

**The Freedom Theatre/Bus:  
The Challenges of Narrative-Formation in  
Palestine**

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to the University of Exeter as a dissertation for the degree of  
Masters by Research in History  
September 2021

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## **Abstract**

In the Spring of 2021, Israel launched another assault on Gaza, during which it destroyed the al-Jalaa tower. Housing international news media outlets, the action was decried as an attempt to control the narrative, and not the first time Israel had done so. Edward Said published the article 'Permission to Narrate' during the 1982 Lebanon War, laying bare the need for a commitment to a national Palestinian narrative. Almost forty years later, the opposing narratives to the Israeli-Palestinian discourse are well-documented. However, it is not simply the case that Palestinians are now speaking up. Under the Israeli occupation, narration is not a simple task, and it is important to understand the obstacles facing Palestinian narrators, especially in a twenty-first century context. One activist group attempting to narrate the Palestinian experience is the Freedom Theatre, in the West Bank. Tracing its origins back to the First Intifada, it was created in 2006 as a centre for cultural resistance in the wake of the violence of the Second Intifada. It adhered to a concept called the "Cultural Intifada" – a dual challenge to the Israeli occupation and a restatement of Palestinian culture. The Theatre drew both support and criticism, coming to a head with the assassination of its director, Juliano Mer Khamis. As the Theatre grew, it launched the Freedom Bus in 2011. The Bus travelled to communities in the West Bank, carrying out playback theatre performances. At the same time, through its online platforms, it created a narrative aimed at an international audience. The Freedom Theatre and Bus faced challenges to their narration, as they acted within the confines of the Israeli occupation and the accompanying reality on the ground. Through their efforts, it is possible not only to delineate a Palestinian narrative – to see the "permission to narrate" in action – but to gain an insight into the nuances and realities of creating such a narrative.

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## Introduction

On the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2021, Israel destroyed the al-Jalaa tower in Gaza City.<sup>1</sup> Israel had launched an assault on the city five days earlier – “Operation Guardian of the Walls” – after a series of confrontations between Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>2</sup> The results were 248 Palestinians, including 66 children, dead, with 1900 wounded, and one Israeli soldier and 12 Israeli civilians, including two children, dead.<sup>3</sup> The collapse of al-Jalaa came amidst the destruction of Gaza wrought by Israeli airstrikes. Whilst claiming to be targeting Palestinian military positions, Israel has often taken its operations in Gaza as opportunities to damage Palestinian infrastructure and attempt to force submission from the Palestinian populace.<sup>4</sup> Although Israel claimed al-Jalaa contained Hamas intelligence assets – a standard justification – the tower was home to international media offices including al-Jazeera, the Associated Press and Middle East Eye.<sup>5</sup> The destruction of the building was condemned as an overt attempt to silence those covering the military offensive – and was not the first time Israel had used force to control international narratives about its

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<sup>1</sup> Al Jazeera, ‘Gaza Tower Housing Al Jazeera Office Destroyed by Israeli Attack’, *al-Jazeera*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2021, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/15/building-housing-al-jazeera-office-in-gaza-hit-by-israeli-strike>> [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021].

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Kingsley, ‘After Years of Quiet, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Exploded. Why Now?’, *New York Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/15/world/middleeast/israel-palestinian-gaza-war.html>> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021]; Judah Ari Gross, ‘IDF: Efforts Against Hamas to be Known as “Operation Guardians of the Walls”’, *Times of Israel*, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2021, <[https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/idf-efforts-against-hamas-to-be-known-as-operation-guardian-of-the-walls/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-efforts-against-hamas-to-be-known-as-operation-guardian-of-the-walls/)> [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021].

<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera and News Agencies, ‘Gaza: Daunting Rebuilding Task after 11 Days of Israeli Bombing’, *al-Jazeera*, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2021, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/21/thousands-of-gazans-return-to-destroyed-homes-after-israel-truce>> [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé, *On Palestine* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), pp.145-146 and 155; Ola Mousa, ‘How Israel Tried to Put Gaza Out of Business’, *Electronic Intifada*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2021, <<https://electronicintifada.net/content/how-israel-tried-put-gaza-out-business/33431>> [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021].

<sup>5</sup> Al Jazeera, ‘Gaza Tower Housing Al Jazeera Destroyed by Israeli Attack’; Dania Akkad, ‘Israel’s War on Gaza: Was Hamas Really Operating Out of the Al-Jalaa Building?’, *Middle East Eye*, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2021, <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-claims-gaza-israel-army-bombing-jalaa>> [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021].

relationship with Palestine.<sup>6</sup> During the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon – a conflict fundamentally intended to quash Palestinian nationalism – Edward Said published an article titled ‘Permission to Narrate,’ writing that despite “having made a strong impression regionally and internationally during the years 1970 to 1982, the Palestinian narrative . . . is now barely in evidence,” with the Palestinian narrative never properly recognised by Israel or its supporters.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the Palestinians were made “‘non-Jews,’ whose inert presence in Palestine was a nuisance to be ignored or expelled.”<sup>8</sup> Palestinians are up against a “wilderness of mirrors” that allows Israel to control the Conflict’s narrative and maintain its dominance.<sup>9</sup> Said’s emphasis laid bare the need for a communal and collective commitment to a national narrative in order to make the Palestinian experience unignorable.<sup>10</sup>

Palestinians and their supporters are attempting to narrate their own history and experience. Attitudes towards the Israel-Palestinian Conflict are changing, especially on social media and amongst the populaces of Israel’s key Western supporters, with rising awareness of and sympathy for the Palestinian cause – despite an apparent, continuing rigidity in the “peace process” status quo – and this is, in no small part, thanks to the work of Palestinian activists and narrators.<sup>11</sup> It is not, however, simply a case of Palestinians now speaking up.

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<sup>6</sup> Al Jazeera, “‘Silence the Story’: Israeli Bombing of Media Offices Condemned’, *al-Jazeera*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2021, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/15/silence-the-story-israeli-strike-on-media-offices-gaza-condemned>> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> June 2021]; CPJ, ‘Israeli Air Strikes Destroy Buildings Housing more than a Dozen Media Outlets in Gaza’, *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2021, <<https://cpj.org/2021/05/israeli-air-strikes-destroy-buildings-housing-more-than-a-dozen-media-outlets-in-gaza/>> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> June 2021].

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, ‘Permission to Narrate’, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 13.3 (1984), 27-48, pp.31-33; Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance* (London: Profile Books, 2020), p.142.

<sup>8</sup> Said, ‘Permission to Narrate’, pp.31-33

<sup>9</sup> Said, ‘Permission to Narrate’, p.37.

<sup>10</sup> Said, ‘Permission to Narrate’, p.47.

<sup>11</sup> Anchal Vohra, ‘Israel Losing US Perception Battle as Palestinian Sympathy Grows’, *al-Jazeera*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/1/israel-losing-us-perception-battle-as-palestinians-sympathy-grows>> [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021]; Sanya Mansoor, ‘How

Against a regime that actively seeks their silence and disappearance, under an oppressive system, narration is not a simple task, and it is important to understand the obstacles facing a Palestinian narrator. It is therefore crucial to not only analyse Palestinian narratives in relation to their Israeli counterpart, as part of a simple narrative discourse, but to explore the implicit and explicit, and external and internal, challenges to Palestinian narration. In moments of greater intensity, such as with the 2021 assault and al-Jalaa tower, the tangible limitations imposed are clear; however, the Israeli occupation is a continuous and systematic process, and the difficulties in forming and sharing a Palestinian narrative are not always recognised.

One such group attempting to narrate the Palestinian experience is the Freedom Theatre in Jenin, the West Bank. The Freedom Theatre traces its origins back to the First Intifada, as Israeli activist Arna Mer Khamis created a theatre school for Palestinian children. Mer Khamis' son, Juliano Mer Khamis, then continued her legacy, creating the Freedom Theatre in 2006, in the wake of the Second Intifada. The Freedom Theatre was founded by Juliano, Zakaria Zubeidi – then leader of Jenin's al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades militant group – and Jonatan Stanczak, a Swedish activist; Mer Khamis would act as artistic director and Stanczak as operations manager, whilst Zubeidi would use his influence in Jenin to provide legitimacy.<sup>12</sup> It is supported, both financially and through other

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Online Activism and the Racial Reckoning in the U.S. have Helped Drive a Groundswell of Support for Palestinians', *TIME*, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2021, <<https://time.com/6050422/pro-palestinian-support/>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2021]; TRT World News, 'Is Israel Losing its Influence over Western Audiences?', *TRTWorld*, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021, <<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/is-israel-losing-its-influence-over-western-audiences-46770>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2021]; United Nations, 'There is Urgent Need to Safeguard Global Consensus around Question of Palestine, Permanent Observer Stresses, as Palestinian Rights Committee Meets', GA/PAL/1425, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2019, <<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gapal1425.doc.htm>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2021].

<sup>12</sup> Johanna Wallin and Jonatan Stanczak, 'The Beginning' in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: Leftword, 2018), 28-45, pp.28-35.

means, by various foundations, organisations and individuals, as well as by a number of “Friends Associations” that aid in fundraising and networking.<sup>13</sup> The Theatre adhered to a concept it formed itself called the “Cultural Intifada” – a dual challenge to the Israeli occupation and a restatement of Palestinian culture – and held productions intended to highlight issues both with Israel, and Palestinian political and societal norms. The actions of the Theatre drew both support and criticism in Israel and Palestine, coming to a head with the assassination of Juliano Mer Khamis in 2011.

As the Freedom Theatre grew, it extended its reach, creating programmes including the Freedom Bus in late-2011, as a means of magnifying its impact within broader political activities.<sup>14</sup> The Freedom Bus initiative was co-founded by Ben Rivers, an Australian playback theatre practitioner, who remained involved as a researcher, facilitator and trainer.<sup>15</sup> Between 2012 and 2016, the Bus travelled from community to community in the West Bank, working to aid those Palestinians they visited with their bespoke problems and rounding-off the visits with a playback theatre performance. During these performances, the Freedom Bus would take testimonies provided by the audience and recreate them on stage. Alongside these Rides, as the Bus termed them, the activists maintained online platforms – centred around a blog – to share their own experiences, and the lived realities and personal testimonies of the Palestinians they visited with an international audience. The Freedom Bus has received endorsements from the likes of Alice Walker, Angela Davis, John Berger, Judith

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<sup>13</sup> The Freedom Theatre, ‘Friends & Supporters’, *The Freedom Theatre* (No date) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/friends-supporters/>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2021]; Wallin and Stanczak, ‘The Beginning’, pp.32-38.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Rivers, ‘Narrative Power: Playback Theatre as Cultural Resistance in Occupied Palestine’ in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: LeftWord, 2018), 305-339, p.307.

<sup>15</sup> Rivers, ‘Narrative Power’, pp.307-308.



Butler, Luisa Morgantini, Maya Angelou, Mairead Maguire, Mazin Qumsiyeh, Noam Chomsky, Omar Barghouti and Peter Brook, and is endorsed by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee.<sup>16</sup> Its stated aims are to use “interactive theatre and cultural activism to bear witness, raise awareness and build alliances throughout occupied Palestine and beyond.”<sup>17</sup> Narrative becomes the vehicle through which these aims are realised and communicated.<sup>18</sup> The Freedom Theatre and Bus’ narrative largely focusses around the idea of cultural resistance – challenging the Israeli occupation both directly and by resisting the destruction of Palestinian culture through non-violent means, although the Freedom Bus then shifted its focus more directly onto challenging Israel.<sup>19</sup>

Both the Freedom Theatre and Bus highlight the discursal and practical challenges in presenting a Palestinian narrative. As an organisation outside of the dominant Palestinian and Israeli authorities, the activists face challenges in entering, interacting with and navigating the dominant narrative discourse, and in overcoming their position as a lesser- or counter-narrative. Alongside this, the activists face physical barriers to their narration, as they act within the confines of the Israeli occupation and the accompanying reality on the ground. As such, through the Freedom Theatre and Bus, it is possible not only to delineate a Palestinian narrative – to see the “permission to narrate” in action – but to gain an insight into the nuances and realities of creating such a narrative. Rather than simply presenting the broader narrative discourse, or approaching the

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<sup>16</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘About’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (No date) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/about/>> [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021].

<sup>17</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘About’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice*.

<sup>18</sup> Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly (eds.), *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), p.14.

<sup>19</sup> Johanna Wallin and Jonatan Stanczak, ‘The Freedom Theatre’s Cultural Resistance’ in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: Leftword, 2018), 88-106, pp.88-90.

Freedom Theatre's cultural resistance as a small facet of the Conflict, this thesis will bridge the gap and emphasise the interlinked significance of the two, as examples of practical action and theoretical discourse influencing each other in turn. In existing scholarship, the results of Palestinian narrators' efforts – the narratives – have been analysed, but the efforts themselves – the narrations – have not been given the same level of attention.

### Understanding "Narrative" as a Framework

For the purposes of this thesis and in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, at the most-basic level, a "narrative" can be understood as a particular perspective of an event or a series of events, created through subjective interpretation. Narrative, in a historical or social science sense, is often tied to discussions of identity, ideology or nationalism, as means of justifying these constructs.<sup>20</sup> Activism, whilst related to these constructs, presents another purpose through which to understand the creation of narratives. Moving beyond accepting "History" as a definitive, factual account of events allows us to use "narrative" to better understand who is interpreting these events, under what influences and for what purpose.<sup>21</sup> Such a notion is especially clear in Israel-Palestine, as the two conflicting sides interpret the same shared history through widely different understandings that contradict one another and directly tie to each of their claims to the same land.<sup>22</sup> In terms of

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<sup>20</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: Verso, 2016); Landon E. Hancock (ed.), *Narratives of Identity in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2016); Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp.ix-xi; Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Ilan Pappé (ed.), *The Israel/Palestine Question* (London: Routledge, 1999); Raphael Israeli, *Old Historians, New Historians, No Historians: The Derailed Debate on the Genesis of Israel*

narrative “discourse” – the theoretical field in which these narratives interact and compete – the Israeli narrative exists as the “dominant” narrative – as it holds hegemony over the discourse, historically seeing greater power and support – and so the Palestinian narrative exists as something of a “counternarrative” – resulting from its distinctiveness and position as a challenge to the dominant narrative.

Equally, however, presenting Israeli-Palestinian discourse as merely having the two sides is over-simplistic. Both sides – the Israelis and Palestinians – see further divides within their own narratives, as they – within themselves – see their own discourses. This is where the Freedom Theatre and Bus, as a case study, finds its relevance. Whilst the Freedom Theatre challenges Israel along much the same lines as the broader Palestinian narrative, it does so with a perspective that differs at times from the generalised Palestinian perspective seen in the overall Israeli-Palestinian discourse. As a result, the Freedom Theatre – in creating its own narrative of events somewhat distinct from the typical Palestinian narrative – also sees itself as a counternarrative within Palestinian discourse, agreeing overall with the dominant Palestinian perspective, but also challenging it in some ways. Along these lines, this thesis makes reference to “the Palestinian narrative” as a shorthand for the dominant, overall Palestinian perspective, as opposed to the Freedom Theatre/Bus narrative – although this is still a Palestinian narrative. Such a phenomenon is seen more-clearly within Israeli discourse, which sees a political divide between Zionists – who support the Israeli annexation of Palestine and its accompanying arguments – and anti-/post-Zionists – who challenge these ideas.

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(Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016); Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*; Avi Shlaim, *Israel and Palestine: Reappraisals, Revisions, Refutations* (London: Verso, 2009).

This thesis also borrows the concept of the literary canon – the collation of texts considered to be significant or of high value by a particular authority – to develop our understanding of how individual narratives are compromised. A “historical canon,” rather than being made up of texts and art, is comprised of the events, actors and periodisations of a History determined to be significant to an individual’s narrative. Whereas a chronology represents all of the elements of a History, a canon is an editorialised version of this. “Canon” is fundamentally set apart from “narrative” as a separate entity: whilst a canon concerns the raw data considered important by a narrator, the accompanying narrative is then their subjective interpretation of that data. Such a notion is evident within Israeli-Palestinian discourse, as the Israeli and Palestinian dominant narratives may disagree, but both accept the same chronology of significant events in their histories – the 1948 war, 1967 war and Oslo Accords, for example – and thus subscribe to and collectively remember the same canon; their narratives then disagree on the details within these events. The Freedom Theatre, as a smaller-scale narrator, then also subscribes to a differing canon, as its localised scope means it holds a different perspective of what events and actors are significant. Discussion of “canons” in a historical context has so far been predominantly limited to the idea of canons of historical writings – the publication of History, as a subject, in a literary context.<sup>23</sup> In this approach, a “historical canon” is a body of literature accompanying a historical narrative. Canons can run much more deeply into the field of History than this, however, and historical canons are much more pervasive. The edited collection *Beyond the Canon* begins to

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<sup>23</sup> Jaakko Tahkokallio, *The Anglo-Norman Historical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jasper van der Steen, ‘Remembering the Revolt of the Low Countries: Historical Canon Formation in the Dutch Republic and Habsburg Netherlands, 1566-1621’, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XLIX.3 (2018), 713-742.

explore this, although it effectively defines historical “canons” as master narratives, presented as definitive history rather than as a historical perspective, especially within the context of Western nation-states and pedagogy – “applied to history, we might define a canon as follows: it is a historical grand narrative, consisting of selected figures, events, story lines, ideas and values, colligated by definite plots, perspectives and explanations.”<sup>24</sup> There is an important distinction to draw between “narrative” and “canon,” however, as the two, whilst inextricably linked, encompass differing elements of a historical perspective; to treat “canon” and “master narrative” as synonymous would be semantically pointless. Understanding “canon” instead as a narrative-adjacent mechanism presents a novel approach that allows us to broaden our understanding of how narratives are practically created and justified.

### Methodology and Sources

It is the Freedom Theatre and Bus’ online platforms that this thesis will utilise primarily, as the predominant home for its narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.<sup>25</sup> Whilst the activists carried out practical action in their local communities in order to bear witness, it was through these online media that they sought to raise awareness and build alliances, and ultimately construct their own narrative.<sup>26</sup> Despite its increasing relevancy, as Lisa Blenkinsop

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<sup>24</sup> Siep Stuurman and Maria Grever, ‘Introduction: Old Canons and New Historians’ in *Beyond the Canon: History for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Maria Grever and Siep Stuurman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1-16, p.3.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with current Freedom Theatre/Bus members were decided against partly due to the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic, but also to maintain focus on the narrative presented particularly from the Freedom Theatre’s inception up until 2016. These online sources were also almost fully in English, being targeted at an international audience, with only four Arabic blog posts (although these have been used in this thesis).

<sup>26</sup> Gail Ramsay, *Blogs & Literature & Activism: Popular Egyptian Blogs and Literature in Touch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), p.121.

acknowledges, the internet has not received the same attention as a historical source as it has in other academic areas – instead criticised, as oral history was in its inception, for its perceived lack of legitimacy.<sup>27</sup> However, as a widely-accessible platform, the internet is increasingly relied upon by historical actors as their primary means of record-keeping and communication. The Freedom Theatre and Bus maintained websites, social media pages, YouTube channels, and a blog created specifically for the Freedom Bus. The blog will be especially relied upon as the most-developed medium used by the Freedom Theatre/Bus to present its perspective and narrative – one that has a high degree of freedom in the content produced.<sup>28</sup> In collating these data for this thesis, the Freedom Bus blog (which currently runs from 2012-2016) was analysed in its entirety, with significance derived from common and recurring themes, imagery and terms evident in the posts, as well as notions otherwise common in Israel-Palestine that are omitted by the activists. The other social media and internet pages were then incorporated where they could provide additional information (the Freedom Bus Facebook page, for instance, began posting earlier in 2012, prior to the blog) or where they were linked into the Freedom Bus blog (either in hyperlinks or in embedded content, which was especially the case for the activists' YouTube channels). In analysing the Freedom Theatre and Bus' online platforms, it became apparent that the Bus blog acted as a centrepiece, around which other content was satellited. The posts created for the blog simultaneously acted as means of advocacy for the communities the Freedom Bus visited, a diary of the annual Rides, advertising for the programme itself, and a tool for highlighting and contextualising the oppressive nature of the

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<sup>27</sup> Lisa Blenkinsop, 'The Internet: Virtual Space' in *History Beyond the Text*, ed. by Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 122-135, p.122.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Jones and Irit Alony, 'Blogs- the New Source of Data Analysis', *University of Wollongong Research Online* (2008) <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/commpapers/469>>, p.11.

Israeli occupation. Equally, blogging represents a longer-form medium compared to other social media, which do not allow the space for nuanced or developed expression in the same way, meaning that it is on the Freedom Bus blog that the Theatre/Bus narrative is most apparent.<sup>29</sup> Jill Walker Rettberg describes blogs as “episodic narratives,” with each post representing a “self-contained unit that contributes to an overall narrative,” gleaned by the reader piecing together fragments from the blog and elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> This thesis takes this approach, relying primarily on the Freedom Bus blog and supplementing this with other sources where useful.

Alongside these online sources, this thesis also incorporates the productions put on by the Freedom Theatre prior to the inception of the Bus initiative, as well as a documentary released by Juliano Mer Khamis in 2004 titled *Arna's Children*. The documentary provides an insight into the work of Arna Mer Khamis, as a precursor to the Freedom Theatre, and the perspective held by Juliano that would feed into the narrative and operation of the Theatre. Somewhat similar to the analyses of the activists' online platforms, this thesis looks at the terms, imagery and concepts that are present or omitted in the documentary in order to glean its overall narrative and message.<sup>31</sup> The Theatre's productions, as part of the overarching “Cultural Intifada,” then demonstrate how this perspective carried through and influenced the activists' actions, before their attention shifted to the Freedom Bus programme. Here, this thesis is less concerned with the productions themselves, but rather with how

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<sup>29</sup> Jill Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p.2.

<sup>30</sup> Rettberg, *Blogging*, p.119.

<sup>31</sup> Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Ib Bondebjerg, ‘Documentary and Cognitive Theory: Narrative, Emotion and Memory’, *Media and Communication*, 2.1 (2014), 13-22.

they were advertised and what the reaction was; this is, in part, due to the fact that the productions were not available online. However, *how* the Freedom Theatre sold the productions indicates how they synthesised meaning from the plays in their Palestinian context, which in turn gives an indication of the narrative they were attempting to present. As such, much of the analysis in this thesis revolves around close readings and interpretations of these sources as vehicles for subjective narrative-sharing. These largely-online sources do not provide a complete picture of the physical actions of the Freedom Theatre/Bus (although, equally, records of these actions are not readily-available elsewhere). However, these sources do demonstrate how the activists sought to present themselves and the narrative through which they interpreted their own activism; this is especially pertinent as a significant portion of the Freedom Theatre and Bus' activism is devoted to international outreach and, thus, narrative.

### Freedom Theatre and Bus Literature

The majority of current scholarly works on the Freedom Theatre and Freedom Bus specifically fall within the scope of theatre studies. These works largely explore the nature of the Freedom Theatre and Bus as a form of cultural resistance, and a vessel for the creation and perpetuation of a collective Palestinian identity and narrative of occupation.<sup>32</sup> These articles focus on the

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<sup>32</sup> Anne Rohrbach, '(Re-)Enacting Stories of Trauma: Playback Theatre as a Tool of Cultural Resistance in Palestine', *Middle East – Topics & Arguments*, 11 (2018), 79-88; Sara Karoline Steinmoen, 'Breaking the Occupation of the Mind: The Freedom Theatre and Palestinian Youth Empowerment' (unpublished master's thesis, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, 2016); Irene Fernández Ramos, 'Storytelling, Agency and Community-Building through Playback Theatre in Palestine', *SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 7 (2014) <[https://www.academia.edu/35587632/Storytelling\\_Agency\\_and\\_Community\\_building\\_through\\_Playback\\_Theatre\\_in\\_Palestine?from=cover\\_page](https://www.academia.edu/35587632/Storytelling_Agency_and_Community_building_through_Playback_Theatre_in_Palestine?from=cover_page)>; Ahmad Qabaha, 'To Reverse or to Rehearse Performing Colonial Reality in *Arna's Children*', *Interventions* (2020), <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1845770?needAccess=true>>; Elin Nicholson, 'The Freedom Theatre and Cultural Resistance in Jenin, Palestine' in



Freedom Theatre and Bus' practical, theatrical activism, especially through its use of Playback Theatre techniques. Ben Rivers, for instance, has written multiple articles on the Freedom Theatre and Bus, all focussing on its use of Playback Theatre as "a unique, community-centred forum for the identification and communication of important issues."<sup>33</sup> Significantly, Rivers is also mentioned in Freedom Bus blog posts, listed on the Freedom Theatre website and included in a Freedom Theatre YouTube video as the "initiator," "project leader" and "bus driver" for the Freedom Bus initiative, and is shown in multiple instances to have been present in Palestine for the Freedom Bus Rides.<sup>34</sup> Rivers' involvement with and proximity to the Freedom Bus programme perhaps explains his focus on the practical, theatrical side of the project in particular, rather than the Bus' own narrative as shared online – he himself would actually be part of the creation of this narrative. Along these lines, many of the academics writing on the Freedom Theatre are, in some way, tied to the

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*Performance in a Militarized Culture*, ed. by Sara Brady and Lindsey Mantoan (London: Routledge, 2017), 66-78; Gabriel Varghese, *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Erin B. Mee, 'The Cultural Intifada: Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 56.3 (2012), 167-177; Madalena Santos, 'Palestinian Narratives of Resistance: The Freedom Theatre's Challenge to Israeli Settler Colonialism', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 8.1 (2018), 96-113; Maryam S. Griffin, 'Freedom Rides in Palestine: Racial Segregation and Grassroots Politics on the Bus', *Race & Class*, 56.4 (2015), 73-84; Irene Fernández Ramos, 'Performing Immobility in Contemporary Palestinian Theatre', *Middle East – Topics & Arguments*, 5 (2015), 108-116.

<sup>33</sup> Ben Rivers, 'Cherry Theft Under Apartheid: Playback Theatre in the South Hebron Hills of Occupied Palestine', *The Drama Review*, 59.3 (2015), 77-90; Ben Rivers, 'Narrative Power: Playback Theatre as Cultural Resistance in Occupied Palestine', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 20.2 (2015), 155-172, p.169; Ben Rivers, 'Playback Theatre as a Response to the Impact of Political Violence in Occupied Palestine', *Applied Theatre Research*, 1.2 (2013), 157-176.

<sup>34</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'The Staff' (2019) <<http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/the-team/the-staff/>> [Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> July 2019]; The Freedom Bus, 'Day #1', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/18/day-1/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, 'Interview with Ben Rivers', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/01/interview-with-ben-rivers/>> [Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> July 2019]; Thefreedomtheatre, *The Freedom Bus: Ready to Ride Again*, online video recording, YouTube, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waoQVtfYEvo>> [Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> July 2019].

organisation, whether they were involved or participated, or knew the activists.<sup>35</sup>

Erin Mee, who wrote multiple works on the Freedom Theatre, is known to have met Juliano Mer Khamis and is described in a news article as a friend.<sup>36</sup>

Another academic, Mark LeVine, endorsed the Freedom Bus, partook in its events and published news articles on behalf of the Bus.<sup>37</sup> The theatre studies approach, and varying degrees of proximity and involvement of many of those writing on the Freedom Theatre and Bus, means that the perspective given is often focussed on the performances and local activism carried out by the group, thus omitting the broader actions of the activists. Similar to these works is an edited collection titled *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, produced in conjunction with the Freedom Theatre, reflecting on its origins, projects, leading figures, activism, cultural resistance and future.<sup>38</sup> The attention of these works is less on a critical approach to the Freedom Theatre itself, however, and more so on the application of its methods in the Conflict. A historical, interdisciplinary approach – rather than theatre studies – allows us to better-understand how the Freedom Theatre/Bus functions over time as an

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<sup>35</sup> Alexandria Milton and Irene Fernández Ramos, 'From the Speech to the Act: Performativity on the Margins', *SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 7 (2014), <<https://www.soas.ac.uk/sjpr/edition-7/file96759.pdf>>, p.1.

