

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Ululating from the Underground: Syrian Women's Protests, Performances,
and Pedagogies under Siege

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by

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DEDICATION

The reality is: I come from an unusual situation. My parents are two powerhouse visionaries, activists, and Syrian experts. I have a leg up because all of the work I've done is the result of their lifelong labors. I am indebted to our long conversations and the brilliant ideas they helped me bring to life. They are always one phone call away when I need support, the low down on historical details, intra movement dynamics, explaining Syrian cultural nuances and providing me with minute-to-minute analyses. They are two living archives and geniuses. A well of wisdom and knowledge who have taught me the importance of evolution and constantly shifting your political orientation around the axis of total liberation.

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To Mama and Baba, for the worlds you make possible with your words.

This dissertation is also for all the women and youth of the Syrian Revolution whose labor makes new worlds come to life.

EPIGRAPH

I must scream—no one listens to my whispering.
Huda Numani, Syrian woman poet

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Chapter 4 contains a poem that has been submitted for publication with Dzanc Books. I, the dissertation author was the sole author of this material.

Halla Barakat and her mother Orouba Barakat. Activists, leaders, dreamers. This is for you. The ocean for always holding me and listening to my siren songs.

MY ANCESTORS!! THE TREES!! MY DREAMS!!

DAMASCENE ROSES. HIBISCUS FLOWERS. LEMON VERBANA. MINT.

WHAT ELSE.

NOT THE INSTITUTION.

THE PAGE.

THE POSSIBILITY.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Ululating from the Underground: Syrian Women's Protests,
Performances,
and Pedagogies under Siege

by

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In my dissertation, I look at the gendered artistic, aesthetic, and cultural practices that formed a constellation of resistance known as the Syrian Revolution. I argue Syrian women's gendered resistance expresses multiple, interwoven critiques against regime authoritarianism, colonial systems, extremism, and heteropatriarchy. I examine the dominant discourses that erase their labors and voices, and frame the misrecognition using the metaphor of siren songs. I look at the pedagogies and theatre performances that emerge from under siege, situate these spaces in the context of the Syrian Revolution, and argue that they express political messages that cannot be divorced from their revolutionary origins. I argue that through these protests, performances, and pedagogies, Syrian women and youth create new worlds, spaces where freedom lives.

Introduction: Embodied Gendered Revolutionary Wisdom

In this dissertation, I write about how Syrian women curate mobile experiences of freedom under siege. I argue that they do this using protests, poetics, performances, and pedagogies, deeply overlapping artistic, political, and creative practices. I situate these sites in the context of the Syrian Revolution and argue that Syrian women and youth express deliberately political critiques while embodying visions for alternate worlds. I use queer of color feminist methodologies to frame the creative work of Syrian women and youth. I draw on writing by Syrian feminists such as Razan Ghazzawi, Mohja Kahf, and Samar Yazbek to understand the protests, poetics, performances, and pedagogies that emerge from Syrian women and youth under siege. Syrians are using creativity to transform themselves and society. They are taking these strategies from under siege in Syria, the creativity they have been forced to develop, and carrying them into liberatory learning spaces in diaspora, which creates a network of what Chela Sandoval calls oppositional consciousness, that is mobile and flexible. I draw on Sandoval's framework to understand the skillsets Syrian women create in diaspora and under siege as technologies of resistance and to argue that their freedom spaces enact a differential oppositional consciousness.

The central questions I ask in this work is *how do Syrian women and youth heal from violence? How can our communities be embodied when displaced from our lands and spirits?* There is much work on how we suffer. And there needs to be. But in a context where there is an entire industry designed to exploit the suffering Muslim-and-Middle Eastern feminized body, a monolith used to justify imperial invasion, it is vital to ask how we heal. To first name those violences, to witness them, and then to dismantle them and ask how we will build alternate

structures outside of them.

At the beginning of the Syrian uprisings, Syrian women and youth took to the streets carrying roses, water bottles, and olive branches. Across Syria, they developed creative ways to resist the authoritarian state and multiple foreign occupations, from graffitiing the walls of their local post office with the names of political prisoners, to tossing origami birds with resistant messages from the tops of city buildings, to throwing red paint on the walls to symbolize the blood of the people running through the street. These protests created momentary experiences of freedom in unfree circumstances and evolved into street theatre performances and other forms of intentional political expression. Eventually these spaces took more permanent forms and became local centers that were sites for youth and women to envision new worlds, such as the Butterfly Effect library in Idlib or the hair-salon-turned political center, Mazaya. Syrian women such as Samar Yazbek and Maria Alabdeh of Women Now founded underground liberation collectives across Syria that use theatre and the arts to literally create a way for women and youth to live. Maimouna al Ammar and her sister activists founded the Hurras (“Guardian-Women”) in Daraya as a child shelter network with mobile art supply vans and libraries to help children survive siege (Enab Baladi 2017). Khotoat’s (“Small Steps”) youth coloring and theatre collective toured Douma and other cities in Eastern Ghouta to perform theatre and provide arts for children under siege, cut off from electricity, water, and food (Step News Agency 2015). In 2015, Syrians in the countryside of Idlib in the city of Ma’arat al-Nu’man took old military barracks and transformed them into a sanctuary and school called Syria’s Hope (Marrat Media Center 2015, Zidan 2015). In the Western countryside of Aleppo, young people created homemade coloring books to explain to kids what to do if they discover a body of someone they don’t know wounded or dead and need to identify it. Teachers design coloring books with different kinds of rockets,

landmines, and hazardous areas colored in for children to learn about safety under siege. In the YouTube video the youth collective uploaded, the teachers ask: “Why is this section covered?” One of the volunteers points to the coloring book. “Because it’s an unsafe zone!” the children respond.



Figure 0.1: Syrians taking to the streets in Baniyas wielding roses and water bottles, March 2011.

In the Rojava region of Jinwar, women created an eco-village and sanctuary for women that uses creativity to cultivate spaces for alternate economies and for children to be children (Jinwar Free Women’s Village Rojava 2019). Their motto is “jin jiyān Azadi,” “Women, life, freedom.” In the village they have their own school, Jinwar Academy, and regularly hold workshops on natural medicine and communal healing (Jinwar 2021). In the besieged outskirts of Zabadani, Syrian women organized a collective called “I am She,” for women who were detained in Assad’s prisons to heal from sexual trauma and discuss everyday gender violence (Peace Insight). “I am She” collective also launched a monthly magazine called *Suwar* to exchange survival skills as rural women farming under siege (I am SHE أنا هي 2021). They created

a network of over 25 Syrian women's collectives in Syria from Daraya to Haram refugee camp to Latakia and Damascus, organizing support for political prisoners and teaching nonviolence workshops to children. They use the newspaper and workshop spaces to communicate about their felt, everyday lived realities (Syria Untold 2015).

In the rural countryside of Syria, from Idlib to Deraa, and in diaspora, from Istanbul to Amman to El Cajon, hundreds of these revolution-based collectives, classroom spaces, and centers have bloomed. In my dissertation I study these spaces, networks, and the art and performances they produce. After the Assad regime's intentional targeting of schools, field and maternity hospitals, and children's play areas, these underground freedom schools and arts-based collectives emerged in direct resistance to the totalitarian state. I call these mobile, creative approaches Syrian women invent using theatre, visual arts, and creative writing to bring restoration and healing to our communities "pedagogies of liberation." While the rise of Syrian women-led mobile freedom spaces allows youth to process the psychosocial trauma of war, these spaces emerge from a politicized context and from a desire to articulate specific societal visions for liberation from 56 years of dictatorship and multiple imperial occupations. My dissertation draws from the archive of YouTube videos that record the opening and performances from these sites, documented online interviews with activists and collective founders, and firsthand experience in community-based activism in revolutionary spaces in diaspora. My intervention is that these spaces do not just provide psychological support but express deliberately political messages and come from a context of Syrian women's gendered creative activism in the Syrian Revolution.

Drawing, writing, performing—creative work curates an experience of freedom for marginalized communities that moves through the underground and into the world. As Audre

Lorde put in “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” “as we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny, and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.”

Creativity provides youth, and Syrian women in this case, with the strength to envision a space where all dimensions of their lives, from the structural oppressions to the intimacies of joy and loss, can be named, felt, and theorized. In these spaces, women and youth are carving sites for future realities and planting the seeds for a world where the same violences cannot happen again.

The Syrian Revolution began as a nonviolent revolution in a town called Dera’a when parents and thousands of community members flooded the streets on March 18, 2011 to demand accountability from the Syrian state. Children between the ages of nine and fourteen had graffitied the walls of their school with messages that said “the people want the fall of the system” “down with the regime,” and “it’s your turn, doctor.” The children were tortured in Assad regime prisons. A woman doctor who had been in the prison relayed news of the children’s mutilated and tortured bodies. This triggered a mass set of nonviolent protests across the region (Kassab and al-Shami 2016). In Syria, a struggle for dignity and freedom blossomed, despite the regime’s response—first shooting down protestors, then barrel bombing their neighborhoods, using chemical weapons such as chlorine, sarin, napalm, and committing crimes against humanity (Dagher 2019).

A rural-led, working class, largely women-organized movement emerged, one that continues in many areas to this day (Kahf 2013). It is their creative efforts that have kept society together when infrastructure has collapsed. In global media on the Syria crisis, it is their efforts that have been most erased.

I investigate the liberation spaces Syrian women and youth open while under siege as

sites where they utilize creative arts, such as theatre, poetry, and visual art, to not only process the psychosocial impacts of war trauma, but also to challenge the systems of oppression they are under. I ask the following questions:

1. In what ways are Syrian women utilizing performances and the arts to negotiate and challenge regimes of violence?
2. How are these arts-based spaces impacting Syrians and in what ways do these effects resonate out on a societal and community level? What kinds of aesthetic and worldmaking practices are possible through these mobile protests, performances, and freedom school zones?
3. How are Syrian women creating networks of liberation zones for youth from surviving siege and carrying those spaces into diaspora? Do these spaces reflect each other and converse, in and outside Syria?
4. What gets produced through the use of arts education movements and efforts? How can this be understood in terms of theories of worldmaking, liberation zones, and modes of resistance? How do these alternate spaces create infrastructure to reconstruct Syria both while under siege and in diaspora, given the massive loss Syrians have endured on a physical, psychological, societal, and cultural memory level?
5. In what ways do these pedagogies of liberation undermine or create alternatives to traditional NGO structures? By traditional NGO structures, I refer specifically to the refugee-NGO industrial complex, where foreign NGOs “teach” refugees how to live and structure their lives according to capitalism

I want to know: how do Syrian women heal? Do others in their community consider the work they do activist labor? What do their creative labors reveal about larger structural oppressions Syrian women and youth face? What are their visions for the future?

I write about Syrian women’s creative labors using M. Bahati’s Kuumba’s (2001) framework of gendered resistance, that studies the taken-for-granted labor that gendered bodies create in movements. I wanted to allow space for understanding women’s experiences as activists, mothers, community leaders. Um Tariq cooking kebab or Aunt Marwa sewing children’s school clothes is an act of self-sufficiency and resistance, just as important as Uncle

Jamal carrying a microphone and yelling about revolution in the street. In Chapter 1, “Syria’s Struggle for Self-Determination,” I focus on the historical and political realities that shaped the Syrian Revolution. I use auto-ethnographic self-inscriptions to write about methodological questions concerning Syria within Ethnic Studies and Feminist Studies and propose a Syrian-Palestinian feminist framework to situate the political and lived realities of Syrians within a neocolonial and authoritarian structure. Chapter 2, “From Feared to Fantasy, Invisible to Hypervisible—Siren Songs in the Syrian Revolution and the Limits of Representation,” turns to representations of Syria as a gendered body in journalism, political science, and anthropological accounts of Syria. I look at what Wedeen (2019: x) calls the “disciplinary-symbolic mode of domination,” and as she proposes, reject “the sharp dichotomy between materialist and ideational approaches from the outset” and insist on “an analysis that theorizes ideology as “inscribed” in material practices.” Essentially, I am bridging together the linkages between erasure in discursive representation and the real legal, political, and social realities that Syrian women navigate. I want to set up a context for why Syrian women’s gendered creative practices have widely been understudied and largely unrecognized. Chapter 3 is where I analyze creative gendered protests at the beginning of the Syrian Revolution. One of the key impulses behind this work is to argue that these creative practices cannot only be understood in terms of their psychosocial benefits, but that they are politicized practices that emerge from the revolution with interwoven critiques of patriarchy, authoritarianism, and colonialism embedded in the creative labor itself. The creative protests of Syrian women on the ground in the revolution itself is what created the infrastructure for the kinds of collective spaces that emerged. In Chapter 4, I center what I call the “poetic,” or a series of artistic, filmic, and poetic forms of cultural labor that emerged from the Syrian Revolution as case studies for understanding the disruptions that

Syrian creative work embodies against the totalitarian state. I look at performances that Syrian youth hold, the theatre performances they stage and record then upload to YouTube, and argue that youth and women-led performances are enacting alternate worlds and embodiments during siege that are revolutionary in nature. I write about some of the mobile classroom spaces that have emerged, often in nature, in caves and under olive trees, where teachers design their own curricula using creative methods outside of the regulations of the Ba'athist state because the school system has collapsed and this vacuum in liberated areas has allowed for alternate pedagogies to emerge. In the conclusion, I understand how these creativity-centered spaces that emerged from the creative practices of the revolution exchange within and through diasporic spaces in Jordan, El Cajon, Turkey, Lebanon and elsewhere to create transnational and inter/national exchanges of strategies for community-based liberation.

Why turn to the experiences of women and youth specifically? While presenting earlier versions of this work at a conference I received important feedback. “You know it’s going to be controversial in our community if you focus only on women. Men are suffering too.” I use the categories of women and youth because it is women and youth who started the Syrian Revolution, and it is their labor that continues to be erased in all layers of discourse about Syria and its diaspora. The Syrian Revolution began in March 2011, when a group of children in the rural village of Deraa graffitied “The people want the fall of the regime,” on the walls of their elementary school (Hajj Saleh 2017, Yazbek 2012). They were subsequently imprisoned and tortured. Women played a critical role in coordinating protests and networks of activism. In “The Syrian Revolution, Then and Now,” Syrian woman activist Mohja Kahf (2013) wrote “women are a prime part of the uprising’s local organizing. The local committee populations attest that women are integral at the ground levels. Women led two of the first three coalitions. Young

women swelled the rank and file of many local committees. Duma had its own parallel women's coordination committee. Generally in the Syrian uprising, the more ad hoc and localized the level of the activism, the more women are levels of the activism, the more women are its mainstay." As Yang and Tuck (2013: 17) theorize, "research on youth resistance is often masculinized, theorized through and onto the male body—when it is theorized through women's bodies, it is specific to their bodies, made un-universal.

Because of the focus on masculinized forms of labor, and of resistance, theories of resistance and their attendant theories of change might already be masculinized unless explicitly queered." Because the primary activist labor behind the Syrian uprisings were youth and women, I focus on specific forms of their labor as central to the analysis of Syrian activism and pedagogies of liberation.

M. Bahati Kuumba (2001) in *Gender and Social Movements* theorizes the necessity of understanding women's work in social movements. Kuumba suggests that because women experience gendered oppression, women resist in gender-specific ways. Kuumba takes into account what reproductive labor looks like in its aesthetic forms in revolutionary movements from Palestine to South Africa. She argues that we must understand the value of reproductive labor such as cooking, taking care of kids, and cultivating safe spaces within hostile circumstances as taken-for-granted social movement work. The category of women includes trans women who are experiencing multiple forms of oppression beyond what cis women experience. As a nonbinary person myself, I struggled with how to include the contributions of nonbinary and alternate gender embodiments. Ultimately I decided I would still focus on women and at times when I am discussing feminized non-women, femmes, and nonbinary people (recognizing that these terms overlap), I use the term "feminized labor" to refer to a form of

labor coming from a non-normative gender nonconforming person who still experiences more femme marginalization under patriarchy. This is not because masculine-of-center non normative gender experiences aren't important, but because within the revolution at times, masculinity itself became a currency for determining mobility vis a vis checkpoints, the forms of activism one would participate in, and a measure of commitment to the struggle, while femme- of-center people were more likely to be dismissed, mocked, and have their gendered expressions of labor erased in larger histories (Ghazzawi 2019). In many ways Syrian women themselves occupy varied and alternative forms of gender that remain outside of colonial configurations of the gender binary and allow for a fluidity of gender and sexual expression that might not be named using terms such as “nonbinary,” but fall loosely under the category of nisa'a, women. In fact, using the term allows for the vague and multifaceted gender practices that fall under nisawiya (woman-ness, this is also the term for feminism) or what it “means” to be a Syrian woman, even with a large range of gendered expressions in that spectrum.

In my work, I draw on Lila Abu Lughod's (2013) method in *Writing Women's Worlds* to emphasize the importance of storytelling within what she calls “critical ethnography,” that takes into account positionality and power. She draws on her hybridity as an Arab American woman in a Bedouin context in Egypt to complicate extractive binaries between West and Other, anthropologist and subject. As Avery Gordon (1997) argues, there is always, “a question demanding to know the implications of understanding the ethnography within an epistemology of the truth as partial, as an artifact of the complex social rituals, bound historically to modernity and its uncertain aftermath, that produce an understanding, a truth, the real.” Often racialized, sexualized “difference” have been produced and assigned (il)legibility through a process of observation from a white, colonial epistemology of truth. The ethnographic method is built on

the formation of anthropology as a discipline that was created to monitor and “understand” the “Other,” which assumed that the researcher could observe and make meaning from social events that would constitute one observable truth.

Gordon quotes Spivak when she asks, “Precisely how will we evoke the path to knowledge, with all its detours, within an institution like the First World Academy that is “shot through with power relations and personal cross-purpose” and yet so effectively disavows the “strategically repressed marks of the so-called private?” That contradiction is why Gordon shifts the methodological question from “what method have you adopted for this research?” to “what paths have been disavowed, left behind, covered over and remain unseen?” That is why I analyze dominant headlines, liberal refugee discourse, and Middle East Studies scholarship, and how they ultimately sweep over Syrian women’s realities in a way that does not see them as active parts of their own histories.

I cannot claim to speak for anyone but myself, and from the hybrid in-between location in which I stand, as a child of Syrian political dissidents. My subjectivity echoes what Patricia Hill Collins (1986) for Black women called the outsider-within¹ status, what Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) for Chicanas called being a border women,² what Audre Lorde (1996) termed sister- outsider,³ what Chela Sandoval (2000) would later identify in U.S. Third World and Black feminists as

¹ In “Learning from the Outsider Within” Patricia Hill Collins describes being an outsider-within as occupying a particular epistemological standpoint that forms the basis of Black feminist theorizing.

² Border woman is a concept Anzaldúa describes at length in *Borderlands: La Frontera*. It is how “Anzaldúa thinks of the self as multiple. There is the self oppressed in and by the traditional Mexican world; the self oppressed in and by the Anglo world; and the self-in-between- the Self—herself in resistance to oppression, the self in germination in the borderlands” as Maria Lugones puts it in “Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interpretative Essay.” *Hypatia*, Vol. 7, No. 4 Lesbian Philosophy. 1992. Pp 31-37.

³ In *I am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, Rudolph Byrd describes Audre Lorde’s use of the term sister outsider as a term that “highlights Lorde’s status as an outsider in the often contested realm of social relations...[illustrating] the ways in which Lorde reclaimed and transformed overlapping, discredited, and marginalized identities—Black, lesbian, feminist—into a powerful, radical, and progressive standpoint.” She writes more about what this position means in her book *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

inhabiting a “differential oppositional consciousness,”⁴ a fusion of experiences, visions, strategies, and futurities that resulted from navigating multiple spheres and shuffling between dominant and marginalized spaces (and what I call a *syrena subjectivity*). In my writing journey I became conscious of the intersection of different narratives of class, gender, generations, sexualities and disability that collided to form my own experience and third-space subjectivity. Because I am displaced and forcibly exiled from Syria, wanted for millions of dollars ransom, I have always been an outsider, and an outsider because of my U.S.-southern upbringing, my gender and sexuality, my language differences, my family’s own liminal experiences as people who were previously forced from Syria for their political activism around Syrians who were not. At the beginning of the revolution, in political organizing spaces near the Syrian border and in Turkey, I was a young teenager in adult-dominated spaces, a “young girl,” who often was not taken seriously, but this gave me a distinctive purview from which I could observe movement dynamics, silently and carefully take note of the labors I would later write about here. I would spend time in the U.S. as a racialized person with specific, intersecting gendered experiences, often being hypersexualized or facing gendered violence as a Muslim feminized person, then spend summers with my family in the Middle East where I would be in Syrian refugee communities, live in Tunisia for a short time during its revolutionary moments, and continue to “travel between worlds.” It is this in-between-ness that Maria Lugones (1992) calls “being a different person in different worlds & having memory of oneself as different without having the sense of there being any underlying I.” My subjectivity has been carved through this fractured

⁴ In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval uses this term to refer to a type of consciousness developed by Black, Third-World, and other women of color feminists in the seventies and eighties who fused together a new historical consciousness and resistance strategy against oppression. A differential oppositional consciousness “activates a new space: a *cyberspace* where the transcultural, transgendered, transsexual, transnational leaps necessary to the play of effective stratagems of oppositional praxis... It is the product of recent decolonizing historical events and produces an ever-new historical moment out of the materials of ideology at hand” (62,3).

consciousness. Judith Butler (2004) writes, "When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community...[it] delineates the ties we have with others. Who "am" I without you?" The creative resistance Syrians create through their traumas, complex subjectivities, and loss ties together similar kinds of worlds that other Black, Chicana, and Third World feminists have theorized on before.

