombing of civilian families and their homes never stops. The struggle of the Young Man to come back and visit his mother is due to all these restrictions, which forced him to flee his home and lose contact with his family. To feel isolated, abused, and deprived of any viable resources is more than what many people in the Gaza Strip can endure.

As reflected in the story of the False Hero in the third scene, it is the dream of all Palestinians to return to their land in historic Palestine. The scene thus evokes a collective Palestinian aspiration by astutely referencing the 2018–2019 Gaza border protests, known as the Great March of Return. The False Hero represents what many Palestinians wish can happen if people are united in the face of the Israeli occupation. A real life analogue of this driving impulse may be found in the Facebook post of one of the border protest organizers, Ahmed Abu Artema:

> [We are] a people that want life and nothing more. Nothing can delay this idea but the shackles of our self-delusions. We are dying in this tiny besieged place, so why not bolt before the knife reaches our throats? Since they are plotting to kick us south [to Egypt] after slaughtering us wholesale, why don't we preempt them and begin to run north? If there must be a price to pay, then let it be in the direction of what is right, in the direction of returning to Palestine, where we can get new land and deepen the enemy's existential impasse. Once we implement this idea and achieve a historic breakthrough, we'll find out that we've wasted many years on hesitation and forbearance.

> Revolt! You have nothing to lose but your chains. #Great_March_of_Return. (qtd. in Abusalim 93)

Abu Artema's words reflect 75 years of Israeli occupation in Palestine, including 17 years of blockade on the Gaza Strip. This series of civilian demonstrations made visible "the extent to which young activists were yearning to play an organic, genuine political role" and their intolerance of "the devastating humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip" (Abusalim 93-94). Therefore, it is not surprising that *Barazkh* pays tribute to these attempts at breaking the shackles of Israeli abuse of Palestinians in the besieged enclave.

In terms of the argument that is central to this chapter, *Barzakh* is a manifestation of how theatre-makers in the Gaza Strip recognize *sumud* and its ability to inspire self-preservation in the face of colonial desires and actions. On one hand, the festival and performance event are acts of survival, considering that people in the enclave do not have regular access to the arts, including theatre, or financial resources that could enable cultural activities to thrive. Adding insult to injury, Al-Afifi and many other practitioners working in these conditions suffered an enormous loss in 2018 when Said Al-Mishal Centre, one of Gaza's biggest hubs for theatre, music, and dance, was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike. With that in mind, the *dabke* dance, music (*tabla* and *oud*), traditional clothes (*thawb*), and the sporadic recitation of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry during pauses stand against colonial erasure by creating an atmosphere of collectivity grounded in uniquely Palestinian cultural practices. All are employed to support the dramatic aspect of *Barzakh* in its representation of life in the Gaza Strip under colonial subjugation that turns people into prisoners of their own land. They also confirm the Palestinian insistence to exist and celebrate life despite all the challenges.

On the other hand, *Barzakh* carries within its characters impulses that promote an understanding of *sumud* that asserts the centrality of rootedness and extends itself to include resilience and endurance. This is evident in how the old generation, represented by the spirits of the Old Man and Grandmother, express strong ties to the land and their refusal to be uprooted and removed. Throughout the play, they criticize the young characters for sometimes failing to realize the significance of people's sacrifices and, in turn, affirm their belief that the struggle for liberation requires unity and selflessness. These sacrifices, however, do not always require losing people to war and conflict. In response to the Grandmother's suggestion in scene 4 that all young people should fight for their country, the Old Man objects:

> Who told you that the land is thirsty for blood? It has always been a place of peace. Why must we die? When did humans lose their humanity? Listen to me, I have experienced the *Nakbe* [catastrophe of 1948] and *Naksa* [the 1967 Arab–Israeli War] and everything that followed. This is not the blood of those who are killed. Rather, it is the blood of those who kill them. This is the blood of those who turn a blind eye. This is the blood of those who act deaf and refuse to speak up. This is the blood of the whole world who watches them kill us using all means and weapons. Shame on them. (*Barzakh*)

The Old Man's words reflect how Palestinians view their land as a home for all those who wish to co-exist and live in peace. Moreover, they highlight the Palestinian tragedy of war and colonial violence, the international neglect of their human rights, and their rootedness to the land and commitment to the national project of liberation.

The resilience aspect of *sumud* in Al-Afifi's production of *Barzakh* is characterized in the actions of the young generation who refuse to be defeated by their reality, most particularly the Young Man (i.e., the son), who has travelled abroad and now is back to visit his family, and the

False Hero who had participated in the border demonstrations in hope of bringing change. In a world of violence and countless restrictions, these young people withstand unbearable conditions caused by various political upheavals, economic challenges, and movement constraints. This resilience is fueled by a pursuit of a better life, just as the case with the Young Man who represents all those who have managed to escape the Israeli ecosystem of despair and to establish a career before coming back to affirm his roots to the land. It is also driven by a need for change, which can only take place if people are united in the face of their oppression. In the end, then, the False Hero is not false at all; rather, he is a young man who embodies the hopes and dreams of his whole generation and all those who are not interested in violence yet unwilling to stand by and watch as life passes them by taking away everything they cherish. As indicated in Abu Artema's Facebook post noted above, this is what prompted the Great March of Return. Both these characters, the Young Man and the False Hero, depict the struggles of young people in the Gaza Strip and their unwavering resilience during all the difficult circumstances. It is their ability to thrive amidst adversity that preserves their Palestinian identity, which is what *sumud* stands for in all its meanings and functions.

By invoking a world of in-betweenness or no-existence inhabited by spirits, *Barzakh* skillfully puts on stage different Palestinian generations whose stories and collective pain reflect on the violent history of the Israeli occupation in Palestine. This dramatization of the Gaza Strip as an environment of death and destruction caused by the Israeli war machine resonates with all the experiences represented by these characters. Their message to the world at the end is not only shaped by recent events in Palestine, but also by the colonial abuse and isolation past and current Palestinian generations have endured. In *Barzakh*, Palestinian misery is challenged at the end, with the coming together of all the characters who simultaneously and

variably highlight persistent challenges obstructing their way to salvation and yet also affirm their ability to survive, echoing a Palestinian resolve to exist, the refusal to give up native land (rootedness), or to be defeated (resilience).

A World of Discrepancy: The Depiction of Palestinian Fragmentation in *The Grey People*

Much like *Barzakh*, Theatre Day Productions' *The Grey People* (2022) was produced at a time where many Palestinian arts foundations in the Gaza Strip were struggling to find financial and material support. The show was made possible by an initiative, Supporting the *Sumud* of Institutions and Individuals Working in the Palestinian Cultural Scene, funded by the Arab Fund for Economic & Social Development and supervised by Welfare Association. The aim of the initiative was to highlight social and cultural challenges facing Palestinians, especially those impacting young people. Inspired by the colonial devastation that determines the daily existence of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, *The Grey People* was envisioned and directed by Ra'fat Al-Aidy, a Palestinian theatre practitioner with a long list of production work in the besieged enclave. As might be implied in the title, the play tells the story of a group of people who suffer from a collective identity crisis—i.e., they are drained of life hence "grey"—that puts into question their sense of belonging; this is an anxiety of existence shared by all Palestinians. [6] In the context of the play, all people are assigned a color that represents the amount of social and financial power they possess. In adopting this premise, *The Grey People* sets itself within a

[6] I accessed a video recording of *The Grey People* via YouTube. I transcribed and translated relevant sections. All translations of direct quotations are mine and all subsequent references to the production are drawn from this source: *The Grey People.* Directed by Ra'fat Al-Aidy, *Theatre Day Productions,* YouTube, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahQayA07oRI

philosophical realm largely defined by the experiences of people in Gaza dealing with political corruption.

At first glance, the stage appears minimal; a blue desk with a few furniture pieces (stage left), a door (stage left), two housekeeping carts (stage right), and a stairway that does not seem to lead anywhere (upstage). The most interesting aspect of the scenic design is the narrow and deep visual composition of the stage with vertical and horizontal lines dividing the floor into rectangles. *The Grey People* begins with a noisy display of manual labor as two male actors, dressed in Green, vacuum the downstage left area, while two others, donning Red aprons and hats, mop and clean upstage right. This introduction establishes the working environment in which these characters exist while also immediately conveying the ruling premise of the piece: that behaviors and status correspond with colors. Once the characters in Green and Red have completed their tasks and exited the stage, a man wearing Yellow enters and is immediately escorted by two male actors, also wearing Red, to an elevator upstage left (a blue-lit chamber under the stairway, with a sliding door). Following this, a second man in Yellow enters, hands a document (later revealed as an application form) to the two female front desk employees in Red jackets, who seemingly review and approve its contents. This second man in Yellow then enjoys a hot drink—a symbol of high status only accessed by an elite few—before also making his way to the elevator. These mostly slow-paced interactions between the color coded groups (Red, Green, and Yellow) establish the play's first reference to discrepancy. While some (i.e., those in Yellow) enjoy a great deal of power living a luxurious lifestyle, others (i.e., those in Red and Green) have to serve them and ensure their comfort. This landscape of power disparity is further highlighted by lighting design; much of the stage is dim making it hard to see anything on the margins, including the spaces primarily occupied by the characters in Red. Conversely, the

spaces largely occupied by those in Yellow, downstage left where they often enter and the elevator, are more intensely lit.

What follows this opening is a segment featuring slow calming music by an *oud* player (one of the two actors in Green) and a revealing announcement by one of the ladies wearing Red at the front desk: “Welcome, dear residents. We wish you a great day here at our hotel, the Grey People Hotel.” (*The Grey People*). This announcement precedes two highly entertaining sequences performed by the characters in Green, each making provocative analogies between animalistic behavior and human suffering. The first includes one of the actors in Green playing *daf* (frame drum) while the other puts on a monkey head and dances around. The act is intended to entertain the two men in Yellow, now sitting at the top of the stairway; it ends when one offers to buy the monkey, an offer that is refused. Soon after the actor in Green with the monkey head leaves the stage, and then returns with a stuffed hawk strapped to his arm announcing the start of the second bit. He displays the bird’s amazing traits before offering it up for sale:

> This bird is strange yet marvelous. It comes from the desert, and it sees the far object near. Its person becomes your friend. And if you betray the bird, it will leave you. To those who want to show off their money and status, this bird is tamed, domesticated, and loyal to its person. Gentlemen, the auction is live. I am selling the most precious of my possessions. (*The Grey People*)

Fascinated with the bird, one of the men in Yellow agrees to buy it and starts throwing money on the floor indicating no one can match his offer. This extravagance is carried further when after purchasing it, he gifts the bird back to the man in Green then offers to buy it again. Significantly, his behavior does not seem to bring those working in the hotel any sense of discomfort; rather, it

is as if they are accustomed to it. Seemingly without cause and disconnected from the action that comes before, the scene ends with a *dabke* dance performed by an ensemble.

The sequence of the monkey dance recalls the idea of freedom and how it is taken away by means of subjugation. When applied to the situation in the Gaza Strip where people are forced to exist under colonial domination, Palestinians have little agency over their bodies and minds as the Israeli occupation aims to dictate all aspects of their lives. This also helps explain why the bird in the second segment is offered up for sale; its freedom is no longer possible. These interpretations do not, however, fully capture what is being evoked with these actions. The men in Yellow represent more than just wealth and corruption; they are also an elite minority that benefit from perpetuating control. Whether they are intended to represent political leaders of different factions, government officials, prominent figures, or businessmen, their main goal is to ensure their own survival in a world where they have economic power and everything is for sale. The two instances of animal entrapment therefore allude to the sense of abuse that Palestinians endure living in an open-air prison while also criticizing those in power who do not care for the well-being of their people.

The second scene begins with the same kind of rote actions that prefaced the first; actors in Red aprons clean the hotel, the two front desk employees also in Red receive calls from potential residents, and those in Yellow enjoy their time doing recreational activities. In the course of the scene, the nature of the conversations that occur on the phone, as well as several announcements made through an intercom, reveal a great deal about the culture of the Grey People Hotel. For example, it is confirmed that colors represent social categories, which are assigned based on job descriptions and status: Red is for workers, Green is for technicians (maintenance workers), and Yellow is for residents. As the scene unfolds, it becomes clear that it

is impossible to survive without being categorized. This is made evident when a Young Man in an outfit that is not in a single dominant color enters stage left and crosses to the front desk. He is warmly welcomed by one of the two receptionists in Red before being handed an application and told that he must complete it immediately. Overwhelmed by the amount of information required on the form, the Young Man asks for a chance to rest since he has travelled a long way. His request is denied; he is told by the receptionists that he must be categorized prior to gaining access to any of the hotel services, including a space to rest, and that the application is the only way that can happen. This strict requirement adds to the Young Man's mental and physical exhaustion eventually causing him to collapse on the floor.

What follows is a choregraphed dance number, which suggests a ritual of indoctrination. In this section of the performance, lighting design again plays a crucial role, as attention constantly shifts from the uncategorized newcomer passed out downstage left and the dominant three groups – Red, Green, and Yellow – converging at center stage and dancing. Those in Yellow now wear masks with wide eye holes and dark fabric covering the back of their heads; along with those in Green and Red, they all perform what appears to be a representation of the process of joining the Grey People Hotel. The dance they perform suggest that there are four steps in this process: surrendering, assimilating, embracing the culture of survival, and fulfilling one's duties within the assigned category. While the performers showcase their adherence to the system through dance, the Young man stands up, spins around himself, and collapses on the floor again and again. Once the dance concludes, he moves center stage, which is now dominated by the two workers in Red aprons and their housekeeping carts; the others, both those wearing Yellow and those wearing Green, sit on the stairs and watch them interact. Each attempt on the part of the Young Man to introduce himself and get information is met with loud objections and

unnecessary scrutiny. The two workers in Red lay out the rules of the establishment: the name of the person does not matter; food and other services are only provided in exchange for work; and most importantly, without categorization, one cannot exist. Upon hearing this, the Young Man argues that he can contribute without having to be labeled and forced into a certain group; his refusal to join enrages those in Red, and draws derision from those in Green and Yellow.

In many ways, all these interactions and imposed regulations of existence in the Grey People Hotel reflect on the challenges facing Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip. The hotel is in many respects a prison; the brutal and capricious treatment of those possessing less power—those in Red and Green—is evocative of the Israeli occupation and its damaging consequences on all sectors of Palestinian life. Furthermore, the aspect of categorization in *The Grey People* covertly speaks to the issue of factionalism in Palestine. To further illustrate this point, I must first offer some context.

In short, now more than ever before, the Palestinian liberation project "suffers from increasing irrelevance and dramatic decline, torn by polarization and division, its national strategy replaced by competing self-serving agendas" (Dana). This is mainly due to the political conflict between Fatah, in the West Bank, and Hamas, in the Gaza Strip. Their conflict is exacerbated by stark ideological differences. The two factions "perceive democracy to be a form of control, power and hegemony, not a social contract aimed at fostering dialogue and defusing conflict," which devastates any chances for national unity and renders "political platforms and social media […] abuzz with self-defeating propaganda" (Baroud 14). The control that the leaders of these Palestinian factions have over their followers is enhanced by the appalling conditions engendered by the Israeli occupation. More precisely, factionalism has "an economic dimension, with employment in the PA's [Palestinian Authority] civilian and security sectors in

Gaza and Ramallah largely based on proximity to the ruling factions" (Dana). With that in mind, the portrayal of an elite minority—i.e., the Yellow men—in *The Grey People* is akin to the factional leaders, who seek to control people's minds and make them dependent on the system based on categorization, which overpowers underprivileged voices.

The third scene in *The Grey People* is a poetization of this type of dynamic. Lights are dim, cleaning carts are taken upstage, and the floor is illuminated creating an impression of an interrogation room. As the scene begins, the two Yellow men take off their masks and approach the unconscious Young Man. They wake him up and forcibly make him sit before them. In turn, they introduce themselves as the representatives of skepticism, noting that their ideas are informed by René Descartes' teachings. They reveal that it is their job to question everything and everyone, so as to determine the best course of action. During the examination, which is both physically and verbally aggressive, the men in Yellow further explain that their approach relies on applying elements of both philosophical and methodological skepticism. Eventually, they reach a conclusion:

> Based on our observations and the data provided, we have come to realize that he [the Young Man] is a flawed and unbalanced human being. His thoughts are unstable with a high risk of being contagious. He is a threat to society willing to work for nothing in return, which is an observable trait among 30% of the common people. It is difficult to categorize him given the lack of personal interests—he believes that he can work for free. We have no idea who he is. So, skeptical analysis has concluded that he must be isolated and vilified since he is contagious. To conclude, he must be removed. (*The Grey People*)

Upon delivering their judgement, the actors in Yellow retreat upstage and are replaced by those in Green, the two technicians. While twirling long sticks in a threatening manner, the actors in

Green continue the process of questioning the Young Man's motives and his reasoning for wishing to join the Grey People Hotel. As the Young Man explains to them his commitment to both individual and collective identity and honoring the sacrifices of those who have proceeded him, the technicians in Green mock him and ridicule his logic. For them, individual memories stored in one's mind and the family pictures he carries with him have no value or significance. Instead, they argue, if people can eat, drink, and enjoy being categorized, they lead a good life. The interrogation of the Young Man concludes as he collapses on the floor one last time.

At the start of the final scene, the hotel residents in Yellow and employees in Red and Green gather around the Young Man demanding that he leaves. In response, he crawls downstage left to the spot where he has initially lost consciousness filling out his application. As the actors in Yellow leave the stage, one of the front desk employees in Red again asks the Young Man to complete his form, repeating that if he does not, he cannot be accommodated. Still in a haze, the Young Man again refuses to adhere to their process and demands that the higher committee of the hotel consider his situation. While this discussion is occurring, the two workers in Red re-arrange the stage, placing furniture pieces downstage center that can seat four people. In turn, the two actors in Yellow re-enter from the stage-left door wearing sunglasses and capes that are both yellow and green. To convene the meeting of the higher committee, joined by one actor in Green and one of the front desk employees in Red. In their ensuing discussion, they address the significance of establishing categories, the economic and social impact of taking in the Young Man, and the necessity of adhering the system in place. Though the actors in Green and Red attempt to contribute to the discussion, it is rapidly overtaken by the two men in Yellow.

Throughout the meeting of the higher committee, the Young Man is not allowed to speak for himself and is forced to observe as others decide his destiny. He can only continue to sit on

the floor and wait. Soon enough, the two desk employees in Red receive a phone call informing them that it has been determined that the uncategorizable Young Man must be kicked out. Interestingly, the decision sparks anger and criticism among the less privileged groups in Red and in Green. Still, they remain unable to act. It is a difficult moment for the devastated Young Man who finally tells his story:

> I know it is hard to change and to only think about the public good. I also know that it will affect the interests and dominance of those in power. My father tried, and now I did as well. My father and his family created their own identity when they built this hotel along with many other people, which became an integral part of their existence. They believed in the need of a place that could unite us all in freedom without categorization or anything in return. [*Grabbing pictures from his backpack*] Look! This is a collection of photos that show how people used to live. My grandfather always tells me that life is much simpler than we think and that things used to be more enjoyable during their time. As a child, I liked eating oranges. But one day, I threw orange peel on the floor. My mother made me collect it before telling me while looking into my eyes that: "Those who care about their home never dirty it." I grew up to understand exactly what she meant. Unfortunately, life has become much harder and now we are fragmented, living within categories and groups who only care about their own interests. My father knew this. At some point, he stood in the middle of this hotel and warned everybody. But no one listened or said anything. I remember his saying repeatedly: "We are not for sale. We are not for sale." The others did not respond to his calling then they called him mad. He later passed away and my mother joined him shortly after. My sister and I were taken away to live with my grandfather. But I came back to stand against those who wish to divide and

> categorize us. Unfortunately, I failed. Anyway, thank you for everything. (*The Grey People*)

Under the now sad and sympathetic eyes of the hotel workers and employees donning Red, the Young Man grabs his luggage and leaves. The group in Red, the two housekeeping workers and the two front desk employees, remain on stage as those in Yellow and Green sit at the top of the stairway fading in the dim background. The workers in Red conclude the production by reminiscing about life before categorization, realizing that they have become complicit in perpetuating the labeling and blocking of others helping the elite minority maintain its control and, by extension, the fragmentation of people.

