



# Mobilizing Anxieties of Ecological Scarcity in Larissa Sansour's *In Vitro*

by: Alice Reiter

Ecological imagery in Palestinian art and media has long been used for political means. In an extensive repository for such media, The Palestine Poster Project Archives, eco-imagery represents a large proportion of the iconography the archivists have documented (Liberation Graphics). Many of these posters are intended to galvanize the public towards supporting a political cause, and others stand as advertisements of Palestine's natural resource offerings; this tells us that plants and landscape are deeply held symbols of nation, resistance, belonging, and ownership. Moreover, the themes of scarcity and abundance in the natural environment are constantly at play in art and media, and in the larger political discussions that surround them. Some imagery within Palestinian visual art represents an ecological worldview; I observed a trend across the work of several Palestinian visual artists, with imagery reflecting ecological abundance of the past being usurped by occupying forces. Visual art by Sliman Mansour, Ismail Shammout, Malak Mattar, and others demonstrates the ways that they respond to loss of land and natural landscape following occupation. Building upon these themes, Palestinian filmmaker Larissa Sansour, in turn, uses the filmmaking process to imagine a "new," negotiating this dichotomy of scarcity and abundance. Film as a medium brings images into dialogue with the important practice of poetry in Palestinian culture; it is therefore worthwhile to examine how film form is

mobilized to explore these environmental issues.

To this end, I use an eco-critical framework to analyze Larissa Sansour's film *In Vitro* (2019), where these views of ecological scarcity are represented through the mise-en-scene of the characters' concrete subterranean village keeping them safe from the inhabitable air post-eco-apocalypse. Also reflected in the film (and additionally, Sansour's earlier film *Nation Estate* (2012)) are the ways that ecocide and occupation go hand in hand within a Palestinian artistic imaginary. This also means that caring for plants can correspond to anticolonial resistance: more elements of the mise-en-scene in Sansour's film reflect a Palestinian alternative environmentalism, a concept elaborated by scholar Ghada Sasa, which associates the natural environment with steadfastness and return.

## *Ecological Abundance in Palestinian Art*

A worldview often expressed in Palestinian cultural output when it comes to pre-occupation ecology and environment is one of abundance, and this idyllic agrarian past is plentifully illustrated by Palestinian artists. The relationship between *fellahin* (farmers) and their land is depicted in many pastoral scenes in painting, and artists like Sliman Mansour have even integrated natural materials like straw, mud, and soil into their artistic practice (Ankori 80). Besides the manual bond with the earth illustrated in agrarian painting, the joy of being in nature is portrayed through the motif of women dancing in the outdoors among trees, which comes up in many paintings by Palestinian artists.<sup>1</sup> Many artists have painted the olive or orange harvest,

1. Ismail Shammout's *The Spring that Was* (1966); Tayseer Barakat's *Path of Love* (1989); Maher Naji's *Folk Dance and Dabka*; Malak Mattar's *The Olive Harvest* (2019) and *My Skin is Not a Sin* (2020).

as these pastoral activities are inextricably linked to Palestinian heritage.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond just painting, a discussion on Palestinian artistic practices must incorporate poetry. Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata emphasizes the importance of the spoken word: “today, still, it is the poet, not the ‘image-maker’ who has the singular power to move the national soul” (Boullata 80). Nonetheless, in his article “Facing the Forest,” Boullata covers important developments in Palestinian art by outlining a diversity of artists’ approaches to depicting landscape, and in keeping with his assertion, also demonstrates how these visual depictions are intimately related to the spoken and written word. Representation of landscape in the Palestinian painting tradition is relatively recent and corresponds to the integration of Western painting principles into artistic practice in the mid-20th century (Boullata 80-81). In this way, a consideration of the importance of language and the spoken word when encountering Palestinian visual art would steer analysis in a culturally specific direction. Boullata pays close attention to the titles of visual artist Walid Abu Shakra’s pastoral drawings, for instance, which illuminate the artist’s careful documentation of place names for each drawing produced. The significance of the work thus hinges on the written word and place-specificity as much as the visual element: only taken together are we able to read the significance. Keeping this in mind for film analysis, Boullata’s characterization certainly works well for reading film texts, being a medium that ties poetry and the spoken word with images.