As I was working through frameworks for understanding ethnography, I was also calling domestic violence shelters for my Sabeian Iranian community member with no place to stay. I was translating for Syrian women friends at hospital visits and helping them with their English homework so that the imperial warship would not cut off their welfare for not achieving the required grades in their required ESL classes. I was listening to my trans Syrian sister tell me stories of surviving transmisogynist violence every day in the streets of Aleppo and Los Angeles. I was speaking on the phone with my Syrian friend from Deir Ezzor on the run to Germany while pregnant, who I met in a refugee camp in Greece, and whose children survived border patrol tipping over their boat while crossing on the Mediterranean. I was receiving messages from my mother, sister, family groups about whether we are safe on our journeys through airports because so many of our loved ones have experienced arbitrary detention and deportation. As a Syrian, I did not need to venture into the field because everyday life is the "field" I study in order to understand the relationship between language, discourse, and the power dynamics that I witness shape my sisters' and siblings' lives.

I was looking for a theory that could articulate the interconnectedness of these experiences under empire with the struggles of Third World women struggling against borders, Zionism, and colonial occupation every day. In *This Bridge Called my Back*, Cherrie Moraga (1981) introduces the "theory of the flesh." The theory of the flesh is not just a way to translate

lived experience into language, but also a way to connect the intimacies of our oppressions, and the differences too. In “Between the Lines: On Culture, Class, and Homophobia,” Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (114-115) write, “Surfacing from these pages again and again is the genuine sense of loss and pain we feel when we are denied our home because of our desire to free ourselves ... So we turn to each other for strength and sustenance. We write letters to each other incessantly. Across a kitchen table, Third World feminist strategy is plotted. We talk long hours into the night. It is when this midnight oil is burning that we secretly reclaim our goddesses... Here we put Billie Holiday back into the hands and hearts of the women who understand her.” I want to know more about the coalitionary strategies Black, Brown, and Third World women make to resist multiple systems of oppression. I want to know why women and youth resist in the ways that they do and why so many feminized people have resisted in similar ways against colonial, patriarchal, classist, capitalist, militaristic systems that threaten to erase them.

My methods require what Toni Cade Bambara (1984) outlines in the foreword to *This Bridge Called My Back*, “a habit of listening to each other and learning each other’s ways of seeing and being... This is vital work we need in order to “create new powers in arenas where they never before existed.” Many feminist scholars who critique humanitarianism and its methodologies advocate for similar commitments to what Maria Lugones (1987) calls “faithful witnessing,” and what Nerferti Tadiar (2009) calls a “sympathetic framework,” an act of alignment to voices that are otherwise made unheard. In *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa (2015: 2-7) grapples with a method of how to critique dominant ideologies and representations of reality. She writes, “to develop an epistemology of the imagination, a psychology of the image, I construct my own symbolic system.... Using a multidisciplinary approach and a “storytelling”

format, I theorize my own and others' struggles for representation, identity, self-inscription, and creative expressions. I also use "imaginal figures (archetypes of the inner world)." Anzaldúa uses a method of storytelling grounded in women of color and decolonial epistemologies, that decenters Western linear narrations of time by using visual symbols and imaginal figures. In my work I follow Anzaldúa's method and employ my own visual vocabulary to describe the hypervisibility and invisibility Syrian women oscillate between.

My metaphor is that Syrian women occupy *syrena subjectivities* and speak through siren songs. In the *Odyssey*, Homer wrote about the island of the sirens, the half-woman, half-fish hybrids whose voices were so threatening that they could lead sailors to shipwreck on the rocky island of Anthemoessa.⁵ The male hero's journey was partially about silencing and overcoming (killing) these hybrid mermaid women in order to reunite with himself and his homeland. In western modernity, leaders and media writers debate who is allowed citizenship and mobility in the global order. Like the sirens, Syrian women are at once threatening and seductive, unknowable and feared, desired and silenced. I argue that this Sirena/Syrena subjectivity of in-between mermaid-hood is a metaphor to describe the hybridized migrant realities Syrian women navigate as they learn the contours of their own power. Decolonial feminist scholars such as Sylvia Wynter (2003) connect the significance of philosophies and mythologies from Ancient Greece and how they were appropriated in Christian theology, the Renaissance, the

⁵ Interestingly, Homer wrote about the siren songs in the *Odyssey* in the coastal region of present-day Syria/Anatolia region at the end of the 8th century BC. In Homeric Greek, "siren" was the word for mermaid, (singular: Σειρήν—phonetically: Seirēn; plural: Σειριῆνες Seirēnes) (Doherty 1995). Scholars who study precolonial cosmologies have traced the origins of the mermaid figure in Northern Syria, between 8th and 10th century BC, in the legend of Atargatis (Butcher 2007, Prothero 2015). Atargatis was said to be a Syrian woman who did not know her power. She fell in love with a shepherd in present-day Aleppo. Atargatis accidentally kills her male lover while making love to him and throws herself into a lake as a result. Instead of dying, Atargatis grows a tail. Atargatis was worshipped as a chief mermaid deity in Syria for thousands of years. See: *The Syrian Goddess* by Lucian.

Enlightenment, and the American Revolution to frame thinking about light and dark, free and unfree, civilized and uncivilized. In my framework, “siren songs,” makes reference to what Arab American feminist writer Jo Kadi (1999) describes as the “invisibility and hypervisibility” Arab women are forced to oscillate between in times of crisis. The “siren songs” are the creative expressions that Syrian women offer the world, expressions that are ignored, silenced, misrecognized, or feared.

The life of a *syrena*—a mermaid, but a Syrian mermaid especially, is solitary. The *syrena* does not live in this world on land, and zhe does not live fully in the water. Zhe traverses borders in ways that threaten colonial nation state boundaries. Zhe is an anomaly to typical global northern colonial epistemologies of gender—zhe is “veiled”—in both a physical and metaphoric sense. Zhe is framed as an object-to-be-known. I came to the idea of a *syrena subjectivity* after watching videos about mermaids on YouTube and reading the comments. They said things like “I wonder how you penetrate a mermaid,” and “REAL MERMAID CAUGHT USING DRONE TECHNOLOGY ACROSS THE SEA” and “poor thing, she looks so scared, we need to rescue her” to “she is so sexy I wonder where I can find one” (imagine you are salivating over a sea creature in this way). The range from hypersexualization to victimhood to a desire to surveil and “know” the body of the siren reminded me of how Syrian women’s bodies are spoken about in popular discourse, in legal discourse, in journalism, and in scholarship on Syrian women refugees. I see the same kinds of comments on news’ articles about Syrian women refugees, where they are both constructed as threats needing to be surveilled, as sexualized, as objects to be rescued, and never understood as revolutionary actors against a totalitarian state.

My overall method involves reading the siren songs of Syrian women and their creative labors that are shifting imaginaries and disrupting power dynamics in dominant narratives about

Syria. I use Chela Sandoval's (2000) method of deconstruction, following Derrida, to challenge narrative logics and employ this form of discursive labor to challenge assumptions about Syria as a gendered body in the global Northern imagination. Anzaldúa (2012) calls this critical consciousness *la facultad*, the ability to mine the meaning of everyday language for an understanding of the deeper realities at play. I read these "siren songs," to disrupt the collapsing of Syrian women's experiences in discourse about Syria. Critical performances, protests, and cultural production from the Syrian feminists in the revolution enact what Sandoval (2000) calls a differential oppositional consciousness, and a methodology of the oppressed, a type of consciousness developed by Black, Third-World, and other women of color feminists in the seventies and eighties who fused together a new historical consciousness and resistance strategy against oppression. A differential oppositional consciousness "activates a new space: a *cyberspace* where the transcultural, transgendered, transsexual, transnational leaps necessary to the play of effective stratagems of oppositional praxis... It is the product of recent decolonizing historical events and produces an ever-new historical moment out of the materials of ideology at hand" (2000: 62,3). The "siren songs" of Syrian women in Syrian feminist films such as *Suleima* and *Estayqazat*, and the records of Syrian women and youth doing theatre as resistance, create cultures of pleasure and activate this same cyberspace that women of color creatives have long contributed to in movements for liberation across the world.

During the March 20 EU-Turkey Deal, Syrians crossing the Mediterranean were constructed as threats to national security and disruptions to Greece's precarious economic stability (even though it would be those migrants and refugees who would be the backbone of the economy working low-wage jobs as undocumented migrants), to the point where all newly arrived Syrian refugees were ordered to all be deported from Europe unless they could prove

Turkey was unsafe. This put Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian refugees at a huge loss because Turkey was just as unsafe for them as Syria under bombing. Families coming from rural areas, children alone who had no place to stay in the camps and had tried crossing 10-11 times before finally reaching the Greek shores were told they would be sent back unless they could prove they were “vulnerable.” The lawyers in the camps would ask me to come up with credible academic articles that “proved” Kurdish people were really oppressed in Turkey to use in court. I saw how discourses, including academic, legal, and journalistic ones, could literally control and embed themselves into material realities that determined whether or not someone could get killed, after risking their life to escape those situations. The media was a circus in the camps, constructing refugees both as threats and as objects-to-be-saved, while refugees who were documenting human rights abuses with their camera phones in Moria, Vial, Dipithe, and other camps and in local prisons were struggling to get word out about the realities they faced.

During this time, there were hundreds of photographs circulating of drowned refugee bodies in the Mediterranean. It was not until I physically was in the refugee camps in Greece and heard hundreds of eye-witness accounts of refugees who had just crossed the sea, read legal accounts, and saw police abuse firsthand against refugees, many of whom had also been shot at by Turkish border patrol and Syrian border patrol and abused by smugglers before crossing the sea, that I understood most refugees were not drowning because of the waves. They were drowning because NATO boats and Frontex—an agency that enforces EU border policies—bumped into the rafts overloaded with people to overturn them (Migranteurop 2017). The Greek border patrol was also committing mass expulsions, loading migrants onto rudderless, motorless rafts and abandoning them to sea (Al-Arshani 2020, Kingsley and Shoumali 2020). The decontextualized discourse around drowning created a way for the West to absolve itself of any

responsibility in its culpability for essentially what was attempted mass murder.

Under Trump's administration, mainstream and alternative news headlines on violence in Syria and “migrants” were designed to elicit panic about terrorists or use video game-like language to talk strategy and geopolitics, further rendering Syrian lives into objects of political debate. The narrative logics of news headlines also turn readers into complicit consumers of representations that homogenize Syrians into evil Arabs who are threats to the West or oppressed Muslims looking to be saved.⁶ Other symbolically violent constructions of Syrians through films and viral media images are used ideologically to justify invasion, deportation, and policing against Syrian people.

In my dissertation, I read critical protest performances recorded by the Syrian feminist collective Estayqazat in the short films *Suleima* and *When I Heard My Voice*. I mine social media archives, particularly YouTube, in order to document the theatre performances and creative pedagogies Syrian activists enact under siege and connect them to the creative strategies Syrian women create in diaspora. I attempt at every point to center Syrian sources and archives, from activists' writing and creative work in Syria. I want to make sure I write about Syria carefully and as ethically as possible as a Syrian in diaspora whose community, entire family, and political history is implicated in how states determine if Syrians are worthy of death or life.

⁶ Orientalist categories of knowing conflate Syrians as all Arabs and all Arab Muslims, erasing the diversity in a country with fifteen major ethnoreligious groups. I grapple with is how to create a category of analysis that moves beyond Arab as a category, something I discuss further in the parts on the failure of Arab nationalisms.

CHAPTER 1: Syrians' Struggle for Self-Determination

THE 2011 UPRISINGS: THE FLAME OF LIBERATION

In December 2010, a young Tunisian fruit cart seller named Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire and sparked a series of uprisings collectively referred to as the “Arab Spring” (Lynch 2013, Gelvin 2015, Lesch and Haas 2016). Shortly thereafter, children in Deraa scrawled Tunisian and Egyptian revolution slogans for freedom and justice against Assad regime violence on the walls of their school. They wrote “the people want the fall of the system,” and “it’s your turn, doctor!” referring to Bashar al Assad, the president-ophthalmologist, who had taken power for a decade. The children of Dera’a were abducted by local police, imprisoned, and mutilated in disturbing ways. Their imprisonment and torture set into motion the people’s uprising in Syria, begun by parents and community members who took to the streets to demand the release of their children from regime prisons (Hokayem 2013).

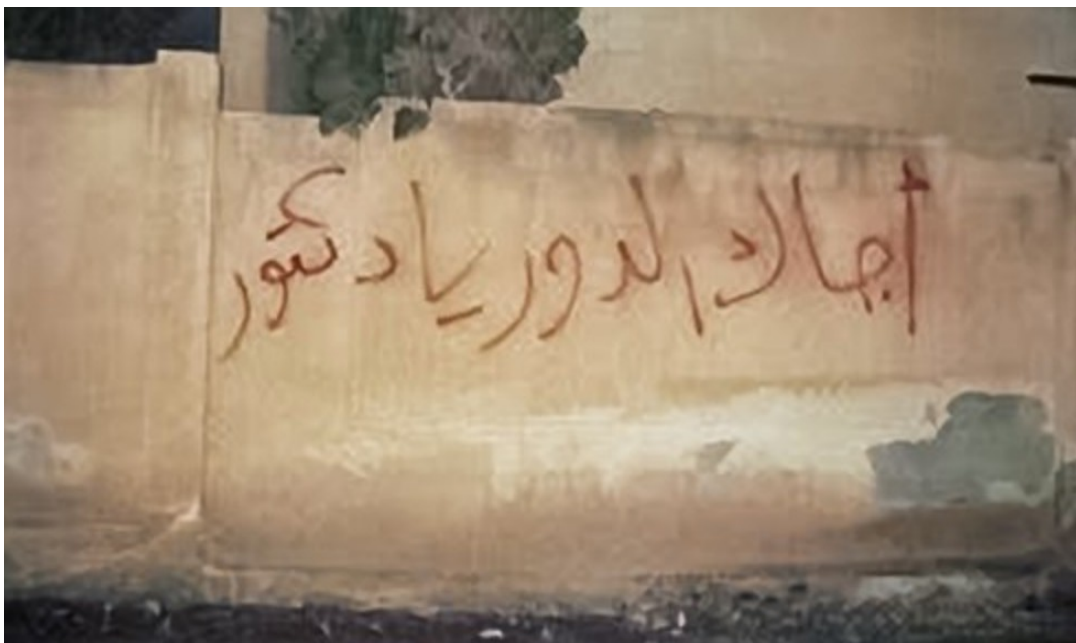


Figure 1.1: “It’s your turn, doctor.” The children of Dera’a’s graffiti on their school wall on February 16, 2011. Source: Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution 2011.

Since the uprisings in Syria began in 2011, women have played an active role in developing resistance strategies (Kahf 2013). Women coordinated neighborhood and regional protests through forming a network of revolutionary councils across the rural areas in Syria (Khalaf, Ramadan, et. al 2014). Single mother and activist Suheir Atassi and human rights lawyer Razan Zeitouneh led factions of the movement and played important roles in the political development of the opposition (Ghazzawi 2014). In response to their activist participation and leadership, Syrian women have paid a high price of detention, torture, and sexual abuse (Human Rights Watch 2014). At the same time, the revolution gave women an unprecedented sense of liberation as powerful social and political actors capable of transforming Syrian society (Yazbek 2015).

When the nonviolent revolution began in March 2011 as a popular and democratic protest movement, the Assad regime responded by crushing the protests with brute force, gunning down protestors in cold blood, sending tanks, responding with imprisonment and mass detention, and other forms of repression. According to Chomsky (2013) “the usual outcome of such a course of action is either a successful crushing of the protests, or otherwise, to see them evolve and militarize, and this is what took place in Syria. When a protest movement enters this phase we see a dynamics at play: usually, the rise of the most extremist and brutal elements to the front ranks.” Chomsky’s (2013) analysis partly articulates what happened in the Syrian Revolution after members of the government forces defected and joined disenfranchised revolutionary youth in September 2011 to form the Free Syrian Army (Hajj Saleh 2017). But it does not account for how the original protest movement still continues in the streets today, and how those in the people’s movement protested against the extremists who later emerged. After a faction of the revolution militarized, the regime’s response to the Syrian uprisings escalated into a situation

characterized by a large-scale genocide, crimes against humanity, and systematic sieges on Syrian cities that decimate(d) everything from life to homes to cultural memory to historic sites (Violations Documentation Centre of Syria 2020, Syria Justice and Accountability Centre 2021, Al Rifai and Haddad 2015). Despite the militarized factions, the grassroots movement continued, and nonviolent protests, arts-based community projects, and civil society structures began to bloom.



Figure 1.2: Image from the Syrian protests in Idlib, Sept. 2018, the There is no Alternative Campaign which continue to this day.



Figure 1.3: Bombing and destruction from Feb. 2014 in Aleppo. Source: AP News.



Figure 1.4: “What’s left of Syria?” info-graphic from the midpoint of Syria’s crisis. Source: Al Jazeera 2015.

After ten years of global complicity, blatant violations of ceasefire deals, and the regime's continued impunity, the situation has reached a desperate point (Kassab and Al Shami 2016). At one point, it evolved into a multi-pronged cluster of conflicting forces. Grassroots activists continue to protest for values of liberation and justice, while the Free Syrian Army's initial support in the form of militarized resistance has translated into human rights abuses of ethnic and religious minorities, and the authoritarian regime's violence relentlessly persists as militant Islamist extremists transformed Syria into what some argue was a post-Cold War battleground between Russia, China, Iran, the Syrian regime, and U.S. and Israeli imperialist invasions.

Ultimately this turmoil has led to the displacement of 13.5 million Syrians, with women and children paying the highest price for the conflict (UNHCR 2020). Many families fled due to the regime's use of systematic starvation siege. A woman describing life in the Damascus suburbs of Daraya and Moadamiyeh in 2012 said, "The living conditions here are terrible; we've been under siege, no water, no bread, no electricity. No one can leave and no one can enter: complete siege" (George 2013). By August 2011, over 5,000 Syrians lost their lives to regime violence and today the number of casualties has climbed to an estimated 850,000 deaths (Violations Documentation Centre of Syria 2021).

The rising radicalism and militarization of factions of the struggle meant increased limitations on women's mobility and other freedoms (Syria Untold 2014). The role of Syrian women in their communities has become more and more vital to the survival of their families. Syrian women have specifically gendered experiences of war, and militarization, which is why I study the gendered strategies they created to resist. In what follows, I investigate the creative, political, and economic strategies Syrian women build to support their communities in

sustainable, transformative ways. I examine existing discourses on gendered activism and situate these resistance strategies in a context and history of diasporic and displaced “Third World Women’s” and youth social movements (Sandoval 2000, Abu-Lughod 1993). My aim in this dissertation is to understand the experiences, visions, and strategies of Syrian women in a pivotal moment, when society is on the verge of transformation. It is to shed light on the invaluable contributions of Syrian women in the revolution, and to ensure that their activism garners the scholarly attention it deserves and rarely receives.

Through investigating Syrian women and youth’s freedom spaces, I argue that women and youth are crucial to creating new terrains of liberation, sovereignty, and self-determination in future Syrian society, particularly as the regime, its allies, and imperial actors occupy the country from multiple sides. I investigate the liberation centers, community schools, and freedom spaces Syrian women hold while under siege and how they carry these spaces with them into displacement, spaces where they curate mobile experiences of freedom. My intervention draws on frameworks from Cultural Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Gender Studies to meet “Middle East” Studies with analytics that are rooted in critiques of patriarchy and colonialism. I specifically make an intervention into Syria Studies, Palestine Studies, Arab and Muslim diaspora studies by merging women of color feminist theory, Third World, and queer of color feminist theories on performance and poetry as resistance.

Women’s cultural productions during times of revolution and displacement can express important critiques of patriarchy within the context of colonialism, authoritarian regimes, and class that are lost in larger discourses. Women’s creativity in these contexts challenges militarized masculinities and highlight the gendered intersections of colonialism and internal power dynamics within resistance movements (Molyneux 1998). Feminist scholars who

interrogate the transnational nature of state violence and impossible frames of representation that accompany violence emphasize a reorientation (Hill-Collins 2020). They emphasize studying how cultural production reveals methodologies of change and mechanisms of critique that targeted communities create (Perez 1999). Many feminist scholars consider cultural work as important accounts that theorize the contours of complex identities, politics, and lived experience. By treating cultural and aesthetic productions as imaginaries to take seriously in knowledge production, these theorists deconstruct positivist assumptions that knowledge revolves around an empirically objective truth. They point out the “ways in which research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism...[a] powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples” (Smith 2012: 2).