The depiction of elitism and social stratification in the third and fourth scenes of *The Grey People* reflects on the political field in Palestine, which, as noted above, is fueled by polarizing views and ideologies that hold people captive to the Israeli occupation. Some argue that this has mainly resulted from the Palestinian internal split in 2007, particularly after Hamas established itself as a leading political party in the Gaza Strip. But that is only a recent factor. In examining the Palestinian political system, Jamil Hilal explains that:

> The Palestinian political field differs from most others in that it includes Palestinian communities with differing socioeconomic, state, and civil society structures, not only in historic Palestine (the 1967 occupied territories and Israel) but also in the diaspora (*al-shatat*) created by the 1948 Nakba. It was also formed *outside* the national territory, not by a state but by a national liberation movement that arose in the Palestinian *shatat*. (Hilal 25)

Fatah, being the leading faction of the Palestinian Liberation Origination (PLO), operated as the representatives of the Palestinian people during and after the Oslo Accords (1993-95), which led

to the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PA). As a result, they "dominated the institutions (government, security apparatuses, the judiciary, and the Palestinian Legislative Council [PLC])" (Hilal 26). With the Second Palestinian *Intifada* (2000-05), the political scene shifted as Hamas became a principle political force competing against Fatah—a rivalry that was deepened after the former won the 2005 parliamentary elections. The two factions failed to form a national unity government causing political and social friction among the Palestinian people and eventually two sperate governments: Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

This political fragmentation in the aftermath of the national split has severely impacted the social fabric of Palestinian life in the two occupied territories. As Hilal points out:

> Physical fragmentation engenders social fragmentation, reinforcing social and economic disparities among regions, districts, and local communities (and between towns, villages, and camps) by affecting access to employment, markets, and basic services. From an institutional standpoint, Israeli restrictions on movement via permits, checkpoints, and physical barriers have effectively restricted the population's access to civic organizations. Meanwhile, the consequent weakening of central national institutions has led to a reinvention of kinship- and locality-based associations to take on some of the functions that the defunct national institutions can no longer fulfill. (Hilal 31).

These circumstances have also allowed for foreign interferences that have a detrimental effect on Palestinian politics exacerbating the issue of factionalism. In this respect, there are regional powers that sponsor and benefit from the polarization of the Palestinian political field as well as international influences that ideologically favor one faction over the other. Anthropologist Dag Tuastad investigates the role of this clientelism in aligning Fatah and Hamas into two conflicting directions. He argues:

> It is important to note the interconnection between two levels of clientism involved here. First, there is the connection between the micro-interests of local warlords in Gaza trying to derail elections unlikely to produce the results they want for themselves and their Fatah sponsors. Second, what should also be noted is the link between these militant forces and international concerns over having election winners who are on the US's and EU's terrorist list. When security comes first, programs concerning the rule of law, governance and transparency are suspended. This leaves the unruly elements and militants threatened by elections and the rule of law unharmed. In order to fight what is defined as Islamist terrorism, the enemy of one's enemy is supported, and thus clientelist politics, producing fragmentation and political violence, is sustained. (Tuastad 799)

All of this is in favor of the Israeli occupation and its settler colonial logic. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip suffer from the consequences of the geographic, social, and political fragmentation, which adds to their isolation and abuse under Israeli colonial violence. The issue of factionalism is a product of all these above noted circumstances, yet the economic aspect remains to dominate how Palestinians navigate the hardships of their existence under two split governments that care only for their own political interests.

In its treatment of Palestinian factionalism, *The Grey People* highlights the socio-political issues Palestinians must endure while being fragmented and abused under the Israeli occupation. More importantly, the production translates how the younger generations in Palestine resist their colonial subjugation perpetuated by figures and groups that seek political power to fulfil their own agendas. In this regard, the Young Man and his refusal of categorization is an echoing example of *sumud*. The hotel, which represents the Palestinian homeland, is controlled and manipulated by an elitist minority that wishes to allow only those who subscribe to their own

ideology. His decision to defend the legacy of his father and all those who have helped build this home, driven by the hope to live in unity, speaks to how rootedness is carried forward from one generation to the next. Despite losing his parents at an early age and being sent away from home, the Young Man chooses to come back and stand against those who have overwhelmed the hotel with their divisive rules and practices. The memories stored in the collection of pictures that he brings with him are meant to preserve native knowledge and traditions of past generations who fought to keep them alive. The imposed system of categorization is meant to block and isolate such attempts at reminding people that they have the power to overcome their differences and to stay united in the face of adversity.

Against all odds and constant demands of categorization, the Young Man remains resilient in his decision to oppose the elite minority and their discriminatory system. The nightmare in which he foresees his life in the hotel is a manifestation of all the hardship and exhaustion that he has experienced as a displaced person in need of recognition and help. It is a consequence of a deep sense of deprivation where access to safety or essential services is denied. While consumed by this brutal reality, the Young Man does not give up his hope for a better life upon regaining consciousness—he does not succumb to the violence of categorization. His resilience is marked by an ability to endure forced displacement and social fragmentation. This stems from his belief, in himself and in his family, that people must not expect anything in return when working for the betterment of society, especially if it is controlled and manipulated by a group of powermongers. The Young Man's "ambitious task" of "keeping on," to borrow from Ruiz, defines his endurance as an act of sustaining oneself from corruption and potential complicity in perpetuating a system of discrimination that aims to reduce people to unthinking loyal subjects (167). In the context of life in the Gaza Strip under conflicting political affiliations

aggravated by the violent practices of the Israeli occupation, this refusal of labeling people is an undeniable adherence to *sumud*.

Conclusion

For many years the work of Palestinian theatre-makers in the Gaza Strip has been dismissed and ignored. As I have sought to highlight in this chapter, the theatrical enterprise in the Gaza Strip is not only existent, it is also dynamically consistent with the national movement in its criticism of the Israeli colonial violence and consequent internal issues. To that end, it must be noted that artists such as those featured in this chapter experience many challenges that apprehend their reach and influence. For example, *The Grey People* was invited to the Palestinian National Theatre Festival at Al-Kasaba Theatre in the city of Ramallah, located in the West Bank. Despite being organized by the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, the Israeli occupation refused to issue the cast of the show the permits that would allow them to travel or cross through checkpoints to the West Bank ("The Voice"). Nonetheless, a full recording of the production was shown at the festival, offering artists from the Gaza Strip an alternative means to share their work. Still, the issue remains: Palestinian theatre in Gaza, as is the case with other cultural activities, suffers from various Israeli attempts at blocking or limiting its messaging and potential ability to connect and stimulate Palestinians from different regions and territories.

In this chapter, I have focused on two theatre productions from the Gaza Strip that reflect on the reality of the besieged territory. In doing so, I have provided non-Arabic speaking scholars and theatre-makers access to theatrical examples of nonviolent activism aimed at engendering anti-colonial ideas and practices. In the case of *Barzakh*, Al-Afifi and his actors offer their audience multiple creative interpretations of the horrific conditions that people must endure during times of Israeli aggressions while also reflecting on the history of colonial violence and

its purpose of displacing Palestinians and tearing their social fabric. In invoking a world of isolation and impasse, the production is inspired by the viewing of the Gaza Strip as an Israeli open-air prison. As for Theatre Day Productions' *The Grey People*, it is a creative and politicized imagining of how factionalism has damaged the Palestinian social life adding to their fragmentation across two geographical territories and under two conflicting governments. By offering an analysis of these two plays, I have highlighted how the Israeli colonial violence creates an eco-system of despair that Palestinians are forced to endure. I have also argued that both *Barzakh* and *The Grey People* are informed by anti-colonial ideas of rootedness, resilience, and endurance that capture the meaning and significance of Palestinian *sumud* (steadfastness).

CHAPTER II. WE SING & DANCE: THE PALESTINIAN ART OF PROTEST

In 2018, the contemporary cultural movement in Palestine bid farewell to one of its most notable figures, Rim Banna. Referred to by many as the voice of freedom and resistance, Banna spoke against the Israeli occupation, its violent methods, as well as to the suffering of Palestinians. She did so across 12 albums, the last of which, *Voice of Resistance*, was released in 2019, the year following her death. The daughter of a well-known poet, Zuhaira Sabbagh, Banna's adaptation of folk music and poetry into a distinctive musical style that appealed to many people, enabled her to offer a potent Palestinian perspective addressing various socio-political issues in Palestine. In an interview with *Qantara.de* she explained her intent: "A part of my work consists of collecting traditional Palestinian texts without melodies. So that the texts do not get lost, we try to compose melodies for them that are modern, yet inspired by traditional Palestinian music" ("Palestinian Singer"). In addition to being a vocalist, songwriter, and composer, Banna was a human rights activist, who, much like her poet mother, was dedicated to highlighting the challenges of Palestinian life under occupation and exposing the Israeli oppression of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Her mission as an advocate for the national liberation project took on a different meaning after she was diagnosed with cancer—she became a cultural icon of Palestinian perseverance and will power.[7]

In one of the few articles written about Banna's career and her struggle with illness, Abir Hamdar focuses on the Palestinian singer's posthumous album. In the course of her thoughtful

[7] Louis Brehony explains how Banna's legacy served and continues to serves as a great source of inspiration in "Rim Banna: A Symbol of Life and Unity." *PalestineChroncile.Com*, Mar. 25, 2018, https://www.palestinechronicle.com/rim-banna-symbol-life-unity/#

consideration, Hamdar seeks to offer "a cultural anatomy of Banna's post-illness body," and moreover argues that "her cancer (and other chronic health issues) have not only been transformed into an allegory or metaphor for the colonial situation of Palestine but into the site for a poetics of Palestinian unity and resistance" (Hamdar 234). For Hamdar, then, Banna's journey with cancer was marked by cultural messaging that relied on her unwell body as a way of medico-political resistance. As Hamdar explains: "Banna, literally and symbolically, recruits her cancer and her possible death from it into an account of her transformation into a *fida'i* ('freedom fighter') who is willing to sacrifice his/her life for the land and the nation" (Hamdar 238). On the other hand, Hamdar also notes how her music continued to reflect a history of a Palestinian whose life is constantly disrupted by colonial violence. To that end, Hamdar views Banna's last album as "a kind of sound collage," which "resonates with the artist's long-standing commitment to the plight of her people at the same time as it underscores her own personal struggle with illness" (Hamdar 239). By singing, writing songs, and creating music while battling a deadly disease for nine years, Banna embodied a true definition of Palestinian resilience, showcasing how music-making in Palestine is actively resisting the Israeli occupation and its ongoing systematic erasure of Palestinian cultural heritage.

In this chapter, I describe and critically consider the work of a new generation of Palestinian musicians who are, similar to Banna, representing the Palestinian experience in ways that are mindful of the past, unflinching in their understanding of the present, while also dreaming of a brighter future. More precisely, I highlight how the hip-hop artist Shabjdeed and the electronic music group 47Soul contribute to the contemporary Palestinian cultural scene, tracing how their creative renderings attest to the challenges of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation. I pay particular attention to the ways in which Shabjdeed employs hip-hop as a

vehicle of musical expression to present daily life in the West Bank, addressing topics that are often neglected. By doing so, he uncovers many sites of colonial violence where Palestinians are challenged and dehumanized. As for 47Soul, I examine three of the group's video clips to highlight its commitment to creating music for movement that infused traditional Palestinian *dabke* with contemporary forms of musical expressions. I argue that 47Soul's specific subgenre of *Shamstep* is a manifestation of Palestinian political expression against restrictions of movement. Studying the work of Shabjdeed and 47Soul helps uncover the current reality of Palestinian protest song and how it functions in certain contexts to stand against many colonial attempts at erasing its cultural identity.

Understanding the Music of Palestine: How Did Hip-Hop Arrive on the Scene?

As an Arabic subgenre, Palestinian music shares many commonalities with other musical traditions within the Arab world, which is commonly defined as comprising most of the Middle East. However, according to Palestinian anthropologist Moslih Kanaaneh, there are three principal types of music in Palestine (or "Palestinian popular music" as he calls it): singing music (which features the human voice only, evident in forms such as *ataaba* and *dal'ona*), instrumental music (which mostly relies on single instruments, evident in forms such as *shobbabah* and *rababa*), and instrumental singing music which draws together both singing and instrumentation (Kanaaneh 377). Further, Kanaaneh argues that the frequent primacy of lyrics (the vocal) over melody (the instrumental) in Palestinian popular music is almost always suggestive of Palestinian singing music (or popular songs). In that view, he lists five "distinctive features" that define popular singing music in Palestine: short musical phrases, limited *maqams* (melody types), simple intervals, simple meters, and high potential for melodic ornamentation (Kanaaneh 378). Further development and innovation of popular songs within these parameters

often occurs with lyrical improvisation, which "has now become a matter of the past" (Kanaaneh 379). As a result, Palestinian popular music is currently more of a shelved heritage rather than a living product.

Kanaaneh attributes this "heritagization" of Palestinian popular music to the shrinking of rural life, institutionalization of music, cultural and religious restrictions, and censorship practices by the Israeli occupation (Kanaaneh 381-384). On how the latter affects the Palestinian musical scene, he explains:

> Palestinian popular songs, and popular culture in general, have always been strictly monitored by the Israelis, both inside Israel and in the Occupied Territories. Any Palestinian song or cultural activity that addresses the 1948–*Nakba*, the loss of Palestine, exile, refugee status, liberation, return to the homeland, resilience, resistance or even any aspect of Palestinianity, is considered by the Israeli authorities to be tools for incitement and a threat to the existence of the 'Jewish State', hence liable to being banned, punished and crushed. (Kanaaneh 382)

These circumstances have rendered the current musical scene in Palestine as a complex set of practices that is difficult to trace. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that the records that do exist of these musical practices "have been materially preserved in the private archives of a few Palestinian persons […] and in the archives of few organizations involved directly or indirectly in collecting and preserving Palestinian folklore" (Kanaaneh 384). Kanaaneh nonetheless asserts that "at the same time, foreign donors and funders continue to endorse and promote Western classical music, Arab pop, rock and hip-hop music with great insistence" (Kanaaneh 384-385). To track the influence of this foreign support, I next examine how hip-hop in Palestine functions, highlighting its mission and various potential contributions to the national project of liberation.

It is often agreed that hip-hop arrived in Palestine proper in the late 1990s pioneered by a three-member group called DAM, comprise of Tamer Nafar, Suhell Nafar, and Mahmoud Jreri. While the significance of DAM should not be understated, it is also important to note that the Palestinian hip-hop movement did not and does not only exist in Palestine. Rather, it is by definition extended to include Palestinian artists in the diaspora, primarily in the United States. These diasporic efforts include the currently active Excentrik and the retired Will Youmans (known as Iron Sheik). Addressing many of the same topics and issues, including identity and cultural heritage, Palestinian hip-hop artists in and outside of Palestine engage with the form to turn the personal into the political. Musicologist Randa Safieh describes this mutuality as a process of "glocalization." In her words:

> Sociologist Roland Robertson uses the term "glocal," a combination of "global" and "local," to describe the ways these two entities interconnect […] The terms "glocal" and "glocalization" are eminently applicable to the Palestinian hip-hop movement, in which its artists have created their own local versions of hip-hop, drawing on influences from urban American hip-hop as a result of globalization. (Safieh 71)

She also refers to the experience of diaspora and the experience of those living in Palestine as being a major difference between the two groups, whose daily lives do not unfold in the same way. To that end, Safieh maintains: "Palestinian Americans have appropriated hip-hop as a channel for the recreation and reformulation of their migrant or refugee identity; in Palestine it is part of a struggle against the occupation" (Safieh 78). In the balance of this chapter, I will unpack this claim, asking specifically: How do Palestinian artists use hip-hop to affirm their identity and withstand colonial violence? But before doing that, I must first review the historical context of its emergence in Palestine and its connection to the tradition of political song.

In his book *My Voice Is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance*, David A. McDonald tracks the historical development of Palestinian music and its political messaging before sharing his ethnographic exploration of the work of DAM. In doing so, he highlights the emergence of Palestinian resistance song as a genre and the recent origins of underground Palestinian hip-hop. According to McDonald, it was after the War of 1967 (*Al-Naksa*) that a modern conception of political song, spearheaded by famous Egyptian singer Sheikh Imam, dominated the Arab music scene influencing and shaping the work of many Palestinian artists. He argues that:

> With the emergence of Sheikh Imam as the prominent voice of political dissent in the years following the June War of 1967, the constitutive elements of contemporary Palestinian political song had fully taken shape. Palestinian activists seeking new media for expressing nationalist sentiment and resistance to prevailing structures of power and domination took hold of Sheikh Imam's repertory and adapted it to indigenously Palestinian musical frames. (McDonald 87)

This marked a pivotal point for the inception, creation, and development of Palestinian protest song, beginning with the music of revolution in refugee camps and through revival movements and cultural assertion efforts during the First and Second *Intifada* (1987-93; 2000-05).

On the emergence of hip-hop around the Second *Intifada* (2000-05), McDonald asserts that it served as a new modality of expression for artists among Palestinians of 48, which is comprised of those who did not flee their land in 1948 after the establishment of the Israeli occupation and now have an Israeli citizenship. McDonald goes on to explain and highlight the crucial role that the group DAM played in adopting the form in the 1990s: "Their [DAM's] goal was to develop a new sound that reflected their Arab ancestry, their Israeli upbringing, and their

love for American hip-hop" (McDonald 244). Later performing for Palestinian audiences, particularly in the West Bank, DAM's work paved the way for a growing culture of underground Palestinian hip-hop inspiring a new generation of young artists. As McDonald concludes:

> Through sustained international media attention, tours, and a series of successful documentaries, DAM has, for better or worse, come to define Palestinian music in the twenty-first century. Buttressed by a new wave of Palestinian hip-hop artists from across the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Israel, and the near and far diaspora, hip-hop has now become one of the dominant forms of political song among Palestinians and international audiences. (McDonald 280)

This realization of the significance of Palestinian hip-hop as a form of political and protest song determines the context of my exploration of how Shabjdeed and 47Soul use music and dance to resist and speak against Israeli oppression. While there are differences in content and topics, both reflect in their own way on the Palestinian experience suffering from colonial violence. What is more, 47Soul creates music for the sake of movement, which I address later in the chapter after examining how Shabjdeed documents daily life under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and, in doing so, re-defines contemporary Palestinian protest song.

Shabjdeed: The Rebellious New Face of Underground Palestinian Hip-Hop

Born Uday Abbas, in the village of Kafr Aqab in Jerusalem, Shabjdeed has made a name for himself recently within the rap scene in Ramallah, the West Bank. Influenced by the work of Saleb Wahad and DAM, among other Palestinian hip-hop artists, he started producing music around 2015 before joining Al Nather, a local producer, and establishing the independent record label BLTNM. Al Nather recalls to *GQ Middle East*: "When I heard Shabjdeed's flow, I realized that he brought something new to the table. His rhyme schemes were nothing I had heard before,

so I was impressed, and this kickstarted our journey of making music and creating new sounds" (qtd. in Shooter). Working together, Shabjdeed and Al Nather released a number of successful singles preceding a full debut album in 2019, *Sindibad al Ward*. All of their tracks, both the singles and those on the album, are marked by a unique blend of hip-hop as a vehicle of expression and culturally familiar Palestinian elements of music-making. As Shabjdeed explains: "Trap influenced all of us. And as Arabs, we have our own music and culture, which we then merged with the original sounds of trap. You can't make music without being connected with who you are and where you're from. It was inevitable" (qtd. in Shooter).[8] This is perhaps one of the major reasons that Shabjdeed's music, in collaboration with Al Nather, has been popular among young Palestinian generations who seem to feel represented by his content and style.

But it is certainly Shabjdeed's daring lyrical topics that have earned him recognition. In a 2019 interview with *The Guardian*, Shabjdeed, Al Nather, and Shab Mouri, one of BLTNM's creative directors, speak about the creation of music in Palestine addressing its various challenges. More revealing is their discussion of the Palestinian cultural atmosphere and the need for boundary-breaking artistic expression. On the aim of BLTNM as a production label, Shab Mouri remarks:

> You don't have to be occupied to make a hit song. There might be a connection between the occupation and some of our verses, but we're also inspired by daily life, the market, the energy in downtown Ramallah. We need a break from everything, not just the

[8] Trap is a subgenre of hip-hop music often associated with Atlanta-based artists. The topic of the subgenre is typically the use of drugs and violence.

