Postcolonial Directions in Education
Volume 9 Issue 1, 2020 | 8-42

RETURN, RECOLLECT, IMAGINE: DECOLONIZING IMAGES, RECLAIMING PALESTINE

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Abstract This article engages with *Recollection,* a film by Palestinian filmmaker Kamal Aljafari, and *And yet my mask is powerful* (Part 1), a video by Palestinian artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, as visual articulations of Palestinian resistance against Israeli practices of settler-colonial erasure. The paper explores how these works both activate, and are activated by, the Palestinian decolonial struggle. These works visually materialize a radical politics of decolonization that problematizes and subverts colonial practices and narratives. Engaging with (material, visual, discursive) sites of colonial violence and destruction as generative sites, these works recover and recenter Palestinian existence. They expose the colonial project's failure to fully erase and representationally evacuate traces of Palestinian presence. From the artists' decolonial creative processes and practices, new countervisual languages emerge that imagine/image an alternative reality, unbound from colonial time, space and narrative.

[1] I thank two Anonymous Reviewers, the Guest Editors, Hoda Adra, and Samiha Khalil for their insightful comments and suggestions, as well as Copy Editor Kealin McCabe for her careful reading of the final text.

Keywords: Palestine – film/video, decolonial struggle, colonial erasure, countervisualizing, imaginative remembrance

> "…the whole history of the Palestinian struggle has to do with the desire to be visible".
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> Edward Said (2006, p. 2)

> "I use cinema as an act of reclamation".
>
> Kamal Aljafari (cited in Zaher, 2019)

> "Only now, returning to the site of destruction as the very site from which to cast a new projection that evokes the potential of an unrealized time, not bound by the here and now or there and then. A parallel time that is not occupied, a virtual time that is not 'our' time".
>
> Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme (2017)

Introduction

Palestinian films are inherently and inescapably political, forged in the crucible of Israel's ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Palestine (Dabashi, 2006; Yaqub, 2018; Burris, 2019), a project premised not only on the seizure and occupation of Palestinian territory and on the expulsion of Palestinians, but on the very denial of Palestinian existence (Zureik, 2015). The myth of a land without people for a people without land that animates Zionist ideology indeed requires the systemic erasure of Palestinian presence—bodies, homes, villages, cities, monuments, language, identity, history—an erasure that takes both a material and cultural form. Film, as a visual medium, holds the radical potential to undo Israel's practices of settler-colonial erasure, by making visible what has been ignored, hidden, marginalized, excluded, or erased by the Israeli discourse.

Films provide, as academic, literary critic and political activist Edward Said eloquently puts it, “a visual alternative, a visual articulation, a visible incarnation of Palestinian existence in the years since 1948, the year of the destruction of Palestine” (Said, 2006, p. 3).

This article engages with *Recollection*[2] (Aljafari, 2015), *a* film by Palestinian filmmaker Kamal Aljafari,[3] and *And yet my mask is powerful* (Part 1),[4] a video by Palestinian artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme[5] as visual articulations of Palestinian resistance against Israeli practices of settler-colonial erasure, to explore how these works both activate, and are activated by the Palestinian decolonial struggle. I argue that these works visually materialize a radical politics of decolonization that problematizes and subverts the colonial practices and narratives. Engaging with (material, visual, discursive) sites of colonial violence and destruction as generative sites, these

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[2] *Recollection,* Germany, DCP, Colour and Black and White, 2015, 70'.

[3] Aljafari was born in 1972 in Jaffa. He studied in Jerusalem and Köln, and is now based in Berlin. Working with moving and still images, he interweaves between fiction, non-fiction, and art. His films include *An Unusual Summer* (2020), *It's a long way from Amphioxus* (2019), *Recollection* (2015), *Port of Memory* (2009), and *The Roof* (2006).

[4] *And yet my mask is powerful (Part 1),* Single screen and 5-channel video projection, 2-channel sound + subwoofer, tools, bricks, boards, 2016. The trailer can be accessed at https://vimeo.com/184413097, and a detailed description of the work can be found here: https://www.baselandruanne.com/And-yet-my-mask-is-powerful-Part-1. This work is part of a larger project, which includes a mixed-media installation, a publication, and sound work. More information about part 2 can be found here: https://www.baselandruanne.com/And-yet-my-mask-is-powerful-Part-2

[5] Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme (b. 1983) live between New York city and Ramallah. They work together across a range of sound, image, text, installation and performance practices. Their practice is engaged in the intersections between performativity, political imaginaries, the body and virtuality. A full biography is available at https://baselandruanne.com/Bio

works recover and recenter Palestinian existence, thus exposing the colonial project's failure to fully erase and representationally evacuate traces of Palestinian presence.

