

“Performative Narrativity”: Palestinian Identity and the Performance of Catastrophe

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Abstract

The day Israel annually celebrates as its “Day of Independence” Palestinians commemorate as their day of catastrophe (al-nakba). To most Palestinians, the catastrophic loss of Palestine in 1948 represents the climactic formative event of their lives. In the aftermath of this loss, the Palestinian society was transformed from a thriving society into a “nation of refugees” scattered over multiple geopolitical borders. In this article, I analyze audiovisual storytelling of al-nakba. I will perform this analysis on an audiovisual artifact that commemorates the Palestinians’ loss of their homeland in the past, and articulates the “deep narratives” of their denial of home in ongoing exile: Mohammed Bakri’s documentary 1948. My reading of Bakri’s film considers aesthetic modes of narrativity through which those deep narratives of al-nakba can be accessed through acts of remembrance.

I have advised you my heart, and
why did not you take my advice?

We became an intoxicated people
who go to sleep and wake up in the
love of their homeland. Oh [...] you,
my body that is torn into two halves,
a living one and another that lived,
and the living half is left for pain and
suffering. -Shafiq Kabha, *Mawaal*,
(1989).¹

I have begun with this Palestinian melody because it resonates beyond boundaries that are set by history and geography. Sung at weddings and other festive occasions, this melody, with its emphatic sighing for the lost homeland, “oh [...]”, serves as a testimony of a remembering that reclaims the experience of another time and another place. The loss of the homeland torments the soul and splits the body “into two halves [...]”, existing between a loved but dead past and a living but agonized present. At the same time, these words point out that the past and the present cannot be simply separated from one another.

Firmly anchored in the present, these words suggest that remembering events and experiences from the Palestinian past remains an effective means of releasing their stories of forced uprooting and struggle for freedom and independence from “official Zionist history”, especially its dominant colonial meta-narrative of “a land without a people for a people without a land”.² The temporal and spatial distance, between the remembered object (Palestine) and the Palestinian subject doing the remembering, functions as a conceptual metaphor for the more unsettling distance between this subject and him or herself in exile. This metaphor, as I will argue below, is most visible in the remembrance of *al-nakba*.

In this article, I probe the audiovisual storytelling of *al-nakba* through analyzing denied exilic narratives, particularly those of Palestinians living inside Israel, often referred to in

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willfully vague terms such as “Israeli-Arabs”.³ I will perform this analysis on Mohammed Bakri’s documentary *1948*, which commemorates the Palestinians’ loss of their homeland in 1948 and articulates the “deep narratives” of their denial of home in ongoing exile. I use the term “deep narratives” to refer to those narratives that are inherently grounded in the past *nakba*, yet continuously (re) surface in reconstructions and retellings of the story of that catastrophe in present exile.

Made in 1998 within the context of Palestinian commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of *al-nakba*, though never “officially” labeled as such, the thrust of Bakri’s *1948* is to express the carping ambiance of present-day Palestinians in exile, in which an interminable sense of catastrophe persists. Surprisingly in view of this grave subject, the set, so to speak, is the theater. *1948* begins as a theatrical performance, the story of which was told before by other storytellers. Theater and storytelling: these are the two cultural modes in which the film is cast. Both modes are anchored in fiction, and both are literally displayed in performance.

Behind the narrative of Bakri’s film hides another storyteller, the late Emile Habibi (1921-1996), to whom the film is dedicated. *1948* opens with “In memory of Emile Habibi”. Habibi was one of the most accomplished Palestinian intellectuals: he was both a writer and a politician who served as a member in the Israeli Parliament (*Knesset*) for nineteen years as the head of *Rakah Party* (The Israeli Communist Party). Habibi’s

satirical novel, *al-Mutasha’il: al-waq’i al-ghariba fi ikhtifaa’ Said abi al-nahs al-Mutasha’il*, serves as the starting point of Bakri’s film. Originally published in Arabic in 1974, *al-Mutasha’il* was translated into English in 1982 by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Trevor Le Gassick under the title: *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Ill-Fated Pessoptimist*. The term *al-Mutasha’il* (The Pessoptimist) in the title of the novel is unique in its linguistic construction as it is made up of two Arabic adjectives: *al-mutasha’im* (the pessimist) and *al-mutafa’il* (optimist). Since its first appearance, serialized in three parts in the daily *Al-Jadid* in Haifa between 1972 and 1974, Habibi’s novel has evoked countless scholarly studies and literary criticism. For example, in his comment on *al-Mutasha’il*, Edward Said points out that the novel embodies the Kafkaesque elements, especially the alternation between being and not being in place, by which its narrative sketches a complete picture of Palestinian identity. As Said puts it, *al-Mutasha’il* is an “epistolary novel [...], unique in Arabic tradition in that it is consistently ironic, exploring a marvelously controlled energetic style to depict the peculiarly ‘outstanding’ and ‘invisible’ condition of Palestinians inside Israel” (1992: 83).⁴

In *1948*, Bakri uses footage from his own stage performance of Habibi’s *al-Mutasha’il*. This self-reflective device allows me to discuss the film’s narrative as an act of remembrance of *al-nakba*, which not only articulates the past catastrophe but also enacts the “catastrophic” in the present of the exilic subject—here, Bakri himself as a

theater director. This situation where a theater performance is recycled as a cinematic performance, and I will argue, through this double performance, as an act of storytelling, offers a good starting point for my analysis. This double use of performance helps me reflect on what I will call in this article a “performative narrativity”. This notion refers to dialectic between enactment and showing images from another time.

Central to this discussion is the question how the identity of the Palestinian subject is performatively constructed and narrativized at the same time—staged and remembered. The connection between performance and memory, by means of storytelling, is foregrounded in Bakri’s film *1948*. Composed of a mix of theatrical performance, archival footage and personal interviews of both Palestinians and Israelis, Bakri’s film, as Haim Bresheeth succinctly puts it in his article “Telling the Stories of Heim and Heimat, Home and Exile”, tells the narratives of Palestinians inside Israel, their subsequent marginalization, oppression and mistreatment, and their aspirations for freedom, equality and development; all dashed by the harsh realities of their exile while living in a Zionist entity that utterly negates their equality and their right to their lands (2003: 27-28). In its presentation of these narratives, *1948* appeals to the concepts of “performance” and “performativity”. These concepts have constituted a paradigm shift in the humanities.⁵

In her book, *Tavelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Mieke Bal probes performativity in performance. She does so by both articulating the unstable distinction between performance and performativity and arguing instead for a “conceptual messiness” between these concepts. At the heart of this “conceptual messiness” is Bal’s contention that while the two concepts are seemingly distinguishable from each other—performance as being determined in a pre-existing script and performativity as an event in the present—both are in fact interconnected through memory, but “without merging” (2002: 176). This, I contend, is what Bakri’s opening sequence does; as I will try to show below. Bakri’s recycling of a stage performance suggests a creative theorizing of this relationship, the emphatic re-use of theater—the art of performance par excellence—in a film that pursues performativity effects—to change our ways of seeing—offers a great insight into the cultural production of performativity.

According to Bal, such a connection between performance and performativity—primarily informed by Derrida’s theorization of the citationality of speech acts—facilitates the analysis of:

[T]he always potentially performative utterances into aspects. This move from categorization to analysis of each term is representative of the move from a scientific to an analytical approach to culture. (2002: 178)

This shift in approach brings Bakri’s film, as an audiovisual artifact, within

the orbit of cultural analysis. What animates the interconnection between “performance” and “performativity”, then, is the understanding of performance as an act of theatrical enactment that has at the same time the performative power to trigger new signifiers and meanings beyond the present act itself and through these, a change of identity. To this effect, following Bal’s argument of the performative (2002: 176-78) and in an attempt to extend its analytical domain, in my analysis of *1948* I bring the concepts of performance and performativity in their dialectic interaction to bear on the film’s audiovisual storytelling of Palestinian *nakba* and exile. In so doing, I assume that both the modes and strategies through which acts of remembrance are (audiovisually) narrativized in a particular cultural setting reflect specific conceptions of political history and cultural memory of the past and turn these reflections into agents of performativity in the present. Hence, they set up the necessary grounds within which a different future can be envisioned.⁶

But *1948* is a film *with* a story to tell. In order to account for the narrative sequence within and through which performativity takes effect, I will employ the concept of “performance” to articulate what happens in a theatrical setting with a narratological device of, what Bal calls in her book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, “focalization” (1997: 142-60). Through focalization, stories of the everyday of Palestinian exile can be enacted, and

brought to the fore, as focalized, that is, perceived and interpreted, rather than happening on the spur of the moment. I will show how *1948* is engaged in refocalizing the everyday experiences of Palestinian exile. The filmic narrative not only shows but also enacts those experiences. Thus, to delineate my itinerary, I make an analytical move from the “aestheticism” of performance—as theater—to the performativity of aesthetics—as political activism—in relation to audiovisual storytelling of Palestinian exile—as the remembrance needed for the activism. Such a move is able to connect the aesthetic representation of *al-nakba* with the ways this event continues to be lived in the present and makes an impact on the lives, identity and agency of Palestinians. This helps us understand what performance, in its connection to performativity may add to the storytelling of Palestinian memory of the past *nakba* in relation to its *mankoub* in the present. This term “mankoub” refers to the “catastrophed” subject.