<sup>36</sup> Erin B. Mee, 'Juliano Mer Khamis: Murder, Theatre, Freedom, Going Forward', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 55.3 (2011), 9-17; Erin B. Mee, 'Mindscapes of Palestine' in *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace: Embodied Dialogues*, ed. by Scott T. Cummings and Erica Stevens Abbitt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 223-225; Olivia Stransky, 'The Stage is my Gun: The Cultural Intifada of Juliano Mer-Khamis', *Sampsonia Way*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2012, <<https://www.sampsoniaway.org/bi-monthly/2012/01/07/the-stage-is-my-gun-the-cultural-intifada-of-juliano-mer-khamis/>> [Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>37</sup> Mark LeVine, 'Angry Jews on the Freedom Bus', *Tikkun*, 29.4 (2014), 9-10; The Freedom Bus, 'An extraordinary statement by Mark LeVine in support of the Freedom Bus', @thefreedombus, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012, (Facebook post), <<https://www.facebook.com/thefreedombus/posts/332907363424643>> [Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2021]; The Freedom Bus, 'Day #6', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/23/day-6/>> [Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2021]; Mark LeVine, 'It will be wonderful... when women can walk freely', *Al-Jazeera*, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2012, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/4/25/it-will-be-wonderful-when-women-can-walk-freely/>>.

<sup>38</sup> Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (eds.), *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine* (New Delhi: Leftword, 2018).

activist group, rather than simply as an isolated example of theatrical resistance.

Another way the Freedom Theatre has been approached in academics is with obituary-style or legacy articles about Juliano Mer Khamis in the wake of his death.<sup>39</sup> These largely focussed on the cultural and theatrical work Mer Khamis had carried out with the Freedom Theatre, and the impact it had on and the response it elicited from the Jenin camp. These obituarial works are the closest Freedom Theatre scholarship comes to exploring the challenges to Palestinian narration; however, they are not framed in this way, but rather approach it as an attempt to pursue a different form of resistance and way of life in a comparably conservative society. The overall scope of the existing academic writings on the Freedom Theatre and Bus is on its physical, theatrical activities and its emphasis on cultural resistance, especially as a more-palatable alternative to violent resistance. These works make reference to “narrative” in a collective sense, more so as an offshoot of Palestinian identity, or look at the Freedom Theatre’s productions that supposedly challenged Palestinian or Jenin’s social norms, as a sort-of narrative. These writings, however, over-simplify the meaning of “narrative,” and do not adequately explore in enough depth *how* the Freedom Theatre and Bus created and presented a broader sense of narrative, and went about disseminating this. They also do not contextualise what narrating, as a Palestinian (activist), means and what its purpose is, especially in a broader context. This thesis, instead, will approach the Freedom Theatre

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<sup>39</sup> Mee, ‘Juliano Mer Khamis: Murder, Theatre, Freedom, Going Forward’; Hala Al-Yamani and Abdelfattah Abusrour, ‘Juliano Khamis: Martyr of Freedom and Culture’, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 17.1 (2012), 73-81; Rachel Shabi, ‘Juliano Mer Khamis’, *Jewish Quarterly*, 58.2 (2011), 38-41; Adam Shatz, ‘The Life and Death of Juliano Mer-Khamis’, *London Review of Books*, 35.22 (2013), <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v35/n22/adam-shatz/the-life-and-death-of-juliano-mer-khamis>>.

not primarily for its theatrical technique, but rather as an example of an activist group set somewhat apart from the typical approach and history of Palestinian activism and resistance, and use this unique position to explore how non-dominant Palestinian narrators fit into the broader Israeli-Palestinian discourse.

### Argument

Following this theoretical and methodological approach, this thesis is concerned overall with understanding the position of the Palestinian narrative, both in its overarching, dominant position and in its more-individualised iterations. This thesis will focus primarily on the latter perspective, that of the non-dominant Palestinian narrator, to glean the discursive and physical challenges posed to the narrators themselves, rather than simply focus on the Palestinian narrative as an abstract entity. The first chapter, however, will contextualise this by exploring the current state of Israeli-Palestinian discourse and historiography, especially since the time of the Oslo Accords, to understand the impetuses behind the Palestinian perspective and analyse how these equip Palestinian narrators to challenge Israel. Particular emphasis will be placed on the overall narratives and paradigms present, and how these interact. The thesis will then shift its attention towards the difficulties for individual, non-dominant Palestinian narrators in navigating this discourse and its hegemonies. The second chapter will do this by tracing the history of the Freedom Theatre and then Freedom Bus, especially though the development of their personal narrative, and how this navigated the Israeli-Palestinian discourse and interacted with its dominant narratives. Beyond simply looking at theoretical discourse, this thesis also explores the physicality of Palestinian narratives,

bringing in the real-world context surrounding narrators, both as a means of influencing and limiting the narrative they produce. The third chapter does this by interpreting the physical symbols the Freedom Bus includes in the narrative it presents through its blogs, especially along aesthetical lines, and contextualising the scope of the Bus' activism in the issues it faces through its own operation within the Israeli occupation. The final chapter will then contextualise narration within the realm of Palestinian activism, understanding the significance of narrative to this activism, the role it plays and who it ultimately serves, especially as part of twenty-first century trends. Ultimately, this thesis – rather than simply recounting the Palestinian narrative as a challenge to Israeli dominance or talking about the Palestinian narrative as an absolute, finalised entity – explores the deep intricacies and nuances of the efforts to tell such narratives, and how these efforts and the resulting narratives can vary. Such an approach will help us better-understand the foundations upon which Israeli-Palestinian discourse is founded and perpetuated.

## **The Current State of Palestinian Narration: Challenging the “Conflict” and Interpreting the Palestinian-Orientated Frameworks**

Israeli-Palestinian discourse – the narratives argued and the conflicting historiographies – often falls into disagreements on aggression and defence, who initiated conflict, what *truly* did or did not happen, or who is following the imposed rules. Israeli and Palestinian narratives, as with narratives more typically, put forward their respective perspective of events. One well-known example of this is the debate on 1948 – the War of Independence versus al-Nakba, the catastrophe – focussing on issues such as Israeli aggression, whether Palestinians were present and whether Palestinians left their land of their own accord.<sup>40</sup> However, with these Israeli and Palestinian narratives, there is a broader, more-abstracted nuance fairly overlooked as to how these narratives frame themselves, even before any discussion of tangible events. This element is seen in more recent historiographic and activist efforts, with the application of new paradigms to understand the relationship between Israel and Palestine. These changes especially emerged in parallel to the Oslo Accords and Second Intifada, as ordinary Palestinians became disillusioned with the status quo on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides.<sup>41</sup> Whereas the First Intifada had seen calls to end Israeli occupation – military control of land inevitably

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<sup>40</sup> Avi Shlaim, 'The Debate about 1948' in *The Israel/Palestine Question*, ed. by Ilan Pappé (London: Routledge, 1999), 171-192, pp.172-190.

<sup>41</sup> Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, p.207; Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.272; Ahmed Abu Rtema, 'Palestinian Identity in the Aftermath of Oslo' in *The Oslo Accords 1993-2013: A Critical Assessment*, ed. by Petter Bauck and Mohammed Omer (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013), 165-177, pp.166-167 and 175-176; Laura Junka-Aikio, *Late Modern Palestine: The Subject and Representation of the Second Intifada* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.89; As'ad Ghanem, 'Palestinian Nationalism: An Overview', *Israel Studies*, 18.2 (2013), 11-29, p.26; Ahmed Yousef, 'Out of the Ashes of Oslo: The Rise of Islamism and the Fall of Favoritism' in *The Oslo Accords 1993-2013: A Critical Assessment*, ed. by Petter Bauck and Mohammed Omer (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013), 99-108, pp.99-100; Jennifer Jefferis, *Hamas: Terrorism, Governance, and its Future in Middle East Politics* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016), pp.41-46.

acquired through conflict – the Second now saw calls for the end of Israeli colonialism – an intentional process of settlement and displacement. What results is a debate between the hegemonic Conflict paradigm and the Israeli status quo, and the newer Palestinian-led Settler-Colonial and Apartheid paradigms.<sup>42</sup> The paradigm employed by a narrative inherently leads its perspective of events, and the debates it has and the questions it asks. It also informs how actors in the context are perceived and labelled. These influences can also be problematic, however, for these same reasons, as they can skew (self-)perception of Palestinians. The Palestinian peoples exist in multiple legal and geographic states, meaning that the transposition of an established paradigm can simplify the meaning of “Palestinian” or omit certain groups for simplicity’s sake, or indeed ignore the bespoke and varied intricacies of Israeli policies by defining it as merely a colonial or an apartheid state.<sup>43</sup> What becomes apparent are the intricacies and difficulties in *how* Palestinians do or should narrate their own history, and how they should engage with or disengage from the existing narrative discourse.

The Conflict paradigm is the most-widely accepted and utilised framework for understanding Israel-Palestine. The frame has been adopted by Israel and is thus an integral part of the dominant narrative. The main implication of the Conflict label for the Palestinians is the resultant framing of the Israelis and Palestinians as two sovereign sides in a long-running war; the Palestinians are enemy soldiers – valid targets – rather than dominated civilians. Israel-Palestine’s dominant canon is also framed around the Conflict paradigm, with the canonical events predominantly consisting of wars and the

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<sup>42</sup> Ilan Pappé, ‘Shtetl Colonialism: First and Last Impressions of Indigeneity by Colonised Colonisers’, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2.1 (2012), 39-58, p.39.

<sup>43</sup> Pappé, ‘Shtetl Colonialism’, p.40.

history's periodisation similarly indicated by military developments. Whilst there is an undeniable logic in framing periodical shifts around military encounters, as these form the impetus for shifts in policy and relations, presentation of the canon entirely within the lexicon of war whitewashes the nuance of the reality on-the-ground and only serves to bolster the dominant Israeli narrative. Where Israel and the Arab states were clearly in a state of war, the same cannot be said for the Palestinians and, as such, the canonical shift in periodisation from the "Arab-Israeli Conflict" to the "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" perpetuates the Conflict frame for the sake of its own hegemony, rather than because the dynamic between Israelis and Palestinians reflects a state of war in its traditional understanding. The Conflict paradigm and the notion of the "peace process" serves those dominating the discourse well and does not demand any significant change of the status quo, and so there is no incentive to deviate from this.<sup>44</sup> Ilan Pappé refers to this using a borrowed term, "The Dictionary of the Peace Orthodoxy" – a lexicon of acceptable phrases derived from a belief in a two-state solution, wherein the two sides are engaged in a consensual conflict and equally hold responsibility for ending violence.<sup>45</sup> This Dictionary remains dominant amongst diplomats, politicians, academics and activists, particularly in the West.<sup>46</sup> As a result, the same framework for peace has remained in place since the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, allowing Israel a "victor's peace" wherein it can continue annexing Palestine, upheld by international actors as part of the dominant solution.<sup>47</sup> For the Palestinians, in the words of Mandy Turner, the outcome has been the development of a "zombie peace" wherein "the

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<sup>44</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.14.

<sup>45</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.16.

<sup>46</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.15.

<sup>47</sup> Mandy Turner, 'Peacebuilding in Palestine: Western Strategies in the Context of Colonization' in *Land of Blue Helmets: The United Nations and the Arab World*, ed. by Karim Makdisi and Vijay Prashad (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 430-447, p.434.



[Palestinian Authority] can continue to stagger on like a zombie” as long as third parties continue to prop it up, and the Israeli and Western-dominated “peace process” requires it to survive.<sup>48</sup> The enactment of the Oslo Accords also allowed the pro-Israeli actors to frame the argument for a lack of ensuing peace, with the blame placed predominantly on Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, or any form of violent Palestinian resistance – it is the fault of “extremists” undermining the agreement, not inherent flaws in the process.<sup>49</sup> The “peace process” becomes a pro-Israeli fabrication which has, in the words of Pappé:

Been accepted, with modifications, by a powerful coalition of the United States, European Union, Russia, the United Nations, most of the Arab states, the Fatah Palestinian leadership, the Zionist Left and Centre Israel, and some well-known figures in the Palestinian solidarity movement. It is the power of the coalition and not the logic of the solution or the process that has maintained the “peace process” for so long, despite its apparent failure.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, the Conflict paradigm represents a narrative endorsed by those with a vested interest, who seek to avoid full responsibility being placed on Israel, or for whom it is convenient to maintain the current state of affairs. This artificial dominance then brings others to perpetuate this perspective.

Some who adhere to the Conflict paradigm have opted to use the term “Palestinian-Israeli” rather than “Israeli-Palestinian” Conflict – often seemingly

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<sup>48</sup> Turner, ‘Peacebuilding in Palestine’, pp.442-443.

<sup>49</sup> Edward Said, ‘The Mirage of Peace’, *The Nation*, 261.12 (1995), 413-420, p.414; Noam Chomsky, ‘The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences’ in *The Oslo Accords 1993-2013: A Critical Assessment*, ed. by Petter Bauck and Mohammed Omer (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013), 1-11, p.9.

<sup>50</sup> Ilan Pappé, ‘Revisiting 1967: The False Paradigm of Peace, Partition, and Parity’ in *The Oslo Accords 1993-2013: A Critical Assessment*, ed. by Petter Bauck and Mohammed Omer (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013), 13-28, p.14.

without explanation. However, this appears to be little more than a superficial symbolic gesture of good will, which in actuality perpetuates the characterisation of Palestinians as equal participants in a just war and perhaps even places emphasis on Palestinian involvement in particular. The Palestinians have begun to challenge the Conflict paradigm in one canonical event/period particularly – the 1948 War and its aftermath – by labelling it al-Nakba in order to emphasise the Palestinian suffering, but this effort stops here and the dominant canon is left unchanged otherwise. There has been some reference amongst Palestinians to the events of 1967 as al-Naksa (declaring the 5<sup>th</sup> June “Naksa Day”) to frame the 1967 War in the Palestinian perspective – not one in a series of consensual conflicts, but a major setback in the search for statehood – but this has not reached the mainstream (inherently Israeli-orientated) discourse or indeed the dominant canon.<sup>51</sup> Some proponents of the Israeli narrative have, on the other hand, referred to the Second Intifada as the “Oslo War,” for example, to argue that the Palestinians had always planned to use Oslo to enact violence and destroy Israel, and to maintain the presence of the Conflict paradigm in the dominant canon.<sup>52</sup> In some ways, if Israel-Palestine is to be understood in a conflictual paradigm, then it might be more apt to say that the war – both militarily and diplomatically – was won sometime early on (perhaps when the US decided it would support the Zionists, thus almost singlehandedly assuring Israel’s continued success) and what we are seeing now is a drawn-out, unilateral armistice negotiation.<sup>53</sup> Generally speaking, there is a strong counter-consensus challenging the use of the phrase “peace

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<sup>51</sup> Mustafa Fatih Yavuz, ‘Palestinians Mark 52<sup>nd</sup> Year of Naksa Day Amid Israeli Occupation’, *TRTWorld*, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2019, <<https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/palestinians-mark-52nd-year-of-naksa-day-amid-israeli-occupation-27266>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020].

<sup>52</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *Waging Peace: Israel and the Arabs 1948-2003* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.155.

<sup>53</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, pp.163-164.

process” – an offshoot of the Conflict paradigm – but it is perhaps necessary to go one step further and question the use of the Conflict label entirely. Other frameworks such as Settler-Colonialism and Apartheid inherently throw off the notion of the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic being a “Conflict” in their assessments to some extent, but the rejection has not appeared to be explicit or necessarily intentional.

Israel-Palestine saw a “settler-colonial turn,” sparked by Patrick Wolfe’s 1999 work *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* and propelled by growing Palestinian disillusionment with the Oslo process, although Israeli and Palestinian writers had engaged with the paradigm previously.<sup>54</sup> The basic premise of the “colonial analogy” is to confront the Israeli security narrative by highlighting Israeli fixation on land possession, within which, as Nadia Naser-Najjab and Ghassan Khatib phrase it, “the political and economic subordination of the indigenous population, the monopolisation of natural resources, and the control of internal markets therefore appear as means that are directed towards this end.”<sup>55</sup> The Settler-Colonial paradigm also inherently upsets the dominant Israeli-Palestinian canon, understanding settler-colonialism and invasion as an ongoing structure, rather than an event – it is a process of displacement, punctuated by instances of greater efficiency or

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<sup>54</sup> Francesco Amoruso, Ilan Pappé and Sophie Richter-Devroe, ‘Introduction: Knowledge, Power, and the “Settler Colonial Turn” in Palestine Studies’, *Interventions*, 21.4 (2019), 451-463, p.454; Uri Ram, ‘The Colonisation Perspective in Israeli Sociology’ in *The Israel/Palestine Question*, ed. by Ilan Pappé (London: Routledge, 1999), 55-80, p.75; Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Nadia Naser-Najjab and Ghassan Khatib, ‘The First Intifada, Settler Colonialism, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Prospects for Collective Resistance’, *The Middle East Journal*, 73.2 (2019), 187-206, pp.188-189.

intensity, such as 1948/al-Nakba and 1967/al-Naksa, which are typically otherwise interpreted as isolated events.<sup>56</sup>

In so far as Palestinian identity is concerned, however, the Settler-Colonial paradigm inserts Palestinians into the role of the “native.” This becomes problematic as the only qualification necessary to be considered the “native” in a settler-colonial context is to be the party originally holding the land; there is nothing uniquely Palestinian necessary – “Palestinian” and “Other” become synonymous. Indigeneity becomes a declaration of existence and continued presence – as if to say *we were here before and we are still here now*, despite the coloniser’s efforts. Along these lines, a common Palestinian mantra is “to exist is to resist.”<sup>57</sup> Being subject to colonisation replaces the native’s identity, and the risk of the Settler-Colonial paradigm is to normalise this and present Palestinian identity in much the same way. The native’s culture becomes a decorative backdrop to accentuate the loss and add to the tragedy, as they not only lose their land, but their culture by extension. A colonial paradigm also holds a particular implication for interpreting Palestinian nationalistic or identity-related development. Fanon, in his own context, argued that it was not the same to be “Algerian” before and after colonialism – decolonisation sees the complete and immediate substitution of one “species” for another.<sup>58</sup> Despite being in the midst of the colonial process, “Palestinian” has gone through a similar development. It was not the same to be a Palestinian moving from Ottoman to British to Israeli rule, and again not the same after Palestinians were offered a very limited degree of autonomy during Oslo, or even constant during

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<sup>56</sup> Patrick Wolfe, ‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8.4 (2006), 387-409, p.388.

<sup>57</sup> Natchee Blu Barnd, *Native Space: Geographic Strategies to Unsettle Settler Colonialism* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2017), p.1.

<sup>58</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p.27.

any of these periods. In this regard, “Palestinian” is little more than a simulacrum representing an identity that shifts according to the ever-changing degree of colonisation the Palestinian peoples were and are subjected to; the contents of the identity are never the same, but they fall under the same label.<sup>59</sup>

Put succinctly, the most striking issue with the Settler-Colonial paradigm, from the standpoint of the Palestinian narrative, is that it is ultimately an analysis of Israel – it focusses on the coloniser and its methods, and the native character is a reactive extra that is ultimately only necessarily present as a statistic.<sup>60</sup>

One further criticism, however, is that typically a Settler-Colonial paradigm applies to a state that has completed its colonisation process, and absorbed or cleansed the native population.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, the paradigm is somewhat predisposed to understand Palestinians as an already-assimilated group – a people who have lost their chance at sovereignty and have disappeared or become second-class citizens, and a *past* that Israel has to come to terms with. The risk then becomes perceiving Palestinians in this light, as a defeated people who now belong to Israel. Pappé argues that, at this point, there is no better alternative to the Settler-Colonial paradigm for analysing Israel-Palestine, which perhaps highlights a significant justification for its use seen in other aspects of the Palestinian narrative: the necessity to, first and foremost, counter the dominant Israeli narrative.<sup>62</sup> What becomes apparent is that the Settler-Colonial paradigm was not brought in to represent Palestinians, but to counter Israel. That the paradigm’s application is presently imperfect is less important

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<sup>59</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Ilan Pappé, ‘The Framing of the Question of Palestine by the Early Palestinian Press: Zionist Settler-Colonialism and the Newspaper *Filastin*, 1912-1922’, *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, 14.1 (2015), 59-81, p.62.

<sup>61</sup> Pappé, ‘Shtetl Colonialism’, p.40.

<sup>62</sup> Pappé, ‘Shtetl Colonialism’, p.41.

when the current importance lies in entering its phraseology into the lexicographic discourse; associating Israel with ethnic cleansing is the ultimate goal from an activist's standpoint – the historiographic finetuning can come later.

The Apartheid paradigm sees similar issues to Settler-Colonialism. The Apartheid and Settler-Colonial paradigms are often employed together to equate Israel-Palestine with South Africa and to warn of a similar fate for the Palestinians to that of the Native Americans.<sup>63</sup> Other academic fields, such as indigenous studies, become useful comparatives for articulating and legitimising the challenges facing Palestinians.<sup>64</sup> For supporters of Palestine, the use of such comparisons is to upset the aforementioned “Dictionary of Peace Orthodoxy”: the Israeli *occupation* can be deemed temporary and is recognisable in international law, but Israeli *apartheid* is a crime against humanity with no morally-justifiable defence; Israeli *occupation* can be ended by a simple withdrawal, but Israeli *apartheid* can only be ended through the creation of Israeli-Palestinian equality.<sup>65</sup> With such a change in rhetoric, it would no longer be a case of a simple military withdrawal, but of systematic change within Israel itself. The paradigm also appears to be employed as a means a describing a facet of Israeli occupation (or indeed the overall system), the intent behind it and how the reader should feel about it in a concise, easily-understood way – Israel's control of water resources in the Occupied Territories is easily

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<sup>63</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.18.

<sup>64</sup> Albert Memmi, *The Coloniser and the Colonised* (London: Earthscan, 2003); Lorenzo Veracini, *Israel and Settler Society* (London: Pluto Press, 2006); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Lavonna L. Lovern, *Global Indigenous Communities: Historical and Contemporary Issues in Indigeneity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Meron Rapoport, 'The Jewish Left is Recognizing that Apartheid is Here', *+972 Magazine*, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2020, <<https://www.972mag.com/israel-jewish-left-apartheid/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020].

understood and interpreted through the phrase “water apartheid,” for instance.<sup>66</sup> For Palestinian identity, however, the Apartheid paradigm becomes problematic as it inherently treats Palestinians as citizens of Israel. A news article covering a mass demonstration against Israeli annexation plans in June 2020 highlights some of the aspects of this issue.<sup>67</sup> The article states that the Israeli political Left has placed support for Palestinians as a precondition for defining itself as “Left” at all – a positive change for Palestinian representation, but one that implies that Palestinians are inextricably linked to and a part of the Left of Israeli politics, rather than their own political body.<sup>68</sup> This adoption is also problematic as the article goes on to recognise that the Israeli Left and Palestinian citizens of Israel are “still far from speaking the same language and formulating a single political goal,” also highlighting that some Israeli protestors brought Israeli flags, rather than Palestinian.<sup>69</sup>

The use of the Apartheid paradigm to understand Palestinian identity is also problematic as the regime’s relationship with the oppressed is different between South Africa and Israel-Palestine. Whilst, in South Africa, the Apartheid regime relied on the Black population for their labour, the intent behind the Israeli regime is to cleanse Palestinian land of Palestinians.<sup>70</sup> The Apartheid paradigm brings Palestinians into the Israeli fold as citizens of an unequal regime, whilst also to some extent ignoring that that same regime does not only see them as inferior, but an obstacle to be removed. Ultimately, a paradigm that treats all

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<sup>66</sup> Ayman Rabi, ‘Water Apartheid in Palestine – a Crime Against Humanity?’, *The Ecologist*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2014, <<https://theecologist.org/2014/mar/22/water-apartheid-palestine-crime-against-humanity>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020]; Mersiha Gadzo, ‘How Israel Engages in “Water Apartheid”’, *al-Jazeera*, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2017, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/israel-engages-water-apartheid-171013110734930.html>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020].

<sup>67</sup> Rapoport, ‘The Jewish Left is Recognizing that Apartheid is Here’.

<sup>68</sup> Rapoport, ‘The Jewish Left is Recognizing that Apartheid is Here’.

<sup>69</sup> Rapoport, ‘The Jewish Left is Recognizing that Apartheid is Here’.

<sup>70</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.103 and 118.

Palestinians as citizens of Israel is inherently problematic, especially as the Palestinians themselves cannot be thought of as one people, but instead as multiple distinct groups: those living in the West Bank, those in Gaza, those within the Green Line (citizens of Israel), refugees and the diaspora. Israel itself benefits from the divided and ill-defined position of the Palestinian peoples; if they fell into a specific category, they would be unequivocally granted particular rights – existing between or within multiple categories means any potentially-applicable rights can be argued against. For Israel, the situation must appear messy and intractable. Since occupying the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, the Israelis have consistently argued that the Fourth Geneva Convention is not applicable, thereby choosing when international law regarding occupation is relevant.<sup>71</sup> Israeli discourse has also treated with ambiguity the status of Palestine – is the occupation temporary or protracted, or does it even exist at all?<sup>72</sup> Reliance on a paradigm that instead puts the Palestinians into one group with the role of the “oppressed” threatens to ignore such an issue, but, like the Settler-Colonial paradigm, leave the Palestinians as an Other.

Whilst preferable to the pro-Israeli Conflict paradigm, the more recent trend amongst post- or anti-Zionist actors to use the Apartheid or Settler-Colonial paradigms has its own problems in regards to applicability. The clearest issue is the imperfect transposition of these paradigms to the Palestinian situation, as they come with pre-attached implications and, to some extent, their own historical baggage. A larger issue, especially in relation to the Palestinian narrative, is that Apartheid and Settler-Colonialism are means of

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<sup>71</sup> Erika Weinthal and Jeannie Sowers, ‘Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza’, *International Affairs*, 95.2 (2019), 319-340, pp.323-324.

<sup>72</sup> Weinthal and Sowers, ‘Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza’, p.323.



interpreting Israel and its behaviour, rather than the Palestinians, who in either case are still little more than the “non-Jew” placeholders Said refers to – background actors for Israeli history. That being said, and particularly from an activist standpoint, the mere presence of the apartheid or colonial labels is justification-enough for their use. Whilst the dominant narrative has the Palestinians as enemy combatants who refuse peace – an easy justification for the support of Israel – it is much harder to support a regime that is known to be intentionally ethnically-cleansing a people. This, taken with the understanding that current Palestinian historiography is inherently more concerned with countering the dominant Israeli narrative, explains their presence in the Palestinian narrative.

The above analysis leads to one final point of contention facing the construction of the Palestinian narrative. It is not simply a case of asking what the history of Palestine is and how it should be interpreted, but also who is writing it. Typically, in the discussion of the History (as a definitive chronology) of Israel-Palestine and the historiography of this, it is written that there was first a Zionist historical account, which wholly favoured Israel, until the emergence of the New Historians in the 1980s, who challenged some of the core arguments of the Zionists’ history, questioned some of Israel’s actions and ushered in the notion of post-Zionism.<sup>73</sup> Whilst this was undoubtedly a significant development in the discourse surrounding Israeli-Palestinian history and certainly something of a victory for Palestinians, it is important to note that these two supposedly monolithic polar opposites are still both situated within the Israeli perspective; the New Historians were and are not Palestinian historians,

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<sup>73</sup> Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), p.xvii.

and were and are writing Israeli histories. There is a query to be raised about whether these post-Zionist historians truly countered the Zionist narrative to the extent that they championed a Palestinian narrative, or if the Palestinians were still thought of as merely “non-Jews,” but perhaps ones that were owed better treatment. Fundamentally, it is worth asking of the New Historians: does it matter that the Palestinians were the subject of their revisions, or are the Palestinians only present in the post-Zionist narrative by geographic happenstance? If Zionism had selected another location to create its state, the post-Zionists would not write about Palestinians. Post-Zionism is ultimately not a Palestinian telling, but an Israeli retelling. As Pappé, one of the New Historians, writes, Israel, as the “stronger party,” “had formed a state and employed the state’s apparatus for successfully propagating its narrative in front of domestic as well as external audiences. The weaker party [Palestine], in this case, was engaged in a national liberation struggle, unable to lend its historians a hand in opposing the propaganda of the other side.”<sup>74</sup> In this sense, a pronounced History of Palestine was potentially drowned out, overshadowed by the debate between a Palestinian-omitted Israeli history and a Palestinian-recognitive Israeli history.