In my analysis, I focus on the artists' decolonial creative practices and processes, including how rituals of return that reclaim occupied territory are performed; how colonized images or objects are re-appropriated and subverted; and how the recollection of aural, visual and material fragments of Palestinian memory and history are recovered. At the intersection between creative practices and processes I map the emergence of new countervisual languages that imagine/image an *otherwise,* that is, an alternative reality unbound from colonial time, space and narrative. Unconventional, hybrid, and fragmentary, the decolonial imaginaries articulated and activated by these works capture the complex realities of Palestinian experiences. To draw again on Said, such works represent the defining features of Palestinian present existence: "dispossession, dispersion, and yet also a kind of power incommensurate with [Palestinian] stateless exile" (Said, 1986, p. 6).

Figure 1: The old city of Jaffa seen from the Mediterranean Sea. Still Image from Recollection, courtesy of Kamal Aljafari.

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Jaffa.[6] He returns to his city by boat, from the sea. He steps down into the port. He walks up a flight of stairs, and from there, enters the old city. He goes to places that no longer exist, having been systemically destroyed, renovated, and gentrified by agencies representing the Israeli state as part of an ongoing attempt at erasing Palestinian existence and identity. He is dreaming, and in his dream, he is filming

[6] Jaffa was a major Palestinian port city on the eastern Mediterranean coast, the commercial and cultural center of Palestine. Its cosmopolitan and dynamic society, of around 70,000 inhabitants, was disrupted with the Nakba (or catastrophe) in 1948, when it was largely depopulated with the violent processes associated with the creation of the state of Israel. These processes of colonial violence and dispossession continue to this day in Jaffa in the form of home demolitions, forced evictions, land grabbing, gentrification (Sa'di-Ibraheem, 2020). More generally, the Palestinian *Nakba* entailed the uprooting of more than 700,000 Palestinians out of a population of 1.4 million, the mass destruction of around 400 Palestinian villages and several major cities (Khalidi, 1992). Massacre and/or forced expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland were perpetrated to establish a Jewish majority state (Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007; Masalha, 2012; Abdo-Zu'bi & Masalha, 2018).

and taking pictures, realizing the importance of what he is doing, because he knows that none of these places exists anymore (Kamal Aljafari, personal communication, May 9, 2020). He wanders through the port and the old city's streets. He is returning to the place he is from, to the streets of his childhood, searching for his memories. He is the main character of the film *Recollection*. The film captures Jaffa through his eyes. It captures his *way of seeing* Jaffa, which requires a particular disposition towards the city's materiality, demanding attention to its urban fabric as living form. *Recollection* captures buildings and houses, streets and stairs, mosques and water towers. It focuses, lengthily, on their details (façades, walls, stones, doors, windows, floors, arcades, street signs) rendering their textures vibrant. They are signs, remnants communicating lost memories, and he is staring, listening, and feeling. He is recollecting these memories and recording them.

Figures 2 & 3: (2) Interior of a Palestinian home, Jaffa. (3) Unknown location, Jaffa.

Figure 4: Homes and shops in the port, Jaffa. Still Images from Recollection, courtesy of Kamal Aljafari.

Aljafari uses both "I" and "him" to refer to the main character (Handal, 2016). And yet, while *Recollection* is a deeply personal film, it also reflects a collective Palestinian desire to search for, and retrieve lost memories, to recollect and reclaim a stolen history, and as Edward Said observed, "to be visible" (Said, 2006, p. 2). The "I" in the film, as Aljafari states, is a composite of all the ghosts in the film, and "his walk is his grandfather's, his mother's, his uncle's walk. The walk of all the phantoms he is finding" (cited in Handal, 2016). The "I" is a "vehicle" (cited in Handal, 2016), the I is multiple, performing a collective walk, performing a collective act of recollection through which Palestinian memory and subjectivity is re/constituted. Jaffa is also multiple, standing for any catastrophized city that has vanished or that is vanishing. Jaffa is Beirut during the

Lebanese civil war; it is Berlin in 1945; it is Aleppo today.[7] The main character's return is that of a displaced person returning to their disappearing/ed city to recollect memories. *Recollection* folds the personal into a collective experience of loss and displacement, and into a collective remembrance as resistance to erasure. That act of remembrance is not confined to a specific people, geography or political reality. As filmmaker and writer Nour Ouayda puts it, "Kamal Aljafari's film materializes an act of resistance against the occupying Israeli forces—but also against forgetfulness, erasure and exclusion—that is only possible through cinema" (Ouayda, 2016).

While the places represented in *Recollection* have been physically eradicated by Israel, their traces were captured in Israeli fiction films made throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as part of using the old city of Jaffa, and other neighbourhoods, as a fitting historic setting on which to project an invented history, and narratives that were excluding Palestinians. As Aljafari incisively puts it, "[Palestinians] were completely excluded from the image and therefore uprooted twice in reality and in fiction" (cited in Himada, 2010). *Recollection* undoes this violent visual displacement by re-appropriating colonial images of Jaffa, and manipulating them, to recenter the city and re-root the Palestinians in it. *Recollection* is entirely composed of cinematic scenes taken from over fifty Israeli films, collected, edited and repurposed by Aljafari. He edits out the Israeli actors from the foreground of the image, a process revealed