Ethnic Studies as a field points out how modernity itself was constructed on the logics of the Enlightenment: that to recognize what is knowledge and knowable in the world order was a crucial part of justifying colonialism. Ethnic Studies and Feminist Studies use methodological approaches that interrogate modernity’s relationship to the study of the Third World as an object of knowledge (Elia et. al 2016). Ethnic studies as a field emerged after Black and Brown students organized to create a Third World Studies College at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley and Santa Barbara campuses (Hu-DeHart 1993). These protesting students were “part of a larger Third World movement representing the growing awareness of Third World people throughout the world of their common experiences under colonial domination, within and without the continent of the United of the States” (Hong and Ferguson 2011).” As Toni Cade Bambara (1969) wrote in “Realizing the Dream of the Black University, "it should be clear to all of us here, as it is certainly clear to the brothers and sisters at San Francisco State, at UCLA, and elsewhere, that fissures or breaks are not enough. To obtain a relevant, real education, we shall

have to either topple the university or set up our own." These were calls for a radical departure from the disciplinary formations of the university and calls for forms of knowledge production that reflect subalternized histories.

This student movement complemented a long history at historically Black colleges to teach about the African Diaspora and Third World epistemologies (Challenor 2002). Ethnic Studies commits to understanding history from a lens that unsettles colonial ways of knowing, to create what Fanon (2008) called a radical rupture, the “total disorder” of decolonization. Ethnic studies asks how and why hierarchies are created in systems of power. It pays particular attention to the cultural imaginaries marginalized people create (Kelley 2016). Ethnic studies take seriously a project of mapping transnational power relations, tracing their routes, and thinking about how political economies are relationally constituted. It studies how power gets made invisible and normalized in systems of enslavement, the prison industrial complex, militarism, and imperialism (Espiritu 2015). And yet there have not been critical Syria studies interventions into Ethnic Studies. Often scholarly work on Syria falls under Middle Eastern Studies, political science, and anthropology. I fuse Syria studies with Ethnic Studies literature to ask questions about systems of domination that silence and repress subjugated people. I am reading across Ethnic Studies texts to frame an understanding of Syrian women’s aesthetic practices in the Syrian Revolution, the cultural productions women create while surviving barrel bombing, starvation, displacement, war, and multiple occupations. More broadly I am asking questions about how targeted youth and women resist and how their specific strategies of survival are vital world-making practices in revolution.

In my approach I use queer of color methodologies from Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Gloria Anzaldúa, who understand cultural production within the context of resistance and the

significance of Third World Women's poetics. The anthropological Orientalism of Middle East Studies fields often fail to account for an understanding of indigeneity, gender, and nationhood in the so-called postcolonial period of the region. I rely on Middle Eastern women anthropologists as well, because they account for the specifically gendered ways to read women's realities from Southwest Asia and its diaspora. In *Decolonizing Methodologies* Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012: 48) argues that the "survival of our people comes from a knowledge of our context." Pairing these texts creates a way to understand Syrian women in a long history of gendered Orientalism. It is an attempt to account for the complex positionality Syrian women have in the crossfires of Assad regime authoritarianism, post-Cold war Russian imperialism, U.S. imperial invasion, extremist violence from ISIS, Jabhat an Nusra and other forces, sectarianism, the ongoing Zionist settler colonial occupation of Syria in the Golan Heights, and patriarchal violence at all levels of structural and everyday experience.

One of the most significant theoretical interventions feminist studies made was to argue for a politics of situated knowledge. I occupy a position of great privilege as a displaced Syrian who can write about the work Syrian women are doing on the ground from my seat in the First World academy. The violence I face every day connect to the struggles my siblings in Syria experience but could never speak for what they are going through. At the heart of my methodological question is what Gayatri Spivak (1985) theorizes in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" -not re-writing the reality of someone else's subjectivity by claiming to speak for, but instead interrogating the boundaries between the Knower and the Known by recognizing the power imbued in representing an experience in a particular way. As Lal (1999: 105) put it, "what happens when the traditional boundaries between the Knower and the Known begin to break down, are reversed, or crosscut with mixed and hybrid identities?" In displacement, many of us

struggle with how to communicate our realities as our family members die in the hundreds of thousands. Loss is everywhere, but especially in our language and the way we write.

A Syrian-Palestinian Feminist Framework

I propose what I call a Syrian-Palestinian Feminist Framework to denaturalize French, British, and Zionist colonial decisions about how our land was divided. I draw upon a Syria-Palestine Feminist Framework in the context of Sykes-Picot and the colonial division of Greater Syria into nation-states. This framework would provide for a way to understand Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in Syria and the Assad regime's role in facilitating and justifying Zionist violence against Palestinians in Syria historically (Dagher 2019). A Syrian-Palestinian feminist analysis would be useful, for example, to frame how doubly and triply displaced Palestinian-Syrian women participated at key sites in the Syrian Revolution and in activist struggles in diaspora. It could also potentially disrupt the use of Arab feminist analysis, which might not have space to also center Kurdish, Assyrian, Armenian, Circassian, Druze, and other minoritized women from the region. I am interested in talking about Syrian and Palestinian feminist studies and what that means in a woman of color feminist theory context within U.S. Third World Black, Latina, Asian, and Native feminist theorizings. As Hafez (2018) argues, SWANA feminists have a history of marginalization within larger feminist of color movements, with huge schisms around Zionism and Palestine. What would it mean to allow space for a Syria-Palestinian feminist studies intervention in that context, one with the decolonizing impulse of Ethnic Studies and the auto-ethnographic politicized storytelling practices of Feminist Studies?

Quite often the Syrian experience is one of dispossession from the ancestral land. This overlaps with the Palestinian experience because 1. Israel occupies Syrian land in the Golan Heights and this is rarely taken into consideration 2. Palestinian-Syrians are a major group at the

intersection of Zionism and authoritarianism, which work together hand in hand. Many non-Palestinian Syrians were also politicized against the regime later because of their early politicization against Israel. For example, my family grew up with Israeli bombs “target practicing” on their surrounding villages in the 1960s, targeting Palestinian resistance that was said to “live in the hills,” which then led to my family and their community participating in the frontlines for the struggle for Palestinian liberation in 1967. With Israeli tanks occupying my family lands, the environmental destruction of the Ba’athist state and deliberate targeted kidnappings against our rural dwelling people, and a family history of serving as migrant laborers across the Middle East after the devastating aftermath of French occupation which led to the current ethnic, class, and sectarian schisms, then witnessing U.S. occupation of neighboring Iraq, the impact of settler colonialism shaped every aspect of our social and political realities. Today, with new forms of settler-hood emerging in Syria, where non-indigenous populations are brought to settle forcibly evacuated neighborhoods, a Syrian-Palestinian feminist framework may be interesting and useful. In the context of Syria, it is important to note that, unlike in the Palestinian context, it isn’t an Arab vs. Israeli settler racial paradigm that constitutes indigeneity, but rather Armenian, Assyrian, Kurdish, and other ethnicities that are indigenous due to their historic and ongoing experience of forced removal and cultural/ethnic cleansing under the Ba’athist Arab Nationalist state, French colonialism, and the Ottoman empire. How could someone like my father’s family, who are rural, land-dwelling Arab peoples be considered in that framework? Especially if they came from nomadic Bedouin migrants, particularly when their experience of indigeneity is one of constant migration but a continual connection with the land? The language of indigeneity and settler colonialism is also about a resistance to a neocolonial regime that perpetuates environmental, cultural, and physical genocide against rural dwelling

working classes, with particularly ethnically specific experiences among Kurdish and other communities that should be accounted for and understood.

AN AUTO-HISTORIA AS A QUEER DIASPORIC SELF INSCRIPTION

As Anzaldúa (2015: 5-6) writes in *Light in the Dark: Luz en Lo Oscuro*, “In enacting the relationship between certain images and concepts and my own experience and psyche, I fuse personal narrative with theoretical discourse, autobiographical vignettes with theoretical prose. I create a hybrid genre, a new discursive mode, which I call “autohistoria” and “autohistoria-teoria.” Conectando experiencias personales con realidades sociales results in autohistoria, and theorizing about this activity results in autohistoria-teoria. It’s a way of inventing and making knowledge, meaning, and identity through self-inscriptions....” In my body alone, as a queer femme child of Syrian political activists who were forcibly displaced and exiled from their country, there are so many embodiments. Because my connection with Syria was ripped from me in a nonconsensual way, I often have had to “prove” my connection to both Syrians and Syria experts. I point to my years of research on Syria and lifelong activism with Syrian communities and mobilize Eurocentric empiricist ways of knowing in order to “show” I was “authentically”

Syrian enough to speak. I have encountered many non-Syrian Middle East Studies scholars and Syrian male activists who asked me to attest to my knowledge and experience with the oppression of the Syrian regime as a Syrian femme in diaspora (or, as some men in the revolution said to me and my friend Halla, “*Who gave you the right to speak? What do you think you know, as teenage girls living away, trying to speak about Syria?*”) And it’s true and an important reflexive exercise—what do I think I know? The reality in my positionality is that I cannot and will not speak for a lived Syrian experience on the ground in Syria that I have not lived, so I make the best effort I can to cite other Syrian voices who express their own realities. It

is an act of careful listening and constant humility. I recognize at the same time how the epistemic violence of whiteness and power has insisted that I “prove” what I know to be true, the oppression I know my family has faced and that I know continues in Syria and follows us in new ways in diaspora.

I do not participate in the same logic that measures my authenticity and connection to Syria anymore. What I do know is my connection to Syria and the pain of the systemic disconnection is in me, felt, and embodied in who I am every single day (Ghadbian 2021). I express this knowing through my being and the things I put into the world, while still grounding myself in a practice of critical listening. Gayatri Gopinath (2005) writes that “queer diasporic cultural forms and practices point to submerged histories of racist and colonialist violence that continue to resonate in the present and that make themselves felt through bodily desire. It is through the queer diasporic body that these histories are brought into the present; it is also through the queer diasporic body that their legacies are imaginatively contested and transformed. Queer diasporic cultural forms thus enact what Roach terms “clandestine counter-memories” that bring into the present those pasts that are deliberately forgotten within conventional nationalist or diasporic scripts.” As Anzaldúa (2015) puts it, writing is a gesture of the body. In writing down my own dissident experiences on the page, I counter the impossible silences and splits, the “open wounds colonization leaves in our flesh,” as Qwo Li Driskill (2004: 54) writes. I bring the submerged and subalternized histories that live in my body with me on the page. In doing so, it is also an invitation for more Syrians, from all their positionalities, to take up more space and to tell their own stories in the ways that feel true for them. My experience is only one of millions of Syrian stories. I resist the global northern tendency to individualize the story of the Syrian revolution in order to make it more comprehensible for outsiders to understand. The story of the

Syrian revolution is a collective story, which is why it is so difficult to tell. By sharing my window into it, I only share one very miniscule part. This is an open invitation for more Syrians to take up space, to share, to record their worlds, especially for the children and youth who came of age in the Syrian Revolution and whose voices are so often not taken seriously.

At the age of 16, when the Syrian revolution began, I was declared wanted by the Syrian regime for 50 million lira (1 million USD) for a viral YouTube video I created telling my family's story of forced displacement. I narrowly escaped being kidnapped by Syrian regime agents on the Syrian-Turkey border with my mother and a group of other displaced Syrian activists. I learned that act of storytelling is threatening in a totalitarian structure and in neocolonial regimes, because it is an embodied reminder of the histories they institutionally erase from the nation's collective memory. This puts me in an estranged kind of exile position—and many Syrians inside Syria, queer Syrians, non-Arab Syrians, rural dwelling Syrians, many others have communicated they feel this estrangement and sense of exile even while within the country's borders (Ghazzawi 2020). Having access to the homeland has often been used as a metric of "authenticity" rather than understanding that exile is a byproduct of Syrian-ness itself, of resistance to the state, just as Palestinian exile is a result of being Palestinian and existing under Zionist colonization. It is important to understand exile as a valid positionality while still making sure to center activists on the ground, whose work in Arabic is often rendered illegible and rarely seriously considered in scholarly work on Syria.

In my own embodiment in my queer diasporic body, I contest binary and fixed diasporic narratives that imagine Syria as a nostalgic place before the revolution. I am the child of *fela7s* on my father's side, or peasant Syrians. Their experience of Syria was one of poverty, oppression, and systemic targeting by the state (as my father puts it, "an abusive relationship

with the state. You grow up resenting Syria, resenting this place that raises you”). In Syrian literature and academic work, even in journalism, the city-dwelling Damascene experience often is over-represented, while minoritized and working-class experiences of farmer families from rural areas, despite having been at the forefront of the revolution, are often rarely considered. Scholars often claim their six-month stay in Damascus gives them the authority to speak on Syria as a whole, as diverse and vast it is. In my family history, I have a window into understanding how militarized resistance replicates violent logics of the state and marginalizes disabled, femme, child, and queer bodies. My mother’s activism in Syria Nonviolence Movement was my entry point into Syria nonviolence movement, but the nonviolent movement was full of contradictions too. Male leaders perpetuating violence against their women partners and patriarchy within the movement pushed me to seek out other revolutionary spaces, ones that were still anti-state, and imagine other forms of resistance outside of guns. This led me to YouTube, where my role in the revolution began, where the revolution was documented—in the depths of the YouTube archives, I witnessed women and youth putting on plays, usually with very few “views.”

In the YouTube videos, I saw women, men, and children saying how they wanted to put on plays to deliver political messages with the outside world. (This is the language that is most often used, “we want to share our messages with the world.”) I saw children creatively mobilizing the resources around them to tell stories of resistance to the state. I saw disabled children dancing, coloring, using their bodies in formation together and becoming more embodied. I realized that the Syrian state operates on a politics of dismemberment, what Jasbir Puar (2017) calls “the right to maim.” That the act of torturing the children of Dera’a revealed the kinds of patriarchal abuse the regime’s power structure is built on—torturing the

marginalized, the rural dwelling people, the youth, the “weak.”

Material Connections and Recollections from the Borderlands

In “Borders, Bordering, and the Transnation,” Ashcroft (2019) writes about the border “not as a thing but a *practice*. practice that produces power relationships and establishes inequalities between those who in and those who are not.” Borders are a creation of power relationships that extend beyond the physical site of the border and onto bodies who are made vulnerable, who are feminized or Othered by virtue of age, race, class, ability, and other axes of oppression. They are maintained through other kinds of borders—ideological borders that determine who is deserving of rights and who is not. In a country historically at the intersection of both imperialist (French, British) and settler colonial (Israeli) realities and under the control of a neoliberal totalitarian regime for the past 50 years, the most vulnerable members of society become collateral for the nation’s definition of who is human and who is not.

Anzaldúa’s (2015) journey through spiritual texts, geographic realities, and political violence creates a kind of medium for storytelling that takes into account expanding sexualities and spiritual wholeness and is not afraid to face the colonized within. Anzaldúa’s work is resonant within a Middle Eastern context, one where multiple layers of colonization and ethnonationalist patriarchal amnesia try to erase what she called “The Shadow Beast,” the divine feminine shadow, “the rebel.” *Borderlands* disrupts Cartesian dualities between the rational/irrational that justified colonial logics of freedom as the rational way of being versus backwards “nonhuman” life. Because racialized peoples become the embodiment of the irrational, Anzaldúa points out how their rebellion against the intimate terrorism of colonialism and patriarchy has the potential to unsettle the nation state from the margins. Anzaldúa’s idea of the Shadow beast embodies a feminized resistance that embraces sexuality and the body as the

site of resisting categories that codify difference. While Anzaldúa's embrace of the "mestiza" identity should be critiqued and understood in terms of its erasure of indigeneity and its alignment with anti-Black eugenicist nationalist narratives of the Mexican state, the impulse to connect the lived experiences of racialized, queer, feminized bodies to an epistemology of the imagination is the essence of what I draw upon here methodologically.

In my body, viscerally, I know the cross-racialization experiences that Arabs and others who are racialized by borders share. Growing up in a southern, white-dominated space, peers used the phrase "dirty little Mexican girl" to describe me more than once. I was criminalized and tried in court because an old white woman accused me of pushing her down in the grocery store as a child, after which her daughter called me a "stupid Mexican girl." These constant experiences of cross-and hyper racialized forms of violence are what catapulted me into a fascination with studying race and racializations in the U.S. I knew that "Syrian" bodies could stand-in for many different racial and ideological categories simultaneously. A large part of the Syrian experience is being expelled and harassed at borders because our bodies contradict the very ideologies that enforce them. In a post 9/11 context, I was racialized as Muslim Other and Mexican/Caribbean/Central and Latin American at the same time, in almost substitutional ways. The borderlands theories speak to me because at every border crossing I've experienced, this duplicity of racializations has intersected with my gender, sexuality, and other systems of oppression to form my experience.

Journal entry: Dec. 2015: Breathless / running from the border/ on foot again/ I was harassed slash "flirted with" by the border patrol officer who said Why don't you speak Spanish? Aren't you Mexican? No I'm Arab. Oh I see, well you can't pass until you answer everything in French. Are you serious? Pourquoi est-ce que tu as visite Tijuana? I look at him like "is this motherfucker serious" as he repeats the question. Pourquoi est que tu as visite Tijuana. My random eighth grade knowledge of French has come in handy here. J'ai visite une amie. I visited a friend. (Really I just gave a talk to the Zapatista collective in Tijuana about Syria and Palestinian solidarity with my friend. The very structures we were talking about are coming to

play out on my body in this moment after my talk—race, gender, sexuality, Syrian-ness, indigeneity, French colonialism, neoliberalism.) He looks me up and down in my black holiday dress (I'm about to go to the Ethnic Studies holiday mixer in Oceanside). I can't explain the kind of hypersexual and patriarchal energy at other moments on the border when I have been told, almost flirtatiously, with a kind of enjoyment: "We're going to have to send you to secondary to get inspected." Every time I hear "you'll be fine!" "it's easy to cross the border!" "it takes like five minutes" and every single fucking time I am detained into the secondary area. When crossing via car, sometimes I go with QTPOC collectives to meet with local activists in Tijuana, my car gets searched and I am held for hours, uncertain, reading ayat al kursi and just praying I don't get physically harmed. I was in Tunisia in 2014 for six months in a program about youth, women, and the Arab Spring. It was late at night and I was taking a taxi home from the student center, which was a five-minute trip by car. There was a military checkpoint—the armed military officer took my papers. "Where are you from?" "My passport is American." Yes, but where are you from? "I'm from Syria." What are you doing here? "Studying Arabic." (that was true, I was taking an advanced Arabic class and writing essays on women's activism in the Arab Spring.)

There's no way this passport is real. You claim to be an American, but you're darker than me. You claim you're studying Arabic, but you're speaking in Arabic. This must be a fake passport. There was a lot going on. Colorism, stupidity, but similar questions and similar dumbfoundment I would always get on the Mexican border. He confiscated my passport and I started panicking. Once I was in secondary inspection on the U.S.-Mexican border and the officer looked at me and my best friend, who is West African from New York. "So you're driving in a car with an Arkansas license plate, from San Diego to Tijuana, but your passport says you were born in New Jersey and she's from New York? I'm supposed to believe all that?" We looked at each other and could read in that phrase alone the coded anti-Blackness, Islamophobia (she wears a headscarf), and xenophobia. As if listing the places had some kind of profound connect the dots moment that would reveal that we were coded undercover terrorists.

In "La Frontera to Gaza: Chicano-Palestinian Connections," Pulido and Lloyd (2010)

write that during Israel's Operation Cast Lead against Gaza, U.S. media pundits and politicians asked the question "what if a terrorist group were lobbing rockets into San Diego from Tijuana?" They connect the material connections between U.S border policies and Israeli occupation, such as the fact that the border separation wall on the U.S.-Mexico border is built by Elbit Systems, an Israeli company that build the apartheid wall in Palestine. The creation of homeland security, ICE, after 9/11, the experiences of oppression and struggle against the racist immigration system, Donald Trump's tweets about illegal Mexicans and "unknown Middle Easterners," all bind the borderlands theories of Anzaldúa and other Chicana feminists with SWANA realities. As Jose

Fuste (2010: 793) wrote in “La Frontera and Gaza: Comparative Lessons on Racializing Discourses and State Violence,” “the Palestinian Struggle is not only one we can sympathize from afar; it is one that reminds us of the unfinished struggle for racial justice in the United States and from whose dignity and persistence we have much to learn.”

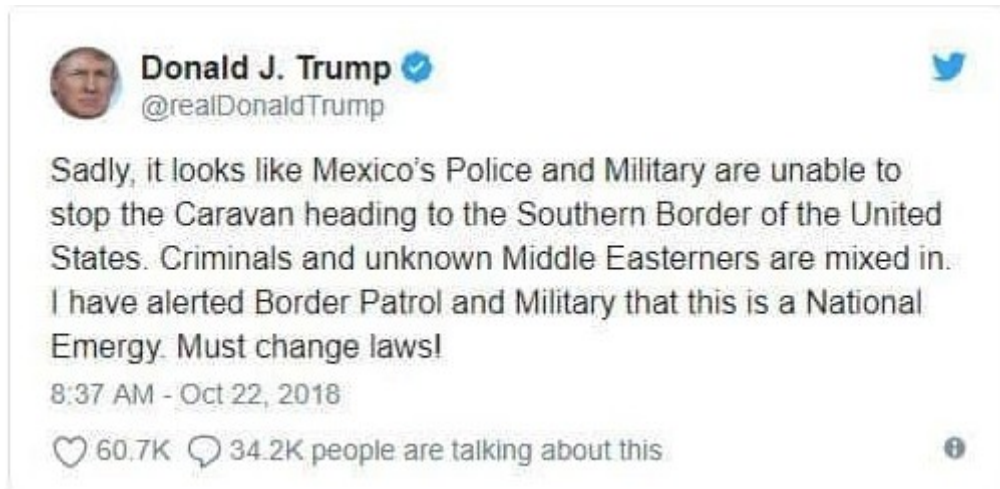


Figure 1.5: tweet from Donald Trump Oct. 22, 2018 that reads “Sadly, it looks like Mexico’s Police and Military are unable to stop the Caravan heading to the Southern Border of the United States. Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in. I have alerted Border Patrol and Military that is a National Emergency. Must change laws!”