By extension, the Palestinians had no say in the overarching canon of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Pappé goes on to acknowledge that this trend has changed, with Palestinian historians now presenting a Palestinian history: “the Palestinian historians challenged a major Zionist claim about the absence of any meaningful Palestinian existence before the arrival of the new Jewish

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<sup>74</sup> Ilan Pappé, ‘Introduction: New Historiographical Orientation in the Research on the Palestine Question’ in *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., ed. by Ilan Pappé (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 1-6, p.2.

community in the pre-Zionist era.”<sup>75</sup> However, even much of the existing historiography written by Palestinians frames itself in relation to the dominant narrative and to other actors in Israel-Palestine – understandably, perhaps, considering the need to counter the dominant (Israeli) narrative and highlight such actors’ actions – rather than presenting a definitive Palestinian narrative and canon of their history. For instance, Rashid Khalidi’s recent publication, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine*, “rather than [writing] a comprehensive survey of Palestinian history, [chose] to focus on six turning points in the struggle over Palestine. These six events . . . highlight the colonial nature of the hundred years’ war on Palestine, and also the indispensable role of external powers in waging it.”<sup>76</sup> One of the underlying purposes of the book thus becomes to raise awareness of the true nature of the actions of Israel and its supporters – to act as an advocate for the Palestinian perspective, and against the Israeli occupation and its status quo. At the same time, however, Khalidi’s book is framed around Israeli attacks on Palestinians and, in doing so, conforms to the Israeli canon. In necessarily combatting the Israeli narrative of events and highlighting the true nature of their actions – not of inevitable military conflict, but of violent outcomes of the Zionist programme – Palestinian narrators are making their case, but continue to do so within the scope set in place by the Israelis themselves.

It is perhaps too close to the past and currently-ongoing history of Israel-Palestine, or too early in a process, for an unadulterated dominant Palestinian narrative to emerge, not required to explicitly challenge the narrative of Palestine’s oppressors. Indeed, in ‘Permission to Narrate,’ Said argues that

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<sup>75</sup> Pappé, ‘Introduction’, *The Israel/Palestine Question*, p.3.

<sup>76</sup> Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine*, p.14.

Palestinians will initially have to assume the role of changing the dominant consensus, which is perhaps what is being reflected in current scholarship.<sup>77</sup> Such a dynamic may also never end, so long as the Israeli occupation and colonisation continues. The role of the Palestinian historian or narrator can then be understood to also be one of an activist; they are not only presenting a history, but arguing for its existence and reacting to the changing reality on the ground. Such efforts also have to be carried out against the hegemony of the dominant Conflict paradigm, that allows Israel to maintain the status quo and continue its annexation of Palestinian land, whilst also allowing its allies to comfortably support it. In this vein, Palestinian narrators have also struggled to negotiate their own dialogic space, instead being corralled into limitations deemed acceptable by the dominant powers. The introduction of the Settler-Colonial and Apartheid paradigms challenges these limitations, shifting the frame away from an equal-parts-blame conflict to a deliberate process of cleansing carried out by Israel. At the same time, however, these paradigms see their own limitations, especially in regards to their characterisations of Palestinians. Such limitations set out by the lack of a dominant dialogic space are also seen in who is or has previously been predominantly writing the history of Israel-Palestine; the debate is still largely dominated by Israeli voices, between the Zionists and the political Left. Overall, the state of the discourse surrounding Israel-Palestine leaves no one correct answer as to how Palestinians should go about their narration, but rather a unifying goal to resist erasure and a growing lexicography to utilise in the fight for this aim. The nature and minutiae of this narration, however, are still ultimately left to the individual narrators.

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<sup>77</sup> Said, 'Permission to Narrate', p.38.

## **Narrating Freedom from the Theatre to the Bus: Navigating Discourse in the Palestinian Context**

With a firmly-rooted broader narrative discourse and pressure on Palestinians to argue their existence, there are inherent challenges and shifts demanded of Palestinian narrators and activists. For individual narrators – rather than nationalised or dominant narrators – they not only compete with the opposing dominant Israeli narrative, but the consensus of the dominant Palestinian narrative as well, as it dictates what these narrators *should* narrate and how they *should* go about this. The Freedom Theatre, with its roots in the 1980s through to its creation in 2006 and its continuation into the present, has expectedly seen shifts in the narrative it presents of Israel-Palestine. What has been a constant, however, has been the fundamental focusses of this narrative. The Freedom Theatre can best be described as having two core strands in its narrative – two arguments that are at times distinct and at others overlap. The first and perhaps most-expected strand is the challenge to the Israeli occupation. The second strand, however, demonstrates the point of contention that distinguishes it from the dominant Palestinian narrative – a challenge to Palestinian cultural and societal norms, most commonly manifested in challenges to violence and constrictive, conservative social norms. This challenge to Palestinian society began with the “Care and Learning” (or “Learning and Freedom”) project (the forerunner to the Freedom Theatre, created by Arna Mer Khamis) as it “use[d] theatre and art to address the chronic fear, depression and trauma experienced by children in Jenin Refugee Camp.”<sup>78</sup> Whilst concerned with the Israeli occupation, the project was inherently

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<sup>78</sup> The Freedom Theatre, ‘Our Legacy’, *The Freedom Theatre* (2020) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/who-we-are/our-legacy/>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2020].

introspective, also seeking to challenge the children's mindsets. *Arna's Children*, a documentary made by Arna's son, Juliano Mer Khamis (a more-immediate precursor to the Freedom Theatre) continued this introspective approach to Palestine, following the children formally involved in the Care and Learning project as many of them lost their lives in the Second Intifada. The Freedom Theatre then undertook what they refer to as the "Cultural Intifada" – a movement that harnesses the force of creativity and artistic expression in the quest for freedom, justice and equality.<sup>79</sup> The "Cultural Intifada" period of the Freedom Theatre's history saw its most explicit clashes with the dominant Palestinian narrative, as it faced direct conflict with those that disagreed with its alternative approach, climaxing with the murder of Juliano Mer Khamis outside the Theatre in 2011. The Freedom Bus then presents a decisive shift in the balance between the Theatre's two narrative strands, as its purpose is decidedly focussed on challenging the Israeli occupation. What is seen, ultimately, is an attempt to set out an alternative narrative for the Palestinian experience that, through conflict, connection and education, comes to assimilate with the dominant Palestinian narrative and its paradigms.

### The Mer Khamis

Arna Mer was a Jewish Israeli born during the Mandate period in 1929, in the Upper Galilee, now a part of Israel.<sup>80</sup> Joining the Palmach – part of the

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<sup>79</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Join the 2016 Freedom Ride!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/08/12/join-the-2016-freedom-ride/>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2020].

<sup>80</sup> Johanna Wallin, 'Arna' in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: LeftWord, 2018), 47-48, p.47; Samy Matar, 'Life Story', *Arna - Active Memorial Site* (2002) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20110721184916/http://www.arna.info/Arna/herstory.php>> [Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> September 2021].

Jewish Haganah paramilitary formed during the British Mandate – Arna became disillusioned with Zionism after her involvement in driving the Bedouin out of the Negev; she became a member of the Israeli Communist Party in the 1950s and began to campaign for Palestinian rights.<sup>81</sup> Arna would go on to marry Saliba Khamis, a prominent, Palestinian member of the Communist Party and have three sons, adopting the surname Mer Khamis.<sup>82</sup> In 1987, at the time of the First Intifada, Arna, a teacher by training, founded the organisation “In the Defence of Children under Occupation” (or “Care and Learning”), which aimed to support Palestinian children who were suffering as a result of the occupation and the surrounding violence, working – amongst other things – to support their education.<sup>83</sup> As part of these efforts, Arna created four “Children’s Houses” in Jenin to provide the opportunity for learning and creative expression; by 1993, there were over 1500 children enrolled.<sup>84</sup> Arna was welcomed as a guest in Jenin, stating in an acceptance speech given in Sweden for the Right Livelihood Award that she had “received the greatest prize of all – their smiles, their confidence, their friendship – all of which have served to breed a new human relationship between Jews and Arabs.”<sup>85</sup> Arna used the award’s accompanying funds to build the Stone Theatre, a children’s theatre, on the top floor of the Zubeidi family home in Jenin.<sup>86</sup> This is where *Arna’s Children* picks up. The documentary begins by following the Stone Theatre’s work, until Arna’s death from cancer in 1995.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Wallin, ‘Arna’, p.47; Shatz, ‘The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis’; Shay Hazkani, *Dear Palestine: A Social History of the 1948 War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), p.13.

<sup>82</sup> Wallin, ‘Arna’, p.47; Matar, ‘Life Story’.

<sup>83</sup> Wallin, ‘Arna’, pp.47-48.

<sup>84</sup> Wallin, ‘Arna’, p.48; Matar, ‘Life Story’.

<sup>85</sup> Shatz, ‘The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis’; Arna Mer Khamis, ‘Right Livelihood Award Acceptance Speech’ in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: LeftWord, 2018), 50-54, p.52.

<sup>86</sup> Wallin, ‘Arna’, p.48.

<sup>87</sup> Wallin, ‘Arna’, p.48; Matar, ‘Life Story’.

Juliano Mer Khamis was Arna's second son, born in 1958 and growing up in Nazareth and Haifa; with a Palestinian-Christian father and a Jewish-Israeli mother, he described himself in later years as "100 per cent Palestinian and 100 per cent Jewish."<sup>88</sup> In his early life, however, he mainly identified with his Jewish-Israeli side; he stopped speaking Arabic for a time and joined the IDF at age eighteen, despite his parents' political stances and disapproval, being stationed in Jenin.<sup>89</sup> According to Adam Shatz:

By the time Juliano was stationed there, it had evolved into a concrete slum where more than ten thousand people were squeezed into a space not much bigger than five hundred square metres. If a soldier killed an old woman or a child by accident a weapon would be planted on the corpse: Juliano's job was to carry the bag with the weapons.<sup>90</sup>

Juliano's time in the military ended after an altercation with his commanding officer; he refused an order to search an elderly Palestinian man, then punching the officer.<sup>91</sup> Juliano spent several months in prison before leaving the army in 1978.<sup>92</sup> He turned to acting, enrolling in the Beit-Zvi School for the Performing Arts in Tel Aviv and launching a successful career in TV, cinema and stage productions.<sup>93</sup> According to Shatz, "his life as an Israeli Jew was over" after Juliano left the IDF; at the performing arts school, he could be an Arab, Jew or neither.<sup>94</sup> Shatz also states that, living in the Philippines for a year in 1987,

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<sup>88</sup> Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'; Johanna Wallin, 'Juliano Mer Khamis' in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: LeftWord, 2018), 55-63, p.55.

<sup>89</sup> Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'; Wallin, 'Juliano Mer Khamis', p.55.

<sup>90</sup> Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'.

<sup>91</sup> Wallin, 'Juliano Mer Khamis', pp.55-56; Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'.

<sup>92</sup> Wallin, 'Juliano Mer Khamis', p.56; Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'.

<sup>93</sup> Wallin, 'Juliano Mer Khamis', p.56; Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'.

<sup>94</sup> Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'.



Juliano “lost all [his] identities,” embracing his Israeli-Palestinian duality.<sup>95</sup>

Juliano then joined Arna in her efforts in Jenin, leading theatre groups, directing plays and filming the work of the Care and Learning project.<sup>96</sup> As Shatz writes:

At first his students looked at him warily . . . but he formed lasting friendships – among them with Samira Zubeidi’s son Zakaria, who would later become a leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a militia of young men affiliated with Fatah, and a co-founder of the Freedom Theatre.<sup>97</sup>

Juliano would leave Jenin after Arna’s death, only returning in 2002, after the Second Intifada’s Battle of Jenin, to find out what had become of the children he worked with as part of Care and Learning.<sup>98</sup>

### *Arna’s Children*

In 2004, Juliano Mer Khamis released *Arna’s Children*, a documentary about the “Learning and Freedom” theatre project, primarily following the children who partook in this project, focussing on their childhoods in Arna’s theatre and their later involvement in the Second Intifada. The documentary is revealing in its demonstration of Juliano’s perception and narrative of the issues facing Palestinians, and as a precursor to the Freedom Theatre and Bus’ narrative and canon. The documentary’s attention is fixated more so on a debate of the nature of Palestinian resistance – peaceful protest versus violence – than on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, with Israel playing an ancillary role. That being said, the documentary still underlyingly incorporates Palestinian

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<sup>95</sup> Shatz, ‘The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis’.

<sup>96</sup> Wallin, ‘Juliano Mer Khamis’, p.56.

<sup>97</sup> Shatz, ‘The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis’.

<sup>98</sup> Wallin, ‘Juliano Mer Khamis’, p.56; Shatz, ‘The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis’.

paradigms regarding Israel, and these can be gauged from the documentary. Ultimately, what emerges is an individual's narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, heavily influenced and led by Juliano's personal experiences, and less concerned with existing discourse.

*Arna's Children* presents an early version of what would become the Freedom Theatre/Bus' narrative and canon of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The documentary creates its own canon of the events, actors and periods that preceded the Freedom Theatre, as well as incorporating parts of the dominant narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict relevant to the Mer Khamis' own history. The documentary most often refers to the First Intifada, and the "Battle of Jenin" – part of the Second Intifada – as a looming spectre and then tragedy. The major events seen as fundamental to the dominant narratives and canons of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict are largely omitted from the narrative presented by the documentary. 1948, for instance, is only mentioned in relation to Arna's personal history, as she joined the Palmach and fought for the creation of Israel.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, whilst the Oslo Accords may hold some implicit significance, as they facilitated the increased reliance on violence seen in the Second Intifada, they are never mentioned in the documentary.<sup>100</sup> *Arna's Children* instead follows a specific course of events that span the personal experiences of the Mer Khamis and the theatre children from the First to Second Intifada, with other events only mentioned or implicitly included. The documentary's narrative is built around these personal experiences, with, for instance, the major turning point for the documentary coming after Arna dies

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<sup>99</sup> *Arna's Children*, dir. by Juliano Mer Khamis, Danniell Danniell, Osnat Trabelsi, Pieter Van Huystee (Media Education Foundation, 2004), 8:54-9:09 and 34:15-37:22.

<sup>100</sup> Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, pp.212-213; Anthony Alessandrini, 'Revisiting Arna's Children', *Jadaliyya*, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2011 <<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24081>> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020].

and the Stone Theatre is destroyed during the Second Intifada.<sup>101</sup> From this point, the documentary focusses on finding out what happened to the children after the theatre closed. As far as the documentary's canon is concerned, this is a distinct and significant change in periodisation from pre- to post-theatre closure.<sup>102</sup> In this regard, *Arna's Children* is inherently insular and highly localised, focussing on the local events that impact ordinary Palestinians – particularly in Jenin. The narrative and canon the documentary creates are less concerned with overarching political phenomena, and more so with the individualised, human experience.

The ultimate argument of *Arna's Children* is its implied condemnation of violence as a means of resistance. Both the contents of the documentary – the interviews, conversations and quotes that have been included – and its framing and editing are geared towards an emphasis on the negativity of violence and particularly the loss of childhood innocence. The documentary makes frequent use of jarring juxtapositions between images of violence and youthful innocence. An early example of this comes around ten minutes into the documentary, when the audience is shown a group of children acting as animals whilst Juliano Mer Khamis narrates “this is Nidal. He is the youngest one in the group. In six years' time, during the al-Aqsa Intifada, Nidal will join the Islamic Jihad Movement and will be killed during the fighting against the Israeli army” and “we used to call Ashraf ‘shorty with the big smile.’ During the al-Aqsa Intifada, Ashraf will lead a group of fighters in the battle of Jenin.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Mohammed Ali Atassi, “Arna's Children”: an Israeli Activist's Family Saga’, *Al Jadid*, 11.53 (2005) <<https://www.aljadid.com/content/%E2%80%9Carna%E2%80%99s-children%E2%80%9D-israeli-activist%E2%80%99s-family-saga>>.

<sup>102</sup> Emine Fisek, ‘I want to be the Palestinian Romeo! *Arna's Children* and the Romance with Theatre’, *Theatre Research International*, 37.2 (2012), 104-117, p.105.

<sup>103</sup> *Arna's Children*, 10:35-10:54 and 11:36-11:48.

The documentary is very intentionally edited throughout to elicit empathy for the children of Jenin and then confront this empathy with the violent reality in Palestine to lead the audience to the conclusion that the children's turn to violent resistance is a tragedy. In a fairly late scene of the documentary, Juliano confronts one of the former theatre children, Mahmoud, about a suicide attack carried out by another of the children, Yousef.<sup>104</sup> At the end of the scene, Juliano asks Mahmoud "what do you think of the suicides? Don't hide behind Yousef," to which Mahmoud laughs and responds "what do I think?" and pauses.<sup>105</sup> It is not clear whether Mahmoud did then respond, as the documentary cuts to the next scene – however, from an editing standpoint, no more was needed to illustrate the argument of the documentary. The recurring motif of the loss of childhood innocence is also seen in the final scene of the documentary, wherein a group of young children chant:

Answer the call from the Aqsa mosque. Call out against those who oppress us. For your sake, my steadfast people. Together we will fight and struggle. Raise your voice and say: God is great, God is great. Every mother's tear and every drop of blood takes its toll. For every martyr that falls, a new one will rise. For your sake, my steadfast people . . .<sup>106</sup>

The chant holds a militaristic feeling and sentiment, with its references to fighting, blood and martyrdom, which also in-turn implies a relation to Islamist militarism, with its theological references. This notion, combined with the chanters being children and its placement as the final scene of the documentary, suggests that the documentary is implying that the disruption of

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<sup>104</sup> *Arna's Children*, 1:04:21-1:05:21.

<sup>105</sup> *Arna's Children*, 1:05:07-1:05:21.

<sup>106</sup> *Arna's Children*, 1:21:25-1:22:32.

childhood innocence by violence has already begun anew with the next generation of Palestinian children. The overall tone of the documentary is ultimately one of regret or remorse that the situation had come to this, and that violence had to be the outcome.

In so far as Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is concerned, *Arna's Children* is thus less focussed on challenging Israel and more on challenging violence as a Palestinian response or solution. As such, condemnation of the policies and actions of Israel – a core focus of a typical Palestinian narrative – is not particularly explicit in the documentary. The “Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” is never mentioned explicitly, with references only and instead to the Israeli “occupation.”<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, certain aspects of the occupation are only shown as part of the *mise-en-scène* – the backdrop to the argument against violence. For instance, the documentary opens with the camera driving down a road alongside a long line of cars stopped by Israeli soldiers; protesters, Arna Mer Khamis amongst them, hold Hebrew and Arabic signs reading “down with the occupation” and disrupt other traffic.<sup>108</sup> Only through familiarity with the Israeli occupation is it clear that this is an instance of Israeli restriction of Palestinian freedom of movement, where the Palestinian traffic has been halted for the sole purpose of disruption whilst Israeli traffic has been allowed to pass.<sup>109</sup> In this regard, the documentary is technically showing the reality for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. However, the purpose of the scene is not to display the Israeli occupation, but to introduce the character of Arna. Juliano Mer

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<sup>107</sup> *Arna's Children*, 1:20, 2:50, 20:18-21:03, 29:40-29:57 and 30:54-31:25.

<sup>108</sup> *Arna's Children*, 0:00-3:33.

<sup>109</sup> Ronit Sela, 'Freedom of Movement v. Restrictions on Movement under the Two Legal Systems', *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics & Culture*, 21.3 (2016), 31-38, pp.31-33; B'Tselem, 'Restrictions on Movement', *B'Tselem: Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories*, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2017, <[https://www.btselem.org/freedom\\_of\\_movement](https://www.btselem.org/freedom_of_movement)> [Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021].

Khamis, narrating, opens by stating “this is my mother, Arna” and gives a brief biography, within which mentioning only “the closure on the refugee camp of Jenin.”<sup>110</sup> The camera largely follows Arna throughout the scene. The scene is intended to establish Arna as a staunch pro-Palestinian activist, advocating for the people of Jenin even in sickness, and it is through this lens that the Palestinian peoples’ plight is shown.

Despite not making it an explicit focus, however, *Arna’s Children* still deals with Israeli policy and thus subscribes to a particular analytical paradigm. Whilst, by the time the documentary was released, the dominant Palestinian narrative had shifted its argument to emphasise the Settler-Colonial and Apartheid paradigms, *Arna’s Children* still used the paradigm of military occupation. With the framing centred around the Second Intifada and the core anti-violence argument, the documentary holds up the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians as a defining feature of their relationship. The key event around which the documentary is based is referred to widely by the voices in the documentary as the “Battle of Jenin.” It is apparent that both the Israeli and Palestinian sides typically refer to the Israeli invasion of Jenin as a “Battle” – for Israelis, it was part of Operation Defensive Shield, a military response to increasing numbers of suicide bombings by Palestinian militant groups.<sup>111</sup> There have been some on the Palestinian side, however, that have referred to the Battle of Jenin as a massacre, or the scene of war crimes.<sup>112</sup> Israeli news media argues that European – particularly British – news outlets at

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<sup>110</sup> *Arna’s Children*, 1:50-2:25.

<sup>111</sup> Daniel Byman, *A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.141-155.

<sup>112</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.78; Yvonne Ridley, ‘We Must Never Forget Israel’s Massacre in Jenin’, *Memo: Middle East Monitor*, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200414-we-must-never-forget-israels-massacre-in-jenin/>> [Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

the time were quick to make these claims of massacres and war crimes without proper substantiation, whilst Israel failed to share their side of the story.<sup>113</sup>

Former theatre child Zakaria Zubeidi, now leader of al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades in Jenin during the fighting, also argued against referring to the Battle as a massacre, stating during the documentary itself that "the Battle of Jenin has become a myth. Now they say the Jews massacred us. That's not true," highlighting the extent to which those involved on the ground in Jenin adhered to the Conflict paradigm.<sup>114</sup> Israelis, most commonly represented by soldiers, are often not referred to as a foreign force in the documentary, but commonly as "the army," implying to some extent that they are the sovereign (or at least military) ruler.<sup>115</sup> This notion is highlighted by Arna in one early scene, as one of the theatre children refers to "the army" and Arna presses him to specify "the Israeli army."<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, one of the theatre children, Ala, in arguing with another fighter during the Second Intifada, exclaims that "when we surrendered, the resistance ended."<sup>117</sup> The use of the term "resistance" is significant, as it implicitly characterises the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict as something of a civil, rather than international, war and thus again presents Israel as the sovereign establishment, rather than a foreign force – Israel is the army, and the Palestinian militant groups are the rebels.

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<sup>113</sup> Marcus Sheff, 'A Decade Since the Battle of Jenin, "the Myth of Jeningrad"', *The Jerusalem Post*, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2012, <<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/columnists/a-decade-since-the-battle-of-jenin-the-myth-of-jeningrad>> [Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> October 2020]; Sharon Sadeh, 'How Jenin Battle Became a "Massacre"', *The Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2002, <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2002/may/06/mondaymediasection5>> [Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>114</sup> Jack Khoury, Josh Breiner and Yaniv Kubovich, 'Israeli Security Forces Arrest Palestinian Ex-Militant Zakariya Zubeidi', *Haaretz*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2019, <<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-israeli-security-forces-arrest-palestinian-ex-militant-zakariya-zubeidi-1.6976944>> [Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> October 2020]; *Arna's Children*, 1:13:07-1:13:18.

<sup>115</sup> *Arna's Children*, 55:32-59:00 and 1:07:54-1:08:04.

<sup>116</sup> *Arna's Children*, 13:42-14:03.

<sup>117</sup> *Arna's Children*, 1:13:07-1:14:18.

The primary way through which the documentary creates otherness, separating Israel from Palestine, is when the voices refer to “Jews.” A scene in which Juliano Mer Khamis converses with a few of the boys from the theatre particularly demonstrates this notion:

I wanted to understand why [Arna had] come here. What her aim was. . .

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What did you think of her?

That she was Jewish. We thought she wasn't good. When we got to know her, we saw she was very good to us. . . .

We thought you [Juliano] were spying for the occupation, but then we got to know you. . . . But we realised you were on our side. . . .

I thought: why isn't there an Arab who would do this for us? Why would Jews, who are enemies of the Arabs, why would they do all this for us?

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There is a resultant apparent dichotomy, in which the Israelis are both the Other – Jews, enemies of the Arabs – and the same society – the establishment. All of this creates a distinction in the documentary between the Israeli system, which is presented as part of the same sovereign body, and the Israeli people, who are treated as a foreign body – not even referred to as Israeli, but as “Jews” predominantly. Although, the common denominator is that Israel exists as a military occupier. Ultimately, *Arna's Children* demonstrates a disconnect with the growing consensus of the dominant Palestinian narrative, as the voices in the documentary – all either ordinary Palestinians or grassroots activists –

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<sup>118</sup> *Arna's Children*, 18:52-21:53.



subscribe to the more-traditional, conflict-orientated perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

Overall, *Arna's Children* represents the origins of a non-dominant Palestinian narrative, formed separately from the dominant Palestinian narrative and the wider Israeli-Palestinian discourse. In narrating the Palestinian experience, Juliano Mer Khamis instead drew from the personal experiences of his mother, Arna, and the Palestinian children they supported, as well as his own experiences, to inform how he narrated the Palestinian perspective. What resulted was a narrative that demonstrated some of the nuances seen at a localised level, but often overlooked by the broader dominant Israeli and Palestinian narratives, that also expressed sorrow for the violence that ruptured from the ongoing conflict. The documentary highlights the two key arguments of what would become the Freedom Theatre narrative – the challenge to Israel, as well as the challenge to Palestinian society. What the audience is ultimately presented with is an introspective narrative, interested (perhaps more so) in finding and challenging the roots of the internal problems facing Palestinians, as well as continuing to stand against Israeli occupation.

### Zakaria Zubeidi

Zubeidi, born in 1976, was one of the few of *Arna's Children* to survive the Second Intifada.<sup>119</sup> Having been military leader of al-Aqsa Martyrs' Bridges in Jenin during the Battle, he was one of Israel's most wanted.<sup>120</sup> In an

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<sup>119</sup> Johanna Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi' in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: LeftWord, 2018), 184-190, p.184; Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'.

<sup>120</sup> Wallin and Stanczak, 'The Beginning', p.28.

interview, Zubeidi traced his militancy back to the death of his mother, who was killed by an Israeli sniper in 2002, during the Second Intifada.<sup>121</sup> When he co-founded the Freedom Theatre in 2006, Zubeidi was still wanted by the Israelis, and remained in hiding in order to avoid arrest and numerous assassination attempts.<sup>122</sup> His involvement in the Theatre gave legitimacy to what was seen by many in Jenin to be a foreign concept.<sup>123</sup> Zubeidi then took an amnesty in 2007, removing him from Israel's most wanted list, in exchange for him laying down his arms.<sup>124</sup> According to the Associated Press, he still never surrendered his weapons to the Palestinian Authority, as he did not trust the amnesty agreement and feared for his life.<sup>125</sup> Zubeidi had, however, reportedly already decided to pursue non-violent and cultural, rather than armed, resistance, being quoted as saying "through the theatre, you can talk to the world and give a different message than the way they see us as terrorists."<sup>126</sup> Armed resistance had been a means of sending a message to the world that the Palestinians were fighting the occupation, but cultural resistance provided a way of contextualising that resistance, to inform others of the reasons behind it.<sup>127</sup> For Zubeidi, the idea for the Freedom Theatre was based on his experiences with Arna's Stone Theatre – the time he spent there had been one of the happiest of his life, when the children "felt like real people, people who mattered."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Joseph Krauss, 'Theatre Kid Turned Militant Stars in Israeli Prison Break', *Associated Press*, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2021, <<https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-jerusalem-middle-east-prisons-west-bank-ce1576a26d245bd4781ba4ff816af2e3>> [Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> September 2021]; Wallin and Stanczak, 'The Beginning', pp.28-29; Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', p.184.