[7] Kamal Aljafari during a Q&A session that followed the screening of *Recollection* at Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts, January 27, 2016 (Phi Foundation for Contemporary Art, 2016).

to viewers in the film's trailer[8] and opening scene, to be able to better see the backgrounds: the city itself, as well as the Palestinians that were inadvertently caught on film in the Israeli features. Despite efforts at erasing their presence, Jaffa's Palestinians "smuggled themselves into the image that didn't want them to be there" says Aljafari (2020, p.17). Ghostly figures roaming in the background, they haunted the Israeli films, waiting and wanting to be discovered. Aljafari finds them. Like a cinematic archaeologist, he digs into Israeli film archives to excavate visual traces of the old Jaffa, and its displaced Palestinian inhabitants. He collects the scenes containing these ghostly traces, removes the layer that conceals them, zooms in to recuperate them, and to make them visible. Aljafari explains this process:

> In the first part of the project which wasn't yet a film project, I projected the films and took photos of places and details in the background of the films. This is when I started seeing the figures, passerby who were not part of the narrative, but were caught in the image. At the end of this process I had thousands of images of place and people, of Jaffa.[9] I later started working on the film, for which I made a selection of scenes that I valued for their documentation of the city, or where Palestinians appeared accidentally. Then I had the idea of removing the actors from the foregrounds of the scene—cleaning the moving

[8] In the trailer of *Recollection*, Aljafari shows how the film was made: by removing the Israeli actors from the Israeli films' scenes, and zooming in on the figures he found in the backgrounds. The trailer is accessible at https://vimeo.com/135388977

[9] These photos were exhibited at Harvard Radcliffe Gallery in 2010: https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news/radcliffe-magazine/documenting-world

image from the actors, so to say. Then I created a camera movement for these scenes depicting the walks and roaming of the narrator/ camera/person/returning (Kamal Aljafari, personal communication, May 9, 2020).

Figure 5: 'Issa Khimel at the door of his café. From *Sixtieth Street [Rehov Shishim]* by George Ovadiah (1976).

Figure 6: Unknown. From The Delta Force by Menahem Golan (1986).

Figures 7, 8 and 9: These are from Kazablan by Menahem Golan (1974). They reveal the process of Aljafari: (7) excavating a scene with a Palestinian figure in the margin, (8) erasing the Israeli actors, (9) zooming in and centering the Palestinian figure, in this case, a school boy caught in the background of the film. Still Images from Recollection, courtesy of Kamal Aljafari.

Through a process of "filming by means of editing" (Hochberg, 2017, p. 544) *Recollection* lays a claim, to borrow Aljafari's formulation, to a "cinematic territory" that was occupied by Israel, and reconstitutes Jaffa's erased and lost *image* (Aljafari, 2020, p. 19). He samples scenes from Israeli films; erases the "cinematic occupiers" (cited in Lee, 2016) subverts the "cleaned" images, by zooming in, or framing and photographing the edges and backgrounds to generate new images; assembles these new images into a film through which he recreates and remembers Jaffa and recovers its original Palestinian community twice removed—from the city and from its representation. *Recollection* enacts and represents what Aljafari terms "cinematic justice" (Hochberg, 2017, p. 547), as it dismantles the Israeli cinematic occupation by intervening in the colonial archive, and rectifying its colonial narrative/representation of Jaffa. From the Israeli images, Aljafari generates decolonized images. These images are grainy and pixelated, but it is precisely from these very grains and pixels that Jaffa (re)emerges. Through the filming, close-ups, zooming, and taking pictures of the colonial images, Aljafari conjures and reawakens the ghosts of old Jaffa and its Palestinian inhabitants, who were hidden/excluded/dismissed but were always there, inscribed in the very materiality of the Israeli images. The grains and pixels mediate Aljafari's cinematic return to, and remembrance of, his city.

The terrain of visual representation, as *Recollection* reveals, is a site of decolonial struggle. Visual culture theorist and activist Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that such a struggle is produced amidst the confrontation between visuality and countervisuality. The former references the

aesthetic articulation/manifestation of colonial power's claim to authority which makes authority visible, and make it seem natural and right. The latter opposes this authority by laying a "claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity…that has the autonomy to arrange the relation of the visible and the sayable" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 1). The confrontation between visuality and countervisuality is a struggle that is not confined to the realm of representation, for visuality, as Mirzoeff conceptualizes it, is a discursive practice invested in organizing and ordering the world through processes of classification, separation, and aestheticizing. What is at stake is the shaping or structuring of reality. Visuality presents colonial authority as self-evident and consolidates relations of power, whereas countervisuality refuses such legitimation. As Mirzoeff explains, "confronted with this double need to apprehend and counter a real that did exist but should not have, and one that should exist but was as yet becoming," countervisuality lays a claim to "a right to the real" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 26). It is a claim to a different, unthinkable, decolonized, reality. In *Recollection*, Aljafari actively engages in countervisualizing. He refuses the visualized colonial authority of Israeli films, which renders Palestinians invisible, and contests it by reconfiguring the terms on which this colonial reality is premised. *Recollection* reverses the power relations embedded in colonial image-making, unsettles the colonial narrative and its erasures, and visually renders the unimaginable/invisible into reality. Through the (re)appropriation of colonial images of Jaffa and their use against the grain, Aljafari liberates these images to reconstitute a Jaffa that is not destroyed and a Palestinian community that is not displaced by colonial power. Decolonization happens through the processes of

(re)appropriation, manipulation and subversion of the image, which enable Aljafari to redeem the "authentic" image from colonial ideological and visual distortion, and to *countervisualize* an alternative decolonial reality for Jaffa. An alternative reality that was always-already there, embedded in those images but muted by dominant colonial discourse. An alternative reality that was waiting for an act of subversion to be activated and animated.


