

BE/LONGING

AMIT BREUER

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Abstract

Be/longing follows Jaffa resident Amal Rihan – Palestinian citizen of the State of Israel, a devoted mother, divorced Muslim, and Arabic teacher – during one of the most challenging times of the year for Palestinian-Israelis: the days between Israel’s Memorial Day, for fallen soldiers, and Israel’s Independence Day. During these days, we also encounter Amal’s good friend, Mika, a Jewish Israeli, and the director of a mixed Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women’s choir. The choir performs once each year – at a joint memorial ceremony that commemorates both Israeli and Palestinian lives lost to the conflict in the region. Just as Mika’s choir strives to bring together disparate voices, Amal struggles to bring together the disparate strands of her identity: "For the Jews, I am Palestinian. For the Palestinians, I am Israeli. I ask myself, who am I? To whom do I belong?"

Against the backdrop of Jaffa, a mixed city annexed to Tel Aviv, the complexities and contradictions of Amal’s life unfold before us, and offer an intimate look at the questions raised about centrality of *place* in narratives of personal identity.

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A Complicated Place

The documentary form is no national language and not culturally specific either. Thus it is able to sustain non-national public spheres and therefore also the seeds for a political arena beyond national and cultural formations.

- Hito Steyerl

Be/longing follows Amal Rihan – a Palestinian citizen of the State of Israel, a resident of Jaffa, a devoted mother, divorced Muslim, and Arabic teacher – during one of the most challenging times of the year: the days between Israel’s Memorial Day for fallen soldiers and Israel’s Independence Day, which for Palestinians is the Nakba, the Catastrophe. The film unfolds against the backdrop of Jaffa, an old Palestinian city annexed to Tel Aviv since 1948 and now threatened by slow yet palpable gentrification.

Throughout the film, we see Amal’s attempts to reconcile tradition with modernity, to practice her feminism within a conservative community, and her Palestinian national identity within a Jewish-majority state. We follow Amal as she faces and reflects upon her multiple commitments – the political efforts and social risks in fighting for better relations between Jews and Palestinians. We follow Amal in more intimate encounters as well -- including a friendly meeting between Amal and her ex-husband’s current wife, Suzanne, cooking together and openly discussing their unusual connection as two women in a male-dominated society.

In the course of these days, we also encounter Amal’s good friend, Mika, a Jewish Israeli, who leads a choir of twenty Muslim, Jewish and Christian women – Rana. Each year, the Rana choir performs at a joint memorial that commemorates both the Israeli and Palestinian narratives of conflict and loss. Active since 2007 the choir members meet every week to rehearse, and hold many concerts within Israel and abroad.

Just as Mika's choir strives to bring together disparate voices, Amal struggles to bring together the disparate strands of her identity. A most telling moment is when Amal addresses the camera and says: "For the Jews, I am Palestinian. For the Palestinians, I am Israeli. I ask myself who am I? To whom do I belong?" Against the backdrop of Jaffa, a mixed city annexed to Tel Aviv, the complexities and contradictions, tensions and ambiguities of Amal's life unfold before us, offering an intimate and honest look at what it means to bear this question as central to her identity. Amal embodies the complexities of her place, of the ideal of the "mixed city" (Nir and Galili 2000) and its failure. I will elaborate this point briefly now, but I return to it in section two of this work.

As I propose below, a mixed town comprises, among other features, a shared yet contested "locus of memory, affiliation, and self-identification". Although the mixed town can be idealized as "enlightened, modern and progressive", the reality is closer to the mixed town as a locus of irresistible gentrification in which a dominant group takes every opportunity to "buttress its domination and expansion". (Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003, 673) In most cities like Nazareth or Acre, the lives and circumstances of Arabs and Jews are separated and stratified in education and housing opportunities. Whereas in the '50s and '60s Jaffa was settled by low-income Jews, many of whom were from Oriental countries, the Jewish majority in the city is now Ashkenazi, with many wealthy Jews living in high-end gated communities – Andromeda Hill for example.

Amal reflects the tension between the mixed town as an ideal, and the mixed town as a demographic and cultural reality. In her everyday relationships, her religious practices, her relationship with Mika, the director of the choir, Amal aims at enlightenment, modernization, progress; she is also politically engaged. But she lives disconsolately in a social and political

reality where the equity Amal aims at is contrary to the aims of the State and to the dominant conservative Jewish-Israeli culture.

My research relating to the film emerges from my interest in the status of women in the Middle East, an abiding concern that continues through my earlier films – films that are centred on women in the Middle East struggling for justice and independence in closed and oppressive societies. The current film centres on women who, by virtue of their place in the Middle East, who suffer, but at the same time make practical efforts to resist perpetuating the tradition of opposing State authority that began when they were under military rule of the State. Jaffa is not a “conflict zone” in the strict, military sense, but it *is* a place of ongoing daily conflicts, contradictions and disparities with which the women in the film – most pointedly so, Amal – are trying to come to terms.

In the course of the filmmaking I began to think about how I can show the effects of place, displacement, and social integration on personal identity. The film shows that living with a fractured self is the consequence of political and social displacement. The main character seeks integration, wants to be comfortable in Jaffa. But it is a home in which she can never be quite at home.

I had been an activist filmmaker and politically aware Jewish Israeli citizen, active for many years in demonstrations against the Israeli Occupation and its discrimination against Palestinians on either side of the Green Line of Israel; I was born and raised in Tel Aviv, a 10-minute drive from Amal’s house in Jaffa, yet I never thought of Jaffa as an occupied territory, nor felt the dichotomy of the dual identity of Palestinian inhabitants of the Jewish State. For years, I spent many evenings in Jaffa enjoying its excellent restaurants, beautiful galleries,

sunsets, and enjoyed many visits to homes of Jewish friends residing in old and renovated houses of magnificent Arab architecture.

It was only when I returned from Canada to Jaffa in February 2016 to research this project, that I “discovered” Palestinian Jaffa. Perhaps I was too close to see clearly; maybe my perspective was too “local” and too “Israeli.” Or maybe I was just a person oblivious to their environment. In any case, for me, this journey became a personal passage in better understanding better my own problematic identity, my identity as refracted in the making of this documentary.

I see myself in Amal, but wonder: am I just projecting or is the film the strong or truthful account it is meant to be? As a Canadian-Israeli who left Israel for Canada in 2004, I became an immigrant for the first time in my life. I had to make an effort to belong. A multicultural Canada has become my natural habitat – an environment I take for granted on a daily basis – but I become acutely aware of it every time I visit Israel. Directing the film and reading the literature about Jaffa, its history and its incompatible identities for Jews and Palestinians, I have now a deeper understanding of Amal, than when I was filming her a year ago. In any case, this journey became a work of coming to better understand my own multiple, sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary, identities. I also began appreciating the work of directing as a practice of self-reflection; about how filmmaking challenges and alters my formative beliefs and experiences

Self-Identification and the Violence of Coexistence

It was in my first semester of the graduate program, autumn 2016, that I began outlining my thesis project. I had come from a film-production background, with many years of experience internationally as a producer, but I had rarely had the opportunity to direct. Compared to the strict commercial environment I had been working in for the last twenty years, the graduate program was liberating; it exceeded the rigid guidelines that the documentary TV and film world impose. The need to think through my own project was liberating but also a challenge.

I knew I would go back to my country of origin to explore some questions / issues I was interested in; as an Israeli-Canadian residing in Canada since 2004 I had not filmed in Israel since immigrating. In my native country I had met many Palestinian women who lived in the West Bank, Galilee and Jerusalem, but hardly any from Jaffa; I was alienated from my hometown. I had had an abiding interest in portraying the strength of these Middle Eastern women, so starkly juxtaposed with their relative powerlessness socially and politically. I was also interested in demonstrating the commonality and cohesion between women in the region who surmount the barriers of difference of religions and nationalities.

Among my previous films that examine women's lives, *Purity* (2002) examines women's sexual life under the rigors of religious constraint; *Sentenced to Marriage* (2004) is a treatment of women struggling against the restrictions of the Jewish religious establishment to be legally divorced. For *Be/longing*, I had decided to again take up that type of narrative as a continuation of my previous work centered on women in the Middle East struggling for justice and independence in closed and oppressive societies.