<sup>122</sup> Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', p.184.

<sup>123</sup> Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', p.185.

<sup>124</sup> Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', p.185; Krauss, 'Theatre Kid Turned Militant Stars in Israeli Prison Break'; Jen Marlowe, 'Freedom Theatre's Zakaria Zubeidi on "Death Fast" in PA Detention', *Electronic Intifada*, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2012, <<https://electronicintifada.net/content/freedom-theatres-zakaria-zubeidi-death-fast-pa-detention/11689>> [Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> September 2021].

<sup>125</sup> Krauss, 'Theatre Kid Turned Militant Stars in Israeli Prison Break'.

<sup>126</sup> Marlowe, 'Freedom Theatre's Zakaria Zubeidi on "Death Fast" in PA Detention'; Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', p.185.

<sup>127</sup> Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', pp.185-187.

<sup>128</sup> Wallin and Stanczak, 'The Beginning', p.30.

## The Cultural Intifada

The two core narrative strands formed in *Arna's Children* – the challenge to Israel and the challenge to Palestinian society – then continue into the establishment of the Freedom Theatre. In 2006, Juliano Mer Khamis returned to Jenin and founded the Freedom Theatre after Zubeidi appealed to him to create a project to support the next generation of young people.<sup>129</sup> The new theatre committed itself to what Mer Khamis called the “Cultural Intifada.” In defining the Cultural Intifada, Erin Mee quotes Mer Khamis as saying:

The Freedom Theatre . . . is a venue to join the Palestinian people in their struggle for liberation with poetry, music, theatre, cameras. The Israelis succeeded to destroy our identity [and] our social structures, [both] political [and] economical. Our duty as artists is to rebuild or reconstruct this destruction. Who we are, why we are, where we are going, who we want to be. . . . We believe that the third intifada, the coming intifada, should be cultural, with poetry, music, theatre, cameras, and magazines.<sup>130</sup>

The Cultural Intifada takes an introspective approach, challenging Israel's destruction of Palestine not only by directly confronting them, but also by restating what it means to be Palestinian besides the Israelis' Other. In this regard, the Cultural Intifada attempts to straddle the two narrative strands present in the Freedom Theatre's narrative. The content of the Freedom

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<sup>129</sup> Killian Fox, 'Young Palestinians Act Out Their Struggle on Another Stage', *The Observer*, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/mar/25/young-palestinians-freedom-theatre-jenin>> [Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2020]; Mee, 'The Cultural Intifada', p.168; Conal Urquhart, 'Friends mourn Juliano Mer-Khamis, the Palestinian-Israeli who used drama to foster peace', *The Observer*, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2011, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/10/juliano-mer-khamis-west-bank-freedom-theatre>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>130</sup> Mee, 'The Cultural Intifada', p.168.

Theatre's Cultural Intifada narrative is inherently anti-Zionist, incorporating themes of Israeli occupation, violence and domination. However, this narrative equally does not shy away from highlighting issues within the Palestinian political climate, or challenging Palestinian societal and cultural norms that are seen as outdated in a modern (Western) context. It takes the idea of defining or restating Palestinian identity as a necessary starting point in challenging Israeli dominance. This attempt to challenge both Israel and Palestine also created contention with the dominant Palestinian narrative, however. Although not the only group to advocate for cultural resistance, according to Shatz:

The theatre's stance was unusually radical for an NGO in Palestine. It refused to criticise the armed struggle, or to parrot the PA's rhetoric about the peace process, positions that lost it some potential funding. It attacked the PA's collaboration with Israel, and described itself as part of a struggle against occupation rather than another 'capacity-building' organisation.<sup>131</sup>

The binary, polarised nature of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict does not leave much room for pronounced counterarguments, especially as this is seen as counterproductive to the primary goal of achieving Palestinian liberation, within which Israel is the ultimate antagonist. The discourse between the Freedom Theatre and the dominant Palestinian narrative, in this case, ultimately led to the murder/assassination of Juliano Mer Khamis.

Within the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict's dominant canon, the Cultural Intifada is not recognised; the *official* chronology only formally recognises the First and Second Intifadas. Nevertheless, the Freedom Theatre, and

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<sup>131</sup> Shatz, 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis'.

proponents of the organisation and theatre more-widely, promoted the Cultural Intifada and it was thus picked up by academics and news organisations. In 2009, *Reuters* published an article titled “In self-satire, Palestinians see cultural Intifada,” covering the Freedom Theatre’s adaptation of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and the response to this.<sup>132</sup> The Cultural Intifada is presented at most as an event to come or that could be, rather than an incipient revolution. According to the article, the Theatre sought to begin an Intifada divorced from the violence of the previous Intifadas, instead emphasising culture and challenging a lack of progress within Palestinian leadership and conservative social norms, which saw hostility from portions of Palestinian society, wherein criticism “is often branded pro-Israeli treachery,” or by those who see them as a threat to Palestinian culture, culminating in an unclaimed arson attack against the Theatre.<sup>133</sup> Effectively, the Freedom Theatre received backlash for challenging the dominant Palestinian narrative.

The plays the Freedom Theatre have put on throughout their history have largely balanced the two core narrative strands of the Cultural Intifada. The presentation and synopses of the plays listed on the Freedom Theatre website show a rough fifty-fifty split in focus outwardly on Israel and inwardly on Palestine.<sup>134</sup> However, certain productions garner more attention than others, and it is with these higher-profile plays that the Freedom Theatre’s narrative – or at least the perception of this narrative – was formed. Naturally, the plays that received more attention were seen as more incendiary within Palestinian

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<sup>132</sup> Alastair Macdonald, ‘In self-satire, Palestinians see cultural Intifada’, *Reuters*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2009, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-satire/in-self-satire-palestinians-see-cultural-intifada-idUSTRE5312BZ20090402>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>133</sup> Macdonald, ‘In self-satire, Palestinians see cultural Intifada’.

<sup>134</sup> The Freedom Theatre, ‘Productions’, *The Freedom Theatre* (2020) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/category/theatre-productions/>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

society; it is not surprising that the theatre faced arson in response to its production of *Animal Farm*, an allegory regarding political corruption and the derailment of political change. The Theatre's two previous productions – *To Be or Not to Be* and *The Journey* – both closely related to one another, dealt with “the joys, troubles and dreams of youth in Occupied Palestine” – an approach inherently focussed on Israel's impact and much less controversial within Palestinian circles.<sup>135</sup> The Theatre's adaptation of *Animal Farm*, on the other hand, in their own words:

Stays true to Orwell's fierce critique of revolutionaries imitating their oppressors. The head pig, Napoleon, flanks himself with two black-clad, Kalashnikov-toting dogs with sunglasses. After moving into the farmer's house, Napoleon hangs a giant portrait of himself in a dark suit and tie above the farmyard. The human who comes to talk business at the play's end wears a green army uniform and speaks Hebrew.<sup>136</sup>

Whilst not explicitly stating so in their synopsis, the Freedom Theatre openly acknowledges its intent to compare the current Palestinian leadership to the Israelis and draw attention to the collaboration between the two governments. In a video teaser for the play, those speaking, including Mer Khamis, warn those in power “that there is a possibility, if we're not careful to follow our principles and our political stands, we'll end up killing each other, persecuting, charging and imprisoning each other, and locking each other up – we'll end up as in *Animal*

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<sup>135</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'To Be or Not to Be', *The Freedom Theatre* (2007) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/to-be-or-not-to-be/>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020]; The Freedom Theatre, 'The Journey', *The Freedom Theatre* (2008) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/the-journey/>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>136</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'Animal Farm', *The Freedom Theatre* (2009) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/animal-farm/>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

Farm.”<sup>137</sup> They also go as far as to argue that this is already taking place, with one of the actors stating that “our play is a reflection of our society. It presents our reality. The pigs took over the farm and became like Mr Jones. Nothing has changed.”<sup>138</sup> There is additionally a warning against a wider shift in Palestinian attitude from collective cooperation to individual selfishness, wherein the play “shows you how they are corrupt, why they are corrupt in the play, because they start to talk about me, not we; and we lost we, we don’t have we in Palestine, we just have me – ‘I did this,’ ‘I will do this.’”<sup>139</sup> The play goes beyond only challenging Palestinian political institutions, to challenging the general Palestinian psyche; in this sense, it is the audience that is directly called out by the play. The aforementioned *Reuters* article corroborates this notion, arguing that the arson attack in response to the play “was a reminder that some take offense at what they see as a challenge to tradition or to their hold over the West Bank” – it is not only the societal structures that feel under attack, but what it means to be Palestinian.<sup>140</sup> The article quotes Mer Khamis as referring to this concept and hostility as a “ghetto mentality” and “dictatorship of tradition.”<sup>141</sup> A BBC article on the play states that Mer Khamis aimed to look at Palestinian society and politics particularly, rather than Israel, and the “unspoken restrictions” internally imposed on Palestinian citizens’ freedoms.<sup>142</sup> However, another article from *The National News* quotes Mer Khamis as saying “that’s what is beautiful about theatre, everyone can interpret it his own way . . . I don’t agree that the [Palestinian Authority] are pigs. I think the PA is caught in

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<sup>137</sup> Thefreedomtheatre, *Animal Farm*, online video, YouTube, uploaded 4<sup>th</sup> August 2009, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfli9le6nmo>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020], 7:26-7:49.

<sup>138</sup> Thefreedomtheatre, *Animal Farm*, 3:44-4:02.

<sup>139</sup> Thefreedomtheatre, *Animal Farm*, 5:42-6:00.

<sup>140</sup> Macdonald, ‘In self-satire, Palestinians see cultural Intifada’.

<sup>141</sup> Macdonald, ‘In self-satire, Palestinians see cultural Intifada’.

<sup>142</sup> Nikki Jecks, ‘Animal Farm Rankles the West Bank’, *BBC News*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2009, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/7968812.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7968812.stm)> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

a situation that affects all of us. . . . Many of them are aware of the political situation they are in, and are open-minded about it.”<sup>143</sup> In this regard, for Mer Khamis, highlighting the corruption and stagnation seen within Palestinian politics was less about challenging Palestinian politicians personally, but more-so reflecting and raising awareness of the problems inherent in the system itself – something the politicians are then a product of. Equally, however, within the play itself, political corruption is personified in the character of Napoleon, ascribing the antagonism to the politician, rather than the system. With the production made up of many people, Mer Khamis is also not the only voice narrating the Freedom Theatre narrative and it is apparent that many of these other voices do not distinguish between the political system and its politicians.

Another of the Freedom Theatre’s productions, *Alice in Wonderland* – which ran from January to March 2011, a week before Mer Khamis’ murder – demonstrates that the Freedom Theatre was not only incidentally ruffling feathers, but at times aspired to be controversial.<sup>144</sup> A post on the Freedom Theatre website recognises the dual-focus of the Cultural Intifada as a driving force in the play, writing “Mer-Khamis created a production that functions on two levels: the first challenges traditional aspects of camp life and the second is an overt critique of the Israeli occupation.”<sup>145</sup> However, the play itself appears to lean much more heavily towards challenging Palestinian culture, with the dynamic between the Red Queen and her subjects providing only an implicit allegory for the Israeli occupation.<sup>146</sup> The Freedom Theatre itself poses the

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<sup>143</sup> Rachel Shabi, ‘The Theatre of Freedom in Jenin’, *The National News*, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2009, <<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/the-theatre-of-freedom-in-jenin-1.498452>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>144</sup> The Freedom Theatre, ‘Alice in Wonderland’, *The Freedom Theatre* (2011) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/alice-in-wonderland/>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>145</sup> Samer al Saber, ‘Alice in Dangerland’, *The Freedom Theatre* (2011) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/news/alice-in-dangerland/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>146</sup> Al Saber, ‘Alice in Dangerland’.



question of whether the play's oppressors represent Israel or "the camp's traditionalists."<sup>147</sup> The play emphasises its use of the story of *Alice in Wonderland* to explore a woman's role and rights in Palestinian society:

Alice escapes a reality of poverty, oppression and conservatism where she is constrained to doing chores in the home. . . . Alice realizes that the other world, which purports to be the real one, is the one where she is robbed of her freedom. As she journeys through Wonderland, she grows and learns how to make her own choices. . . . the performance shines a different spotlight on today's Palestinian society. . . . [It] manages to tackle issues such as the position of girls and women in the community, while simultaneously questioning many of the social restrictions that limit the roles available to both women and men.<sup>148</sup>

The webpage for the production describes the play as "subversive" and "radical," and quotes Mer Khamis as saying "it will be our biggest scandal yet, I hope."<sup>149</sup> The Theatre used its challenge to Palestinian society and its subversion of societal norms not only as a narrative stance, but as a selling point.

The direct challenge the Freedom Theatre narrative presented to the dominant Palestinian narrative led to an extreme climax beyond the scope of theoretical discourse. On the 4<sup>th</sup> April 2011, Mer Khamis was killed in his car by a masked gunman outside of the Freedom Theatre.<sup>150</sup> The specifics

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<sup>147</sup> Al Saber, 'Alice in Dangerland'.

<sup>148</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'Alice in Wonderland'.

<sup>149</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'Alice in Wonderland'.

<sup>150</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'Murdered: Juliano Mer-Khamis *قتل: جوليانو مير خميس*, *The Freedom Theatre* (2011) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/news/murdered-juliano-mer-khamis/>> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020]; Jack Houry, Avi Issacharoff, Anshel Pfeffer and Haaretz Service, 'Israeli Actor Juliano Mer-Khamis Shot Dead in Jenin', *Haaretz*, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2011, <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.5146901>> [Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

surrounding Mer Khamis' death are murky; however, there were assumptions and expectations surrounding the cause of his death that are worth exploring.<sup>151</sup> Three years prior to his death, in 2008, Mer Khamis said during a video commonly presented as an interview:

I'm telling them about how I'm going to end my life – a bullet from a fucked up Palestinian, who's going to be very angry that we are in Jenin with this blonde [his wife, Jenny Nyman], coming to corrupt the youth of the Islam, and he's gonna [miming gunshots and death] and she's going to find me dead on the doorstep.<sup>152</sup>

The instance of the video found for this thesis was taken from *Channel 10 News*, an Israeli television news organisation, and uploaded to a pro-Israeli YouTube channel consisting of selective news clips presenting Palestinians and Arabs in a negative light – the news segment and video clip were aired and uploaded on the 7<sup>th</sup> April 2011, days after Mer Khamis' death. The use of the video by these two Israeli sources immediately demonstrates how Mer Khamis' death was capitalised-upon by the Israeli narrative to damage Palestinian credibility.<sup>153</sup> Mer Khamis' statement, however, comes across somewhat as a joke, with the hyperbolic miming and Mer Khamis' smile to his wife as he says that she will find him dead, although there is equally a hint of belief in Mer Khamis' demeanour with his pauses, exasperated tone and body language as he talks about the motives of his imagined killer; in this regard, the miming is

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<sup>151</sup> Shatz, in 'The Life and Death of Juliano Mer Khamis,' states that Palestinian security forces concluded that the murder was an issue of money and power in the theatre, and that some suspected Zubeidi of being involved.

<sup>152</sup> MiddleEastNewsWatch, *Juliano Mer-Khamis predicted his own murder by Palestinians*, online video, YouTube, uploaded 7<sup>th</sup> April 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSPUxYMoKR>> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020].

<sup>153</sup> Jacob Gough, 'Working with and Reflecting on Juliano' in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: LeftWord, 2018), 373-386, p.378.

almost used to revive the jokey tone and pace. A *Guardian* article corroborates Mer Khamis' frequent envisioning of "his death at the hand of 'a crazy Palestinian gunman,'" also suggesting that this video clip was not simply an isolated joke.<sup>154</sup> Mer Khamis understood that his and the Freedom Theatre's narrative constituted a provocative counternarrative to the dominant Palestinian narrative.

The Freedom Theatre itself seemed to subscribe to the idea that the killer was Palestinian, writing in a 7<sup>th</sup> April 2011 post on their website that "a traitor's hand shot and killed" Mer Khamis.<sup>155</sup> In line with Mer Khamis' and the Theatre's perception of his likely death, by some accounts, he was killed by Mujahed Qaniri, "a former Al-Aqsa Brigades' militant."<sup>156</sup> *The Guardian*, visiting Jenin following Mer Khamis' death, used a circulated leaflet and *vox populi* interviews to assert that criticisms were made of Mer Khamis and the Theatre as proponents of liberal values, and these were suggested by these sources to be the impetus for his murder.<sup>157</sup> In this regard, at the very least, Mer Khamis' death was viewed as positive in the eyes of some Palestinians, at least in conservative circles. Regardless of the genuine circumstances, according to *Haaretz*, after Mer Khamis' death, Palestinian and PNA president Mahmoud Abbas also posthumously awarded Mer Khamis a "Medal of Jerusalem,"

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<sup>154</sup> Conal Urquhart, 'Juliano Mer-Khamis – a killing inspired by drama, not politics', *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/21/jenin-grievances-death-juliano-mer-khamis>> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020].

<sup>155</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'In Memory of Juliano Mer Khamis في ذكرى جوليانو مير خميس', *The Freedom Theatre* (2011) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/news/in-memory-of-juliano-mer-khamis/>> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020].

<sup>156</sup> Oren Kessler and Khaled Abu Toameh, 'PA forces nab Hamas suspect in Mer-Khamis murder', *The Jerusalem Post*, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2011, <<https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/PA-forces-nab-Hamas-suspect-in-Mer-Khamis-murder>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020]; AFP, 'Jenin militant charged over theatre director murder', *Yahoo News*, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2011, <[https://web.archive.org/web/20110414010355/http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20110406/wl\\_mideast\\_afp/israelpalestiniansarabtheatrearrest](https://web.archive.org/web/20110414010355/http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20110406/wl_mideast_afp/israelpalestiniansarabtheatrearrest)> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>157</sup> Urquhart, 'Juliano Mer-Khamis – a killing inspired by drama, not politics'.

referring to him as a “martyr.”<sup>158</sup> This is significant as the label of “martyr” is inherently symbolic; a “martyr” is reduced to a symbol of a broad idea – in this case, the “Palestinian cause” – and thus stripped of nuance – in this case, criticism of the Palestinian government and repressive social norms through Freedom Theatre performances. Through this declaration, the dominant Palestinian narrative was able to adopt Mer Khamis’ superficial image as a “martyr” in order to bolster itself whilst omitting the counternarrative he had created. Generally, people expected and were willing to believe that Mer Khamis’ death was linked to his open countering of the dominant Palestinian narrative through the Theatre, regardless of the truth of the matter. In this regard, Mer Khamis’ death was pre-narrativised; it was known that the Freedom Theatre was seen as controversial by some, there had been previous attacks against the Theatre, and it was anticipated by Mer Khamis himself and others that he would die by the hands of a disgruntled Palestinian. There was an atmosphere surrounding his death that suggested that this outcome was expected or, at least, not surprising. The Freedom Theatre was openly countering the dominant Palestinian narrative, and recognised the danger in this.

After the death of Mer Khamis, academic articles were published reflecting on Mer Khamis and his legacy, treating the Cultural Intifada with increasing seriousness.<sup>159</sup> The Cultural Intifada stands in contrast to the dominant understanding of “intifada,” however. “Intifada” (انتفاضة) literally translates to “uprising,” holding the connotations of a revolt.<sup>160</sup> These

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<sup>158</sup> Haaretz Service, ‘Abbas Honors Slain Israeli and Italian Activists’, *Haaretz*, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2011, <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.5003796>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>159</sup> Mee, ‘Juliano Mer Khamis’; Al-Yamani and Abusrour, ‘Juliano Khamis’; Mee, ‘The Cultural Intifada’.

<sup>160</sup> ‘Intifada’ is also derived from ‘nafada’ (النفادا), which translates to ‘shaking off.’

connotations are upheld by the dominant Israeli and Palestinian canons, with the natures of the First and Second Intifadas. Other iterations of the “Third Intifada” have been argued for alongside this Cultural Intifada iteration. Two examples are the violent unrest in Jerusalem in 2014 – which was nicknamed primarily the “Silent Intifada” – and the 2015-2016 wave of violence, again centred predominantly around Jerusalem – primarily nicknamed the “Intifada of the Individuals.”<sup>161</sup> In these cases, the application of the “intifada” label was instigated by the Israeli narrative. A *Jerusalem Post* article from 2014 emphasised the agreement of Jerusalem’s Israeli politicians that the “third intifada is a foregone conclusion.”<sup>162</sup> The article relies on two Israeli Jerusalem councilmen who represent opposing sides of the Zionist political spectrum. The underlying perspective shared by the two is effectively the same – the applicability of the “intifada” label is granted by the increased perception of violence and the risk to Israeli citizens. Given the specific utilisation of the word “intifada” in the canonised First and Second Intifadas to represent a nationalised struggle to “shake off” Israeli control over Palestine, the association within the Israeli psyche of Palestinian aggressiveness and the term “intifada” dilutes its meaning to be synonymous with violence. In this regard, the First and Second Intifadas act as precedents for understanding the “intifada” label; however, this

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<sup>161</sup> Ben Caspit, ‘Jerusalem’s “silent intifada”’, *Al-Monitor*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2014, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20141030194410/http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/israel-east-jerusalem-temple-mount-terror-attack-train.html>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2020]; Simone Wilson, ‘In Israel, no one’s backing down from a Third Intifada’, *Jewish Journal*, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2014, <<https://jewishjournal.com/israel/140319/>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2020]; Amos Harel, ‘Uneasy Calm in the West Bank Following Several Violent Incidents’, *Haaretz*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, <<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-uneasy-calm-in-the-west-bank-1.5278621>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020]; Sara Yael Hirschhorn, ‘Who’s Afraid of a Third Intifada’, *Haaretz*, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2014, <<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-whos-afraid-of-a-third-intifada-1.5339192>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2020].

<sup>162</sup> Daniel K. Eisenbud, ‘Analysis: Jerusalem’s “silent intifada” is anything but silent’, *Jerusalem Post*, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2014, <<https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/jeruselems-silent-intifada-is-anything-but-silent-380001>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020].

interpretation ignores the Palestinians' rationale behind these uprisings, instead basing itself on the Israeli experience and witnessing of violence.

The use of the "intifada" label for the Cultural Intifada, conversely, demands a broadening of the definition to encompass non-confrontational, long-term processes of cultural re-establishment and protection – in stark contrast to the typical imagery of an uprising – as is the stated aim and intention of the Cultural Intifada.<sup>163</sup> The "Cultural Intifada" has also been treated as part of a growing trend in Palestinian resistance along these lines. Mee states that "while there are other theatres in the West Bank . . . The Freedom Theatre, Alrowwad, and ASHTAR devote themselves specifically to what The Freedom Theatre calls a 'cultural intifada,' and what Alrowwad calls 'beautiful resistance,'" going as far as to explicitly endorse the existence of the event by signing off "the cultural intifada continues..."<sup>164</sup> An article by Dasha Tanner from 2014 then – despite presenting itself as a question of the existence of "a Third Cultural Intifada" – treats it as entirely canonical and perhaps inevitable, and situates the Freedom Theatre's concept in the existing discourse of Palestinian cultural identity, also canonising Edward Said and the cultural writings of Palestinian activist and Christian pastor Mitri Rahed within the umbrella of the "Cultural Intifada."<sup>165</sup> Gabriel Varghese, like Mee, compared the Cultural Intifada and "beautiful resistance" in his 2020 book, creating a commonality between the two in their use of the "vocabulary of resistance," also highlighting that the "theatre-makers explicitly assert the contribution the arts can make to the national liberation

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<sup>163</sup> Mee, 'The Cultural Intifada', p.168.

<sup>164</sup> Mee, 'The Cultural Intifada', p.167 and p.177.

<sup>165</sup> Dasha Tanner, 'A Third "Cultural" Intifada?', *International Affairs Review* (2014) <[https://www.usfca.edu/sites/default/files/arts\\_and\\_sciences/international\\_studies/a\\_third\\_cultural\\_intifada\\_-\\_university\\_of\\_san\\_francisco\\_usf.pdf](https://www.usfca.edu/sites/default/files/arts_and_sciences/international_studies/a_third_cultural_intifada_-_university_of_san_francisco_usf.pdf)>, p.2.

struggle.”<sup>166</sup> The Cultural Intifada not only challenged notions of how Palestinians should confront Israel, but also common understandings of the labels used in these confrontations.

The Cultural Intifada inherently sought to challenge fundamental principles seen from both the dominant Israeli and Palestinian narratives. The Freedom Theatre attempted, foremostly, to highlight issues and inequalities present in Palestinian society, as a starting point for Palestinian resistance to Israel. In parallel, the Theatre used the Cultural Intifada to challenge what resistance and “intifada” meant, to Israelis and Palestinians alike. What continues to be apparent from the time of *Arna’s Children* is the introspective nature of the Freedom Theatre’s narrative. Rather than projecting resistance outwardly towards Israel – using demonstrations, for instance – the Cultural Intifada creates cultural resistance projects intended to be consumed by Palestinians, to challenge their own perspectives. Such an approach, divorced from the typical Israel-orientated focus of (dominant) Palestinian narratives, put the Freedom Theatre in conflict with these narratives as it attempted to present an alternative viewpoint. This challenge then invoked a strong reaction from proponents of the dominant Palestinian narrative, effectively as a punitive measure against the Theatre’s narrative divergence.

### The Theatre after Mer Khamis, and Ben Rivers

According to Johanna Wallin, “in the aftermath of [Mer Khamis’] murder, [the Freedom Theatre] initially dealt with issues of survival and later of spirited revival, and whilst it would have been impossible to resume the work of Juliano,

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<sup>166</sup> Varghese, *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank*, p.25.

the Freedom Theatre would continue to build on his legacy as well as that of his mother's."<sup>167</sup> The general impression was one of resolve to continue the Theatre's cultural resistance, whatever that would look like – whether that meant raising awareness internationally or focussing on bringing the Theatre's ideas to the Palestinian people.<sup>168</sup> Continuing Mer Khamis' legacy would be a matter of interpretation. Jacob Gough, an international member of the Freedom Theatre since 2008, described Mer Khamis as the "central pillar of the organisation at that time, with a large amount of administrative and fundraising support from his wife Jenny."<sup>169</sup> Mer Khamis personally handled many of the relationships with donors and partner organisations, and these needed to be maintained.<sup>170</sup> The Theatre had to build a management and decision-making structure for the different departments and the Theatre overall.<sup>171</sup> Leadership was effectively decentralised. Members of the Theatre became fearful for their lives, as threats were made; investigations launched into the murder by both the PA and Israelis led to members of the Theatre being detained and arrested.<sup>172</sup> Fundamentally, the Freedom Theatre needed to prove it was still going.<sup>173</sup>

Zubeidi, later in 2011, was informed that Israel had revoked his amnesty pardon and was arrested in 2012 by the PA, only released five months later, after going on hunger strike and with pressure from supporters internationally.<sup>174</sup> Zubeidi returned to prison in 2013, on the advice of the PA,

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<sup>167</sup> Wallin, 'Juliano Mer Khamis', pp.57-58.

<sup>168</sup> Johanna Wallin, Jonatan Stanczak and Ola Johansson, 'A Conversation about Cultural Resistance: The Freedom Theatre School Alumni' in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: LeftWord, 2018), 136-144, pp.138-143.

<sup>169</sup> Gough, 'Working with and Reflecting on Juliano', p.376.

<sup>170</sup> Gough, 'Working with and Reflecting on Juliano', p.376 and 380.

<sup>171</sup> Gough, 'Working with and Reflecting on Juliano', p.376.

<sup>172</sup> Gough, 'Working with and Reflecting on Juliano', pp.377-380.

<sup>173</sup> Gough, 'Working with and Reflecting on Juliano', p.380.