> occupation. We need freedom of speech, freedom to dance the way we wanna dance. Freedom to just be us. (qtd. in Faber)

The interview affirms Shabjdeed's commitment, as a founding member of BLTNM, to depicting and representing Palestinian daily life, particularly in Ramallah, where many issues and themes are either not sung about or taken for granted.

Shortly after speaking with *The Guardian*, Shabjdeed held another interview with an online magazine, *Ma3azef*, in which he explains his motives as a hip-hop artist primarily invested in highlighting the Palestinian culture. Early on in the interview he elaborates on this aspect of his music-making:[9]

> In the past, I feel rap was all about the [Palestinian] cause; there was no room for anything else. Nobody will listen to you. But the West will support you, if you give them a Palestinian sob story. We didn't perform sob stories and somehow managed to have successful careers. Secondly, I think the Palestinian national cause is no longer in fashion; if you go out there and sing about it, you'll look stupid. Third of all, we're used to the status quo. I sing mainly for Palestinians, so I can't go and sing about the Palestinian national cause. I mean we don't talk like that; we don't sit around and say: woe onto us, look how miserable we are. (qtd. in "Shabjdeed | Interview")

[9] Shabjdeed's interview with *Ma3azef* was conducted in Arabic. An English translation is provided for the YouTube video. For the sake of this study, I transcribed relevant sections. All subsequent references are drawn from the same source: "Shabjdeed | Interview - شب جديد | المقابلة." *Ma3azef*, YouTube, Sep. 16, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvqRlsmFHwY

More often than not, Palestinian artists, especially emerging talents, boast about their adherence to the national cause of freedom and liberation as a means to prove relevance and gain popularity. But as indicated in his words noted above, Shabjdeed has a lesser interest in walking that path. He is more focused on documenting daily life encounters, exposing the existence of various challenges caused by the Israeli violent practices in the West Bank and, in doing so, contributing to the Palestinian culture of nonviolent action.

In "Kohol w 3atme," one of his earliest tracks, Shabjdeed offers a striking example of his ability to covertly point to the struggles of Palestinians in navigating even the most mundane life events. The song offers a glimpse into the journey of someone travelling for work within the West Bank, which is an occupied Palestinian territory suffering from the existence of an apartheid wall and the constant threat of Israeli annexation of land. More importantly, the lyrics call attention to the violent nature of Israeli checkpoints and military barriers where Palestinians are exploited and harassed under the pretext of security measures. In sum, these restrictions on Palestinian movement "have existed since 1967 with Israel occupying the rest of historical Palestine territories" later becoming "a vital aspect of the first Intifada […] which led to a series of increasingly controlling acts including school and university closures, destruction of houses, exiles, land seizures, and arrests" (Nagamey et al. 2). It must also be noted that in recent years Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank "have undergone fundamental changes" in an attempt to legitimize their existence, including "architectural and administrative forms (e.g., changing the checkpoints into terminals, operating the checkpoints by both private "security" companies and IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] soldiers)" (Nagamey et al. 2). The largest of these military barriers in disguise is Qalandia checkpoint—the only Palestinian gateway between the northern West Bank and Jerusalem.

A site of constant contention and demonstrations against the Israeli practices of control, Qalandia checkpoint constitutes a colonial disruption of daily Palestinian life in the West Bank. Given that the checkpoint is located on a border, it separates Palestinians within the same geography and disrupts their efforts to socialize, go to work or school, visit a hospital, or perform any number of mundane everyday activities. Yet, it is also a daily meeting point for Palestinians who gather there to cross for different purposes, thus producing social and economic interactions. Helga Tawil-Souri examines these contradictions to argue that Israeli checkpoints, such as Qalandia, can be thought of as both "anthropological spaces with their own conventions and routines" and "nonplaces that continually reinforce the transience of the Palestinian experience, its individual and collective vulnerability and dislocation" (Tawil-Souri 21, 19). She concludes:

> As a point, which centralizes and fragments, Qalandia is akin to a "nonplace"; but as a site of commerce and meeting, complete with its own routines and sets of behaviors—that have almost nothing to do with the IDF—it is also a lived, social space. Checkpoints have a simultaneous, although ever shifting, specificity and "generic-ness," as such, they challenge neat dichotomies. (Tawil-Souri 22)

This points to the complex reality of these Israeli checkpoints and how they function to affect all aspects of Palestinian life. People in the West Bank must navigate these spaces daily and without much agency over their movement or the ability to reconstruct them.

Released in 2018, "Kohol w 3atme," translates to "Complete Darkness" in English, is inspired by Shabjdeed's personal experiences at Qalandia checkpoint. In his above-mentioned interview with *Ma3azef*, he recalls:

> We have to go through that [Qalandia checkpoint] in the morning. There's four, no three lanes for cars. Six lanes for pedestrians, and the pedestrians are in a certain area, surrounded by cages and so on. Cars that pass through are searched, and so on. There's a street for the buses. There's an entry point for people with a blue ID card [a type of identification given to Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem], and one for people with a Gazan ID card [green-colored identification card issued for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip upon turning 16 years old], depending on where you're going. So, it's like you need a workshop. You need some practice before you can get through Qalandia. On my best days, I could do it in 15 minutes. (qtd. in "Shabjdeed | Interview")

What adds to these struggles when navigating Israeli checkpoints is always having to the endure humiliating procedure of a cavity search; such searches are especially prevalent at times when there is escalation of violence in the West Bank. Shabjdeed captures the process of going through Qalandia checkpoint in the chorus of his song:

> There is nothing in the world,
> Look how everything is colored pitch black, complete darkness,
> As I am heading to Qalandia, she [my mother] said goodbye,
> As I am heading to the crossing point, she said goodbye,
> If I put my hands in my pocket on the train,
> He will be suspicious of me stabbing him, and I have to wait for an extra half an hour,
> Cavity search as I am standing, he felt around my middle section,
> No knives were found yet he physically harassed me. (Shabjdeed, "Kohol w 3atme," my trans.)

The lyrics describe what many Palestinians are forced to experience at military barriers, where they are constantly treated as a threat by Israeli soldiers. But "Kohl w 3atme" does not only focus only on the never-ending Israeli dehumanizing practices. It also depicts a Palestinian determination to withstand and survive their long days under occupation. Apart from the lyrics, this can be seen in the video version of the song where many scenes of Palestinian daily life are shown; people shopping at marketplaces, young men riding motorcycles, children playing and riding scooters, and old men walking around with *keffiyeh* (a traditional black and white scarf) wrapped around their heads (Shabjdeed, "Kohol w 3atme").

Long hours of waiting and daily harassment at Israeli checkpoints are only one aspect of the colonial nightmare that Palestinians in the West Bank must endure. Israeli occupying forces often raid refugee camps, kill or detain civilians (many of whom are children) without cause, confiscate or sabotage properties, and most provocatively attack Muslim worshipers at Al-Aqsa Mosque. These circumstances inspire another popular track by Shabjdeed, "Mtaktak," in which he references various Israeli violent practices that deny Palestinians any sense of safety and dignity. At the beginning of the song, he alludes to how Israeli military operations and the excessive use of force, especially firing flash-bang grenades, haunt Palestinians all day and night.

Gunshots, gunshots, party-like noise in the middle of the night,

A military operation nearing the house, nearing Al-Aqsa Mosque,

Even if I curse god, I am still a spiritual man,

Bringing a whole army to invade Al-Aqsa and still struggle,

I cannot sleep from the deafening sounds of flash-bang grenades. ("Mtaktak," my trans.)

A principal site of these repeated and extreme actions is Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem, including the aforementioned Al-Aqsa Mosque, where Israeli raids, closures, and access

restrictions are constantly enforced. In August of 2019, for example, around the time "Mtaktak" was released, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor reports that:

> The Israeli forces carried out 61 raids into the towns and neighborhoods of Jerusalem. These raids included the arrest of 115 citizens, including 17 children, six women and six Al-Aqsa guards. It has become clear that the Israeli authorities use arrests and summons as a tool of punishment and intimidation without any legal pretext or justification. ("New Report")

Moreover, these Israeli violations are often meant to enable Jewish settlers in the West Bank to storm Al-Aqsa Mosque and perform their Talmudic rituals and, in turn, expel and limit Muslims from practicing their religion. This adds an aspect of religious discrimination to a situation already marked by an unsettling and excessive use of force.

Another site of Israeli colonial violence is Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, of which Balata is the largest. In the main verse of "Mtaktak," Shabjdeed sings:

> In Balata, the sky is lit with bullets,
> With security coordination you raid Kafr Aqab,
> You need an army to enter a refugee camp,
> We do not reveal names when interrogated,
> You need an army to dominate,
> A helicopter too, your situation is deteriorating,
> We do not reveal names here,
> Those who take videos are screwed. (Shabjdeed, "Mtaktak," my trans.)

As indicated, the imbalance of power between Palestinians and the Israeli military machine has devastating consequences on life in the West Bank. Refugee camps are almost always rendered

areas of operation where the Israeli occupying forces kill and arrest Palestinians, demolish their properties, and restrict their movement. On these issues, security and policy expert Alaa Tartir explains that:

> In addition to dire living conditions, camp residents have suffered continuous repression and persecution by the Israeli army over the years, including brutal raids and security crackdowns/sweeps. These camps [Balata and Jenin] were particularly targeted by Israel because of their active role in armed resistance and in nurturing the emergence of armed groups. The camps also played a major and pioneering role during the popular protests and civil disobedience of the first intifada (1987–93). (Tartir 9)

As a refugee camp, Balata was established in 1950 on a tiny piece of land (0.25 sq km) and now is home for approximately 33,000 Palestinians, who are forced to live with "a sense of fear and anxiety, especially among young children," dealing with "overcrowding and poor infrastructure" ("Balata Camp"). "Mtaktak" thus highlights how brutal it is to raid a camp, like Balata, almost daily and with such a high number of military forces.

In addition to that, Shabjdeed's lyrics noted above reference an extremely controversial topic among Palestinians; security coordination, intelligence and operational, between the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and the Israeli occupation. It was a defining feature of the Oslo Accords (1993-95) and only actualized under the presidency of Mahmoud Abbas in 2007 as an attempt, funded by the United States government, at reforming the PA. While it is often claimed that the security coordination with the Israeli occupation is necessary for the survival of the PA, Palestinians suffer from its consequences as raids and attacks by the Israeli occupying forces on their refugee camps, towns, and neighborhoods never seem to prove a point, other than inciting and perpetuating violence This coordination entails:

> Security coordination between the PASF [The Palestinian Authority Security Force] and the Israeli military manifests in a number of ways, including: the PASF's arrest of Palestinian suspects wanted by Israel; the suppression of Palestinian protests against Israeli soldiers and/or settlers; intelligence sharing between the IDF and the PASF; the revolving door between Israeli and PA jails through which Palestinian activists cycle successively for the same offenses; and regular joint Israeli-Palestinian meetings, workshops, and trainings. (Tartir 15)

To many of Palestinians, the PA's involvement in subduing the Palestinian armed and civilian resistance in the West Bank is nothing short of a betrayal to the national liberation project and of the Palestinian people. This helps explain another lyrical line later in 'Mtaktak," where Shabjdeed sings: "I have no time for you complicit liars in this difficult time during which controversy rages and no one has power over the other" ("Mtaktak," my trans). His words reflect on the Palestinian public view of security coordination with the Israeli occupying forces and the failure of the PA in living up to its commitment to protect its people.

Between 2019 and 2021, Shabjdeed released many commercially successful tracks. Two notable examples are "Amrikkka," which criticizes the United States government's foreign policy and its interference in the Middle East, and "Kteer Ktar," a song about gossip and circulation of false news. But it is his collaboration with Daboor, one of BLTNM's emerging talents, that solidified Palestinians' appreciation for his style and content. Titled "Inn Ann," translated as "It's Time" in English, the track has earned him more international recognition, especially within the Arab World, which allows BLTNM to organize and participate in concerts and musical events in neighboring countries, including Egypt and Lebanon. More significantly, "Inn Ann" showcases how the new generation of Palestinian musicians, such as Shabjdeed and

Daboor, are able to effectively address topics that concern the Palestinian youth and their frustration with daily life under Israeli occupation without directly tapping into or referencing stereotypical and over exhausted images about the Palestinian national struggle. One of Shabjdeed's followers from Ramallah tells *Mille World* that:

> Shabjdeed and BLTNM have always been a favorite since they started producing music. I find in them exactly what Palestinian art needs right now. Hearing ["Inn Ann"] for the first time, I was way more amazed even though I find all of their songs super creative and powerful. This song was a reminder to all Palestinians. (qtd. in Harris)

This response from one individual is indicative of how Shabjdeed's audience constantly makes connections between his music and the colonial violence that Palestinians experience given that the former is informed by the latter. The added and high significance of "Inn Ann" is that it was released within days after the 2021 Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip that took place as a result of protests against evicting and confiscating the homes of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, especially the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

In his collaboration with Daboor, Shabjdeed reminds the Palestinian youth of all the daily challenges and also the various injustices governing their lives. The chorus of the song, sung by Daboor, tackles the issue of unemployment and how political corruption has rendered half of the Palestinian youth without any future prospects.

> It's time to heal that pain,
>
> *Boom bukh* [gunshot sound], my homeland has been sold,
>
> What the hell? The majority of us are sellouts,
>
> Trying to bring change but it all remains the same,
>
> It's time! (Daboor, "Inn Ann," my trans.)

This issue is further complicated in the first verse where Daboor references the names of two Israeli prisons, Nafha prison and Al Jalame detention center, where many Palestinians, including minors, are imprisoned without a cause and treated inhumanely. Here is an excerpt:

Chill,

Hardship reveals people's true colors,

God is our witness,

Real men, ready to fight,

Boom [sound], we can handle a war anytime,

We can dismantle a whole mountain,

Welcome to the culture of Jerusalem people,

We can handle anything,

Called up Nafha, boys are lining up. (Daboor, "Inn Ann," my trans.)

Daboor's lyrics in "Inn Ann" thus call attention to how the new generation of Palestinians are forced to experience dire social, cultural, economic, and political conditions caused by the Israeli colonial practices and the subsequent absence of Palestinian sovereignty and self-determination on their land. This is all complimented by Shabjdeed's verse about Palestinian resilience:

You will die from fear, we rise from the ground like jinn, *bikh* [boo],

Just calm down,

Our ideas are slowly cooking, *ikh* [a sound],

We chase after those who flee,

I ride with no one, I am a vehicle myself,

If you can, go ahead and fuck up the country,

A rooster among sheep suits you better. (Daboor, "Inn Ann," my trans.)

Shabjdeed's words of defiance highlight a Palestinian resolve and refusal to remain silent while the Israeli occupation continues to sabotage their life. They are an expression of resistance against attempts at easing the Palestinian existence and their cultural identity, despite the various challenges and issues facing the new generations.

Much like "Kohl w 3atme" and "Mtaktak," Daboor and Shabjdeed's "Inn Ann" uncovers how the contemporary political song in Palestine functions; it focuses on highlighting issues and topics within the Palestinian society that pertain to their daily life under occupation rather than establishing direct links with the national liberation project. It is a means of musical expression grounded in political and cultural protest against oppression and violence. In a recent interview with the podcast *Sarde*, Shabjdeed confirms this new direction for Palestinian music, or at least for BLTNM, when commenting on the success of "Inn Ann" by explaining that:

> Its success is based on it being related to a Palestinian cause that's stereotypical. It's not a bad thing, you know? We're not running from it. But we have a different approach. Our generation isn't going through the First *Intifada* or the Second *Intifada* or *Nakba* or *Naksa*. We're the new generation that came after them almost making amends with the Jewish Zionists. So, our way of [telling] the story should be different. ("Shabjdeed: Poetry")

This new way of sharing the Palestinian experience, particularly in the West Bank, through hip-hop is an example of how artists, like Shabjdeed, rely on nonviolent action to reclaim their human status and to expose their unbearable reality.

Dancing to Consolidate: The Politics of Movement in 47Soul's *Shamstep*

On a warm, sunny day in September 2016, Palestinian dancer and musician Walaa Sbait recorded a video of himself performing traditional *dabke* on an abandoned site in his ancestral

hometown, Iqrit—just of the many Palestinian Christian villages that were annexed and depopulated by the Israeli occupation during 1948. With the terrain of Iqrit in view, Sbait steps on three scruffy barely attached pieces of plywood surrounded by different-in-size chunks of stone and begins to warm-up by swaying while twirling a blue handkerchief in his right hand. Shortly after, he engages in a two-minute traditional *dabke* dance that mainly features low and high jumps, leg sways and crossovers, and low kicks. Dressed in jeans and a white tank-top, the young man concludes his performance by stretching his arms to the sky creating a crucifix with the huge cross planted in front of him. Affirming the political message of the YouTube video, the description box reads:

> This simple video is dedicated to all refugees and all people displaced from their homes around the world. From the ruins of my grandfather's house (Sulieman-Abu-Afeef-Sbait) in Iqrit's displaced village, to all the resisting people around the world. Salam, love & solidarity. (Sbait)

The video is a glimpse into how Palestinian artists use *dabke* to formulate ways to strive against systems of oppression. To that end, in the balance of this chapter I focus on the work of 47Soul, of which Sbait is a founding member, which is often viewed as a fusion of traditional dance music (*dabke*) with electronic instruments. This new iteration of folk music is referred to as *Shamstep*, which was the title of the band's EP in 2015 that later became a cryptonym for a politically conscious genre. A prevalent theme in almost all of their video clips, and live concerts around the world, is *dabke* dance, choregraphed in different ways and performed by a collective of people (mostly Palestinian performers). I thus seek to examine the purpose and value of dance and movement in 47Soul's videos to highlight how these performances attempt to stand against and comment on the cultural and socio-political circumstances of their time.

While the term "*dabke*" often refers to a type of popular folk dance in the Levant, it can also refer to the style and mode of music that informs the movement. In the case of *Shamstep*, dance, music, and lyrics significantly contribute to the iteration of 47Soul's *dabke* requiring a mindful consideration of all three. I therefore engage *Shamstep* not only as a genre of music but as a performance that offers a politically aware combination of these components. Focusing on different aesthetic and socio-political aspects of 47Soul's *dabke*, I argue that their performances of *Shamstep* constitute demands of space indicative of the band's Palestinian identity. They deploy *dabke* as a means of political intervention to reflect a deep sense of rootedness and belonging, highlighting their experiences as individuals and artists. In the three videos that I consider, "Intro to *Shamstep*," "Dabke System," and "Border Ctrl.," 47Soul members, as well as accompanying dance collectives, rely on embodied practices that affirm a relation between dance and politics. My goal is to explore these manifestations in view of the Palestinian understanding of cultural resistance.

Studying dance as a means of resistance in the Palestinian case is not only logical but necessary to understanding the cultural context of the Israeli settler colonial war on Palestine. And while there are admittingly challenges given the contested history of the region, it is an opportunity to emphasize the significance of introducing dance and its capacity for sociopolitical messaging as an important part of Palestinian cultural resistance. The extent to which Palestinian dance forms and traditions can contribute to the project of national liberation, and by extension withstand any attempts at their erasure, can be debated. Nonetheless, it is at the heart of what Palestinians rely on to imagine, negotiate, and render effective notions and applications of nonviolent resistance. Focusing on the work of Palestinian artists, and their rhetoric of socio-political defiance, my analysis of 47Soul's *Shamstep* is informed largely by the premise that

Palestinian dance can reveal embodied practices of resistance that are often understudied for reasons of social, cultural and political exclusion. I thus begin with linking Palestinian *dabke* to its historical context by tracing some of the ways in which it has been discussed. And while there are some popular theories about the emergence of the form, it is still heavily in dispute.