Figure 1.6: Scene at the U.S.-Mexico border in Tijuana in Nov. 2018 in which U.S. border patrol attacked families attempting to cross with rubber bullets and tear gas.

What may be useful is connecting Anzaldúa's methods to Steven Salaita's (2016) framework that understands the connections between Palestine and North American indigenous communities' struggle, which he calls a theory of inter/nationalism, a decolonial practice that understands indigeneity outside of the parameters of the nation state and "demands commitment to mutual liberation based on the proposition that colonial power must be rendered diffuse across multiple hemispheres through reciprocal struggle." And understanding how legal and political infrastructures such as the creation of ICE after 9/11, the creation of the department of homeland security, the intersecting experiences of oppression and struggle within the racialized immigration system creates a kinship and understanding of the Syrian-Palestinian struggle as it relates to indigenous people's struggles on Turtle Island, even while Syrians and Palestinians flee their lands and become settlers and occupy contradictory racial positions in the North American

settler colonial system. It is important to understand how the mandate system in Palestine and Syria “became another scene of exchange and implementation of European colonial modes of governance tested elsewhere” (Sherif 2019). Arabs and Mexicans in particular also share histories of neocolonial governments and racialized nationalisms that erase indigenous groups and perpetuate structural and ontological anti-Blackness through social othering and constant erasure of Black Arabs and Black Mexican peoples, histories, and erasing Arab/ Mexican participation in enslavement of Black African people. It is critical to understand the connections between our struggles in terms of settler-colonialism and not rely on the same militarized nationalisms that perpetuate narratives of racial “purity” and “unity” built on anti-Blackness and anti-indigenous violence.

I draw on Anzaldúa’s methodology while still understanding the contradictions and complexities of sharing these analytics. She builds an “epistemology of the imagination,” engaging her own experience to write the stories of oppression that have written themselves on our bodies as queer, nonbinary people of color caught between highly militarized borders and empires. She writes

Using a multidisciplinary approach and a “storytelling” format, I theorize my own and others’ struggles for representation, identity, self-inscription, and creative expressions. When I “speak” myself in creative and theoretical writings, I constantly shift positions--which means taking into account ideological remolinos (whirlwinds), cultural dissonance, and the convergence of competing worlds. It means dealing with the fact that I, like most people, inhabit different cultures and, when crossing to other mundos, shift into and out of perspectives corresponding to each; it means living in liminal spaces, in nepantlas... “Soy la que escribe y se escribe / I am the one who writes and who is being written. Ultimamente es el escribir que me escribe / It is the writing that “writes” me. I “read” and “speak” myself” into being. Writing is the site where I critique reality, identity, language, and dominant culture’s representation and ideological control” (3).

Through this self-inscription, she creates an auto-ethnography where she is “both observer and participant, subject and object,” to create her own language of her awareness and experience

navigating the systems of oppression that fracture our minds, bodies, communities, and spirits.

Journal entry: Linked by sweetgrass/ growing up, every other summer my sister and I were sent to Jordan to live with our aunts and grandparents. We would begrudgingly get sent to the local community center to learn “life skills,” or what my aunts called “fela7a skills,” land-based, feminized forms of labor that we “missed out on” in our American upbringing—which meant we were taught basket weaving, how to sew, and how to make cosmetic wax from scratch. So all summer, we mixed sugar over hot burners, measured and cut cloth, and wove baskets. Because in the colonial space, you forget to work with your hands. In college, my uncle would always say with a wink “You’re studying women’s studies, so like chopping parsley and cleaning toilets, right?” That is the gendered work that holds our communities together. Baskets sprinkled with glitter. Insignificant women’s work. In grad school I recall attending a workshop at NWSA with Qwo Li Driskill and it was the first time in my graduate school experience where I actually felt embodied. Qwo Li brought what we call “qash,” basket weaving grasses. We wove baskets together in the same way we do in the “blad” the homelands, the Cherokee weaving structures and the Syrian “fela7a” designs were exactly the same. I had a muscle memory in my fingers that was older than what I could even explain. These were the baskets that reminded me of my grandmother and the land she tended to every day until she was forced to flee in the night.

A SHAMANIC “SHEIKHA” METHODOLOGY

I received support from the spirit world throughout writing this dissertation. While finishing my masters’ method paper, my first sisterfriend from the Syrian Revolution, Halla Barakat, along with her mother, Orouba Bakarar, were brutally murdered. They were murdered the week her mother was opening a Syrian women’s refugee collective in Istanbul. Their spirits helped me illuminate insights that generated this dissertation. Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) writes about shamanic journeying, in which the shaman “accesses spiritual realities unseen by those whose awareness focuses entirely on the ordinary reality of daily life. The shaman, or in my case the “sheikha” is a “walker between the worlds,” “moving from one zone to another to encounter “spirits” from whom she or he obtains healing insights and brings them back to help their community” (32). The sheikha in many desert-dwelling Arab communities is the medicine person who reads the cowrie shells, interprets dreams, speaks with the spirits, and lives to support community liberation. As Anzaldúa writes, the shaman consults spirits who guide and

support her, “the spirits of place; the elemental spirits of air, water, fire, and earth; or ancestral spirits of the dead” (33). Anzaldúa writes that Carlos Castaneda and others argue that shifting to a dreaming body allows for a way to channel messages for liberatory means. She writes that “we are able to “see” when we shift our stance from the perceptual to the imaginal, from...the world of ordinary reality...to the second attention (the other reality). When we shift our attention, we enact “dreaming,”...”seeing” from the other side (34). Anzaldúa calls these “willed interactions with imaginal realities” ensuenos. In these imaginal spaces, Anzaldúa writes, “I process feelings, traumas, negativities, resulting from gender, racial or other oppressions, and I mourn my losses.” Throughout this process, my dreams have shown me the way. I dreamt of this topic, I dreamt the research I would do, and questions I had along the way. I believe dreams are forms of time travel and ancestral guidance. I take messages I received from the dreamtime as a decolonial epistemology that is spirit led heart led body somatic intelligence and ancestral memory.

The stories that I see in my dream worlds illuminated other forces, stories, and realities beyond my ordinary world. They were also a way of healing—dreams “are a form of experience, a dimension in which life and mind seem to be embedded. Dream reality is a parallel continuum” (Anzaldúa 2015). Leanne Simpson (2021: 193) writes, “my ancestors are not in the past. The spiritual world does not exist in some mystical realm. These forces and beings are right here beside me—inspiring, loving, and caring for me in each moment and compelling me to do the same. It is my responsibility with them and those yet unborn to continuously give birth to my indigenous present.”

Dream interlude: How can we be in our bodies/ Friday March 13, 2020 {interestingly enough, this was the date the pandemic hit our town and shit hit the fan in the U.S.} I dreamt that adrienne maree brown posts a writing prompt and she encouraged people to respond in 5,000 words or less. In the prompt, she asks: How can our communities be in our bodies? As part of the prompt, she sends a YouTube link to her aunt’s community center space for us to take notes

on. Her aunt is a Black femme immigrant from Brazil & in the video she talks about her community center in Brazil where they hold dance classes, yoga, karate, and workshops on STIs and sexual health. She asked the teens what activities they wanted to do and they created the program. I took notes on notebook paper and it reminded me a lot of the activities we had done for Syrian youth in Arab Youth Collective in El Cajon. I began to brainstorm more ways my community can be in their bodies more, and it felt so inspiring to see the work happening in her aunt's context, using body-based practices to heal from colonial violence. It is clear to me that the question is: in the wake of ongoing settler colonial and authoritarian violence that displaces us from our lands and spirits, how can our communities be in our bodies?

Simpson refers to “Everyday Decolonization: Living a Decolonizing Queer Politics” where Kwakwaka’wakw scholar Sarah Hunt and non-indigenous scholar Cindy Holmes (2015) ask “what does decolonization look and feel like?” How can it be embodied in our intimate lives? Simpson (2021) argues that in order to be centered in our indigenous presents, rather than centered in responding to the neoliberal politics of the state, *we must become embodied*. To align ourselves with the visions of indigenous futures, one where indigenous freedoms are centered, requires countering the body/spirit displacement colonial systems create. Simpson writes that “The generative and emergent qualities of living in our bodies as political orders represent the small and first steps of aligning oneself and one’s life in the present with the visions of an indigenous future that are radically decoupled from the domination of colonialism and where Indigenous freedom is centered” (192).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SYRIA’S STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

To understand why the 2011 uprisings were momentous, it is important to situate them within the context of Arab, Middle Eastern (West Asian), and North African political histories. The term “Arab Uprisings” is limited in describing who participated in the string of popular protest movements beginning in 2011 that occurred and continue in the geographic region Middle East Studies theorists call the “Arab World,” a name embraced in favor of the colonial

invention “Middle East,” but also critiqued for its misleading assumption that only Arab people populate the West Asian peninsula and North African regions. This name categorizes West Asian/North African people on the basis of shared linguistic and cultural ties to the Arabic language and countries’ membership in the Arab League. In many political organizing spaces and in Ethnic Studies, the term “Southwest Asia and North Africa,” (SWANA) is presented as an alternative to the limitations of the term “Middle East,” and “Arab World,” but still carries limitations. The term “Arab Uprisings” invisibilizes peoples, including but not limited to Imazighen, Kurdish people, Druze, Circassians, Assyrians, Armenians, Copts, Maronites, Romani, Turkmen, Yazidis, Mandeans, Nubians, and members of other ethnic minority groups who played important roles in the uprisings. Part of creating new epistemologies and vocabularies to document the narratives of SWANA people outside of the Orientalist framework is acknowledging the limitations of these terms.

In the 1950s and 1960s, momentous struggles against colonial occupations thrust the Arab world into pan-Arabist “post-colonial” governments, from Egypt to Sudan to Libya to Tunisia to Syria, and the military heroes from these resistance struggles were elected presidents-for-life—from Sadat to Bashir to Gaddafi to Bourguiba to Assad (Lynch 2013). Although some of the leaders came to power with the genuine spirit of their revolutionary agendas intact, they replicated systems of colonial abuse and violence through enacting neoliberal, neocolonial economic, political, and constitutional policies that policed the movement, speech, and resistance of Middle Eastern and North African people. Pan Arabism attempted to solidify the fiction of one consistent Arab national identity across the region through forced Arabization and “modernization” programs such as the Ba’athist modernization program of the 1980s that introduced large scale agro-projects to “manage” rural populations with devastating effects, and

Bourguiba's modernization programs for rural Imazighen people living in the mountains of Tunisia that banned their languages and monitored their movements doubly.

A SHORT CHRONOLOGY OF REPRESSION IN SYRIA

Syria's early borders were created in part from an agreement between the British and French in 1916 called Sykes-Picot (Cleveland 2001). Syria was under French colonial rule under the post-World War I League of Nations mandate from 1923 to 1945, an era characterized by censorship, harassment, and discrimination against the Alawite minority and Sunni majority (Batatu 1981). When Syrians declared their independence from the French in 1945, the country saw a brief shift to democratic rule, which created space for free intellectual and political development to flourish in civil society. This brief and fragile period was shattered when Husni al-Zai'm, a military official motivated by the Arab defeat in the Arab-Israeli war, staged a coup in 1949. His coup was followed by a series of other military coups characterized by "tightened state control of cultural instructions" (Kahf 2001: 227). After al-Za'i'm's assassination in 1949, Kurdish military leader Adib Shishakli rose to power and banned political opposition from the Muslim Brotherhood, the People's Party of Aleppo, the Community Party, and the Ba'athist Party (Paul 1990:123). After Shishakli's regime was overthrown in 1954, there was a very brief restoration of the parliamentary body and another short democratic period; various socialist and Syrian nationalist political parties fought for control. From 1958 to 1961, Syria joined in a political union with Egypt called the United Arab Republic, which increased the Syrian state's censorship powers (Middle East Watch 1991).

The brief periods of democratic rule in Syria "are important because they establish that Syrians do indeed understand and have a collective memory of the political freedoms they lack today" (Kahf 2001: 228). In 1963, a police state headed by the secular Ba'athist Party came into

power. I remember my grandparents describing the terror they felt when they watched the Ba'ath Party assume power and asserting their dominance by broadcasting public executions of Nasserite party activists on state television. Hafez al-Assad, one of the founding members of the Ba'athist party and a military hero from the Alawite minority, named himself president in 1970 (Dagher 2019). Under the Ba'athist regime, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom to protest, and freedom to assemble were outlawed under the Emergency Martial Laws of 1963, which lasted until the Syrian uprisings began in 2011.

The State of Emergency [gave] sweeping powers to the Martial Law Governor and his Deputy (Minister of the Interior) to restrict freedom of assembly and movement; to censor mail, other communications, broadcasts and publications; to confiscate, suspend and close organs of the media; and to requisition or confiscate property. The State of Emergency also includes a long list of offenses "Against State Security" and those which "Constitute a General Danger. (Paul 1990: 26)

The Emergency Martial law also suspended habeas corpus and expanded the definition of what characterizes a political crime, as any "offense against the security of the state... actions considered incompatible with the implementation of the socialist order, whether they are deeds, utterances, or writing, or are done by any means of communication or publication... or [any act that] opposes the unification of the Arab states or hinders their achievement" (Paul 1990: 27).

Essentially, given the vague definitions and arbitrary discretion of the military officials who determined what constituted political crimes, any disagreement with or act of resistance against the Ba'athist government was deemed illegal. Anyone violating the Emergency Law was brought before a military regime court without the protection of the rights of the accused (George 2003). Any opposition to the self-elected Ba'athist government was legally punishable by imprisonment, torture, or death which was codified in the new constitution of 1973. The Ba'athist party established a totalitarian authoritarian regime structure, led by Hafez al-Assad and members of the Assad family (Seurat 2012). The regime began to fortify itself through

institutional incorporation of authoritarian control: a 15-branch security apparatus, an extensive prison system, a large army, corporatized partners and international actors who funded the regime, and a crackdown on social life in the public sector and in media (Abboud 2015). Assad's brother Rifa'at was in charge of the military, while Muhammad Makhoul, his brother-in-law, was in charge of the economy of the inner structure, and a judicial branch was established as a mere formality (Seale 1989).⁷

The regime operated in a mafia-like structure that used the overlap of sect and class privilege to establish a ruling class (Batattu 1999). In this structure the regime systematically oppressed ethnic minorities such as Kurdish people, Druze, Assyrians, Ismailis, and Circassians, with particular emphasis on targeting rural living fela7 ("peasant") classes through modernization projects that had devastating environmental effects on their land and ability to farm despite its original party rhetoric that incorporated populist goals (Daoudy 2020). In order to establish dominance, the regime created what Syria scholar Lisa Wedeen (1999) describes as a "cult of personality," a complex system of mass propaganda, media, and control over education—in order to reshape historical narratives into a mythologized account of the president-as-hero to keep Syrians living in fear and ignorance. "Asad's personality cult served

⁷ To understand the essence of Hafez' al Assad's regime, it is critical to understand there was the official structure and the inner structure—the decision-making inner circle that included the head of the mukhabarat (secret police), the army units, and other loyalists who advised the president and were close to the Assad family, while the outer structure included formal institutions such as the cabinet and parliament. The official state structure established a bureaucracy that became a way to reward loyalists who held various positions in the Ba'athist Party or Ba'ath-aligned parties. This formed what was known as Al Jabha al Watiniya al Taqdamia—the Nationalist Front Assembly that was part of the outer structure—and Assad was appointed the official security general. In a so-called People's Council, or Majlis asha3ib, the Parliament, there were periodic elections but was/continues to be a "rubber stamp" body that serves as part of the outer structure. These two intertwining structures, the outer one and the inner, allowed for a way to Ba'ath party became the structure for state surveillance by enforcing a system of informants in all areas of political life. The inner circle was also funded by an economy of smuggling that when Bashar inherited the presidency, would translate to Rami Makloul's monopolization of the cellular phone economy in a way that would benefit the Assad family (Ghadbian 2021 (personal conversation) and Dagher 2019).

as a disciplinary device, generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens acted *as if* they revered their leader. By inundating daily life with instructive symbolism, the regime exercised a subtle yet effective form of power. The cult worked to enforce obedience, induce complicity, atomize Syrians from one another, and establish the guidelines for public speech and action” (Wedeen 1999: viii). As early as the 1960s, the Ba’athist regime consolidated power by purging oppositional forces from all state apparatuses and fortifying itself through human rights abuses. When in 1976, a militant wing of the Muslim Brotherhood called Fighting Vanguard launched a wave of bombings targeting members of the Alawite community (Dagher 2019), and when a group of students at Aleppo University began nonviolently protesting, the regime crackdown of the late 1970s and early 1980s began.

SILENCES IN SYRIAN CULTURAL MEMORY

I felt the impact of the systemic Syrian governments’ human rights abuses in my family and family’s communities, where accounts of torture in political prisons and rape by regime agents (who are called “Shebiha,” an Arabic word that literally translates into phantom or ghosts) haunted and wounded people around me. I had several young family members who were forcibly disappeared by regime agents on their way from their high school exams in the 1980s. My grandmother, father, and uncles went through the streets calling their names every night for weeks. Every time I am with my grandmother, she tells me their names and their stories. How a family member was tortured in the electric chair and returned from prison covered in blood. Some are still disappeared. No funeral, no closure, just erased from history. I had grown up with family members’ sudden jumps and paranoias every time you open or close the door, but I never knew what they had been through, or that an entire generation in the 1980s had gone through it.

Some Syrians dissidents belonged to a group of religiously conservative anti-imperialist Islamists—a term that refers to individuals who practice political applications of Islam called the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is ideologically and politically rooted in the Salafiyya movement that emerged in Ottoman-era Syria as a way “to reform Islam from within in order to give the Arab world the resources deemed necessary to confront the challenges of European domination” (Lefevre 2013: 3). Although the Muslim Brotherhood has evolved into different strands across the Arab World, varying in political nature, the branch in Syria was formally established in 1945 as a “particularly moderate politico-religious trend instinctively favouring political pluralism and religious tolerance” that relied heavily on populist discourse (Lefevre 2013: 4). According to the Emergency Law of July 8, 1980, membership in the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria was punishable by death (Paul 1990).

The context of regime repression and censorship of free speech in the 1970s and 1980s Syria cannot be discussed without mentioning the Hama Massacre. In 1982, a group of armed revolutionaries affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood staged an uprising against regime officials in Hama, a city on the Orontes River in western Syria (Lefevre 2013: 122). In response to the uprising, the Syrian Arab army under commands from Hafez al-Assad barricaded the city and massacred everyone in the city limits, from women to children to the men who had staged the uprising. According to a 1991 Human Rights Watch account, “virtually every façade [in Hama] [was] pockmocked with shell holes.” Between 17,000 and 40,000 people died. Exact estimates do not exist because of the systematic erasure of the Hama Massacre from Syrian history and collective Syrian memory. As soon as the bodies were piled into mass hidden graves, the government insisted that the uprising in Hama never happened.

When governments are responsible for committing genocides against their own people,

denial is a common strategy to bypass international human rights law, as in the case of the Armenian genocide in Turkey, and the ongoing genocide against Black and Native people in the U.S. The Hama Uprising was wiped from Syrian history and any mentions of it were punishable by death, imprisonment, and torture. Hama also came during a chain of a series of events in the 1980s that repressed political opposition movements, including the massacre of political prisoners in Tadmur in 1980, the executions at Sheikh Miskin Prison in June 1985, executions at Jisr al-Shughur, Ma'arra, Idlib, and the killing of two hundred unarmed Syrian political opponents in Tripoli, Lebanon in 1986 (Paul 1990). During my organizing in 2011 with other Syrians in the diaspora, I met a Syrian engineer who was imprisoned at the age of thirteen for asking where Hama was at a train station shortly after the massacre. "It does not exist," police officers told him. "What do you mean, it does not exist?" he asked. "I know it exists. I am looking to buy a train ticket there." They abducted him and kept him in political prison for the next ten years of his life, where he communicated revolutionary messages with other prisoners with tiny scraps of paper and pencil. He learned while in prison what had happened to Hama and it fueled his desire to fight the systematic erasure of resistance in Syria.

My great uncle Taha had been murdered during military training, and there was a lot of speculation in the family whether it was political assassination either from the Ba'athists or al Hizb al Qawmi during the time of the nationalist regime, before the Ba'ath government took power. Years later, my grandfather, known for being active politically against the Ba'ath, was targeted by the regime. During the early 1980s, my grandfather was living in the Emirates to provide for his family while they were in Syria and returned to Syria in the summers. One summer, twenty regime agents armed with machine guns stormed our family home to detain and arrest him in political prison without trial. I heard accounts of the story of how he escaped

through fragments growing up, but it was not until the Syrian Revolution began in 2011 that family silences were broken, and stories were told in full for the first time.