Amal's own question of identity – or perhaps, her complaint – as she expresses it in the film cannot be adequately understood except when viewed against the “meaning” of Jaffa. For

David Harvey Jaffa is an instance of creative destruction (Harvey 1991); for Al Sayyad, it is a site of bi-national hybrid urbanism (Al Sayyad 2001); for Montereescu, among others, it is a mixed town – a term widely used in Israel. It is an urban space that sheds light on what Montereescu aptly calls “the violence of coexistence” (Montereescu 2016)

For Harvey, Jaffa “encompasses a heterogeneous variety of historical neighborhoods and new residential quarters alongside gated communities and luxury projects often built on the ruins of previously demolished Arab houses.” (Harvey 1991, 7).

Harvey depicts Jaffa’s heterogeneity as an urban pastiche, a geographical and demographic palimpsest. For Montereescu, Jaffa encompasses more than a geographical element. His definition of the mixed town is “two pronged”:

“One element of it is a straightforward sociodemographic reality: a certain ethnic mix in housing zones, ongoing neighbourly relations, socioeconomic proximity, and various modes of joint sociality. The second element is discursive, namely, a consciousness-based proximity whereby individuals and groups on both sides share elements of identity, symbolic traits, and cultural markers, which signify the mixed town as a shared yet contested locus of memory, affiliation, and self-identification.” (Montereescu 2016)

The idea of a mixed town points to an intertwining of a sociodemographic reality and a complex discourse. Jaffa is a “mixture” not only ethnically or sociodemographically. It means that the place that is Jaffa and the discourse that is Jaffa cannot be separated from each other.

In their contribution to the journal *Society and Space*, Yiftachel and Yacobi make the important point of the mixed city that, though Jews and Arabs occupy the same “urban jurisdiction,” mixed spaces are both exceptional and involuntary. These urban spaces are not depicted (as other writers portray the city) as the heart of enlightenment, modernization, progress, and...politics. Rather the mixed city is an “ethnocratic” space “that stems from the exclusionary Israeli-Jewish national identity, which works to essentialize and segregate Arabs

and Jews, where a dominant group appropriates the city apparatus to buttress its domination and expansion” (Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003, 673).

Prior to 1948 (The year the State of Israel was established) Jaffa was part of network of modern coastal cities – alongside other Palestinian cities like Ramle, Acre, and Haifa – that rose to prominence in the first half of the twentieth century, only to devolve into poverty after the establishment of the state of Israel (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993). With over 90% of the 70,000 Palestinian inhabitants who have lived in Jaffa prior to 1948 in exile, the early years of Israeli statehood saw the final transformation of Jaffa from an Arab to a predominantly Jewish town. In the 1950s Jaffa’s Muslim population was reduced to about a fifth of its original size, and the Jewish population tripled (Khazzoom 2008, 3). The Jewish immigrants were divided into two socioeconomic groups -- Easterners from Muslim countries known collectively as *Mizrahim* and Westerners from Christian countries known collectively as *Ashkenazim* (Khazzoom 2008, 4). Khazzoom also points out that “the *Mizrahim* were evaluated simultaneously as a group and as individuals at the communal level, all Mizrahim were taken as Eastern and signaled a negative contribution to the collective” (Khazzoom 2008, 7).

In Israel, higher-status occupations were often seen as representing the modernity and Westernness of Israeli society; as such they seemed appropriate for people who were not only technically qualified but also culturally Western, or at least European. Patterns of ethnic preference were not incidental but rather central to the formation of this modern industrialized society, as a modern industrialized society and a Western entity (Khazzoom 2008, 9). This distinction signals the orientalising (Said, 2003) of Israel in general and Jaffa in particular. In 1950, Jaffa lost its autonomous municipal status and was annexed to Tel Aviv; it has become the

“Arab neighbourhood” of Tel Aviv. On the process of annexation Monterescu cites a *Yediot* newspaper article in December 1949 that conveys the following sentiment:

“Truly we knew that Jaffa’s pedigree is prestigious and important...while Tel Aviv was founded only in 1909. Thus it is difficult for us to change the name of Tel Aviv to Jaffa-Tel Aviv...if we are to give a name to the two merged cities let it be Tel Aviv-Jaffa and not vice versa.” (Monterescu 2015, 78)

Since the mid 80s Jaffa has seen a surge of neo-liberal urban renewal. Part of this plan was to demolish many parts of the Old City and re-invent it as an artists’ colony. As many new Jewish immigrants from Europe and Middle East settled in the city, the Palestinian population became an urban minority faced with a shortage of housing, a poor education system, a high crime rate and severe drug problems. In yet another transformation, as Monterescu argues, a look at daily life in Jaffa in the past 60 years illustrates how the Jewish-Arab city changed from a site of ethnic violence and social marginality – a radical marker of a cultural alterity in the postwar public landscape – to a symbol of urban desire for liberal gentrifiers in search of Oriental authenticity and spatial capital. (Monterescu 2015, 21)

Since the 1990s the emergence of gated communities in Jaffa like the Andromeda Hill project has signaled new modes of urban exclusion. (Andromeda Hill is the neighborhood on screen when Amal is walking from her school to meet Mika in a nearby café). Walking in Jaffa today it is very easy to distinguish between the relatively new posh Jewish houses and the very basic housing conditions in which Arab citizens like Amal live.

In September 2000, Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount – an act seen by Palestinians as highly provocative. In October 2000 a series of protests in Arab cities and towns in Northern Israel turned violent; Israeli Arabs throughout the country began rioting. This led to counter-rioting by Israeli Jews and clashes with the police. Palestinian demonstrators, throwing stones at police, were dispersed by the Israeli army, using tear gas and rubber bullets.

The incidents ended in the deaths of 13 Arab demonstrators. Most of the Israeli riots took place towards the end, between October 7 and October 9, 2000. The *Or* special commission was established to investigate the police response to the rioting and the Al Aqsa intifada that was the second Palestinian uprising against Israel – a period of intensified Israeli–Palestinian violence. Since these two dramatic events, the Palestinian communal mobilization has become increasingly visible in Jaffa. However, it is no match for the market forces which threaten to Judaize the city.

If one thread of a “discourse of resistance” is violence, another is what Salim Tamari refers to as obsessive nostalgia (Tamari 2003). This thread of resistance is exemplified in attempts to “restore the city by reinventing dramatic public performances such as summer pilgrimage to Nabi Rubeen from pre- 1948 Jaffa ... Nabi Rubeen is a shrine some 25 km south of Jaffa, which attracted pilgrims from all over southern Palestine for a colorful three festival each summer.” (Tamari 2003, quoted in Monterescu 2007, 42)

This tradition is mentioned also by Adam LeBor who relays a somewhat more detailed account in *City of Oranges*. Nabi Rubeen, in LeBor’s account shows that not all resistance is violent.

One of the Jaffa-born kids now adult tells with passion about the days before the annual festival of Nabi Rubeen ...Nabi Rubeen took place every summer at a village of the same name , just south of Jaffa (today where Israeli Palmachim Kibbutz is based). It was built around a shrine where, according to tradition, Rubeen, the first son born to Jacob, was buried .Nabi Rubeen was one of the highlights of the year, a cross between a holiday camp and a spiritual and religious folk festival. Cloistered in their homes Arab women, especially, counted the days until it began, which gave them at least a week of freedom. ‘Either you take me to Nabi Rubeen, or you divorce

me...’ they threatened their husbands, only half joking... Musicians played, singers crooned popular love songs, poets declaimed their works...as Fadwa Hammami, one Palestinian woman remembers: ‘This was our family holiday, and we enjoyed it very much. If you ask anyone in Palestine about Nabi Rubeen they would love to have it again. (LeBor 2006, 101)

The resistance that Nabi Rubeen represents can be called “nostalgic” because, on one hand, it represents a tradition that speaks to the desire to “block modernization” (Bishara 1993). On the other, it is a tradition that has itself been “blocked”, or at least resisted, by modernization – perhaps transformed into obsession, as Tamari has suggested.