<sup>174</sup> Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', pp.187-188; Zakaria Muhammed Zubeidi, "I will Die for my Freedom": Letter from Prison by Zakaria Zubeidi, Director of the Jenin Freedom Theatre', *Mondoweiss*, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2012, <<https://mondoweiss.net/2012/09/i-will-die-for-my-freedom->



after Israel made threats against his life; his amnesty was reinstated in 2017, although Israel arrested him again in 2019.<sup>175</sup> During this time, Zubeidi was appointed director of the Palestinian Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs by the PA.<sup>176</sup> Most recently, in 2021, he escaped prison alongside five other Palestinian prisoners, although was recaptured and transferred to a hospital to treat injuries inflicted by Israeli beatings.<sup>177</sup>

Ben Rivers was brought into the Freedom Theatre in 2011 to coordinate the Freedom Bus and "other community-based projects that utilize interactive theatre for advocacy, activism and alliance building."<sup>178</sup> The Bus initiative, developed from an earlier playback theatre programme, represented the Freedom Theatre's strongest effort to bring their work to all Palestinians, expanding their scope beyond the Jenin area.<sup>179</sup> Rivers is an Australian theatre practitioner who has, according to the Freedom Theatre website, worked with a "broad range of communities impacted by structural oppression, political violence and collective trauma."<sup>180</sup> He holds a Masters in Counselling Psychology, with a concentration in Drama Therapy, and a PhD in Peace Studies.<sup>181</sup> Rivers is also Co-Director of the Arab School of Playback Theatre,

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letter-from-prison-by-zakaria-zubeidi-director-of-the-jenin-freedom-theatre/> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2021].

<sup>175</sup> Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', p.188; Krauss, 'Theatre Kid Turned Militant Stars in Israeli Prison Break'.

<sup>176</sup> Wallin, 'Zakaria Zubeidi', p.188.

<sup>177</sup> Krauss, 'Theatre Kid Turned Militant Stars in Israeli Prison Break'; Albawaba, 'After Beatings: Palestinian Prisoner Zakaria Zubeidi Transferred to Hospital', *Albawaba News*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2021, <<https://www.albawaba.com/news/after-beatings-palestinian-prisoner-zakaria-zubeidi-transferred-hospital-1446469>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2021].

<sup>178</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'The Staff'; The Freedom Theatre, 'Playback Theatre', *The Freedom Theatre* (2020) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/news/playback-theatre/>> [Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

<sup>179</sup> Jen Curatola, 'Theatre and Civil Society in NGO-ized Palestine' in *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, ed. by Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin (New Delhi: LeftWord, 2018), 157-183, p.168; Rivers, 'Narrative Power' in *The Freedom Theatre*, p.307.

<sup>180</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'The Staff'.

<sup>181</sup> Johansson and Wallin, *The Freedom Theatre*, p.475.

Lebanon, and Executive Director of Dawar for Arts and Development, Egypt, being an accredited Playback Theatre Trainer through the Centre for Playback Theatre, New York.<sup>182</sup> Academically, Rivers has published extensively on Playback Theatre as a tool for cultural resistance and social change.<sup>183</sup> As opposed to Mer Khamis or Zubeidi, who have personal connections to Palestine and Jenin particularly, Rivers comes in as a foreign expert, although familiar with theatrical method, activism and the Middle East. Rivers very much appears to be motivated along these lines, explaining that “the inclusion of theatre, music and song connects us to the creative forces that sustain a people and their struggles.”<sup>184</sup>

### The Freedom Bus

Where *Arna's Children* and the Cultural Intifada demonstrate a Palestinian counternarrative interested in challenging Israel, but introspective-enough to reflect on the negative forces within Palestine that upset such a challenge, the Freedom Bus represents a noticeable divergence. The balance between the two narrative strands enshrined in the Cultural Intifada is tipped in favour of directly challenging Israel. Whilst the Bus' mission statement to promote cultural resistance by using “interactive theatre and cultural activism to bear witness, raise awareness and build alliances throughout occupied Palestine and beyond” shows a continued emphasis for the Theatre on cultural

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<sup>182</sup> Johansson and Wallin, *The Freedom Theatre*, pp.475-476.

<sup>183</sup> Aforementioned articles on the Freedom Bus; Ben Rivers and Jiwon Chung, ‘Playback Theatre and Social Change: Functions, Principles and Practices by Ben Rivers and Jiwon Chung’, *Playback Theatre Reflects* (2017) <<https://playbacktheatreflects.net/2017/05/21/playback-theatre-and-social-change-functions-principles-and-practices-by-ben-rivers-and-jiwon-chung/>>.

<sup>184</sup> LeVine, ‘Angry Jews on the Freedom Bus’.

resistance (as opposed to violent, implicitly), the Bus' own emphasis is on, firstly, challenging Israel itself and, secondly, on providing those Palestinians it visits with the tools to use cultural resistance to challenge Israel themselves.<sup>185</sup> The Bus explicitly states that it “promotes cultural resistance . . . to give voice to life under occupation.”<sup>186</sup> The emphasis is placed on the Israeli occupation as the mantle to be overcome. Fundamentally, the Freedom Bus represents a significant shift in the Freedom Theatre narrative as it converges sharply with the dominant Palestinian narrative.

A 2012 Press Release gives an insight into the rationale behind the creation of the Freedom Bus and the divergence from previous iterations of the Freedom Theatre narrative. The statement lists several challenges the initiative faced in the year leading up to its launch, including the death of Mer Khamis and the imprisonment of Zubeidi, alongside continuing harassment by the Israeli army, and separately states that the project “comes amidst widespread social unrest in the West Bank.”<sup>187</sup> The death of Mer Khamis meant that the Freedom Theatre lost its main narrative figurehead; whilst his voice was rarely omitted from the output of the Theatre previously, there now existed a vacuum for a leading voice. The apparent result is that leadership of the Freedom Theatre and its peripherals decentralised. The Freedom Bus itself was created and led by Ben Rivers, who is mentioned in Freedom Bus blog posts, listed on the Freedom Theatre website and included in a Freedom Theatre YouTube video as the “initiator,” “project leader” and “bus driver” for the Freedom Bus

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<sup>185</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘General Press Release’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/09/19/34/>> [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>186</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘General Press Release’.

<sup>187</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘General Press Release’.

initiative.<sup>188</sup> The YouTube video appears to show Rivers actually in Israel-Palestine, and the blogpost 'Day #1' states that "after breakfast with a view at the guesthouse [Freedom Ride participants] moved on to our Theatre School facilities for some relaxed and fun ice-breakers and team building activities, led by Ben Rivers," demonstrating the extent of his involvement.<sup>189</sup> The Freedom Bus thus represents the growth in influence of outside voices within the Freedom Theatre narrative.

Significantly, the Freedom Bus sacrifices the challenges to Palestinian society seen in the Cultural Intifada for a much more explicit and focussed critique of the Israeli occupation. Perhaps again related to the loss of Mer Khamis' leading voice in the Theatre narrative, the Cultural Intifada is mentioned only once explicitly in the Freedom Bus' blogposts.<sup>190</sup> In the 2015 post, the Bus writes that, in connection with the Theatre's then-forthcoming anniversary, "over the past decade, we have devoted ourselves to what our co-founder, the late Juliano Mer Khamis, called the 'Cultural Intifada' – a movement that harnesses the force of creativity and artistic expression in the quest for freedom, justice and equality."<sup>191</sup> The description here simplifies and abstracts the original intent of the Cultural Intifada, defined by Mer Khamis himself in his messaging in *Arna's Children* and through the Freedom Theatre's earlier productions, instead taking freedom, justice and equality as universal notions – applied in the Freedom Bus' case to the Israeli occupation. The

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<sup>188</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'The Staff'; The Freedom Bus, 'Day #1'; The Freedom Bus, 'Interview with Ben Rivers'; thefreedomtheatre, *The Freedom Bus*.

<sup>189</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day #1' (2014).

<sup>190</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Join the 2016 Freedom Ride!'.  
<sup>191</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Join the 2016 Freedom Ride!'.

Cultural Intifada became less an ongoing event and more an idealistic notion left behind by Mer Khamis.<sup>192</sup>

Such a notion may have in fact been Mer Khamis' goal, however. In October 2011, four of the Theatre's students were interviewed for *Sampsonia Way*, an arts-based magazine.<sup>193</sup> The journalist writes that:

I told them that I wanted to do a profile on Juliano, one that would go deeper than a recitation of the publicly-known facts of his life. I said that I wanted to hear their stories about him. The response I got was an emphatic “no.” Batoul [one of the students] explained the reasoning behind the troupe's decision: “The problem is people keep asking for the same stories, and we're not going to immediately cry for them and say ‘Yeah, I've been beaten, Juliano was murdered, everything is so horrible’ and cry and be pitiable.” . . . The four actors asked that they be able to talk about the future, not the past.<sup>194</sup>

The students highlight two main concerns with Mer Khamis' legacy. Firstly, there was the misinterpretation of his work and aim, which was not to establish a children's theatre, but to present, enable and expand “quality Palestinian theatre” as a means of emphasising Palestinian culture.<sup>195</sup> Secondly, the graduates faced pressure to remain a part of the Freedom Theatre: “There is a fixation on Juliano's past, on what he completed before he died. . . . Juliano did establish an acting school in Jenin—an admirable achievement—but after talking to Moe'men and Eyad it became clear that the school was only one step

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<sup>192</sup> The Freedom Theatre, ‘Our Legacy’.

<sup>193</sup> Stransky, ‘The Stage is my Gun’.

<sup>194</sup> Stransky, ‘The Stage is my Gun’.

<sup>195</sup> Stransky, ‘The Stage is my Gun’.

towards Juliano's goal."<sup>196</sup> In this regard, a divergence away from pursuing the Cultural Intifada as a canonical event, but instead approaching it as one person's idea to build upon, may be more constructive than becoming entrenched solely in the past. Mee, who the *Sampsonia* article identifies as a friend of Mer Khamis, also reflected that "to his students, audiences, and admirers Mer Khamis leaves the legacy of the Jasmine Revolution and the freedom to perform."<sup>197</sup> The emphasis is again on the expansion of and access to Palestinian theatre, not on the Freedom Theatre itself.

The article also quotes the Freedom Theatre's students, speaking at Mer Khamis' funeral, as saying "your children are going to stay, following your path on the way to the freedom battle, and we will go on with your revolution's promise: the Jasmine Revolution."<sup>198</sup> The interchange of the term "Cultural Intifada" for "Jasmine Revolution" is significant, as it further reduces the Cultural Intifada to a smaller facet of the MENA-wide Arab Spring – a discourse even broader than the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict – ignited by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, originating on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010.<sup>199</sup> The Jasmine Revolution itself was specific to the Tunisian context, but the wider Arab Spring held universal values and notions, and a sense of unity that transcended national borders.<sup>200</sup> The Arab Springs are mentioned by the Freedom Bus itself as early as February 2012, writing at one point that "for The Freedom Theatre, this was a unique opportunity to participate directly in the greater dialogue surrounding

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<sup>196</sup> Stransky, 'The Stage is my Gun'.

<sup>197</sup> Stransky, 'The Stage is my Gun'.; Mee, 'Juliano Mer Khamis', p.16.

<sup>198</sup> Mee, 'Juliano Mer Khamis', p.16.

<sup>199</sup> Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin, 'Rethinking the "Arab Spring": The Root Cause of the Tunisia Jasmine Revolution and Egyptian January 25 Revolution', *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, 13 (2018), 69-80, p.69.

<sup>200</sup> Glen Rangwala, 'The Arab Spring is Not About Twitter', *Cambridge Alumni Magazine*, 64 (2011), 40-41, p.40.

civil resistance, popular struggle and democratic reform in the region.”<sup>201</sup> The Freedom Theatre students’ equation of the Cultural Intifada to the Arab Spring, then, situates it as a nationally-specific movement embodying pan-Arab values of greater cultural and societal freedom – the cultural destruction Mer Khamis sought to undo was no longer only an issue of Israeli occupation, but of regional political norms. Such an understanding may be expected, considering the Theatre’s belief that Mer Khamis died at the hands of a Palestinian, rather than Israeli. Overall, the fundamental change within the Freedom Theatre/Freedom Bus narrative, and the distinction created from previous iterations of the Freedom Theatre’s narrative, is the slight focal and tonal shift. Rather than representing an introspective Palestinian narrative, the Freedom Bus represented an extrospective Israeli counternarrative, also concerned and imbued with wider regional issues. Without the presence of Mer Khamis, the Freedom Theatre/Bus narrative became a communal effort, led by multiple voices.

Rather than seeing an immediate cut-off or ontological shift, the Freedom Bus’ relation to the dominant Palestinian narrative also changed over time. What started as a counternarrative changed focus and then increasingly converged with the dominant Palestinian perspective as it adopted more concepts and terms from the dominant paradigms. In 2012, the year of the first Freedom Ride, the Freedom Bus’ narrative was broadly focussed on the

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<sup>201</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Upcoming Performances’, @thefreedombus, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2012, (Facebook post), <<https://www.facebook.com/thefreedombus/posts/301805099868203>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, ‘The Freedom Bus in Cairo earlier this year’, @thefreedombus, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2012, <<https://www.facebook.com/thefreedombus/posts/405964492802733>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2020].

practicalities of the occupation. The Bus' blog post for its first day, on the 24<sup>th</sup> September, opens by saying:

Today the Freedom Bus visited the small village of Faquaa. Although the town's name means *spring water bubbles*, it has been a long time since the villagers had easy access to clean water. Since Israel erected the separation barrier, the inhabitants of Faquaa have been cut off from their land and can no longer use their traditional underground springs.<sup>202</sup>

The post goes on to give specifics about Israeli water access and allocation before going on to discuss the Freedom Bus' playback theatre performance, specifically inviting them to "share their real-life stories of water shortage."<sup>203</sup>

The Bus pays attention to a particular issue – water access – and seeks to explore its impact on a localised level. A second-day blog post focusses on day-to-day interactions with the Israeli army, for instance writing "the conductor asked the audience for story [sic] that linked to the street we were sitting in. A woman called Ranin came forward and told a story about an Israeli army incursion in Nablus" and sharing another man's story from 1982.<sup>204</sup> The Bus is again shown to be pursuing a particular issue, although one different from the previous day. Another day-two post focusses on non-violent resistance, Israeli arrests and military violence.<sup>205</sup> Day three focusses on the enforced separation between Gaza and the West Bank, and travel restrictions, as well as Gaza-

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<sup>202</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day One: Stand with Faquaa!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/09/24/day-1-stand-with-faquaa/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>203</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day One: Stand with Faquaa!'.

<sup>204</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day Two: Stand with Nablus!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/09/25/day-2-stand-with-nablus/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>205</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day Two: Stand with Nabi Saleh!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/09/25/day-2-stand-with-nabi-saleh/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].



specific issues.<sup>206</sup> Day four covered the Israeli wall and the Intifadas.<sup>207</sup> Day Six covered the Bedouins.<sup>208</sup> Day Eight highlights Israeli post-Oslo land fragmentation.<sup>209</sup> The first Freedom Ride's content covers a wide range of practical issues that Palestinians have to deal with in their day-to-day lives. The posts make no reference to the "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," and does not explicitly use either the Settler-Colonial or Apartheid paradigms. Rather than concentrating on how to talk about the Conflict, the Bus put its attention towards providing a platform upon which to highlight the problems facing varying Palestinian communities, with the Bus adapting its activism to match the bespoke situation in each community it visited.

The 2013 Freedom Ride followed the trend set by the first Ride, emphasising "unequal access to water resources, violence from settlers, and frequent – and sometimes violent – harassment from the Israeli army."<sup>210</sup> An exception is a "seminar day," in which Palestinian academics talked on "the nature of apartheid" and colonisation, although this is very much an outlier and ultimately not the Bus' own voice.<sup>211</sup> The final post for the 2013 Ride then adopts the labels from the dominant Palestinian paradigms, writing that "through Playback

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<sup>206</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day Three: Break the Siege! Stand with Gaza!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/09/26/day-3-break-the-siege-stand-with-gaza/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>207</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day Four: Stories from the First Intifada', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/09/27/storiesfromthefirstintifada/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, 'Day Four: Stand with Aida!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/09/27/day-four-stand-with-aida/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>208</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day Six: Stand with Khan Al-Ahmar!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/09/29/day-six-stand-with-khan-al-ahmar/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>209</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day Eight: Stand with At-Tuwani!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/10/08/day-eight-stand-with-at-tuwani/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>210</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'March Freedom Ride: Day 1, Jenin.', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2013) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2013/03/21/march-freedom-ride-day-1-jenin/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>211</sup> The Freedom Bus, "'To Exist is to Resist": Seminar Day in Jiflik', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2013) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/to-exist-is-to-resist-seminar-day-in-jiflik/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

Theatre, residents of the Jordan Valley and South Hebron Hills shared personal accounts about the realities of life and resistance under settler colonialism, military occupation and state-sanctioned apartheid,” setting the scene for the following year.<sup>212</sup>

In 2014, the Freedom Bus’ narrative undergoes a sharp paradigmatic shift. The first two posts continue to predominantly follow the same style as was seen in 2012 and 2013.<sup>213</sup> However, the third-day post demonstrates a clear, intentional adoption of the Settler-Colonial paradigm:

We see Al-Haddeye in the distance with a settlement lurking in the background. Someone in the group suggests to replace the term “settlement” by “colony” because the difference is that the former is by nature no crime whereas the latter implies usage of force. So this colony we are looking at is a[s] ugly and alien looking as all the others built on stolen land, taken off the real natives by force and murder.<sup>214</sup>

The Freedom Bus undertakes a visible and explicit transformation in its use of mainstream Palestinian paradigms, employing language unambiguously specific to a colonial perspective. “Settlement” is the label used by the dominant Israeli narrative; the crux of the Israelis’ argument for their settlements throughout the Conflict’s history is that the land they are occupying was empty before they arrived. The argument was and continues to be that these settlements were legal and justified. The land fragmentation of the Oslo Accords

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<sup>212</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘2013 March Freedom Ride’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2013) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2013/03/30/2013-march-freedom-ride/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

<sup>213</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #1’, (2014); The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #2’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/19/day-2/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>214</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #3’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/20/day-3/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

was plotted by the pro-Israeli side along Israeli settlement lines, with all but one of the settlements falling within Area C, designated as under complete Israeli control because of a lack of Palestinian presence.<sup>215</sup> The UN, which has condemned Israeli settlements on multiple occasions, frames them within the context of war, presenting them as illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention with its “Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.”<sup>216</sup> The dominant understanding of “settler” within Israel-Palestine is ultimately channelled through the Conflict paradigm. The Settler-Colonial paradigm challenges the hegemonic understanding of Israeli settlements, emphasising their inherently colonial nature.<sup>217</sup> The Freedom Bus also then immediately refers to the Palestinians as “natives,” further solidifying the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic as one of coloniser-colonised, rather than one of two warring sides.<sup>218</sup>

The Freedom Bus then refers to Israeli colonies again on day six of the 2014 Freedom Ride, writing:

After lunch we take a walk up the mountain where the views are breathtaking – not only because of the landscape’s beauty, but also because it is clearly visible how At-Tuwani is surrounded by a growing number of illegal Israeli settlements. These illegal colonies are to be connected if the occupation regime gets its way – this means Palestinian communities will be further divided and what will be created is comparable to Bantustans in apartheid South Africa.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine*, pp.202-203.

<sup>216</sup> UNSC Res 2334 (23<sup>rd</sup> December 2016) UN Doc S/RES/2334 <<https://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/SRES2334-2016.pdf> > [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>217</sup> Rachel Busbridge, ‘Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial “Turn”: From Interpretation to Decolonization’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 35.1 (2018), 91-115, p.94.

<sup>218</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #3’ (2014).

<sup>219</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #6’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/23/day-6/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

What is also significant in this post is the further adoption of mainstream Palestinian paradigms with the comparison of Palestine to Apartheid South Africa. This demonstrates not only an adoption of another dominant paradigm, but one not obviously prompted by an external voice, as with the Settler-Colonial paradigm. Day eight sees the Bus write that “two Israeli soldiers are supposed to accompany the group of children by foot. Colonist settlers throw stones at them, verbally abuse them and hit them,” referring to “colonist settlers” again later in the post.<sup>220</sup> This instance marks the first in which the colonial paradigm is applied to the Israeli people, not just the country’s structures and institutions. Day nine sees another significant step, as the Bus refers to apartheid not through a Palestinian-South African comparison, but as the “reality of our world in which we live,” suggesting that the Apartheid paradigm has become a naturalised part of the Freedom Bus narrative.<sup>221</sup> On day ten, the Freedom Bus writes that “you wouldn’t be able to tell that yet another demolition serving the purpose of ethnic cleansing has taken place; for Palestinians this has become a daily hurdle to take,” referring as well to apartheid.<sup>222</sup> The introduction of the phrase “ethnic cleansing” falls within the Settler-Colonial paradigm. Pappé, in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, makes multiple explicit links between Israel and colonialism, stating, for instance, that:

The roots of collective dispossession are, of course, more ancient:  
foreign invaders have used the term (or its equivalents) and practised the

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<sup>220</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #8’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/25/day-8/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>221</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #9’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/25/day-9/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>222</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #10’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/26/day-10/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

concept regularly against indigenous populations, from Biblical times to the height of colonialism. . . . The fact that the expellers were newcomers to the country, and part of a colonisation project, relates the case of Palestine to the colonialist history of ethnic cleansing in North and South America, Africa and Australia, where white settlers routinely committed such crimes.<sup>223</sup>

It is also worth noting that throughout the 2014 Freedom Ride, the Bus continued to frequently refer to the Israeli “occupation” – for instance, commonly referring to the Israeli Defence Force as the “Israeli Occupation Forces” – demonstrating that the Conflict paradigm maintained its presence alongside the Settler-Colonial and Apartheid paradigms.<sup>224</sup> The Freedom Bus’ eleventh-day blogpost perhaps provides the greatest insight into this rapid change in narrative. The post talks about the Ride attending a Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) lecture – a means to, in the words of the Bus, counter the “system of occupation, apartheid and colonialism that Israel pursues.”<sup>225</sup> The link between the Freedom Bus and the BDS movement may prove significant in this regard – the BDS website states that the movement pursues ongoing justice as “Israel maintains a regime of settler colonialism, apartheid and occupation.”<sup>226</sup> The BDS page also states that it is inspired by the anti-Apartheid movement that had been present in South Africa.<sup>227</sup> The BDS movement was formed in 2005, but especially gained prominence after Israel’s

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<sup>223</sup> Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2006), pp.1-2 and p.8.

<sup>224</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Days #12 and #13’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/29/day-12-and-13/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>225</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #11’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/27/day-11/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>226</sup> BDS National Committee, ‘What is BDS?’, *BDS: Freedom, Justice, Equality* (No date) <<https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

<sup>227</sup> BDS National Committee, ‘What is BDS?’.

Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2009.<sup>228</sup> By 2014, Israeli political figures were expressing concern over the growing influence of BDS, and the movement saw wide-ranging support abroad and from Israelis within Israel.<sup>229</sup> It was in this same year that the Bus attended the BDS lecture. The 2014 Freedom Ride demonstrates a rapid transformation in the Freedom Bus narrative, as it transferred from its practical, localised, day-to-day perspective on the Israeli occupation to a frame deeply entrenched in the paradigms used by the dominant Palestinian narrative.

The narrative the Freedom Bus presents is also impacted by the many voices that contribute to it, however. The Bus' initial adoption of the Settler-Colonial paradigm in 2014 was prompted by the suggestion of one of the participants on the Freedom Ride. The 2015 Freedom Ride broadly maintained the narrative precedent set by the previous year, promoting that "through Playback Theatre, community members will share personal accounts about the realities of life and struggle under settler colonialism, military occupation and structural apartheid."<sup>230</sup> However, the references to the Settler-Colonial and Apartheid paradigms are fewer and further between, and much less pronounced, compared to the 2014 Ride. That being said, the 2015 Ride also features four Arabic-language blog posts, which are much less diplomatic in their utilisation of the dominant Palestinian narrative paradigms. The first Arabic-language post frames the Israeli occupation as historic ethnic

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<sup>228</sup> Sina Arnold, 'A Collision of Frames: The BDS Movement and its Opponents in the United States' in *Boycotts Past and Present: From the American Revolution to the Campaign to Boycott Israel*, ed. by David Feldman (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 219-241, p.220.

<sup>229</sup> Philip Marfleet, 'Palestine: Boycott, Localism, and Global Activism' in *Boycotts Past and Present: From the American Revolution to the Campaign to Boycott Israel*, ed. by David Feldman (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 261-286, pp.263-264.

<sup>230</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Join the 2015 Freedom Ride!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/06/16/join-the-2015-freedom-ride/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020].

cleansing.<sup>231</sup> The second Arabic-language post refers to Israeli colonialism and ethnic cleansing, as well as condemning silence from the international community.<sup>232</sup> The 2015 Ride represents the first clear time that the blog was written by multiple voices. Between 2012-2014, the blog appears to have been written by the same person throughout the Rides, although the writer appears to change each year. 2015, on the other hand, begins with potentially a single writer, but then shifts to each post having a different writer partway through the Ride.<sup>233</sup> Day six explicitly signs-off with “*written by Stan Verstraete, 2015 Freedom Ride coordinator,*” with days seven through nine then similarly follow suit.<sup>234</sup> The 2016 Freedom Ride blogposts then appear to have always intended to have multiple writers, with each post individually crediting its authors. Only three of the 2016 daily reports make reference to colonisation, apartheid or ethnic cleansing.<sup>235</sup> The nature of the Freedom Bus’ communicative medium,

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<sup>231</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘الاعوار الفلسطينية المحتلة’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/22/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%ba%d9%88%d8%a7%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%81%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b7%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%ad%d8%aa%d9%84%d8%a9/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

<sup>232</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘الانطلاق’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/24/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%b7%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%82/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

<sup>233</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘2015 Freedom Ride Day #1: Jenin’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/19/2015-freedom-ride-day-1-jenin/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, ‘2015 Freedom Ride Day #2: Nabi Saleh’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/21/2015-freedom-ride-day-2-nabi-saleh/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

<sup>234</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘2015 Freedom Ride Day #6: Jordan Valley’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/2015-freedom-ride-day-6-jordan-valley/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, ‘2015 Freedom Ride, Day #7: Jericho & Jerusalem Gate’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/2015-freedom-ride-day-7-jericho-jerusalem-gate/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, ‘2015 Freedom Ride Day #8: South Hebron Hills’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/28/2015-freedom-ride-day-8-south-hebron-hills/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, ‘2015 Freedom Ride, Day #9: South Hebron Hills’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/29/2015-freedom-ride-day-9-south-hebron-hills/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

<sup>235</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day 3 – Northern Jordan Valley’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2016) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2016/03/23/day-3-northern-jordan-valley/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, ‘Day 5 – Struggle and Solidarity: the Friday

with blogging's piecemeal release schedule and potential for multiple authors, meant that the Bus' narrative was difficult to keep consistent unless done so with coordination and intent. Without this coordination, and with each author free to share their thoughts, the Freedom Bus narrative was instead left at the whim of a collection of individual perspectives, with the commonality being a familiarity with the dominant Palestinian narrative. This notion is seen most clearly during the 2015 Freedom Ride, with its multiple English-language authors and Arabic-language author each subscribing to the dominant Palestinian narrative paradigms to varying degrees, ranging from some English-language posts not mentioning any paradigmatic terms whatsoever to the Arabic-language posts employing the paradigms explicitly and unforgivingly. The result is that, whilst there is an overall trend of the Freedom Bus narrative increasingly converging with the dominant Palestinian narrative, the level to which the Bus' narrative mimics this dominant narrative varies wildly between each communicative instance.

Overall, the Freedom Bus demonstrates a marked divergence from the norms established in the Freedom Theatre's narrative by *Arna's Children* and the Cultural Intifada. Perhaps the most understated, but most significant, change was the shift from an introspective Palestinian counternarrative to an extrospective Israeli counternarrative, much more in line with the dominant Palestinian narrative; a notion especially seen in the Bus' adoption of the Settler-Colonial and Apartheid paradigms. The Bus initiative represented a

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Demonstration in Nabi Saleh', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2016) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2016/03/26/day-5-struggle-and-solidarity-the-friday-demonstration-in-nabi-saleh/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020]; The Freedom Bus, 'Day 9 – Checkpoints and child arrests', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2016) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2016/03/30/day-9-checkpoints-and-child-arrests/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].



break from the typical modus operandi of the Freedom Theatre, using a new theatrical method, travelling to other Palestinian communities and intentionally hosting a platform for this work aimed at an international audience. The Freedom Bus also demonstrates, however, that its adoption of the dominant Palestinian paradigms was not an immediate instance, but a gradual and inconsistent process as the dominant Palestinian narrative's influence grew over time and the Freedom Bus adapted its own perspective.