In what follows, I will discuss how *1948*’s audiovisual storytelling of *al-nakba* and exile articulates Palestinian identity and cultural memory in terms of performance and performativity. In the first section, I will analyze the opening sequence of the film (the theatrical performance), and also reflect on what I mean by “performative narrativity”. As I will attempt to show, the combinational construct of this specific mode of narrativity, between theatrical performance and the archival footage, produces narratological fragments both in images and voices that facilitate

the construction of a present-oriented story of Palestinian loss of homeland. In this story, the historical enterprise of the catastrophic event (*al-nakba*) rejects a dissociation of cause and effect. I will then move to the next parts of Bakri's film where Palestinian and Israeli voices join the storytelling. In my analysis of these parts, I argue that Bakri's film advances the idea that Palestinian loss of homeland and exile is inherently about what people, the Israelis, do to other people, the Palestinians. At stake here is the notion that *al-nakba* is a thoroughly political event that has responsible agents behind it, not uncontrollable forces of nature, nor the effects of our uncontrollable aggressive and territorial genes.

Performative Narrativity: Exposing the Betrayal of Time

That we make ourselves intelligible to others through performative acts is hardly a novel argument. What needs to be underscored, however, is how our acts can narrate and account for catastrophic events and traumatic experiences such as that of the Palestinians' loss of homeland and exile. In this respect, what is remarkable about Bakri's 1948 is that it is primarily linked to *al-nakba* through theatrical performance. Unexpectedly, the film begins its storytelling of this catastrophe as comedy play. Yet, 1948 is a documentary film.

The opening part of the film shows a theatrical play that was performed many times in Arabic and Hebrew to packed audiences over a number of years. In this performance, Bakri plays the role

of the main character of Habibi's novel, Saeed Abi al-Nahs (*al-Mutasha'il*, The Pessoptimist), the unfortunate fool who after *al-nakba* becomes a citizen of Israel. Saeed's story evokes the victimization and ensuing struggle of the Palestinians in Israel by means of a mix of fact and fantasy, tragedy and comedy. His is a story composed of fragments of loss and fortitude, aggression and resistance and affinity. In a series of tragic-comic episodes that reiterate the enactment of who he is, Saeed's stupidity, sincerity and fear transform him gradually from an unfortunate and naïve informer into a simple Palestinian man, who is victimized but determined to survive. Through the performative transformation of Saeed's identity, the film manages to make a trivial comedy stand in for catastrophic events.

At least for this viewer, the employment of comical performance in a documentary dedicated to catastrophic events solicited perplexity and attraction; both affects are in need of analysis. To make sense of Bakri's adaptation of comical performance in documentary cinema it is worth considering 1948 as an instance of audiovisual storytelling within a recent Palestinian cinematic tradition. This tradition reiterates, transfigures, and vindicates the multiple narratives of the past *nakba* and the predicament of present exile. These cinematic instances often resort to various forms of narrative representation, including "open-endedness" as a technique of narrative closure that mimics "ongoingness" (or the non-ending) of Palestinian loss of homeland. Examples of this Palestinian

cinema include other films such as Bakri's documentary film *Jenin, Jenin* (2002), Tawfiq Saleh's *Al-Makhdu'un* (The Dupes, 1972), Rashid Masharawi's *Curfew* (1994), Elia Suleiman's *Chronicle of Disappearance* (1996), Nizar Hassan's *Ostura* (1998), and Hani Abu Assad's *Ford Transit* (2002).⁷

In distinction from these films that are classically narrative, in 1948 narrative representation takes the form of a stage performance. This is particularly preeminent in the opening scene of the film, in which the story of Saeed is presented as a folk tale. In the opening shot of the film, while we see four images of Palestinian families during *al-nakba* gradually filling up the screen, Saeed, on stage, begins recounting the story:

Every folk tale begins: "once upon a time, long time ago [...]" Shall I tell the story, or go to sleep? I am Saeed (happy) Abi al-Nahs (the father of misfortune), *al-Mutasha'il* [The Pessoptimist], ID card No. 222222. I was born during the days of the British. In other words, my father and Churchill were very close friends. But [when] Papa knew that Churchill did not intend to stay here [in Palestine] very long, Papa befriended Yaakove Safsarchik. Before he died, Papa told me: "if life is bad, Saeed, Safsarchik will fix things". So he fixed me.

Like a folk tale, Saeed's story is told many times over. It is as if Bakri sought to insist on the iterative nature of identity as well as on the narrative nature of performance. It is a story composed of a combination of optimism

and pessimism: an episode of human suffering, survival and hope, which cannot avoid contradiction. Such a contradiction is bound to identity as early as in the Arabic meaning of the character's name, which jams happiness "Saeed" and misfortune "Nahs". The combination of contradictory elements is precisely what makes him *al-Mutasha'il* (The Pessoptimist).

Besides his name, Saeed identifies himself by an identity card number "ID card No. 222222", given to him by the State of Israel. In order to explain how he was given this number after *al-nakba*, Saeed recounts the past in terms of its "official" history, consisting of documented historical facts. The moment Saeed begins recounting "the days of the British", we see archival footage of the British forces during their mandate in Palestine. At the point that the voice reaches "Yaakove Safsarchik" –based on the Hebrew word *Safsar*, for "illegal peddler" or "black marketer" –we see archival footage of Ben Gurion and his wife on the occasion of the transfer of power from the British mandatory forces to the Zionist movement in Palestine. This scene ends with the British flag lowered, and the Israeli flag being hoisted on the same pole. This is precisely how the Zionist "Yaakove Safsarchik" betrayed Saeed in the past, and "fixed" him with an insignificant number. The insignificance of this number, "222222", can be interpreted in its senseless repetition of the number "2", suggesting second-class citizenry.⁸

At one level, the film's straightforward approach to history

through its use of archival material has the benefit of allowing the viewer to understand the story of the speaking subject, Saeed, as the fable of the betrayed Palestinian whose father trusted the false promises of the British and the Zionists. This approach, however, does not suffice when it comes to explaining the complexity of the betrayal that Palestinians endure beyond the historical event of *al-nakba*. The archival footage of *al-nakba* does not provide information about the effects of that event on the Palestinians in terms of their subjectivity. This is why there is a need to supplement the shift that the film takes from performance (present) to history (past) with another shift back to performance.

That shift can be seen in the following scene, in which the viewer is drawn back to the stage performance. The moment the flag of Israel is hoisted on the pole, Saeed's voice re-enters the stage to continue the recounting of the story:

My life in Israel began with a miracle. During the incidents [...] of 1947, I travelled to Acre with my father, by donkey. That is our national Mercedes. When we reached the railroad tracks, boom! We heard shots. Papa was hit and killed. I got off the donkey and hid behind it. The donkey was shot dead and I was saved. I owe my life in Israel to a donkey.

The shift to stage performance is primarily audiovisual, but also conceptual and temporal in that it enables the viewer to see the catastrophe

of Palestinians from a different angle than in the archival film footage in two ways. First, what is most notable in Saeed's performance of *al-nakba* is his description of this event not as *al-nakba* of 1948, but as "the incidents [...] of 1947". For Saeed, *al-nakba* is not so much a singular event, but rather a series of fragmented incidents that occupy different temporal moments. Saeed's catastrophe is grounded in that incident he experienced while traveling with his father in 1947. For Saeed, there are many *nakbas*, temporal variations of "the" event. As such, the concept of *al-nakba* does not appear as limited neatly to the year 1948. This may seem like a minor point, but it is relevant for the issue of the singularity of (catastrophic) events in relation to subjective experiences and cultural enactments of these events—when do you exactly mark *al-nakba*? On the one hand, there seems to be a vaguely collective date (May 15th, 1948), which demarcates the establishment of Israel, but that fixed date is utterly dependent on the Israeli/Zionist timeline and narrative. According to Saeed's performance, actual commemorations of *al-nakba* also happen at different moments and dates. This conceptualization not only repudiates the singularity of the catastrophic event, but also reflects and delineates different collectives or sub-collectives of its memory. For example, a particular village commemorates "its" *nakba* on the day on which the inhabitants experienced the fall of their own village.

The second way in which the temporal shift is conceptual touches on

performance in the strict sense. Whereas the archival footage only represents *al-nakba* on the political level – the transfer of power in Palestine to a single ethnic minority while depriving the ethnic majority – on stage, Saeed performs the catastrophe as a violent event that entails death and victimization. Hence, logically, he should be dead. Therefore Saeed describes his existence in Israel after *al-nakba* as a “miracle”. Saeed’s use of “miracle” here is important in relation to his survival. While “miracle” signifies an event that is inexplicable by the laws of nature and held to be the result of a supernatural act that therefore generates wonder, in Saeed’s case the miracle of surviving *al-nakba* is attributed to a donkey. By attributing his survival to a donkey, Saeed not only fuses his survival of the catastrophe with the intervention of an insignificant power, but also reduces the value of his life in Israel after *al-nakba* as similarly insignificant, just like his savior the donkey. This is an instance of performative narrativity. In the storytelling of his miraculous survival, Saeed performs his second-class identity.