The example of Nabi Rubeen appears pointedly in *Be/longing*. Amal, is second generation post-Nakba. In one scene of the film Amal is talking during her Hebrew class to one of her students who identifies his hometown as the Israeli kibbutz named Palmachim, established upon the same location where the traditional Palestinian Nabi Rubeen celebration occurred. Amal fondly recounts Palestinian tradition with her Jewish Israeli students, sharing this account with a wistful smile and without anger. It has been pointed out to me, as well, that the shrine of al-Nabi Rubeen was torn down and reconsecrated as a Jewish holy site. Changing the name of Nabi Rubeen to Palmachim is itself an interestingly rich instance of re-placement and displacement, an interweaving of personal memories and politics. Amal was born in the early 70s and would have heard stories about Nabi Rubeen as it was prior to 1948 from her parents and grandparents.

Despite resistance, from 2000 onward the municipal policy in Jaffa vigorously promoted gentrification – mainly in the Ajami area, where Amal had lived with her husband. Today she lives nearby. Local Palestinian proprietors, as well as Israeli and international entrepreneurs build luxurious housing projects, some of which are gated communities marketed primarily to

wealthy Jewish and foreign and diplomats. With many Arab residents desperate for better housing, Ajami became a mixed neighbourhood again but this time with an ethnicized class gap between the local Palestinians residents and the Jewish gentrifiers.

Azmi Bishara accounts for the “ethnicized class gap” between Palestinians and Jewish gentrifiers this way:

“The path leading to modernization was blocked to the Palestinian minority because it lost its economic, political and cultural elites, and most importantly it lost the Palestinian city and remained a rural society that is dependent on labor in the Jewish city which does not absorb it. In the next stage, it lost village when it lost agriculture, and thus it remained neither urban, nor rural – this, it seems, is the Israeli ARAB [*sic*].” (Bishara 1993)

It is particularly interesting in light of *Be/longing* that the figure of the Arab that Bishara outlines shares Amal’s question of identity. Resonating with Amal’s account of herself, the Israeli Arab that remains in Jaffa is dispossessed; a being that is neither this nor that. By the same token, Amal embodies and expresses the experience of insubstantiality that delineates the figure of Bishara’s Israeli Arab. This negative identity marks the experience, the effect, of loss that came with the onslaught of gentrification and dispossession.

For Salim Tamari the mixed town is a model of urban oppression in which co-existence is contrived. Yet at the same time it stands as “a model for sustainable social policies with far-reaching implications for the future of peaceful co-existence in Israel/Palestine and beyond” (Tamari 2003, 25). In an article in *Ha’aretz* in 2000, mixed towns are reported to be deeply intertwined with the future of the State of Israel and its relation to its Palestinian citizens (Nir and Galili 2000). From this point of view the future of Israel and its Palestinian citizens is deeply ambivalent (Baumann 1991): will it resemble the model of urban oppression or bring sustainable social policies? Crudely applied to *Be/longing*, if the anger at the joint Memorial Day celebrations represents the model of oppression, then the choir and the joint Memorial Day

celebrations together represent, if not the model, then the vision, of sustainable social policies. In this regard Monterescu notes that recent developments in Jaffa point to new sites of political and cultural agency. More Jewish and Arab collaboration challenge the hegemonic Zionist and Orientalist imagining of the city. Few places like Yafa Café, Anna Loulou and more are enabling a shared vision for a bi-national future of “dialogue and recognition”. On one hand it is impossible to stand up to state efforts to Judaize the city, or to market forces of gentrification, the grassroots initiatives produce powerful discourses of resistance and symbolic re-Palestinization of the city from below. (Monterescu 2015, 96)

Since the 1990s, some Palestinian neighborhood activists like Sami Abu Shehade approached the onslaught of gentrification as a potential new partnership: “For dozens of years we were victims of neglect and now we are victims of development.”

Gentrification also brought to Jaffa Jews who are getting along well with Arabs and get along well with Arabs and are close politically...we live in a mixed reality and this is a blessing. Let’s see how we can develop a model for real shared life. (Shehade as quoted in Monterescu 2015, 128; original in Hebrew)

Socio-demographically, Jaffa is a place of ambivalence (Baumann 1991), of strangers (Monterescu 2015), or “collective strangeness” (Portugali 2000 as cited in Monterescu 2015, 241). Sociation in Jaffa is neither one of friendship nor of enmity; it is a complicated synthesis of both. But the synthesis is essentially problematic: the attributes ascribed to the mixed town throughout the literature cited above are incompatible – simultaneously urban oppression *and* model for the future; marker of cultural alterity *and* symbol of urban desire; comprising shared elements *and* contested spaces.

A notable exception to the metaphors for tension and contradiction, to the colonialist model in the literature on Jaffa, and in contrast to the formulation of the mixed town as contrived coexistence, as involuntary proximity, appears in an interview with Edward Said. On the eve of Al Aqsa Intifada, in what would be his last interview with an Israeli journalist, Said says:

“When you think about it, when you think about a Jew and a Palestinian not separately, but as part of a symphony, there is something magnificently imposing about it. A very rich, also very tragic, also in many ways a desperate history of extremes – opposites in the Hegelian sense – that is yet to receive its due. So what you are faced with is a kind of sublime grandeur of a series of tragedies, of losses of sacrifices, of pain that would take the brain of a Bach to figure out.” (as quoted in Monterescu 2015, 1)

There is a sublime grandeur (to borrow from the quote) in using the image of a symphony. The musical metaphor is particularly poignant in relation to the role of the choir in the film. In its optimism, the metaphor is akin the concept of “sustainable social policy” above. In the image of the “symphony”, Said is not recalling a past or projecting a future, but suggesting the unfolding of a sublime (a neither painless nor pretty) present.

The tensions and contradictions referred to above in social, political and demographic analyses of Jaffa have also been addressed in film. Of films that are relevant to my topic that also address these tensions and contradictions, I would like to mention four in particular.

A hit musical from the early 50s that later became a very successful film, *Kazablan* (1973), centered around the leader of a gang of Moroccan immigrants in Jaffa who falls in love with an *Ashkenazi* girl from a middle-class family. At that time these characters were considered an impossible match. The story ends with their marriage. I was quite young when I first saw *Kazablan*. Our household was culturally European and our concerns and attachments were to Western Europe; we did not have particularly strong attachments to Israel and our immediate

surroundings. In contrast, *Kazablan* conveyed conflicts and attachments that were specific to Jaffa. It removed Europe to, so to speak, the margins.

Amal participated in the Israeli feature film *Ajami*, shot in Jaffa in 2009. The film was nominated to the Oscars that year, co-directed by Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani, (Palestinian and Jewish Israeli, respectively). The film had a mix of real Jaffa residents like Amal and professional actors. Copti, who grew up in Jaffa, said in an interview from August 2006:

“The story of different identities at play among Arabs and different identities perspectives on life in Jaffa ... it’s a complicated place, hard to understand. I myself cannot figure out all the differences and the alienation between people, although they ostensibly belong to the same thing, the same location. Jaffa is called “Mother of the stranger” and people are indeed strangers to each other. Almost nothing bring them together.” (as quoted in Monterescu 2015, 92)

Monterescu says of Copti that:

“Against the metonymic violent expansion of Zionist ideologies and institutional arrogance, but also contrary to notions of Palestinian local patriotism and communal solidarity, he posits the “perspective” of strangeness and alienation. Copti’s intervention and the collective work of *Autobiography of the City* at large result in the denaturalization of Zionism’s key symbols and subversively disrupt respective national mythologies.” (Monterescu 2015, 93)

The recent history, as well as the social and cultural tensions between “different identities” in “a complicated place”, comes through particularly sharply and poignantly in Keren Yedaya’s film *Bride of the Sea* aka *Jaffa* and in Jacir’s *Salt of the Sea* (Yedaya 2009); (Annemarie Jacir 2008). In *Bride of The Sea* (By Keren Yedaya, Israel 2009) the film carries its Palestinian name and depicts the impossible love story, the tension between Arab and Jews, racism and humiliation. The beautiful mixture this city creates bubbles amid violence and tension. The end brings some optimism to the main couple’s child and, perhaps, a resolution to this love story. This film is a good picture of the mixed city and the subtext of tension between Arabs and Jewish Israelis living and working together.