Figures 8 and 9: (8) Ajami quarter, Jaffa. (9) Street scene, Jaffa. Still Images from Recollection, courtesy of Kamal Aljafari.

While Aljafari enacts a cinematic return to visually reclaim and recreate Jaffa, the city's sonic reconstitution warrants his physical return, and his engagement with (and sensing of) the city's soundscape. In an interview with *Guernica* magazine, Aljafari explains that, in order to (re)create a soundtrack for these images, he used special types of microphones that capture sounds inside walls, and installed microphones beneath the water and on the port. The sounds these microphones record are the sounds of an erased history. The sounds of the Palestinian lives that the city's walls bore witness to and still contain. The sounds that were buried under water with the debris of the destroyed houses that the Israeli agencies dumped on Jaffa's shoreline, and were claimed by the sea (Sa'di-Ibraheem,

2020). To hear and capture those sounds, Aljafari recorded at night, “when places free themselves from the present, and its occupiers” (cited in Handal, 2016). The sound of Jaffa, unbound from occupation, (re)emerges and is recorded. This decolonized sound exposes the incompleteness of the settler-colonial project, and reveals its inability to mute Jaffa. Jaffa’s free but hidden sound, conjured by Aljafari, resonates to evoke possible pasts, presents, and futures.

By freeing images from the grip of Israeli cinematographic occupation, and invoking the possibility of free sounds, *Recollection* breaks from and through colonial hegemony to imagine and represent an otherwise. From this break, Palestinian history and memories that exceed colonial power spill over, they could never be totally contained, hidden, marginalized, oppressed, muted, or erased by its discourse, practices and narratives, their force is captured by the recurring sounds and images of a turbulent sea. These haunting traces, returning and persisting against colonial power, desiring attention and wanting to make themselves known, disturb the normative order of things. From this break and these recovered traces, freedom is imagined and Palestinian existence is affirmed. It is captured by a scene at the end of *Recollection,* which Aljafari poignantly describes: “phantoms are walking together, hand in hand. They are singing. It is a song where they are declaring themselves. They decide to walk and sing and talk to the world. It’s a final march where these ghosts are no longer ghosts” (cited in Handal, 2016).


Figures 10 & 11: Palestinian Children in the Ajami Quarter. Still Images from *Recollection,* courtesy of Kamal Aljafari.

Recollection remembers *imaginatively*, as African Diasporic culture and politics scholar Sophia Azeb would put it, as it explores "what was, what should have been, and what might still be" (Azeb, n.d.). It revisits the past in the present moment, and imagines/images another possible present future. Writer, media theorist, and media activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi argues that:

> what is interesting is not the Image as a representation of reality, but its dynamic power, its ability to stir up and build projections, interactions and narrative frames structuring reality. What is interesting in the Image is its ability to select among infinite possible perceptual experiences, so that imagination becomes imagin/action (Berardi, 2005, p. 64).

Recollection engages in imaginative remembrance as resistance against settle-colonial violence and erasure, countervisualizing an alternative and radical reality that refuses and transcends colonial bounds, and that activates decolonial frames for reclaiming and practicing Palestine.

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Figure 12: Still image from And yet my mask is powerful. Courtesy of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

A group of Palestinian youth walks through landscapes of dense vegetation. They are returning to the sites of their destroyed Palestinian villages inside the State of Israel. They return "to possess and almost be possessed by these strangely living sites of erasure and wreckage" (Abbas & Abou-Rahme, 2017). They sit amongst the ruins, circle around them, touch and feel them, film them, collect pieces of them. They re-inhabit these sites, even if for a brief moment, and reactivate their spaces. In *And yet my mask is powerful* (Part 1), Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme participate in, and capture in audio-visual form, the experience of these ritualized returns. Returns that defy colonial practices of enclosure, and reclaim sites of dispossession. Returns that perform Palestinian refugees' right of return to their homeland, returns that, if truly

enacted, would dismantle Israel. As modern Arab politics and intellectual history scholar Joseph Massad argues:

> it is precisely because the European Jews' 'right' to return to their alleged 'homeland' could only be realised through colonisation of the homeland of Palestinians, and Jewish colonisation of Palestinian land could only be realised through the expulsion of indigenous Palestinians and ensuring their inability to ever return home, that a Palestinian right of return would undo the entire Zionist project, which is premised on their expulsion (Massad, 2019).