Dabke is a Levantine social dance that originated from folk tradition in the Middle East—most notable variations are attributed to Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Often combining line and circle dancing, the traditional form is celebratory and, by virtue, popular for its capacity to serve as a bonding activity. Indeed, *dabke* is performed at parties, weddings, and festivals, whether by professional dancers or participating members from the present crowd. Typically guided by an experienced performer, the line of people dancing *dabke* start with slow-paced movements trying to synchronize themselves, and as the music goes faster and louder, they speed up, accelerating their footwork, to match the rhythm. In terms of when, how, and why *dabke* was created, scholar Johanna Sellman is of the opinion that it began as a communal act among villagers in the Levant. She explains:

> During those times, the people in these small villages made the roofs of their houses with tree branches and mud. Any weather changes lead to cracking in the mud—often causing leaks and other issues. When this happened, family and community members would come and help patch it by forming a line and joining hands and stomping the mud into place. (Sellman)

Within the Palestinian context, Sellman asserts that *dabke* has developed over the years to function in several different ways. As it remains a cultural practice of celebrating collective effort, the form "signifies hope, struggles, and history of the Palestinian people" (Sellman). Also, it features aesthetic elements that are exclusively Palestinian: male performers wear a *kufiyah* (a

cotton scarf/headdress) and twirl a *misbaha* (beads) or handkerchief, and female performers put on an embroidered *thawb* (a loose-fitting dress) with a long veil (often white). But of course, that is not always the case; *dabke* can be casually done in other everyday clothes. This is especially true when Palestinians decide to extend the purpose of the traditional dance to make a political statement, or an urgent one. As Sellman points out: "Palestinians have taken this [*dabke*] to war zones and in the middle of protests because it unifies [them] against [their] oppressor" (Sellman). In that regard, and to better understand how the dance form can function as a vehicle for unity within the culture, it is imperative to try and understand the history of dance in Palestine.

Given the tumultuous, highly contested history of Palestine, it is certainly a complicated task to track the progression of any cultural practice in the territory, let alone dance. In a detailed account, *Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine*, Nicholas Rowe picks up the challenge of charting the cultural history of dance in Palestine (from the 1800s up until 2008), realizing the existence of many conflicting histories—this is mainly caused by the Zionist agenda of the Israeli occupation and its efforts to dominate and erase all Palestinian historical narratives. Addressing the period between 1948 and 1980, Rowe documents the role of three dance revival movements: Zionist, Pan-Arabist, and Palestinian Nationalist, offering insight into their 'salvagist' nature. To elaborate: "Such revival involves taking a dance from its first existence as a specific communal activity and affording it a second existence, as a representation of cultural identity" (80). The first of these, Zionist appropriation of indigenous dance forms in Palestine, whether methodically done or not, led to a high interest in *dabke*, bringing even more socio-political contention.

In the 1950s, the pan-Arab movement, supported by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970), aimed at "salvaging the traditional culture of the region's peasants in order

to provide a basis for a region-wide cultural identity that had been emancipated from European hegemony" (Rowe 101). This was the case in Palestine through the artistic efforts of Palestinian-Lebanese teacher/choreographer Wadea Jarrar-Haddad and her husband Marwan Jarrar, who both studied dance (modern and folk) at the Moiseyev School and the Bolshoi. Before arriving in the West Bank, they toured various Arab countries and thus brought with them, to the Palestinian territory, "the emerging aesthetics of the wider pan-Arab folklore movement" (Rowe 103). The establishment of these qualities transformed *dabke* into a 'choreographed' performance, which became an integral part of the Ramallah Nights Festivals during the 1960s. Following the Six-Day War (June 5-10, 1967), however, cultural life in the West Bank saw a major disruption after the territory fell under the Israeli military occupation.

The new socio-political circumstances in the West Bank, after the Arab-Israeli War and the defeat of pan-Arabism, inspired a Palestinian nationalist ideology, solidified by the growing influence of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which led to a considerable increase in nationalist consciousness among Palestinians. During the time, nationalist attempts at reviving Palestinian folklore shifted the cultural status of *dabke* from being an indigenous dance tradition to "an emblem of Palestinian national identity" that represented "a traumatic reminder of the imagined past, as its conscious revival was inextricably tied to the notion of a violent break with that past" (Rowe 117). *Dabke* thus became, during the 1970s, a highly popular movement-based activity, performed by Palestinian youth, featured at political rallies, and celebrated at social and cultural events. Such dissemination re-introduced the traditional dance as "a new cultural ritual, proclaiming collective identity through repetitive enactment" (Rowe 118).

During the First *Intifada* (1987-93), the Palestinian folklore revival movement, and several newly founded dance collectives, such as El-Funoun, became part of a wide-spreading

wave of civil disobedience against the Israeli military occupation. Using *dabke* to emphasize nationalist ideas, encouraging people to join in, those local artists/performers "were targeted" and "imprisoned without charge or trial for periods ranging from a week to two years, and subjected to mental abuse and physical torture" (Rowe 150). After the Oslo Accords (1993-95), and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the Occupied Territories (the West Bank and Gaza Strip), a new cultural era began unfolding, in which *dabke* is perceived as a performance art more than a communal activity—it is now performed in restaurants, weddings, and entertainment venues. This is especially true given the fact that "local performing arts groups became more visible as funding for the arts suddenly became available from international donor agencies" (Rowe 162). The Second *Intifada* (2000-05) brought about yet another major shift in socio-political conditions, forcing Palestinian artists, and dance collectives, to face more cultural complexities than ever. The disruption was made greater with the death of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in 2004; a Palestinian leader known for his support of the arts and the preservation of national heritage.

Several political upheavals during this second uprising, and the consequence of the 2006 legislative elections that resulted in an on-going Palestinian national division, make it difficult to track the cultural development of *dabke* in Palestine from that point onward. I therefore turn to two contemporary examples of utilizing *dabke* as a tool of protest, and solidarity, situating the practice within the Palestinian culture nonviolent resistance—inside and outside of Palestine. The first arose in Gaza Strip during the 2018-2019 Great March of Return; this was a series of nonviolent demonstrations held weekly near the borders calling for the right of return for Palestinian refugees and against the Israeli blockade. Met with violent means of Israeli oppression, these waves of civil protest escalated into traumatizing scenes of bloodshed, where

"214 Palestinians, including 46 children, were killed, and over 36,100, including nearly 8,800 children have been injured" ("Two years on"). Among the ways in which those Palestinian protestors made visible their frustration with the disastrous situation in Gaza Strip imposed by the Israeli occupation was performing *dabke* in a collective display of human steadfastness.

In her book *Dance and Activism*, Dana Mills includes the Palestinian performances of *dabke* during the March of Return to point to the function of dance as a political tool of creating demands. She asserts: "The quest to return to a land from which those dancers were exiled is grounded in anger and longing. This dance, as angry and joyless as it is, is expressive of this longing and its call for action" (118). What the author affirms here is the significance of dance in documenting and telling the Palestinian story in Gaza Strip, especially that of the refugees that were displaced and made homeless during the catastrophe of 1948 with the establishment of the Israeli occupation. Moreover, the need of oppressed Palestinian to express their feelings and political views through creative, often collective, techniques. Here, dancing *dabke* becomes a necessity of life, not an opportunity for leisure.

The second example of employing Palestinian *dabke* to make public political demands took place in May 2021. Coinciding with the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, two Palestinian activists based in the US, Bintfalisteen and Salma Shawa, organized a community event, where a crowd of people (Palestinians and non-Palestinians) gathered to dance *dabke* on the streets of Boston, Massachusetts, in support of the defenseless people in the besieged enclave. Palestinians in Gaza came under attack after refusing the ethnic cleansing carried out by the Israeli occupation in Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighborhood in Jerusalem, after an Israeli court ruled to forcibly evict 12 Palestinian families from their homes to be soon handed to Israeli settlers. The colonial, unlawful practice of disposing Palestinians in all areas of Jerusalem, not

only Sheikh Jarrah, is one of many attempts at sustaining the ongoing Judaization process in Palestine.[10] It is by such means that the Israeli occupation seeks to erase the Palestinian right of existence, and self-determination, in their homeland.

The *dabke* event in Boston took place in continuation of a series of events that Palestinian youth around the world are calling "The Unity Intifada." In an open letter to the independent news website *Mondoweiss*, they express their goal to write "a new chapter of courage and pride, in which we tell a story of justice and of the truth that no level of Israeli colonial repression can erase, however cruel and brutal that repression may be" ("The Dignity and Hope Manifesto"). Frustrated with the current status of national division, and the political conditions in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem, the young activists seek to find ways in which they can inspire change and promote unifying values. In a co-authored essay for *My.Kali Magazine*, Bintfalisteen and Shawa reflect on the role of dancing *dabke* in their mission to unity Palestinians everywhere by interviewing each other. They hold that the dance form is "a tool of cultural resistance," and that despite its "questionable" political function during times of war, it can still be used to show and promote solidarity with those affected by its tragedies (Bintfalisteen and Shawa).

In providing these examples, I bring to view some of the Palestinian iterations of nonviolent resistance within the national struggle against the Israeli occupation and its violent, hegemonic practices aimed at further establishing a dominant narrative that demonizes Palestine

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[10] As defined by *Alquds Jerusalem*, Judaization is "a policy through which the Israeli government aims to drive out any non-Jewish religious influences in Jerusalem in order to reinforce the Israeli claim to the area." For more details: https://alqudsjerusalem.com/geography/what-does-judaization-mean-and-how-is-it-implemented/

and Palestinians. More importantly, I aim to highlight how Palestinians are, despite the harsh living conditions under which they are forced to survive, interested in developing nonviolent ways of protest to share their pain with the world and thus create demands of solidarity. This refusal to be removed from the international sphere is not recent, nor untraceable. It is emblematic of the Palestinian epistemology of embodied resistance, which has been growing and solidifying since the early days of the Israeli occupation, and it is my goal here to offer some insight into it.

47Soul was founded in Jordan in 2013 by Tareq Abu Kwaik (*El Far3i*), Ramzy Suleiman (Z the People), Walaa Sbait, and Hamza Arnaout (*El Jehaz*). It should be noted that those artists are based in different countries—Abu Kwaik and Arnaoutin in Jordan, Suleiman in the United States, and Sbait in Palestine. According to their official website, they foster "a unique style that they call *Shamstep*, in which hip hop and electronica are fused with Arab-influenced melodies and styles" ("About Us"). For several reasons, the band was not able to produce music at the moment of its establishment. Rather, they had to wait two years, until 2015, to release their first record, an EP titled *Shamstep*, which was a major success among Palestinian audiences around the world. What followed was a global tour during which they were able to connect with their followers in the Middle East as well as with the Arab diaspora in Western countries, notably the US and UK.

On October 28, 2015, 47Soul released a video clip, "Intro to *Shamstep*," that captures the essence of their music genre as it features footage from their concerts around the world. Abu Kwaik, Arnaout, Suleiman, and Sbait are seen dancing *dabke* on stage as they perform before different audiences, as well as dancing their way on the streets of the cities in which they toured. During the latter, they are holding their instruments on their backs—a guitar, *tabla* (hand drum),

electric keyboard and *daff* (frame drum)—which they use to create the festive atmosphere for their fans. These moments of walking freely and dancing, and getting together in a concert to dance and let go, are not exactly a typical experience for those living inside Palestine. But as the first verse of the song indicates, it is a time to escape all restrictions, a time of possibility and openness:

> What's the soul of the 47?
>
> What's that soul in the 47?
>
> *Sham* put the soul in the 47,
>
> No agent, no guarantee,
>
> No landlord on your back,
>
> No country, no form,
>
> Back to the peasants, to the *falaheen* [farmers] born. (47Soul, "Into to Shampstep")

As the lyrics indicate, the four performers, whether while joyfully dancing on the street or in concerts along their audiences, are not just attempting to escape an ever-lasting Palestinian reality of human suffering, but also to create one where they can imagine the withering away of all colonial power.

In these performances, however, the members of 47Soul do more than just entertain their audience by creating high-spirited music and spaces of joy. Their *Shamstep*, which puts together the word *Sham*, referring to *Bilad al-Sham* (the Levant), with step, emphasizing the movement aspect of their genre, is performative in its evocation of the issue of Arab connectivity and its dire impact on the situation in Palestine. As I noted earlier, *dabke* is a popular form of dance in the Middle East and highly recognizable among Arab people everywhere. Therefore, 47Soul's *dabke*-based movements and gestures can be effortlessly received and digested, which provides

them with quick access to their audiences. The gentle moving of the shoulders, the footwork and the clapping are all essential vocabulary of *dabke* that the Palestinian band employs to render their work culturally relevant. In this way, they contest the current Arab political atmosphere and transcend borders to assert their Arab/Palestinian existence. Writing for *Vice*, Peter Holslin states that: "By invoking the term with *shamstep*, 47Soul wants to metaphorically stamp out the borders that have driven a wedge through their homeland and promote a broader, more inclusive state of mind" (Holslin). In "Intro to *Shamstep*," one of the group members, Sbait, sings and dances *dabke* on stage while wearing a traditional white scarf with a vest decorated with Palestinian embroidery (an important symbol of Palestinian culture), bringing multiple cultural roots together. What makes the band's project more valuable and enticing is the fact that their audiences are noticeably diverse. While much of their following is comprised of youth (especially those from the Arab diaspora), their audiences include parents, children, teens, as well as aspiring artists and *dabke* dancers.

Nadeem Karkabi reviews the work of Palestinian music groups, 47Soul included, from an anthropological perspective, so as to explicate how they rely on "rooted authenticity in conjunction with cosmopolitan aesthetics" to "forge international solidarity with the Palestinian national struggle by performing universal, borderless, and stateless humanity" (174). For Karkabi, these musicians make use of joy as a shared human sentiment to support their politicalized content and establish links with their international audiences, who in turn dance *dabke* to display solidarity reflecting a sense of intimacy between the two. Focusing on 47Soul, whom he interviewed while attending some of their shows in Palestine and London, Karkabi argues that: "Coming from a band of stateless Palestinian musicians, the highly rooted *dabke* became an expression of antiracism and the global struggle for justice and equality against

hegemonic power" (187). Within the context of his article, Karkabi refers to *dabke* as a combination of the music genre and popular dance. Certainly, the line of difference between the two fades as one (music) is created for the sake of the other (dance). This is further solidified by the band's choice to include Arabic and English lyrics, and to play both traditional instruments (e.g., *daff*) and electronic ones (e.g., synthesizer). These choices enable 47Soul "to locate rooted and authentic *dabke* away from an orientalist gaze on cultural difference and turn it into a marker of human solidarity" (Karkabi 188). With that in mind, I view 47Soul's *Shamestep* as an iteration of Palestinian resistance where performances of *dabke* become instances of human self-expression towards political messaging informed by the experiences of individuals under oppression.

Based on Randy Martin's theory of mobilization in dance, I view their creative work as "a practical activity" where "demands for space produce a space of identifiable demands" (4). Mobilization in dance, holds Martin, is "what moving bodies accomplish through movement," in a way that emphasizes "the practical dynamic between production and product" (4). This is to say that there is a direct link between movement and its final form where it has materialized into a meaningful outcome. Whereas production here refers to the potentiality of movement, product is what can be achieved through the process. 47Soul's *Shamstep*, is a mobilization of dance, music, and lyrics, where *dabke* is used to constitute an "immediate context for movement," motivated by its socio-political context to create spaces where "bodies display as their identity the practical effects of dancing" (Martin 4). In a world of limitations and restrictions, *Shamstep* is an embodied artistic articulation of resistance; it is used to turn the political lens on the stake of Palestinian movement, of dancing *dabke* within spaces where it is highlighted and celebrated.

This establishes a direct relation between politics within different contexts (those where Palestinians exist) and dance (articulated through *dabke*).

After the success of their EP, which introduced their music to the world, 47Soul released a debut full length album in 2017, entitled *Balfron Promise*. For this project, the band joined the London-based organization Bow Arts Trust, as part of their artist-residency program in Fall of 2015. During that time, Abu Kwaik, Arnaout, Suleiman, and Sbait moved into Balfron Tower, a 26-storey residential building in East London, where they reportedly worked on their music for about a year. Their stay at the landmark concrete skyscraper turned out to be a transformative experience for them and their *Shamstep*. In another article, this time for the independent online newspaper *Mada Masr*, Peter Holslin reveals that:

> Over the year they lived in the tower, the creep of global capital seemed perpetually on the horizon. Indeed, 47Soul's very presence in the building was a sign of London's ongoing gentrification process. The live/work artist lease they'd secured was introduced as part of a wider plan from the building's owner to move out longtime tenants, refurbish it, then resell it as luxury housing. (Holslin)

These circumstances, aggravated by the fact that the building needed serious repairs, led the members of 47Soul to feel involved in a parallel cause to their own as Palestinians, one of exile and displacement. Suleiman, the band's keyboardist, reflects on these events in his interview with Holslin, conveying the group's sense of entanglement at the time: "Who's gonna remain, and who's gonna keep being moved around? We were kind of both of these people. We became part of the moving-out project, and the moving-in project" (qtd. in Holslin). Convenient to the practice of 47Soul's folk dance (*dabke*), the aesthetic of constant movement was a big inspiration for the album.

Containing 8 songs, each reflects 47Soul's penchant for mixing stomping *dabke* rhythms with electronic beats, *Balfron Promise* underlines the question of movement and its significance in the band's life as a collective of four Palestinians. This is especially evident in the lyrics of "Moved Around," one of their most performed tracks. The chorus reads:

My people moved around,

More people moved around,

My people move around,

Before we all get moved around,

My people move around,

Now people move around,

All people move around. (47Soul, "Move Around")

The words not only reflect on the historical context of the Palestinian experience where most Palestinians had to flee their homes before, during, and after 1948, they also speak to the sense of discomfort that still haunts Palestinians—as refugees they must always move (around) as they remain displaced.

Upon release, the album found critical praise and great commercial success; Robin Denselow from *The Guardian* gave it a rating of 4/5. More importantly, as indicated in almost all reviews, the title, which refers in part to the Balfour Declaration—a public statement issued in 1917 by the British government in support of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine—affirmed 47Soul's adherence to creating a politicized content that promotes solidarity with the Palestinian national struggle. In relation to utilizing *dabke* (the inclusive genre of dance and music) to stress these artistic articulations, Holslin writes: "If *Balfron Promise* is a dance album, it is one designed not just to get people moving but also to make the listener think critically about their

place in the world" (Holslin). Movement, whether through physical borders, or on the dance floor, is a major impetus behind the band's creative choices; it is fueled by their Palestinian experience, inside and outside of Palestine, where restriction of movement is a constant reality.

After having toured the world together, delivering many successful shows and expanding their reach, one of the band's co-founders and its guitarist, Hamza Arnaout (*El Jehaz*), decided to leave. After seven years of working under 47Soul, it was time for him to take a break and "slow down [his] pace a little bit and kind of regroup; think about the future and give [himself] the space to be more creative" (Ahamd). While Arnaout was an integral member in the creation of their *Shamstep* genre, the Palestinian group was able to continue producing music that appealed to their devoted fans in the Middle East and the Arab/Palestinian diaspora. In fact, in August 2020, they released their second and most successful album, *Semitics*, at a time when the political landscape in the Middle East was shifting, not necessarily in a positive direction. Under the influence of Trump's administration, the Israeli occupation, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain agreed to normalize their relations in what has become known as Abraham Accords—the agreement was officially signed on September 15, 2020, in Washington, D.C. Many considered the treaty to be a betrayal of Palestinians' rights, who remain under occupation, cast aside and silenced.

Embracing a strong political consciousness, 47Soul attempted through their music to give voice to Palestinian concerns. The title *Semitics* pays tribute to all Semitic cultures (notably Arabic and Jewish), sending a message of unity that can be traced through the album's ten tracks. In an interview with Micah Hendler for *Forbes*, 47Soul's Ramzy Suleiman confirms: "Politicians like to brand words to simplify ideas; most of the time they have an agenda attached to them. In looking at reclaiming the word 'Semitics,' we're talking about a language family. I

think it's an important identification in this time when looking for a unity across national and religious identities" (Hendler). This is done to emphasize the linguistic and geographical connections between Arab and Jewish people. Also strongly present in this second record is the use of *dabke* dance to reflect the band's political and artistic statements.

In "Dabke System," Abu Kwaik, Suleiman and Sbait are joined by several Palestinian dance groups, including Jaw, Salma and Manjal, as they all perform *dabke* in what seems to be a refurbished warehouse. Donning *kufiyahs* and hoodies covered in Arabic words and symbols, the collective of people dancing in the video twirl beads (*misbaha*), which is characteristic of *dabke*, mixing traditional moves of the Levantine form with hip-hop breakdancing. The lyrics, especially those in English, effectively assert 47Soul's Arab/Palestinian voice and sense of belonging.