A film text in which this can be observed is Larissa Sansour’s film *In Vitro* (2019). In this film, the characters live underground after an eco-apocalypse has rendered Bethlehem unliveable. The two characters have differing relationships to the outside world of before—the older character, Dunia (Hiam Abbass), has memories of her home, the landscape, her olive harvest, and her family. The younger character, Alia (Maisa Abd Elhadi), is in fact a clone of Dunia’s late daughter, with memories of the world planted in her mind, but no actual lived experiences of life on the outside. Essential to the post-apocalyptic world Sansour has created for this film are glimpses of a past before the ruination – images of a destroyed world are all the more meaningful when considered along with images of what once stood in the ruins’ place. Memories of abundance, when put together

with the present’s hollow void, make clear just how much was lost. In *In Vitro*, these memories of the world before come in the form of flashbacks that resemble the Palestinian olive harvest paintings discussed before, such as beautiful shots of the characters in their olive grove, market scenes full of an abundance of spices and bread, groups of nuns walking around happily. Foliage is abundant and rolling hills surround the characters’ home, but these images are all still behind a veil of monochrome, the true beauty of the flora’s colours inaccessible to us in the same way as for the protagonists. In addition to the desaturation, these similarities of the flashbacks to common motifs in Palestinian painting are also troubled by the characters’ words: Alia reveals that none of these memories are hers, but rather an amalgamation of memories that, as a clone, she has been designed to store for an indefinite future. Incredibly, she also houses sensory memories: she recounts, “I remember walking through the rain and feeling my shirt sticking to my skin. The flames of a bonfire heating my face.” Alia rejects the burden of these memories because she knows nothing else than her underground concrete home. In this way, Alia is a representation of an imagined future of scarcity, the personification of the inability to properly access a natural environment and the anxieties that this produces.

Her character’s story, told through her own words, can be seen as a metaphor for diasporic Palestinians’ relationship to Palestine through inherited memories in the absence of physical presence on the land. Social anthropologist Nayrouz Abu Hatoum writes on the temporal fragmentation that the occupation creates for Palestinians and the affective experience of this; violence ruptures time, making the future difficult to conceptualize. This suspended future creates a period of waiting for diasporic Palestinians – waiting for return, for the end of the Israeli occupation – that is characterized by uncertainty (Abu Hatoum). As she puts it, “the future for Palestinians becomes an imaginative space where suspicion and hope coalesce” (Abu Hatoum 398), and we can see this coalescence materialized in the underground world of *In Vitro*. The characters make it clear through their dialogue that they are waiting to return overground, but the architectural permanence of their concrete home suggests an uncertainty that this future of return will come to pass. Alia, as a clone of a deceased person and a store for memories of other deceased people, is a repository of the past in service of an uncertain future. Alia’s story can therefore also be read as a personification of the mourning for lost futures in the wake of environmental destruction. Her existence

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2. Sliman Mansour’s *Yaffa* (1979) and *Orange Picking* (1980s); Maher Naji’s *Jaffa Oranges* and *Olive Season*; Najat El-Taji El-Khairy’s *Salam* series (2004-22), to name just a few.

is for the purpose of storing a collective longing for the past, in response to the suddenly lost future that her community has experienced. As they reside underground indefinitely, Alia is a collection of ghosts waiting for a future that may never happen. Dunia emphasizes how Palestine, as a holy site, is particularly haunted by the past: “Bethlehem was always a ghost town. The present upstaged by the past.” Now that it has been destroyed by an eco-disaster, Bethlehem is doubly a ghost town, frozen in time by Biblical history and environmental destruction. Alia, then, is a representation of Palestinian lost futures.