In *Salt of the Sea* we follow Soraya, a Palestinian-American who decided to go to Palestine, where her family was exiled since 1948, and she is visiting her family house now inhabited by a young Jewish Israeli. The polite encounter becomes a moment of crisis for Soraya who realizes the deep loss of her family, of her people.

Natural Language and the Language of Documentary Form

At the cost of making this chapter longer than I anticipated, I would like to briefly address the topic of *language* as it appears in the literature about the displacement in the region of Arabic by Hebrew, and suggest its relation to documentary form as it applies to *Be/longing*. I have already mentioned one opening into the topic the film provides: the renaming of Nabi Rubeen to Palmachim – an instance of the displacement of the Arabic language by Hebrew. Another moment in the film that turns out to be more ambiguous, is the sequence in which Amal, her daughters, Yaffa Abouramadan and Ala Abouramadan, and her friend, Rola Far, are discussing their feelings about Memorial Day; they're speaking to each other in both Arabic and Hebrew. Following Shammas we could call this discussion an instance of "Hebrew imposing itself on the language of the Palestinian "other" under the misleadingly soothing guise of bilingualism" (Shammas 2007, 305). Here, Hebrew has imposed itself on Nabi Rubeen without an attempt to disguise the imposition as bilingualism. If we assume a stringent version of bilingualism, it is impossible to say *on the face of it* which of the two languages is the "other". If we assume that Hebrew has imposed itself, then we cannot also assume a strong version of bilingualism. Or, in Shammas' terms, we cannot be soothed by saying that the women are speaking in a combination of Hebrew and Arabic because they are "bilingual". Bilingualism is "soothing" only if we can't identify one or other of the languages as imposing itself.

Deleuze and Guattari ask: “how many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer (or not yet) even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve?” (Deleuze and Guattari c1986, 19). But when the women are talking about Memorial Day, when they speak Hebrew, are the women speaking a language that is not their own, or have they made Hebrew their own to the extent that they use it in a discussion about Memorial Day? What does it mean, for Amal to make Hebrew her own...?

Shammas, who lives in Ann Arbor, referred to a talk with his brother who lives in Australia. At one point in their conversation (conducted in Arabic) his brother uses a Hebrew word. Shammas says:

“A single Hebrew word inserted inside the Arabic sentence uttered in Sydney Australia might not signified much, but it’s certainly indicative of the process that started with the *Nakba* (“the disaster”) of the Palestinians, the Hebrew occupation was now complete., and what the state of Israel did in 1949 was declared a perfect triumph; not only the Hebrew language empty the land of its inhabitants, but it also rendered their language captive. Hebrew, did not only impose itself as a language of power and dispossession but, rather, it touched and altered the deep structure of the language of the Palestinians, who were left for some reason or another, inside the newly demarcated borders of their dispossessed life.” (Shammas 2007, 304)

The conversation among the women about Memorial Day is like Shammas’ conversation with his brother in Australia: a Hebrew word spoken by the women doesn’t mean much, unless you take it as indicative of a deeper process of alteration and dispossession. As we overhear the conversation between Amal, her friend and her daughter, Shammas’ reflections raise the question of significance: What is *signified* by the use of Hebrew in the conversation? What does it point to? Are the speakers living in a language that they know only “poorly”, as Deleuze and Guattari say? Are they serving a language imposed upon them? Are they dispossessed by the language or “possessed” by it, contained within what its borders will allow? These questions are implied for

viewers of *Be/longing* as they overhear the conversation between Amal, her friend and her daughter.

In *The Language of Documentary*, Hito Steyerl notes that:

“Documentary forms ... partake in the arousal of fear and feelings of ubiquitous threat. ... The general uncertainty catalysed by...political upheavals is channeled into simplifying clichés about others. Those pseudo-documentary images do not represent any reality in the first place. They tend to realise themselves instead within the political dynamics they originally helped to unleash. Stereotypical assumptions about so-called cultures can catalyse dangerous social dynamics and align reality step by step to its caricature. Those documentary assumptions become the more persuasive the more they rely on affective address and the more they abstain from the laborious arguments of rational judgement. They tend to overwhelm perception, but fail to introduce any reflection into it.” (Steyerl n.d. 7)

Without in any way trying to answer the questions implied by Shamma, Hito Steyerl warns of one of the risks of documentary practice – what she identifies as “pseudo-documentary”. The risk is that *Be/longing* will *caricature* the conversation; enforce and re-enforce the “stereotypical” assumption that the use of Hebrew words constitutes the dispossession of the speakers; the documentary risks producing a *clichéd* rather than reflective response towards the political dynamic it seeks to represent.

I think Steyerl illuminates the filmmaker’s risk – a risk that is mine as filmmaker – in *making* the documentary: the risk of reducing Amal and her circle into clichés and caricatures of oppression and dispossession. But I would suggest that Amal’s use of Hebrew is analogous to the way she inhabits her city: it is a home in which she can never be quite at home. Hebrew, is for Amal, the *unheimliche* language in which she can never be certain of what is most familiar. The next section is an account in outline of how for me as a filmmaker documentary practice amplified and sharpened the *uncertainties* that the conflict in Jaffa catalysed.

Documentary Filmmaking as Liberating Practice

I had recently begun to think about how my earlier work might have contributed to my decision to immigrate. In this section of my support paper, I address my professional background, and try to convey some sense of how my work grew out of my formative experiences in Israel. The recent work on the film I shot in Jaffa sharpened my insight and my discontent with the conventional narratives of that city, its culture and its significance in Israeli society.

I grew up in North Tel Aviv, a homogenous middle-to-upper middle-class environment, which consisted of Ashkenazi Jews, who were very Eurocentric and very Western-centered. The ethos was clear: the immediate environment was safe, even though “enemies” surrounded the country.

My milieu was a monolithic elite with a simple, clear narrative that was recited and uttered by white Jewish Ashkenazi voices – usually male with a military background. The members of this elitist society did not aspire to become a part of the Middle East. As a young teen, it never crossed my mind that there are other cultures, religions, minorities nearby. Arabic was a distant, foreign language. In my high school, for example, French was embraced – more so than English – as a second language and a beacon of culture. I travelled to Europe with my family even before visiting certain areas in Israel, and certainly not areas inhabited by minority communities.

The Israeli school curriculum for History is extremely Jewish centered. “History” mostly meant “The History of the Jewish People”. Ancient History included the old empires of the region from Babylon to ancient Greek and Rome and the focus was always on the history of the Jewish people in connection with biblical stories and holidays. For the most part, the curriculum on the ancient period ended in the first century with the Roman Exile. The next big chapter was

about the “Golden Age” of Spain, the Great Expulsion and Inquisition. We learned briefly about life in the Jewish diaspora (primarily focusing on suffering and atrocities in different parts of Europe, with very little attention to other areas). Then came contemporary history of the late 18th and 19th centuries with the main focus on the history of Zionism, the Holocaust and the establishment of the Israeli State.

The thrust of the narrative was always consistent and simple: Jewish history is fraught with atrocities. There were some great periods in ancient times when Jews had sovereignty, and some good ones in the diaspora – like the Middle Ages in Golden Age Spain, the emancipation in Europe, or certain kings in Russia or Italy who were good to the Jews. But these were temporary and followed by disasters like the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust. Throughout history, Jews were always the victims of injustice, cruelty and even extermination, as was the case of the unique genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany. The narrative was clearly aimed at establishing the importance and the success of the Zionist ideal and the State of Israel as the safe haven of and for the Jewish people.

I can think of two significant encounters that helped me discover alternatives to the one, official, narrative I had until then been exposed to. These two events and my university education, especially in general history, drove me to understand how much history was left out and twisted.

In 1980, travelling in South America, I was exposed, for the first time, to an indigenous fight for land and rights. I befriended a South African, Richard, an activist who left Apartheid South Africa and was traveling the world. A few months later, in 1981, he came to visit me in Israel. I was in my first year of university. It was with him that I visited the West Bank and Gaza

for the first time, meeting with refugees, seeing the Israeli occupation and learning about the other reality so near, yet so far from my earlier years, my education, etc.