### Conclusion

A transformation can be traced through the Freedom Theatre's history and accompanying narrative that highlights the challenges posed against a Palestinian narrator as they attempt to navigate the existing Israeli-Palestinian discourse. Juliano Mer Khamis and the Freedom Theatre originally presented a counternarrative to the dominant Palestinian perspective. *Arna's Children* represents the organic growth of the narrative, whereby Mer Khamis' personal experiences with his mother, Arna's, "Learning and Freedom" project, and the human impact of the Second Intifada and violence on the people of Jenin, informed the perspective that Mer Khamis then carried into the creation of the Freedom Theatre. The creation of the Freedom Theatre then saw the birth of the "Cultural Intifada," following an argument for creative resistance, rather than violent. This approach was coupled with a dual-argument that in order to challenge the Israeli occupation, Palestinians must also challenge the destruction of their culture – the "occupation of the mind" and its accompanying

assumptions.<sup>236</sup> However, the nature of the Cultural Intifada, with not only its challenge to Israel, but also its criticism of conservative Palestinian social norms and politics, meant that the Freedom Theatre received backlash for its work and its perceived betrayal of Palestine. This discourse led to real-world consequences as Juliano Mer Khamis was subsequently murdered, purportedly assassinated by a Palestinian extremist. Such an outcome demonstrates the power and hegemony of the dominant Palestinian narrative, both in terms of its dictation of narrative as well as how Palestinian narrators should narrate their shared experience.

The Freedom Bus, with its divergence in aim from *Arna's Children* and the Cultural Intifada – to now bear witness to the daily life of the Israeli occupation, rather than challenging Palestinian society – demonstrates how the Freedom Theatre ultimately responded to this punitive response. The change in the Theatre's narrative was an ontological one, from an introspective Palestinian counternarrative to an extrospective Israeli counternarrative. There was, however, another process going on simultaneously in the wake of Mer Khamis' death, as his legacy was also being interpreted as a foundation to be built-upon, rather than a tangible on-going movement; his work would have a lasting impact, but the Freedom Theatre could not replace him and would thus decide their own path for cultural resistance. This shift also led the Freedom Theatre/Bus narrative away from its position as something of a Palestinian counternarrative, towards a greater convergence with the dominant Palestinian narrative. Additionally, those telling the Freedom Bus' narrative gradually, but inconsistently, adopted mainstream Palestinian paradigms of the Israeli-

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<sup>236</sup> Cynthia P. Schneider, 'Building artists and leaders in Palestine: The Freedom Theatre 10 years on', *Brookings*, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2016, <<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/building-artists-and-leaders-in-palestine-the-freedom-theater-10-years-on/>> [Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

Palestinian Conflict – the Settler-Colonial and Apartheid paradigms. What becomes apparent is the influence and significance dominance has in a narrative discourse, especially as a self-perpetuating phenomenon that emphasises homogeneity above all else.

## **Narrating within the Contexts and Confines of the Occupation: The Influence of Palestinian Presence and Physicality**

Exploring narrative discourse, it is easy to become fixated on theoretical notions and the exchange of ideas. However, narrators, whether individuals or organisations, are not simply voices in a debate, but physical entities existing within a real-world context. Palestinian narrators not only argue against the Zionist regime in a theoretical or moral sense, but from a position wherein they are subject to the realities of the occupation on a daily basis. Just as they argue the Palestinian perspective within a theoretical framework dominated by the Israeli Conflict paradigm, these narrators present their case from a position within the material confines created by Israel. The effect of this physicality is twofold, both as a tangible limitation, and a means of interpreting and articulating Israeli-Palestinian discourse. In challenging both the dominant Israeli argument of a lack of any meaningful Palestinian presence in the land of Palestine, and the very real efforts by the Zionist programme to cleanse this same land to make way for Israeli settlement, the physicality of the Palestinian becomes an important argument in a Palestinian narrative.<sup>237</sup> The Palestinian people are not simply conceptual and their identity, especially as the Freedom Bus presents it, is directly tied to the land of Palestine. Similarly, whilst Palestinians are aware of the rationales behind Zionism, their experience of this oppressive system is inextricably linked to its physicality, as they face day-to-day confinement and violence. Particularly for the Freedom Bus' narrative, the result is a visual dichotomy, as the land of Palestine – a beautiful symbol of Palestinian identity – occupies the same physical space as the ugly face of the Israeli occupation, meaning the imagery it deploys is in conflict with itself. The

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<sup>237</sup> Pappé, 'Introduction', p.3.

lands of Israel-Palestine – their materiality, structures and nature – are ultimately themselves the sites of conflict, both as a vehicle for understanding identity and the context Palestinians live within, and in a literal sense, as narrators are required to navigate these spaces in their efforts. As the Freedom Bus explicitly seeks to “bear witness,” these physical, visual surroundings play a key part in informing their narrative, acting as communicable representations of the Zionist programme and Israeli occupation.<sup>238</sup> That is not to say the Freedom Bus was entirely at the whim of its experiences during its Rides, however, as it was also able to draw on its own experience and, to some extent, decide what parts of the Israeli occupation it would bear witness to during its travels. The physicality of the Freedom Bus means that the narrative it creates is unavoidably informed by its real-world surroundings, its choices in planning its Rides and its experiences operating within the Israeli occupation. Being granted the “permission to narrate” does not only mean being provided or creating a space within the discourse to have Palestinian voices heard, but also the physical means and capability to create and communicate these ideas. Such a notion is crucial in truly understanding how narratives are formed, but often overlooked when considering Israeli-Palestinian narrative discourse.

### Beauty and the Israeli Beast: Palestinian Purity and the Ugly Occupation

The Freedom Bus, as a Palestinian narrator, sought overall to challenge the Israeli occupation of Palestine and emphasise the right to Palestinian freedom and self-determination. More specifically, like Juliano Mer Khamis and the Freedom Theatre, it emphasised Palestinian cultural resistance and the

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<sup>238</sup> Kusha Sefat, ‘Things and Terms: Relations between Materiality, Language, and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran’, *International Political Sociology*, 14 (2020), 175-195, p.176.

freeing of the Palestinian mind in the face of Israel's destruction of Palestinian culture. Fundamentally, much of the Bus' narrative concerned Palestinian introspection, self-expression and visibility. As such, the actions of the Freedom Bus and the contents of its output reflected this narrative. As a core part of its narrative, the Bus created an image of an archetypal, idealised Palestinian as a national character who holds traits that emphasise Palestinians' undeniable presence on their land. Additionally, through imagery, Palestinians are often described in relation to the land they occupy, especially in its natural state. In contrast to this, the Bus crafted its own portrayal of "the Israeli" as a generalised antithetical figure, abstracted from individualised identity and featured almost exclusively as a threat to the Freedom Bus and the Palestinians. Such a juxtaposition also feeds into their imagery, as they – both textually and photographically – present the Israeli occupation as an ugly presence, alien to natural Palestinian beauty. The perspective provided by the Freedom Bus inextricably ties the Palestinian people to the land of Palestine, and thereby equates Israeli oppression of Palestinians and encroachment on Palestinian land as one and the same – an offensive, violent act. Overall, the Freedom Bus narrative presents itself through an emphasis on Palestinian presence by witnessing the (natural) existences of Palestinians and the (unnatural) Israeli threats to these existences.

Whilst the Freedom Bus calls for and highlights traits such as strength and unity as important for Palestinian identity and survival, the core of its characterisation of Palestinians lies in its emphasis on presence. Such a notion is common in Palestinian narratives, as there is a necessity to challenge the Israelis' insistence that the Palestinians do not exist. As Rashid Khalidi puts it, "over seventy years after the creation of Israel, the Palestinian people . . . were

no longer supposed to constitute any kind of national presence. In their place was meant to stand a Jewish state, uncontested by the indigenous society that it was meant to supplant.”<sup>239</sup> In this vein, a frequent Palestinian mantra is “to exist is to resist” – the idea that the mere act of continued presence in the face of Israeli erasure is resistance. The Freedom Bus itself uses the mantra, as the phrase forms the title of a blog post from the 27<sup>th</sup> March 2013 which argues that “perhaps the most fundamental form of popular resistance is simply to remain on the land . . . hence the famous slogan: ‘To Exist Is To Resist.’”<sup>240</sup> Whilst showing some commonality with dominant Palestinian ideas and narratives, the use of this phrase also highlights the underlying ideas behind the Freedom Bus’ presentation of what it means to be Palestinian. There is a certain simplicity in what such a phrase asks of a Palestinian, although the reality would be much more complex. The same blog post where the Bus features the mantra relates a seminar day in which Ride participants learn from two Palestinian academics, stating:

This kind of resistance is key to Palestinian life in Area C, where homes and infrastructure are constantly being demolished, and traditional ways of life are becoming increasingly difficult. [Professor] Mazin [Qumsiyeh] argued that in this way, every Palestinian living in Gaza or the West Bank is engaged in resistance every day.<sup>241</sup>

Resistance fundamentally becomes about being Palestinian, despite the constant and growing challenges. In this regard, Palestinian identity itself becomes the foundation of effective resistance; the presence of Palestinians not

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<sup>239</sup> Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine*, p.238.

<sup>240</sup> The Freedom Bus, “‘To Exist is to Resist’”.

<sup>241</sup> The Freedom Bus, “‘To Exist is to Resist’”.

only corporeally, but culturally – not only remaining on the physical land, but also maintaining a sense of self and unity in opposition to Israeli oppression and erasure. Along these lines, the Freedom Bus creates, through its narrative, a sense of what this Palestinian identity is, emphasising the attributes that lead to and must be saved by Palestinian presence and resistance.

“To exist is to resist” also relates closely to the Palestinian nationalistic concept of *sumud* (صمود), which is typically translated as “steadfastness.” Anney Lax outlines the concept by stating that:

The term *sumud* has morphed to span cultural resistance and the maintenance of traditions, to economic resilience via micro-enterprises and to “ideational resistance (maintaining a sense of hope, endurance, and normalcy)” . . . “everyday resistance” – the daily praxis where subordinate groups challenge and subvert the power of the oppressor.<sup>242</sup>

According to Samih K. Farsoun and Jean M. Landis, *sumud* has two main derivations. Firstly, emerging in the latter 1970s, there was “static *sumud*,” which Palestinian activist Ibrahim Dakkak defined as the “maintenance of Palestinians on their land” – again harkening to “to exist is to resist” – characterised by a resigned-yet-determined manner.<sup>243</sup> This was followed by the development of *sumud muqawim* (صمود المقاوم), or “resistance *sumud*,” which took a more active approach to build alternative institutions, and resist and undermine Israeli occupation, in contrast to the passive nature of standard

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<sup>242</sup> Anney Lax, “‘To be Creative is to Exist’: Rejecting Resilience, Enacting *Sumud* in the Cultural Resistance of ASHTAR Theatre’, *Ride: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 26.1 (2021), 153-170, p.165.

<sup>243</sup> Samih K. Farsoun and Jean M. Landis, ‘The Sociology of an Uprising: the Roots of the *Intifada*’ in *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, ed. by Jamal R. Nassar and Roger Heacock (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 15-36, p.28.



*sumud*.<sup>244</sup> The phrase is effectively an all-encompassing term to describe an underlying and continual state of resistance that ranges from large-scale resistance to small, individual acts. It informs and collectivises Palestinian resistance, even drawing-in those not involved in “active” resistance but continuing to live in Palestine. It provides a baseline of Palestinian identity and resistance to aspire to.

The Freedom Bus makes multiple explicit references to “steadfastness” as a definitive Palestinian characteristic. In the blog’s Arabic-language post “The Great Walk” (المسير الكبير), the Bus uses the word *sumud* specifically. Firstly, the Bus argues that the Palestinian National Authority (PNA)’s lack of response to the village’s need for teachers is an “example of the Authority’s failure to fulfil its duties towards the Jordan Valley people to support their presence and steadfastness [صمودهم] in the face of Israeli occupation.”<sup>245</sup> Secondly, the Bus praises a man named Makhoul Khalaf and his family, living in a complex in the mountains, as “this complex was demolished three times in one month, but [they] insist on their steadfastness [صمودهم] and stayed. They rebuilt it and have sworn not to surrender or abandon their land.”<sup>246</sup> Both of these instances highlight the Freedom Bus’ emphasis on the importance of remaining present on Palestinian land as opposition to Israel. Lastly, the post explicitly refers to *sumud* as a nationalistic characteristic in relating the story of a man named Abu Saqr, who the Freedom Bus described as “an example of the steadfast Palestinian [الفلسطيني الصامد], resisting in his land, remaining on it, familiar with the

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<sup>244</sup> Farsoun and Landis, ‘The Sociology of an Uprising’, p.28.

<sup>245</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘المسير الكبير’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/03/24/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b3%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%83%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1/>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>246</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘المسير الكبير’.

history of the Palestinian issue and international law, and argues his right to all levels of visitors.”<sup>247</sup> The Bus’ specific wording of “the steadfast Palestinian” presents it as something of an archetype of Palestinian-ness within the national identity – not just a resistance concept, but a personal ideal.

The Freedom Bus’ description of Palestinian identity, especially with archetypes such as “the Steadfast Palestinian,” presents a romanticised view of what it means to be Palestinian. This becomes especially apparent as the Bus goes beyond relating *sumud* only as a characteristic of the Palestinian people to attribute it to inanimate objects. In a post from the 2016 Ride, the blog relates a moment where the Bus requires repairs, stating:

On the way to Yerza the Freedom Bus got two flat tires. There was only one spare and it was clearly Palestinian, as it maintained steadfastness through the rocky roads of the mountains until we were able to buy a second.<sup>248</sup>

Throughout the Freedom Bus narrative, notions of Palestinian identity become wrapped-up in the utility of inanimate objects as well as in aesthetic beauty. The Bus frequently opined about the beauty of the landscape of Palestine; however, these descriptions moved beyond this, also infusing notions of Palestinian nationalistic identity into the land itself and its material features (at least those not associated with Israel). On day seven of the 2014 Ride, the Bus blog relates a guided walk, stating:

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<sup>247</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘المسير الكبير’.

<sup>248</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day 4 – A Village that Never Sleeps & Always Resists’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2016) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2016/03/26/day-4-a-village-that-never-sleeps-always-resists/>> [Accessed 29<sup>th</sup> April 2021].

The walk continues through the typical stunning Palestinian landscape that tell so many tales of beauty and suffering without speaking a word. Sometimes we get brief explanations, other times we all reflect looking out at sandy, stony hills interrupted by pastures of the lushest of green you want to dive right in!<sup>249</sup>

The description of and imagery applied to the Palestinian landscape not only demonstrates the emotion that the Bus' narrative ascribes to the Palestinian experiences, but also gives a sense of the passion of the activists themselves. The passion driving the Bus' narrative demonstrates how this emotional aspect takes precedent in leading its imagery, rather than standard aesthetic beauty. In the same 2014 blog post, the Bus gives a description of a Bedouin cave:

After arriving in Mofaqarra we all get to cool off sitting down on comfortable mattresses in a Bedouin home – a cave. Makeshift shelves are fixed to the ceiling, storage is improvised by means of bags hanging off a wall in the most decorative fashion... There are some very beautiful vintage clocks, vases and other bric-a-brac – this cave exudes the feeling of roots, steadfastness.<sup>250</sup>

From the Bus' textual description, the reader is given a sense of a minimalistic, but beautifully-adorned space that embodies Palestinian identity and culture. However, photographs accompanying the day on the Bus' Facebook page show the Bedouin cave, with one showing the sundries described in the blog post.

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<sup>249</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day #7', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/day-7/>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2021].

<sup>250</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day #7' (2014).



(Figure 1: Decorated Bedouin cave)<sup>251</sup>

A dissonance becomes apparent between the romanticised description given through the Freedom Bus' narrative and the more-simplistic appearance seen in the photography. The sense of Palestinian identity tied-up in the Freedom Bus' narrative enhances the beauty of the imagery it includes. The beauty of the cave's aesthetics stems from the sense of steadfastness it provides; the presence of the Bedouins and their collected belongings demonstrate their existence and continued presence on this land. It is less in the presentation of these objects and more in their presence, and, by extension, the sense of longevity they provide. The concepts of Palestinian identity created and perpetuated through the Freedom Bus narrative transcend how the Bus sees Palestinian people into how it sees the land of Palestine itself and the

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<sup>251</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day #7 – The Beauty and the Pain of Palestine', @thefreedombus, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2014 (Facebook page), <<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=thefreedombus&set=a.631469676901742>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2021].

Palestinian-owned inanimate objects that occupy that land. The beauty of the Palestinian people and land is found in the underlying symbols of resistance apparent through the Freedom Bus and wider Palestinian narrative.

In stark contrast to the romanticised description of Palestinian Palestine, the Freedom Bus presents the Israeli occupation as an eyesore – not just an action-based violation of Palestinian rights, but a visible blight on the land itself. In the same post from the seventh day of the 2014 Ride, the Bus sums up this notion in a description of the landscape surrounding their walk: “we see Yatta in the distance, the landscape is so beautiful yet broken by illegal settlements and outposts. There it is: the ugly face of the occupation, land theft, water theft, human rights violations...”<sup>252</sup> In the same way that Palestine’s natural beauty is inextricably linked to the Palestinian national consciousness, the Bus collates the tangible structures of the Israeli occupation with the abstract processes of Palestinian erasure. The Bus’ Facebook page features photographs from that day, which demonstrate how this notion of beautiful Palestinian purity and ugly Israeli incursion also informed not only the images the Bus collected, but how they were interpreted. One image shows the scene accompanying the blog’s description of Yatta.

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<sup>252</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #7’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014).



(Figure 2: Landscape of Yatta)<sup>253</sup>

The settlements and outposts the blog describes can be seen in the photograph, and the road visible in the lower third is an Israeli one, constructed for the illegal settlers.<sup>254</sup> However, the image itself is inoffensive; without the context provided by the blog, it is not apparent that the structures are Israeli or that they are built on Palestinian land; the violence of the occupation is not visible. As such, the meaning behind the image is created by the Freedom Bus – they ascribed the context of the photograph, and the accompanying emotion and outrage. The photograph itself is not designed to insight anger. The image is framed “beautifully,” following photographic techniques that are approved of as conventionally beautiful. The subject of the photograph is also typically seen

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<sup>253</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #7 – The Beauty and the Pain of Palestine’, @thefreedombus, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2014 (Facebook page), <<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=thefreedombus&set=a.631469676901742>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2021].

<sup>254</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #7’ (2014).

as beautiful – a warm, fertile landscape with clear skies. Within this subject, there is a visual dissonance. The photo's purpose is to display the Israeli structures, but the intentional, artistic framing and the visually-pleasing contents feature equally or even more prominently. Fundamentally, a contradiction also presents itself in so far as the Freedom Bus narrative is concerned, as it is impossible to capture the Israeli occupation without also capturing the land of Palestine. The land featured in the photograph is part of the same "beautiful Palestine" that represents Palestinian identity. In this sense, the Bus perhaps does not take issue with these buildings as physical entities, but much more so with what they represent; the lack of Palestinian agency in deciding which building is constructed where and what their purposes are, or that these buildings are used to annex Palestinian land.

In the same way, "the Israeli," as an actor in the Freedom Bus' narrative, is abstracted. In the image of Yatta, "the Israeli" is not represented by people, but by these same buildings that the Bus ascribes negative attributes. In this regard, the Israelis are a faceless enemy, with the occupation not present in the narrative through the actions of people, but in the results of their efforts – the structures they install to displace the Palestinians. The same blog post from Day Seven, 2014, shares how "our next local guide talk[ed] about how the army forces families to leave their homes, claiming the land as a military firing zone and in general doing their best to make live[sic.] unbearable for communities."<sup>255</sup> The Facebook photo album provides an accompanying image of the concrete block installed to demarcate this zone.

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<sup>255</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day #7' (2014).



(Figure 3: Israeli military firing zone)<sup>256</sup>

In this image, the figure of “the Israeli” is represented not by the soldiers who forced the Palestinians off their land, but by the signs on the concrete blocks; the Israeli remains a faceless presence and threat. Although this image may provide a clearer instance of the systems of the Israeli occupation than the image of the countryside, as the sign provides the viewer with some information, the context is again provided separately by the Freedom Bus’ blog, and the meaning behind the image and the negative connotations are ascribed by the Bus’ narrative. Within the image, the only information provided is the text – “DANGER, FIRING AREA, ENTRY FORBIDDEN” – and that it is given in three languages – Hebrew, Arabic and English – with Hebrew coming first, suggesting it is Israeli. The image shows the aftermath of the forced military

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<sup>256</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day #7 – The Beauty and the Pain of Palestine’, @thefreedombus, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2014 (Facebook page), <<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=thefreedombus&set=a.631469676901742>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2021].



evictions – although, there is an absence of any explicit Palestinian suffering and it can only imply the ongoing harassment such a designation of that land would mean. There are buildings visible in the distance, but it is unclear what they are (although they are assumedly Israeli, from contextual knowledge). The framing of the image presents the faceless Israeli mandate as an overbearing presence, with the rest of the photo empty or sparse. In the same way that “the Israeli” is abstracted from any human presence in these images, the threat of the Israeli occupation is also abstracted as there is no inclusion of explicit suffering or clear danger within the *mise-en-scène*. The Palestinians themselves are absent. Even the textual description provided in the blog, outlining the purpose of demarcating the land a military firing zone, does not detail the actions taken by the Israelis to achieve this goal, leaving the threat non-specific and to the imagination of the narrative’s recipient.

Such a presence and threat can be seen in less abstracted, more aggressive examples of materiality, however, such as with militarised constructs like barbed wire, fences or, more-recognisably, the separation wall. These photographs provide more-widely recognised images of violence and power that the Freedom Bus narrative’s audience would be familiar with regardless of their background. These images also emphasise the visual juxtaposition between the more-natural, architectural or simpler Palestinian structures, and the harsh, aggressive, utilitarian Israeli structures. Where the Palestinian structures fit visually with their surroundings, or appear naturalised, the Israeli structures appear alien or unnatural. A post from Day Nine of the 2016 Ride features an image of an Israeli military checkpoint in the city of Hebron.



(Figure 4: Israel military checkpoint in Hebron)<sup>257</sup>

This instance is one of the more overt examples, as the structure is a relatively large one; however, the juxtaposition with the historic architecture is clear. Such uses of heritage see the conceptualisation of “contact zones,” which represent spaces for dialogue, negotiation and conflict between competing narratives,

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<sup>257</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day 9 – Checkpoints and child arrests’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2016) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2016/03/30/day-9-checkpoints-and-child-arrests/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

especially in contexts that see asymmetrical power dynamics.<sup>258</sup> The purpose of such juxtapositions is then to emphasise the long-standing Palestinian presence over the newer, unwelcoming, aggressive Israeli claim to that presence; to emphasise the necessity of material power in maintaining the Israeli occupation and narrative.

Images of active tools of repression – rather than passive tools such as military zone demarcations – also give the viewer more of a sense of the active role of people and violence of the occupation. However, still images cannot capture these actions unless they are present within the frame, and so the meaning behind the image is again reliant on the Freedom Bus' accompanying narrative. In the post, the Freedom Bus describes the situation in Hebron to accompany the image of the checkpoint:

The beauty of this ancient city, with its old buildings and winding streets, is totally overshadowed by the lethal military presence. Menacing soldiers with guns patrol the city and cage-like checkpoints with turnstiles and body scanners are always just around the corner. The city is shrouded in tension.<sup>259</sup>

With the framing of the image, the overshadowing military presence is clear, however the lethality of this presence and the tension is only implied. Although, the viewer may also recognise the unusuality of such a military presence in a civilian population centre, at least in the Western world. Such an image is much

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<sup>258</sup> Feras Hammami, 'Issues of Mutuality and Sharing in the Transnational Spaces of Heritage: Contesting Diaspora and Homeland Experiences in Palestine', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 22.6 (2016), 446-465, p.452.

<sup>259</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'Day 9 – Checkpoints and child arrests' (2016).

more typical within a colonial context, however, and one that would be especially recognised by the oppressed. As Frantz Fanon writes:

The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesperson of the settler and his rule of oppression. . . . The policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle-butts and napalm not to budge. It is obvious here that the agents of the government speak the language of pure force. The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native.<sup>260</sup>

In this regard, the purpose of the military presence is not intended to be recognised by those outside of the context, and this presence is indeed presented by the occupier as an upholding of the peace; the Israeli narrative – the narrative accepted by those in power in the West – would have these military structures be a necessary precaution against Palestinian violence. The true message of these structures, however, is clear to the occupied Palestinian, as Israel's purpose is to dissuade the oppressed from resisting their occupation. It is this inherent understanding that the photograph cannot capture on its own, as the occupier-occupied messaging is not inherently understood by those with an outsider's perspective. Whilst the photograph is the same for all, the

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<sup>260</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.29.

interpretation is dependent on perspective, and thus the Freedom Bus' textual context is necessary. Ultimately, even with a recognition of the military and violent applications of these material objects, the meaning behind these presences is still abstracted and open to interpretation, requiring the Freedom Bus narrative to provide this meaning. At the same time, it is this materiality that leads this narrative, as the Bus inherently seeks to respond to these material presences. As such, in the imagery the Freedom Bus uses to present its narrative, the "ugly face of the occupation" is largely comprised of the visible scars left by Israeli policies and incursions on Palestinian land, rather than of current acts of violence perpetrated by the Israelis, or of the Israeli people in the West Bank themselves. At the same time, however, with the Israeli occupation being a gradual process of displacement, rather than a rapid, highly-visible removal, such images perhaps best-represent what "the Israeli" is to the Palestinians living in the West Bank.

That being said, there are images and representations of Israel that do capture in-progress acts of violence and the Israeli people that perpetrate these. These images, however, are only derived from the direct experiences of the Freedom Bus during its Rides. In travelling within the confines of the Israeli occupation, and engaging in activism and supporting the communities Zionism seeks to erase, the Bus and the Palestinians it visits are confronted by Israeli soldiers and, to a lesser extent, settlers. The nature of these interactions inform the Freedom Bus' narrative presentation of "the Israeli" as, even when interacting with these Israeli people, the Bus' focus is rather on the present violence, with the Israeli as a soldier, rather than an individual. Such interactions often take place in its stops in Nabi Saleh, for instance, where there are anticipated weekly demonstrations. During the Freedom Bus' involvement

with the Nabi Saleh demonstration from Day Five, 2016, the Bus photographed an Israeli soldier.



(Figure 5: Israeli soldier firing teargas)<sup>261</sup>

The photograph shows an Israeli soldier firing teargas under the direction of another soldier. With this image, the Freedom Bus is giving a human face to

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<sup>261</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day 5 – Struggle and Solidarity: the Friday Demonstration in Nabi Saleh', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2016) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2016/03/26/day-5-struggle-and-solidarity-the-friday-demonstration-in-nabi-saleh/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

“the Israeli” of the occupation as the viewer sees a person, rather than only the material outputs of the occupation they see otherwise – the distant settlements, and signs and demarcations. The purpose of the image is not to capture the soldier himself, however, but his military equipment, or rather his overall role and appearance as a soldier. The blog post accompanies this image by writing:

Within minutes, the soldiers began to throw canisters onto the road that exploded with a loud noise. This startled the crowd and we split, running in different directions. Shortly after, several tear gas canisters were thrown. The sound bombs and tear gas are “crowd dispersal” tactics.

