



## WALKING THE HYPHEN IN PALESTINE-ISRAEL

It took me until I was nearly 30 to visit Palestine-Israel, this summer, as I researched contemporary art and film that refracts the political realities of military occupation, dispossession, and segregation through the opaque lenses of science fiction, parafiction, and other non-documentary modes. I was also there, quite simply, to see what it was like, after years of reading scholarly and journalistic accounts, watching documentary films, and attending political talks and rallies. My mother's family is part of the Palestinian diaspora. Her parents were forced to flee Jerusalem in 1948, eventually ending up in Beirut, where, as Christians, they were afforded the privilege of citizenship (the vast majority of Palestinians in Lebanon are refugees awaiting a perpetually deferred return). My own parents fled Beirut during the Lebanese civil war, for the east coast of the United States, where I still live. Today my family members are dispersed from Washington, DC to Seattle to Beirut to Damascus (my father's side is Syrian), and only one of them, a committed activist and writer involved in feminist, anti-racist, and anti-incarceration struggles, has seen Palestine-Israel in living memory. Yet so many friends and acquaintances of mine have traveled to Israel on "Birthright"—how quickly a catchphrase obscures the insidious meaning it carries—that I had gotten tired of interjecting, when they recounted their "amazing" and "complicated" experiences, the simple truth that they held an unrestricted right to Israeli citizenship while my Teta (grandmother) did not have the right to return to the land where she was born. Recognizing my own privilege as the holder of a U.S. passport, with numerous academic and cultural institutions at my back, and appearance and accent more identifiably American than Arab, I decided it would be a form of self-censorship, a self-imposed restriction on movement, not to go.

But what could I really see by visiting? When I speak with the artist Yazan Khalili, who, as artistic director of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, must be accustomed to artists, curators, and writers taking one-day trips to Ramallah at the end of a week in Tel Aviv, he bitterly references the 2008 film *Je veux voir*, wherein Catherine Deneuve "wants to see" the ruins of south Lebanon after the recent Israeli assault. As if merely being there were sufficient for seeing, as if seeing amounted to experiencing, to knowing. I am reminded of another film, *Hiroshima mon amour*, and the refrain, "you have seen nothing in Hiroshima," spoken by a Japanese man to his lover, a French woman.<sup>(1)</sup>

One can speak of seeing Palestine in another way. There is a dialectic of seeing and *unseeing*, as the British author of speculative fiction China Miéville writes in *The City & The City*, his 2009 detective novel about two city-states that share the same physical space but whose residents are prohibited from consciously seeing the other city. The state of Israel facilitates a never-ending process of unseeing: forever constructing the apartheid wall ("security barrier"); displacing Palestinians and renaming the sites on which their villages stood ("Judaization"); destroying long-cultivated Palestinian farmland and planting non-native trees ("making the desert bloom"); erasing the identities of Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship and reside within the state's 1949 borders ("Israeli Arabs"); and so on.

At the same time, Jews and Palestinians living everywhere in Palestine-Israel are

always devising ways of seeing, against the state. Palestinian artists Emily Jacir, Jumana Emil Abboud, and Nida Sinnokrot have each used the same DIY trick—slicing a hole in a bag and hiding a camera in the open slit—to document their passages through checkpoints and their interactions with Israeli soldiers. The Tel Aviv–based organization Zochrot ("remembering" in Hebrew) designed the app iNakba, which grafts crowd-sourced information about hundreds of Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948 onto a GPS-enabled map of present-day Israel/Palestine, and serves as a mnemonic device for those who did not live the catastrophe, or who grew up with its official repression.<sup>(2)</sup> The Israeli human rights organization B'tselem gives video cameras to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank to record the abuses of settlers and soldiers, and artists like Arkadi Zaidés, a choreographer who meticulously reenacted movements from the resulting videos, have incorporated elements from this archive into their work, refusing to separate their own bodies from the routine acts of violence committed in their names. Beyond the gestures of witnessing, remembering, and embodying, seeing is also speculating: see Muhammad Jabali's *Jaffa 2030* project, which imagines young '48 Palestinians<sup>(3)</sup> returning to the city now affixed to Tel Aviv by a hyphen (Tel Aviv–Yafo) and by southward gentrification, for a more utopian vision of integration and cultural reclamation; or Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate*, a video that portrays a future state of Palestine as a luxury high-rise separating cities by level, for a more dystopian lens

onto neoliberal Palestinian nationalism.

