

**SING FOR ME**

SAMA WAHAM

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## **Abstract**

*Sing for me* is a contemplation of the notion of belonging, connecting with heritage in the form of an inherited nostalgia, while investigating the viewpoint of fractured diasporic identities and ethnic solidarity, and meditating on a fading ancient practice that sends its roots back to the depth of Babylonian history. A personal reflexive lens that departs from loss and follows a river to meet Baghdad, the film travels through shared family memory, a collage of stories and old footage that provide a glimpse of Iraq's modern history and its defeated dreams of a modern and just society, broken by decades of severe dictatorship that have led to a culture of violence, ongoing genocides and religious extremism.

The journey is guided by a familiar voice from the past, found on an old audiotape in an abandoned box, to a new exposition of 'home'.

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## **Introduction**

The inspiration behind this story must have been an accumulation of various episodic memories. For me, a collection of poems, reflections and emotions had been brewing in my thoughts, and shortly after the start of courses in the fall of 2013, they surfaced in the form of my commitment to wanting to make this film as my master's thesis project.

Everything I had worked on prior to this film in my short projects had been an exploration of the 'other', someone with a challenge or a difference. In my short films *Ramp* (2012), *Resight* (2012) and *Bajoo* (2014), I focused on investigating the notion of special needs in stories that were narrated by visual compositions, evocative scores, and unconventional perspectives. I have always been attracted to poetic documentaries, and enjoyed exploring new concepts that are foreign to me through an observant lens that tries to dive into the subjects' viewpoints as they narrate their story. But my long-term objective has been trying to find a new storytelling fusion, and attempting to combine various hybrid elements that could be interwoven to relate a personal journey.

Shortly before the start of classes at York University in 2013, I started thinking about a new story, with new themes and concepts that I had never worked on in the past: a personal quest to connect with my family's roots, homeland, and identity, and a story of a generation that was given up for adoption by a war-torn country, facing its birth parent, their homeland, while following a river of nostalgia that narrates the story.

## Themes

### Baghdad

*Baghdad,  
Our lives that have passed,  
Baghdad is a lost epoch that will not return.  
-Lamea Abbas Amara <sup>1</sup>*

I was born in Baghdad, and was less than a year old when my parents decided to leave Iraq as a result of the political strife and pressure applied by Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. Since then, I have visited Iraq for a total of a few weeks spread over three very short vacations when my grandparents were still alive.

I have traveled, lived in, and formed memories in many places, and grew up in cultures that were distant from my family's own, alienated from the foreign concept of homeland. My childhood was awash in my father's nostalgia and dreams of returning to Iraq one day, and my mother's reserved silence towards his dream. Our less than a handful of visits to Iraq were short and always punctuated with incidents that did not allow me to understand my father's longing for that return.

I vividly remember landing in Baghdad's airport on one of our few visits. I was ten, and had not been to Iraq for over seven years. My brother and I were warned against saying anything about Saddam Hussein. My father did not come with us, and I thought it was because he could not have kept quiet about his disapproval of the regime. My mother was talking to the customs officer, and I was baffled by his rudeness. *This is supposed to be our home, it was in trouble, we left it, and now the*

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<sup>1</sup> Lamea Abbas Amara. "Baghdad", Colloquilly. (n.p. 1973)

*officer does not like us*, were the only thoughts that wandered in my mind at the time.

That officer's hostility towards my mother and everyone who *betrayed the Ba'ath* and left the country seems to be my first encounter with any form of ethnic solidarity. *He speaks perfect Iraqi*, I thought to myself. Everyone around me did. I was no longer the only Iraqi in class; my sense of foreignness faded into the culturally monochromatic scene that welcomed us, with rudeness and antipathy. I snuck out of the arrivals area without anyone noticing, to the clear glass partition walls where families waited for their loved ones to arrive, and immediately knew where to head; there was a cheering crowd of over twenty people waiting for us. For me! I had seen their faces before in pictures. I had read their letters to my parents and me. I knew their handwriting.

I remember running spontaneously to that glass door with an uncontrollable smile that was greeted with tears that I did not know how to react to. I was busy trying to figure out where the exit was, while studying their faces and their incredible resemblance to my parents' faces and voices. *What a miracle!* One person's voice stood out. It was a familiar voice that I had not forgotten for some reason: my grandfather's.