In “The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature,” Kahf (2001) discusses the politics of Syrian silence, particularly as it relates to the Hama massacre. The silences in Syrian history, literature, and political discourse on contemporary Syria enable the cult of personality narrative to legitimize Assad’s abuse of power, “as a constituent element in the fabric of political life in Syria; the cult evolves, waxes and wanes, changes direction, and returns to prior points of emphasis in response to identifiable political crises that challenges the regime’s idealized representations of events, conditions, and people” (Wedeen 1999: 34). “The Assad clan had embedded itself in the fabric of Syrian society and unscrupulously manipulated class and religion fissures to empower itself, effectively co-opting Syria’s national identity. Syria became *Souriya al-Assad* (“Assad’s Syria)” (xxii Dagher 2019).

I was motivated to trace the contours of these silences in the resistance narratives of Syrians in the diaspora. My mother’s family were also displaced for being active against the regime. Her father was an outspoken activist and witnessed his comrades from different political parties disappear in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of their family friends were forced into exile, but even then, some could not escape the iron fist of regime control.

Even after her family fled and immigrated to the U.S. in 1971, my mother heard stories about regime agents following activists into the diaspora and targeting their families. In the early 1980s, the wife of a Muslim Brotherhood political activist named Banan al-Tantawi was murdered by Syrian regime agents in her own home in exile in Germany in front of her four children. Her murder was a regime strategy to punish her husband, the former director of the Muslim Brotherhood’s nonviolent branch, for his political organizing—a transgression that

followed him even in exile. It catapulted my mother's family into a fear that concretized itself into silence and secrets about their own stories and whereabouts. They were forced, at one point, briefly to live under fake names and fake addresses in the U.S for fear that Syrian regime agents would track them down and massacre her siblings or mother to target my grandfather's political work. It was a fear that was not unwarranted, as regime agents did follow us and tried to kidnap my mother and me outside Syria's borders for ransom over thirty years later. It was a fear that followed my friend Halla and her mom in their own home when they were murdered in Istanbul in 2017 for being outspoken feminist pro-revolution activists in our community.

In the 1980s, my father was forced to burn his childhood photographs, change his name, and flee Syria for his life. His friends were detained for their affiliation to him and during widespread government raids against what were considered rebellious rural dwelling youth-- some were tortured, others escaped too. With the knowledge of my family's political history given to me in hushed pieces, I was yearning to know more. I wanted to fill in the gaps and record the narratives that were forced into hiding. When I was a youth, watching Egyptian and Tunisian protesters tear down the systems that had imprisoned and abused them for so long, I felt a sense of collective liberation. I began connecting with other activists inside and who were fleeing. Political pundits predicted that the prospect of resistance in Syria was slim. In fact, internal intelligence and security services briefed the Syrian president that "It is impossible for Syria to witness anything of the sort. everything is under control... Syria is immune to the turmoil" (Dagher 2019). Activists in exile had attempted to organize a "Day of Anger" in Syria on February 5th, 2011, but no one physically came out into the streets for fear of death, torture, and the massacre of their loved ones (Abdulhamid 2011). Academics and experts on the region predicted that a revolution in Syria was impossible, especially because a large-scale political

mobilization had not occurred since the 1982 Hama Massacre, which had set a grim example for the future of political mobilization in Syria. Political opposition since Hama was mostly limited to exiles who organized the Damascus Spring in the early 2000s and who signed the Damascus Declaration calling for improved human rights in Syria. Kurdish revolutionary groups organized protests in Qamishlo on March 12, 2004 calling for better treatment as ethnic minorities (and amazingly burned down the local Ba'ath party office as well as toppling a statue of Hafez al-Assad). They were brutally repressed by the regime, who sent thousands of troops, arrested thousands of activists, killed over thirty people, and caused thousands to flee to neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan (Yassin Kassab and Al Shami 2016). On March 12, 2011, Kurdish protestors in Qamishlo, led by Kurdish woman activist Hervene Awsi, commemorated those fallen protestors, laying the groundwork for the revolutionary protests to come later that week.

I grew up hearing about the human rights abuses of the Assad regime and witnessed how it shaped my family, the silences between us, and the traumas that remained unsaid. When the uprisings began in 2011, my uncle was visiting my family home. I remember watching my loved ones watch protestors demand an end to dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt with tears in their eyes. This was the reason they fled, this was the reason they resisted, this was the reason they lived in fear for so many years.

That February 2011, with a poster of Bouazizi's Tunisia behind me, I made a YouTube video from my living room sharing my family's story of displacement and calling for freedom and justice in Syria. I didn't expect much, but the video circulated. And circulated. My aunt's friend called. "Your niece is on the news!" The Syrian government played my video on the news, Ad-Dounia TV channel, and referred to me as an example of a child terrorist attempting to overthrow the government. I used Facebook to reach out to Syrian woman activist and single

mother, Suheir Atassi, who was instrumental in organizing early mobilizations before the revolution began in Syria. She described to me how she organized solidarity vigils with Tunisia and Egypt outside of their embassies in Feb. 2011 and how regime agents (shebiha) responded by beating her and her fellow activists. I remember her telling me, “They treated us like insects. They stomped on us and beat us like we didn’t matter.”

It was our connection via Facebook that brought Suheir and me into conversation, and internet access to footage of revolutions in North Africa that inspired Dera’an children to resist. When the children of Dera’a, a quiet rural village in Syria inscribed anti-regime slogans--We want the fall of the regime! and Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!--onto the walls of their elementary school walls and were tortured, the first ones to take to the streets in response were disenfranchised youth. They released a series of demands and flooded the streets of Dera’a on March 18, 2011. Other rural cities in Syria joined in solidarity, and by the next week, protesters were in the streets of Banyas holding red roses and water bottles to the sky, demanding retribution for the collective abuse Syrians had suffered. This creative symbolic nonviolent resistance was in large part crafted by women activists in the Local Coordinating Committees that emerged as the Revolution took shape. Soon the Syrian Revolution became known as “The Youtube Revolution,” because of the day-to-day live streams of footage that citizen activists uploaded to social media platforms to document the abuses of the regime. The Revolutionary Youth Council of Dera’a posted their demands for freedom and justice as a document in their neighborhood Facebook group. In the summer of 2011, my mother and I traveled to the Turkish-Syrian border to join the Syrian revolution and activist efforts my mom was connected to on the ground, with grassroots support of the first wave of refugees displaced by regime violence. While there, some Syrians recognized me as the “Syria Youtube Girl” and shared

with me unspeakable stories of violence. Social media allowed Syrians access to share their experiences, on their own terms. This documentation and sharing was a radical act, particularly in a culture where regime repression enacted a sense of collective fear. We had begun organizing with local activists to distribute underwear, socks, and diapers to refugees on the border and to record interviews with recently displaced political prisoners. My mother was also engaged in a collective effort to organize a political oppositional body. She was organizing a flotilla with other Syrian women, a radio network, and documented forced disappearances with the Syria Prisoner's Movement, uploading prisoners' stories and making videos about their stories to share on Facebook pages, as well as organizing with Syria Nonviolence Movement and arranging meetings with local officials and refugees seeking asylum in Canada. Orders were sent through the town to begin a search for my mother and me. Why would a regime capable of massacring thousands of people, who regularly used medieval-like torture in underground prisons to silence activists, who later would use internationally banned chemical weapons and displace over 13 million people to cling to its power, why would they be so threatened by a sixteen-year-old girl from YouTube? Why was it so necessary to send 12 men to kidnap my mother and me even though we were outside Syria?

Later that summer after my mother and I fled to Istanbul where we joined other oppositional activists, I met my friend Halla, who encouraged me and all the young people to study the strategies of other movements, like Bosnian youth in the 90s who used creative graphics to resist against their state, and who brought all the youth together to create our own poetic video in which we shared our visions for a future Syria.

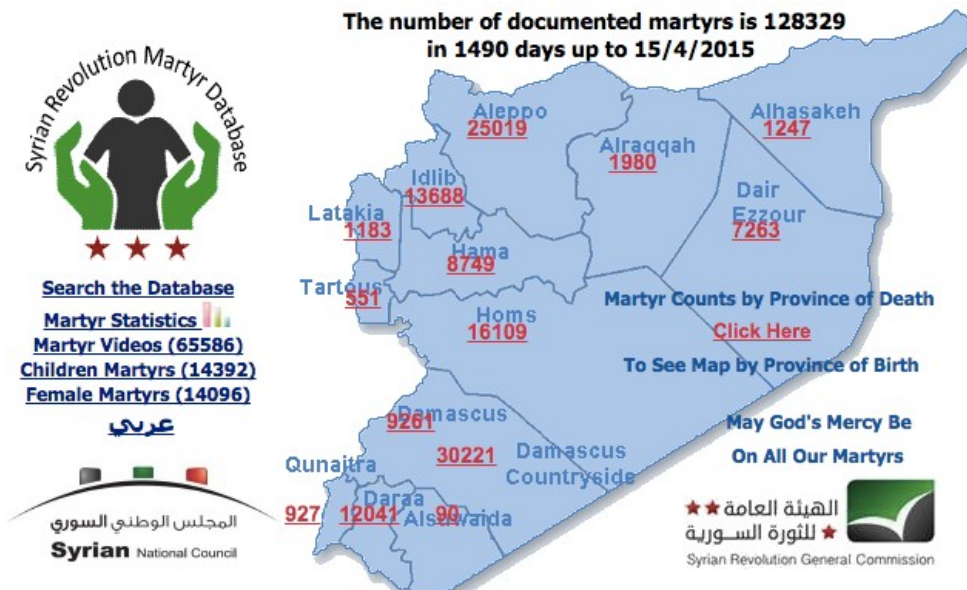


Figure 1.7: An example of the online documentation grassroots civil society organizations in Syria and the political opposition (the Syrian National Council) have created with YouTube videos of protestors' deaths included. Source: The Syrian Revolution Martyr Database.

After that summer in Turkey in 2011, I spent summers volunteering at a Syrian refugee social services center run by my aunt Hanna and other displaced Syrian women in Amman, Jordan until 2018. I traveled to Chios, Greece in 2016 where I translated for displaced Syrians after the EU Turkey Deportation deal where millions of Syrians were sent orders to be forcibly deported back to Turkey after risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean. I co-created arts and social support program for Syrian refugee youth in El Cajon in 2016-2017 where we did yoga, breakdancing, art making, and used crafts to tell stories of displacement and heal. We partnered with the local Alfred Olango BLM chapter, Colectivo Zapatista, Anakbayan, Palestine Youth Movement and others to hold protests and teach Syrian youth about movements for racial and social justice. As this was happening, more of my loved ones were fleeing Syria, and were

banned from entry in the U.S. Witnessing these moments and participating in the struggle for liberation across borders are the backbone of this dissertation.

One day I opened the *Huffington Post* online and saw that a white woman professor had written a riveting story about Syrian political refugees who fell in love during the Revolution. She wrote about an activist niece who had uploaded videos for Syria on YouTube. It sounded like me, but I didn't recognize myself. I realized that she was describing my uncle and his wife, who had just left Homs in the middle of shelling to be his lover in Jordan. I knew the realities of my communities and the complexity of their stories. The article framed my uncle's wife as a victim and he as her savior, when family members knew a very different story, one where she left Homs under bombing to meet up with him on her own accord because she was in love. Other people are constantly writing Syrian stories, and we are displaced from our own voices, with much higher stakes. My dad was one of the first Syrians to publicly speak out against the regime on Al Jazeera during the nineties. But each time he spoke out against the government, he would wonder which of our family members back home might be tortured or kidnapped because of his words. Many of my family's testimonials are in books on Syria today, but often times they are quoted, by western researchers who get to journey inside and out of Syria, without due credit. Later the same scholar who wrote the article would publish a book with my family's testimonies of regime violence. Their first names were there but the last name was omitted, and there were no mentions of them in the acknowledgements. As Audra Simpson (2014: 2) writes in "On Ethnographic Refusal, "I am interested in the way that cultural analysis may look when difference is not the unit of analysis, when culture is disaggregated into narratives rather than wholes, when proximity to the territory that one is engaging in is as immediate as the self, and what this then does to questions of "voice." Reading my own family narratives that had been

distorted into Orientalist sensationalism motivated me to authentically research the stories of Syrian women in my family and in our community.

Each summer in Jordan, I listened to the stories of many Syrian women who were struggling in a society that did not allow their husbands to obtain work visas, driver's licenses, or citizenship. As many of the women struggled to feed their families and raise their children under stable circumstances, they began developing informal economies from the ground up. No NGOs taught them these skills. They already knew how to make something out of nothing and built entire structures to support that work. These were Syrian women who had already participated in revolution, many of them sewing, demonstrating in the streets, sheltering vulnerable people, and creating networks of care under precarious circumstances. I watched displaced Syrian women envision creative ways to stay afloat in the diasporic space, starting their own underground hair salon businesses, selling homemade meat patties, and sewing clothing to sell to provide for their families in the face of socioeconomic and xenophobic discrimination in Jordan. A few years later, groups of these same women in my community were holding theatre-based classrooms to talk about sexual and domestic violence. Women were actively carving out underground and alternative economies to take advantage of the limited resources they had and using them in innovative ways to heal and liberate each other.

CONCLUSION: SYRENA SUBJECTIVITIES~ CREATIVE, COMMUNAL LAND-BASED LIBERATION AS A WAY TO SURVIVE THE APOCALYPSE

In Syria, realities have been warped, revised, and misrepresented to justify state repression. I write this in an effort to reclaim truths that have been neglected by the regime's cult of personality narratives that mythologize its power into an all-knowing and righteous force. The common headlines on Syria, from "Rebel-on-Rebel Violence Seizes Syria" to "U.S. Fears Al

Qaeda Group in Syria Is Plotting Terror,” overemphasize the militarization of the Syrian conflict and frame it as apolitically volatile, and prey on an Islamophobic fear of extremism. They do not recognize the voices of the resilient and brilliant people who resist structures of oppression in Syria. And when they do, they frame them in an exceptionalist narrative that sees our culture as inherently volatile and frames the violence as ever-present. There is a global industry around packaging images of Third World, oppressed Muslim women used to justify colonial occupation (Abu Lughod 2013). Syrian women do face multiple oppressions, but their narratives must be framed in a way that respects the complications and specificities of their sociopolitical contexts.

In Indigenous Action Network’s (2020) “Rethinking the Apocalypse,” they argue that the apocalypse is a “slow mass suicide built on the altar of capitalism,” we are already living; a reality built on genocide, enslavement, mass incarceration, biowarfare and imperialism is a form of apocalypse in itself. They argue that “we live in the future of a past that is not our own.” What would it mean to carve our alternative futures with the knowledges, skillsets, and tools our communities have gathered surviving and navigating apocalyptic conditions? During the COVID pandemic, learning from Syrian’s creative survival strategies is more relevant than ever. In 2015, local farmers in the outskirts of Aleppo near Tal Hadya began a seedbank for saving thousands of Syria’s biodiverse crops (Duggan 2017). According to a study by the Yale School of Forestry, those Syrian seeds from Aleppo were resistant to pests that were devastating grain crops in the U.S. in 2017. Because the Syrian seeds were the place of origin for domesticated wheat in the U.S., the Syrian seeds “stored the germplasm embedded *with survival strategies developed over thousands of years of changing conditions and evolving pathogens inside the wheat*” (Schapiro 2018). A wild relative of the domesticated wheat called *Aegilops tauschii*, a common grass in Syria, withstood the destruction of the Hessian fly that

was devastating U.S. wheat crops from Nebraska to Kansas. Essentially, it was the work of these rural farmers in Syria, the survival strategies they developed under siege to continue our culture despite genocide, that saved the U.S. from a total crop failure. So, as a Critical Refugee Studies (2021) perspective argues—what if we flipped the whole NGO’s-come-to-save-refugees narrative and embraced this reality—it is the displaced, the refugees, the revolutionary global majority people who carry the knowledge that will help people in the global North survive devastation, virus, and environmental disaster. It is the people of Idlib, the people of Gaza, the people of Oakland, who learn to make life when there is a structural landscape of death around them.

My grandmother had spent her entire life in the fields of Syria as a “fela7” or “peasant,” growing wheat and processing bulgar, and started a sewing business to sustain her family. She would often describe to me the impact of the Ba’athist modernization projects on her village as “the time the regime poisoned the rivers, turned them brown, and made everyone sick.” She exhibited extraordinary resilience when the regime agents stormed her home and occupied it for days. The regime police demanded she hand over my grandfather. With her children still sleeping in the back room, she quickly went to my grandfather and instructed him to hide in the root cellar. Using a system of coded messages with the neighbors, she coordinated a way to smuggle my grandfather in a truck first to Barzeh to the Jordanian border where he fled to Irbid for safety. She told the mukhabarat that she did not know where her husband was, and that they would have to search at another time. At least twenty-armed security forces ransacked the house in the middle of the night. They kidnapped my sixteen-year-old father while barefoot in his pajamas. They detained him and dumped his body on the side of the road days later; he walked home barely alive. During this incident, my grandmother was nine months pregnant, and the

shock of having her oldest son kidnapped sent her into labor. She gave birth a few days later under extreme stress, all while coordinating an escape for her husband and protecting her other six children. This is not some mythical story of a hyper resilient Syrian woman but quite an ordinary one from the stories of millions of rural Syrian women like my grandmother who use creativity to improvise solutions while under conditions of siege, who create entire futures when there is death all around them.

This dissertation uses a framework that emphasizes how women, feminized people, and children creatively enact ways to survive and resist state violence across diasporic lines. Syrian women in the revolution and in displacement have complex social locations and experiences; their narratives are virtually illegible without a framework that can understand them. Syrian women are facing the Assad regime and its prison, police, and military apparatus; Zionist occupation (Israel still occupies the Golan Heights and many Palestinian-Syrians live in internally displaced refugee camps across the country); class discrimination; rural poverty; sectarianism; post Cold War proxy wars played out in Syria between Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, the U.S, and Israel; French re-colonial presence; the extremism of ISIS and Jabhat an Nusra that control women's movements and threaten them with sexual violence; human traffickers targeting Syrian women as they cross nearby borders with families in tow; environmental devastations that expose them to toxic chemicals and gases; the risk of living in the crossfire of the revolution's armed oppositional forces such as the Free Syrian Army; the patriarchal devaluation of Syrian women's gendered activisms that continue to feed the civil society sector; public health risks and psychosocial effects of war trauma, and domestic violence from Syrian men themselves. The central question that drives my project is: *how do Syrian womxn heal from the silences that split our tongues in two?*

When the Syrian regime has already targeted hospitals, childcare centers, schools, as Waed el Khatebi put it in the documentary *For Sama*: Syrians are forced to learn how to rebuild society from scratch (Frontline 2019). Like Yasmeenat Souriyat, Syrian Jasmine, a group of displaced women in Maarat al-Numan, Idlib who provide psychosocial support for internally displaced people into their communities and distribute meals during Ramadan (Syria Campaign 2019). And Women Now for Development, a grassroots women’s collective whose center in Idlib has been targeted multiple times, reopened, and was recently bombed again (Women Now 2019). When the government is not adequately equipped to care for its vulnerable populations because it is invested in deliberately targeting them, it is the everyday people who sweep the streets, distribute food, and provide basic relief. And devastatingly, those people become targeted again and again because they are doing exactly what the system does not want them to—insisting on life in a political system that operates on their death.



Figure 1.8: Syrian women and children protesting in Idlib: Source: Baladi News Network, May 2019.

This image is from a video of activist women, mothers in Idlib and Hama, who held a protest against the bombings in May 2019 even while under siege. Women and children hold signs that read “There is no other Idlib to flee to,” and “we are civilians, not terrorists.” One woman explains “Syrian women are out here standing today to confirm that the Syrian Revolution continues and we are the ones staying and carrying it on, like branches of the olive tree. Until victory.”

You have to be creative when your basic rights to water, food, safety, and shelter are violated. To be alive when there are toxic chemical weapons, city blocks of rubble and destruction where children play, to be alive and use your creativity in that context, grow plants from earth and cultivate calm spaces and cradle loved ones when the world is on fire, that is a miracle. Creativity is my grandmother improvising, giving birth when the circumstances are death—it is that imaginative reach from scarcity to creative possibility, a movement that allows new futures to come alive.

When the school system has failed in Syria, and hospitals are bombed and compromised, there are few supplies to work with (Idlib Lives 2019). As a result, Syrians use bedsheets as theatre costumes, dirt and water to make clay pots, and survive through the use of art, using every medium they can to express themselves and create visionary forms of cultural productions. Often these art forms move beyond the realm of the psychosocial and are used to communicate politicized messages to the world.



Figure 1.9: Tweets from Women Now for Development in Ma'arat al Numan/Idlib from Nov 2019 that reads “Don’t break my pencil, I have the right to education! A silent play, performed by the g participants of the courses at the Women Now Center in Maarat alNu’man/Idlib. The girls raised their banners demanding their right to education and safe schools. #WomenNow #GirlsOfIdlib.”

As you read this, mothers in Idlib are finding creative ways to entertain and educate their children while under siege and while living with limited food and shelter in refugee camps (Fleisher 2020). Mothers across Syria have been doing this for the past ten years (Women Now

2020). We all can learn from the people of Idlib, the women and youth of Syria, who, crowded in underground shelters during relentless bombing, insist on creativity and connection when they are made to feel alone and scared.