As a performance with a performativity effect, Saeed’s description of his survival and life in Israel after *al-nakba* engenders a feeling, not of wonder, but of amusement. This sense of humor, however, is problematic because of its connection to a tragic memory, the death of his father. The result of such a tragicomic composition is that humor in the film does finally arrive, but always a little too late. For example, we hear the audiences

of the stage performance in the film laughing at Saeed’s description of the donkey as “our national Mercedes”. Yet, the laughter equally expected at Saeed’s description of the donkey as a savior is not heard and remains absent. Presumably, the idea follows on the heels of the story of his father’s death in a chronology that is not comical at all. Humor in *1948* not only serves as a trigger of laughter, but also of the impossibility of laughter. Through its contradictory effects, humor is, then, put at the service of the present reality of exile: it adheres to the everyday life of the exiled subject, yet also puts forward a vision of an alternative reality. In order for that alternative vision to materialize, however, the viewer is required to pay attention to the fragmented narrativity drifting between role-playing (performance) and archival footage (official history). This is what I will be referring to in this article as “performative narrativity”.

In a previous article, in my analysis of Tawfiq Saleh’s film *Al-Makhdu’un* (*The Dupes*, 1972), I called that film’s storytelling “exilic narrativity”. Exilic narrativity, as I argued there, presents a fragmented narrative sequence in terms of place, memory, self and other through a plurality of voices. Moreover, this narrativity articulates Palestinian exilic space and time as an experiential “truth” by means of a mode of audiovisual storytelling that drifts between fictional and documentary images and voices. The affective results of this drifting storytelling destabilize the binary opposition between “fiction” and “documentary” with regard to

“truthful” representation. Accordingly, this type of storytelling facilitates the travelling of the narrative between the present of the (re)telling of the (fictional) stories of *al-nakba* and the (documented) past happening of the event itself.⁹

Here, I focus on the relationship such exilic narrativity establishes with performance in order to promote the performativity that allows change to occur. Exilic narrativity not only signifies the storytelling of catastrophe that conforms with the mental workings of memory and its temporality against linear time, but, if it manages to be performative, also enacts and triggers the cultural shift, which the narrative itself seeks to achieve: from “official history” to a theorization of catastrophe and exile that we can “live” and understand at the same time. The exilic narrativity of *al-nakba* consists of the telling of a story wherein the historical past (archives) collides with its present (fictional) re-telling in exile up to the point where it can affect the identity of “we”.

Bakri’s film is emblematic for this potential because it presents a mode of audiovisual storytelling, which drifts between performance and archival footage. “Performative narrativity”, as particularly powerful mode of exilic narrativity, deploys a fragmentary narrative composed from a plurality of voices. However, the specificity of performative narrativity, as a form of exilic narrativity, I contend, is determined by specific, complex sense of temporality. The employment of bodily engagement in 1948’s audiovisual storytelling through

explicit role-playing engenders Palestinian narratives of *al-nakba* as acts of “re-reading”.¹⁰ These acts are triggered by the performance of the storytelling on stage. Since this telling takes the form of a folk tale, it harks back to unspecified ancient times. Narrating a subjective *nakba* event, it also brings in the historical past. On the stage, the audience is interpellated with a humor that cuts off the laughter it triggers. In the movie theatre, finally, the viewers, who are, likely to have seen or heard of the successful stage performance, are confronted with these three temporalities and the strong tragic-comic confusion in the present.

By focusing on the temporality of storytelling between theatrical performance and archival footage in 1948, I am practicing a re-reading of the film in this sense. Through this re-reading, I seek to demonstrate an important specificity in relation to exilic narrativity. There, the temporal referentiality of the fictional story is determined by the documented past of its event. In performative narrativity, due to the drifting between performance and archive, the referential scope of narrative broadens beyond the film’s temporal limits. As a result, it re-enacts the *mankoub* that characterizes the catastrophed subject in ongoing exile. This re-enactment involves the viewer affectively.

This affect does not emerge from theatrical performance as a vehicle of representation as such. Rather, it emerges from that performance’s ability to influence our sensory and perceptual concept of the systems

“archive”. Through performativity, the archival footage in the narrative becomes iterable: repeated and changed in a different frame. This performativity sharpens our notions of memory. Thus, the ontological status of cultural events in terms of their past happening and of the way they are experienced and memorized in the present is at stake in performative narrativity. Hence, the performativity of theatrical performance in *1948* not only lies in its mode of being, as Bal succinctly puts it, as “something that hovers between thing and event”, but in the fact that it performs an act that produces a new event (2002: 176).

In our case, the act of *1948* produces a narrative event in which the proliferation of the audiovisual invades the perceptual field of the viewer. Like the figure of Saeed, the viewer is caught by contradictions. When confronted with impossible laughter, the viewer is just perplexed: unable to deal with a laughter that is contextualized – it is felt and has all the required elements for it to come about – yet remains disembodied; that is, laughter does not manifest itself bodily. On one level, in its presentation of a contextualized yet disembodied humor, the film seems to conform with Henri Bergson’s conceptualization of laughter based on the principle of “exploitation and utilization” (1956: 180). In accordance with this principle, and distinct from Freud, for example, who believes that laughter and jokes are “fundamentally cathartic: a release, not stimulant”, Bergson decisively argues that “laughter is, above all, a corrective, and a means of correction”

(1956: 185).¹¹ As such, beyond its affect of relaxation and amusement, laughter, for Bergson, carries with it a need to correct a situation of missing the mark.

The impossible laughter in *1948*, I wish to argue is “corrective”. The laughter is no longer the known laughter, the sign of humor, when detached from its bodily manifestation. This disembodiment of laughter, through its absence in the film, generates a sense of alienation by which the viewer’s question shifts. From how images of the film tell a predetermined folk tale, the viewer now wonders what story the filmic representation produces. Thus, the viewer’s attention moves a way from the internal audiovisual structures of the known story of *al-nakba* to its narrative pragmatics; hence, opening up the temporal and contextual realms of the story and the event it recounts. Seen in this light, the impossibility of laughter in the film triggers a thought: a primary step made by the viewer towards the awareness and preparedness to deal with a different and more serious exilic reality. At the heart of this thought, impossible laughter emerges as an adequate marker of the problematic relationship between official history and the ways in which this is performed and experienced in the present by the people whose identity is at stake in the act of viewing.

Audiovisually, the film corresponds to this performative narrativity when, at the moment Saeed utters the words “I owe my life [...] to a donkey”, once more the viewer observes archival material of the war of 1948. While the title of the film, *1948*, pops up on

the screen in the shape of a burning flame, images of the fighting in 1948 are presented in the background. This return to archival historicism connects Saeed's performance in the film, through the impossibility of its laughter, with the alternative to humor—historical evidence. This connection turns Saeed's performance into a method of decoding the historicity of the event (the betrayal that *al-nakba* was), while at the same time encoding its (tragic) memory in and through the present betrayal of that past. In Saeed's performance, the viewer is constantly teased into laughter, only to realize that this laughter is a shield behind which tragedy lurks.

The shift from history to performance and back that the film undertakes enables us to see how performance keeps alive the memory of the past *nakba*, but also how this memory dwells in the present of the exiled subject. This effect emerges from the fact that what is enacted in Saeed's performance is not the event of *al-nakba* itself; rather, it is the subject's experience of this event. In this sense, the film's approach to *al-nakba* becomes emphatically subjective. Through this approach we are lured into the history of *al-nakba*, but we are also positioned as the subjects of that exile itself. Confronted with the impossibility of our laughter, together with Saeed, we come to live the past *nakba* in our reality.

What characterizes 1948, then, is a mode of audiovisual storytelling in which the past happening of *al-nakba* and the present experience of its exiled subjects, through memory, become locked together. The viewer may desire

to break loose but is unable to do so at the moment and as a consequence of enactment. In this sense, performative narrativity, drifting between performance and archives, becomes bound up with a temporal movement that displaces the narrative of *al-nakba* from its historical past of 1948 in order to reframe it in the present experience of Palestinian exile: fifty years later in 1998; more, at the moment of cinematic viewing later, in this case sixty years later in 2008. This narrative and reframing, wherein the past and the present of the event are conjoined in the same ontological domain, causes the viewer to be caught in a feeling of "ontological vertigo" by which his or her temporal distinction between the "real" and the imaginative become disordered.¹² As a result, narrative events do occur; they are constantly evoked by the fragments of performance and archival images and voices through which the verisimilitude of the narrative itself becomes inextricably connected with the language of the past and its memory as externally enacted by the body in the present. Hence, a performative mode of audiovisual storytelling occurs, wherein showing and enactment interlock and thus produce the referentiality of the narrative of Palestinian catastrophe. This referentiality is determined, not by the historical past, but by the political—cultural actuality of its exilic subjects.

In the film, this happens by marking off time, then setting up relations through the impossibility of laughter between archival footage and Saeed's act. Thereby the film uncovers meaningful designs of temporal series

through which the past event and the experience of the Palestinian subject can be connected in the present of exile, but without merging. This is how the film's performative narrativity becomes a re-enactment wherein the movements of mind and body affiliate. As a result, the viewer of the film becomes conscious not only of what was and is no more, but also of what is, and is living on. In this sense, to re-enact what is living through performance (role-playing) in *1948* becomes a narratological strategy that does not aim at unveiling the past, but rather at performing and transmitting the present. In other words, performance both keeps alive the memory of the past *nakba*, but also turns this event itself into an index that stands in a causal relationship with the presence of Palestinian exile.