> Turn up the sound of the Galilee loud,
>
> You hear it now stomp on the ground,
>
> Dabke system we coming to town,
>
> Pick up your keys at the lost and found,
>
> Hold on, look what we created,
>
> Refugee overseas, still I'm a Native,
>
> Call back the kids to remain,
>
> Don't question the land, she tell you her name. (47Soul, "Dabke System")

It is clear in these lyrics how crucial it is for 47Soul to emphasize their Palestinian identity and to always re-affirm a sense of rootedness in their homeland (Palestine). Despite living abroad, their existence as Palestinians (Native) is never altered. This potent expression of Palestinian identity

is fueled by the celebratory moves of *dabke* serving as an example of how music, dance, and lyrics are mobilized to create context for Palestinian movement.

All dance performances in "Dabke System" are designed to indicate a Palestinian sense of collectivity—one that is marked by a human struggle for freedom and self-determination. The contemporary Palestinian representation of *dabke* is always present in the video clip making the dance form a vehicle through which these Palestinians sensibilities are brought together and displayed. The often-crowded dance floor also serves as a site where these diasporic Palestinians whose parents had to leave the country as a result of the Israeli occupation since 1948 can establish a link with their native culture to affirm their rootedness to the land. As Abu Kwaik sings: "We either fall down, or we rise up. But we're the children of the land, the children of diaspora" ("Dabke System"). Resistance to political and cultural erasure is conveyed through the high and low kicks of *dabke*. It is a technique to speak against all colonial attempts at abolishing the Palestinian right of existence. Humans are not the only guests in the infectiously energetic clip. A range of different birds and animals are carried on the shoulders of dancers, with a note from the band at the end that animal rights were protected during the shooting of the video, followed by: "While none of these humans live with their basic rights yet" ("Dabke System"). This juxtaposition of human and animal status is a yet another powerful moment that reflects on countless Palestinian experiences of colonial oppression and human rights violation.

Whereas "Dabke System" presents a large group of Palestinian dancers along with the trio of 47Soul, one of the other commercially successful songs from *Semitics*, "Border Ctrl," features two female artists: British-Palestinian rapper Shadia Mansour and German-Chilean MC Fedzilla. The recruiting of these London-based artists made the popular track a cry out against separation walls and the abusive practices of border control in North America and the Middle

East. Indeed, in the video version, Abu Kwaik, Suleiman, and Sbait perform next to the Israeli apartheid wall, which cuts through the West Bank dividing Palestinian communities in the territory. They are seen walking and dancing against the various murals and graffiti art pieces painted there.[11] To evoke a parallel reality, the Mexican/Unites States border is shown throughout the clip, notably at the beginning. The chorus thus resonates:

> This border control,
>
> Congesting our soul,
>
> Taking its toll on us all,
>
> We gonna dissolve,
>
> This Mexico Bethlehem wall,
>
> If you hear us heed the call. (47Soul, "Border Ctrl")

Both Palestinians (in the West Bank) and Mexican people experience the harsh ramifications of border control. As indicated in the lyrics, it is an overwhelming issue of blockade and denying humans the right of movement and co-existing. While the geo-political circumstances for the two border walls (Israeli and US) might differ, both function in a discriminatory way, dividing land and depriving people access to certain spheres. Calling for solidarity, the track warns against the cruelty of physical barriers when used for purposes of human control.

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[11] Many Palestinian and international artists create street art as a way of resistance against the hegemonic practices of the Israeli settler-colonialism. For more information, please see: Amin, Bahira. "Apartheid Art: The Stories Behind 14 Striking Pieces of Graffiti on the West Bank Wall." *Scene Arabia*, Apr. 01, 2019, https://scenearabia.com/Culture/apartheid-art-palestine-israel-graffiti-separation-wall-west-ban

In “Border Ctrl,” *dabke* is again utilized in a creative way to indicate issues of oppression and movement restrictions. Mansour, who is dressed in a traditional Palestinian *thawb*, Fedzilla, and 47Soul members are joined by the Palestinian-Jordanian Al-Ajaweed Dabkeh Group from Al-Baqa’a Refugee Camp (one of several camps established in 1968 to accommodate Palestinian displaced families after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War). Al-Ajaweed Dabkeh Group are dressed in green uniforms in reference to border control army/police. Alternating between line and circle dance, *dabke* dancing, in sync with the lyrics of the song, is used to “welcome [everybody] to the queue” and show them “this border control” (“Border Ctrl). This metaphorical use of the structure of *dabke* as a mixture of line and circle dancing to condemn abusive practices of power allows the members of 47Soul to interact with Al-Ajaweed Dabkeh Group in ways that highlight their artistic responses. For instance, Sbait, wearing a traditional Palestinian garment (*jalabiyah*), dances around joyfully disregarding everything that is going on around him and celebrating his sense of freedom and refusal of control.

As another example of how *dabke* can be used to create political content, “Border Ctrl” confirms 47Soul’s message of unity and their dedication to introducing artistic articulations that go beyond the limitations of time and space. As described by Abu Kwaik, the track is “talking about us as globally-displaced people saying what our unity is in culture” (Hendler). Referring to the significance of cultural productions, the band member calls attention to how dance and music can create spaces for Palestinian expression. This is also a reminder that *dabke* (encompassed in *Shampstep*) as a celebratory dance has the power to subvert Israeli settler colonial methods of control, bringing to view how dance can serve as a form of resistance. In that vein, whether it is now, or in the future, in Palestine, or somewhere else in the world, 47Soul attempts to establish

global links (just like that with Mexico) and find ways in which music and dance, coming together in *Shamstep*, can help engender corporeal expressions that defy systems of oppression.

Conclusion

The impetus for this chapter came from my desire as a Palestinian scholar to consider how the work of performing artists who work outside of the arena of traditional theatre aim to subvert and alter many dominant narratives about Palestine and Palestinians. More precisely, I was interested in expanding any understanding of a broadly conceived Palestinian performance culture that includes Palestinian popular music and dance as complex and politically charged forms of Palestinian protest. This inspired my interest in the work of Shabjdeed and 47Soul. In this chapter, I have explored how Shabjdeed uses hip-hop to render a contemporary iteration of Palestinian protest song. Exposing the Israeli colonial violence through nonviolent means, I analyzed three songs by Shabjdeed that reveal how daily life under occupation in the West Bank unfolds and, in turn, how some in the current generation of Palestinian musicians evoke and highlight their experiences. In doing so, I have called attention to the need for new ways of engaging with and contributing to the Palestinian national project of liberation.

I have also focused on the work of 47Soul, whose genre of *Shamstep* calls for celebration and freedom of movement in the struggle against hegemonic practices of control. *Shamstep*, as I have argued based on Randy Martin's theory, is a mobilization process in which *dabke* is utilized to create a space of movement that cuts across borders. By analyzing the reliance on the Levantine form in three of 47Soul's popular music videos, I have provided a case study of how dance and politics are interconnected where *dabke* is deployed, in a contemporary context, to further politicize the band's musical content. In the course of that investigation, I also discussed the cultural development of the traditional dance in Palestine. All of this is to showcase how

Palestinian artists seek to represent their Palestinian experience, and in turn, move beyond its limitations. It is important to note, however, that 47Soul is not the only Palestinian group in existence that attempts to produce politically-aware context by creatively emulating their individual and collective experiences. As I noted earlier, many Palestinians remain displaced, living in refugee camps or in host countries where they must assimilate. As a result, there are many different projects and creative ways in which Palestinian cultural elements/features are translated and deployed. In Chapter I, I discussed Palestinian theatre-making in the Gaza Strip and how it is informed by *sumud*. I will attend to another instance of theatre-making in the following chapter, Chapter III, that highlights the pain of Palestinians in Israeli prisons. This time, however, it is the work of a Palestinian actor and playwright, Imad Farajin, who hails from the West Bank. I will also provide an analysis of Palestinian hunger strikes aiming to situate them within the broader contexts of Palestinian nonviolent action and national struggle against occupation.

CHAPTER III. THE PRICE OF FREEDOM: ASSESSING THE PLIGHT OF PALESTINIANS IN ISRAELI PRISONS

Following a hunger strike that lasted nearly three months, Khader Adnan, a Palestinian political figure, was denied sufficient medical care and died in an Israeli prison on May 2, 2023. Arrested and detained thirteen times by the Israeli occupying forces, this was Adnan's second hunger strike; previously, in 2011 he protested in this manner for more than two months against his detention without trial, or what is known as administrative detention. The death of the 45-year-old activist, who was the first Palestinian prisoner to go on multiple extended hunger strikes, called international attention to the Israeli treatment of Palestinian prisoners. Heba Morayef, Amnesty International's Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, noted this in the organization's statement addressing Adnan's death:

> Khader Adnan is the first Palestinian detainee to die as a result of a hunger strike since 1992. When his life was at risk, Israeli authorities refused Khader Adnan access to the specialized care he needed in a civilian hospital and instead left him to die alone in his cell. The appalling treatment of such a high-profile detainee is the latest alarming sign that Israeli authorities are growing increasingly brazen in their contempt for Palestinians' rights and lives, and increasingly reckless in their cruelty towards Palestinians. (qtd. in "Death of Khader Adnan")

Morayef is one of many human rights journalists and experts routinely calling for the Israeli occupation to be held accountable for its abuse of Palestinian prisoners. However, even in the face of such instances and calls for change, the international community seems unable to defend or protect Palestinians held and mistreated in Israeli prisons. This often occurs as a consequence

of the Israeli unsubstantiated and demonizing claims that detained Palestinians were involved in acts of violence and terror, which renders their repressive tactics as necessary.

In this chapter, I examine and highlight the struggles of Palestinian prisoners and the cruelty of the Israeli military legal system that operates within an apparatus of colonial control. I begin by reviewing literature, primarily the work of Lisa Hajjar and Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, on the history, structure, and function of the Israeli military courts. In turn, I offer a textual analysis of Imad Farajin's script *603*, which concerns the hopes and dreams of four Palestinian prisoners. In doing so, I explore the various social, cultural, and political circumstances that Palestinians in Israeli prisons and detention centers must endure as well as provide an example of how Palestinian theatre addresses the plight of those prisoners. In the second part of this chapter, I explore the performative nature and functionality of hunger strikes as a means of resistance. To accomplish this, I chart the historical development of the Palestinians prisoner movement and its reliance on nonviolent action against the oppressive tactic of the Israeli occupation and its military legal system. To achieve this, I build on the extant research, including the work of Ashjan Ajour, to contextualize these Palestinian hunger strikes as performances of resistance.

No Palestinian Rights Available: The Marking of the Israeli Military Court System

Upon its seizure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Israeli occupying forces established a military judicial system designed to exert control over Palestinian life in the two territories. Since then, and even after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 with its own civil rule, it is estimated that one million Palestinians have been tried and judged by Israeli military courts that deprive them of their legal and civil rights. In its description of this discriminatory system, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (B'Tselem) acknowledges that:

> The military judges and prosecutors are always Israeli soldiers in uniform. The Palestinians are always viewed as either suspects or defendants, and are almost always convicted. For all these reasons, military courts are not an impartial, neutral arbitrator – nor can they be. They are firmly entrenched on one side of this unequal balance, and serve as one of the central systems maintaining Israel's control over the Palestinian people. ("The Military Courts")

In addition to this prejudice against Palestinians, the question of jurisdiction is another vexed issue within the military judicial system that violates Palestinians rights and perpetuates the Israeli occupation and its violence. While arrested Palestinians are prosecuted in military courts on all matters, Israeli settlers are tried within a civilian court system. It must also be noted that following the Israeli military withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Israeli trials of Palestinian prisoners mainly take place in the West Bank. In a study of this unjust system of law, lawyer and international law expert Sharon Weill examines the issue of territorial jurisdiction and how it serves the Israeli occupation and its agenda of colonial domination. She argues:

> There is in fact an invasion of the military legal system over civilian domains. Due to this expansion of jurisdiction, matters which should be under the jurisdiction of a civil court (Palestinian or Israeli) are in many cases dealt with under the Israeli military system – a system that enjoys less independence and impartiality and does not effectively safeguard the individual rights of accused persons and suspects. This interference by the military legal system, taking broader territorial control than is authorized by international humanitarian law, is no more legitimate than any other kind of military domination merely because it is affected by a legal system. (Weill 419)

As expected, the Israeli occupation has little respect for international law or the inalienable rights of Palestinians. While it adds valuable context to understanding the challenges facing Palestinian prisoners, the legal aspect of the Israeli military courts is not my primary concern; still, it is a considerable byproduct of my exploration in this chapter. In the end, though, I am more concerned with tracking how Palestinians are forced to navigate the military court system and those spaces within where they are presented as dangerous.

In *Courting Conflict: The Israeli Military Court System in the West Bank and Gaza* (2005), Lisa Hajjar provides an ethnographic account of the Palestinian experience going to an Israeli military court, from the time of arrest through to attempting a plea bargain. In doing so, Hajjar establishes the soldier-run courts as "harsh, alienating places" with a visible "caricature of the most brutish aspects of military rule over a foreign civilian population" (Hajjar 81). For her, this can be seen in the arrangement of the space, the uniforms, the imbalance of power, and of course the security apparatus. On the latter issue, she records that:

> Lawyers, family members of defendants, witnesses, and other civilians enter by passing through a guard booth or inspection area where soldiers check identification papers and conduct bag-and-body searches. Such security measures are completely routinized in Israel/Palestine, with similar practices typically occurring at many sites, from roadblocks to college campuses to grocery stores. No one is exempted from searches, although Palestinians are subjected to more probing checks and certainly more harassment than Israelis and foreigners. (Hajjar 84)

Similar to those encounters at and across various sites of Israeli control, Palestinians within the Israeli judicial system, whether the defendants or their family members, are demonized and treated as a threat. As Hajjar points out: "In the courts, soldiers on guard duty exhibit an almost

uniform disdain and hostility toward Palestinians. For them, Palestinians are the problem, the enemy, the reason they have to be there, armed, sitting in a courtroom" (Hajjar 88). If that is the case with guards, one must then ask: what about judges and prosecutors? What about the aspects of language (availability of Arabic/Hebrew translators) and representation (defense lawyers)? Is it possible for an antagonistic military system to provide Palestinians with the legal and humanitarian rights they are due?

As noted earlier, the legal framework of the Israeli military court system is a product of a military occupation of the Palestinian territories. According to international law, "civilians may be prosecuted in military courts under a temporary basis" ("Military Courts"). Given that the Israeli military courts still exist, Palestinians are constantly deprived of their civil rights and rendered as colonized subjects within an unequal reality; Weill describes this system in her abovementioned study as "the judicial arm of the occupation" (Weill 395). As for Hajjar, she describes the validity of the legal processes by which Palestinian prisoners are prosecuted and tried within the Israeli military courts as "heavily disputed" and that "even some Israeli officers who serve in the military administration do not unanimously concur with or uncritically accept the official narrative" (Hajjar 96). Clearly, the military judicial system remains weighted unfavorably against Palestinians; however, the official narrative constructed by the Israeli government will never acknowledge that. One main aspect of such judicial injustice is prosecutorial advantages. As Hajjar explains:

> In the Israeli military court system, there is no basis in law or practice for the presumption of innocence. The three-pronged practice of arrest, interrogation, and detention is premised on a de facto presumption of guilt. This is evident in the fact that

> any soldier can arrest any Palestinian for the slightest suspicion or cause, and once arrested, people can be held for prolonged periods incommunicado. (Hajjar 111-112)

This is a potent reminder of how the Israeli occupation regards Palestinian civilians as a constant threat, simply for existing.

Once a Palestinian is arrested for whatever reason, communication in courtroom proceedings becomes of paramount importance as there is often a language barrier between the defendant and their prosecutors. This presents another site of alienation where Palestinians are always at a disadvantage. Assigned translators often belong to bilingual groups who are close to and favored by the Israeli system, many of whom are the Druze. Hajjar comments on and explains this:

> The Druze are preferred for the role of translators because they have both bilingual skills and a sociopolitical status as "non-Arab Arabs." In the military courts, Druze translators are called upon to navigate between the linguistic-ideological worlds of Hebrew-speaking Jewish Israelis (military judges and prosecutors and some defense lawyers) and Arabic-speaking Palestinians from the territories (defendants and nonbilingual defense lawyers). (Hajjar 136)

This adds more complication to the plight of arrested Palestinians who are forced to trust those ostensibly biased solider translators assigned to their cases. In the end, it is clear that all aspects of the Israeli military court system are designed to prove Palestinians guilty, dangerous, and unwanted. This is not only a violation of human rights but also a colonial process of dehumanization that never ceases to stop hamstringing Palestinian life.

In a more recent study, *A History of Confinement in Palestine: The Prison Web* (2022), Stéphanie Latte Abdallah builds on years of archival research and ethnographic fieldwork in the

West Bank to provide a detailed account of the Israeli apparatus of confinement, its treatment of Palestinians, and its far-reaching effects. A French political scientist, Abdallah begins by exposing the conditions under which Israeli military courts try Palestinians and the various ways in which these spaces operate to overwhelm and control them. For example:

> Often, the haggard-looking detainees ask their lawyer, who they only meet at the first hearing, what the time is. Many of them are prevented from seeing a lawyer at all during the interrogation (incommunicado detention), and, in this event, their lawyers make their arguments with almost no knowledge of the file and are asked to leave the courtroom when the detainee is summoned. (Abdallah 5)

In considering time inside the Israeli military courtrooms and prisons, Abdallah includes many individual Palestinians narratives that highlight how these carceral experiences not only affect them within these spaces but also outside of them. She writes:

> The Inside constantly permeates the Outside and the carceral universe is omnipresent in Palestinian society. More often than not, carceral time is not a watertight one. Detention is not a circumscribed period in people's trajectories; several periods in prison follow in succession, in a troubling toing-and-froing between the Inside and Outside, except when sentences are particularly long. (Abdallah 46-47)

This carceral universe is a product of the various mechanisms of colonial control practiced within the Israeli prison and court system. By depicting life inside and outside prison, across many places and encounters, as carceral, Abdallah links together how imprisonment has horrific effects on various aspects of Palestinian life, including the cultural, social, political, and economic. In a way, all of Palestine is a prison.

Given how far-reaching the Israeli courtrooms and prisons are, they not only entrap men but women and children too are forced to navigate carceral spaces suffering from similar harsh prosecution and imprisonment conditions. These cases of arresting and imprisoning Palestinian women by the Israeli occupying forces often incites uproar among Palestinians. Abdallah explores the history of women's activism in Palestine and the Israeli violent practices in trying to subdue these efforts, specifically after the 1967 military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. She records that:

> In 1967, women became involved in the national movement and found themselves placed under arrest. Unlike the previous 1948 to 1967 generation when the Jordanian State was in control of the West Bank, they were not spared by the Israeli military system. Previously, only men were imprisoned, most of whom were Communists; the women were simply banned from their jobs or placed under house arrest. (Abdallah 159)

In including stories and testimonies by Palestinian women from different generations, Abdallah highlights their motives for engaging in the national struggle against Israeli occupation, often resulting in the loss of land, family members, or property. More importantly, she reveals the nature of their involvement and its reliance on nonviolence.

> Women's activism has transformed over time in a similar manner to male militantism, but on a different temporal scale and with more limited participation. Women were most active in the civil society mobilizations of the First Intifada firstly, then in the popular resistance launched in the mid-2000s, and later in all civil society's new forms of non-violent action, in which they participate in equal numbers to the men: youth movements, social media and press activism, or in the resistance economy (*iqtisad al-sumud*), and the

> mobilizations around the threatened neighborhoods of Jerusalem (Cheikh Jarrah, Silwan), and so on. (Abdallah 167)

In a 2022 statement addressing the horrible conditions that these Palestinian women must endure, Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association recorded that there were "32 Palestinian female prisoners" in Israeli jails being "subject to torture, ill-treatment, medical neglect, and the violation of their rights and dignity" ("On International"). The Palestinian civil organization also reveals that when Palestinian women are detained, they "are generally held in extreme conditions in Damon Prison," which "dates back to the British mandate when it was originally built to store tobacco and operate as a horse stable" ("On International").