As far as I can recall, that was the closest I had ever gotten in touch with my inner Iraqi without pushing her away. I internalized my connection with that moment and I remember feeling grounded, with an ease that was beyond my grasp at the time.



## **Yardena**

My family belongs to a minority that only exists in Iraq and southern Iran in present times, known as the *Mandaeans* – described by various sources as the original followers of John the Baptist who still perform their rituals the way he did thousands of years ago and recite his very words in Mandaic and Aramaic. To this day, the Mandaeans only baptize in running rivers, which are referred to in their prayers and recitations as *Yardena* - Aramaic and Hebrew for Jordan River, where John the Baptist first spoke to them, baptized them, and asked them to address *Yardena* as a witness of their prayers and purity.

Mandaeans existed well over 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. Some consider the fact that they still exist and perform their ancient rituals today a miracle, especially due to the fact that holding weapons, including for self-defense purposes, is forbidden in the essence of the religion. Moreover, people cannot convert to Mandaeanism; a person has to be born to two Mandaean parents to be Mandaean.

My first encounter with Mandaeanism followed a family loss. I had never witnessed a Mandaean ritual prior to that time, due to my secular upbringing, but was pushed by a quest of healing to get in touch with that part of my heritage. I started learning more about the religion and researching it in what seemed like a newly surfacing interest in history – Middle Eastern and Mesopotamian history specifically.

There are a number of relatives that I only met for the first time after the passing of my brother in 2003; relatives that had left Iraq and the Middle East decades ago to settle in Europe and the States. The concepts of loss, family stories,

and shared memories were all deeply intertwined with this newly discovered research for me, all of which were forms of investigating a new sense of communal identity that I was unfamiliar with, yet was comfortably able to identify with. Once again, the child in me looked around every time they visited, and stared at the ethnic, linguistic, and physical resemblance in amazement.

## **Production**

I was encouraged by Professors Brenda Longfellow and Phil Hoffman to pursue this story and continue developing it. By the time we proposed our films in front of the production faculty, I had drafted a short poetic documentary's treatment that was based on a journey that follows a river to Baghdad, interwoven with interviews that contextualized the trip and narrated a brief history of modern Iraq, following visuals from a Mandaean baptism to the meaning of belonging. I was determined to go to Baghdad that following summer. I started contacting potential subjects and connecting with various Iraqi artists, musicians and writers, most of whom were very receptive and welcomed being interviewed for the film.

I imagined returning. I anticipated, longed for and feared that trip, before even deeming it feasible. In my mind, I enacted my journey from Toronto to southern Iraq, and from southern Iraq to Baghdad. I picked my angles, framed many shots and rolled my imaginary camera on silhouette compositions by the Tigris and Euphrates. I based my story on that romanticized journey and started planning and building a bridge of trusted contacts there, despite the objection of everyone around me due to the lack of stability and increasing violence in the country. I was convinced that the film would be incomplete without my trip to Baghdad, and that one's identity quest is never resolved unless one faces that 'birth parent', despite perhaps knowing on some level that I would not fit in or feel at home; that my trip would be an encounter with another form of displacement.

My plans were overthrown by the sudden outburst of violence in Iraq, when ISIS invaded the city of Mosul in June of 2014. My trip plans started fading away as

the extremists spread in northern Iraq, invading more areas. The chances of the violence decreasing any time in the near future were declining by the hour.

While I stayed in touch with my contacts in Iraq, I decided to start reconstructing my story and basing it on an imagined return to Baghdad.

### **Jiddo! (Grandpa)**

*Recorded in the past and played in the present... The foregrounded letters, photographs and audiotapes often call attention to the means by which people in exile negotiate cultural identity.*

*-Ella Shohat<sup>2</sup>*

While researching the topic and looking for references and old family photos, I found an old audio-cassette that had “*Parents’ recording - Baghdad – 1979*” written on it in faded ink in Arabic. I did not know what to expect or how much of it would be useable in my story. I could not have predicted the impact it would have on me.