There is another memory from the same time – a party in Paris. As I was talking to some political activists, I was shocked to see, for the first time in my life, a map of pre-1948 Palestine. It showed more than 400 Palestinian villages that disappeared after 1948.

I felt very much alone when I began trying to convince others that to make a change in their attitudes towards the official Zionist narrative. But I loved the world of filmmaking. I loved the storytelling and the creation of something from the very beginning, from an idea on paper to the execution of a film. I particularly loved documentaries.

The Times of Harvey Milk (Robert Epstein 1984) marked the beginning of my fascination with documentaries and seeing them as a way to bring truth to light and a tool for change. Another thing I loved about the idea of making films was the emotional potential in telling one human story and changing perspectives, transforming ideas and connecting to people, convincing people through stories about people. I had found “my element”.

Fresh out of film school in 1985 I worked in documentaries and fell in love with field research and digging up forgotten images in stills and video archives. Back then, the independent documentary scene in Israel was a barren land. A few revered, veteran documentary makers – David Perlov, Ram Levy and Uri Barbash – worked in the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and the Israel Film Centre (official public TV channels funded by government). They tried to offer some alternative perspectives that were mostly censored. There was a handful of independent filmmakers in Israel. I recall just a few – David Ben Schitrit, Michal Aviad, Asher Telalim and Reuven Hecker. There was hardly any local funding available and no platform upon

which to broadcast completed works. Politically controversial materials were not purchased by the IBA. Cable made its slow beginning in 1989.

Still searching for my way, I received a call from a veteran producer, who hired me, a researcher at the time, to produce the election campaign of the Progressive List for Peace, one of the two small Arab-Jewish political parties then in Israeli parliament. It was an extremely marginal group and a very new environment for me both socially and politically. The work introduced me to many new people – in particular a young Israeli director who had come from his home base in Paris to lead the campaign. This was Eyal Sivan, who became my collaborative creative ally for the next 10 years. This collaboration was transformative for me and my work. For the first time since the early 80s I felt I found my soul mates and did not feel alone. I felt our work could make a difference.

The first independent documentary for which I was the assistant director and main researcher was Sivan's *Izkor, Slaves of Memory* – which I consider one of the most important Israeli documentaries ever produced, for its critique of Israel's educational system.

Izkor also inspired me and other local young colleagues to continue the path of pioneering alternative creative work reflecting our social and political narrative, which was still uncharted territory at the time. It introduced me to filmmakers in Paris and Germany who became colleagues and significant allies in my next projects.

The Hebrew word “*izkor*” means “remember”, and it is the word that opens all annual official national and religious ceremonies that take place during national remembrance days). It was the first time an independent Israeli film crew gained full access to classes and school events for the purpose of documenting the five weeks over which the key remembrance days are prepared and implemented, beginning with the Passover holiday, followed by the Holocaust

Remembrance day, Remembrance Day for fallen soldiers and Independence Day. We followed several families in Jerusalem from different ethnic backgrounds and with children in different age groups over this period of time. We also talked to Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a prominent Orthodox Jewish intellectual at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who appears at various moments in the film, to comment on the education system.

The film was never aired on Israeli television, though it was screened in Israeli cinemas. It was widely distributed in Europe and broadcast on European television channels. It was the first time audiences in Israel and abroad were exposed to the well-structured indoctrination of Israel's younger generations by the country's education system. The movies were not well received by the schools we filmed, and the ministry of education has since changed its policy regarding film crews shooting inside the education system, and now scrutinizes a filmmaker's intentions and film's content before giving approval. *Izkor* was produced and financed by a private Israeli investor; remaining funding came from European sources. It was the first and last to receive free access.

We were a small group of passionate storytellers armed with cameras. During the first ten years, I worked on more than twenty-five independent films, then took a break to start an independent original program for one of the cable channels for four years, and went back to working independently after 2000. I worked with emerging and veteran filmmakers, creating my most significant works with Eyal Sivan, Julie Shels, Ilan Ziv, Ido Sela, Ayelet Heller , Anat Zuria and Yoav Shamir.

My independent work anticipated the revolution to come in both content and style of the new Israeli documentary vogue. In retrospect I would say that four of the films I produced and worked closely on are particularly notable in this regard. My first two independent works,

Unpromised Land and *Eduyot*, came out in 1992 and 1993 respectively *The Specialist* and *Checkpoint* came out somewhat later.

In 1912 a group of Yemenite Jews followed their spiritual leader, Rabbi David Ben-Israel Tze'iri, to the Sea of Galilee, where they drained the swamps, built shelters, grew vegetables, and sold produce in Damascus. Then, in 1914, the land was given to a group of Ashkenazi pioneers, now celebrated as the founders of Kibbutz Kinneret. In *The Unpromised Land* (1992) filmmaker Ayelet Heller challenges the official Euro-Israeli narrative and gives voice to the Tze'iri clan and their descendants, who can finally mourn the loss of their sacred plot and confront those who erased the Yemenite presence from history.

Eduyot (1993) is built around intimate interviews with Israeli men doing military service during the Intifada. Shot between 1989 and 1991, during the years of the Palestinian Uprising, the film portrays a powerful picture of the price Israeli society pays for the Occupation. This was the first film to examine at the implications of the occupation on Israeli civil society. I was invited to screen the film at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), and it was curated as one of the Top Ten films.

The Specialist (1999) follows the incredible trial of an appallingly ordinary man. Drawn entirely on the 350 hours of rare footage recorded during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, in 1961, in Jerusalem, this film about obedience and responsibility is the portrait of an expert in problems resolving, a modern criminal. The film is inspired from the controversial book by Hannah Arendt: *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Report on the Banality of Evil*.

In 2003, I co-produced *Checkpoint*. The West Bank and Gaza Strip have been under Israeli Military authority since 1967. Over three million Palestinians live under Israeli occupation. When travelling from one village or city to another to go to work, to visit relatives,

or to get medical treatment, they must pass through Israeli checkpoints. These checkpoints, essentially the first points of contact between the two people, have an enormous significance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Checkpoint* was a multiple-award winning film over two years director Yoav Shamir created a stunningly honest and moving instance of *cinéma vérité* with a record of various occurrences at checkpoints in the West Bank and Gaza. This film was significant for me in that there were no interviews; all dialogue was captured on site. It was not – so to speak – a “crowd pleaser”. For the filmmakers, the priority was the film style, which satisfied the viewer by eliciting a level of sincerity and candidness on the part of the subjects. It is a demanding film, at points bordering on discomfort for the audience.

Production Process and Post-Production Reflections

As I mentioned much earlier, I came to this thesis an interest in Middle Eastern women, their personal strength in contrast to their social and political status as women in Middle Eastern society. I was fascinated by the ability I saw to develop a sense of community among themselves *as women* irrespective of ethnicity – a sense of community that grew out of a shared interest in peace and a strong alternative to continuing militarization in the region.

I think this was developed upon my arrival to Canada. It was here in Toronto that I first time made contact and built relationships with women from Syria and Lebanon – women with whom I would never have been able to have contact had I not moved to Canada. I remember I had a talk with one of my Palestinian-Israeli friends in the past years, sharing with her these interesting encounters; she, in turn, lamented the fact that she herself would never be able to meet these women unless she were to travel abroad, which she was not able to do. It was a particularly interesting to be a Canadian-Israeli filmmaker in Jaffa, rediscovering the city, my view of it and at the same time, how my work on the film there affected my sense of who I am.

In January 2017 I tried to search Lebanon for a Lebanese woman to include in my film and quite soon realized I would be unable to follow through with that plan. Even though I would not be physically on site, the fact of me being an Israeli (even an Israeli Canadian living in Canada) was problematic – dangerous – for any Lebanese citizen, being under the Hezbollah regime forbade any contact with Israelis, anywhere.

One of my contacts in Beirut was even called to the police station, was investigated and told in no uncertain terms that he should not be in contact with Israelis... By the same token, other of my Beirut-based contacts had to withdraw from the project.

Therefore, my attempts to film in both Lebanon and Israel were frustrated by these unrelenting efforts by Lebanese authorities to block possible relations between Lebanese and Israelis – to enforce, in Monterescu’s terms, an “ethnic separation” between the two.