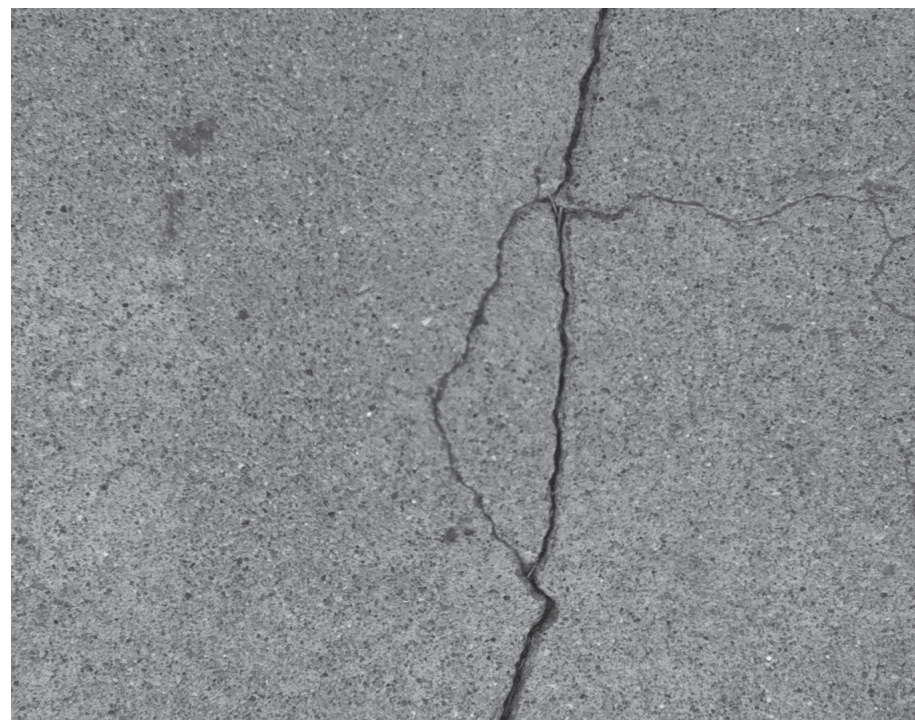
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In Haifa, in Jerusalem, in Ramallah, in Jaffa, I walk Israel and I walk Palestine. I walk Palestine and I walk Israel. These are not consecutive movements—as if there were two discrete terrains, "Israel proper" and "the (occupied) territories," let alone two contiguous states—but adjustments of posture, stances toward the facts on the ground, pivots from one identity position to another, leaps across time. I am as hyphenated, as contingent, as Israel-Palestine, Palestine-Israel, that which names both the wretched reality and the hopeful possibility of one state.<sup>(4)</sup> But I move through the country as an American: no political division of the land is off-bounds to me. I arrive at Ben Gurion Airport, stay the night in Jaffa, take a *sherut*<sup>(5)</sup> to Jerusalem, and soon after I am in Area A, those urban zones of the West Bank that Israelis are legally—though not strictly—prohibited to enter.

In Ramallah I am welcomed as a Palestinian, even a returnee, with a family story not unlike so many of the Palestinians I meet who grew up in Algeria, Bosnia, Lebanon, Kuwait, or the United States, and who came back after the Oslo Accords. Even theirs are not true returns to their parents' or grandparents' homes in Haifa, in Nazareth, in Palestine, but to those diminishing fragments of "the West Bank" tenuously controlled by the languishing Palestinian Authority. In the eyes of the Israeli state, however, I am not a Palestinian, and I can go back to Jerusalem each night, even avoiding the traffic at Qalandiyah<sup>(6)</sup> as I take the Hizme checkpoint (used mostly by settlers). As Yazan tells me, "It's not apartheid in black and white; it's apartheid in blue and green and white and yellow." ID cards, passports, and license plates define your identity—your precise coordinate in the spectrum of citizenship, fixing most Palestinians to an ever-waning portion of land or freeing someone like me to travel from the river to the sea with only the most minor of indignities that come with crossing checkpoints.