Returns that embody the desire to return in/to history, particularly to sites of wreckage, and to engage with them.

Poet, essayist and feminist activist Adrienne Rich's poem *Diving Into the Wreck* (1973) is the starting point for *And yet my mask is powerful*. The poem lends the work its title and scripts its narrative. Verses from the poem visually appear on the screens, in an intensifying rhythm, throughout the video. They speak of the solitary pursuit of an explorer diving under the sea. A journey of exploration of an underworld. The diver came for "the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth" (Rich, 1973). In other words, this is a journey of reckoning with the truth concealed by myth; a reckoning with an unmediated reality that had been dominated and structured by myth; a reckoning with the material evidence of damage and disaster. The diver engages with the wreck not to salvage it, but to confront it, and feel its force. A confounding bodily experience, both painful and precious, for the wreck is the

very site from which a different way of being, sensing and knowing emerges. In the hold, the sense of dispossession that takes over comes with a sense of recognition and liberation. The journey is one of losing one's self, of mutating, of becoming. A journey when/where the identity of the solitary "I" begins to unravel: "This is the place/And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair/streams black, the merman in his armored body/We circle silently/about the wreck/we dive into the hold./I am she: I am he" (Rich, 1973). The "I" unravels into a queer presence, dissolves in a collectivity: "We are, I am, you are/by cowardice or courage, the one who find our way back to this scene/carrying a knife, a camera/a book of myths/in which/our names do not appear" (Rich, 1973).

Figure 13,14,15: Still images from And yet my mask is powerful. Courtesy of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

The “we” gathers all those who risk such journeys of reckoning, who find their way back to the wreck to experience and record the evidence of damage and disaster. The “we” gathers all those who confront and shatter the myths that do not account for their existence. For Abbas and Abou-Rahme (2017), the “we” represents the young Palestinians collectively returning to the sites of their destroyed villages to surrender to their force and experience their liberating potentialities. Through this act of returning, a new subjectivity emerges from the ruins. As anthropologist, curator, and art critic Esmail Nashif asserts, the Palestinian returning to their ruins is returning to themselves, returning to the core of the Palestinian tragedy to re-engage with it, to be expulsed from it (Nashif, n.d., p. 137).

Where Aljafari reads the city as bearer of Palestinian history and living memory inscribed in the city’s urban materiality, Abbas and Abou-Rahme turn to vegetation as a living archive of Palestinian stories. As the artists bring a different mode of decolonial “seeing” or “reading” to bear on sites of ruins, one which requires an openness and receptivity to non-human species, these sites are transformed from sites of tragedy and death to living fields of human-nonhuman relationality. These sites, as the artists express, “emerge not just as places of ruins and trauma, but appear full of an unmediated vitality” (Abbas & Abou-Rahme, 2017). Abbas and Abou-Rahme engage with these sites as social and cultural landscapes, made by a history of human and non-human relations that are inscribed in the native vegetation. Like the walls and stones in *Recollection*, the vegetation in *And yet my mask is powerful* is speaking

forgotten, lost, erased stories, and Abbas and Abou-Rahme are perceiving and recollecting them. For instance, we read in the artists' notes that cacti were used by Palestinians to create a natural border for their villages (Abbas & Abou-Rahme, 2017). Their presence in the landscapes traversed by the artists and the young Palestinians signal the often-hidden remains of the destroyed villages. The cacti fences, both a living material evidence of these villages, and an index of the colonial violence inflicted upon them, become a medium through which Palestinian history, memory and presence are conjured.

If *Recollection* is haunted by the ghosts of Jaffa's Palestinians who were displaced and erased but have re-emerged to find their way to the present, *And yet my mask is powerful* is haunted by a different force, one of non-human life. This resilient force persists in the face of colonial destruction and erasure and still inhabits the sites where Palestinian villages once stood. This non-human life force undoes the double-eradication of these villages: first, their physical obliteration; then, the enclosure and transformation of their ruins into archaeological sites by the Israeli government (Abbas & Abou-Rahme, 2017). Sociologist and scholar Avery F. Gordon tells us that "haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way we're notified that what's been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, messing or interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression" (Gordon, 2011, p. 2). Those sites are not, in any way, dead, as the colonial narrative would have it. Their ruins are not relics from a distant past, remnants of an extinct culture and people. These sites, and the stories they hold, are kept alive by the unruly vegetation.

Figures 16 & 17: Still images from And yet my mask is powerful. Courtesy of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

And yet my mask is powerful makes this liveliness visible, sensible, legible. The video mediates a "hyper-sensory audiovisual landscape rooted in the real",[10] which is intensely immersive and experiential. The sites of wreckage represented are experienced viscerally and affectively, their vitality deeply *sensed* and *felt*. The sounds of insects, the smell of wild fennel, the touch of wild thorns, the sight of cactus or a lone pomegranate tree not only haunt the ruinous sites—they also haunt the young Palestinians that visit them, and haunt viewers. Gordon suggests that:

> when the repression isn't working anymore the trouble that results creates conditions that demand re-narrativization. What's happening? How did it come to pass? What does it mean? When the repression isn't working anymore the trouble that results creates conditions that invite action. (Gordon, 2011, p. 3).