I played both sides to find out that it was an audio letter addressed to my mother from my late grandfather, grandmother, and my aunts. They recorded it and mailed to her shortly after we left Iraq in 1979. Listening to it was a weighty emotional experience beyond my expectations. It took several rounds of going through the material for me to be able to work with it. I did not initially realize that the ending was addressed to me. It was surreal to listen to my grandfather talking to me about my career, singing for me, and asking me to join and sing with him. I immediately knew that my film had just transformed into a much more personal journey into my *Iraqiness*, the meaning of belonging, and everything surrounding it.

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<sup>2</sup> Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*. (London: Duke University Press, 2006) 309.

It did not take much time processing the letter before I decided that I would base the treatment of the film on a virtual conversation between my grandfather and me.

I had already started contacting some relatives seeking assistance, references, and connections regarding my research about Mandaeanism, as well as my journey to Iraq. After reworking my story's basic treatment based on the new elements, I reconnected with them regarding interviewing them for the film. I felt that their familiar voices, memories of Baghdad and my grandfather, along with their knowledge and research in Mandaeanism, was precisely what I needed to assemble my personal narrative of that fictional Baghdad, the imagined return, and the meaning of belonging.

Shortly after that, I experimented with this treatment for the Graduate Symposium presentation, and while the footage sampler was missing quite a few elements, such as the interviews and the archival footage, I still felt that the emotional impact was on the correct path, and decided to continue working on my narration, the story structure, and treatment accordingly.

### **July 2014 – Cambridge, Ontario**

Two weeks before the event, I learned that the head Mandaean Priest and spiritual leader, Father Sattar J. Helou, was going to be in Canada for a short visit to perform a mass-baptism in Cambridge, Ontario – the site of my first baptism years ago. I immediately began organizing what ended up being our first production day, and one of the pillars of the baptism footage in the film.

I had the privilege of collaborating with the acclaimed director of photography Duraid Munajim on this shoot, and despite it being the only day that he was able to film with us and lead the camera team, his contribution to the film was imperative in calibrating the visual tone and setting the bar for the remainder of the production phase. We each had a camera on that shoot, and filmed what ended up being two different perspectives and visual understandings of the event that complemented each other tremendously, and laid down an essential foundation for the following production days.

### **August 2014 – Novi, Michigan**

The second production day took place in Novi, Michigan, a few weeks after the first shoot in Cambridge. I was in touch with a Mandaean priest in Detroit and co-planned the shoot with him, based on the fact that there was to be a number of people getting baptized. A crew of four and I arrived there on a Saturday evening and decided to head to the location immediately prior to unloading the car and settling at the hotel, to take photos and start sketching our angles and compositions. Upon arriving at the location, I received a call from the priest informing me that the baptism had been cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances.

Needless to say, overcoming that disappointing hurdle after all the arrangements and travelling was a draining task. After a number of hours and a few phone calls, the priest finally agreed to baptize one person for the shoot the next morning; however the baptism was to take place in a new location that we were not familiar with.

We arrived at the location early the next morning and started setting up. Two priests arrived with their assistants and the person who was going to get baptized. The main obstacle that was instantly clear to me at that moment was the fact that it would be a short ritual, and that we drove from Toronto to Detroit to capture less than one hour of footage. However, in an attempt to optimize the trip, I realized that this was a great opportunity to capture clean audio and uninterrupted visuals, unlike in the previous location shoot where there was a large crowd, uncontrollable ambient noise, and unexpected movements in the frame. Since we only had an hour to take advantage of that situation, in addition to my co-cinematographer, I asked our camera assistant to use our back up DSLR and we each positioned ourselves in different angles of the subjects. The baptism ritual took about 45 minutes, during which we were able to capture it from various angles and with clean and useable location sound. Before wrapping, I asked the priest to recite verses from the prayer book in front of the river.

### **September 2014 – Novi, Michigan**

Over the following days I stayed in contact with the priest and learned that there was going to be another baptism event that would take place two weeks after our initial trip to Novi. The event was a large Mandaean gathering during which over fifty people would get baptized, followed by two wedding ceremonies. We rolled non-stop from 9:00 am until 4:00 pm, capturing various steps of the mass baptism, the priests' prayers that preceded the baptisms, various moments during the event

and rituals from our two camera angles, despite the location sound not being entirely useable as it was getting more and more crowded by the hour.