Through such indexicality, both *al-nakba* and its present exiled subject are utilized in the film as drifting between mediums—between the stage and the archive. This drifting, as a result, produces narratological fragments that compose a present-oriented story—not only of where we were, but also where we are now. The beginning of this story in *1948*, however, does not attend to a shadow world: it is not alluding to comical tragedies in the vein of dark humor. Instead, the employment of tragic-comic episodes represents a beginning that is deliberately insensitive. In relation to *al-nakba*, the performative aspects of re-reading this narratological insensitivity establish a relation between the conceptualization of the catastrophe (as an event both in time and space) and the conceptualization of

Palestinian subjectivity as an actuality constructed in the past of a subjectively lived *al-nakba*, yet ultimately performed and lived in the present of exile. Performative narrativity, then, conjugates *al-nakba* to the experience of the *mankoub* subject.

In the opening scenes of *1948*, the combinational construct of performative narrativity between performance and archival footage appears to authorize the historical enterprise of *al-nakba* itself in all its forms; as meaningful representations of a fragmented Palestinian subjectivity in the present. Precisely through this historical authorization, the catastrophic event—regardless of the form of its representation in the narrative (here, performance and archives)—rejects a dissociation of cause and effect. In *1948* the telling of *al-nakba* as a folk tale “every folk tale begins [...]” offers a perfect example of this conceptualization. On the one hand, the folk tale suggests the inevitability of narrativization: more than half a century later, *al-nakba* has already become a story. On the other, the tale ironically warns against the risk that the Palestinians' loss of homeland and exile becomes temporally distant; just another fable among many.

At work here is not a trivialization of folk tales per se, but instead a narrative movement from *legend* set in a historical setting to *folk tale* as a story not told as “true”, but told as “pedagogy”. While the miracle and the donkey are part of the genre of folk tale, precise dating, “1947”, and the “national Mercedes” are not. Through Saeed's theatrical performance, especially in its

progression through several repetitive acts, this story of *al-nakba*, then, is a recent, in fact contemporary, ongoing story. It is a story that works through the problem of becoming a Palestinian subject; a desire gone wrong in the past that needs to be corrected in the present. This story of *al-nakba*, however, is not a unified whole. Instead, like the memory of its catastrophed subjects, it is a fragmented narrative consisting of multiple personal stories. This can be seen later on in the scenes following the opening of *1948* wherein audiovisual storytelling drifts yet again once more: this time between personal (oral) narratives and theatrical performance.

Exile of Body and Mind

Unlike the opening of *1948*, most of the scenes later on in the film are personal interviews conducted in 1998: story after story is told, interrupted by Bakri (the performer) on stage, who interprets and comments on the tales. The interviewees represent the first and second generations of post-*nakba* Palestinians. Their stories are arranged in a temporal sequence that takes the viewer on a journey covering the period between 1948 and 1998. The dominant characteristic of these stories is the emphasis on the violent nature of *al-nakba* and on the exile that followed 1948 and continues to exist in the present. Massacres, forced expulsion and loss of home are the main issues of these stories, particularly the *massacre of Deir Yassin*. This massacre refers to the killing of scores of Palestinian peasants in the village of Deir Yassin, near Jerusalem, during the British Mandate

of Palestine by Jewish paramilitary forces, Irgun and Stern groups, between April 9th and 11th, 1948.¹³

The following sequence of stories is a typical example of the alternation of interviews, archival images and the performance on the stage. As the archival images of the fighting of 1948 fade away, the camera moves from the flag of Israel to an elderly woman crying, identified on the screen as Um Saleh from Deir Yassin. Together with her grandson, she is standing on a hill over-looking a house on which the flag of Israel hangs. Looking at the house, Um Saleh begins to lament what used to be her house by chanting:

I kept calling [...] O Papa, until my head spun. There was no sound, no response. They were deaf and couldn't hear me. One of the floor's tiles answered me: "Go, light of my life. Destiny is thy bridegroom and absence will be long".

Both the traditional form of lamentation and the presence of the grandson give Um Saleh's chanting a theatrical feel. She seems to put up a performance: an act of singing. This is reinforced by the grandson's position as audience. Yet, Um Saleh's act is specifically "theatrical" as well. She also "plays", putting an act of loss and belonging. This act becomes manifest immediately after the singing as Um Saleh recounts the story of how she lost thirty members of her family during the *massacre of Deir Yassin*. With the flag of Israel hanging on her lost house as the backdrop, the decor on the stage, serving as a historical remainder, Um Saleh describes how her grandson

feels sorry of her whenever she cries:

[This] child starts pampering me when he sees me crying [...] Thirty of my relatives fell in Deir Yassin. Thirty people! My grandfather [...] was the Mukhtar [head of the village]. When he saw them killing his children, he slapped a Jew who said: "We are not slaughtering you. The British are". We Arabs, masters of our fate, became subservient to the Jews. After the injustice of Deir Yassin, 400 villages were erased. Had ten people come to our aid; Deir Yassin would have been saved.

Since the boy is both the audience of the performance and the object of the story, the temporal merging of past and present is enacted in the merging of play and story. Moreover, Um Saleh's story, and numerous ones like it, set up the historical and political framework of *al-nakba*. The old woman thus performs the intergenerational transmission of its narrative to the child, hence the present. This transmission inflects the position of the grandson as an audience into that of a new generation who "inherits" the grief and the loss of place.¹⁴ On a historical level, Um Saleh's story emphatically lays the political responsibility for the loss of Palestine with the British, whose intention of doing justice to the world's Jewry in the aftermath of the Holocaust brought injustice and victimization on the Palestinians, so that the Palestinians became "victims" of the "victims": they "became subservient to the Jews".

For my purposes, it is more important to understand how Um Saleh works

this historical claim from past fact to enduring state. Um Saleh's conception of *al-nakba*, similarly to Saeed's in the theatrical performance in the opening of 1948, is localized: her catastrophe is the loss of her home and family during the Deir Yassin massacre. Um Saleh's loss is tempered with a longing for solidarity that does not come, "kept calling [...] They were deaf [...]" and "Had ten people to our aid [...]". It is also performed as subjective, since the song enacts a tormented experience of exile wherein a long absence is constantly re-produced, "destiny is thy bridegroom and absence will be long". The personification of absence as the offspring of a personal relationship (marriage) between the subject and her destiny, "bridegroom", gives shape to this subjective slant of her focalization. It weaves a symbolic net that not only allows for the interpretation of the absence of, and from, home as a dispossession aimed at both body and mind, but it also connects the expulsion of Um Saleh in the past to her living experience in the present. Only on that condition of that mixed temporality can she affect the grandson with that subjectivity. The theatricality stands for this temporality.

Hence, the presence of the grandson in the scene performs this connection between the past and the present. As a listener to the story, his presence not only signifies the iterability of the act and the cultural dynamics of memory transmission through oral narratives, but also the generational distance between Um Saleh's actual experience of the event and her act of telling. As

a result, the temporal structure of Um Saleh's story blends its re-enactment in the present of the film. The grandmother and the child are both involved in the act that produces the illocutionary force of telling. The acceptance of their mutual roles facilitates the felicity of the act: the grandmother tells and cries, and the grandson pampers her in agreement. The question of narrative duration in 1948 as such becomes moot at this point. Instead, the blend allows for a narrative focalization of the way *al-nakba* is lived in the body and mind of its subjects. Through this focalization, the expulsion and separation of, and from home, become geographical, historical, and personal all at once. And all this, presumably, for the film's viewer, who is offered the position of the child for partial identification.

This can be observed at the end of Um Saleh's account when the scope of the narrative widens to the outside of the subjective realm, only to return to it again. As Um Saleh's crying voice slowly fades away, images of popular demonstrations held in commemoration of *al-nakba* enter the screen. The demonstrators' voices overtake hers as they shout repeatedly: "Calamity day: through our resolve, the right of return will not die [...]". The "right of return" that the demonstrators call for represents the main political demand of the Palestinian people for the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This narrative movement to the exterior of Um Saleh's personal narrative transforms the private event of her loss of home into a public one. This move from private to public gives political

relevance to the notion of "returning", but also forces a questioning of what it means to "return". What or who returns? To where, and when?

Immediately after the film audiovisually *returns* to the personal narratives. The next story is that of Taha Ali Mohammed. Taha speaks of what the loss of his village (Saffouria) and "return" to it means to him:

Saffouria is a mysterious symbol. My longing for it is not a yearning for stone and paths alone, but for a mysterious blend of feelings, relatives, peoples, animals, birds, brooks, stories, and deeds [...] When I visit Saffouria I become excited and burst into crying, but when I think about Saffouria the picture that forms in my mind is virtually imaginary, mysterious, hard to explain [...].

Taha's words present a classical case of nostalgic yearning for the remainder of a destroyed place. In the situation of exile nostalgia does not necessarily appear as sentimental or escapist. Instead, if approached as an analytical concept, it can have a productive function as a cultural response to the loss of homeland in exile and, thus, facilitates detailing notions of Palestinian cultural memory and identification with Palestine as their homeland.

In Taha's narrative, this productive impulse of nostalgia can be seen in the fact that his longing for the past and for what has been lost does not represent a return to an idealized past: "my longing is not a yearning for stone [...]". For Taha, what were lost are not just houses, stones, and paths, but a

whole life: the country, the people, and their entire existence. The return to the lost home is constituted in the difference between “visiting” the place and “thinking” it. While his visit to the material site (the ruins of his village) evokes an emotional flux and tears, Taha’s thinking of Saffouria engenders a “mysterious” picture in his mind. Thus, Taha’s cultural identification and belonging appear grounded in the difference between “seeing” the place and interiorizing it, through which the material image of the lost home is transformed into a mental one.