More disturbing is the carceral experience of Palestinian minors. Like adults, Palestinian children are tried and prosecuted within the juvenile court of the Israeli military judicial system. According to Defense for Children International – Palestine:

> Israel has the dubious distinction of being the only country in the world that automatically and systematically prosecutes children in military courts that lack fundamental fair trial rights and protections. Israel prosecutes between 500 and 700 Palestinian children in military courts each year. ("Military Detention")

A case that has garnered much attention in recent years is that of Ahed Tamimi, a Palestinian teenaged activist in the West Bank. Tamimi was arrested multiple times for resisting the Israeli occupation in the village of Nabi Salih, where she lives with her family under unbearable conditions. Tried for alleged assault and incitement by an Israeli military court in 2018 at the age of 16, she has become an icon of Palestinian resistance. Writing for *The Guardian* about Tamimi's trial, Harriet Sherwood notes:

> Ahed is a member of the second generation of Palestinians to grow up under occupation. Her father, Bassem, was born in 1967 – the year Israel seized the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza and the Golan Heights in the six-day war. He and his children have known only a life of checkpoints, identity papers, detentions, house demolitions, intimidation, humiliation and violence. This is their normality. (Sherwood)

These circumstances of being forced to live under occupation and to be prosecuted for protesting against it define the Palestinian reality across the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In 2019, Human Rights Watch published a report that criticizes the Israeli reliance on outdated military orders that deprive Palestinians from their human and civil rights; the Defense (Emergency) Regulations of 1945 and Military Order 101 of 1967. Focusing on the West Bank, the report features several interviews, cases, and testimonies by Palestinians who have suffered from the various ways in which the Israeli military orders "unlawfully restrict the rights of free assembly, association, expression and press for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank." ("Born Without"). It is the contention of Human Rights Watch that international human rights law "applies to Israel's conduct towards Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip" and as such the organization recommends that Israeli occupying forces annul aforementioned military orders "and refrain from imposing any new criminal regulations unless the offenses are defined in a clear, narrow, and specific manner and are consistent with international human rights law" ("Born Without"). Despite such calls by internationally recognized human rights organizations and experts, the Israeli military orders and court system under which Palestinians are tried persist. It is no surprise then, that this aspect of Palestinian life has drawn the interest of artists, including theatre-makers. In the following section, I explore one such artistic response: Imad Farajin's script *603*.

We Are Humans Too: A Character Analysis of Imad Farajin's *603*

Wafa'a Al-Ahrar refers to a particularly historic prisoner exchange deal that took place in 2011 between Hamas and the Israeli occupation. The agreement brokered between the two sides included the release of over 1000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for one Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. Mediated by Egypt and Germany, the deal was in the works since 2006, after Shalit was captured and taken into the Gaza Strip. In the five years that followed, his condition and the possibility of an exchange was constantly speculated and discussed by national (Palestinian), Israeli, and international media organizations. At the time of the exchange, an article by National Public Radio (NPR) called *Wafa'a Al-Ahrar* "the most lopsided prisoner swap in Israel's history," elaborating that:

> Jubilant Palestinian families held […] celebrations after 477 Palestinian prisoners, including 27 women, were released from Israeli jails. Some were returned to their homes in the West Bank; others were to be deported to Gaza, Egypt or other Arab states. An additional 550 prisoners are slated to be released in two months to complete the swap, which Hamas deems a major victory. ("Israeli Solider")

The script *603* was written by Palestinian theatre artist Imad Farajin concerning this historical moment. Set in a time before the terms of the exchange were formalized, it tells the story of four Palestinian prisoners, three of whom hope to be released as part of the exchange.

Set in a cell in Ashkelon (Askalan) Central Prison, the play begins with the four prisoners waking up to the sound of buses that they hope and believe have arrived as part of an imminent prisoner swap deal. Taking turns listening through the prison walls using a plastic cup, these men discuss their potential release, all the while arguing with each other about the gender of the bus drivers and whether they are occupied by Red Cross staff members or Israeli soldiers. As their

speculations about the purpose and drivers of the buses continue, it is revealed that three of them are wearily optimistic, expecting to be freed from prison: Boxman, Slap, and Mosquito; the fourth, Snake, is serving twelve life-sentences and, as such, has no chance of being included in the exchange deal. The waiting seemingly finally ends as the cell door opens. Boxman, Slap, and Mosquito grab their belongings, pay farewell to Snake, and exit. Following their exit through the cell door, Snake franticly grabs the plastic cup and attempts to hear if the three have made their way to the bus. To Snake's surprise. Slap and Mosquito soon return to the prison cell. They are soon followed by Boxman. Together, Boxman, Slap, and Mosquito report to Snake that it is a national day of celebration and that the guards came for them not to escort them toward their release, but instead to have them collect wood for the fire ceremony. Now bitter and uncertain, the four men discuss their experiences in prison, and in the process reveal how their nicknames are closely tied to the circumstances of their arrests and imprisonment. Importantly, they also share with each other their often-simple hopes and dreams, thus highlighting how their humanity has been squashed by the Israeli disregard for their most basic rights.

Slap is a schoolteacher who has earned his reputation and name after slapping an Israeli soldier harassing one of his students. The incident resulted in him getting hit in the back of the head with a rifle butt, causing a cerebrovascular condition (affecting the vessels that supply blood to the brain) that often sends him into episodes of losing control; more precisely, he becomes highly irritated and then passes out. Among the prisoners, Slap is referred to as a "conniving communist." This is partly due to the story of him slapping an Israeli soldier, and the fact that he stealthily writes in his notebook when everybody is asleep, documenting his life in prison and his relationship with the other three inmates. In the course of the play, it is made clear that Slap turns to his notebook, which he keeps under his bed, as a means of coping with the

demeaning experience of prison-life. His writings are the only outlet available for his inner thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. Regarding Slap's habitual writing, Mosquito notes:

> Slap is a devious bastard. He's like the water of a river: on the surface, nothing but calm but underneath the current runs and runs . . . He hates my mosquito, every time I want to feed her, he starts causing trouble. Marxists are like that, love no one but themselves. (Farajin 594)

Despite his secretive ways, Slap is viewed as a hero for standing up for himself and his students against the Israeli soldiers. The slapping incident that sent him to prison has come to define how other prisoners regard him.

The four prisoners share a complicated relationship springing from various issues, one of which concerns boundaries. Despite being on several medications for his brain injury, Slap is one of the primary candidates for feeding Mosquito's pet mosquito, which he keeps in a matchbox. In a heated exchange between the two incited by Slap's refusal to let the insect suck his blood, the furious Mosquito declares that he has found the former's secret notebook and threatens to read from it. As their dispute escalates, Slap's background story is uncovered and his most vulnerable self is exposed. Mosquito reads different excerpts revealing the full story behind Slap's being sent to prison. It began when Slap was humiliated by Israeli soldiers in front of his entire village during a curfew, during which he resisted orders to sit on the ground. During that incident, Slap was forced to reveal that he has hemorrhoids, telling not only the Israeli soldiers but members of his community that were there with him that it would be extremely painful for him to be in a sitting position. Due to this public shaming, Slap had to relocate and find a different school. It was while working at that new school that he ended up striking the Israeli soldier and going to prison.

Mosquito's invasion of Slap's privacy leads the latter to lash out and confess that the infamous soldier slapping incident was merely an accident not a radical act, and that he does not care for patriotism. In a particularly moving moment, Slap describes his disdain for conflict:

> Fuck the nation. Fuck this country. Look how much blood it has demanded from us . . . and for what? For dirt and rocks and stones and orchards . . . fuck all these things . . . I want to live . . . I want to hear the other and have him hear me . . . not slap and be slapped back . . . forgive and be forgiven . . . not hit and be beaten . . . fuck this country for all the blood it took . . . I want to hold this country by the scruff and slap it across the face . . . slap its greens and yellows . . . slap Marx and Lenin, slap and slap and slap. (Farajin 631)

Apart from the apparent emotional depletion, Slap's words affirm that he is a human being with modest dreams. He is exhausted from the exaggerated socio-cultural expectations forced on him as a patriotic figure. Moreover, his perceived political ideology, Communism, is the least of his concerns. Indeed, Slap wishes only to lead an ordinary peaceful life of dignity away from hostility and violence.

Before being sent to prison, Boxman was a bus driver. When he is first introduced, he occupies the role of gossiper among the four inmates. He also prides himself on keeping in touch with the current trends as much as possible. His eagerness to remain informed on everything unfolding in and outside of the prison allows him to be the first to detect the sounds of buses arriving at the facility; he is also the one who first finds out about Slap's secret notebook. Boxman's favorite topic is his love for Siren, a woman from his hometown in Gaza. In a moment of frustration with how the prison authority tends to manipulate the inmates and exploit their hopes raised by the rumor of a prisoner swap deal, he cries out:

> All I want is to marry Siren, and finish my degree in agriculture, buy a small tractor with a right wing and a left wing, put a small chair for Siren next to me. She'll be seven months pregnant and on the right wing; I'll have a son and on the left wing, a daughter. And another boy running behind the tractor, he'll be the one we always forget about. "Dad, stop, take me with you." Fairuz will be singing "Last Days of Winter" on the radio . . . and Siren will split open tomatoes and pop them in my mouth. "Eat, they'll strengthen your blood . . . damn we've forgotten about the boy again." (Farajin 611-612)

Those dreams of a happy married life, busy with taking care of children and farming the land, are constantly on Boxman's mind. To that end, he often sits in an imaginary bus made of a cardboard box and placed in the corner of the cell; hence his nickname, Boxman. To him, being away from Siren is the true definition of imprisonment and the prospect of reuniting with her is freedom. This is evident in how Boxman keeps on recounting romantic moments with Siren and imagining how meeting her after all those years in prison will be like.

In one of these instances following another false alarm where the prisoners once again hear the buses arrive again and hope for their release, the heart-broken Boxman takes to his imaginary bus before being joined by Mosquito and Snake, who ask him to drive them to different parts of Palestine and the world. While Boxman is adamant to head to Gaza, Snake wishes to visit Haifa, and Mosquito dreams of flying to Canada to meet his daughter. As they argue about destination, one of the play's most grim confrontations unfolds. When Boxman imagines encountering Siren at the village and expressing his deep love and longing for her, Snake confesses that he has been fantasizing about her. Upon hearing this, Boxman explodes:

> You're so selfish . . . you did this because you knew I am leaving this place and you're stuck here. We're all going except you. I'm going and you'll stay in the darkness and the

> dampness and the isolation, dying slowly. I'll get married and have kids and whoever said prison is for men is a cunt . . . and a liar. Prison is the end of men. You're going to die, Snake. Know how? Inside the toilet where you spend all your time . . . you're going to hang yourself. You pretend to be tough but you're weaker than Mosquito's mosquito . . . get ready for death, Snake . . . because after you see us go, you'll feel as if a knife went through your back and came out of your belly. Your death should be slow, bloodless . . . you know where they'll bury you? Near Askalan, in the prisoners' graveyard with just a number to mark your grave because all you are is a number . . . you'll live and die without making a woman pregnant, without leaving behind a son to carry your name . . . think about what I'm saying . . . no woman pregnant . . . no son to carry your name . . . let your death be bloodless, Snake. Let be a hanging. (Farajin 625)

Boxman's words, directed at Snake, do not only reflect his dreams of a life with Siren, but also his deep despair and a sense of loneliness. As do all the prisoners, he suffers from social isolation and the lack of human contact; he is forced to spend his life in prison where he can only dream about reuniting with his loved ones. In lashing out at Snake, Boxman highlights the soul-crushing life in Israeli prisons; taken away from everything and everyone, thrown in a depressing cell, tortured and manipulated, and, more painfully than anything else, forgotten by the world.

Mosquito is another prisoner with a dream to be reunited with a loved one. Earlier in life, he was married to a Canadian woman with whom he has a daughter named Sama. In prison, his favorite activity is to take care of his pet mosquito, after which he is nicknamed. To ensure that the mosquito is well fed, Mosquito constantly asks the other three inmates to give it some of their blood. In a charged encounter with Slap after he refuses to let the insect bite one of his fingers, Mosquito responds:

> Fine, Slap, be like that . . . I'll sort you out in the coming days . . . this mosquito which you refuse to feed, pissed off the highest judge in all of Israel, she circled around his head, landing one time on his nose and another time on his ears. She made him so nervous, he had to leave the court, at a time when the gallons of blood spilling on our streets failed to move a single hair on his head. Have you forgotten? This little mosquito has done far more than your dear old friend Marx . . . the one you write about day and night . . . about his opinions . . . and theories on communism and socialism. The age of communism has passed. If your friend, Marx, were living today he'd be writing about this mosquito you hate so much. I know what you've been writing. And I'll sort you out one day soon. (Farajin 609)

Emphasizing his disdain for the Israeli occupation and its figures of authority, Mosquito admires the insect for having managed to disrupt the Israeli courtroom where he was being tried. In the course of the action, the events that led to his imprisonment are made clear: during his trial, Mosquito refused to stand up for the judge; for that reason, he was sent to prison.

Near the beginning of the play, when the buses arrive at the prison for the first time and the inmates start hoping for their release, Mosquito shows a bit of reluctance at the prospect of leaving. When asked by Boxman about the reason, he claims that he does not wish to leave Snake alone. While it is true that Mosquito and Snake are close friends, it is revealed later that the issue is much more complex than leaving someone behind. In the course of conversation with his cell mates, it is revealed that Mosquito was betrayed by his Canadian ex-wife, is still bitter about the incident, and is fearful of exposing himself to the world outside the prison. His resentment for marrying a foreigner makes him also sometimes question whether his daughter, Sama, is really his. In one of the play's most unsettling scenes, Mosquito finds his pet insect

mating with a male mosquito. He reprimands the insect as if it is his daughter indicating a deep sense of longing:

> Look what scandal you've made. Didn't I tell you sweetheart that we have customs and traditions? First he has to ask for your hand in marriage then you can have your wedding night. I want to give you the best wedding and dance and sing in your wedding. (*Sings a lullaby*) Why she doesn't have photos? Why can't her mum send me her photos from Canada . . . her mum . . . probably running around with her boyfriend . . . or maybe she sends the letters but they take long to get here . . . I wonder if Sama knows me . . . does her mum talk to her about me . . . I've even forgotten what her mum looks like . . . it's been seven years since I've seen her. (Farajin 615-616)

On one hand, Mosquito is a divorced man afraid of being judged for his ex-wife's betrayal. On the other hand, he is a father who has not seen his daughter for so long. Being in prison has made it all worse. At one point later in the play, he reflects a shift in his interest to leave and seems in no hurry to do so, declaring that he has nothing to go back to.

Of the four inmates, Snake is perhaps the most complex. He spends most of his time in the bathroom smoking and keeping away from everybody else. While close to Mosquito, Snake has a tense relationship with Slap and Boxman; their exchanges with Snake often involve screaming or mocking. While the others show their frustration with life in prison or any kind of vulnerability, Snake remains emotionally detached. In a conversation with Mosquito and Slap about parenting and feeling closer to family at an older age, Snake responds:

> My emotions are dead, Slap. I don't let myself think about these things. I know where my path is taking me . . . give us a cig, Mosquito. (*He lights it*) I need to take a crap . . . guys

> do you want to use the toilet before I go in there? I'm staying all night. Boxman, how about you? (Farajin 600)

Snake's destiny is determined by the fact that he is serving twelve life sentences. His nickname is an attribute to his favorite activity as a shepherd before going to prison; he used to capture young snakes, tie them to rocks, and throw them at the Israeli settlers. But his legend as a prisoner goes beyond that. With an old English rifle, Snake shot twelve Israeli soldiers before his capture; he became known as the sniper of the valley. By consequence of his past actions, inmates respect and fear him.

In many ways, Snake represents the depths of despair. The most apparent aspect of his misery is that he has no hope of being released. But the consequences of his life in prison extend beyond it to affect his loved ones. His exchanges with the other prisoners make clear that Snake is very attached to his family. In particular, he frequently tells stories about his grandparents, Salama and haja Nasra. This deep connection is palpable in his response to Mosquito, who slaps him for fantasizing about Siren. While his reply indicates a deep sense of abandonment, it also speaks of shame for inflicting pain on his family:

> If someone else did that, I'd cut off his hand. What do you want me to do? Outside, they think of me as hero. But what kind of hero am I when I'm rotting here and no one gives a fuck? First two years passed and no one came to visit yet outside they call me the sniper hero and talk endlessly about how I shot twelve soldiers with a rusty English rifle. Only haja Salma comes around to see me. Her kidneys are rotten; she sells half her medicine to buy me things, gifts she brings. She tells me, "Thank god I have kidney disease; it's the only way I could make money." I'm killing her slowly. What kind of hero does that make me? A hero waiting to be exchanged with another prisoner. An exchange that will never

> happen. The only way it could happen is if my blood turns black, expires, ages. I'll be exchanged when I'm completely humiliated. Not humiliated by my jailer, no, the jailer doesn't have that power over me. My humiliation feeds on watching haja Salma, selling her blood for my sake. Fuck the prisoner exchange. Fuck it. (Farajin 626-627)

Up until this moment, Snake appears uncaring and unconcerned by events unfolding around him or issues brought up by the other inmates. When the buses arrive at the prison for the first time, he asks Boxman, Slap, and Mosquito to leave immediately and not worry about saying goodbye. Almost always, Snake gives the impression that he can endure life in prison and that it does not bother him to not be included in the anticipated swap deal. But his embarrassment for having to rely on his father's old and ill aunt, haja Salma, shows that, just like the others, his pain is deep and overwhelming.

Snake's feelings of shame, Mosquito's fear of judgement, Boxman's love for Siren, and Slap's hopes for a life free of conflict lead to an ending that is more haunting than conclusive. It is their search for peace and dignity that makes it so. Near the end of the play, when it is finally announced by one of the prison's guards, that Slap (Prisoner #607), Boxman (Prisoner #301), and Mosquito (Prisoner #2002) are to be released, none of them answer the call. Having spent so many years in prison, they are exhausted and doubtful about their ability to enjoy their freedom under the Israeli occupation. In Slap's case, his public humiliation in front of his whole village still disturbs him adding to the physical and mental fatigue caused by his brain injury. His secret writings exposed by Mosquito also reveal what is at stake for him should he get released. Equally agonizing is Boxman's unrealistic expectation to find Siren unmarried and waiting for him. His fears are exacerbated by Snake's suggestion during the aforementioned heated moment between the two, that she might have been killed in an Israeli airstrike on Gaza. As for Mosquito,

he has no means of connecting with his daughter, who lives abroad with her mother. In a moment of vulnerability, he also confesses to Snake that he is still in love with his ex-wife who cheated on him. Therefore, going home to Mosquito means having to face that both his wife and daughter no longer exist in his life. In its depiction of the hopes and dreams of Slap, Boxman, Mosquito, and Snake, Farajin's *603* highlights some of the struggles facing Palestinians in Israeli prisoners as they wait endlessly for their freedom. More significantly, it addresses two major aspects to their carceral experience; an Israeli environment of isolation and the unlikelihood of getting released.

In the case of the former, isolation must not be equated with solitary confinement where a prisoner is typically held in a single cell alone. In a study on the comparison between solitary confinement and isolation as two common prison-related practices, Sahar Francis and Kathleen Gibson explain that:

> Prisoners held in isolation are held in a cell alone or with one other prisoner for 23 hours a day. They are allowed to leave their cell for a daily one-hour solitary walk; on the way to the recreation area, the prisoners' hands and feet are typically shackled. Handcuffs may sometimes be removed during the recreation period, but prisoners have reported to Addameer that, in many cases, they remained handcuffed and sometimes even leg-shackled during the walk. During every transfer from the isolation cell, including for attorney visits, the prisoner's hands and feet are shackled, and he or she is accompanied by a prison officer. (Francis and Gibson 270)

In *603*, the Israeli deliberately harmful environment of isolation for Palestinian prisoners is evident from the beginning. When the four inmates speculate about the arrival of the buses and

the sounds that they hear outside, Boxman suggests that the female voices belong to the drivers. When Mosquito reject's this idea, the following exchange occurs.:

> BOXMAN: Women could be drivers, man. The world has changed. Your mind is still set to nine years ago; today everything is different.
>
> MOSQUITO: You really think they'd use women drivers to transport inmates who've spent at least eight years inside? There're guys in here that could impregnate a rock. (Farajin 586)

This is one of many examples in the play, like Boxman's assumption that Siren still waits for his release, where the prisoners seem to be stuck in time and without a sense of the world beyond. While it can be argued that this can be a byproduct of imprisonment, it is also evident, as I aim to highlight next, that Palestinians in Israeli prisons suffer from severe isolation.