As the third and last of the baptism production days rolled around, we were far more acquainted with the dynamics and steps of the rituals around us, more equipped with pre-planned decisions regarding the angles and compositions that were missing from the first two shoots and able to tackle some of the visual and audio difficulties by choosing selected frames and steps of the rituals within the crowded event.

### **New York, New Jersey, Toronto Interviews**

The subjects that I had contacted for this film were all professionals in their fields, who had dedicated decades of their lives into studying and researching Mandaeanism, the history of Iraq, and Iraqi literature and art, each in a different stream and field.

While assisting me with my research about Mandaeanism, I wanted to use the interviews to contextualize the baptism visuals and briefly explain the history of Mandaeanism and its survival from Mesopotamia until modern times. In addition to Mandaeanism, I also wanted to interview them about their memories of Baghdad and personal definitions of homeland in order to create a journey of thoughts and images that trace their stories into the place where my own story was heading.

The challenge that I faced in trying to piece together a coherent narrative from the interviews is that Mandaeanism is a vast topic, a very broad and intricate research, as is the modern history of Iraq.



I decided to consider those topics from a very personal viewpoint of the interviewees, and then my own. The subjects were close relatives that contributed to both my research as well as my interest in history and Mandaeanism over the years. The conversations were about Mandaeanism, Baghdad, the meaning of homeland, and shared family memories. I also discussed my potential upcoming trip to Iraq with them, as two of the interviewees were people who were involved with assisting minorities in Iraq and facilitating their immigration, as well as refugee applications and connections with various United Nations offices and organizations.

Two of the subjects were spiritual individuals who were passionate about Mandaeanism and the discussion of spirituality, whereas the other two were much more secular and inclined toward atheism in their personal beliefs. I felt that this medley of voices reflected an assortment of questions and an inner dialogue that I was personally experiencing and wanted to foreground.

Much like my parents', my relatives' departures were abrupt and difficult. The one topic that seemed to combine their voices in harmony was Baghdad. Their nostalgia for an old Iraq was one of the most sentimental segments in all the interviews, and it seemed to always emphasize a mournful truth: that there is a Baghdad we will never regain, leaving us with a stateless idealization, and a longing to a time and place that is either gone or yet to come.

Another uniting point was that they were all pointedly against the trip, whether it was to Baghdad or to southern Iraq. The persecution and violence that Iraqi minorities were undergoing everywhere in Iraq, especially towards Mandaeans, was far more than that which the global media was acknowledging.

There were daily incidents of violent assaults and kidnappings for ransom in various Iraqi cities, most of which ending in what can only be described as tragedy.

## Cinematography

*Let images and sounds present themselves spontaneously  
to your eyes and ears as words do to  
the spirit of a creative writer  
Make visible what, without you, might never  
have been seen*

*-Robert Bresson<sup>3</sup>*

I often visualize compositions before concepts and stories. I frame shots, change lenses, experiment with the depth of field before drafting the first sentence of my synopsis. I entered the storytelling sphere through photography, and often catch myself wanting to make an entire film just to reach a certain frame that haunts me, which then undergoes a process of metamorphosis into many others, and eventually into a theme and a story. In this film, the first shot that started harassing my imagination was an underwater image of baptism, with clouds moving slowly behind the subjects until they leave the water and the camera continues pondering their absence. This shot might have been the first seed to an entire layer of the film, and trusting my non-linear pre-production practice, I let further shots invite me to consider other parts of the story as well. With the exception of working with Duraid, I have always led the small camera teams in my own projects which have, for the most part, been short documentaries thus far.

I always look for frames that can narrate stories independently and express viewpoints with both participant and observant lenses. I knew that I would need to rely on different perspectives to intercut the story, so it was important to have more than one angle in every shoot, including the interviews. I employed multiple

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<sup>3</sup> Bresson, Robert. Notes on the Cinematographer. Translated by Jonathan Griffin. (Los Angeles: Green Interger, 1997) 35-39.

underwater angles using GoPro cameras and various grip pieces that I rented, purchased, or made.