Once I realized I would not be able to have a Lebanese character nor shoot in neighboring countries I had to alter the initial concept I had for the film, and adapt it to the situation I was faced with. During the research and even in some days of the shooting I felt confused and did not have a clear conception of my final film. Moreover, the more time I spent in Jaffa the less I understood.

It was during my research trip to Jaffa that I met Amal, learned something about her life. I was also interested in the Rana Choir, comprising Muslim Christian and Jewish women. Mika, the founder and the conductor with whom the choir had been working for nine years was a good friend of Amal.

From the outset, my conversations with Amal were frank and we developed a good rapport. It did take a while for me to learn more about Amal and discern when she was being authentically herself and when she was performing for the camera. Her discomfort about being Palestinian *and* Israeli (or, as she might put it, *neither* Israeli *nor* Palestinian) was evident in our interactions. I felt I found good alternative heroines in Amal and Mika.

I was not “rediscovering” Jaffa, but discovering a Jaffa I had never known before, though it was so much part of my environment. These discoveries were quite intense for me, as I would not have thought I could “discover” new angles on my hometown.

As described in previous chapters, when I was in my 20s I got a new perspective on my own *Israeliness* and the Zionist ethos that is tightly woven into the education system. I rebelled against the Zionist education I received and became politically aware of the broader reality of

where I lived and grew up – an awareness that ultimately brought me to my decision to emigrate. The new question I can now add to it after finishing the work on my film and reading a lot about Jaffa and Arab-Jewish relations is how do I see and understand Jaffa and its Palestinian inhabitants now? Was the process of documentary film making in this case a process of estrangement from the place I was trying to understand?

Upon my return to Canada late February 2017, I discussed potential shooting dates with my cinematographer and friend, Canadian Duraid Mounajn and set the dates for shooting according to his tight time table. I was happy he was available the week of the Memorial Day when I knew the choir would have their traditional show. It all looked well until few days prior to my departure when Duraid bailed out due to a very high-paying job he was offered. I desperately made calls to potential camerapersons and eventually found myself talking to Tanya Aizikovitz. This was at that time, from my perspective a compromise, as I hardly knew her, though I appreciated her and we had a very good rapport. The fact that she knew Jaffa very well and spoke both Hebrew and Arabic was a very strong asset. We had a sound person (two sound people, really – once Nadir and twice Idan) joining us primarily for the sessions with the choir. At other times Ayelet, a director, my colleague and friend who lent us the camera, also joined us.

My Approach

For most of the scenes I took a *cinema-verité* approach, allowing participants to act and talk naturally. I never asked them to say something in particular, never prompted them, but sometimes asked them to repeat if a line was unclear or inaudible. I learned in the process of interviewing that the best way to achieve openness and honesty from the participants is to keep questions very short and allow the interviewee to express herself at her best and most natural

under the circumstances. I had formulated some questions beforehand, for the purpose of the interview, but the most interesting ones came spontaneously. In many cases, I ignored my planned questions in favour of one that occurred to me *in the moment*. I was, for example, very surprised to see the very open interactions between Amal and Suzanne. These moments of surprising familiarity between them began to engage my interest more than what I had planned. In contrast to this, I was quite disappointed in the talk with Amal's father. He is in decline and not in very communicative; Amal's brother took over the talk, very little of which I used. Actually, I used only the visuals of their gatherings.

On one hand I was conscious of the limits on the time I had to gather footage for the film. On the other, I shot much more footage than appeared in the edited version and had to make tough decisions about where my story lies. I did manage, as I was filming, to preserve the Memorial Day atmosphere – both as a background and woven into dialogue and events.

The weeks I spent on the film with Amal were culturally and politically quite significant – sensitive moments for Palestinian as well as Jewish Israelis. These moments as background in the film served to accentuate the cross-pressures Amal faced in her daily life. Perhaps she faced them less intensely on a daily basis, perhaps more intensely; but certainly she faced them in more mundane and less markedly ceremonious circumstances. As I mentioned earlier, I wanted to convey the social pressures Amal faced and the effects of contradictory pressures on her sense of self. Nowhere in the film is her self-understanding more clearly enunciated as when she says, "For the Jews, I am Palestinian. For the Palestinians, I am Israeli. I ask myself who am I? To whom do I belong?"

It was very interesting for me to be in Jaffa at this time, where so nearby, in the center of Tel Aviv, I could feel in the air the mixed emotions of the Palestinian population. We see it in

the film in the talk between Amal and her friend, Rola, at home, as they share the Memorial Day experience. We also meet Amal walking to the joint Memorial Ceremony beside the throng of aggressive anti-Arab demonstrators shouting “death to the Arabs”. Amal (who was together with the women of the choir) was one of the only Palestinians attending the event. The authorities do not allow Palestinian mourners from the West Bank to enter Israel and attend the joint event. A parallel joint ceremony was organized in Ramallah for the same evening.

Post-Production

During post-production I had two main collaborators: David London, a writer, was my collaborator as of early on. Our conversations about the film helped at each stage to crystalize the meaning and focus of the story I was telling. My other collaborator was Rebecca Yogev, the film editor, who dedicated many months to working on the film with me and helped me slowly make some tough decisions about what is to be left out and what remains as the film’s focus and structure. It was very interesting for me to have these dialogues – one with a local Canadian, one with an Israeli – where I could find myself in both. One is a person of words and literature; one is a person of images and sound. I felt very lucky to have these two creative and thoughtful minds to crack the film which is hiding in the material.

In Canada after completing filming, I viewed the material over a period of five or six weeks, during which time I carefully wrote up the description of the material and transcribed all the dialogue. This is always, for me, a very important stage where I actually face the material *as a reality* as distinct from the “dream” situation I had prior to the shooting. While I was watching and transcribing the material I was happy to discover some precious moments I was not

expecting – the beautiful moment, for example, when the women of the choir are quietly standing together during the sounding of memorial siren.

Yet at moments, I was disappointed because, for example, I was not always convinced of Amal's authenticity, as she seemed quite guarded. Mika, in contrast, is very open and natural in front of camera. She was exceptionally honest in my initial talks with her (when she talks about Amal and other women in Jaffa and their challenges). I think though, that Mika later felt she had said too much about them and subsequently restricted herself. Sometime the first talks, even as preliminary research, are the most fruitful and that is why I always film my research interviews.

While we were editing (between October 2017 to April 2018) I started to read many books about Jaffa and saw several films. While I was finalizing work on the film I was also conducting interviews and reviewing the relevant academic literature. I also came upon some interesting people with whom to discuss some of the content of the reading and filming in Jaffa – interesting because they represent a community, or communities, that speak squarely to the concerns addressed in *Be/longing*. One was Daniel Monterescu; another was Sami Shalom Chetrit.

My view of Amal's predicament was much sharpened during a conversation I had with Monterescu, in which he said:

“As a minority [Arabs] are well-exposed to the majority of the Jews, the integration game that does not really work. The tension between the need [to survive] economically, much dependent on the Jews, and the natural political and national alienation present between Jews and Arabs in the city, affected Amal and other Palestinians and created the dichotomous relations between the communities... For a single woman like Amal this is an ongoing struggle.

Amal is part of the middle class in Jaffa; its status is weak in the ranks of society, weak within the very conservative surrounding not accepting women alone, divorced. The need to survive in this alienation and isolation, mainly as a woman as a divorced, which is not accepted by their society is a very big struggle (we can see it through the critics and opposition she is getting in school for

example). Therefore she feels very lonely and suffers from a very tough environment for her.” (personal interview with the author January 2018)

I want to note an important difference between Monterescu’s explanation and Bishara’s figure of the “neither urban nor rural” Arab that I referred to earlier. While Bishara captures the negativity of Amal’s self-understanding, the being-neither-this-nor-that, I think Monterescu points to the conditions that create, not ghostliness or insubstantiality of identity, but the sheer stress of living daily life in relation simultaneously to the Arab and the Jewish communities.

Amal’s socioeconomically “weak” position contrasts sharply with her presence and demeanour on film, and with the apparent confidence with which she resists criticism and expectations of how she should present herself as a Muslim. One challenge in doing the documentary was to show both her stress *and* her confidence in tension with each other – her pride *and* her disappointment.