### *Imagined futures of scarcity*

*In Vitro* sees the world going underground, the streets uninhabitable because of a thick, black liquid coursing through them. In flashback, Dunia and her family run away from a burning Bethlehem, their houses abandoned. To expand on the aforementioned trend in Palestinian visual art of anxieties about environmental scarcity, including in *In Vitro*, it is useful to look at the current environmental realities in the West Bank, where Bethlehem is located. Reports from various human rights organizations such as Al-Haq and the UNRWA have found that people in the West Bank disproportionately suffer the consequences of environmental crimes, which come as a result of Israeli policies, industry, and infrastructure. Authors of the 2015 Al-Haq report documented a long list of environmental crimes in the West Bank and Gaza, including industrial pollution of residential areas (Pontin et al. 25), drinking water contamination by waste dumping (26-7), and landscape deprivation, which covers its spiritual significance as well as issues of mobility within these landscapes (30). They detail how these practices violate the Oslo Accords (47) and international laws regarding the responsibilities of an occupying power toward civilians under belligerent occupation (37). On the issue of water access, the UN’s Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People highlights Israel’s disproportionate water provision to its own citizens (and settlers within the Occupied Territories) compared to Palestinians (Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People). Hydrologist Clemens Messerschmid substantiates this in his 2007 talk on the subject of Zionist intervention and water scarcity (Messerschmid). Finally, the UNRWA’s Barrier Monitoring Unit found that Israel’s Separation Barrier limits Palestinians’ water source access and full use of agricultural lands divided by the barrier; the barrier and its construction also

drastically affects ecosystems, agriculture, and soil erosion (Barrier Monitoring Unit (BMU) and Applied Research Institute Jerusalem (ARIJ)).

Given the persistence of these man-made environmental issues, it makes sense that many Palestinian artists use ecological imagery in ways that emphasize these realities on the ground, as well as a possible future bereft of natural environment. Returning to painting, Sliman Mansour’s painting *From the River to the Sea* (2021) is of a woman holding onto an intertwined orange and olive tree, with holes dug all around the otherwise-empty landscape, suggesting that this is the last tree left. The title paired with the imagery connects Palestinian resistance with protection of the environment against colonial forces. Similarly, Ismail Shammout’s painting entitled *Where to..?* (1953) depicts a refugee family against the backdrop of a barren landscape after the Nakba, with a bare tree behind them. Here, the occupation is directly connected with environmental scarcity, and the title suggests an uncertain future; the date of this painting demonstrates anxieties of environmental destruction already present in the period immediately after the Nakba.

Sansour’s films continue this line of questioning about the future of the Palestinian people and the environmental scarcity that accompanies the

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occupation. Sansour’s imagining of a black liquid flowing through the streets of Bethlehem is not that much of a mental leap from the realities of industrial pollution on Palestinian towns in the West Bank, for instance. In her films, through the mise-en-scene, she imagines a possible future in which ecological scarcity has reached a critical point, and Palestinians have had to conserve nature in contrived ways. In *Nation Estate* (2012), Sansour conceives Palestine as being transposed into a high-rise building, with the natural environment being confined to indoor spaces: the Mediterranean Sea occupies one floor, and an olive grove another. Like in *Nation Estate*, *In Vitro*’s characters are in a state of major landscape deprivation – one of the environmental issues outlined in the Al-

Haq report – and the constructed world in the film shows how their Palestinian society has adapted to this landscape deprivation. In the film, the world has moved underground post-eco-disaster into a Brutalist world of concrete. What seems like natural light from overhead shafts is the main source of illumination, making for a mostly shadowy ambiance. However, when the younger character looks out one of these windows, she looks not at the outside world but at an indoor atrium, making us wonder whether any of this light is natural at all. The barren surroundings give the characters’ home a clinical coldness and the vast, dark hallways suggest a scale that does not seem matched to the number of people we see— this environment is not full of life, in the literal sense. From what we see of their world, though, the two characters have access to medical care—the older character Dunia is on a hospital bed with an IV and a heart monitor—and both wear well-kept clothing and seem settled in this underground environment. The younger character, Alia, has grown up in this world, so has evidently had access to everything required to survive relatively comfortably. The main thing missing from both their lives, then, is access to the natural environment. This has been made impossible by whatever forces caused the eco-disaster to happen.