Communication was instrumental during the shoot, as various unpredictable factors kept pulling us in different directions. We switched lanes, changed plans, and improvised various shot lists on the go as the event was happening. My co-camera operator and myself alternated between wide and long lenses, as well as focusing on the steps of baptism, individual moments and vignettes that were surrounding the baptism. Having worked previously with Canons, I shot most of this film with a C100, C300, 5D MKIII, MKII and a 7D. However, I chose not to operate the camera during the interviews and decided to dedicate my full focus onto the conversation with the subject. I relied on two skilled camera operators to take over. We shot the interviews from two different angles and we composed each one to reveal part of their character, story and nostalgia.

### **Recreating Archival Footage**

*To rely on the reconstruction of found (often familiar) images, re-establishing the order, space, and time of those images. This re-establishing of context invited the viewer to re-examine the familiar, to understand the image in a larger context of production. The reality of the image is both asserted and disrupted. And you as filmmaker are positioned ultimately not so much as a documentarist representing the real but as a metacritic of both the image and the society that produces those images.*

*-Harun Farocki <sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Rascaroli, Laura. *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and The Essay Film*. London: (Wallflower Press, 2009) 52.

I personally found the Bolex-hand processing workshop to be one of the most engaging exercises, and I knew that I would revisit the method somehow in my thesis film when I formed a clearer plan. Upon reviewing my footage and the interview content I decided that I would like to recreate archival footage of baptisms and use it as part of the Mandaean history and personal memoir of the first baptism. With Phil Hoffman's generous guidance and help, I filmed some of the footage that I had shot digitally with a Bolex and hand processed it in the dark room.

My first experience with processing photos in a dark room goes back to 1998, during my undergraduate studies in Lebanon. Watching images emerge from nowhere and waiting for them to dry was probably my first encounter with visual storytelling. I have always found the organic and lively mechanism of hand-processing photos and footage in the dark room to be a different dimension of filmmaking. Waiting for the baptism footage to arise from the recreated past was almost another independent layer within this story, one that complemented the nostalgic quest and theme of the film. I am definitely satisfied with the result, to the extent that I tend to forget that these images descended from a digital parent.

Working with found footage was also an intriguing exercise that we were encouraged to experiment with in the production course along with various assignments that were catered towards supporting our thesis films' research and pre-production phases. In a different way, I had a comparable emotional experience with acquiring archival footage of old Baghdad for this film, sorting it out and editing it as I was shaping the story and structure. This was especially powerful for me since I had started researching and collecting that footage after resigning to the

idea that I was not going to be able to travel to Iraq at any point in the near or even perhaps distant future. The Baghdad that I was seeking was nothing but these images today; short clips that I was downloading, compressing, and moving around on a timeline that I created.

## **Water**

Water is a significant and a very present character in the film. I wanted to portray it as one of the subjects and tried to reflect that from the start of the production, through the various water compositions and underwater photography of both the baptism and the interviews. Since the very beginning of the development phase, I envisioned certain parts of the visual story to be shot as a reflection on water, especially used as a transition between the different elements. In various experiments I ended up shooting visuals as a reflection of an image, projected on a mirror in a pool in complete darkness. I experimented a great deal with the techniques before arriving at a result that was in line with my initial vision.

In her feedback notes to one of my cuts, Brenda Longfellow, my supervisor, complimented some of the visual treatments, but also described them as “distancing techniques”. I reflected on that description and felt that I could certainly relate to it. The images, techniques, and visuals that I was after were being fueled by various emotions and unspoken words that I was also masking and avoiding facing without any visual filters or cinematic excuses.

## **Iraq Footage**

Duraïd Munajim had connected me with an acclaimed Iraqi cinematographer, Ahmad Al Hilaly, with whom I collaborated to film and complete footage from Iraq. Ahmad lives in southern Iraq and thus he had access to areas that were much more stable than Baghdad and the north. We communicated on a daily basis for months until he completed the footage that we had discussed and mailed it to me on an external hard drive. Another surreal experience was reviewing the footage that I did not film, of an Iraq that I could not visit. Ahmad's cinematography blended seamlessly into the film. However, due to the increasing violence and mass-displacements in the area, the one thing that we had discussed that he was not able to shoot was a Mandaean baptism – a fact that I found upsetting yet heartbreakingly central to the core themes of my film, so I decided to incorporate it in the film's narration in a candid and direct way.