I held a personal interview with Sami Shalom Chetrit, a Moroccan-Jewish poet and interdisciplinary scholar. Chetrit noted the failure of the left to include Mizrahi Jews in its ranks. “Why,” he asks, “Is there no solidarity between the Mizrahi and the Arabs?” Chetrit answers his own question: “because the Mizrahi identity is...based on the hatred that was built as part of the Zionist war with the Arab countries...So in order to be accepted they had to erase their Arabness on a daily basis.” (personal interview with the author January 2018)

Now, this part of the interview (even though Chetrit is referring to Jews) is striking for its applicability to Amal’s account when, as a child in kindergarten the kindergarten teacher asks threateningly “*mi zoht Rihan?*” (Who is this Rihan?) and strikes out – erases – Amal’s Arabic name. It is as though her kindergarten teacher were saying to Amal as a little girl “death to the Arab”, and it is an enactment on paper of Amal’s “death”, her erasure as an Arab, just as the name “Palmachim” erases (and memorializes) Nabi Rubeen (see above section two of the work).

Once we arrived at the final cut, I shared the film with my supervisors and made some changes but all in all it seemed the film is there. It is a strange moment to finalize the editing of the images and get to the last stages of sound editing and music. I did not know what I felt about the film. It became tough to watch it again and again in these last stages. I felt far from it and emotionally removed from its content.

The film was screened at the Toronto Jewish Film festival and will have another screening towards the end of August, as part of JSpace Canada event. I plan to show it in Israel at the International Haifa Film Festival in September 2018. I submitted the film to various Jewish and international film festivals, and currently waiting for responses.

Second Thoughts

My fantasy is to re-shoot talks with Amal, as I discovered during the shooting that in front of the camera Amal was actually open to sharing very little of her personal history. But judging realistically, I am not sure the result would have been that different; it took me quite a few exchanges and several attempts at interviewing her to build trust between us, and get some “honesty”, the most successful sequences of which are now included in sequences with Amal towards the end of the film. In our first few filmed exchanges she was self-conscious, overly aware of the camera and very guarded about how viewers might judge her. By the end of the shoot we knew that she was reciting, declaiming, etc., in prepared sentences. In order to elicit from Amal more honest – I should say, more “telling” – answers I asked her directly to “please be honest and think before you answer... it all sounds as ready-made.”

At that moment, she appeared to become thoughtful, but she was not speaking. I felt I had to provoke her into responding verbally, and I said something like, “you’re a kind of toy to your Jewish friends and talking to them ... thinking about them as the audience to the film”. She was angry, but then spoke a bit more from the heart. That was the moment we captured “For the Jews I am Arab, for the Palestinians I am...”

In the event that readers are inclined to think the provocation was insensitive, it is best to bear in mind that interactions between people in the Middle East are typically blunt and abrasive (if not aggressive) by some standards governing interaction in North America. These are features of lively conversation in the Middle East and are not understood to be violating interactional norms and expectations. I adored Amal’s courage and strength facing so many personal and social obstacles; and I was relying on the rapport that had developed between us, and a shared mode of interaction that in the normal course of daily life in the Middle East can bridge

differences. But at that moment, I had in mind Amal's tendency to "act" for the camera and to sanitize her responses. If my response to this can be said to be a "strategy" it still cannot be said to have been well thought out, or well deliberated upon.

That was the last day in the first round of shooting. I later called Amal from Canada and told her we needed to get the "real" her; she understood, but remained concerned – stressed, actually – about how she is coming across.

On the very last day of the shoot, December 2017, Tanya, my cameraperson, and I decided that we will "play good cop/bad cop" to get a bit from Amal about how she really feels, her struggles, and so on. Tanya, who was almost always behind the camera and never interviewed Amal directly, began a conversation with her and started the camera. This was near the end of the film; I'm not really sure if Amal was aware but she was more open than she was at other points during the shoot, and I think this is evident in the latter part of the film. The fact that Amal did not associate the questioning stance of the interview with Tanya, allowed her – Amal – to be just that much more relaxed and open.

From my previous work as a director and producer I know how valuable it is to spend time without shooting, just to be present and get acquainted with the environment and the main character. Even with quite a limited shooting time I made an effort to spend some days where I was in Jaffa, walking around, overhearing conversations. As I recall the evident contrast between the rich Jewish parts and the neglected Arab buildings, I regret that I did not represent this contrast enough in the film. I was planning to have many more quiet moments and simply "be there"; those moments also are not adequately represented in the final film. I am sorry that Jaffa as a character is not as present in my film as I now would like; it could have been a very good

reflection to Amal's state of being. To achieve that, though, I would have needed many more days of shooting than I had.

On one hand, the Memorial Day was an excellent time to shoot, as it brought so much emotion to the surface. For example, we feel the aggression and hatred of the protestors outside the joint memorial ceremony; we hear the memorial siren; we hear from Amal and her friend Rula about the conflict this day creates for Arab citizens. But we also see the beauty and sense of optimism the joint memorial ceremony brings to both Israelis and Palestinians.

On the other hand, after I filmed the ceremony and encountered this huge protest outside (which I did not expect) my focus in the next days of filming was on the time of the year. I took the next day, Independence Day, to spend the whole day documenting the BBQ feasts everywhere – a very colorful tapestry of people cooking and eating. This footage, however interesting, did not find its way into the film. I guess this is an example that gives sense to the reason I feel I missed filming the place – Jaffa itself. I do have some footage of some houses and streets but these sequences were captured without any strong intention. I did not have the time and didn't quite appreciate how important it is to have Jaffa as one of my film's main characters.

I also felt the limitation of not being able to understand Arabic, as the language Palestinians speak between themselves, though most speak Hebrew very well. I did come to learn how differently the conversations in Hebrew develop, depending on whether they are being conducted in Hebrew or in Arabic. I felt increasingly uncomfortable being a Hebrew speaker, with Hebrew as the socially and politically dominant language. Arabic is an official language in the state of Israel but only a minority speak it today. Some because it was the language of their childhood if they are of Arab descent, or they learned it in the course of Military training. Very

few Israelis have an interest or need to communicate with the 20% Arab minority in their own language. Regrettably, I include myself.

Culture as Shelter?

A headline in the daily Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* of December 30, 2015 announces that Dorit Rabinian's book *Borderlife*, depicting a fictional love story between a Palestinian and an Israeli, is banned from the Israeli high school curriculum by the Minister of Education; the same minister who recently revised the civics textbook to downplay the basic values of democracy and play up Jewish theocracy. These phenomena, along with many other social and political injustices no longer attract public rage or make people take to the streets in protest. There is a sense of acceptance and a silence of despair. I also hear family and friends in Tel Aviv: people do not listen the news or read the newspaper. They choose to live in deliberate denial. I hear many stories from my filmmaker colleagues about growing censorship; even more concerning to me is the self-censorship by creators who now fear losing support and public funding.

I was writing part of this work while in Israel on a family visit. As always, visiting Tel Aviv sets my thoughts racing: did I have to leave my life here? It feels so natural, so much so that I am not sure anymore where I belong, not sure anymore where and which my narratives and counter-narratives are. I feel I have been uprooted. But living in Toronto, I have become accustomed to its diversity -- which looks and feels just as "natural" to me. And the time I spent filming in Jaffa, and the encounter with Amal, made me emotionally connected to this past of Jaffa more than to my own very white and privileged neighborhood. The racism and nationalism in Israel, which has grown so much in the fifteen years since I left, is shocking to me every time I return to visit.

I envy my "self" of fifteen years ago, so focused and clear. I feel more alienated than I had before and I am not as angry as I used to be. But my anger has been replaced by a deep

sadness, and a concern for the future of the Jewish-Israeli populace racing downhill in some crazy, suicidal drive to deny the social and political challenges it faces.

At the beginning of this thesis I sketched the main concerns guiding me when conceiving the film: the influence of place and displacement in the region I filmed; the social and political contradictions that result in a fractured citizen, a fractured self; the status of women in the Middle East who resist abetting the conflicts they suffer daily.