They tell us again and again that our revolution in Syria has failed. But this struggle has only just begun. And in the U.S. and other countries, times of crisis exacerbate what we already know: a system that neglects the elderly, disabled, working class, a system built on slavery, anti-Blackness, Native genocide and xenophobia is a system not designed to last. The people of Idlib today and the people of Syria, like so many indigenized and displaced peoples, have already survived the apocalypse (widescale bombing, chemical weapons, massacres, and the violent unraveling of neoliberalism as it inevitably falls). Instead of treating Syrians like objects that need to be saved, it is imperative to understand that Syrians have knowledge of how to survive and create new futures. And we do it with humor, compassion, and resilience. There is no need to despair when the brave people of Idlib, of Kashmir, of Oakland, of Gaza, global majority Black and Brown peoples, when all the brilliant, resilient, targeted mothers and children of this planet, are fighting to hold on to their joy.

Chapter 2: From Feared to Fantasy, Invisible to Hypervisible—Siren Songs in the Syrian Revolution and the Limits of Representation

“I am leaning towards visual art again, because I continue to find English a harsh instrument. It is the language of colonization, for all of us--the literatures of our own tongues.”

Letters to Audre Lorde From Chrystos--Box I, Series 1.1 Folder 025 in the Spelman College Archives

“It’s a war of different narratives, as Gilbert Achcar has suggested. Discourse is a battleground, and we have to perceive it as such. It’s not simply a representation of what’s happening: it’s a battleground. This is why it’s important to push for the revolutionary grassroots narrative that has been completely isolated, silenced, marginalized, and for many, unthinkable. This is why, I think, we should highlight the struggle and make sure that people hear about it.”

--Syrian scholar Yasser Munif in *Resistance from the Rubble in Syria: The Stolen Revolution* published by the Mexican anarchist collective El Rebozo

Robert Fisk was a prominent best-selling author and award-winning “expert” on the Middle East. In April 2018, Fisk went to Douma for a day, where under his Western authority he declared, after 24 hours, that the hundreds of documented chemical weapons attacks the people of Douma had endured in the past two months were fake. He arrived in Douma with an envoy of Syrian (state-sponsored) and Russian journalists. He wrote that, according to a local doctor (who he also clarified was not an eyewitness), thousands of people died in Douma because they “were overcome not by gas but by oxygen starvation in the rubbish-filled tunnels and basements in which they lived, on a night of wind and heavy shelling that stirred up a dust storm.” Fisk even mentioned how the World Health Organization treated 500 patients on the ground with “signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals” but somehow this information was void and null. No, Fisk argued, people died because they didn’t evacuate when they had the option to and hid in underground shelters where they suffocated on dust.

In fact, he says that while people were suffocating from the dust, a White Helmet (the grassroots Syrian collective who do rubble-cleanup after bombings) called out “Gas!” which created a panic in the town. Fisk wrote “I walked across this town quite freely yesterday without soldier, policeman or minder to haunt my footsteps, just two Syrian friends, a camera and a

notebook. I sometimes had to clamber across 20-foot-high ramparts, up and down almost sheer walls of earth. Happy to see foreigners among them, happier still that the siege is finally over, they are mostly smiling; those whose faces you can see, of course, because a surprising number of Douma's women wear full-length black hijab." He described how the underground tunnel shelters were filled with armed Islamist groups organizing terrorist cells beneath Douma. Jaysh al Islam was indeed terrorizing local civilians, but he equated them with the revolutionaries who were resisting both the regime and the extremists, and civilians who were literally taking shelter in the tunnels while their town was being bombarded from above. Fisk crafted this narrative after speaking with Syrian colonels and generals and a handful of townspeople who were probably terrified to speak against the regime since they had just survived a chemical weapons attack for their resistance. Claiming that a chemical weapons gas attack did not happen when Syrians on the ground had been documenting their exposure to chemical weapons was extremely dangerous in a context where their voices were already being ignored and the violence was continuing with internationally-sanctioned impunity.

In 2016, Henry Lowendorf, another "activist" and the chairman of the New Haven chapter of the U.S. Peace Council, led a delegation who met with Bashar al-Assad to tell the "world" what was "really" going on in Syria. According to him, what surprised him the most was the sense of "normalcy" in Damascus, probably because Damascus is the seat of Assad's power. There have been sporadic bombing attacks in Damascus, but it is not under systemic bombardment as the other areas south of Damascus are. Lowendorf and his delegation interviewed Bashar al Assad, lawyers, and Syrian students to get the "Syrian point of view." According to Lowendorf, "Assad, who is often demonized in the western media, spoke English in the meeting with the delegates. The ruler was open and candid about his feelings and views

about foreign money-fueled terrorist activity in the country.” He painted Assad as a calm, reasonable leader (trustworthy because he “spoke English”) who was inconveniently being overrun by terrorists funded by the U.S. Gerry Condon, vice president of Veterans for Peace, said “the U.S. is conducting a psychological warfare campaign to demonize Syria’s president. We’re small voices in this whole thing. And we need to become very loud.”

In September 2019, Max Blumenthal, Rania Khalek and other leftist activists attended a delegation to meet with Assad to similarly get “both sides of the story.” Khalek posted a photo on Twitter and Snapchat captioned “Beautiful views in Syria!” She tagged the geolocation Sednaya, right in the area of Sednaya Prison where 13,000 imprisoned people, most of whom were political prisoners, were mass executed by the regime’s forces between 2011 and 2015 (Amnesty International 2017). It is a prison where members of my family and community have been tortured. Blumenthal and Khalek posted a selfie while in Damascus and wrote “For the Haters!” because they were facing backlash for meeting with the regime (Ahmad 2019). Giving the neoliberal, neocolonial regime space to legitimize its crimes against humanity normalizes the structural abuse of power. It creates a false inversion of power, one where the regime is the victim of the whims of its chaotic people, one where the regime does not militarize every facet of society to control and surveil the people. It becomes a story that needs to be “uncovered,” and that is rendered oppressed. The people become an invisible signifier and ironically, while claiming to fight Western dominant powers in the name of socialism and communism, defending the president and his regime becomes the primary focus and the everyday working people’s struggle become invisible—not only invisible, but rendered illegitimate in the discursive schema.

Later Khalek, after receiving more backlash, said she recognized the people’s revolution in Syria and that people needed to stop harassing her about it. I wonder what would happen if a

group of non-Palestinian activists publicly met with Netanyahu but later issued support for the Palestinian people's struggle. The actions would not add up, and they would have to sit with accountability for normalizing genocide, instead of immediately being defensive and claiming to be victimized by the critique. Wanting major activists in our struggle to not meet with genocidal leaders is not "cyberbullying" or a "difference of opinion." Framing it as such individualizes the deep collective and discursive harm that these activists have caused in representing our struggle as journalists and scholars.

Who is representing Syria, and how, has dire impacts for Syrian's lived realities on the ground. Time after time, these non-Syrian "peace activists," scholars, and journalists venture into Syria to "tell the real story," and interview Syrians handpicked by the regime. They return to declare that Assad is the victim, and hold extensive speaking tours with their "evidence," across Europe and North America. Many Syrians who live in cities such as Damascus are afraid to speak up on the record because there is not the same revolutionary community-based infrastructure of dissent as in liberated areas. They could easily be tortured or imprisoned, as any Syrian can, for their words. There is much more at stake for them, and part of the privilege in these empirical forays into Syria is not understanding that power dynamic.

These actions matter because they generate forms of discourse that then ripple out into sites where power is negotiated on the bodies of Syrian and Palestinian-Syrian refugees: in court rooms, in border checkpoints, at refugee social services agencies. Journalism is a major force in swaying popular opinion and feeding moral panic, which correlates with policies and laws that determine whether or not refugees are granted rights. Journalism is the accessible form that everyday people have to shape their opinions about political affairs in the SWANA region. Journalism and researchers in the university, from fields such as sociology, political science, and

Middle East studies overlap and converge to create what is understood as “expert” knowledge on current affairs in the Middle East. Rod Ferguson (2011) writes that “empiricism grants authority to representation, empiricism functions hegemonically, making representations seem natural and objective.” Emerging fields such as critical university studies examine how the university becomes a site for reinforcing social and political structures, by creating and finetuning disciplines in order to “know” the Other, which ripples out into how their social and political realities are understood, constructed, and controlled (Hong and Ferguson 2011).

In this chapter, I examine narrative logics of journalistic headlines, and how mainstream global northern media define Syria in passive voice to normalize an imaginary in which the human rights struggles in Syria are simply a byproduct of an inherently violent geography and Syrians are framed as terrorists or helpless victims. I look at how a local San Diego refugee organization categorizes Syrians in diaspora according to those narrative logics. I analyze how Syria and the “Syrian refugee crisis” is understood in dominant journalism and scholarly texts in order to set up a context for Chapter 3 to center Syrian voices and Syrian realities. I also look at representations of refugees that go “viral” on Twitter as a social media platform and how these tweets by academics and journalists help shape dominant perceptions of Syria that intimately shape Syrian lives.

In this chapter I start with asking methodological questions about research and how we know what we know. I then track different kinds of global northern representations of the Syrian revolution and Syrian women in scholarship and media since 2011. I establish my framework of the “siren song,” or how Syrian women’s creative practices refuse a politics of visibility within settler colonial realities, a language I draw from Jarret Martineau’s (2021) work on how indigenous creative practices are framed against representation, creating “noise to colonialism’s

signal.” I look at the function of ideological apparatuses to understand how racist, sexist, and Orientalist ideologies shape dominant images that have direct impacts on Syrian women’s access to material resources. The Syrian revolution is “hard to understand” for people because it is a grassroots movement against our own neoliberal regime, a movement against police and prison brutality, and every colonial, imperial system torturing the children, hurting the earth, bombing and destroying those who resist. It is what happens when you revolt against the person claiming to represent you. We want a new kind of world.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?

Journal entry: Coronavirus in Syria/ Today is Wednesday, July 29th, 2020. The Syrian Facebook and Whatsapp groups are filled with “rest in peace to my uncle, to my brother, to my cousins, to....” I have lost three uncles in the community (my aunt’s husband’s uncles) and two of my dad’s cousins in a week to COVID. Entire city blocks of people in Damascus have COVID. There’s a viral video of a coroner cursing the bodies of the infected dead, while the government is assuring the dead are being taken care of with precaution. There are few ventilators, the ventilators themselves are infected, people die from using them. The doctors have COVID-- relatives tell me about the first case of an infected doctor in Bab el Hawa camp in Idlib and their fears of how it will spread in the camps, where social distancing is an impossibility. But there is no media coverage of the COVID crisis in Syria, only the voices of people on the ground who we know to be true. The government denies and minimizes COVID statistics. On the official record, there’s nothing wrong in Syria. The pandemic, like the people’s revolution, is invisible, never happened. There is no deliberate structural mismanagement, no systemic neglect, no genocidal politics that leaves the rural, internally displaced people to die. White Helmets and other grassroots groups like the Mazaya Center, the people themselves, are on the ground organizing—they are desanitizing school spaces, they are dressing up in homemade hazmat suits, when the government has failed, as always, it is the people who pick up the responsibility, organize community care, and fend for themselves.

Here’s how it goes. I hear about what is happening, based on conversations with the people

who are experiencing it or from my mother in touch with activists in those areas. For example: the siege in Idlib. The chemical weapons attack in Ghouta. The escalating economic impossibility of living in Damascus. My cousins who have COVID in Tal and are being systemically neglected by the state. Now: I have to find sources to “prove” what I say is true. That the reality is real. The sources are NPR’s Deborah Amos calling these people “jihadis” (Amos 2020). The sources are the *New York Times* saying “Bombs drop. Children Freeze” (Yee and Said 2020). There are no signifiers. There are no humans, only helpless refugees, apolitical objects who are shuffled around. There are fears of terrorists and Islamophobia seeping through the descriptions. Then: the sources cite the “people,” the same people I’m talking to, only filtered through a Real, Reliable Western journalist who knows the “truth.” This process continues for 10 years, until as Syrian film director Orwa Nyrabia (2012) said, reality in Syria has died. There is no reality anymore. It is only a bizarre amalgam of misrepresentations we have to sift through and cite to prove that we once had a revolution, somewhere, in all of this. A regime which is responsible for 91.4% of total casualties,⁸ and its people who resist total annihilation, these now become a discursive quagmire called a “civil war” (SNHR 2020). It is so absurd, and we are all alienated from the reality we know.

So where do we derive our reality from? Conversation. YouTube videos. Grassroots centers uploading their activism on YouTube channels with 35 views. Interviews. Whatsapp Texts. Facebook messages. Scraps of paper thrown from the rooftops of Damascus buildings. My family friend tortured for 26 consecutive days for throwing them. But I can’t even document who it is or that we’re related or abide by traditional citation standards because it might get them

⁸ This figure is based on the regime and Russian allied casualties from March 2011 to March 2020 according to Syrian Network for Human Rights (2020).

killed or tortured. So how do I know what I know?

This problem at the heart of methodological problems with traditional anthropological methods of observation and “investigation” as a measure of truth, is that there is one absolute continuous truth in a culture that must be “uncovered” according to colonial epistemologies. As Trinh T. Minh Ha (1983: 63) writes, “The image conveyed through this discourse of “total observation,” is, therefore, either that of a bricolage aspiring vainly after the engineer’s scientism or that of an engineering constantly annulling itself through bricolage without being able to dispense with it.” Many decolonial queer and women of color feminist theorists discuss the colonial implications of research, particularly when knowledge about indigenous communities has been “collected, classified, then represented” to justify projects of domination (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012: 1).

Rod Ferguson (2012) writes about how the creation of U.S. sociology was the reflection of “a discursive formation that emerges out of Enlightenment claims to rationality and scientific objectivity. These claims entail an investment in heterosexual patriarchy as the appropriate standard for social relations and the signature of hegemonic whiteness.” He describes how U.S. sociology developed liberal ideologies to explain U.S. racialization, which inherently could not account for African American non-heteronormative formations because they were formed through white heteropatriarchal observation of social difference in order to manage and discipline social Others. Ferguson quotes Gidden (1991) to argue that sociology and the social sciences were “inherent elements of the institutional reflexivity of modernity.” The social changes brought about in the U.S. from industrialization to urbanization and dislocation of Black communities caused U.S. sociology to build on the quest to “understand” the ways that societies

and cultures differed from each other. Not only did they create “understanding” but also guidelines for how to “routinely...organize and alter the aspects of social life they reported on or analyzed.” This is why a queer of color analysis is so critical—it understands the gender and sexual variation of noncolonial cultures, bodies, and lived experiences that cannot be “read” within traditional epistemological paradigms such as anthropology, sociology, and political science.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012: 1) of the Ngati Awa and Ngati Porou people, writes that “the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized people...It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us.” It is no coincidence that Tuhiwai Smith (2012: 2) then draws upon Edward Said’s (1978) theory of Orientalism to explain how Western institutions “[authorize] views of the Orient, describing it, by teaching about it, settling it, ruling over it,” because the epistemic process of knowing thereby conquering a space is directly tied to how Western researchers have created knowledge in and about the Middle East.

I draw upon Palestinian scholar Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s (2015: 6) methods of paying close attention to “tension between presence and desire and absence [and how it] shapes settler society and consciousness.” Kevorkian (2015: 6) draws on theories from indigenous feminists in Canada such as Joyce Green through an analysis of the “creation of language celebrating colonial identities while constructing the colonized as the antithesis of human decency and development.” Said (1978: 20) argues that Orientalism is an ideological project that serves political interests. Not only it is a “distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic,

sociological, historical, and philological texts” but it also maintains “certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world.” The need to “Know” and “discover” the mysterious, unknowable Other is part of what drives colonial invasion. There is a whole series of psychological, geographic, sociological, and philosophical conventions that accompany the ways scholars write about the “Orient.” The construction of the Other, as a menacing and evil backdrop, reifies the subject position of the colonizer who must “voyage” in to “know” the “unknowable.”

What are the most attentive analytic strategies scholars can use to respond to the symbolically violent rhetorical strategies of empire we are inundated with every day? How do we challenge and interrupt the violence of normalized colonial vocabularies and develop alternate ways to articulate the shapes and languages of our suffering? What challenges do women from militarized, racialized regions in Southwest Asia face in confronting the institutions that normalize the suffering of our people every day? How do we cope as people of color mourning the ongoing death of our communities inside and in the shadows, in the belly of the beast, at the settler’s university?

I am interested in T. Minh-ha’s (1989) method of speaking nearby-- speaking with and to, creating a relationship in which the Self/Other anthropology is dismantled. Minh-ha wrote that “A critical difference from myself means that I am not i, am within and without i. I/i can be I or i, you and me both involved. We (with capitals W) sometimes include(s), other times exclude(s) me. You and I are close, we intertwine, you may stand on of the other side of the hill once in a while, but you may also be me, while meaning what you are and what i am not. The differences made between entities comprehended as absolute presences--hence the notions of pure origins

and true self--are an outgrowth of a dualistic system of thought peculiar to the Occident (the “ontotheology) which characterizes Western metaphysics)” (90). In that vein, I position myself as a Syrian in diaspora whose lived experiences directly connect to the images and texts produced from Syrian women activists on the ground. It is part of my contribution to the revolution to argue for a centering of their creative expression, and for an insistence that they be understood as technologies of emancipation and methodologies of the oppressed on their own terms. This feminist labor of Third World and subaltern women as languages are unrecognizable to dominant ways of knowing and liberate themselves from the confines of colonial epistemologies through poetic and creative means. They embody what Toni Cade Bambara (2012) said when she declared that “the job of cultural workers who belong to oppressed people is to make revolution irresistible.”

I want to echo Nefertiti Tadiar’s (2009) call to use a sympathetic framework, one that does not claim to speak for subjects but requires a positional alignment to the “not yet.” It would draw on her notion of life times, or looking at the time people use to make lives for themselves, and how they use these worlds to build something beyond what Jose Muñoz (2009) calls the prison house of the “here and now.” I align myself with Audra Simpson’s (2014) call for ethnographic refusal that resists the urge to reproduce certain narratives often coopted by colonial and imperial knowledge productions that capitalize off studying the “Other.” Lila Abu Lughod (1993) carefully crafts an ethnographic method for understanding Arab women’s oral cultures. Abu Lughod articulates an important ethnographic critique that problematizes strands of feminist methodologies that veer towards a western imperialist universalism. She dismantles the notion of an expert/researcher, and develops what she calls “writing against culture,” a way of moving against language that homogenizes people and flattens power dynamics. In *Do Muslim*

Women Need Saving? Abu-Lugghod (2013: 31-21) explains this concept of “death by culture”: in the case of SWANA women and Muslim women around the world, “instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religious or cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the examination of internal political struggles among groups in Afghanistan, or of global interconnections between Afghanistan and other nation-states, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—re-creating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which first ladies give speeches versus others in which women shuffle around silently in burqas.” As leftist Syrian writer and former political prisoner Yassin Haj Saleh (2020) put it in “Finding Words for Syria’s Revolution,” “We must learn this well, and unlearn the culturalist stuff that reduce politics to culture, and culture to religion, which is still dominant in the West (and the world) when it comes to the region. The “secular” West should secularize its understanding of the region in order to understand it. That includes the rise of nihilist Islamism between the 1980s and the Arab Spring.” Unpacking these assumptions and the industries around them is critical for understanding why the Syrian struggle was so misrecognized in both the dominant right and leftist political, scholarly, and media spheres.

ON THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

One of the most illuminating experiences I had in graduate school was taking a Middle East studies class. The professor had a Syria specialty and declared “There was no photography in Syria in the 1920s.” I returned to class with a photograph of my great grandmother on my mother’s side in Aleppo in 1924. “There’s no way this is real,” he said to the class. “But it is, I checked with my great grandmother.” “Her father must have been an

Ottoman general, only Ottoman generals had photographs according to historians.” “He wasn’t.” He told me according to historians, there was no photography in Syria then because Syria had not yet *modernized*.

After class I called my great grandmother and asked her to verify the date. “Yes, it was 1924, I was four years old,” she assured me. And: “Don’t listen to French men and their nonsense.” My professor requested to see me after the next class. He asked me to show him on a map where I’m from in Syria. The challenge was met with confusion on my end, but I realized later it was something he genuinely thought I couldn’t do. I gave him the luxury of sharing more family details—how my great grandmother was part of the first cohort of girls to attend high school in Aleppo, which was a huge honor. How her father was shunned by his brother for the decision, and the differences in their attire reflected rising divisions between religious and secular Syrians, although ironically later the whole family would be deeply religious from the 1970s onwards. How her husband was the grandson of an Algerian revolutionary who fought with Abd al Qadr against the French in Algeria and then migrated to Syria. How her husband, my great grandfather, wrote the first ethnographic account of Syria in the 1950’s *تركيب المجتمع السوري* *The Makeup of Syrian Society*. He by the looks of it, doubted everything I said. “You need to stop sharing crazy stories your grandmother tells you in class,” he joked. “This photograph is from the 1930s.”

Who will believe the Syrian grandmother’s words over the white Syria historian? Does the man with the degrees and the stamp of authenticity from spending six months in Syria on a regime-sponsored Fulbright get authority over the exiled Syrian who cannot access the same culture he safeguards?