This mental image is inexplicable: “hard to explain [...]”. On the one hand, Taha’s failure to articulate this mental image is the performative moment in the narrative at which his tragedy of loss of home is qualified as larger than the individual, hence collective and for that reason, not “fitting” in his individual mind. On the other, through the inexplicability of the mental image, Taha’s belonging to the lost place does not appear as a material belonging – not as a matter of “having and having not”. Rather, Taha’s belonging to his lost home appears as an enigma: a very personal sense that gives off an awareness of a specific knowledge of the self that cannot be expressed discursively, like an exotic and unnamable scent. The subjectivity of the enduring loss (of place) is again foregrounded. For Taha, this is how the return to the lost home becomes a return that must equal what was lost in the first place: a whole life. Hence, such a loss cannot be simply compensated with a visit to the lost place. Taha’s narrative confirms

Palestinians’ collective conceptions of the “right of return” as a return to a whole life, not just to a place.

In this part of *1948*, the movement of storytelling from the interior psyche (Um Saleh’s story) to the public exterior (demonstrations) and back again (Taha’s story) performs the process of becoming – in other words, of a dynamic identity – in terms of cultural memory. This wavering narrativity not only puts forward a political statement about the Palestinian loss of homeland and their “right of return” as the self demanding a return to itself, but also, I contend, exemplifies the idea of cultural memory, to borrow Bal’s conceptualization of the term, as an act of citationality that “establishes memorial links beyond personal contiguity” (1999a: 218).¹⁵ Through the resulting intertemporality of memory, becoming can be viewed as a process based on interaction between the individual subject and collective, cultural and politic milieu, including that milieu’s history.

This process enables the discovery of a unique and irreplaceable position, a topographical one, with respect to exile. This movement inside and outside personal narratives not only frames Um Saleh’s and Taha’s narratives within contemporary political context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but also exposes Palestinian cultural memory and identity as contextually embedded within a past loss of homeland that invariably interferes in the present of exile. As such, the storytelling of *1948* not only deals with the temporality of the past within the present, also with the spatial and the generational

distance between the lost home and the exilic subject in the sense of the “there” in, and for, the “here”. At the heart of this figuration of Palestinian identity in *1948* is, then, a topographical position that maintains the notion that “there is no travel without a return” by which the past narrative of *al-nakba* is cognitively and spatially grounded in the present of the exilic subject. This figuration is performed in the storytelling acts of Um Saleh and Taha. In *1948*, however, this topographical positioning does constitute a point of arrival for Bakri’s film, but also a point of departure for another kind of journey: a return trip to the subjective realm of narrative not of the self but of its “other”.

Performing “We” in the “Aftermath”

As I already indicated, Bakri’s theatrical play was performed many times in Arabic and Hebrew to packed audiences of Palestinians and Israelis over a number of years. In keeping up with this mixing, *1948* brings in Israeli narratives of this event. In the next scene, as the camera slowly moves away from Taha standing near the ruins of his destroyed village, a voice over comes in saying: “Saffouria endangered the Israeli army, the IDF [...]”. Slowly, the face of an elderly man, identified as Dov Yirmiya, sitting with his grandson in the courtyard of his house, enters on the screen. Speaking Arabic with an Israeli accent, Dov tells the story of how he was responsible for conquering Taha’s village (Saffouria) as IDF officer: “One battalion went to Illout and I led my platoon to Saffouria. I was ordered to conquer it and I did [...]”.

Audiovisually, Dov’s story is connected to the stories of Um Saleh and Taha. The setting of Dov with his grandson inside his house is symbolically charged. It echoes the scene of Um Saleh and her grandson standing outside her house, in exile. This not only reminds the viewer of the generational distance and the oral dynamic of narrative transmission, but it also sharply contrasts their respective positions: Um Saleh in non-place (not-home or exile), Dov in place (in Um Saleh’s home). Narratively and historically, through his confession of conquering Saffouria—“I did [it]”—Dov becomes the perpetrator of Taha’s catastrophe. As the perpetrator, Dov’s presence in the film concretizes Taha’s loss as well as his allegorical “return” to the lost home. Through Dov’s confession, Taha’s loss of place and the “right of return” are given a specific historical context: the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as the origin of Palestinian exile in the film’s present. Most importantly, on a political level, Dov’s narrative relates to the issue of negation of *al-nakba*. His confession emphatically deviates from official Zionist history that denies that *al-nakba* took place.¹⁶

Through the employment of multiple personal narratives of both self and other, the movement of audiovisual storytelling in *1948* brings together different visions and voices playing off against each other without the need to reconcile them, but to hold them together—the “Palestinian self” as victimized and the “Israeli other” as a perpetrator. They need each other as

in a Hegelian dialectic.¹⁷ Additionally, the film practices a narrativity that runs through the singular form according to the convention that several voices must at different moments claim the position of the main character in the narrative of *al-nakba*. This feature facilitates a polyvocal storytelling of the catastrophe that expresses feelings and aspirations of several people, in order to suggest that the voices of the Palestinian self and the Israeli other are each answerable to the other. This answerability can be seen to be performed in the audiovisual shift the film makes from the realm of personal memories to the theatrical and the public stage where self and other are brought, not into opposition, but into dialogue. In 1948, this dialogic relationship is grounded in specific conflicted, yet inherently *uneven*, discourses of memory, in which Palestinian and Israeli voices speak *of* and *in* “the aftermath” of *al-nakba*. I shall return to the “unevenness” of Palestinian and Israeli discourses of memory in the next section of this article.

After Dov’s story, the viewer encounters one more personal narrative. Her eyes looking straight into the camera, as if talking not to the interviewer but to the viewer, an elderly woman, identified as Zahariya Assad from Deir Yassin, begins her story with the words: “One thing made me cry the day we left our village, never allowed to return [...]”. The emphasis in Zahariya’s story is on exile occurring in a non-place. Her story can be summarized as follows. When Zahariya was fifteen years, the wife of her old brother

was killed during the *massacre of Deir Yassin*, leaving behind two baby girls. Zahariya takes care of the babies. After fleeing her village during the massacre, carrying with her the two baby girls, she ends up in an empty and strange place, without knowing how to support the girls. Following directly on Dov’s confession, the significance of this story lies primarily in its focalization of the catastrophic moment not in Dov’s act itself (his conquering as a contribution of the establishment of the State of Israel), but in the aftermath of this act: being stranded in a non-place (exile). What makes Zahariya cry is not that she must care for two babies with no means of survival, but, as she says, that she is “never allowed to return to her home”.

The aftermath—it is this retroactive recall of the past that causes tears. This “preposterous temporality” of the catastrophic moment, the aftermath of *al-nakba*, serves as the starting point for a renewed (theatrical) dialogue between the voices of self and other.¹⁸ After Zahariya’s story, the screen, in the form of a book page, opens the theatrical stage. On stage, Saeed Abi al-Nahs, as if entering from afar, appears once more to complete his story, left off in the opening scenes:

I swear that when this great misfortune befell us in 1948, my family was scattered throughout Arab countries, bordering Israel that Israel had not yet conquered. But the day will come. When my father and the donkey were shot dead [...], I set sail for Acre, by sea. The great sea, whose foamy waves are like

mountains. Its shores are bullets and treachery, with refugee boats to the end of the horizon. The sea is great and treacherous and our cousins too, including infants, are drowning, drowning.

Saeed describes *al-nakba* as the “great misfortune” of 1948. In contrast to the opening scenes wherein the catastrophic moment is specified as “the incidents of 1947”, Saeed’s expression here follows the public dating of the event. In so doing, *al-nakba* becomes no longer the private catastrophe of the individual subject, but the larger collective one. Many small incidents in 1947 together add up to the collective catastrophe of 1948. *Al-nakba*, thus, appears as both utterly individual – it happened to each village or Palestinian – and collective – it targeted the Palestinians as a people and a nation – at the same time.

With respect to the notions of “self” and “other”, Saeed’s swearing gives his performative act a sense of sincerity.¹⁹ But since the act takes place in public as well as expands to others, it transforms his performance into an act of testimony.²⁰ Saeed’s performance reiterates a story of loss and dispersal that is similar to the ones we already saw. Hence, Saeed takes responsibility for the film’s subjects through his re-telling of their losses. Like in a courtroom, Saeed’s act on stage embodies the aesthetic capacity both to reiterate the personal narratives and to “take their stand”. The similarity among the experiences of loss, expressed at the beginning of his statement “I swear [...]”, threatens the binary division of the self as

victimized and the other as perpetrator. Yet, Saeed’s description of the “great and treacherous” sea prevents this categorization. In the sea both the exilic (victimized) self and its (perpetrator) other perish equally: “the sea is great and our cousins too, including infants, are drowning, drowning”. In this sentence, the phrase “our cousins” is key. This is the phrase that Palestinians commonly use in reference to the Jews, thus, signifying the biblical relationship between both peoples as descendants from Isaac and Ishmael (the two half brothers), the sons of Abraham.²¹ For Saeed, “our cousins” are drowning with us in the sea of conflict. His description, through referring to the Israel/Jewish other as “cousins”, moves away from oppositional politics and constitutes both self and other as a relationship between relatives. This is a performative politics of “we”.