The time of year during which I filmed most of the footage was not a deliberate choice – but it turned out to be a serendipitous one. The ceremonies and demonstrations I captured on film worked in my favour to highlight the tensions and the alienation I was trying to convey. As a documentary filmmaker it got me to think about the need to respond openly to the opportunities, the unplanned moments and events that present themselves. I had to allow the “dream” situation I envisioned prior to shooting dissolve into the reality of the material I ended up working with, without abandoning the essence of what I was trying to do in the film.

But I do wonder if it was mere accident that I used the ceremonial period of the year to my advantage. It is a season that in my teenage years held a great attraction for me. A spring evening in high school comes to mind: Israel’s annual Remembrance Day to mark the memory of fallen soldiers, was an annual highlight of the school year – a mix of emotions, hormones and social bonding we would look forward to. With citrus blossom in the May evening air, we walked in silence wearing white shirts and dark pants, the whole school, teachers and many graduates, usually in their military uniforms, gathered in the school yard for the ceremony on the eve of Remembrance Day. The ceremony was set against a wall displaying the names of the fallen soldiers who were our school’s graduates. This evening was the most celebrated event of the year; no other national or religious event got this much attention or had such a prestigious

tradition. After the sober dramatic ceremony accompanied by poetry, whispered singing and large torches, the schoolyard became a huge meeting place for school graduates full of youthful energy, laughter and romantic gazes and hugs. What a strong unifying event it was. What an emotional highlight of my youth it was – and for many young Jewish secular Israelis all over the country it still is. Occasionally names of recently fallen graduates were added. I knew one personally – the best looking guy in school who was a few years older than us. We all adored him; half of us were secretly in love with him. He was killed during a naval combat mission in 1985 and left behind a young widow who was in my grade. That was the most intense evening I remember. Boys and girls cried together in each other's arms.

I include this, not merely to reminisce, but to convey some sense of the hold the culture had on us teens and the claim it had on our emotions. It's not merely that I was a sheltered youth (which I was). It's that we were all sheltered by the belief system, the ideology embodied in these ceremonies. I have an abiding interest in people's real-life events that shed light on their taken-for-granted belief system – as travel and university shed light on mine. As a filmmaker, I wonder about the role and the ability of documentary – as the practical process as well as the viewable result – to illuminate ideology. In my film as a *viewable result*, Amal provides a perspective from which viewers can begin to examine their beliefs about Jaffa. My *process*, my making of this documentary, provides me with a privileged position – a privileged practice – from which I *publicly* (in view of an audience) review, question, reconsider and challenge my taken-for-granted assumptions about Zionist Nationalism.

Conclusion

I want to conclude – not really with a “final” conclusion, but with questions among which is a question raised by Anton Shammas, namely, can a cultural encounter begotten by a colonial takeover ever be transformed into an equal multicultural exchange? As a privileged *Ashkenazi* woman with European roots who spent much of her life in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, I’m implicated in the colonial takeover of Jaffa. As a Canadian, I enjoy the distance that allows me to examine the social and political injustices that occur in Jaffa – that are features of the “discourse” of Jaffa seen from the perspective of a neo-liberal desire for a “mixed town” in its ideal sense. As a filmmaker, I’ve aimed at a film and a process of filmmaking that has been a “multicultural” exchange that one hopes will influence this discourse. I would like to think that my film, at least in spirit, is an answer to this question.

However eager I am to answer Shammas’ question in the affirmative, the concept of a multiculturalism has been recognized as problematic. Elizabeth Povinelli pursues the distinction between postcolonial struggles and multicultural struggles (Povinelli 2002). She continues:

“Frantz Fanon and members of the school of Subaltern Studies have suggested how colonial domination worked by inspiring in colonized subjects a desire to identify with their colonizers...[M]ulticultural domination seems to work, in contrast, by inspiring subaltern and minority subjects to identify with the impossible object of an authentic self-identity; in the case of indigenous Australians, a domesticated nonconflictual ‘traditional’ form of sociality and (inter)subjectivity.” (Povinelli, 2002)

Understood in the way Povinelli recommends, Shammas’ “multicultural exchange” is not a solution to colonial domination but yet another instance of domination. In filming *Amal*, am I tempted to seek an impossibly “authentic” and self-identical *Amal*, who has resolved the breach expressed in “for the Jews, I am Palestinian. For the Palestinians, I am Israeli”? The insight that multiculturalism brings to *Amal*’s question – to her complaint – is that an authentically possible

self is always in some way a breached self; there is always a moment of recognition that “for someone, I will always be the *other*”.

In view of Amal’s question and the limit of multiculturalism outlined above, I would like to briefly return to the epigram with which I began this work – Steyerl’s image of documentary practice as “able to sustain non-national public spheres and therefore also the seeds for a political arena beyond national and cultural formations” (Steyerl 2006, n.p.). What would that arena look like? What does it mean to go beyond national and cultural formations? I don’t know. But I do feel that Steyerl is trying to point the way.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Images



Image 1: Amal



Image 2: Announcement for the 2018 annual Joint Palestinian–Israeli Memorial Day ceremony



Image 3: Andromeda Hill neighborhood



Image 4: Amal playing a sick Palestinian mother in the film *Ajami*

Appendix B: Shooting Schedule

Be/longing is a 33-minute documentary shot in Jaffa over 12 days during the months of April, May, and December 2017. It was shot by a small crew – myself and Russian-Israeli female cameraperson, Tanya Aizokovitz; a sound person joined us to capture the choir rehearsals and show. The film was edited between October 2017 and May 2018 by my editor, Rebecca Yogev. Final sound editing and online was done early May 2018.

DAY/DATE	TIME	TEAM	SCENE
Day 1/April 30, 2016	11:00 AM	Amit, Ayelet, Tanya, Nadir	Amal at school pending the principal's approval
	NOON		Meeting at Yafo d small Merkaz Mahrozet 26, near Kiosk Paulina; shoot Miki Cohen of the choir – short interview and walk
	1:30 PM		Shooting Pauline from the choir; interview and walking in Jaffa
			Short break
	3:00PM		Meeting Mika at her home 14 Rav Hanina, Jaffa; she's preparing special food for the choir women; walking in Jaffa;
	5:45 PM		Meeting the whole group in Jaffa and going on the bus ride with them to the event; meet at Gan Hashnayim, Yeffet, corner of Erlich. Shooting behind the scenes and the even – Amal will arrive and sit in the audience. Rehearsal and final song at the ceremony. Ends 11PM.

Day2/May 1	11:00 AM	Amit, Tanya, Idan	Sirens, people in the streets
	11:30 AM – 2:30 PM		Shoot at Mika’s house, Mika and her partner -- interview
	3:00 PM		Meet at Amal’s home, shooting her and her friends Abir/Rola
	6:30 PM		Walking in Jaffa; Amal and her parents
Day 3/May 2	NOON	Amit, Tanya	Independence -- A and T shooting visuals in Jaffa and the Meat celebration in the parks; Jaffa visuals
	4:00 PM		Outside Amal’s home – walking and talking.
Day 4/May3	NOON – 3:00 PM	Amit, Tanya	Shoot through list of streets – flags, guns.
	4:00 PM		Rakefet – walking and talking
	6:00 PM	Idan joins Amit, Tanya	Meeting Gina and Lubna
	7:00 PM – 10:00 PM		Choir rehearsal
Day 5/May 4	11:30 AM		Meet at location – Amal and Mika, lunch at Finjan
	5:00 PM		Meet Amal home – talk with her kids
	7:00 PM		Meeting of Women Wage Peace; ends 10:00 PM (3 to 4 hours)

Day 6/May 5	Early		Jaffa visuals
	9:30 AM	w/ Amal	Bicycle ride, then meet with Amal and the group of women at the harbour
	Evening	w/ Amal	Amal praying; Visuals, Jaffa evening
Day 7 & 8/ May 6 & 7	Days & Evenings	Amit, Tanya	Shoot Amal at home; visuals of Amal teaching her Arabic language class
Day 9/May 8	Hours decided yesterday		Shoot Amal and Mika working together and talking
Day 10/ May 9	6:00 PM (Maybe earlier)		Meet with Alya and her two daughters, Badriya and Sahrab
	7:00 PM – 10:00 PM	Idan joins Amit and Tanya	Shoot Choir rehearsal
Additional days December 2017		Amit, Tanya	Shot talk with Amal and visuals in Jaffa