Journal Entry Feb. 7, 2016: Blood on your hands in my people’s name/ The Case of the Innocent

Middle East Studies Scholar

Let's talk about these academics who travel with ease to Syria but are not Syrian and imagine an emotional connection to the people in the name of intellectualism. They get to theorize and make claims on things that I know deep down do not feel true, but that I don't have the colonial language to argue. In diaspora you lose authority because your displacement renders you inauthentic. Violent systems fragment us and we blame ourselves for our lack of wholeness.

We are here but not here. What do we have left to "prove" who we are? Photographs maybe, or memories we make from them, or stories we tell about them, names we alter and change on the run. But not even that. My family had to burn their photographs in trash cans before they fled, because the traces of their existence might be dangerous to the state. They did not want to leave a memory of themselves behind that might endanger others. The archive is gone. What did you bring with you from Syria that you have left? My mom has a pair of her grandmother's earrings she passed down to me. And some house slippers that say "Made in the Syrian Arab Republic." My dad had nothing but his skin. What do we have to prove our Syrian-ness? I have my body, my hair, my habits, whatever else was planted in me by my ancestors like a promise. It's simple. Knowing where you are from and living there or getting to be there is different from knowing vaguely what the trees look like or what the water in the rivers taste like and why you feel so sick.

This scholar told me certain moments in my family narrative are historically inaccurate. I want to tell him maybe it is history itself that is inaccurate. I know certain things are romanticized, dramatized, all of it, but so is history. There is a deep violence in how they make knowledge on behalf of us while our people die in the streets for singing freedom's name. They make so much money studying the minute details of our cultures--tallying and measuring the dimensions of our buildings while they fall from barrel bombs. They dissect what they have facilitated destroying and ask why it is dead. They receive accolades for publishing research while people who look power face to face, every day, unwavering, are forcibly erased, down to the last protesting child. They debate if we are worthy enough to suit their European and Global Northern labor pool while Syrian people starve with nothing but salt and insects to eat. They laugh and theorize on the borders they created---while our people starve. They mock how our worst fears become real, that our millennia old temples are decimated into dust, that the knowledge that we died resisting against is now again disappeared.

*This Middle East Studies scholar (at UCSD lol) wrote an article in favor of the Syrian regime during March 2011, as the first protestors were being gunned down by regime police. Not because he "believed" in it, but because he didn't want to jeopardize his **vacation visa** to Syria from Germany. The regime requested that he write the article in favor of them, and in exchange he would get his visa to vacation. You see the power of the words here. The power of discourse, the tug of war between what's real and what's constructed as reality but is a series of elaborate shams held together by bribes and complicity. While our family members were relearning the value of the written and spoken word. And then he wrote another article about how he felt guilty for writing the first article and got lots of speaking gigs at Syria Week here talking about it. While my family members were dying, really dying out here just as they did before, losing everything they loved. Would you die for what you believe in? Would you die for your own liberation, if that was the risk? Would you risk losing everything you love--your children, your home, your vacation, your job, for a few moments in the streets shouting "we want*

the fall of the system.” Would you face the barrel of the rifle and still insist on your right to speak?

There are multiple forms of cultural loss. I have the luxury of knowing exactly where I am from. That in itself is a huge privilege. I have access to these institutions--that in itself is huge. These borders and this kind of madness I was born into might always keep brewing.

I dream about the day that every politically electrified displaced people in the world receive the kind of world they desire, realize that they resist so that the memories of their mothers and their mothers' mothers can be honored and finally heal and see justice. I want to hold Syrian soil in my hands and feel it on my fingertips and know that this is the piece of earth that I come from. I need to know my wound more intimately. I want to go to my homeland more than anything in this universe. But I am wanted for 50 million liras. I am wanted because I told my family's story in a video they could not erase. I have stood at the Syrian border, watching the thin edge of barbed wire between us. I have stood next to other exiles, Kurdish, Sunni, Assyrian, we have stood together in that experience. We wept together, watching the green fields of Idlib and the goats chewing on grass. Longing to be there, to remember. What does it mean to be wanted when they want you to unwant you, to torture you, to tear your body apart piece by piece until you forget your desire to be free, until you stop telling your story? To be able to visit your family's cultural space, whatever it is, to not be caught in this limbo that starts off temporary then becomes generational...This is the stuff I dream about.

I was born into impossible layers, stories whose storytellers cannot speak, whose stories I cannot tell, whose stories are vital to my existence. And these stories may be absorbed into the walls of history because it will take another 50 years before anyone can tell them. I will not out the torture survivors without their consent or write my family's prison stories in my dissertation unless it would be used in an international tribunal for justice. I refused to do research or interviews with the newly relocated Syrian community because we saw many non-community academics come in, do a round of interviews, and leave with no benefit to the community.

So, I find some other way to prove I know what I know. That is why creative work is some of the only truth we have. No objective source has succeeded in capturing what we know. But the poems tell the truth. The films tell the truth. Any creative work is an expression of the truth because feelings are a source of reality and truth (Lorde 1996). Recently, several formally imprisoned Syrians held the first court trial to make Assad regime officials accountable for over 4,000 cases of torture in Branch 251 (Orient 2020). During the convening trials, a Syrian sculptor

named Khaled Barakeh constructed an art installation outside of the German consulate with sculptors of Syrians, with megaphones for mouths, in a harrowing silent art protest called “The Muted Demonstration.” The families of the tortured, disappeared, murdered imprisoned people, most of them women, gathered outside his installation and shared the emotional connection they had to his work. One woman said it made her feel like she was in the beginning of the revolution again. These artists help convey and narrate “truth” more than any western researcher who ‘journeys’ in to do that (Syria Campaign 2020).

Journal Entry: Mar 4, 2018. In Which They Do Not Want to Hear About the Revolution / Today is a protest in City Heights Library Annex in solidarity with victims of the chemical attacks in Eastern Ghouta. I read a list of every single attack that has happened in Eastern Ghouta in the past two weeks, and testimonies from activists, friends, and residents on the ground. In front of a press conference setup of cameras at the protest, I gave a brief synopsis of the Syrian Revolution and expressed how the regime targets these areas because they think they are targeting “terrorists” who, in reality, are civilians.

As soon as I started speaking, the news cameras began to pack up their gear. “She’s not a refugee. We wanted to hear about the refugees, not this,” one local news cameraman says as he walks away. So I turned my back to the English speaking media in front us, and instead began to address the mostly-Syrian crowd standing behind me with their homemade signs. (Some of the youth’s signs we made together at the Majdal Center. I had brought glitter, paints, posters. Some of the young girls wrote messages of peace and love. Older teenagers wrote powerful messages about stopping violence, using red paint to symbolize the blood of the people, printing out photos of the devastation.) Instead of crisp white-American English, I spoke in colloquial rural Arabic. Instead of statistics that the news media didn’t care about anyway, I told a story, in the tradition of our people, who are always storytellers. This is how we often share knowledge, this is how we connect, through a good parable, through standing around and listening to a hakawati, a storyteller. There were tears streaming down my face as I spoke. The Syrian-American uncle who organized the protest looked uneasy, but my friend signaled at him to let me finish. The rational, logical, steady calm voice I used to speak to the English-speaking media was gone. I was now, in their eyes, “speaking in tongues.”

Here was the story I told the crowd: ‘The other day, I walked by a homeless woman sitting down on the side of the street here in City Heights. I passed her by and she asked if I had money to spare. I only had a dollar, and I told her I was sorry I didn’t have more to share. She said it was okay, because I was the only one who stopped the entire day. Everyone else had passed her by, without seeing her, without speaking to her. As if she were invisible. Millions of

our Syrian siblings are homeless. They are ignored and made invisible. When they speak, it is as if no one can hear. But there are some of us here who see them. We stop and we share their stories and we mourn. We witness them. Because to us, they exist, and we want a world where no bombing will kill them, no weapons will cause them to flee. We do this to be free.” Many uncles and youth came up to me with tears in their eyes saying that for the first time in a long time, they felt seen. They shared with me stories of their relatives who just had to flee. They thanked me and we exchanged contact information and I realized in speaking as a femme, as a nonbinary queer femme with short hair and a soft voice, with my visibly trans/gender nonconforming Arab friend who came to support me, I also felt seen. We were not questioned or harassed but loved. I felt like the first time we could really build new ways of relating, of hearing each other, especially when the gaze was gone.

ARABIC/ENGLIZI/ARABIZI/ARABISH: THE ILLEGIBLE LANGUAGES

“In a culture of violence, where even language has been used to demean, abuse, and manipulate...language can be used to transform, change and liberate, too.”
Aja Monet in *The Named and the Nameless: An Anthology of Prison Writing*

“Once you change the language, you change the direction of what you gonna do.”
Sonia Sanchez

“The connection between words and the Syrian revolution is quite basic. The revolution was about appropriating politics; that is, owning talk about public issues and gathering and protesting publicly. I think it is quite fair to say our struggle was essentially about words: using them, interpreting them, and protesting with them. Both the revolution and the words have been crushed during nine Trojan years, during which Syria has been reduced to a battlefield of inhuman powers, while Syrians are pushed back to silence and absence; dispersed, impoverished, “subalternized”, and denied a say in their fate.”
--Yassin Haj Saleh, “Using Words for Syria’s Revolution”

What does it mean to be writing in English? Chinua Achebe (1992) writes about the sense of betrayal and guilt he feels when writing in English when it is inaccessible to so many and implicated in representation. But he says, “I have been given the language and I intend to use it.” Ngugi Wa’Thiongo (1986: 9) points out this paradox and quotes Gabriel Okara's position that “Living languages grow like living things, and English is from a from a dead language. There are American, West Indian, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand versions of English. All of them add life and vigour to the language while reflecting their own respective cultures. Why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking

and philosophy in. our own way?" Wa'Thiongo (10) writes about in his childhood how storytelling brought language to life, and the games "we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transposition of syllables, and nonsensically but musically arranged words. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own." I am reminded of Syrian YouTubers such as Zoya Bustan, a defector of the regime and an exiled journalist who uses clever rhyming and Damascene wordplay to insert resistant messages against the regime. In one of her recent videos, she humorously weaves similar sounding words and slippages that point out how the government claims there is no coronavirus in Syria (zoya bustan 2020).

I think of how Syrians speak in riddles and euphemisms, like when a community member says someone was "ghayib wara al shams," or disappeared behind the sun, meaning they were kidnapped and sent to prison by the state for engaging in political activity. In Arabic alone, one word's pronunciation can have so many meanings, and different dialects add to this. In Syria, there is Kurdish, Assyrian, Aramaen, Turkmani, and so many other local dialects and languages spoken. There is no way to represent a Syrian experience and it makes me wonder with incredulity how the scholars who don't speak much Arabic or who have a rudimentary/intermediate grasp on the language can represent the culture with such authority. It also makes me wonder why a large body of works written in Arabic about the Syrian Revolution, including prison memoirs and ethnographic details of the early revolution days, are not taken seriously among scholars in the global North. How can we refocus on texts written in Arabic and other local languages?

A large part of this dissertation emerged from watching videos of local grassroots women-led projects that were posted on YouTube in Arabic, with little views and then

feeling hypervisibilized when the spotlight hits Syria, without mention of those projects. Part of the epistemic labor I want to offer is a community-consulted translation film archive, in which I have archived, translated, and subtitled hundreds of these videos recording Syrian women and youth's grassroots projects so that they may be accessible in English. They are part of a website I created through the Critical Refugee Studies Collective Grant called "Teaching the Syrian Revolution" (teachingthesyrianrevolution.tumblr.com). I do this because one of the foundational imperatives that Ethnic Studies was built on was offering material support to communities via research and epistemic labor that can help reshift systems of power and the discourses they make about targeted bodies at their expense.

In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ Wa' Thiongo's (1986) "farewell vehicle to writing in English," he makes a political decision to write literature, children's books, and academic work in Gikuyu and Kiswahili. What is the point of the knowledge production if it will not circulate and be translated? What is the point if it is not accessible? And what does it mean to be accessible? I am thinking about a certain Syria studies scholar who published a major work on the regime's use of propaganda. When someone translated the work into Arabic with the author's permission, it began to circulate across the Middle East in cafés and underground bookstores. The work was quickly banned in Lebanon and Jordan. She was furious with the translator because she had not realized that the translation to Arabic would jeopardize her ability to go back to Syria. For the rest of us, dispossessed Syrians, it is obvious that this is the price one pays for knowledge production about an authoritarian state.

There is something called phylogenetic trees that trace how dialects and words become sisters to one another. We begin to develop different strands of similar languages that then morph

into parallel but different spatiotemporal directions. Like our subjectivities, language evolves into vastly fragmented, complex strands of meaning and belonging. What does it mean when new terms are entering Arabic, new forms of writing and new codes to communicate our split realities? How can writing from the university reflect the colloquial, everyday languages people use to communicate their lived experiences in social media, in the everyday world? What does an attention to language mean in terms of understanding the power dynamics within our communities, how hierarchies of language are built on anti-Blackness globally, with Syrian linguistic superiority over other dialects of Arabic, with intra-Syrian superiority complexes of city dialects over rural dwelling “country” sounding populations, with our histories of racist Arab nationalisms that ban Kurdish and Assyrian peoples from speaking their languages, that displaces them from their tongues?

SYRIA AS A GENDERED BODY IN THE MEDIA COMPLEX

On March 18, 2011, a revolution began in Syria. What is usually overlooked in this historical fact is that disenfranchised rural Syrian women and men started the revolution, after discovering that their children were detained and tortured by the Assad regime for writing protest slogans on the walls of their school (Kahf 2013). After these women and youth took to the streets in Deraa, a popular protest movement swept the country and continues today (Ghazzawi 2014, Yazbek 2011, Baladi News Network 2021). The government responded by firing live bullets on protesters and when that didn't work, barrel bombing areas of the country that were considered rebellious (Yassin Kassab and al Shami 2016). Ten years later, 13.5 million Syrians are now displaced as post Cold War proxy powers battle over the country and Islamic extremist groups rushed to exploit the situation (UNHCR 2020).

The international community's focus has become less about the struggle for freedom, dignity, and justice Syrians have been asking the world to focus on, and instead the issue of where to place this huge mass of Syrian refugees in the global schema of who is human has confounded the world. For this analysis I put decolonial and gender studies theorists in conversation with the ambiguous categories of difference Syrians have come to occupy. I use decolonial theory to understand how representations of Syrian refugees in policy and mass media swing from terrorists, to "illegals," to potential laborers/"good" refugees, to threats, to victims in need of saving. The strange self-referential loop of invisibility, hypervisibility, denial, refusal, hostility, racism, "acceptance," and further decontextualization creates a contradictory discourse where Syrian refugees and the conditions that created their refugeehood become so distorted that they are rendered voiceless masses. This contradiction is historically rooted in colonial articulations of Otherness. The "painting" of Syria and Syria as a gendered body flattens actually Syrians into two-dimensional, silenced, misrecognized subjects incapable of being heard because of their complex realities.

Daily news headlines about Syria range from "Syrian Envoy Slams U.S. Airfield Attack" (CNN) to "French jets pound Raqqa as G20 pledges new ISIL fight" (Al Jazeera) and "Syria Rebels Penetrate Aleppo Siege" (Wall Street Journal). Syria becomes imagined as a feminized body that various actors "slam," "pound," and "penetrate," with force. The subjects are almost always Western or Eastern powers or militarized groups, and the contents of the news articles rarely identify the ambiguous referents in the titles. In Patrick Wolfe's (2006) framework of settler colonialism, he argues that the language of elimination is key to enforcing structures of genocide by symbolically working to constructing relationships to indigenous bodies as missing, erased, and disappeared from the settler colonial imaginary. The linguistic erasure of Syrians and

Syrian women in dominant media headlines is dangerous, when it is Syrian woman who actively began the Syrian Revolution, otherwise known as the mysterious entity encompassed in the term “conflict,” as women who resisted against multiple imperial occupations and who doubly experience the layers of violence.

It is important to note the implied “they” and “us” in dominant headlines about Syria and the exchange they create with the power political and the power moral. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978: 20) argued that Orientalism is both an exchange in the power political (the colonial and imperial establishment), the power intellectual (the construction of sciences and disciplinary formations), the power cultural (taste, values), and the power moral (ideas about who “they” are and what “we” are defending ourselves from). The Syrian Revolution becomes invisible, and Syria’s crisis is constructed as an issue of defending our civilized countries from terrorism. Verbs like “slam,” “pound,” and “penetrate,” imagine that Syria is a passive, gendered body in a rapidly disappearing and destroyed backdrop, assumptions which are then mapped onto Syrian women’s lived experiences with everyday violence. The Syria “crisis” becomes devoid of a space and time, a context, and is just another “war-torn” Middle Eastern “conflict,” in the stagnant history of the barbaric Orient. Fatima al Tayeb (2011) argues that hierarchical constructs linking the West as a “progressive” time and space place the Other in “politicized spatial and temporal modes” of backwardness that are later used in the civilizing mission of the West as reason to enlighten Muslim-majority societies into secular submissions via militarized occupation.

Chela Sandoval (2000) writes that one of the technologies of emancipation is the power to read the signs, radical semiotics, and deconstruction. Deconstruction requires questionings the separation and the binaries of invisibility/hypervisibility and asking why colonial norms have

been naturalized. Those who are surviving on the margins learn to develop this capacity, what Anzaldúa (2012: 60-61) calls *la facultad*, in order to "become more sensitized" if they have not already been "brutalized into insensitivity" by dominant systems of oppression.

Stuart Hall (1978) analyzed how grammatical signifiers in news headlines, or the lack thereof, reveal symbolic relationships about who is considered a subject and who is an object in the narrative assumptions behind the language. Language is imbued with subconscious associations that narrate systems of power. Hall (1978: 4) argued that the media's assembly and narration of events of crime played important discursive roles in justifying state violence against Black communities as the British government was attempting to avoid accountability for the economic crises of the 1970s by scapegoating working class Black youth. Attention to these narrative structures is a critical challenge that allows for new meanings to emerge.



Figure: 2.1: Political Cartoon of Syrian Women in Revolution and Syria as a gendered body.

This political cartoon captures different kinds of erasures that occur when institutions represent Syrian women's experiences in ways that cannot account for the complex narratives and work that Syrian women and feminized bodies create in the revolution. In this chapter I look at each angle of the image as tool to analyze what these different representations of Syrian women reveal about colonial epistemologies and constructions of the Other. I examine constructions of Syria as a gendered body and gendered Syrian bodies using the cartoon as a metaphor that provides a visual illustration of the levels of misrecognitions of Syrian women's experiences. In the cartoon, I read the person wearing a Syrian revolution flag on their body as the Syrian Revolution, the gendered labors of the revolution that have kept it alive, and literally the bodies of Syrian women, as well as Syria as a general signifier for a gendered place. I also note that unlike in the image, there is not "one" Syrian woman—the Syrian woman in question wears hijab, doesn't wear hijab, is Druze, is Christian, is Sunni, is Alawite, is queer, is trans, is in exile, is on the ground, is many experiences at once. The problem is there are few frameworks that understand that.



Figure 2.2: The militarized perception of Syrian women as invisible.

THEME 1: SYRIA AS DISAPPEARING, INDIGENOUS, ELIMINATED

I begin by using this panel of the political cartoon to talk about representations of Syrian

women, and the gendered ways Syria as a body is represented through disappearance and invisibility. In the media, Syria as a signifier becomes a gendered body that vacillates from rapidly disappearing and permanently in a state of war, to a place that produces subjects who are threats to the nation-state.⁹This panel in the political cartoon depicts a man in a military uniform who is “painting” an image of a Syrian revolutionary woman as invisible—he cannot see her—or, because he is constructing her, and consciously painting her—he chooses to see her presence as absence. He does not see her labor, her creative work, or the gendered experiences of revolution, colonialism, and resisting authoritarianism. The “military man” could represent both the colonial states and the neoliberal Syrian regime that erases the resistance of Syrian women and the Syrian Revolution as a whole.

Syrians escaping the Assad regime, French/U.S. imperialism in Northern Syria, Free Syrian Army abuses, anti-Kurdish racism in Syria and Turkey, sectarian violence, who are risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean and facing racist violence in Europe and in the U.S, are at the crux of colonial hierarchies that are deliberating, in this current configuration of empire, who is deserving of rights in the nation-state. I question why Syrians as subjects are missing from dominant narrations on the Syrian “conflict,” and how Syrian women are erased in semiotic structures. The invisible Syrian women plays an important semantic function that informs how empire makes decisions about who is allowed mobility and subjectivity as refugees

⁹ The *White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* by Aileen Moreton-Robinson was helpful for me conceptualizing this. Robinson looks at the construction of Australian national identity and the erasure of indigenous land possession through the construction of the settler as under attack by the dangerous landscape. “The literature on colonial Britishness expressed through the bush battler, the prisoner, the explorer, and the convict place these founding ancestors as struggling against the landscape. Thus the landscape stands in as the oppressor in these narratives of victimization and a displacement occurs; the violence committed against Indigenous people is disavowed” (29).

and migrants are being violently pushed out from what the colonizers understand as humanity.