On the level of narrative language, this conceptualization of self and other makes place for personal memories that confound official history and at the same time return to that history what often escapes it – the catastrophic in the present. Thus, the narrativity of *al-nakba* between personal memories and historical performance in 1948 establishes an equitable and dialogic relationship between the Palestinian self and its Israeli/Jewish other that is based on the unraveling of official Zionist history. This corrective stipulates that official history is bad, not in its essence – which would be a tautology – but rather in its application. In her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak argues that the re-examination of

colonial discourse does not necessitate discarding previous versions of history or truth but challenges the notion that anyone is privileged to have access to the truth (1999: 21-25). In light of Spivak's critique, I wish to argue that in 1948 the distrust in official history's capacity to express the memories of *al-nakba* leads to a re-telling of the past that challenges the notion that anyone has privileged access to historical truth. As I pointed in my analysis of 1948 thus far, this challenge most clearly manifests itself in Dov's confession of conquering Saffouria, which sharply contradicts official Zionist historicity of *al-nakba*.

The performative narrativity of the film, then, constructs an alternative knowledge of the loss of Palestine. This alternative knowledge both activates the referentiality of the narrative of *al-nakba* as present-oriented, and politicizes its aesthetic experience. Thus, the film's narrative becomes a political performance that appeals to the audience to acknowledge and experience the actuality of Palestinians' loss of homeland and exile as ongoing. The appeal also extends the audience to include victims and perpetrators as co-dependent—as "cousins". What animates this appeal is not just a disagreement about what happened in the past, but also the issue of whether the catastrophe is really over, or continues in the present, albeit in different form. In the closing part of the film, the movement of audiovisual storytelling bears this out. Immediately after Saeed's performance of the metaphor of the sea, the viewer encounters more personal

stories of both self and other, but from a more recent point of view. Thus, the performative narrativity of the film is a mode of telling that, as I will attempt to show in the remainder of this article, explores the causes and effects of the narrative, but also attempts to bring this narrative closer to resolution.

The Everyday: Self, Others, and Exile

The final sequence of Bakri's 1948 performs the conflicted, yet co-dependent "we" most directly. It opens with a close-up of Bakri outside the theatrical stage: we see him interviewing, listening to stories, and wondering between the ruins and the cactus trees. In one of these scenes, Bakri interviews a man, identified as Abu Adel from Dawaima. Abu Adel describes how the people from his village fled their homes during the Israeli army's invasion in 1948 in which "400-500 men, women, and children were killed then". The moment Abu Adel utters these words, a voice over comes saying in Hebrew: "It was a slaughter planned by IDF". In the next shot, the speaker—a man setting in his garden—is identified as Amos Keinan. Amos continues the story and says:

It was not the Irgun, Stern Group or the Hagana. It was the army. You won't find this in the official [Israeli] history books. But those who have to, know it. I, for one, have to know. I knew it back in 1948 [...].

Amos's narrative exposes the violent nature of the expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948. His narrative

also harks back to Dov's narrative in that it lays the responsibility for *al-nakba* on the Israeli army (IDF). Most importantly, his narrative emphatically shows the gaps of official Zionist history of *al-nakba*: "you won't find it in official history books". This congruity between Amos's and Dov's narratives further coalesces the idea of a co-dependent self and other. Through this consistency of their narratives, both Amos and Dov are focalized as Israeli/Jewish voices who confirm the stories of Palestinians and at the same time accept responsibility for *al-nakba*.

However, the conceptualization of a "responsible other" appears problematic as soon as Amos finishes his narrative. In the following scene we see Abu Adel leading Bakri to the place where his lost village (Dawaima) once stood. While both men wander among the ruins, they come across a Jewish house where they meet a man and his son who is carrying a gun on his waist. When Bakri asks the father – identified as David, a resident of Moshav Zecharia – "You live in an Arab village. Today, it's a Jewish locality. Are you comfortable living in a house that was not yours?" David, taken by the question and after some hesitation, answers with a question: "What can I say, yes or no?"

While David remains silent, still unable to come up with an answer, Bakri says: "That means you understand the pain of a person who [...]". Before completing the sentence, David rushes in and replies: "I understand it very well". The moment David finishes his sentence, his son – identified as David's

son from Moshav Zecharia – interferes in the discussion, so that a dialogue between them starts:

I was born here and this is my place. I don't look at whoever was here before me. Nothing. This land was given to the Jews thousands of years ago, and it's ours.

At this moment, David comes in completing his son's words and comparing his own immigration from Iraq to the loss of home that Palestinians experienced:

Whether we're comfortable with it or not. We were also hurt when they threw us out of our homes. They did not use force to throw us out and they did not say: "Get out of here!" I know that the State of Israel made a deal with the Iraqis and got us out of there. We came here.

The narrative of David and his son is crucial in this scene. The intergenerational transmission we saw earlier yields to a willful denial in the younger generation. On the one hand, both men reiterate the official Zionist narrative that is utterly grounded in terms of the intricate mythology of Israel's religious origins as Jewish continuity from biblical times: "This land was given to the Jews [...]". On the other hand, both of them take the position of an Israeli/Jewish other, who neither acknowledges the Palestinians' rights to their land, nor takes responsibility for what happened to them in 1948: "whether we're comfortable with it or not".

Thus, compared to Dov and Amos, both David and his son stand as extreme opposites of the former pair. With regard to “self” and “other”, the juxtaposition of the narratives of David and his son to those of Dov and Amos allows us to understand the Israeli/Jewish other as a construct that includes different “others”. These “others” are divided between an other who reforms Zionism and takes responsibility (Dov and Amos), and another irresponsible Zionist other constituted in the difference between David and his son.²²

This presentation of the Israeli/Jewish other as internally divided others poses a theoretical challenge to the Palestinian victimized self: namely, where the Palestinian self is located and how it is configured in relation to its “others” so that they can become the “we” of the play and the film’s mixed audience. In order to answer this question, the film resorts to theatrical performance. For the final time and immediately after the scene with David and his son, the camera shifts from the outside to the theatrical stage. On stage, with a metal plate on his head like a soldier’s hat, hiding behind the broomstick as a defensive barrier, and with his hand in the shape of a pointed gun, Saeed audiovisually performs both self and other. Speaking Arabic with an Israeli accent, Saeed says: “Where did you come from? Tell me or I’ll shoot you?” Changing both his accent and position, coming out from behind the broomstick, Saeed starts talking to the audiences describing how an Israeli soldier held a gun to his child’s head and how he stood there helpless.

Changing his position again into that of the soldier, Saeed then recounts the story in a monologue in which the soldier interrogates the father of the child:

[Soldier:] Where are you from?
[Father:] from Birwa, Sir. [Soldier:]
Are you returning to Birwa? [Father:]
Yes, Sir. Please, Sir [...] [Soldier:]
Didn’t I order you not to return?
Animals! You respect no law? Go on.
Get out of here.

In Saeed’s performance, Palestinian self and Israeli other are intertwined in a violent relationship, that is, of a colonizer and colonized. The use of the “animals” enables a reading in which the Israeli soldier’s description becomes fused with racist, imperialist images of Palestinians as less than human. Moreover, the dialogue between self and other which was established in Saeed’s performance of the metaphor of the sea is now terminated by the sheer force of the soldier’s statement: “Get out of here!” What the Iraqis did not say to David (“Get out of here”), the Israeli soldier says to the Palestinians. More importantly, this scene makes concrete the internal division of Israeli/Jewish “others” (between Dov and Amos, and David and his son) in terms of power: not Dov and Amos, as responsible others, who have power in Israeli society, but David and his son. The gun on the waist of David’s son becomes a symbol of control and power. This symbol exposes the conflictual grounds of Palestinian and Israeli discourse of memory and identity, but it also embodies the *unevenness* of these

discourses. Since 1948, Israel always had the advantages of a state apparatus and military authority, which not only fashions images of historical Palestine exclusively as the so-called “Jewish land” internally and abroad but also suppresses and de-legitimizes Palestinian narratives of identity.

At the end of Saeed’s performance, the focalization of the Palestinian self and the Israeli other as colonized/colonizer seems to bring the film’s narrative to a halt. Only then, audiovisual storytelling shifts from the theatrical stage to the outside. In this scene, we see Dov playing his accordion music to a group of children, and singing in Arabic: “We bring you peace”. After the singing, Bakri asks Dov about the reason for his sympathy with the Palestinians, and says: “I sense that you’re playing music not only because you love music. You sympathize [with Palestinians] not just because you like Arabs, but also for another reason: You’re assuming responsibility for [a] national feeling of guilt. Am I right?” Dov then immediately answers:

You are right about one thing. For many years, I believed in my Zionism, but not like today’s Zionists and also not like the kind we had back then. I believed that we were not harming the Arabs here [...] I admit that even before the war, I perceived a trend in Zionism [...] when people come to a place where another people lives, especially if there’s resistance, and this resistance is justified, we later discovered [...] I certainly don’t feel comfortable with the idea, even before the establishment of the State

of Israel. But after the state was established, from the moment there was something we could do about it [...] To heal, rectify, show good will, help out, bring back refugees. That’s when it started to eat me inside. Since then I’ve been consistent in my views.