[10] Description of *And yet my mask is powerful* on the Lincoln Center (n.d.) website: http://lincolncenter.org/show/artist-spotlight-basel-abbas-and-ruanne-abou-rahme

This haunted and haunting work, not unlike *Recollection*, reveals the failures of settler-colonialism, and its inability to fully and hermetically contain or erase Palestinian existence. *And yet my mask is powerful* fractures the colonial narrative, and from its fractures, which are aurally rendered through the stutters and glitches of the video's sonic element, visualizes a reality outside of colonial time, space and discourse (Abbas & Abu Rahme, cited in Kabra, 2018). This decolonial reality emerges from beneath the dominant narrative, activated by an alternative mode of perceiving, experiencing and being/becoming in the wreck.

In Rich's poem (1973), a scuba diving mask enables the diver to be under water, and gives her the power she needs to confront the wreck: "First the air is blue and then/it is bluer and then green and then/black I am blacking out and yet/my mask is powerful/it pumps my blood with power" (Rich, 1973). For Abbas and Abou-Rahme, the poem evokes the mask's multiple performative powers: the power to conceal one's identity; the power to enable one to become anonymous, to become other, "to move from the singular to the common;" the power to enable and empower one to do things they normally wouldn't or couldn't do (cited in Kabra, 2018). Like the diver in Rich's poem, the returning Palestinians in the video are wearing masks.

Figure 18: Still image from And yet my mask is powerful. Courtesy of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

The masks returning Palestinians wear are copies of Neolithic stone masks dating 9000 years. Excavated and stolen from the occupied West Bank and its surroundings, they are now part of public and private Israeli collections (Busbridge, 2020; El-Haj, 2002; Rjoob, 2009). In 2014, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem displayed the masks as part of an exhibition titled *Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World*. The museum describes the exhibition in the following terms:

> A rare group of enigmatic stone masks, which were created in the Judean Hills and the Judean Desert and are the oldest human portraits known to us, sketch the cultural and spiritual world of the people who lived in our region during the Neolithic Period, 9,000 years ago.[11]

[11] Exhibition description on the website of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (n.d.), at https://museum.imj.org.il/exhibitions/2014/face-to-face/en/index.html

The revival of the biblical terms "Judean Hills" and "Judean Desert" to refer to the original provenance of the masks reveals the museum's endorsement of Israeli militarized and ideologized geographic naming practices, and exposes the museum's active role in the broader and systemic colonial campaign of writing Palestinians out of the history of the land. Further, the "our," which precedes the term region, discursively performs/upholds Israel's colonial claim over the land of Palestine.

The colonial narrative is further expanded upon in a publication (Hershman, 2014) accompanying the exhibition, pages of which were scanned, annotated, and republished by Abbas and Abou-Rahme as part of a book that documents the *And yet my mask is powerful* project (Abbas & Abou-Rahme, 2017). The artists' notes, scribbled in red onto the scanned pages, materially intervene in the colonial narrative to unsettle it, and to rectify it. The red notes, for instance, highlight the colonial claim over the masks, circling the "our" that precedes the word "mask" through the scanned catalogue pages. The red notes also excavate some of the questionable processes through which these masks found their way into Israeli private and public collections. For example, one of them, referred to as the Dayan mask, was "purchased" in 1970 by Moshe Dayan, Israel's then Defense Minister. Abbas and Abou-Rahme (2017) report that the mask was then acquired along with the Dayan collection of antiquities by Laurence and Wilma Tish in New York, who donated it to the Israel Museum (The artists reference this information from Hershman, 2014). The artists also annotate the map included in the catalogue, adding the missing contour of the West Bank. Abbas and Abou-Rahme's

intervention exposes the ways in which these masks, as well as the history/culture embedded in them, were appropriated, framed, and instrumentalized to reinforce Zionist myths that lay a colonial claim over the land and its history, eliding and excluding Palestinians from them.

To challenge these practices of colonial cultural appropriation, the artists "hacked" the masks and 3D-printed copies of them. Abbas and Abou-Rahme explain that they gleaned the specs of the masks from the virtual version of the "Face to Face" exhibition, by zooming in on the masks and taking screen shots from different angles. Combining these screenshots with high resolution images of the masks that were released online by the Israel Museum, the artists were able to reproduce the masks with the help of a 3D-designer, and to print them. They also plan to upload the 3D designs online, so people can print their own masks (Basel Abbas & Ruanne Abou-Rahme, personal communication, May 14, 2020). The use of the term "hack" to describe both the work and the process is deliberate and conscious, and inscribes the artists' decolonial intervention in a political commitment to liberating material culture from relations of ownership and control, and making it freely accessible. As Abbas and Abou-Rahme put it, "we use the word hacking in relation to material living culture that is possessed and privatized by all these collections and museums, we're hacking the masks to free these materials, free these archives, and to say this is material cultural is for everyone, and should not be owned by anyone" (Basel Abbas & Ruanne Abou-Rahme, personal communication, May 14, 2020).