## Films

While studying various examples of diasporic voices, personal diaristic essays and autobiographical portraits of displacement, I was inspired by a number of films which I felt crossed paths closely with various elements of my research and treatment. One of which was Jonas Mekas, an essential reference in essay filmmaking, and I especially referred to *Lost, Lost, Lost* as a personal diary that contemplates immigration, the frustration and anxieties of displacement and the desperate quest for a new ground in which to grow roots.

I was quite inspired by Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* and the visual treatment of the photos and the dialogue between her voice and her mother's while exploring the renewal of friendship between the two during a brief family reunion. When placing my grandfather's voice I sketched some of the transitions between the different layers after her use and treatment of fragmented memories of diverse generations which express nostalgia and distance while rebuilding closeness in what I found an engaging layering of sound design and visuals.

I found the narrative structure of Elia Suleiman's *Homage by Assassination* to be a powerful representation of an exilic voice that was trapped in silence and constant failure in communication, while referring to the Palestinian dream of return through many visual elements.

As I started developing the story, I got to see a film by an emerging filmmaker Mais Darwazah, *My Love Awaits Me By the Sea*, a project that I felt was the closest to my vision in terms of concept, structure, and plot. I was easily able to relate to the visual style as well as the flow in relation to the development of the story. Her film is



a poetic documentary about a woman who takes a journey to her family's homeland, Palestine, to meet her imaginary lover *Hasan*, in a trip that also aims at exploring the concept of identity and return.

Similarly, Samir's film, *The Iraqi Odyssey*, is an important case study of family history, shared memories, and stories of departures and uprooting; it pieces together glimpses of the modern history of Iraq through interviews with relatives and close family members which I was inspired by. His film *Forget Baghdad* was one of the few references that I could find on Iraqi minorities, their involuntary departures, memories of abrupt displacement, and agonizing nostalgia for a time and place that no longer exists.

*Baghdad Twist* by Joe Balass is another film about Iraqi Jews that I found to be a powerful use of archival footage. His personalization of the found footage combined with family photos and his mother's voiceover was easy to relate to. I studied the way he repositioned and reframed the footage from various sources around the family memory as I experimented with early edits.

## **Editing**

I had to detach myself from the story many times in order to be able to analyze the structure as I was cutting, to better assess the story from different perspectives and ensure that I was delivering my viewpoint to the audience, and that what seemed clear and coherent to me was also comprehensible to others. My supervisor and committee's feedback was extremely helpful in highlighting all the junctures and crossroads that needed further detailing in order to convey the idea intelligibly.

Like most documentaries, the longest process of making this project was studying the footage, transcribing the interviews, and selecting both the visuals and the interview clips accordingly. At first, I started with constructing an hour-long cut consisting of wall-to-wall interviews, which formed the nucleus of the story's structure, and the main drive of the visuals. While continuing to trim and cut down the interviews, I also started to work on the visuals, focusing on following the actual steps of the baptism ritual. To test the visuals I sometimes place them on a timeline with a score without the contextualizing interviews, and try to evaluate the flow of the image and the pace of the story as a silent experimental treatment.

As the structure was slowly emerging, I wanted to maintain the concept of the journey to connect with a sense of belonging throughout the film as the constant main line of the story, and kept re-evaluating the basic arc and where the different layers should be intercut together. I continued trimming the interviews and began creating small vignettes of voiceovers and recurring baptism visuals based on both the content and the themes that form the main personal story. Interwoven with the

vignettes were clips from my grandfather's 1979 recording which I placed based on the narrative of the interviews, and where they would also act as an introduction and announce the following chapter of the story.

Parallel to the early stages of the assembly, I also started writing my own voiceover narration. To experiment with the method of treatment, I tried constructing a virtual conversation between my voiceover and my grandfather's for the Graduate Symposium presentation. I re-examined the treatment several times again after studying the interviews and as the film slowly emerged from various cuts.

The most challenging phase of editing was undoubtedly the final stage. I was quite attached to many elements – visuals and lines that continued fascinating me throughout all editing stages. Having to let go of some of them and revisit the film from a different viewpoint was an emotionally draining process that I was not sure I could successfully undertake in a timely manner. Part of me was liberated from the heavy weight of that attachment by letting go of the old title, which allowed me to eventually cut a shorter, more focused story, although the title *Yardena ~Baghdad~Yardena* remained the essence of the film and the summary of the journey.