To further highlight the implications of such environment, I turn to the setting of *603*, Askalan (Ashkelon) prison. Founded during the British Mandate as an interrogation center, it was among many locations that were repurposed by the Israeli occupation after the 1967 war to receive Palestinian prisoners. In regards to the makeup of the prison and its different sections, Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association note:

> Ashkelon Prison is composed of five sections including an isolation section composed of cells labeled "A, B, C, D, E" situated to the north of other prison sections. There is also a special wing for the Israeli Shabak (security services) for interrogating Palestinian and Arab prisoners. In 1979, the "shame" section was founded to the north west of the prison, wherein prisoners who collaborated with the Shin Bet security services and the prison administration authorities were grouped. ("Ashkelon (Askalan)")

While it is not unique to only Ashkelon prison, the isolation section is an Israeli mechanism of mentally and physically torturing Palestinian prisoners. Being one of the most notorious Israeli prisons and detention centers, Askalan has a long history of depriving Palestinians from any human and legal rights. In 1977, for example, the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) issued a brief report addressing the dreadful conditions that Palestinian prisoners are forced to endure in Askalan prison; overcrowding, low quality of food, lack of recreational activities, and repressive interrogation techniques. The publication also features a statement by lawyer Leah Tsemel, who at the time had a few Palestinian clients in Askalan prison:

> Almost all the prisoners suffer from ulcers and all suffer from rheumatic pains. Among them are prisoners who have been disabled by intensive interrogation processes. They do not receive medical treatment for their ailments. There are men who are paralyzed, blind and a few are mentally unbalanced as a result of their interrogations but they receive no care. (qtd. in "Ashkelon: Palestinian")

As the MERIP report indicates, these circumstances of imprisonment led to a series of hunger strikes among Palestinian prisoners. It must also be noted that a Palestinian prisoner movement has ensued as a reaction against the Israeli environment of control and abuse.

The second aspect of the carceral experience in *603*, which concerns the unlikelihood of being released, can be recognized in many examples throughout the play. One of the more striking occurs in a brief exchange between Slap and Boxman after they come back from collecting wood for the celebration of the Israeli holiday:

> SLAP: Tomorrow comes to those who wait.
>
> BOXMAN: Way I see it, those who wait never see tomorrow. (Farajin 593)

Boxman's words of hopelessness highlight his mental fatigue having spent many years in prison waiting. They also reflect on the fact that Palestinian prisoners in most cases are forced to either make a plea bargain or wait endlessly for a prisoner swap deal where they might be included. More often than not, Palestinian prisoners choose the first route. Concerning the high rate of plea bargains in Israeli military courts, Hajjar notes that:

> Because most Palestinians who are arrested are held incommunicado for the first several weeks, and sometimes throughout the duration of their interrogation, defense lawyers have no opportunity to advise or assist their clients during this period. The first time that many lawyers get to meet with their clients is after the interrogation process ends, so they "inherit" whatever comes out of it. Consequently, lawyers' legal options are circumscribed by events that ensue prior to their actual involvement in the case. (Hajjar 220)

As noted earlier, the cruelty of Israeli prosecution and the inevitable imprisonment provoke many imprisoned Palestinians to go on hunger strikes. In the following sections of this chapter, I turn to those instances of Palestinian nonviolent action in Israeli prisons.

Apprehend Them All: The Israeli Mass & Arbitrary Detention of Palestinians

In this section I turn to a consideration of how Palestinians in Israeli prisons resist their subjugation by choosing to starve themselves to death. In so doing, they assert their own agency over their own bodies and minds. To understand the complexities of the history and function of Palestinian hunger strikes as a tactic of prison resistance that is performative, I must first address its most instigating circumstance: the Israeli use of administrative detention. B'Tselem describes this preventative measure as follows:

> In administrative detention, a person is held without trial without having committed an offense, on the grounds that he or she plans to break the law in the future. As this measure is supposed to be preventive, it has no time limit. The person is detained without legal proceedings, by order of the regional military commander, based on classified evidence that is not revealed to them. This leaves the detainees helpless – facing unknown allegations with no way to disprove them, not knowing when they will be released, and without being charged, tried or convicted. ("Administrative Detention")

In the Palestinian case, especially in the West Bank, the Israeli military judicial system relies on administrative detention to not only imprison Palestinians, often without revealing the cause or any details about the accusations against them, but to demonize them. Moreover, the use of secret evidence perpetuates the vagueness of the legal process and puts to question its legitimacy. To that end, Hajjar maintains:

> [U]sing secret evidence, which is unavailable to either the defense lawyer or the defendant, taints the legal process; the defense is afforded no opportunity to know the contents or contest the veracity of the evidence directly. Under such circumstances, a defense lawyer's only option is to request that the judge evaluate the merits of the secret evidence. Thus, the judge becomes the de facto representative of the defendant, since the lawyer is barred from playing such a role. (Hajjar 111)

Forced to trust their assessments of the secret evidence, Palestinian defendants are often baffled and disadvantaged by the Israeli military court system, which lacks clarity and transparency.

In an article exploring Israeli use of administrative detention against Palestinians in the West Bank since 1967, lawyer and human rights activist Tamar Pelleg-Sryck argues that the preventative measure can serve as a form of torture. Having represented Palestinian detainees for

many years, Pelleg-Sryck is familiar with the Palestinian carceral experience and the suffering of those who wait in hope of being released or at least go on trial before a court to understand their situation. Commenting on the measure itself, she argues:

> The procedure of administrative detention, in all its phases, is conducted under a veil of utter secrecy and in violation of the right of the detainee to defense. It enables a person to be held in detention without evidence and without trial, on the basis of classified intelligence alleging that he constitutes a security risk. (Pelleg-Sryck 165)

Abused by the Israeli military court system, administrative detention can be renewed indefinitely leaving Palestinian detainees constantly hoping for their release without a confirmation on when that might happen. While hope is often associated with optimistic anticipation of the future, in the case of Palestinian detainees it can be a never-ending curse. To support these claims, Pelleg-Sryck provides the following testimony:

> I can attest to the fact that during all my years representing administrative detainees, beginning in 1988, I never met a single detainee who was cured of cyclical hope, or who gave up the belief that the High Court of Justice (HCJ) would release him and this despite the fact that the proportion of petitioners released by HCJ decision never even reached 1 percent. Nor do I know a single woman who abandoned her expectations that her detained husband would be released by the end of the term. (Pelleg-Sryck 167)

As they dream of freedom that rarely if ever arrives, hope for those Palestinian detainees is a source of vulnerability that the Israeli judicial system relies on in its exploitation of preventative measures. Perpetuating the cycle of abuse and questionably legal procedures, the Israeli practice of administrative detention extends to trying to recruit Palestinian detainees as collaborates; in

effect, the system preys on the hope of the detainees. Pelleg-Sryck provides an insight into how this usually takes place:

> Administrative detention is an effective tool used to persuade a person living under the yoke of occupation that collaboration is worthwhile. Many administrative detainees at some stage of their detention are brought in front of a GSS [General Security Service] official who proposes to them that they become collaborators. Usually, these are very young men or those who are highly respected by their community. In return, they are offered different kinds of rewards. (Pelleg-Sryck 172)

Refusal to collaborate with the Israeli security services, known as Shin Bet or Shabak, means to be subjected to indefinite or repeated administrative detention. As the case in many other sites of Israeli colonial control, Palestinians have developed nonviolent iterations of resistance against imprisonment, often studied and understood in regards to the Palestinian prisoners' movement.

To establish a clear connection between the Palestinian prisoners' movement against mass and arbitrary arrest and the Palestinian culture of nonviolent action against the Israeli occupation, it is imperative to briefly explore the history of the movement and highlight its significance in exposing the Israeli settler colonialist agenda in Palestine. Having conducted several surveys and penned accounts on the subject, Israeli sociologist Maya Rosenfeld argues:

> That mass imprisonment has had a fundamental impact on Palestinian society in the OPT [Occupied Palestinian Territories] is amply manifest in a range of spheres and areas. To start with, it is rare to find a family in the West Bank or in the Gaza Strip that has not experienced the incarceration (even if short-term) of at least one of its male members and many a family has faced the imprisonment of two or more members. (Rosenfeld 24)

In addition to its pervasiveness in the decades following the 1967 war and the establishment of the Israeli military court system, two major historical moments where Palestinians witnessed mass imprisonment are the First (1987-93) and Second *Intifada* (2000-05). Causing many social, political, economic, and cultural complications, especially for Palestinian families with multiple arrested members, those waves of widespread arrest and imprisonment have led to a Palestinian movement of prison resistance that soon became an organized body, inaugurated by the prisoners themselves and maintained by their communities of support, mostly their families and prisoner rights organizations. Rosenfeld refers to this movement as a "counter-order":

> What made the "counter-order" especially powerful was its all-inclusive, indeed "total" nature, embodied in the attempt and more so in the ability to encompass and address all spheres of the prisoner's daily life, starting from the material conditions and basic facilities in the prison cell and from the fundamental necessities of those confined to it, continuing with education (formal, non-formal, political), and culminating in the prisoner's ongoing (daily) participation in political discussion and democratic decision making**.** (Rosenfeld 26-27)

As an oppressed group suffering from the immediate consequences of military occupation and life in prison, Palestinian detainees have always been at the forefront of the Palestinian national movement. In other words, their reliance on nonviolent action as a way of prison resistance is a major puzzle piece in trying to understand the Palestinian collective organization efforts against the Israeli occupation.

In a more comprehensive study, *The Palestinian Prisoners Movement: Resistance and Disobedience*, Julie Norman tracks the development of the Palestinian prison resistance also as a

counter-order, including during the early days of establishing the Israeli military court system in the occupied Palestinian territories. On the emergence of the movement, Norman notes that:

> The Palestinian prisoners' movement began in the post-1967 period, when prisoners faced sub-standard conditions that prompted early episodes of resistance. The narrated histories of prisoners from the years immediately following the 1967 war refer to hardships in terms of three main categories: living and sleeping spaces, quantity and quality of food, and access to medical treatment. (Norman 53)

Building on Rosenfeld's theory of the Palestinian counter-order in prison, Norman explains that it "provided a foundational structure for resistance." She continues:

> Ashkelon Prison was one of the first sites where prisoners developed the counter-order, by organizing according to political affiliation and instituting an alternative order with an elected administration, education system, financial system, and communications system. However, the system spread quickly within and between other prisons, ironically due in part to prison authorities' attempts to counter resistance by transferring presumed leaders to different prisons. (Norman 56)

As indicated, this form of resistance relied on organizing individuals, mostly those within the network of Palestinian detainees, against their conditions of imprisonment. These early efforts of "resistance for survival," as Norman refers to it, paved the way for the now-dominant action-based form of prison resistance, principally hunger strikes (Norman 53).

As a nonviolent means of fighting for human rights, hunger strikes have been effectively employed by the Palestinian prisoner movement to combat the dehumanizing Israeli system of military courts and its abuse of administrative detention. While not exclusive to the Palestinian experience in Israeli prison, it has become a tactic that is frequently used in the Palestinian

resistance against colonial control. On the history of its employment in Palestine, Norman maintains that:

> In Palestine, hunger strikes have been used since the early days of incarceration and have continued to the time of writing [2021], with over 30 documented hunger strikes by Palestinian prisoners. These strikes have resulted in a gradual realization of rights and improvement of conditions, ranging from improved food and better bathing conditions; to access to books, writing materials, and eventually radios and televisions; to establishing negotiation policies between prisoners and the prison administration. (Norman 77)

As noted, those early documented hunger strikes were for the sake of gaining prisoner rights and improving the prison conditions. What followed later was a wave of hunger strikes for the sake of gaining release from prison. As Norman records:

> Focusing less on conditions and rights and more on prison policies, the strikes of 2011, 2014, and 2017 concentrated on ending solitary confinement and administrative detention. While some limited gains were made following the 2011 strike in reducing the use of solitary confinement, administrative detention has continued, prompting individual detainees to go on hunger strike to push for their release. (Norman 81)

These recent and individual instances of nonviolent action, like that of the earlier mentioned Khader Adnan, are the focus of my next section where I discuss their centrality to understanding the Palestinian national struggle towards liberation.

Hunger Strikes in Israeli Prisons: The Employment of the Palestinian Body

In 2021, the London-based anti-poverty charity War on Want issued a detailed report that examines the history and current reality of the Israeli military court system and its violation of Palestinian rights in the West Bank. Aligning with many international human rights organizations

and experts, it refers to Palestinians held under administrative detention as "political prisoners," ill-treated by the Israeli judicial system (Shi 31). As such, the struggle of those detainees cannot be separated from the Palestinian reality under Israeli occupation, and it must be understood in relation to the Palestinian culture of nonviolent action against colonial control. In addressing the ongoing plight of Palestinian administrative detainees, the report confirms that, "The Palestinian prisoners' movement, which grew within prisons, has been central to the wider Palestinian liberation struggle against Israeli occupation, colonialism, and apartheid" (Shi 32). Moreover, it highlights how Palestinian detainees express their objection to the Israel abuse of their human rights by boycotting military courts and going on hunger strikes. On the significance of the latter, the report notes that:

> Throughout the [Israeli] occupation, Palestinian prisoners have risked their lives to carry out hunger strikes. Hunger strikes have been prisoners' main means of resistance to protest their imprisonment, win better conditions, and draw international attention to their struggle. Since the 1990s, Palestinian political prisoners have also used hunger strikes to protest Israel's practice of administrative detention. Prisoners on hunger strike face repression from the prison authorities, including solitary confinement, the denial of visitation rights, confiscation of their belongings, and fines. (Shi 34)

It is my goal in this section to critically address how Palestinian hunger strikes in Israeli prisons affirm the Palestinian reliance on nonviolent action. In other words, I aim to highlight how those instances of prison resistance in their employment of the body are consistent with the Palestinian national struggle against the Israeli occupation and towards reclaiming their humanity.

While being a method of nonviolent protest, a hunger strike is still a violent act towards the body of its practitioner. In his book on the history of prison hunger strikes, Nayan Shah calls

the act a self-imposed "crisis," where "the deprivation of food turns violence upon the striker" (Shah 1). Shah also highlights one of the major differences between choosing to self-starve in an attempt to assert your demands as a prisoner and to commit suicide or take a more extreme route, such as self-immolation:

> A hunger strike is a prolonged protest. The hunger strike's lengthening duration is possible only because of the prisoner's determination to overcome the body's signals of hunger and to withstand the pressures of authorities, guards, fellow prisoners, family, and physicians to resume eating. (Shah 2)

In that view, I understand hunger strikes as instances of resistance/nonviolent action that demand a high level of endurance. In the case of how Palestinians resist the circumstances of their life under occupation, including mass arrest and imprisonment, endurance is by no means strange to them, as I highlight throughout this dissertation. But it is the embodied aspect of this prolonged (durational) act of protest, i.e., hunger strikes, that marks my exploration of Palestinian self-starvation in Israeli prisons as performances of resistance.

Engaging in a hunger strike is an act of demanding attention, to both the striker and the circumstances of their imprisonment. Therefore, to regard Palestinian hunger strikes in Israeli prisons as performances is to understand them as "actions that incessantly insinuate, interrupt, interrogate and antagonize powerful master narratives," where "the social world becomes the theatrical stage of everyday encounters as cultural performances" (Walsh and Tsilimpounidi 83). In doing so, I propose that hunger strikes are revealing cultural acts of nonviolent action, which Palestinian detainees employ to protest the conditions of their arrest and imprisonment, and in turn, affirm their role in exposing the violent, unjust practices of the Israeli settler colonialist machine in Palestine. My argument is also grounded in a claim that, "The context, motives,

status and gender of the person condition the meaning that their hunger is given, by themselves and others" (Machin 110). To achieve my goal in this section, which is to highlight the performativity of Palestinian hunger strikes, I must first explore the corporeal consequences of self-starvation, as an embodied act of survival, and then emphasize its socio-political context that is my concern, i.e., the Palestinian national struggle for human rights and self-determination.

In a recent study, Malaka Shwaikh and Rebecca Gould offer an extensive examination of how Palestinian detainees engage in hunger strikes after being abused and imprisoned by the Israeli military judicial system. To Shwaikh and Gould, the body is a "formidable weapon," used by prisoners as "instruments of their political will by individually or collectively subordinating their need for food to their equally powerful need for dignity and freedom" (Shwaikh and Gould 10). In adopting a perspective where hunger strikes are viewed as a strategy of weaponizing life, of which death is a potential consequence and not the goal, the two authors reject the violent-nonviolent dichotomy. Instead, they introduce hunger strikes as a choice based on agency over the body and in protest against subjugation. Their research also operates on the assumption that:

> In a context wherein life—and the will to sacrifice it—is the primary source of agency, the body becomes a battleground on which this struggle takes place. The body also becomes a stage, and its withering away is used to attract external support from those outside the prison cell. In other words, the 'stage' allows for an audience and hence attracts external support, while the 'battleground' is the site of the conflict. (Shwaikh and Gould 25)

A thorough translation of this analogy of the body of the striker as a stage, where conflict is a dynamic variable, designates hunger strikes as a spectacle of performative resistance; it demands attention and response by its audience. On one hand, the prison authorities attempt to overcome

the battleground by ending the strike—one of the traditionally repressive methods is force-feeding. On the other, there are communities of support that aim to highlight, document, and raise awareness around the issues facing striking prisoners, including immediate family members and prison rights organizations. Hence, there is a focus on documenting and publicizing the performance.

It is also important to emphasize that there are two types of hunger strikes: collective and individual. While the first helps achieve changes for a larger group of prisoners, often related to improving the conditions of imprisonment, the other is case-specific where the typical demand is release from prison or end of administrative detention. A notable example of collective hunger strikes by Palestinians in Israeli prisons took place in the aforementioned at Askalan prison. According to Shwaikh and Gould, the 1976 strike lasted for 45 days and it remains as "both the longest prison hunger strike to date and the first open strike (that is, a strike without a scheduled end date)" (Shwaikh and Gould 31). As for individual hunger strikes, the list includes the often-discussed cases of Awni al-Sheikh, Etaf Elian, and Khader Adnan, among others. Regardless of the level of success in acquiring concessions from the prison authorities, both collective and individual Palestinian hunger strikes follow "a deeply sacrificial logic" given that "a hunger strike, even when done alone, is a political act that is performed on behalf of a collective—whether of an entire oppressed people or of a specific group of oppressed prisoners" (Shwaikh and Gould 39). But the question remains, how effective are those self-imposed acts of survival in their reliance on agency over the body and the attention/support they receive in the process?

When discussing the efficacy and success of hunger strikes, one major aspect to consider is power disparity. As indicated throughout this chapter's exploration of the Israeli military court system, Palestinian detainees do not typically have much influence over the conditions of their

arrest, trial, and imprisonment. As Shwaikh and Gould confirm, going on a hunger strike is one of the few ways in which they can establish a ground for negotiating with the prison authorities:

> Palestinian prisoners recognize that negotiation with the Israeli state is futile unless it can be done from a position of power. That power is harnessed through hunger strikes, in which prisoners seize on the two areas in which they have leverage over their jailers: their bodies, and potential public support. (Shwaikh and Gould 72)

Another prime aspect to arguing for the success of hunger strikes is visibility, which is closely tied with public support. As embodied iterations of prison resistance, hunger strikes lay bare the shocking conditions, various challenges, and both the physical and emotional well-being of striking detainees and, in turn, call attention to the suffering of repressed detainees. In the case of the Palestinian carceral experience in Israeli prisons, Shwaikh and Gould explain that:

> In practice, wherever prison authorities give in to prisoners' demands, the same authorities typically reverse such agreements at a later date. However, protest actions, collective and individual, continue because they expose the inhumane conditions of the imprisonment and attract support from foreign organizations. These dynamics are crucial to the wider project of liberation. (Shwaikh and Gould 75-76)

Being an integral example of Palestinian resistance, hunger strikes are essential to understanding the Palestinian experience under occupation and the Israeli oppressive tactics of colonial control. As Palestinians struggle for their human rights and constantly develop or make use of nonviolent means of protest, such as hunger strikes, the central cause of national liberation always makes its way to the forefront of how Palestinians shape and understand protest.