I understood this at one level, but I also imagined that in Israel's increasingly racist society, I who pass as white in (much of) the United States would suddenly be seen as black, as an Arab, a threat. Before I entered the country, I deleted hundreds of emails that included the words "Palestine" and "BDS,"<sup>(7)</sup> deactivated my Facebook and Twitter accounts, and even ripped pages out of my journal (a friend, also an American of Palestinian descent, had recently told me of her hours-long harassment by soldiers reveling in personal details from her diary). But I had no problems entering. And I quickly realized how light-skinned I was, in relation to the millions of Mizrahi Jews whose families hail from Morocco, Yemen, Iraq, Syria.

Yazan Khalili, *Cracks Remind Me of Roadkills*, photography and text, 2015



Only my first name betrays an Arabness that the great majority of Mizrachis in Israel have been trained to expel from their language, their customs, their relations. Until I offer it I am just another American tourist, enjoying my own, self-declared "birthright" to see the country in which my family lived only two generations ago.

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I wander East Jerusalem occasionally looking for the bus to Bethlehem, glad I don't know my way. I walk up and down Nablus Street and wonder if it winds northward all the way to the city of soap, knafeh, olive oil, a center of trade since the time of the Crusades, if not the preceding Caliphate. I loiter along Saleh e-Din Street, enter the Educational Bookstore (once owned by Edward Said's family), and buy another book I'll have to ship home—my suitcase is already stuffed, and I'm reluctant to fill it with any printed material that, upon search, might undermine my official purpose for visiting, "to research Israeli art." I consider buying a basket of figs from the women sitting in the shade supplied by limestone arches, but instead I think about what would have been here 70 years ago, if my mother's parents, then 12 or 15 years old, walked the same streets from their nearby homes. I don't have any stories from which to build images; my mom's father died when she was 10, and I have not yet been persistent enough to glean much of my Teta's Jerusalem childhood from my conversations with her in Beirut. So I ask for directions to Bethlehem and board a bus parked outside the Damascus Gate, in a lot that straddles the inconsequential Green Line. From my seat I hear another American, on the phone, introducing himself as a reporter as he makes calls about police relations with the Ethiopian community in south Tel Aviv, then gossiping with a friend about a prominent American Jewish journalist who has taken to Twitter to declare he will no longer read *Ha'aretz*.<sup>(8)</sup> I shrink a bit thinking of our noisy presence on this bus with Palestinians who traverse checkpoints daily, cramming into cagelike corridors, waiting for hours before dawn to get to work on time. But when we get off at Hebron Road, I ask my fellow passport-holder for directions to Manger Square.

I am not in Bethlehem to be a tourist, actually, though I do appreciate the multilingual Tourist's Guide to the Occupation posted outside the Peace Center, between the Church of the Nativity and the Mosque of Omar, and of course I step into the historic buildings and take my pictures of baby Jesus dioramas and posters made in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners on hunger strike. I am here to meet artists in the adjacent villages of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. So I get in a cab to meet Benjy, a painter in Beit Jala whom I know

little about. I don't have an address, or much command of Arabic, so once we're nearby I hand my phone over to the driver to speak with Benjy. We enter a scene from an Elia Suleiman film, a humble exercise in Arab slapstick: the driver, navigating windy 60-degree slopes, asks one pedestrian after another where the family home can be found. They lobby him with questions, they give him definitive answers, they label the last advice he got as nonsense, they ask to speak with Benjy, they promise they'll find it right away, no problem. My phone is passed off to a man in a Jeep while we circle around the street to let another car pass through the narrow road. We arrive half an hour later and the driver, excoriating Benjy for his poor directions, pleads with us for more money than I'm carrying. By now I've seen that the first street Benjy told him to drive down was the correct one, and everyone else in the village led him in circles, but we give him an extra 10 shekels nonetheless. I sit with Benjy, drink tea and chat with him as he touches up a painting in progress, and soon after get into another cab to Beit Sahour, where I will meet with Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti of Decolonizing Architecture.

I stay in Beit Sahour until 10pm, after

the towns and villages from which they were displaced in 1948 or 1967, it must be a cruel reminder of the sea that was once a short ride, a walk, a stone's throw away.