Abbas and Abou-Rahme's decolonial and subversive gesture not only ruptures the museum's material claim on

the masks, but also its cultural framing. The artists engage in de/counter-mythologizing as they generate new myths, their own, around these objects (cited in Kabra, 2018). They imagine a new narrative, semi-real and semi-fictional, for five of these masks (and continue to develop stories for the remaining ones), which they present in the form of a sound recording alongside the masks in a different iteration of this project. Further, they used copies of the masks to create new rituals that they, along with other Palestinians, performed during the journey of return. In this sense, the artists disrupt the dominant colonial mythology surrounding these masks, displacing it to replace it with a counter-mythology. The more Abbas and Abou-Rahme show *And yet my mask is powerful* in its different iterations, the more the counter-mythology is amplified, the more Palestinian existence is made visible, and the more the dominant myth is decentered and displaced.

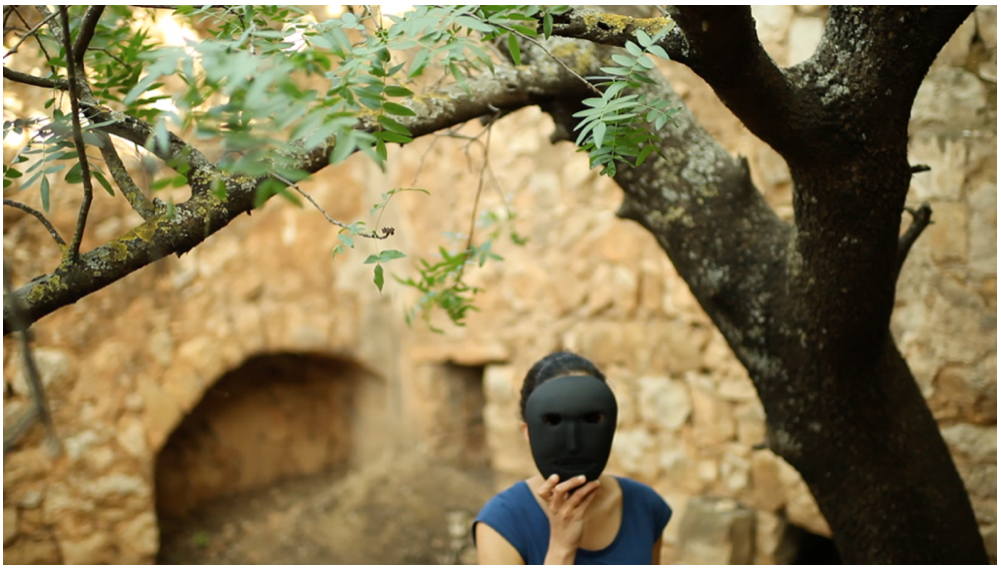

Figure 19: Still image from And yet my mask is powerful. Courtesy of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

By mobilizing techniques of image hacking, freeing, copying, subverting and repurposing both the image of the masks and the image of the museum's catalogue, as decolonial artistic practices, Abbas and Abou-Rahme reinscribe Palestinians into a history from which they have been expunged. The artists reposition the masks and their history, reactivating them within the politics of the present moment. From dead artifacts, the masks are recoded, and recorded, as potent objects that mediate the experience of return journeys. They become powerful tools that empower returning Palestinians to be where they are not allowed to be according to a history that has no place for them. Tools that reinscribe them on the colonized sites of their destroyed villages. Tools that enable them to perform rituals that revitalize and reclaim these forgotten sites. Tools that allow them to disappear their singular identity and to generate a sense of collective experience. Tools that generate a new visual identity which counters the pervasive stereotype of "the masked Arab" (Said, 2006, p. 3). Tools that mediate the imagining of an otherwise. Just like the sites of wreckage, the masks "mutate from dead fossil to living matter"[12] and in that becoming, activate the process of decolonization embodied in/by these returns.

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Recollection and *And yet my mask is powerful* mediate radical decolonial practices and politics enacted through the artists' return to sites of colonial occupation and Palestinian dispossession. While Aljafari's return is cinematic and his

[12] The description of *And yet my mask is powerful*, is available on the artists website: https://www.baselandruanne.com/And-yet-my-mask-is-powerful-Part-1

decolonization is semiotically enacted, Abbas and Abou-Rahme's decolonization is embodied, and takes place through the ritualistic form of a physical return. The three artists perform a forensics, returning to the sites of Palestinian tragedy to recollect subdued fragments of Palestinian existence. They mobilize a particular way of seeing and sensing, one that focuses on materiality and interprets it as historical text, to retrieve these traces. Proceeding like archaeologists of memory, Aljafari unearths memories coded in the material form of the city, while Abbas and Abou-Rahme recover stories embedded in the living matter of the vegetation. In that sense, Aljafari, Abbas and Abou-Rahme take the landscape as object of analysis. And yet, despite the similarity of their approaches, and their concern with colonial erasure and Palestinian reemergence, the artists differ in the ways in which they locate their decolonial work in global conversations. While Aljafari returns to a destroyed urban landscape and engages with the politics of architecture and the built environment to expose the violence of colonial urbanization, gentrification, and urban warfare, Abbas and Abou-Rahme return to rural landscapes and, engaging with the politics of ecology, to reveal the potentialities of exploring human-nonhuman entanglements and relationality.