Tear gas overwhelms your senses: your throat is raw, you struggle to breathe and your eyes sting so much you can barely keep them open.<sup>262</sup>

The post focusses specifically on the soldiers’ deployment of teargas; the weapons of the occupation, rather than the Israeli employing these weapons. Whilst this image, unlike the previous examples, does feature an in-progress act of violence perpetrated visibly by an Israeli, the context the Bus provides is still concerned with the inanimate objects of the occupation; there is still a distance between the Palestinians and any Israeli human presence. It does not matter who the person is, just that they are carrying the tools of the occupier. In this vein, the soldier himself – despite being a sentient, individual person – is rather a continuation of the Freedom Bus narrative’s presentation of “the Israeli” through materiality, as the focus is on the physicality of these soldiers. The Israeli soldier is not a person, but rather a collection of military equipment and weapons, and “the soldier” as a non-individual character. Furthermore, the soldier and their weapons, as a material object, fit with the images of Israeli

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<sup>262</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day 5 – Struggle and Solidarity’ (2016).

structures and demarcations as examples of gradual displacement, as the purpose of their presence is not to defeat the Palestinians outright, but to frustrate them and wear them down, and keep them subdued as annexation continues. In all of these instances, the soldier is a tool of the occupation akin to the signs and structures put in place as part of a system of repression.

The Israeli soldiers' presence as a material object of the occupation – a collection of tools of repression – is more striking when the Freedom Bus juxtaposes these soldiers with the Palestinian people. Such instances highlight the rationale behind this perspective in the Bus' narrative as well as the purpose in presenting this contrast. From the Bus' perspective, "the Israeli" represents a physical, militaristic response to its mental, cultural resistance – although it does carry out physical demonstrations of this. This contrast is then presented in its narrative outputs to highlight this physical crackdown on mental resistance. In the same post from Day Five of the 2016 Ride, the blog features an image of a Palestinian woman standing in front of the Israeli military; from the text, it is apparent that this image was taken just after the soldiers arrived, before they began deploying teargas canisters.





(Figure 6: Palestinian protester in front of Israeli military)<sup>263</sup>

The Palestinian woman is a civilian, exhibiting a Palestinian flag and hand gestures symbolising peace, confronted with military personnel, weapons and an armoured military police vehicle. The purpose of the image is to emphasise the peacefulness of the Palestinian whilst also contrasting this with the violence

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<sup>263</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day 5 – Struggle and Solidarity: the Friday Demonstration in Nabi Saleh', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2016) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2016/03/26/day-5-struggle-and-solidarity-the-friday-demonstration-in-nabi-saleh/>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020].

of the Israeli – the asymmetry of force. The framing of the image, in and of itself, however, also provides an insight into the Israelis' posture in their confrontation of Palestinians. Unlike the previous image of the soldier firing teargas, this image shows the Israeli soldier behaving in a nonchalant manner, their guns lowered, helmet visor raised. There is no sense of immediate threat to the Palestinians. There is no violence in the image itself, only the symbols of violence – the military equipment; again, the material signifiers of the occupation. There is equally no sense that the soldiers expect a threat to themselves and that their presence in this sort of scenario is routine; they know what to expect and what their actions will be. Whilst the Freedom Theatre canon acknowledges that violent Palestinian resistance exists, especially in *Arna's Children*, such a presentation of peaceful Palestine versus violent Israel is much more in-keeping with the Freedom Theatre/Bus narrative of cultural resistance. The act of featuring these images on the Bus' blog perpetuates this form of resistance, as it feeds into the narrative of Palestinian national identity, and the dynamic between Palestine and Israel presented by the dominant Palestinian narrative and the narrative of the Freedom Theatre/Bus. Such photographs also reveal the intentionality behind the images the Freedom Bus captures for its narrative; it is not only in-progress acts of occupation or violence that the Bus captures in the moment, but also opportunities it seeks for images that feed into the cultural narrative it presents. The activists combined both the physicality of the Palestinian – the nationalistic and peaceful iconography – and the Israeli – the tools of violence and occupation – in order to create meaning. The posturing of the image with the Palestinian woman and the Israeli military police suggests that the composition was either a product of the woman's choice to make a statement, or a scenario created by the Bus for the

photograph itself. In either case, the Freedom Bus sought the juxtaposed framing of the peaceful Palestinian and the militarised Israeli in line with its narrative and core messaging.

### Physical Limitations from Within and Without

Alongside the influence of physicality in informing the Freedom Bus' perspective, the Bus' physical presence within Israel-Palestine impacts its narrative by imposing limitations on the scope of its activism and its ability to carry out that activism. The Bus took a somewhat microcosmic focus, with its perspective informed by its tour structure and the specific locations it visited, as well as its locality within the West Bank specifically. Whilst the Bus chose where to visit, such decisions would have been influenced to some extent by its existing narrative, and where it chose to visit would then, in turn, develop this narrative, as these experiences would inform the Bus' perspective. Operating in a heavily-controlled area, subject to Israeli land fragmentation and restrictions on movement, would also impact where the Bus could travel, thus also influencing what it could witness and, by extension, its narrative. These factors would ultimately editorialise the Freedom Bus' narrative, as these journeys and experiences decided the content of the Bus' output. These tangible limitations present a side of Palestinian narration not captured by a focus on historical or political discourse – one representative of the obstacles put in place by Israel physically and militarily, rather than just through its narrative hegemony.

Ultimately, and especially as the Freedom Bus' intention is to “bear witness,” the narrative the Bus presents is heavily informed by the physical or tangible signifiers that are presented to them through the course of their

activism. The significance of this materiality is heightened by the nature of the Freedom Bus Rides themselves. As the Bus takes a specific route that makes specific stops, and those riding with the Bus carry out preordained and locality-specific activities, these same people who go on to create and present the Bus' narrative online do so with a very particular thread of information. The Freedom Bus conducted itself through annual "Rides" around the West Bank across nine to thirteen days. During the Rides, the Bus would travel between Palestinian communities within the West Bank, carrying out various activities – holding workshops and putting on playback theatre performances, for example, but also working with the local community to improve their bespoke situation through construction and other means. Such projects could be incredibly localised and specific, such as when the Bus helped a village called Khirbit Samra build a school with mud bricks during its 2013 Ride.<sup>264</sup> More widely, however, the Freedom Bus would focus on greater issues, such as water access. In late 2012, for example, the Freedom Bus held a "Ride for Water Justice" in addition to its Freedom Ride for that year.<sup>265</sup>

Even within its more-general annual Rides, the Freedom Bus, especially earlier on, took a practical focus on the problems facing Palestinians; such an approach perhaps informed by the Bus' goal to "bear witness," as it would inherently see the tangible, material effects of the Israeli occupation. The Freedom Bus' first post from its first Ride in 2012, for instance, focusses entirely on the issue of water access facing the village of Faquaa.<sup>266</sup> Even the Bus'

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<sup>264</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'March Freedom Ride: Day 2 and 3, Ein Hiluwe and Khirbit Samra', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2013) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2013/03/21/march-freedom-ride-day-2-and-3-ein-hiluwe-and-khirbit-samra/>> [Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2021].

<sup>265</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Ride for Water Justice kicks off in Faquaa', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2012) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2012/11/03/ride-for-water-justice-kicks-off-in-faquaa/>> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> March 2021].

<sup>266</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day One: Stand with Faquaa!' (2012).

description of the issue is practically-focussed, relaying the factual aspects and the statistics:

Although the town's name means spring water bubbles, it has been a long time since the villagers had easy access to clean water. Since Israel erected the separation barrier, the inhabitants of Faquaa have been cut off from their land and can no longer use their traditional underground springs.

Although the village is allocated 300,000 litres of water per day by the Israeli Civil Administration, the only filling station is 6km away from the village, and the water, once divided evenly between the villagers, leaves only 75 litres a day per person. This is well below the 100 litre minimum put forward by the World Health Organization.

To access the water the villagers have to pay to hire tankers to collect the water from the filling station and ship it back to the village. This option remains unaffordable for many, who instead choose to collect rain water in tarps or large containers. This water is often difficult to sterilize, leading to an increase in illness.<sup>267</sup>

The blogpost is concerned, first and foremost, with informing the reader about the water access system implemented by Israel as part of its occupation and the effect this has on Palestinians. The post also features two of the stories the Bus collected during its playback theatre performance in Faquaa. The first concerned "an older woman" and "how her family's well water became polluted with sewage. The family tried everything to clean it, adding chlorine and other chemicals, but nothing worked. In the end they had to replace all the water in

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<sup>267</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Day One: Stand with Faquaa!' (2012).

the well. She added that lack of access to water was so difficult because it is used for everything; cooking, bathing the children, cleaning the house, washing clothes etc.”<sup>268</sup> The second was about a young man’s grandmother, who, fourteen year prior, had been attacked by Israeli settlers whilst collecting water, which the Bus included to highlight that “the problem of water access in Faquaa is not a new one, but is part of a long struggle that goes back generations.”<sup>269</sup> Both of these stories highlight the Freedom Bus’ emphasis on practical issues, as they demonstrate that the Bus employs the testimonies it collects in order to further these same arguments; these particular stories were included in the Bus’ output because they fit with their narrative. Further to this, the blogpost prefaces these stories by stating that the Bus invited the people of Faquaa to “share their real-life stories of water shortage and then transform[ed] them into short pieces of theatre,” demonstrating that it was not simply an editorial decision after-the-fact, but a message the Bus was aware of prior to the Ride and one that they sought to “bear witness” to specifically.<sup>270</sup> Such issues are not specific to the village of Faquaa alone, however. The Bus, for instance, in its 2012 Ride also stops in At-Tuwani on its eighth day, and recognises that the village has “struggled to gain access to water, while the surrounding settlements are supplied by Israeli water system.”<sup>271</sup> It is through these shared physical signifiers that the Freedom Bus begins to “bear witness” to issues facing the Palestinian people on a larger scale. The Freedom Bus was informed by its prior awareness of water as a material signifier of the Israeli occupation, and this impacted the scope and focus of its narrative.

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<sup>268</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day One: Stand with Faquaa!’ (2012).

<sup>269</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day One: Stand with Faquaa!’ (2012).

<sup>270</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day One: Stand with Faquaa!’ (2012).

<sup>271</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day Eight: Stand with At-Tuwani!’ (2012).

Water access is an issue especially particular to the West Bank, rather than an issue faced by Palestinians as a whole, as the Israelis employ policies to intentionally restrict Palestinian access and support the growth of Israeli settlements. As such, the Freedom Bus was additionally materially informed by its overall operation within the West Bank, as a specific Palestinian context. A key issue facing Palestinian national identity is that the Palestinian peoples were and are fragmented. According to Pappé, “first came the distancing of the refugees outside Palestine’s borders and the isolation of the Palestinian population in the 1948 territories. Today we also witness the political separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.”<sup>272</sup> This also does not include the Palestinian diaspora and those living within sovereign Israel. Despite commonality and unity in overall identity and narrative, the desires and needs of each group of Palestinians inevitably differs – Pappé argues that “it is very difficult [for activists] to adopt a clear ethical position that respects the interests of all the Palestinian groups concerned.”<sup>273</sup>

As such, with the Freedom Bus geographically confined to the West Bank, the issues it would “bear witness” to were inherently tied to the bespoke situation under this system of the Israeli occupation. Alongside the division of the West Bank into zones of control – with Palestinian Zones A and B, and Israeli Zone C – Israel imposed movement restrictions upon the Palestinians, solidifying the segregation of Palestinian population centres within the West Bank, and between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.<sup>274</sup> According to Alison P. Brown, “*Internal closure* is used to control movement . . . and to prevent entry to and

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<sup>272</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.178.

<sup>273</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.80.

<sup>274</sup> Alison P. Brown, ‘The Immobile Mass: Movement Restrictions in the West Bank’, *Social & Legal Studies*, 13.4 (2004), 501-521, p.504.

exit from villages, cities and refugee camps, by use of roadblocks and checkpoints,” as well as roads solely for the use of Israeli settlers.<sup>275</sup> As a result, Maryam S. Griffin states that the Freedom Bus “aimed to expose its international and Palestinian riders to the particularities of life in smaller West Bank towns, particularly those rural villages located in Area C.”<sup>276</sup> Such particularities would not be fully shared with other Palestinian groups (or indeed with all West Bank Palestinians, as they fall under differing Israeli “Area” designations). In this regard, the Freedom Bus narrative is informed by the material signifiers that define the Palestinian experience in the West Bank specifically, rather than signifiers that might represent the entirety of the Palestinian experience.

Further to this, it becomes apparent that these signifiers are also decided externally to some extent, as the Israeli occupation of the West Bank informs the parameters within which the Freedom Bus acts. The Israeli restriction of movement, as one of the most pertinent and invasive elements of the occupation, demands the attention of those subjected to it. As such, the material presence of this informs the Palestinian and Freedom Bus’ narratives; the Bus cannot help but “bear witness” to it. As Griffin argues:

Palestinian life under occupation has increasingly come to be defined by a crisis of contiguity, both territorial and social. As walls, fences, barriers, checkpoints and other impediments disrupt the flow of traffic in the Occupied Territories, desires for freedom of movement congeal in popular demands.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Brown, ‘The Immobile Mass’, p.507.

<sup>276</sup> Griffin, ‘Freedom Rides in Palestine’, p.80.

<sup>277</sup> Griffin, ‘Freedom Rides in Palestine’, p.76.



Because of this, and a Palestinian reliance on public transport as a result, the bus, as a vehicle, has become a sight of struggle and resistance.<sup>278</sup> In 2011, prior to the creation of the Freedom Bus, Palestinian activists boarded Jewish-only buses to protest segregation and the systematic support of illegal Israeli settlements.<sup>279</sup> The Freedom Bus programme was then created very much with the Israeli restrictions on movement in mind, and the Bus chose their vehicle consciously, as the goal of the Bus, according to one of its organisers, was to build international awareness and rebuild connections amongst West Bank Palestinians to resist the social impact of cantonisation.<sup>280</sup> Like West Bank Palestinians, the Bus is unable to travel through particular areas at different times and at the whim of the Israelis, and thus carries out its Rides within the confines of the Israeli occupation. As B'Tselem reports:

Two major checkpoints split the West Bank in three: The Za'atara checkpoint between Nablus and Ramallah, which is staffed some of the time, and the Container checkpoint east of Abu Dis, which is always staffed. The traffic arteries, together with other checkpoints and roadblocks, direct all Palestinian traffic moving between the north and south of the West Bank into the roads that are controlled by these two checkpoints. The military has also installed iron gates at the entrances to the vast majority of West Bank villages, allowing it to isolate them within minutes and with minimal personnel.<sup>281</sup>

The Israeli restriction on movement is characterised by its uncertainty, and so the Bus cannot guarantee it will be able to progress unmolested, at any stage.

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<sup>278</sup> Griffin, 'Freedom Rides in Palestine', pp.76-78.

<sup>279</sup> Griffin, 'Freedom Rides in Palestine', pp.78-79.

<sup>280</sup> Griffin, 'Freedom Rides in Palestine', p.81.

<sup>281</sup> B'Tselem, 'Restrictions on Movement'.

Ahead of its 2013 Ride, for instance, the Freedom Bus was confronted by Israeli restrictions on movement, as some of its activists were denied permits to enter the West Bank. In a press release, the Bus wrote that:

The Freedom Theatre was required to submit permit applications to the Palestinian Ministry of Civil Affairs. On March 11, after months of waiting, The Freedom Theatre finally received notice that these applications had been denied by the Israeli Civil Administration. Events such as this serve as yet another stark reminder about the humiliating system under which we live: That our own Palestinian Ministries must coordinate with, and obey Israel.<sup>282</sup>

These instances are also a reminder that the Bus, whilst acting as an activist and advocate, is itself a Palestinian entity and thus liable to Israeli targeting. More typically, the Bus was stopped and confronted by the Israeli army during its activities and journeys. These notions of the restriction of Palestinian access also go some way to explaining the largely-faceless characterisation of Israelis, as the occupation is designed to keep Palestinians away, and so the image of “the Israeli” is created by these blockades. The only time such distance is broken is when the Bus and the Palestinians it visits are confronted by Israeli soldiers. Overall, the Israeli occupation influences the Freedom Bus’ narrative through two aspects of its materiality. Firstly, it controls the physical movement of the Bus, deciding what the Bus and its members can and cannot see. Secondly, it presents an unignorable challenge to Palestinian life that cannot help but be an integral part of the Bus’ narrative, as it ultimately seeks to share

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<sup>282</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Israel denies Arab artists permits to join the March Freedom Ride’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2013)  
<<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2013/03/15/israel-denies-arab-artists-permits-to-join-the-march-freedom-ride/>> [Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021].

the plight of the Palestinian people; in this sense, the Freedom Bus' narrative is reactive to the Israeli occupation and thus led by it.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, notions of physicality permeated all aspects of the formation and presentation of the Freedom Bus' narrative. The Bus was fundamentally engaged in the act of "bearing witness" and so it derived meaning from its surroundings. The Zionist programme, not just an occupation of the mind, left material scars and open wounds on the land of Palestine. The physical contexts the Bus operated within acted as both a tool and a hinderance in the formation and telling of its narrative. Palestinian identity and the Freedom Bus' perception of this tied into the land itself, not just as a space to occupy, but as a part of what it means to be Palestinian. Palestinians were equated with the beauty of the land, and the land became beautiful because it was Palestinian – a symbol of continued existence, resistance and steadfastness. This notion of the physical beauty of Palestine carried into the Freedom Bus' narrative and imagery regardless of its subjective aesthetic quality. Any Palestinian presence and materiality on Palestinian land was natural and represented historical longevity. By contrast, because of this inextricable link between land and identity, the Israeli occupation and its physical features were alien and ugly. Where Palestinians and their materiality fit with their surroundings, Israeli presences, regardless of the extent of their visual imposition, contrasted sharply. The presence of Israeli settlements in the distance were as visually offensive as an immediate military presence. Israeli presences in the Freedom Bus' narrative were undivorceable from the inherent and explicit violence of the

Israeli occupation, leading the image of “the Israeli” to be fixated primarily on the material structures and tools that maintained the occupation. The Freedom Bus’ physicality, both concerned with and caught within the confines of this occupation, fed into the narrative it presented, and its conceptions of Palestinian and Israeli identity. It captured the experiences of the Palestinians physically around it – informed by the bespoke, localised issues it was confronted with – whilst also being Palestinian itself, subject to the same struggles. The material impact of the occupation was both witnessed and felt, and the Freedom Bus used its familiarity with the occupation to navigate that physical context and witness the issues it knew to be significant. The real-world context the Freedom Bus existed within simultaneously limited its scope and access physically, and allowed it to use its knowledge and experience to effectively employ that materiality to further its narrative. Even whilst Israeli-Palestinian discourse is focussed on arguments over the lands of Israel-Palestine themselves, the physical significance of these lands is overlooked, with the debate left abstracted. They exist not just as a resource to be coveted, but a lived experience, a contested space to be navigated and, ultimately, a home. Being “Palestinian” requires a physical presence, which acts both as a source of inspiration and a limitation to overcome. Narration, in this sense, is not only a theoretical concept, but a physical act, demanding of those who seek to be narrators for the Palestinian cause.

## **Narration as an Impetus for Palestinian Activism**

The idea that Palestinians need to narrate their own history is founded on the notion that they need to do so in order to combat the Israel narrative – it is narration with a purpose. As highlighted in the previous chapter, however, there is also a practical side to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and, thus, a need to take real action alongside this narration. The Freedom Bus, whilst certainly a Palestinian narrator, is fundamentally an activist group. The output of their narrative is not the central purpose of the Bus, but is rather a means of furthering their activist efforts to “bear witness, raise awareness and build alliances throughout occupied Palestine and beyond.”<sup>283</sup> It is pertinent to ask, then, how narration fits into these goals – who is the Freedom Bus’ narration and activism serving, primarily? Whilst the Bus’ practical action – the playback theatre performances and local projects – were targeted at supporting the local Palestinian communities it visited, the presentation of these efforts online was aimed at a separate, international audience. Alongside this, the Bus invited international attendees to partake in the programme. Effectively, the Freedom Bus had three audiences, reached through different mediums, coming from different contexts and having different requirements of its activism. By extension, narration, as a tool for furthering activism, held different significances and purposes for each audience. Equally, the Freedom Bus works within a wider trend and network of Palestinian activism, with its efforts serving a broader, overall purpose in dismantling the Israeli occupation. The scope of this broader activism carries a certain baggage that has particular expectations and makes particular demands of those working within it, requiring the Bus to

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<sup>283</sup> The Freedom Theatre, ‘Freedom Bus’, *The Freedom Theatre* (2021) <<https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/what-we-do/theatre/freedom-bus/>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021].

consider how its activism fits with and contributes to the wider movement, and what that activism should look like. Understanding the purposes and significances of narration/activism for each of the Freedom Bus' audiences, and how its efforts contributed to the broader movement, helps shed light on the relevancy of narration in the twenty-first century Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and for contemporary Palestinian activism. This is significant as, whilst narration held a clear meaning in terms of arguing the Palestinian case to the international community, the changing nature of the Conflict now gives narration a different purpose that needs to be explored.

### Activism, Audience and Narrative

The Freedom Bus, in its localised, practical action, sees itself first-and-foremost serving the Palestinian communities it visits; it is these communities for whom the Bus is bearing witness and raising awareness. A significant and central part of the Freedom Bus' story-telling activism is in its use of playback theatre to provide a platform for Palestinian individuals to share their testimonies. In the Freedom Bus' own words:

Palestinian actors and musicians invite true stories from communities across Palestine and subsequently transform each account into a piece of improvised theatre. This approach, known as Playback Theatre, has proved to be a powerful artistic vehicle for witness, solidarity and advocacy on a grassroots level.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'About'.

In academic articles, Ben Rivers has explicitly described playback theatre as an interactive process that emphasises histories, and fortifies people in their struggles against violence and inequality by helping “provoke critical consciousness and the will for action amongst audience members – be they international or other Palestinians.”<sup>285</sup> In another article, Rivers provides three motivations for audience members to share their stories:

- To share the psychological burden of traumatic events, with the belief that understanding, acknowledgement and accompaniment will lead to the reduction of psychological suffering.
- To provide an international audience with insight into the realities of life and struggle under occupation, in the hope that a more visceral understanding will motivate committed action in solidarity with the Palestinian cause.
- To remind fellow Palestinians about the oppressions and sacrifices that have been endured in the struggle for freedom, with the hope that this reminder will challenge complacency and stimulate active struggle.<sup>286</sup>

The first and third bullet points are explicitly concerned with the Palestinians who partake in the Bus’ activism. The purpose of its practical action becomes to create support networks, in a therapeutic sense, and to channel this solidarity and communal experience of oppression into active Palestinian resistance. The second bullet point, along these lines, serves to support the resistance generated by the third. The Freedom Bus’ activism, from these accounts, is

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<sup>285</sup> Rivers, ‘Cherry Theft under Apartheid’, p.89; Rivers, ‘Narrative Power’, p.169.

<sup>286</sup> Rivers, ‘Playback Theatre as a Response to the Impact of Political Violence in Occupied Palestine’, p.161.

presented as a means for supporting those involved in its theatrical process; its action is focussed on the grassroots of Palestinian resistance, helping Palestinian communities make sense of their collective experiences under the Israeli occupation.

Through sharing these experiences in a way accessible to the rest of the community and the wider world, the Freedom Bus is contributing these stories to a collective consciousness. Such a phenomenon has been recognised in wider historical contexts. Fanon, for instance, uses an example that:

Two men are beaten up at Salisbury, and at once the whole of a *bloc* goes into action, talks about those two men, and uses the beating-up incident to bring up the particular problem of Rhodesia, linking it, moreover, with the whole African question and with the whole question of colonised people. . . . [The colonised people] no longer limit themselves to regional horizons, for they have caught on to the fact that they live in an atmosphere of international stress.<sup>287</sup>

Individual stories are shared and compared, and drawn together – recognised as wider patterns of oppression, rather than isolated instances; a wider narrative begins to be constructed. In this regard, the Freedom Bus' use of playback theatre testimonies provides a springboard for discourse on the Israeli occupation as a whole – it bears witness, raises awareness and builds solidarity. The purpose, however, is not necessarily in producing this narrative, but emphasising and communicating to those being oppressed that they are not alone in these experiences. The Bus provides a means of storytelling for the subaltern, allowing for the production of “truth” through a performance of

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<sup>287</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp.59-60.



collective experience, which also then inherently stands in contrast to the Israeli narrative as a result.<sup>288</sup> To that end, the Freedom Bus provides volume for the Palestinians' voices, acting as an equaliser against Israeli homogeneity and dominance by firstly hearing the stories in a formal setting itself and secondly providing a platform wherein they could be heard more-widely, as per Rivers' second bullet-pointed motivation.<sup>289</sup> Sharing these testimonies internationally gives the sense that they can become part of a greater movement to educate and bring about change. The Freedom Bus and its use of playback theatre provides the Palestinian peoples a platform through which they can collect, organise and legitimate their experiences, as isolated, individual testimonies are formalised and given greater authority.<sup>290</sup> Ultimately, the Freedom Bus' methods are less concerned with creating a narrative to counter Israel, but rather with emphasising commonality and solidarity, and supporting the local Palestinian communities it visits. Whilst a narrative becomes necessary to demonstrate and contextualise a pattern of Israeli oppression, this narrative is fundamentally only formed to further the Freedom Bus' activism and support for the Palestinians of the West Bank. Whilst narration is still relevant, it is not the crux of the Palestinian cause.

The Freedom Bus' effort to share these Palestinian experiences online also serves the international audience for this platform, however. The online platforms are not simply repositories for the Palestinian playback testimonies and the Bus employs these testimonies in a particular, intentional way for the

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<sup>288</sup> Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.3.

<sup>289</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Talk: Interview with the Editors (1993-94)' in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 287-308, p.289.

<sup>290</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, 'Memory, Metaphor, and the Triumph of Narrative' in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19-28, p.20.

narrative it presents, as a means to build-upon and help illustrate the points it is otherwise making.<sup>291</sup> With creative control of its online platforms, the Bus was responsible for how these testimonies are shared, and it interpreted the testimonies within the context of its own activism and drew out the anecdotal symbolic significances from the literal stories. Rivers recognises himself that “care must be taken to ensure that oppressive dynamics are not reproduced within the social realm of the theatrical space itself. Cultural activism will remain limited for as long as the artistic means of production remain solely within the control of ‘expert’ practitioners.”<sup>292</sup> Whilst this was stated in relation to participation in the playback performances of individuals’ testimonies, such an issue persists in the presentation of these testimonies after-the-fact. The online dissemination of the playback theatre testimonies effectively becomes part of the theatrical performance, as the boundary is blurred between the physical local and virtual global audience.<sup>293</sup> Emily Bridger, writing on the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), argues that “a chain of abstraction is evident in which activists’ own narratives were incrementally rewritten according to the audience in question”.<sup>294</sup> For the Freedom Bus, the original testimony shared during a performance was immediately interpreted and retold by the actors with its physical audience in mind. After an individual’s story has been performed, the activists ask “did you see your story?” to confirm their satisfaction with the portrayal, as though to alleviate any concerns about shared authority.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Blenkinsop, ‘The Internet’, p.124.

<sup>292</sup> Rivers, ‘Cherry Theft under Apartheid’, p.89.

<sup>293</sup> Nobuyoshi Terashima, ‘The Definition of Hyperreality’ in *HyperReality: Paradigm for the Third Millennium*, ed. by John Tiffin and Nobuyoshi Terashima (London: Routledge, 2005), 4-24, p.4; Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.1.

<sup>294</sup> Emily Bridger, ‘Functions and Failures of Transnational Activism: Discourses of Children’s Resistance and Repression in Global Anti-Apartheid Networks’, *Journal of World History*, 26.4 (2016), 865-887, p.873.

<sup>295</sup> Rivers, ‘Narrative Power’, p.156.

However, in a theatre with a live audience and an authoritative acting group, it is not unreasonable to suggest that an individual is unlikely to interrupt or upset the proceedings by voicing dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the main point of concern for the individual would likely be the accuracy of the sequence of events, rather than of the nuances of the testimony.