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My partner and I meet Rabbi Arik at a gas station down the hill from our Jerusalem apartment. He wears a t-shirt with the words "We are all Al-Araqib" written in Hebrew, English, and Arabic. In comfortingly American, if businesslike English, he asks our names, where we're from, why we're here, what we're researching. We continue the small talk in his SUV, taking the highway south toward Beersheba. Arik asks what we know about Al-Araqib. I tell him I've heard that the village has just been demolished for the 100th time, that I know it's one of 35 Bedouin villages unrecognized by the state, that I first heard of it through Eyal Weizman, whose book *The Conflict Shoreline* treats the destruction of Bedouin villages as a colonial policy of planned climate change—"Making the desert bloom," per the Zionist trope. He nods and tells a much longer story, about the Land Expropriations Act of 1953, about the papers the village residents hold from

Palestinians in the Naqab stand their ground. Still, I understand our presence, which one police officer tries to dissuade by demanding our names and passports, is a source of both encouragement and, thanks to our cameras and networks, protection for the people of Al-Araqib.

Aziz, the generous, resilient son of the village sheikh, is effusive in his praise of Arik, other Jewish Israeli activists, and the international visitors who join them. He invites us into a van to enjoy a few minutes of air-conditioning, using the time to tell the story of the village's displacement. He thanks us colorfully, explaining, "We are the van—and the Jews who join us are the diesel. We need you to keep going." I think of Aziz's metaphor again on the drive back to Jerusalem, when my partner asks Arik why he made *aliyah*,<sup>(9)</sup> and, explaining his Zionism as an expression of *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world"). He replies, "I wanted to be here as the rubber hit the road." The response expresses hope from a position I find hard to comprehend, one that would lubricate the tires of a state I cannot but see as settler-colonial in its origins and its policies. Still, wherever that particular state vehicle is going, the vans that run on a perpendicular road are fueled by the co-resistance of people like

a powerful, Palestinian-led grassroots movement presently demanding what has been denied Palestinians with every round of "peace negotiations," it should be encouraging to see positions "harden" around basic human rights. Nonetheless, I believe the Israeli liberal's anxiety—whatever one thinks of its predominance in American political discourse—has legitimate basis in the loss of a desired co-existence, which is threatened simultaneously by Israel's segregationist policies and by the increasingly confident demands for Palestinian rights not met by a state apparatus with which the liberal more and more tenuously identifies.

Let us acknowledge that Palestinians and Israelis can only "co-exist" when Israelis recognize and fight for the rights of Palestinians; but equally, let us preserve the image, however virtual, however allegorical, it may be for now, of talking, working, walking, dancing, making art together, beyond the terms and coordinates of the present struggle, in a space where the difference between co-existence and co-resistance is, finally, only semantic.

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Larissa Sansour, "Nation Estate—Jerusalem Floor," C-print, 75x150cm, 2012

the buses to Jerusalem have stopped running. So Alessandro drives me to Checkpoint 300, as it's called, and I plan to catch a cab on the other side. (When one takes a bus from the West Bank into Israel, the passengers all disembark, stand in line at the checkpoint while the vehicle is searched and bomb-swiped, then mount it again on the other side, which is not the other side of the Green Line, but an area known as the Seam Zone that has been effectively annexed and designated Israel.) I walk through a long, empty passageway, concrete walls by my sides and steel bars above my head, imagining the throngs packed in prisonlike limbo each morning. When I exit, I walk to my right, where I see an Israeli soldier waving cars through, but no cabs waiting. The soldier shouts at me. An instant later, before I understand what the soldier is saying, Benjy appears on his bike, and yells, pointing behind me, "Kareem, that way!" I dumbly wave at him and the soldier, wondering what kind of danger I just placed myself in, turn around, and enter what I realize is the continuation of the checkpoint. Eager to escape the cage, I had forgotten that I hadn't shown my passport to a soldier. I continue through, handing it over to another 20-year-old in uniform, and notice a Ministry of Tourism poster depicting a smiling couple on the Tel Aviv beach. It offers a soothing vision for the tourist momentarily unnerved by an unpleasant border experience after journeying to the birthplace of Jesus. For the thousands of Palestinians issued temporary permits to labor across the so-called border, sometimes closer to

the Ottoman period, about a cemetery in Al-Araqib that shows—contra Israeli claims—their continued presence in the area since at least 1914.