In these works, ghostly traces emerge as semiotic and audio-visual markers of persistent Palestinian presence against colonial violence, destruction, theft and erasure. In and through *Recollection*, Aljafari awakens and reanimates the cinematic traces of a past life in the present moment, whereas Abbas and Abou-Rahme experience and record living non-human traces in *And yet my mask is powerful*. Out of these reclaimed fragments, gleaned from ruinous

landscapes, the artists bring to the foreground, via the medium of the moving image, realities that have been oppressed, marginalized, and erased, and yet were always there. *Recollection* and *And yet my mask is powerful* uncover and visually represent what cultural critic and scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris calls "submerged perspectives." Situating her analysis within majority indigenous extractive zones in South America, Gómez-Barris (2017) conceptualizes submerged perspectives as alternative modes of perceiving, living and resisting, that are linked to, and yet are outside of, colonial boundaries. Often unperceivable and invisible, the alternative modes of living nonetheless exist within extractive zones—alongside and against colonialism, destructive capitalist extraction, and their visual regimes—reconfigure and expand the conditions of decolonial possibilities. Gómez-Barris argues that, "submerged perspectives":

> …allow us to see local knowledge that resides within what power has constituted as extractive zones. In each of these places, *submerged perspectives* pierce through the entanglements of power to differently organize the meanings of social and political life.… Extractive zones contain within them the submerged perspectives that challenge obliteration…Seeing and listening to these worlds present nonpath dependent alternatives to capitalist and extractive valuation (2017, pp. 11-12).

Aljafari, Abbas and Abou-Rahme see and listen to these submerged worlds. They embody a practice of "perceiving otherwise" (Gómez-Barris, 2017, p. 3) to oppose the ruinous

effects of settler-colonialism, and to visually render decolonial alternatives that trace the contour of a space, time, and narrative in excess of colonization, outside of it. *Recollection*, and *And yet my mask is powerful* articulate "emergent alternatives" (Gómez-Barris, 2017, p. 4) that resist, refuse and reconfigure the terms and effects of colonial violence, destruction and erasure.

The artists practices and politics of decolonization are materialized through subversive processes of image-making. In *Recollection*, Aljafari collects, edits, subverts and repurposes colonial cinematic images taken from Israeli films, to recover the visual traces of a destroyed Jaffa and of its displaced Palestinian community. Reversing the colonial practice of erasure, he erases the Israeli actors, and zooms in on the city's now lost urban fabric (stones, walls, houses, streets) and makes the Palestinian passerby the main characters of his film. Aljafari recuperates the traces of his destroyed city and its displaced Palestinian community from the colonial violence and erasure they were subjected to, and brings them from the margins to the center, that is, to visibility. From colonial representation, Aljafari extracts and represents an alternative reality, which had always been there, albeit hidden and submerged. Similarly, Abbas and Abou-Rahme recover an otherwise through the (re)appropriation, manipulation and subversion of colonial images. They hack the image of colonized Neolithic masks to copy and reproduce the masks, that is, to free them from colonial material and cultural claims. Further, by inserting the masks into a contemporary Palestinian cultural context, they activate the masks' liberating potentialities and its ability to mediate a collective experience of a Palestinian space unbound, even if briefly, from colonial time. "Wading

into what lies beneath the surface" (Gómez-Barris, 2017, p. 12) of colonial representation, these three artists countervisualize by lifting and representing submerged perspectives which point to alternative perceived realities that have been oppressed and marginalized. These emergent alternatives evoke the potentiality of the visual as site where new forms of healing, liberation and justice can be articulated and enacted. As Yomaira C. Figueroa (2015) points out, these alternative gestures towards new possibilities of action as "an integral part of imagining new decolonial futurities" (p. 44).

Recollection and *And yet my mask is powerful* intimate an alternative way of making art and doing politics under conditions of occupation/colonization—what curator and editor Faye Harvey (2020, p. 2) calls "recollective resistance", which generate new countervisual grammars for resistance and struggle against colonial violence and erasure. These works attest to the liberating potentialities of the moving image in the Palestinian decolonial struggle: to open a space where alternative modes of seeing, sensing, being and living are activated, where a desire and a politics of liberation are energized, where a new political identity is imagined, where a post-statist Palestinian nationhood is revitalized, and where a sense of futurity is restored. These imaginative works forge new possibilities for making Palestinians visible, and for imaginatively returning to, remembering, and reclaiming Palestine.

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