Dov’s consistent views of Palestinians not only show the inconsistency of David and his son’s views, but also particularize the difference between the views of Israeli/Jewish “others” as based on different ideological trends within Zionism.²³

In our film, Dov is an Israeli/Jewish subject who believes in a Zionist ideology. Dov’s version of Zionism, however, is different from “today’s Zionism and also not like the kind we had back then [in 1948]”. Unlike the Zionist trend of David and his son, in Dov’s ideology establishing a “homeland for the Jews” should neither harm the Palestinians nor deny their existence: “When people come a place where another people live”. Precisely through this articulation of a specific trend of Zionism Dov becomes a subject with a historical consciousness, but also dominant trends of Zionism become atrocious—just like official history—not in their nature, but in their application. The current ideology of Zionism (or the trend of David and his son) is precisely dubious in its lack of historical consciousness: through the denial of the Palestinians’ rights and the refusal of responsibility for their catastrophe. Further, unlike David who lives with his ideology “whether [he is] comfortable with it or

not", Dov's historical consciousness is characterized by a moment of unease: "I certainly don't feel comfortable [...]". After the establishment of the State of Israel, this moment of unease, for Dov, became a moment of recognition of the fact that there was something that could be done about what happened to the Palestinians: "to heal, rectify, help out". Thus Dov's feeling of guilt, "that's when it started to eat me inside", is not grounded in what happened in the past, but in the failure to correct it in the present, to do something about the Palestinians' suffering today.

Dov's distinction of his own brand of Zionism unravels it as an ideology that has multiple strands and trends, but that hides them in an artificial unity. Rather than resolving the issue, Dov's narrative suggests that the possibility of resolution is in the hands, not of the Palestinians, but of their Israeli "others". The resolution of the Palestinian narrative of *al-nakba* can only work at the level of the others' ideologies, substituting racist Zionist ideological trends with historically conscious ones. However, until that moment comes, the Palestinians' remain colonized and dispossessed: their everyday of exile surges on without any sign of ending or reducing suffering.

The closing scene of *1948* illustrates this contradictory situation. We see Bakri walking among the ruins and the cactus trees, intimating the Palestinian present as tainted with loss of place and nostalgia. In a close-up, we see him standing on one of the graves and brushing the dust off the name on the gravestone. At this moment the image

of a bird, a seagull, at the shore of the sea enters the screen. As the bird is about to fly away, the camera captures its image, and Bakri's voice over comes in chanting:

O bird, you have reminded me of my [loved ones] with your plaintive song. Don't compound my sorrows. O bird, when you see a man placing his hand on his cheek, it means he parted from his loved ones. Don't approach him. O bird, everyone had his own troubles. Don't compound my sorrow.

The bird emerges as a metaphor for the tormented continuous journey in Palestinian exile. It not only reminds the exiled of his or her "loved ones" in the past, but also torments the self in the present, compounding "the sorrow". Thus, both the loss of the homeland and the helplessness to overcome it, "when you see a man placing his hand [...]", are displaced from the historical catastrophe to the contemporary reality of exile.²⁴

In *1948*, the narrativity through which *al-nakba* is performed, then, suggests a dynamic reciprocity between the past and the present by which the agonized present of exile becomes the main motivation behind the subject's telling of the past. This mode can be derived as performative narrativity: drifting between theatrical performance, historical archives, and personal memories it comprises the performance of a fundamental aspect for the actual state of the Palestinian narrative. The image of Bakri brushing the dust off the name of the gravestone

becomes the ultimate enactment of this actuality. Through its confrontation with official Zionist history, the film's performative narrativity shows us the dusty gravestones of Palestinians, while performance exposes their names in the present.

In 1948, official history and performance emerge as the dialectic of politics and aesthetics. This dialectic, however, appears as self-perpetuating: it feeds on itself, especially through the film's moving inside and outside personal memories and the theatrical stage. Fittingly, the performative approach of audiovisual storytelling accepts intellectual responsibility for maintaining rather than resolving the tension between the aesthetic and the political, using the former to criticize, re-examine and transfigure the latter through performative acts of telling. The film constructs temporal bridges between the past of *al-nakba* and the present of exile that allows us to see both from different angles at once in a durational continuity that they share.

The salient aspect of this analysis of 1948 is not to recognize the temporality of the past event of *al-nakba* within the present of exile, but to see the aesthetic experience (in this case a theatrical performance) of that catastrophe as not merely a representation of the past but as a living form of the catastrophic present, where the battle for justice, emancipation and the diminishment of human suffering continues. Re-reading the film's performative narrativity can become a cultural intervention that does not aim to merge Palestinian "self" and Israel/Jewish "other", but

enacts their conflicted discourses of memory through which they can converse together in a shared space where narratives and identities are always already implicated in each other. Neither separation nor merging is ever absolute, but dependent on the specific contexts in which re-telling and re-reading are staged and performed.

Notes

1. This *mawaal* (melody) is my translation and it is taken from Palestinian folkloric music that is commonly sung during festive occasions such as wedding ceremonies and births. The audio-cassette tape where I found this melody is from a composition of songs by Shafiq Kabha. See Kabha (1989).
2. I am referring here to the well-known Zionist narrative which makes claims for Jewish historical presence in Palestine based on a timeless biblical attachment to the land by absolutely rejecting, with brutal military force, any Palestinian historical or temporal counterclaims. For excellent explications of such a narrative, see Said (1992), Masalha (1992), and Pappé (2006).
3. The term "Israeli-Arabs" is often used to refer to the 17 percent of the Palestinians who remained in the area of Palestine on which Israel was established in 1948. Currently, there are more than one million Palestinians living inside Israel as a "second-class citizens" minority. The vagueness of the term "Israeli-Arabs" is due to the contradictory approaches through which these Palestinian subjects are theorized in dominant political ideologies and academic discourses, especially anthropological and ethnic studies. On the one hand, as Arabs, these subjects are

dismissed and degraded as uncivilized subjects. On the other, as Israelis, they are conceived of as an object for civilizing. For further critique of this term as well as the various acts of social disenfranchisement and political oppression which this segment of Palestinians had endured since 1948, see Frisch (1997: 257-69), and Suleiman (2001: 31-46).

4. In recognition of his life work, Habibi was awarded the Palestinian prize for literature (*Al-Quds Prize*) by the PLO in 1990. In 1992, Habibi also accepted the "Israel prize for Arabic Literature", and as a result, had to face some fierce literary and political attacks by Arab and Palestinian intellectuals that lasted until his death. Habibi was born and buried in Haifa and, in an adamant response to the attacks against him, his will was to have inscribed on his grave: "Emile Habibi remains in Haifa forever". For a comprehensive study on these controversial aspects of Habibi's life and literary project, see Jaraar (2002: 17-28). In his article, Jarrar also discusses many of the critical studies that dealt with Habibi's novel, *al-Mutasha'il*. Also, see Dalia Karpel's documentary about Emile Habibi's life, *Emile Habibi – Nisarty B'Haifa* (Emile Habibi – I Stayed in Haifa), (1997).

5. To be sure, the theory of performative, initially formulated by John Austin, in *How to Do Things With Words* (1962), changed linguistics drastically. This theory has been modified and extended from philosophy to cultural analysis and back again in other theorizations particularly these by Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. Derrida embraces the theory of the performative as the basis for a new conceptual methodology of analysis in what he refers to as the

"new humanities". Through his intervention, the performative is brought to bear on a wide range of cultural practices and events; not only language. Derrida assigns the analytical authority of the humanities within the university to knowledge (its constative language), to the profession (its model of performative language), and to the *mise en oeuvre* of putting to practice of the "performative", which Derrida, alluding to metaphorical fiction, calls the "as if" (2001: 235). On Derrida's conceptualization of *mise en oeuvre* in the sense of "as if", see Derrida (2001: 233-247), and Singer (1993: 539-68). For further studies on Derrida's thought and theory, see Derrida (1976, 1977: 172-97, 1981, and 1989: 959-71), and Culler (1981, 1982, 2000: 503-19, and 2006). The term "new humanities" is cited in Peters (2002: 47-48). In his article, Peters discusses what Derrida outlines as seven programmatic theses in the humanities or what Derrida calls "seven professions of faith for the new humanities" (48). Butler's theorization of performativity follows this Derridian view of iteration as the key to performance in that it accounts for the performative's relationship to cultural practices such as gender. Butler argues that gender is discursively constituted by performative acts, which in their iteration come to form a specific and "coherent" gender identity. Gender, then, becomes a "performative reiteration", that is, as the subject's habit to embody hegemonic norms. As such, for Butler, there is no gender identity behind expressions of gender: identity is constituted by and through the very expressions that are said to be its results. See Butler (1990 and 1993).

6. My assumption here benefits from Richard Bauman's cross-cultural perspective of intertextuality, especially his folklore standpoint of looking at communications across time and the relationship of texts and performance to the past. See Bauman's (1984 and 2004). For relevant studies on this perspective in terms of performance, memory and storytelling, see Dell Hymes' works on the methodology and theory of ethnopoetics in Native American context. See Hymes (2003 and 2004).

7. It is worth mentioning here that Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin* (2002) is dedicated to the *Jenin massacre*. This massacre (also known as *The Battle of Jenin*) took place between 3rd and 11th of April, 2002 in Jenin Refugee camp in the West Bank as part of Israeli Army's Operation Defensive Shield during the second *Intifada*. Bakri's film includes testimonies from the residents of Jenin describing how Israeli forces destroyed most of the camp. *Jenin, Jenin* begins with a deaf and dumb man who leads the viewers (and Bakri himself) to the scenes of destruction after which straight up interviews with the inhabitants of Jenin are introduced. Bakri also includes an interview with himself. For more information on this film, see <http://www.arabfilm.com/item/242/>. For detailed insights on the *Jenin massacre*, see Baroud (2003). Baroud's book is an excellent compilation of eye-witness accounts of the residents of Jenin.