The next link in the “chain of abstraction” is then in the Bus’ distribution of these performed testimonies online, as the activist group had to curate its experiences to share those which it felt to be best-representative of its efforts and message. The purpose of the Freedom Bus’ activism shifts, with narrative becoming more significant as the scope of its audience widens; the testimonies the Bus collects become a tool for enabling this. For instance, a post to the Freedom Bus blog on the 29<sup>th</sup> September 2012 relates the narratives of Bedouins affected by Israeli occupation:

The Bedouin are frequent victims of violence at the hands of settlers. We heard a story from an older man called Ahmed about the death of his brother, who was hit by a settler’s car while on the way to school and killed. There was an investigation into the death but no one was ever brought to justice. “I am afraid of sending my children to a faraway school now,” he said, “we need our own school here.” It is clear that the loss of Khan al-Ahmar’s school would affect the community deeply.

We heard stories of shepherds who have been arrested for grazing sheep too close to the settlements, and whose flocks have been confiscated. We heard from a young Bedouin man about his arrest, imprisonment, and seven-day interrogation at the hands of Israeli soldiers.

While settlers can build homes anywhere, these people are prevented from pursuing their traditional way of life, and their homes are constantly under threat. Nonetheless, an older Bedouin man described the Bedouin as “fierce and resilient people” who will resist as long as they can. As one young Bedouin man put it, “the singer may die, but the song will live.”<sup>296</sup>

The testimonies are included in an illustrative capacity, almost as witness-testimonial evidence of Israeli violations. Details on the individuals and their testimonies are minimal and the focusses are on the violent or oppressive acts carried out by the Israelis. In this regard, the Freedom Bus is not dissimilar to other activist groups who act with a particular message and focus, whether intentionally or unintentionally. For the AAM, the stories the anti-Apartheid activists collected and shared were transformed at each level to meet the criteria for those sharing them. As far as South African child activists were concerned, their narratives emphasised their individual stalwartness and commitment to overcoming Apartheid; however, the AAM, in sharing these narratives, generalised the stories and emphasised human rights issues and child victimisation.<sup>297</sup> Unlike with the AAM, the Bedouins here are not presented merely as victims, as they are shown to still be resistant. However, the way in which the Freedom Bus included this still primarily serves their own narrative, as the quotes appear to be included more because they offer appealing soundbites, rather than because it helps adhere to the individuals’ narratives. The individual Palestinians are listened to and repeated selectively through a goal-led activist perspective, wherein the message of the testimony is more important than the testimony itself. Although the Freedom Bus provides a

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<sup>296</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Day Six’ (2012).

<sup>297</sup> Bridger, ‘Functions and Failures of Transnational Activism’, p.867.

platform for Palestinians to share their testimonies, emphasising the support this provides, the way in which these are then transposed onto its online outputs incorporates them into the narrative it presents. At this stage, the Bus' activism begins emphasising its narrative more heavily, with the focus of its activism firmly rooted with its international audience in mind.

The Freedom Bus features a third, international audience for its activism that is granted much greater proximity to its practical action. Whilst the Bus has a base crew that runs the Rides and carries out the playback theatre performances, the Bus also invites international participants to partake. The Freedom Bus consistently advertised available places ahead of their yearly Rides, asking participants to make payments to help fund the Ride.<sup>298</sup> The Bus brought in these international riders with the intent to gather “internationals and Palestinians who come to learn from and engage in solidarity actions with community members.”<sup>299</sup> In this sense, these foreign participants are present as an audience for the Freedom Bus' activism; the Bus aims to change their hearts and minds, so that they can return to their normal lives with a newfound solidarity with the Palestinian cause, to help advocate in their own countries. The Freedom Bus, considered through this lens, becomes a tool for connection and communication, or networking. The bus, as a vehicle, has already been covered as a site of resistance and conflict in Israel-Palestine. There is a sense that the presence of vehicles like the Freedom Bus in the occupied territories, as tools for unity and mobilisation, equates to resistance. Along these lines,

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<sup>298</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Join us for a day', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/join-us-for-a-day/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> August 2021]; The Freedom Bus, 'The Wheels are Turning!...', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/02/15/the-wheels-are-turning/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> August 2021]; The Freedom Bus, 'Join the 2016 Freedom Ride!' (2015).

<sup>299</sup> The Freedom Theatre, 'Freedom Bus'.

there have been parallels drawn between these Palestinian acts of resistance and the bus rides of the US Civil Rights Movement of the mid-Twentieth Century, especially as a source of inspiration. Griffin relates that:

On 15 November 2011, fifty years after the iconic freedom Rides of the US civil rights movement began, a group of six Palestinian activists mounted their own anti-segregation protest using the same name. They set out to board segregated “Jewish-only” buses that connect Israeli settlements in the West Bank to occupied East Jerusalem.<sup>300</sup>

These riders were explicit in their Civil Rights analogies and their purpose was to highlight the racial inequality and segregation present in the illegal Israeli occupation, but muted in the Israeli narrative.<sup>301</sup> The Freedom Bus itself was explicitly “inspired by the Freedom Rides of 1961 in the USA, which saw civil rights activists travel through Southern states challenging segregation, and the Australian Freedom Rides of 1964 and ’65, which raised the issue of indigenous rights,” referring to these as a “radical inheritance.”<sup>302</sup> According to Derek Charles Catsam, the US Freedom Rides:

Quite literally took the Civil Rights Movement national, transforming it from a phenomenon of isolated events creating crises from place to place – here Little Rock, there Montgomery’s bus boycott, somewhere else protests against a lynching. Freedom Riders, whether known as

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<sup>300</sup> Griffin, ‘Freedom Rides in Palestine’, pp.78-79.

<sup>301</sup> Griffin, ‘Freedom Rides in Palestine’, p.79.

<sup>302</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘Press Releases and Resources’, *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (No date) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/press-releases-and-resources/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> August 2021].

such formally or not, went from one place to another, connecting communities, pulling the discrete pods of resistance together.<sup>303</sup>

The purpose of the US Freedom Rides was thus to create a sense of commonality and larger political upheaval; not to necessarily lead political action, but to help draw these actions under a single umbrella. The Freedom Bus serves a similar purpose, drawing together the common experiences of different Palestinian communities as a counter to the fragmentation of Palestinian land and peoples by the Israelis. The people riding the busses become an integral part of the vehicle's activism; it is the responsibility of the riders to create the connections between isolated events and communities, forming the wider movement.

To do this, the riders must also be educated as to the issues and wider phenomena facing the oppressed. By Griffin's measure, the Palestinian Freedom Bus follows a similar direction, "transport[ing] West Bank residents and international allies together to places in which they can get a clearer understanding of occupied life and begin to practice the many faces of freedom."<sup>304</sup> Through its recordings of its daily activities during its Rides, the Bus certainly gives this impression. In a broad sense, the Bus outlined that "at the heart of all Freedom Bus activities is the belief that community engagement, active solidarity and creative expression are vital in the journey towards a more just, peaceful and egalitarian world."<sup>305</sup> Its overarching ethos places importance on active engagement with those living under the Israeli occupation as a means of promoting support and fostering change. The Freedom Bus blog also often

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<sup>303</sup> Derek Charles Catsam, *Freedom's Main Line: The Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Rides* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), p.7.

<sup>304</sup> Griffin, 'Freedom Rides in Palestine', p.81.

<sup>305</sup> Freedom Theatre, 'Freedom Bus', *The Freedom Theatre* (2021).

featured a conclusive post at the end of the year's Ride, and these highlight the significance the Bus saw in educating and encouraging solidarity with its participants. In 2014, the Bus celebrated the inspiration that the Ride instilled to go forward and continue their advocacy:

Everyone leaves inspired and strengthened by the unique and life-changing experience that is the Freedom Ride. Palestine is in all our hearts! . . . This year's Freedom Ride may be over but the Freedom Family will live on! . . .

*The injustices that I have witnessed with my own eyes is at times too catastrophic to explain, but I know I will do my best. My hope is that I will bring this truth home with me and share it [with] everyone and anyone I come into contact with. I will carry this truth with me wherever I go.*<sup>306</sup>

In focussing on the change in the minds of the participants in its conclusion, the Bus places implicit significance on this as almost the purpose of its Ride. The 2016 Ride especially emphasised the *responsibility* it bestowed upon its participants to commit to Palestinian activism, share what they had witnessed and further solidarity:

Throughout the ride participants were armed with stories of love and resistance, each departing with a new responsibility to spread these truths abroad. The power carried by our experiences is immense . . . By bearing witness and standing in solidarity with those in struggle, we are now better equipped to change the hearts and minds of our friends, families and societies at home. Through articles, film screenings, photo

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<sup>306</sup> The Freedom Bus, '2014 March Freedom Ride concludes', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/30/2014-march-freedom-ride-concludes/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2021].



exhibitions, participation in Palestine solidarity committees, and organising in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement, we are now more committed than ever to furthering our solidarities with Palestinians.<sup>307</sup>

The Rides become a means of creating and recruiting new activists, to return to their own lives and advocate for the Palestinian cause. The role of the Freedom Bus is then to produce these activists, to invite people with the interest in participating and train them in Palestinian cultural resistance.

In some sense, the Rides effectively offer international participants a tourism opportunity that also allows them to engage in activism. The Freedom Bus, in advertising these Rides, employs language that emphasises the travel opportunity they provide – for instance, writing in 2014 that:

We can assure you that if you are part of this year's group, you are in for a special treat. Different activities, walks through breath-taking landscapes, work with local communities and children, cultural events in the evenings that will make you want to never leave this country again... It all adds up to a memorable and unique stay here in beautiful Palestine – and what better way to learn about the impacts of apartheid and occupation than to actively contribute to putting an end to them? The souvenir you will take with you will be the smiles you are bound to put on children's faces, the unforgettable stories and fates shared during our playback theatre performances and the great new friends you will make for life.

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<sup>307</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'The end and the beginning', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2016) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2016/04/12/the-end-and-the-beginning/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2021].

Ready for it? We can't wait to welcome you here in the refugee camp of Jenin to prepare for what we already know will be an epic journey of discovery. Welcome onboard the Freedom Bus!<sup>308</sup>

In advertising the Ride, the Bus emphasises the experience and memories it will provide its participants, with the added learning about the crimes of the Israeli occupation. The Bus sells the trip as though the international participants are potential customers. Anna de Jong points out that, despite the presentation of tourism as antithetical to activism – with tourism dependent on “quiet, solitary environments” and activism as “necessarily radical, overt and controversial” – travel provides activists with an opportunity to perform their version of activism as part of a negotiation of varying spaces.<sup>309</sup> The Freedom Bus deviates from this insofar as they determine themselves what activism is to be performed, rather than the international participants, who instead sign on to this itinerary.<sup>310</sup> However, the Rides certainly allow the Bus activists and participants to engage in their style of cultural activism outside the Freedom Theatre's usual confines and negotiate the highly-controlled spaces within the Israeli occupation. The international participants are almost brought on as “helping hands” and additional witnesses who can spread the information in different circles. De Jong also highlights that events “play a critical, but under-recognised, role longer term, beyond their time-frame” that allow instances like the Freedom Bus Rides to have wider-reaching effects beyond their “spatial and temporal

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<sup>308</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Another Community Visit', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2014) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/another-community-visit/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> August 2021].

<sup>309</sup> Anna de Jong, 'Rethinking Activism: Tourism, Mobilities and Emotion', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 18.6 (2016), 851-868, pp.865-866.

<sup>310</sup> The Freedom Bus, 'Another Community Visit'; The Freedom Bus, 'Join the Freedom Ride's Cultural Events!', *Freedom Bus: Ride for Justice* (2015) <<https://freedombuspalestine.wordpress.com/2015/02/24/28280/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> August 2021].

confines.”<sup>311</sup> Furthermore, the knowledge, interest and connections developed during a volunteer tourism experience significantly influence participants’ involvement in (global) social movements, demonstrating an effectiveness in the Freedom Bus’ focus on mobilising its participants.<sup>312</sup> Alongside its explicit audiences of local Palestinian communities and its international online readers, the Freedom Bus sees a third, implicit audience that effectively straddles the two, both working to support the local and online performances, and equally learning about the Israeli occupation and Palestinian activism from the Bus itself. Whilst supporting the practical activism of the Freedom Bus, these participants are equally being instilled with the narrative it produces; the Bus emphasises practical action with these participants, whilst simultaneously requiring its narrative to inform them as to why they are participating at all.

### Broader Trends in Palestinian Activism

The Freedom Bus is not only beholden to its own agency and form of activism, however, as it also operates within a wider movement of Palestinian resistance. With a broad variety of possible actions to promote Palestinian resistance and challenge the Israeli occupation, a generalised, theoretical sense of what Palestinian activism *should* attempt to accomplish emerges to coordinate action and direct these efforts effectively. The general perspective stresses the importance of highlighting the actions of the Israeli regime and, ultimately, ending the occupation, especially as it becomes apparent Israel has

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<sup>311</sup> De Jong, ‘Rethinking Activism’, p.866.

<sup>312</sup> Nancy Gard McGehee and Carla Almeida Santos, ‘Social Change, Discourse and Volunteer Tourism’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32.3 (2005), 760-779, p.774; Benjamin J. Lough, Margaret Sherrard Sherraden, Amanda Moore McBride and Xiaoling Xiang, ‘The Impact of International Service on the Development of Volunteers’ Intercultural Relations’, *Social Science Research*, 46 (2014), 48-58, pp.54-56.

no intention of so much as halting its Zionist programme.<sup>313</sup> For creative-based activism specifically, there is an attitude that it should be demonstrative of the impact of the Israeli occupation. Madalena Santos, in her work on narrative and the Freedom Theatre, argues that “Palestinian creative resistance works to disrupt Zionist narratives to illustrate the continuous occupation, apartheid, and settler colonial practices of the state.”<sup>314</sup> Creative works provide an insight into Israel-Palestine that makes clear the necessity in dismantling the Zionist narrative.<sup>315</sup> At the same time, Palestinian creative resistance, according to Tahrir Hamdi, “entails writing, drawing, *documenting* the Palestinian narrative, creatively shaping a Palestinian experience that would be meaningful to the storyteller and his or her audience, and which would enable a mass witnessing of that experience” in order to retain the idea of “Palestine” in the minds of its people.<sup>316</sup> In both senses, Palestinian creative activism is based around the notion of “bearing witness” – both as a way of highlighting Israeli injustices, and maintaining Palestinian identity and encouraging continued resistance. The emphasis is placed on narrative as a core facet of cultural activism, especially as a challenge to the Israeli narrative, rather than specific practical action. Chomsky and Pappé also emphasise the importance of help versus harm in carrying out activism on behalf of the Palestinians, however; it is not enough to act on behalf of Palestinians, but to do so in a way that is ethical and concrete.<sup>317</sup> Chomsky argues that there are two key points to consider: “one,

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<sup>313</sup> Maia Carter Hallward, *Struggling for a Just Peace: Israeli and Palestinian Activism in the Second Intifada* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), pp.224-226; Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.78.

<sup>314</sup> Santos, ‘Palestinian Narratives of Resistance’, p.108.

<sup>315</sup> Madalena Santos, ‘Beyond Negotiating Impossibilities: The Art of Palestinian Creative Resistance’, *Platform*, 12 (2011), 57-79, p.74.

<sup>316</sup> Tahrir Hamdi, ‘Bearing Witness in Palestinian Resistance Literature’, *Race & Class*, 52.3 (2011), 21-42, pp.40-41.

<sup>317</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.77 and 80.

what does it have to do with the policy of the state; how does it affect that? The other is, what about the audience here – at home [the US] – that you are trying to mobilise to become more active themselves, through civil disobedience and everything else?”<sup>318</sup> In this sense, Palestinian activism also demands impactful, practical action that exerts some pressure on the Israeli occupation, as well as mobilising an (international) audience. These issues are covered by the Freedom Bus’ incorporation of multiple audiences, as it supports local Palestinian communities in their resistance whilst also employing these efforts to mobilise international supporters. Generalised theoretical concepts of what Palestinian activism should accomplish are still, however, situated around the notions of narrative and discourse, with action – whatever that entails – focussed on furthering the Palestinian narrative.

Broader Palestinian activism is not only concerned with theoretical challenges to Israel, however, especially following twenty-first century trends that emphasise direct practical action. According to Griffin:

Following popular disillusionment with the dissatisfying results of the Oslo Accords and their implementation (or lack thereof), Palestinian politics has turned to the populist organising of grassroots collectives. In fact, this shift represents a return to the strategies of the first Palestinian intifada, which was guided by the priorities of Palestinians living under occupation or in exile, including economic independence and opportunity.<sup>319</sup>

Rather than being explicitly or exclusively concerned with challenging the Israeli narrative, more-recent trends have emphasised supporting Palestinians in the

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<sup>318</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.79.

<sup>319</sup> Griffin, ‘Freedom Rides in Palestine’, p.74.

practical challenges they face. Cultural activism – inherently concerned with narrative-based action – straddles the two, meaning groups such as the Freedom Bus must situate themselves within these broader, practically-minded networks of Palestinian activism. One of the most well-known, practically-based Palestinian resistance movements to emerge post-Oslo is the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS). The Freedom Bus describes itself as “endorsed by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee (BNC).”<sup>320</sup> BDS aims to use practical pressure to achieve three goals regarding Israel’s violations of international law:

1. Ending its occupation and colonisation of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall
2. Recognising the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.<sup>321</sup>

BDS employs three types of practical action to apply pressure to Israel:

- **BOYCOTTS** involve withdrawing support from Israel's apartheid regime, complicit Israeli sporting, cultural and academic institutions, and from all Israeli and international companies engaged in violations of Palestinian human rights.

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<sup>320</sup> The Freedom Bus, ‘About’.

<sup>321</sup> BDS National Committee, ‘What is BDS?’.

- **DIVESTMENT** campaigns urge banks, local councils, churches, pension funds and universities to withdraw investments from the State of Israel and all Israeli and international companies that sustain Israeli apartheid.
- **SANCTIONS** campaigns pressure governments to fulfil their legal obligations to end Israeli apartheid, and not aid or assist its maintenance, by banning business with illegal Israeli settlements, ending military trade and free-trade agreements, as well as suspending Israel's membership in international forums such as UN bodies and FIFA.<sup>322</sup>

Rather than explicitly arguing against the narrative created by Israel, BDS simply states that Israel is carrying out these particular actions and urges others to insist upon these broad, practical changes until Israeli stops, not arguing over Israel's rationale behind their actions, but emphasising that they are illegal regardless. As such, Maia Carter Hallward quotes one activist as explaining "BDS is sort of a tactic and not a movement in and of itself; it's a tactic in the larger Palestinian rights and antioccupation movement," elaborating herself that, whilst it has bodies to help coordinate action, BDS does not represent a set of people deliberately committed to a single, shared identity or common, collective programme with a common purpose.<sup>323</sup> It is something of an umbrella for unifying otherwise-disparate activist programmes. Such a focus – on targeted, economic action – appears far-removed from the cultural activities of the Freedom Bus, however.

Although sharing BDS' goals, the Freedom Bus does not pursue these through the practical actions BDS lays out, rather educating people in the issues facing

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<sup>322</sup> BDS National Committee, 'What is BDS?'

<sup>323</sup> Maia Carter Hallward, *Transnational Activism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.177.

Palestinians. In some sense, however, the Bus provides the context for and justifies BDS' activism. BDS' goals, whilst not concerned with countering Israeli narratives, are derived from the notions of the dominant Palestinian narrative, referring to the "colonisation" of Palestinian land and the right of return, for instance. Along these lines, BDS is tangentially involved in promoting the dominant Palestinian narrative. Hallward quotes BDS-era activists as "signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers. They are deeply embroiled . . . in what has been referred to as 'the politics of signification,'" adding that their primary function is to reframe Israeli-Palestinian discourse and challenge Israeli's moral authority.<sup>324</sup> BDS is not itself, however, a producer of these narratives; it carries out practical activism whilst relying on existing narratives to educate its supporters as to why they are taking this action and what its intended impact is. Cultural activist programmes such as the Freedom Bus thus play a supporting role for these broader trends, helping mobilise new activists, who can then direct their efforts into practical actions such as BDS. The discourse is reframed in these more-recent trends, as activists are not trying to convince Israel of their wrongs, but rather demonstrate those wrongs to potential supporters. Chomsky recognises this in a growing "circling the wagons mentality" within Israel – seen in the late stages of South African Apartheid as well – as international pressure grows against them.<sup>325</sup> Narrative remains an important tool, but it is applied differently; broader trends in Palestinian activism instead emphasise effective, practical action as the core. The Freedom Bus, within this wider context, straddles the two, carrying out practical action that

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<sup>324</sup> Hallward, *Transnational Activism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, pp.194-195.

<sup>325</sup> Chomsky and Pappé, *On Palestine*, p.99.



supports Palestinian communities whilst also concerned with creating and disseminating a Palestinian narrative to challenge the rationales of the Israeli occupation. As part of broader Palestinian activism and the notions of what this activism should accomplish, the Freedom Bus plays the role of a mobiliser, educating others as a way of promoting solidarity and creating new activists in support of Palestine – as it sets out to do so, it bears witness, raises awareness and builds alliances.

### Conclusion

Overall, the narrative the Freedom Bus creates and distributes does not exist as its own entity; it is inherently tied to the activism and practical action the Bus carries out, and it exists within wider trends of Palestinian activism and resistance. With the Bus' goals boiling down to witnessing and raising awareness of the Palestinian experience, the narrative and the online platform through which it is delivered are a part of its advocacy, aimed more towards the international audience. This advocacy is, itself, a part of and the next step on from its efforts to support local Palestinian communities, as it disseminates the individual Palestinian testimonies it collects to help highlight the patterns of oppression enacted by Israel – both as a means of emphasising a commonality and collective identity between Palestinians, and to garner international support for these resistance efforts. These notions suggest that the Freedom Bus' activism is primarily focussed on practical action and intended to serve the Palestinian communities it visits during its Rides. However, the Freedom Bus equally targets its action towards its international audiences – both online and with its participants – consciously employing its activism as a means of

educating potential supporters of the Palestinian cause and encouraging solidarity. Here, the Bus uses narrative to present a comprehensive and digestible introduction to the issues facing Palestine, both to educate and mobilise, but also to emphasise the necessity of their activism. Thus, narrative, whilst not the core of the Freedom Bus' activism, plays a crucial role as a means of communication that enhances the effectiveness of their efforts. The presence of this narrative also helps the Freedom Bus, a culturally-orientated programme, situate itself within and contribute to wider Palestinian activism, as contemporary activist trends rather emphasise practical action that directly pressures Israel. The Bus serves to contextualise the action that is taking place as a means to educate and mobilise international audiences, who can then channel their support into accessible tactics, such as BDS. Fundamentally, the Freedom Bus does not narrate for itself, or for the sake of presenting a Palestinian narrative, but rather employs its narrative as a means of furthering Palestinian activism. Such a notion is crucial to understanding trends in contemporary Israeli-Palestinian discourse. The purpose of Palestinian narration has moved away from arguing the rights of Palestine against Israel and its supporters, as in the time of 'Permission to Narrate,' towards supporting the practical action activists take towards dismantling the Israeli regime themselves.

## **Conclusion**

In resisting destruction and erasure, it has been long-acknowledged that Palestinians have needed to narrate their own perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and have that narrative heard. In theoretically-based discourse, the issue is often presented in abstract as an argument between two different sides – both arguments are presented and contrasted. However, in reporting events on the ground, it is much-better recognised that Palestinians are an oppressed group; it is known that Israel has enacted apartheid policies and continues to annex Palestinian land, frequently carries out violence against Palestinians, weakens Palestinian societal structures, and destroys the means for Palestinians to make themselves heard. There is an evident dissonance in these two perspectives and approaches. Contextualising the Palestinians' need to narrate within the restrictive reality on the ground opens up the issue to demonstrate that, even as Palestinians are presenting their own narrative, there are very real hurdles to overcome in order to do this, both within the theoretical discourse and in having to physically navigate the Israeli occupation.

The Freedom Theatre and Freedom Bus, as non-dominant Palestinian activists, demonstrate clearly the difficulties in narrating and advocating for Palestinians, both in challenging Israel and in presenting a perspective that, to some extent, deviates from the homogeneity of the dominant Palestinian narrative. The activists' narrative – one that stemmed ultimately from the personal experiences of the Mer Khamis, rather than the paradigms and arguments of the dominant discourse – had to carve out its own space between the restrictive domination of Israel's Conflict-led narrative; the expectations of Palestinian society, activism, and discourse; the limitations and influences of operating within a country controlled and fragmented by occupation; and the changing

requirements of Palestinian attention and action, as the Conflict progresses and new contexts emerge. What the Freedom Theatre especially demonstrated was the inevitability of, or perhaps the necessity in, that narrative adapting over time. For those narrating from within Israel-Palestine, sharing Palestinian experiences is inextricably undivorceable from living them, and considering this when approaching the narrative discourse allows us to appreciate the significance the Israeli occupation has as both a subject of and an influence on Palestinian narratives. The Freedom Theatre recognised this in its “Cultural Intifada” and its efforts to free the “occupation of the mind;” however, the Theatre was itself subject to these same influences, as the reality surrounding it informed its perception and presentation of the contexts it created and was subject to. It is not as simple as creating a documentary, performing plays, visiting communities, advocating online – sharing a narrative. The Freedom Theatre and Bus demonstrates that it takes sustained effort and, occasionally, sacrifice.

This thesis offers the opportunity to develop our understanding of narrative discourse, history-telling and activism, particularly within Israel-Palestine – although such phenomena are certainly relevant in other historical contexts. Taking a critical approach to the underlying paradigms and means through which a history is told – especially when approaching these histories as subjective narratives – provides us with a clearer view of the driving assumptions and ideologies of a history, both as a means for better understanding historiography and discourse, and in interpreting real-world events and actions. Along these lines, utilising the concept of canons in histories and narratives develops this further, especially as a means of realising and emphasising what parts of a history are included or omitted, and for what reason. Activism, as something of an intent behind some narratives and

histories, can also be more-deeply analysed through this thesis' methodology, especially as a means for interpreting the purpose behind its approach and its place in the existing discourse. Equally, touching on subjects such as media studies, theatre studies, aesthetics and materiality, this thesis can also present some avenues for further exploration in our approach to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. These specific approaches allow us to go further in our analysis by considering particular facets of the Conflict, which might otherwise be overlooked, and combine them to form a more-complete picture. These approaches equally allow us to consider the means through which the Conflict is recorded, told and perpetuated.

There were, ultimately, limitations in the scope of the work here due to the constraints of the thesis and, as such, there exist opportunities for further research. For the Freedom Theatre and Bus specifically, although this thesis only intended to utilise its online and media outputs, access to a greater pool of sources would grant us the opportunity to corroborate the narrative present in its online outputs and paint a more comprehensive picture of the activist group overall. There is also scope to make contact with the Freedom Theatre/Bus and gain the present perspective of those who were involved at the time, to gain their insight in hindsight into the events covered here and learn more about their activities post-2016. More generally, whilst a close-reading case study approach provides for a much deeper insight into the nuances of a Palestinian narrator, further research into other activist groups and actors in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict could provide us with a more-comprehensive picture of the nuances of both Israeli and Palestinian narratives of the Conflict, as well identify general trends in Israeli and Palestinian activism and advocacy. Further research into activism will also provide us with a better sense of the development of the

Conflict, as the status quo amongst the dominant actors remains and change is increasingly driven from the grassroots.

The Freedom Theatre shows us the efforts Palestinians are continuing to make to narrate their own history and have their voices heard, and the effectiveness of cultural resistance in combatting the Israeli occupation. In a system intended to quash the Palestinian spirit and drive them out of their land, continuous resistance that emphasises Palestinian agency becomes an effective tool in countering those efforts. Ultimately, we cannot only play attention when violence escalates – when Israel launches another “operation” into Gaza – and criticise these overt instances when the regular, muted violence of the Israeli occupation continues day-to-day. The need for Palestinians to narrate becomes apparent when Israel launches a war into Lebanon or an assault into Palestine; however, as this thesis makes clear, Palestinians are narrating even outside of these flare-ups and continue to do so against opposition from Israel and the status quo.

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