To examine the Palestinian national struggle properly and effectively as the governing socio-political context of hunger strikes in Israeli prisons, I turn to the work of Palestinian

sociologist Ashjan Ajour in *Reclaiming Humanity in Palestinian Hunger Strikes: Revolutionary Subjectivity and Decolonizing the Body*. By engaging with and further complicating aspects of Frantz Fanon's idea of revolutionary violence, Michel Foucault's concept of technologies of the self, and Alain Badiou's theory of subjectivation, Ajour offers "a systematic investigation of the process of subjectivation embodied in hunger strike resistance," where violence, being proposed as a technology of the self, is directed inwardly via self-starvation onto the body, which becomes the site of resistance (Ajour 143). In doing so, she identifies three principal stages that can help reveal the imbued meanings of embodied prison resistance: the pre-hunger-strike, the decision to hunger strike, and the embodiment of humanity. It is also within this framework that Ajour regards the former Palestinian detainees whom she includes in her book as political prisoners whose humanity has been colonized and taken away.

The first stage of Ajour's framework, the pre-hunger-strike, deals with dispossession and the Israeli apparatus of control. At the heart of the discussion is administrative detention, viewed as a technique of colonial power, and its inescapable effects on Palestinian life. Ajour notes:

> The political detainees view administrative detention as an exercise of power to control their future on the basis of secret evidence. Detainees expect to be repeatedly arrested at any time and live unstable and unpredictable precarious lives. Prisoners are not informed of the precise reason for their detention and don't know about their future. Thus, administrative detention is a form of dispossession of hope and future, confiscating detainees' lives and damaging their family relations. (Ajour 148)

The Israeli exploitation of the preventive measure, as indicated above, is a form of dispossession encompassing the aspects of hope and future, love and social bonds, and dignity. To counter this colonial subjugation, Palestinian detainees turn to their bodies in an attempt to subvert the unjust

system and invite public support. By doing so, they also find an access to their humanity, which is constantly under the threat of dispossession.

To reclaim their humanity, Palestinian detainees must resist their dispossession, which is synonymous in their case with dehumanization. In deciding to self-starve, they alter their status from passive to active subjects, forming a "*zero mode of being*, from which the colonized subject makes a transformative jump or leap to create a 'new humanity'" (Ajour 159, ital. in original). During this second stage of Ajour's framework, the decision to hunger strike, the goal is to bring about new conditions by rejecting the persistence of the oppressive techniques of prison control. To put differently, as Ajour argues, this gives a hunger strike, during which evolutionally violence is used inwardly, an emancipatory aspect:

> The participants do not deny that it damages the psyche but they also recount the technologies of the self they appropriated and developed in order to defend their humanity. They present themselves as neither 'heroic militants' nor 'passive victims' but rather as a combination of the two; and in their resistance to dispossession, they transform themselves from passive victims into engaged 'active victims.' (Ajour 180)

One of the major circumstances leading to the Palestinian decision to hunger strike in Israeli prisons is the renewal of administrative detention and its inevitability. Also is the aforementioned environment of isolation that Palestinian prisoners are forced to endure, which prevents them from connecting with their families, lawyers, and/or any bodies of support.

As a self-employing technique of resistance, hunger strikes are embodied, performative instances of standing against colonial control in its prison form. On one hand, they require developing self-contained technologies where death is a potential consequence. On the other, the imposed self-starvation is met with technologies of control where the prison authorities attempt

to undermine the striker's project of reclaiming their colonized humanity. In tracing the development of the resultant power conflict during this third stage, the embodiment of humanity, Ajour theorizes:

> The deliberate acceleration of their bodies' disintegration demonstrates the link between the political temporality of the conflict and negotiation on one hand and the temporality of the body and its decomposition on the other. The hunger strikers use the relation between these temporalities in the sense that the more the body collapses the more they put pressure on the state to negotiate. (Ajour 191)

Hunger strikes thus become a means of seeking power through subjecting the body to extreme circumstances and, in doing so, create a new range of stakes, where the prison authorities must acknowledge the existing challenges and work towards change. As Palestinian detainees realize their relation to the national struggle, being victims of colonial domination in the form of the so-called preventive detention, their reach for support becomes inevitable.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the inherited injustices within the Israeli military court system and the ways in which Palestinian prisoners are oppressed and dehumanized. By focusing on different aspects of the Israeli judicial system, I have highlighted how it operates as another cog in the Israeli colonial machine that attempts to wreck Palestinian life. In doing so, I have paid attention to the issues related to mass arrest of Palestinians, trying them unfairly within a biased antagonistic system, and the conditions of their imprisonment. My exploration has also included a character-focused analysis of Imad Farajin's *603*, which tells the story of four Palestinian prisoners who have lost any connection to the world and, by means of prison control, their humanity has been pushed aside and neglected. My reading of the play has at its core the

belief that those inmates are humans with hopes and dreams—the circumstances of their life under Israeli occupation must not be overlooked. Following my analysis of how Boxman, Slap, Mosquito, and Snake reveal in *603* the bigger context of the plight of Palestinians in Israeli prisons, especially Askalan prison, I have turned to the Israeli cruel use of administrative detention as a preventative measure to subdue any Palestinian resistance, specifically nonviolent, or right to expression. Left with little choices, Palestinian detainees sometimes resort to self-starvation, in the form of hunger strikes, to withstand the Israeli denial of their human and prisoner rights. By examining hunger strikes as durational acts of survival indicative of the Palestinian culture of nonviolent action against the Israeli colonial control, I have attempted to contextualize them as performative instances of weaponizing life, where death is a potential outcome along the strikers' search for dignity.

CONCLUSION. A PREDICAMENT OF MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS

In 2020, the Dance Studies Association (DSA), a US-based international organization of dance scholars and artists, issued a statement expressing support for the human right to freedom of movement. It also relayed the DSA's concern over the potential denial of this fundamental and inviolable right by certain governments or counties to its people or other nations. The statement begins as follows:

> As scholars and artists in dance we investigate, theorize, and practice movement in all its expansive meanings and possibilities. Therefore, this statement expresses our deep concern for those moving across borders who seek safety from violence, slavery, military occupation and poverty resulting from colonialism, disaster capitalism, and trans-border exploitative economic policies. These policies have violent outcomes for people whose movements are conducted to survive conditions of precarity; these policies disproportionately harm and destroy populations made vulnerable through ongoing conditions of coloniality and imperialism, including Indigenous peoples, people of color, children, women, queer and trans persons, and others. ("Statement on the Inviolability")

In Palestine, or what the international community recognizes as the Occupied Palestinian Territories (the West Bank and Gaza Strip), those destructive policies of restricting movement exist. This is a major consequence of the Israeli occupation and a ruinous circumstance of Palestinian life. As The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (B'Tselem) reports:

> Restricting movement is one of the main tools that Israel employs to enforce its regime of occupation over the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories. Israel restricts the movement of Palestinians within the Occupied Territories, between the West Bank and

> the Gaza Strip, into Israel, and abroad. Only Palestinians are restricted in this manner, while settlers and other civilians – Israeli and foreign – are free to travel. ("Restrictions on Movement")

Denying Palestinians their freedom of movement perpetuates the Israeli colonial control over all walks of Palestinian life. This is true of theatre in Palestine and all performance-based practices that I include in this study.

To better ponder the overwhelmingly negative impact of the Israeli restrictive policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, I must include the definition of the right to freedom of movement as articulated by the United Nations. In their "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," specifically Article 13, the international intergovernmental organization states that a human freedom to move entails the following:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country. ("Universal Declaration")

In the case of Palestinians, and as indicated in B'Tselem's report, the Israeli occupation obstructs their movement in, out of, and back into the Occupied Territories. It is another denied human right for Palestinians who must endure those maddening restrictions, which manifest in various ways and on different levels; roadblocks, checkpoints, border and seaports control, surveillance systems, city closures, and forbidden roads.

In the West Bank, for example, there is a vast number of Israeli checkpoints and physical obstacles permeating Palestinian towns and neighborhoods. In August 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) published a report detailing that:

> At the beginning of 2023, OCHA conducted a closure survey which revealed that there were 645 fixed movement obstacles deployed by Israeli forces, permanently or intermittently controlling, restricting and monitoring Palestinian movement in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the H2 area of Hebron. These physical obstacles form part of a range of restrictions that the Israeli authorities have imposed on Palestinians since 1967, including permit requirements and the designation of areas as restricted or closed. ("Movement and Access," 2023)

As expected, these restrictions have been exacerbated further and made worse after the events of October 2023. In their latest report, published in September 2024, OCHA reports the following:

> At present, there are 793 movement obstacles which are permanently or intermittently controlling, restricting and monitoring Palestinian movement in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the H2 area of Hebron. OCHA has documented these obstacles, which include 89 checkpoints staffed 24/7; 149 partial checkpoints that are not always staffed (46 of which have gates); 158 earth mounds; 196 road-gates (122 of which are usually closed); 104 road blocks; and 97 linear closures each of which blocks one or more roads, such as road barriers, earth walls and trenches. ("Movement and Access," 2024)

Disrupting the life of about 3 million Palestinian in the West Bank, these Israeli methods of control bring with them economic, political, social, and cultural adversities that diminish many possibilities or opportunities for Palestinians to thrive, on their own land.

Two more aspects of the Israeli restrictive policies in the West Bank that cannot be overlooked given their many detrimental effects on Palestinian life are the existence of an apartheid wall and the forceful employment of a surveillance system. Regarding the former,

Amnesty Intermarital declares that so far, and mainly after the 1967 war and the seizure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip:

> Israeli authorities maintained their system of apartheid, passing laws that deepened the segregation of Palestinians from Israelis, confined Palestinians to deprived locations, and implementing policies that furthered the systematic dispossession of Palestinians. Wanton destruction, home demolitions, denial of access to livelihoods, and state-backed settler violence, all intensified forced displacement. ("Israel and Occupied")

As for the Israeli surveillance system in the West Bank, it is an all-around experience of surveillance that Palestinians are forced to navigate. In 2021, the *Washington Post* investigated this system of control by interviewing two former Israeli soldiers. Here are some details:

> The surveillance initiative, rolled out over the past two years, involves in part a smartphone technology called Blue Wolf that captures photos of Palestinians' faces and matches them to a database of images so extensive that one former soldier described it as the army's secret "Facebook for Palestinians." The phone app flashes in different colors to alert soldiers if a person is to be detained, arrested or left alone. (Dwoskin)

Such violation of human rights to movement and privacy is another cog in the Israeli machine of colonial domination adding another layer of complexity to how Palestinians must navigate spaces and different contexts of social and cultural life.

The situation in the Gaza Strip in terms of movement restrictions and Israeli policies of control might be different in nature but not in function; they are also meant to choke Palestinian life. As summarized by the Institute for Middle East Understanding, locals of the Palestinian territory are forced to endure the following circumstances:

> Since 2007, Israel has imposed a crippling siege and naval blockade on Gaza, which has been condemned by the UN and human rights groups as collective punishment of the entire population and illegal. Under the siege, it's almost impossible for Palestinians to leave tiny, impoverished Gaza, even to travel to the West Bank or Jerusalem to study, work, visit family, or receive life-saving medical treatment. The Israeli military also prevents fishermen in Gaza from traveling far from shore, denying them the ability to reach the most productive fishing grounds, frequently detaining, shooting at and injuring or killing them, in the process. Gaza is often described as the world's largest open-air prison. ("Fact Sheet")

As mentioned earlier in my study, 2007 is when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip following a brief civil war with Fatah. The Israeli occupation used this event as a pretext for imposing a suffocating blockade restricting all movement within, into, and out of the Palestinian territory.

During the ongoing war on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli occupation has taken the definition of blockade and movement restrictions to new lengths of colonial control. In addition to bombing hospitals, dividing Gaza into multiple territories, razing and demolishing homes, neighborhoods, and infrastructure, the Israeli occupation army arrested many Palestinians and led them to undisclosed locations without revealing yet any information about their conditions. Per a recent report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR):

> Due to Israeli authorities' refusal to provide information on the fate or whereabouts of the reportedly thousands of Palestinians from Gaza held in Israel or the West Bank, Israeli human rights organizations submitted petitions to the Israeli High Court requesting information on hundreds of detainees. However, as the Court ruled, in contradiction with international law, that the authorities are not obliged to provide such information, most

> detainees from Gaza continued to be denied access to their families, effective legal representation and the protection of the courts, and their families denied information on their fate and whereabouts. ("Thematic Report" 17)

In many ways similar to the plight of Palestinians in Israeli prisons, which I discuss in Chapter III, these Israeli violent practices are a continuation of restrictive policies of domination that have been in place for so long, whether post-1948 (Nakba) or post-1967 (the Three-Day War).

There are many contexts in which the Israeli restrictive policies, especially those related to movement, can be traced and highlighted. To provide a brief example, however, I shall focus on the medical field. In a 2018 study published in *American Journal of Public Health*, Clea McNeely and other public health experts explore the dire ramifications of the Israeli movement restrictions on Palestinians between 1987 and 2011. One of their research results indicates that:

> The pervasiveness of restrictions varied with the intensity of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and by geographic location, and the patterns of restrictions were consistent with multiple external reports. The most severe movement restriction—being completely barred during an entire year—was associated with poorer SRH [self-rated health measure] and greater limits on daily functioning caused by physical health as long as 2 decades after the movement restriction occurred. (McNeely et al. 81)

Given that the Israeli occupation has been ruling over Palestinian life since 1948, and for 76 years now, most, if not all, Palestinians experience some form of movement restriction that negatively affect their public health and well-being.

With all the above in mind, it should not be surprising that I borrow language from the DSA statement to highlight how the Israeli occupation and its colonial and military apparatus of control and domination hamstrings Palestinian movement impacting their cultural activities,

including theatre, dance, and music. Perhaps the most striking section for me and the orientation of my study in the DSA statement is the following paragraph:

> We move to live, to survive, to thrive, to connect, to exchange, to celebrate, to mourn, to protest, to escape. Movement conducted in respectful relationship to earth and Indigenous peoples and caretakers of land--as well as other-than-human beings inhabiting the land--is an imperative of our existence as a species, and one that must never be compromised. ("Statement on the Inviolability")

Palestinians move to live despite of the colonial devastation caused by the Israeli occupation, to thrive against all adversities, to connect with each other and the world, to exchange knowledge and experience, to celebrate life, to mourn loved ones lost in war, to protest the international failure to aid them in their cause, and to escape their present reality.

On stage, Palestinians move to creatively reconstruct their world and, in doing so, call attention to how it and their lives are marked by an endless Israeli abuse. In Chapter I, I included a focused consideration of the work of a local theatre-maker in the Gaza Strip, Ashraf Al-Afifi, whose experience of colonial oppression is representative of the Palestinian experience in the besieged territory. His production of *Barzakh* (2021) aims to highlight how Palestinian families are torn apart by the ongoing Israeli occupation. This piece effectively dramatizes the ever-present reality of colonial violence, including how Palestinians are constantly injured and killed, their homes are routinely destroyed, and their achievements and memories are in danger of erasure. In *Barzakh*, stories of several Palestinian young men echo those of the older generation, offering a testament of the bleak reality of living under the Israeli occupation that seems, for them, to have existed since the dawn of time. I argued that theatrical retellings of the Israeli war atrocities and crimes against humanity—now viewed by many as acts of genocide— such as

those presented in *Barzakh*, help process and expose the devastating legacies of colonialism preserved by an Israeli occupation in Palestine.

In the latter half of that first chapter, I explore how many of these same themes and issues are also addressed in Theatre Day Productions' *The Grey People* (2023). More specifically, I aimed to highlight how that piece endeavors to expose the Israeli denial of the freedom of movement to Palestinians through the dreary depiction of a life in the Gaza Strip, where political corruption and social fragmentation are dominant circumstances. I argue that *The Grey People* offers a somewhat absurd reflection of Israeli colonial investment in the division of Palestinians, exacerbated by partisan differences and the many frictions between Fatah and Hamas. My examination of the journey of the Young Man in *The Grey People*, highlighting his frustration with the status quo, aims to underscore how Palestinian theatre-makers engage with and critique the dire socio-political circumstances imparted by this national split and the Israeli occupation. Moreover, I argued that the socio-economic disparity facing many Palestinians is represented not only in the eerie atmosphere of the hotel, but also in the dramatization of its bizarrely bureaucratic operational aspects, which perpetuate the suffering of the Young Man and frustrate his efforts to preserve the cultural memories that he has inherited from the previous generation, notably his parents, in the form of stories and photographs.

In Chapter II, I turned my attention to music and dance, focusing on how Palestinians transcend the limitations of language and movement to emphasize their eagerness for freedom. I commenced with an exploration of Palestinian Protest song, highlighting the historical functions of that genre of popular song in Palestine, and connecting that tradition to contemporary hip-hop practiced by Palestinians in exile. In turn, I addressed the work of rapper Shabjdeed, and argued that his work is a continuation of Palestinian political or protest song. To support my claims, I

examined a number of Shabjdeed's popular tracks to demonstrate that his depiction of everyday life, especially in refugee camps in the West Bank, is indicative of how Palestinians withstand their reality under the Israeli occupation via music. This, I argue, marks a shift in Palestinian protest song where the focus is no longer on Palestinian victimhood, but instead on the ongoing injustices under the Israeli colonial domination. Following this, in the second half of the chapter, I turned to the genre-defying work of the Palestinian group 47Soul and their creation of *Shamstep* as a performance-based fusion of electronic music and folk dance. In analyzing a sampling of the group's video clips, I highlighted how the band relies on moving and inspiring movement in their audiences, who often experience the music collectively by virtue of swaying and stomping along in a repeating sequence of steps within the line or circle structure of the traditional form of *dabke* dance. I argued that *Shamstep* may not only be regarded as a performance-based stance against colonial power, but also a corporeal expression of Palestinian determination to create nonviolent means of seeking human recognition.

In Chapter III, I turned to a consideration of the structure and legal implication of the Israeli military court system on life in the Occupied Territories. Here I argued that Palestinian movement becomes more of a complex task given the immobility imposed by Israeli colonialist mechanisms. In other words, in carceral spaces, Palestinians move, rather incrementally, to remind the world of their stolen humanity. In this chapter, I engaged with Imad Farajin's *603*, and used it as an access point into a consideration of the Israeli prison apparatus by offering character analyses of Boxman, Slap, Mosquito, and Snake—the four prisoners around which the play revolves. In doing so, I also provided an example of how the plight of Palestinians in Israeli prisoners is featured in Palestinian literature. In the second part of my final chapter, I reviewed the recently developing scholarly efforts to investigate Palestinian hunger strikes in Israeli

prisons and the many ways in which they challenge the simple dichotomy of violence and nonviolence and in turn defy the so-called Israeli preventative measure, i.e., administrative detention. By reading the prisoners' action as performative, I argued that they choose to inflict harm, by starving themselves, on their own defenseless, colonized bodies, in service of a larger demand for public/global solidarity and acknowledgement of their humanity that has been deformed by the Israeli system of confinement.

In sum, this study has identified how performance practices created in Palestine reflect the dire state of Palestinian human rights brought about by the Israeli occupation. My exploration has focused on how Palestinians take to the arts in their search for ways to express their need for wider recognition of their suffering and to nonviolently demand sovereignty. Specifically, I have employed my disciplinary knowledge in theatre and performance studies to explore how Palestinian theatre practitioners, musicians, dancers, and prisoners reflect in their performances and performative actions a Palestinian interest in nonviolent action.

I shall end by noting once again that all the performance-based practices I included in this study suffer from a severe lack of critical attention. As such, I hope that this study leads to more considerations of the complex mosaic of Palestinian theatre and performance that exists and is yet to come into existence. I am confident in saying that as long as the Israeli occupation persists, Palestinians, including artists, will resist and produce work that prompts varied efforts of academic investigation. While I regard it as my ethical and moral obligation to draw scholarly attention to these works, it has also been a privilege to tell the story of my people.

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