8. Similarly, Simone De Beauvoir's famous term "The Second Sex" indicates the second-class status of women. See Beauvoir (1949 [1989]).

9. See Saloul (2007: 111-28).

10. I use the term "re-reading" as discussed by Inge Boer. In her book, *Disorienting vision*,

Boer argues that "re-reading" is a temporal process of discovery which is itself "part and parcel of the act of reflecting on the relation that operate between a reader and a text or a viewer and an image. This process runs parallel to strategies of interpreting context" (2004: 19). In other words, re-reading is an interactive process that is explicit about both the practice of interpretation and its political pertinence in the context of the present.

11. This statement from Freud is quoted by Merchant (1972: 9), and Taha (2002: 56). For Bergson's notion of laughter, see Bergson (1956: 170-89).

12. My use of the term "ontological vertigo" is similar to Inge Boer's use of the term as an effect that emerges from literary works' use of common devices to claim truthfulness of their account while at the same time making use of the imaginary. See Boer (2004: 91).

13. For a comprehensive historical record, details and figure of this massacre as well as its psychological and political impact on the Palestinians, See Kanaana and Zitawi (1987), and Morris (2005: 79-107).

14. For relevant discussions on generational transmission of personal narratives and experiences, see for example, Stahl (1977: 9-30) and Robinson (1981: 58-85).

15. This conceptualization is further developed in Bal (1999b: vii-3).

16. In "official" Israeli political and academic discourse, the event of *al-nakba* is presented as an event that did not happen. On Israeli negation of *al-nakba*, see, for example, Kadish and Avrahor (2005: 42-57), Morris (1987 and 1990), and Masalha (1988: 158-71 and 1996).

17. For a useful study on this dialectic, see Buck-Morss (2000: 821-65).

18. My use of the term “preposterous temporality” here benefits from Bal’s notion of “preposterous history” as she theorizes it in her book *Quoting Caravaggio*. The object of investigation in Bal’s book is not the well-known seventeenth century painter, but rather the temporality of art. In her book, Bal retheorizes linear notions of influence in cultural production. She does so by showing the particular ways in which the act of quoting is central to the new art but also to the source from which it is derived. Through such dialogic relationship between past and present, Bal argues for a notion of “preposterous history”, where works that appear chronologically first operate as “after effect” caused by the images of subsequent artists (1999a: 1-27). A similar temporality, I contend, is at stake in Bakri’s film, *1948*.

19. Sincerity is itself subject to rhetorical analysis. See Van Alphen (2008, in press).

20. For relevant works on testimony in relation to conflicted discourse of memory, see Lévinas (1996: 97-107), Derrida (2000: 15-51 and 2002: 82-99), Hartman (2002: 67-84), Felman (1991: 39-81), and Sontag (2003: 104-26).

21. The Islamic reference of this relationship as “cousins” can be found in Surah Ibrahim (14: 39). See Yusuf Ali (2000: 200-206).

22. For a useful study on the mishaps of the representation of Palestinian history in Zionist narrative in Israeli cinema, see Shohat (1989). Shohat’s driving thesis is that Palestinians are often not mentioned in Israeli films, and if they are, then their history and their case for a homeland are not treated with understanding and

sympathy. In her analysis, shohat also points out how the exclusive *Jewish rythem of life* which Zionist cinema promotes serves to camouflage the deep socio-cultural discrepancies between the European (Ashkenazi), the Oriental (Sephardim), the Orthodox and the secular Jews in Israeli society today.

23. For relevant studies on the different ideological trends within Zionism, see Hertzberg ([1976] 1997) and Rose (2004). Also, for a useful philosophical discussion of political ideologies and the ways they affect formation of subjectivity and sense of self, see Althusser (2001: 107-25).

24. For a relevant interpretation of the use of birds in Palestinian folktales, see Muhawi and Kanaana (1989).

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Response

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The remembrance of Palestinian *al-nakba*, or the catastrophe of 1948, which is celebrated in Israel as the Day of Independence, is clearly an issue of grave global geopolitical weight. Therefore, the many audiovisual texts that perform this remembering carry a particular political charge. Ihab Saloul's essay analyzes one such text, Mohammed Bakri's documentary film *1948*. I have not seen this film, but the essay has convinced me that it is an important text: it has a multi-layered narrative, a self-reflexive approach, and a rich aesthetic fabric, all of which makes the film able to perform the trauma of and for the Palestinian people. While I cannot judge the validity of the author's evidently sensitive and knowledgeable interpretation, it makes me yearn to go beyond textual analysis. I feel like I would like to be addressed by the essay not just as an academic who enjoys erudite textual analysis, but also as a global citizen who should understand the implications of 1948 better and care more about the injustice committed against the Palestinian people.

While the *al-nakba* at the heart of *1948* is unique to a particular historical trauma, the compulsion to process historical trauma and memory is not. In fact, the field of study that has grown up around the contemporary global obsession with memory and history testifies to what Andreas Huyssen calls a global crisis of memory.¹ The crisis is due to the simultaneous shortage and abundance of

memory available. History, which used to be the exclusive property of nation-states, is quickly multiplying into historical narratives and non-national memories. These are all becoming simultaneously accessible within giant electronic memory databases. The globalization of consumer culture tends to generate waves of nostalgia and renders past periods matters of style to perform in the present. The encroachment of such a vast, depthless present on a chronologically organized past is also fostered by the convergence of media technologies and content, whose economic lifeline is manufactured technological obsolescence. As the recent global revival of Holocaust memories has shown, in our era, historical and popular memory not only coexist but often become indistinguishable.

Saloul seems quite aware that the Palestinian national memory of the catastrophe has a more universal dimension, that it is not safe from the contemporary global crisis of remembering. His very emphasis on narrative performativity reveals a keen sense that national memory is subject to repetitive reenactment. Rather than adopting a truth-seeking mission, the essay approaches memories of the catastrophe from the theoretical platform of performative remembering. This approach is familiar to those who have seriously pondered the workings of collective memory and its relation to official national history. Theory is the lingua franca that allows us to see analogical pain in remembering and analogical difficulties to remember among different events and sites. In my own view of Eastern Europe, another

trauma-ridden region, the double need to tell collective trauma on the one hand and to allow for contesting, competing memories to surface on the other has permeated virtually every question raised about the post-Soviet transitions. Theory, particularly poststructuralist and postcolonial accounts of nationalism, have helped me make sense of this paradoxical double need. Homi Bhabha's essay "DissemiNation," for instance, tackles precisely the theoretical and political implications of the nation's narrative dimension, which continually and repeatedly splits between two functions: the pedagogical and the performative.² This duality is implied in Saloul's emphasis on performativity as well. Performativity allows for the play of contestation to prevent history from rigidifying into a singular national narrative with a mythical beginning, an authoritative past, and a glorious future set aside for the chosen people. However, to me the essay's exclusive choice of textual analysis and singular focus on a high cultural text veers towards a pedagogical closure and undercuts the work of performativity itself that Saloul attributes to *1948*.

The analysis is grounded in the assumption that this particular film tells the story of and thus represents a dispersed and largely diasporic collective. But there is a discrepancy between the collective political significance of the Palestinian historical trauma, which has lasting and global consequences in the present, and the author's literary and textual focus on a single text. When he refers to the "Palestinian subject" or "the viewer," I think about another one

of the many documentaries on the subject, video essayist Ursula Biemann's latest film, *X-Mission* (2008). In one particularly memorable scene of this film, a Palestinian woman who lives in a refugee camp lists her relatives along with the places where they live. As she speaks, this information also appears written out on the screen, surrounding her lonely figure as she labors away at the kitchen sink with her back to us. We gradually realize that her family is scattered across at least ten countries. This scene is just one of the many evocative illustrations of the claim Biemann makes throughout the film, also spelled out on her website: "Given the vital connections among the separated Palestinian populations, the video attempts to place the Palestinian refugee in the context of a global diaspora and considers post-national models of belonging which have emerged through the networked matrix of this widely dispersed community." (http://www.geobodies.org/01_art_and_videos/2008_x-mission/).

Biemann's representation of Palestinians as geographically dispersed, diasporic, multi-generational groups problematizes the "Palestinian subject" that emerges from Saloul's interpretation of *1948*. The national subject of the essay is mirrored in the assumption of a rather monolithic viewing subject, "the viewer," who is expected to engage with the text in a highly predictable way every time and place.

But there is another, somewhat overshadowed possibility implied in Saloul's interpretation of the film: Remembering is not only performative but

also relational. Jews and Palestinians are “cousins,” who are both drowning in a sea of conflict. This, to me, is one of the most productive claims of the film as well as of the analysis itself – a claim that could and should undermine the author’s very assumptions about national representation and viewership. It also raises the question what kind of position the author himself occupies in this web of relationality. What is his own viewing and analyzing position in relation to *al-nakba* and subsequent histories? The essay demonstrates well that theory is a useful tool of intercultural translation. However, theory can also fold upon itself and become a shield. To evoke Bhabha again, I see the essay’s commitment to theory, but I long for a more committed theory.³

Notes

1. Huyssen, Andreas. 2000. “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia.” *Public Culture* 12: 21-38.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation.” In *The Location of Culture*, by Bhabha, pp. 139-170. New York: Routledge.
3. Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. “The Commitment to Theory.” In *The Location of Culture*, by Bhabha, pp. 19-39. New York: Routledge.