As desert engulfs the highway, Arik tells us it's time to talk about whether we're "arrestable." We ask him to explain the consequences of an arrest. He says, for a non-Israeli, it would result in immediate expulsion—with a name like Kareem, he adds, it may mean never making it back in. Abashedly, we decide we are not arrestable, and Arik advises us to stay back when villagers and activists approach the police or the bulldozers. Then he hits the brakes. There is no exit in sight. But he turns confidently onto a gravelly dirt path, through a small gap in the railing, and two bulldozers and a police van appear in front of us. Arik starts to snap photos with his phone. We roll forward in a distracted jolt for a few hundred feet, and he parks on a dusty plateau. This is home for the residents of Al-Araqib: a couple plastic-tarp tents, a few benches in the shade, a van here, a sedan there, and a cemetery with a memorial plaque commemorating those killed in '48.

I won't dwell on the activity of protest that followed, the diffuse choreography of Bedouin and bulldozers inching across a vast chessboard of arid hills and valleys. These movements are practiced daily here, and my six hours under the desert sun, standing back while young boys and women put their bodies on the line, represent no more than a few seconds of squinting at the ways

Arik and Aziz, dedicated to the practices of *sumud* and *tikkun olam*.

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In Haifa, in Jaffa, in the headlines of *Ha'aretz's* culture section, there is talk of *co-existence*. The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement—and, incidentally, every Palestinian with whom I have spoken—rejects the term as implying a normalized status quo, preferring to speak of *co-resistance* rooted in the shared goals of dismantling the occupation apparatus, fighting legal discrimination within Israel, and supporting the right of refugees to return (to a multiply transformed country). In practice there are spaces and times where the significant semantic differences between the two slogans melt away, as Palestinians, Jewish Israelis, and an international coterie of students, activists, and artists drink Taybeh beer and dance to the electronic music a Palestinian-Israeli DJ plays in a Jaffa bar. But these are passing, and, for the great majority of Palestinians, inaccessible, glimpses of a time, space, and politics outside the governing state of affairs. Hence the semantic interval between co-existence and co-resistance remains, for now, a space to preserve, to occupy, to critique, to place in crisis.

American and Israeli liberals often complain of a "hardening of positions on both sides," referring to Palestinians and international solidarity activists on the one hand and the Israeli right and its American supporters on the other. With

(1) Jalal Toufic reflects on the resonance of this line from *Hiroshima mon amour* in the context of catastrophic events of war and dispossession throughout the Middle East in his remarkable book-length essay, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Forthcoming Books, 2009).

(2) For more information about the iNakba app, see: <http://www.zochrot.org/en/keyword/45323>.

(3) The term "48 Palestinians" designates Palestinian citizens of present-day Israel, i.e. those Palestinians who live in areas of historic Palestine constituted as Israel in 1948, while avoiding the awkwardness of a phrase thought to be oxymoronic, "Palestinian Israelis," and rejecting the negation of Palestinian identity operational in the commonly used "Israeli Arabs."

(4) For a rigorous schematic analysis of contemporary Israel/Palestine as "one system of control, one set of state apparatuses, and two distinct systems of governance," see Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *The One-State Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 19.

(5) A *sherut* is a service taxi, or shared van, that holds about 10 passengers and is typically operated by Palestinian citizens of Israel. The ride from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem costs 25 shekels (roughly \$6) per person, just slightly more than the state-run bus system.

(6) Located between Ramallah and Jerusalem, Qalandiya is a village, a refugee camp, and the main checkpoint through which Palestinians with Jerusalem residency cards or permits to enter Israel must cross to access Jerusalem.

(7) BDS is the acronym for the international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, launched by a coalition of Palestinian civil society organizations in 2005. See <https://bdsmovement.net/>. During my visit, the Israeli government announced the formation of a task force to prevent BDS activists from entering the country, and to deport those who had entered. See Barak Ravid, "Israel Seeking to Deport Foreign Pro-Boycott Activists," *Ha'aretz*, August 7, 2016. <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.735719>.

(8) In response to an article in the left-liberal Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* titled "We're American Jewish Historians. This Is Why We've Left Zionism behind," *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg tweeted, among other things, "I think I'm getting ready to leave *Ha'aretz* behind, actually."

(9) One of the central tenets of Zionism, *aliyah* (Hebrew for "ascent") names the act of immigrating to the Land of Israel.

(10) Arabic for "steadfastness," *sumud* connotes Palestinian rootedness, resilience, and resistance to the injustices of the occupation.