As in *Nation Estate*, natural resources have had to be relocated to locations where their survival would otherwise be futile. Without the sunlight needed to grow agriculture, *In Vitro*’s underground society has configured an orchard with available resources. Mediterranean cypress and other native tree species grow on the ground along with saplings, divided in sections. Smaller platforms mount the walls of the large atrium like opera boxes. Olive trees grow out of a box in the foreground, and next to it are closed glass cases of seedlings in jars.<sup>3</sup> Pollination is possible through the bees salvaged from the world above, and lamps work to photosynthesize. There is vegetation coming from every angle of the atrium, and the cold, concrete architecture suddenly seems a lot more humid and inviting. The orchard brings comfort to Dunia: she is able to escape her “entombment,” as she calls it, when the orchard lights are on, and she can hear the ecosystem come alive.

#### *A Palestinian alternative environmentalism*

**D**espite the characters’ yearning for the outside world, Sansour’s imagined future of ecological conservation is successful;

3. This brings to mind artist Jumana Manna’s exploration of the life of a seed from the Global Seed Vault in *Wild Relatives* (2018).

an orchard is able to grow underground and the Mediterranean Sea is able to survive on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor of a skyscraper. Through eco-apocalypse and total spatial reconfiguration, nature is able to live on in impossible circumstances. These imaginings of decolonial environmental persistence also bring to mind Ghada Sasa’s conception of a Palestinian alternative environmentalism, under which she brings together the concepts of *a’wna* (collaboration), *sumud* (steadfastness), and *a’wda* (return) (Sasa). *A’wna* or collaboration is about all human and non-human entities living in harmony, stressing that harming one will harm all (Sasa 11). In this way, with *a’wna* the “human-nature binary... severely erodes,” making all species more interconnected (Sasa 12). The rupturing of this division between humans and non-humans also challenges the status-quo of the anthropocentric logic that fueled climate change. *A’wna* therefore allows us to conceptualize a future radically different than the current reality, and how caring for plants is also a means of countering Israeli environmental crimes. The underground orchard in *In Vitro* is a fitting example: with the underground society’s agricultural ingenuity, trees are able to grow and produce fruit without seeing the sun. The humans provide the means of survival for these trees outside of regular processes of photosynthesis, while the trees provide sustenance: *a’wna*. Although fictional scenarios, Sansour’s imaginings of flora and agriculture persisting in impossible conditions reflect the hopeful outlook of a Palestinian alternative environmentalism, even despite the Israeli occupation’s control of the environment.

#### *Conclusion*

**L**ooking at the work of prominent Palestinian visual artists like Sansour, Mansour, Shammout, and others tells us how this resistance to the occupation plays out in visual terms. Narratives of ecological scarcity and abundance play an important role in how people think about the occupation of Palestine, and reflect the realities on the ground. An idyllic agrarian past is a common motif in the Palestinian painting I examined, with ecological abundance characterizing the time before occupation. Additionally, through Larissa Sansour’s mise-en-scène and use of ecological imagery in dialogue, her film *In Vitro* depicts Palestinians living in environmental scarcity, and its resulting mental toll. The world that Sansour has conceived of here fits the pattern of imagined futures of ecological scarcity that comes up in other Palestinian visual artists’ work

since 1948. A study of reports detailing environmental issues caused by Israeli occupation in the West Bank suggests that these anxieties of environmental failure are prompted by realities on the ground. However, Sansour's characters have managed to conserve their natural environment and agricultural practices even in the most inhospitable of landscapes, which echoes Ghada Sasa's notion of a Palestinian alternative environmentalism that centres collaboration and steadfastness through the violence of occupation. The connection and care for the environment that the selected visual artists depict in their work demonstrates this resistance to colonial occupation.

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