## Conclusion

*In a strange way, the movement toward memoir, toward using memoir to resolve some of these anxieties of belonging, has liberated these authors, and many more of them, from the idea that one must choose one culture over another. Instead, we witness how the positive aspect of the “between” creates a rich narrative landscape from which writers, whether minorities, poets, or fiction writers, continue to explore and thus move beyond a singularizing diaspora consciousness.*

*-Persis Karim<sup>5</sup>*

The last sequence of clips meditates on a juxtaposition of images from various cities, where the troubled search inclines towards a new definition of belonging: a shared displacement. As the story travels between the different layers, it follows my grandfather's voice along with the various subjects' viewpoints as they shed light on brief segments of Iraq's modern history through the viewpoint of the Mandaean community. Just like the Tigris and Euphrates meet in the south, the secular and spiritual voices meet where my personal journey and quest ends: singing with my grandfather.

Recording and then mixing my voice in the studio in 2015 over his voice that was recorded in 1979 was a bizarre concept and experience, an unmatched healing exercise, and a revelation on many levels. I felt that all the stories and layers were ready to resign serenely to this ending, and I came to understand and perceive my journey differently.

While wondering about the future of Mandaeanism, and the diasporic threat to the community's survival and continuity, I contemplate the thought that they have still managed to pack their books and flee to peaceful countries where, for the

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<sup>5</sup> M.Oliver Rotger, *Identity, Diaspora and Return in American Literature* (New York, Routledge, 2015) 115

first time in centuries, they experience no threats. Whether the future generation's interest in this inheritance will be enough to maintain this "dispersed assembly" is a question that time will address. Today, I painted my homage to *Yardena*.

Perhaps identity is not a static, still image that emerges from nowhere in a dark room but is, in fact, a journey of seeking answers and crossing oceans in search of a sense of belonging that will always remain trapped between various inherited and recreated memories, languages, and cultures. Ella Shohat provides a compelling exploration of "peripheral" cultures that result from immigration and exile, characterizing the culture that results as one of "hybridity" and "syncretism." Both of these terms allow negotiations of multiplicity of identities as a result of displacements.<sup>6</sup> While communicating with Shohat's analysis of hybridity, Hamid Naficy also examines fluid exilic and diasporic identities in his work, while focusing on the psychological and philosophical implications of homecoming journeys, among the most of important of which are journeys of identity. Identity as a "process of becoming", an ever changing journeying and border crossing performance seems particularly apt to me at the end of my quest.

Much like a personal pursuit of belonging that submits to a place that does not exist, I have come close to resolving my diasporic identity paradox and deep longing to belong by submitting to a song that does not belong anywhere in time, place, or logic. It is an account that leads to a new reality and reconnects me with my

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<sup>6</sup>Ella Shohat, *Notes on the Post Colonial*, "Geopolitics and the Post-Colonial." (2004) n. pag. Web.

<sup>7</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema, Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (2001)

inner newly liberated Mesopotamian self as it claims its share of history and settles for cultural “in-between-ness”.

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## **Filmography**

*My love awaits me by the sea*, Mais Darwazah, Jordan, Germany, Palestine, Qatar, 2013

*Measures of Distance*, Mona Hatoum, United Kingdom, 1988

*Calendar*, Atom Egoyan, Canada, Armenia, Germany 1993

*Iraq in Fragments*-James Longley, USA, 2006

*Far From Poland*-Jil Godmilow, USA, 1984

*Homage by assassination*, Elia Suleiman, USA, 1992

*Lost, lost, lost*, Jonas Mekas, USA, 1976

*News from home*, Chantal Akerman, France, Belgium, West Germany, 1977

*Letter from Serbia*, Chris Marker, France, 1957

*Sans Soleil*, Chris Marker, France, 1983

*A Scent of Mint*, Pierre Sidaoui, Canada, 2002

*Baghdad Twist*, Joe Balass, Canada, 2007

*The Iraqi Odyssey*, Samir, Iraq, Switzerland, Germany, United Arab Emirates, 2014

*Forget Baghdad*, Samir, Germany, Switzerland, 2002

*Continuous Journey*, Ali Kazimi, Canada, 2004

*Passing Through/ Torn Formations*, Phil Hoffman, Canada, 1988