In November 2015, gunmen attacked a concert hall, restaurant, and bar in Paris, killing 130 people. The attackers were Arab but not Syrian. A widespread panic ensued over terrorism in Syria and the rise of ISIS. Worldwide hashtags circulated to #PrayforParis and #Prayforhumanity. Kanye West's new album opened with the lyrics "Pray for Paris/Pray for the parents/This is a God dream/We on a ultralight beam." France "retaliated" by bombing Raqqa. Media headlines read "French Jets **Pound** Raqqa," "France **Strikes** ISIS Targets in Syria in Retaliation for Attacks," "France **Bombs** ISIS HQ, **Hunts** Attacker Who Got Away," "**Revenge** from Above: France **Pounds** ISIS Capital" (emphasis mine). Metonymized, machoist, militarized headlines imagined Raqqa as an empty, violent wasteland inherently deserving of death. This horrendous retaliation was positioned as "justified."

Raqqa was one of the first Syrian cities to be liberated from the regime in 2013. It was a beautiful moment of victory, one where the thought of liberation became possible. The people of Raqqa took to building an entirely new infrastructure until Jabhat a-Nusra and ISIS invaded and occupied the town. Women in Raqqa formed the Janna collective to rehabilitate bombed out buildings and resist the Assad regime and the extremist occupiers (Syria Untold 2013). When extremists overtook Raqqa, these women staged sit-ins and held community revolution-themed campaigns to distribute food in the besieged town and protested against extremist violence, which I describe more in Chapter 3. Syrians in Raqqa were already target practice for the regime; then came the Russian airstrikes, then Jabhat an-Nusra, then ISIS, and then when the West felt threatened, they had to suffer more.

President Francois Hollande vowed to be "unforgiving with the barbarians" as he met with the national security team to bomb Syria (Rubin and Barnard 2015). He did not say who the

barbarians were, although it was implied he was speaking about members of ISIS. But in a context where ISIS was becoming a shorthand for Syria and Syrian bodies were inconsequential, who was he really referring to? The people of Raqqa launched the nonviolent campaign “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently” to show how local Raqqans were resisting ISIS violence every day and to expose the atrocities of ISIS were committing against civilians in the town. Khaled al-Homsi, the nephew of archaeologist Khalid al Asaad, who was beheaded by ISIS in retaliation for protecting sacred sites in Palmyra, issued a plea to France, to point out that the civilians in Raqqa were not all ISIS terrorists. “To the people & government in #France, #Raqqa City residents are not all #ISIS,” he wrote in a post on Twitter. “Please do not [sic] targets atrandom.”

The Islamophobic fear of the Other triggered passionate defense of French revenge against Syrians. Syrian people became subsumed by one geographic category and were also shamed for mourning their losses in the context of the “larger” injustice in Paris. There was no consideration that any casualties would result from the retaliations, that real people would be hurt. Instead, Syria and the Raqqa region were imagined as empty, ISIS-filled terrorist enclaves, when the people themselves were resisting terrorism every day from the ground up. Whose humanity was #prayforhumanity referring to? What dictates how and when we grieve? Which Raqqa were they really bombing? The revolutionary Raqqa, regime-controlled Raqqa, rebel-controlled Raqqa, Jabhat an Nusra controlled Raqqa, ISIS Raqqa? The women and youth of Raqqa building civil society institutions from the grassroots? Who were they retaliating against?

Pagden (1987: 2) explains how colonists conflated qualities of the mystical flora and fauna of the New World with the “wild” human beings who lived there. The notion of uncivilized barbarians, Pagden argues, came from a teleological 12th century view of non-Christian people, who were characterized as uncivil animals. When De Soto and other early

“explorers” came to the New World in the 1500s they composed philosophical and religious testimonies on the “nature” of Indians. Initially they conflated Indians with Ethiopians and other non-European people. Soon theologians were deliberating whether it was ethical for Indians to be enslaved. Wynter (2003) points out that Bartholome de Las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda debated “archeo-astronomy” and “ethno-geographies,” this hierarchy that delineated human/Man/nature categories. Las Casas wanted to legitimate conquest over the land through an argument that Indians were “slaves by nature” who had no rational souls and did not fear God.

In the retaliation against Raqqa, French Islamophobia against the Muslim, non-Christian terrorist became an underlying defense for justifying the subhumanity of Syrians, who because of their assumed radical extremist beliefs were not Godly enough to be considered human and were deserving of total destruction. (Like Kanye said, Pray for Paris/ this is a God dream.)

Wynter argues that the framework of “terra nullius,” or land of no one, was necessary in justifying enslavement and spreading white Christianity. In 1444, when the Portuguese landed in West Africa, they legitimized the enslavement of non-Christians through the idea of terra nullius, that global expansion could be theologically justified. This discourse was useful for establishing the legitimacy of Spanish sovereignty in the New World. At the same moment in history, Wynter points out, Christian dominance was on the European agenda—struggles over Muslim-controlled Jerusalem occurred in the 1490s, around the same time Columbus set sail.

Maldonado-Torres (2004) argues that racialized categories become exchanged for each other in the coloniality of power. For example, he points out how the term Muslim/Musliman was used by Nazis to define the category of Jewish people in concentration camps who were “ready to die” (47). Torres points out the forgetfulness of coloniality and how not acknowledging differences in space is a key part of the coloniality of knowledge because it leads

to an erasure of epistemologies and languages. The coloniality of knowledge, power, and being justify an ethics of non-war, the capacity to normalizing violence that would otherwise be defined as murder and rape (Quijano 2000). Maldonado Torres (2004) argues that the coloniality of power targets communities by arguing they have a preferential character of violence. The way the non-Syrian Paris attackers, who were from a variety of backgrounds, were conceptualized as markers of Syrian's barbarity shows how the coloniality of power and racism play out in how the colonial apparatus justifies its violence with an intentional lack of specificity. Syrians theorized, organized, and advocated from the virtual world to the U.N. asking for specific kinds of international accountability for the crimes against humanity the Assad regime committed for years but France's retaliation bypassed that. The response to the attacks in Paris disregarded the forty years of oppositional revolutionary advocacy work and Syrians were not a consideration because in the construction of terra nullius, they did not even exist in the global imagination but were simply subsumed and invisible in an inherently violent geography.

A historical amnesia seemed to sweep public responses—there were no mentions that France was Syria's colonizer. As Yen Espiritu (2014) writes in *Body Counts*, “much of the official U.S. history about the Vietnam War is based on organized forgetting.” It is because of France that the sectarianism of the dictatorship exists. In 1922, French forces split Syria into an Alawite state with its base in the northern coastal city of Latakia, a Sunni Arab state in Central Syria, and Jabal Druze for the Druze minority south of Damascus. Both of those states (except for a brief period from 1936-1939) were separate from Syria until 1942, when the French reunited the states of Damascus and Aleppo to form the State of Syria (Cleveland and Bunton 2013: 203-206). This institutionalized fragmentation of ethnic groups in Syria was a key part of the French colonial strategy to destabilize the region. Political analysts have compared the Syrian

situation to Burundi and Rwanda—a similar case, where a French colonial authority gave rights to disenfranchised minorities who then committed ethnic cleansing against their former oppressors, who were really pawns in the colonial game against them. And the neocolonial dictatorship, along with the U.S., played a direct role in creating and engineering the rise of terrorism in Syria, as Dagher (2019) carefully documents.

Although the usage of the term humanity was meant to be inclusive, after #PrayforParis came under attack for not considering other tragedies, the irony is that #Prayforhumanity became synonymous with Paris. Paris was the marker of humanity. Kanye's lyric connecting the Paris tragedy to the challenges of parenthood and the triumph of God's dream could be analyzed through Wynter's (2003) and Lugone's (2007) look at the construction of light and dark binaries, about what constitutes good and evil, what loss is understood as tragic and who is deserving of death in the global imaginary. The lyrics also capture how Paris as the pinnacle of modernity and its status as a colonial metropole becomes equated with the epitome of human progress and liberation. The coloniality of being continues to structure the way we mourn and how we conceptualize resistance. Dominant headlines erased the everyday, grassroots oppositional cultures that disenfranchised women, youth, and children create as ways to survive in Raqqa. Syrians did not even have the rights to mourn their collective traumas and connect them to the tragedies in Paris. Additionally, it shifted the global northern focus off the regime's atrocities and instead fed into a War on Terror fear of Islamist extremists, who were wreaking havoc in Syria, but the majority of casualties and physical destruction was being perpetuated by the Western-educated secular regime. This was a regime that was enabled by the West and whose sectarianism is a consequence of France's division of Syria, and yet framed by leftist anti-imperialists as somehow revolutionary (Karadijis 2019, Transnational Solidarity Network 2019).

As Daher (2019: 288) put it, “the majority of Western states, led by United States, did not get deeply involved in the organization of the opposition. They initially rejected any plans to assist armed opposition forces. The United States and any western states became increasingly focused on IS and the war on terror, following its announcement of its caliphate in 2014. This situation served the Syrian regime’s agenda. Syria was not seen as a strategic interest for the United States, notably because it lacked substantial oil reserves. The significance of Syria was related to its geographic location border Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel.”

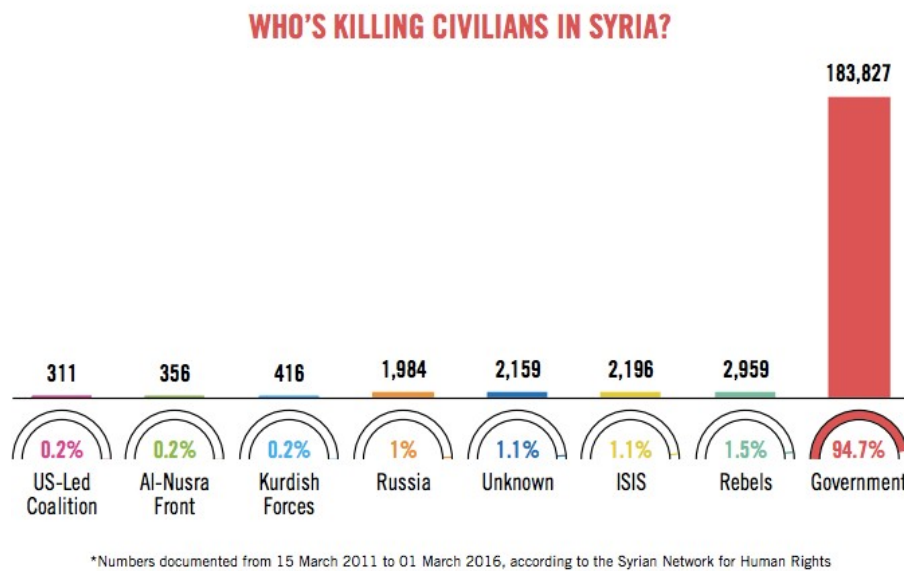


Figure 2.3: Infographic from 2016 via the Syrian Network for Human Rights. The updated casualty percentage in 2021 is that the regime and its Russian allies are responsible for 91.4% of casualties. Which is not to minimize the brutality of the extremist forces or the foreign actors in Syria, but to point out how the regime’s violence actually served Western geopolitical interests.

In “The Question of Palestine,” Said (1992) details how the creation of a Zionist state coincided with ideological and grammatical constructions of Palestine as a “nonplace,” with no history and no land. This narrative logic normalizes Zionist occupation as the product of a

longstanding religious “conflict,” between the barbaric East and the civilized West. Just as the phrase “Israel-Palestinian conflict” intentionally works to obscure the power imbalance of Zionist occupation by linguistically implying parity, terms like crisis, conflict, and civil war intentionally make ambiguous the Syrian Revolution and its roots. In *Syria Speaks*, Halasa, Mahfoud and Omareen (2014) write, “Syrians eschew phrases like conflict and civil war to describe the situation in their country. For them, these words suggest an equal playing field between the aggressor—the regime of Bashar al Assad and the victims—the Syrian people targeted by government violence and brutal sectarianism.” Theorists in the field of decoloniality point out how colonizers deny violent invasions through narratives of victimization which center the colonizer’s experience of being under attack from a “foreign” enemy. This denial cements the colonizer’s subjectivity in a removed place of innocence, which reinforces Syrians as either nonexistent, terrorists, or victims of a mysterious and overwhelming crisis, rather than as agents of revolutionary change and active creators of liberation and sanctuary spaces while under siege.

There’s No Space for Irony When You’re Drowning: The Spectacle of Suffering

Every few years during the Syria “crisis,” certain images go viral. After a few more years, they circulate again, with no context, as if they just happened. The photographs are most often taken by non-Syrian photographers. As Tamara K. Nopper and Mariama Kaba (2014) write in “Itemizing Atrocity,” in the context of spectacles of anti-Black violence, “spectacle as the route to empathy means the atrocities itemized need to happen more often or get worse, to become more atrocious each round in hopes of being registered.” As Clare Hemmings (2012) writes, spectacle is the “cannibalization of the other masquerading as care.” These images, such as the two of nameless Syrian refugee children mistaking the photographer’s camera for a gun, circulate with messages of heartbreak, pity, and concern, with no mention of the Assad regime’s

ongoing genocide, the Islamist extremism, or U.S., Israeli, and French airstrikes that displaced them.

One such photograph of three-year old Syrian Kurdish refugee, Alan Kurdi, whose drowned body was photographed on the shores of the Mediterranean in September 2015. Alan, his brother Galip, and their mother died trying to cross to Greece by boat after fleeing Qobani. This was their fourth attempt trying to cross the sea (Gunter 2015).



Figure 2.4: Tweet by Khaled Beydoun Feb. 13, 2021 that reads “A little girl in Syria mistakes Osman Sagirli’s camera for a gun. Heartbreaking photo.” The photograph is actually from 2014. (BBC Trending 2015).



Figure 2.5: Tweet by Khaled Beydoun from Feb 16, 2021 that reads “Another Syrian child mistakes a camera, held by a member of the Red Cross, for a gun.”

In January 2016, the French leftist magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published a cartoon of Alan Kurdi, depicted as a would-be rapist of European women had he survived. In the cartoon he is depicted as a monkey wildly chasing after fleeing European women. It is captioned, “What would have happened if little Aylan¹⁰ had grown up? He would grope women in Germany.” The magazine argued it was a satirical commentary on the racism of the European mainstream. In effect, the magazine reproduced a sadistic colonial voyeurism invested in the carnivalesque reproduction of animalized, sexualized representations of the Other.

Jodi Byrd (2011: 68) analyzes how representations of the Other rely on a series of

¹⁰ Note Alan Kurdi’s name has been spelled “Aylan” by much of the global northern media, but his aunt told BBC (2015) that this was a version of his name assigned by Turkish officials and his Kurdish name was Alan. The erasure of his name further emphasizes the layers of misrecognition of specific Syrian experiences, which is particularly disturbing given the experiences of Kurdish people in Turkey that ethnically cleanse their names, languages, and resistance.

tensions and erasures, as "consolidations of cacophonous discourses." Byrd looks at the interpretations mapped on the character Caliban in *The Tempest*, who Byrd uses as a way to explain emergent forms of racialization as colonial empires were taking shape and categorizing phenotypes and characteristics into racial hierarchies. Caliban becomes an allegory for understanding "distortive effects of planetary parallax gaps produced in the lingering stretch of the real between and among bodies in motion, a series of deferrals that facilitate the transit of Empire at the contesting site of indigeneity" (40). Byrd also raises questions about satire, because satire assumes that a dissonance between colonial semiotics, the meanings, and interpretations are understood the same by everyone at the same subject positions. Byrd argues that for satire to work within a hierarchal dynamic is problematic, because "to engage one history runs the very risk of obscuring another (45)." Satire, she points out, is positioned by the institutional power dynamics from which the parody is coming from. By making light of the absurdity of violence, it renders that violence part of the past. It ignores that colonial discourses and histories are still alive and operating today.

When Prospero first comes in contact with Caliban, he asks whether Caliban is a fish or a man, dead or alive, then wonders how much this "monster" would make him on the streets of London. Eventually, representations "become so culture deprived and decontextualized that it is difficult to trace their start...back to their beginnings of colonial manifestations" (67). Caliban is characterized as animal, then as not living, then as a monster—Shakespeare is writing as deeply racist representations of Blackness and indigeneity take shape in colonial epistemologies. Byrd argues that the Caliban becomes emptied of identity and that emptying *becomes* his identity (63). Aime Cesaire (1969)'s rewriting of the *Tempest* pointed out how in the original play, Prospero refers to Caliban as a "dull thing, not honored with human shape," "thing of darkness," "rapist,"

“monster,” and “beast.” While Byrd conceptualizes the figure of Caliban in terms of indigeneity, Césaire points to clear ways that Shakespeare condemned Caliban to an object because of anti-Blackness.¹¹ Like Caliban, parallax constructions collapsed onto Alan as a subject who occupies multiple racial categories at the same time. In the cartoon, he is depicted as a monkey, an animal—then as a potential rapist of white women, punctuated by the fact that he is not living and that this is all a speculation on who he would be if he lived. In this moment, as Syrians re-enter the global order as 13.5 million refugees, the colonial master code is trying to articulate Syrians’ racial position vis a vis histories of violently racist signifiers of indigeneity, foreignness, and Blackness. The “comedic” speculative turning of the Charlie Hebdo cartoon baby Alan into an animal (a monkey), then a potential rapist, reinforces that even in death, we are not granted space to honor his life.

THEME 2: SYRIA AS A THREATENING, FEARFUL, POTENTIAL PERPETRATOR
[JUXTAPOSED WITH THEME 3, SYRIANS AS POTENTIAL “STEVE JOBS,” “GOOD IMMIGRANT,” “WHITE MIGRANT,” x GENDERED DIMENSIONS]

“Why am I always seen in binaries? The victimized concubine or the bitter witch? The docile housewife or the ruthless boss? The prude or the slut? The saint or the femme fatale? Cold or hysterical? Baring all or covering all? Sexualized when naked and fetishized when dressed.”
-From *hysteria: The uterus*, quoted in *Jamila* by Wessam el Meligi, p. 93

¹¹ In Aime Césaire’s 1969 play, *La Tempête*, he rewrites Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* from a decolonial, anti-imperialist lens. He resignifies Caliban as a symbol of resistance, a trickster figure. Césaire specifies that Caliban was an enslaved Black revolutionary who refuses Prospero’s colonizing language and renames himself X. He “refuses to submit and wants freedom without delay,” and articulates his visions for liberation and decolonization (Smith and Hudson 1992: 387).



Figure 2.6: a “painting” of the Syrian woman wearing niqab.

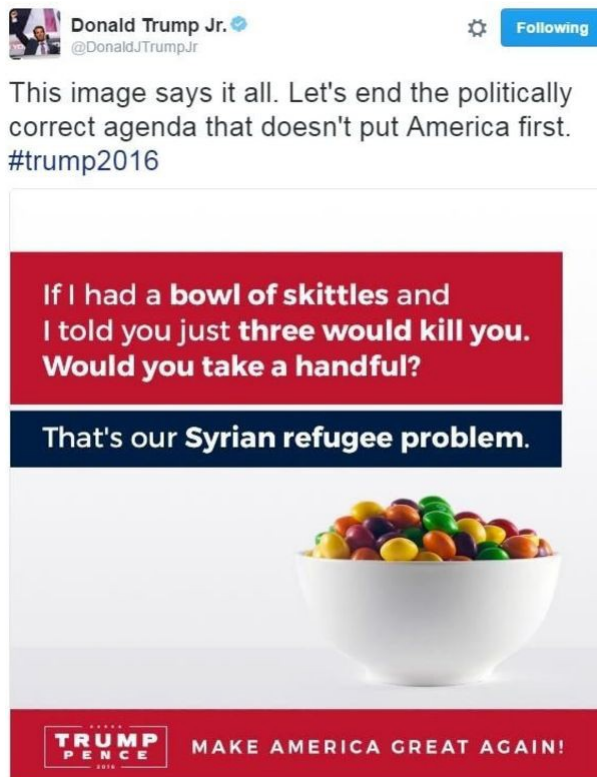


Figure 2.7: Tweet by Donald Trump Jr. with an image that reads “If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you. Would you take a handful? That’s our Syrian refugee problem.”



Figure 2.8: Tweet by Texas governor Greg Abbott from Nov 2015 that reads "THIS is why Texas is vigilant about Syrian refugees: 8 Syrians Caught at Texas Border in Laredo."

During the 2016 election campaign, Donald Trump Jr. tweeted a graphic that read “If I had a **bowl of skittles** and I told you just **three would kill you**. Would you take a handful? That’s our **Syrian refugee problem**.” In 2015, the governors of 27 different states in the U.S. proposed to “oppose” Syrian refugees from entering their states (Strickland 2015). The governor of Texas tweeted that 8 illegal aliens and potential members of ISIS were caught in Laredo, Texas attempting to enter the state, and the hashtag #8SyriansCaught was the top twitter hashtag around the world for several days. It turned out that a Syrian family of eight, four adults and four children who were headed to Texas from Mexico were detained and harassed by military assassins (contractors) on the border and a widespread moral panic based on existing anti-immigrant, anti-Latino sentiments ensued. The mayor of Roanoke, Virginia suggested that the best solution for Syrians was to put them in internment camps like the Japanese during World War II. Think pieces and social media backlash was not in disagreement, but instead criticized officials for not taking a stronger stance against Syrians—they should *refuse* them, not oppose them. Syrians vacillated between multiple racial and ethnic categories in popular discourse, from immigrants to refugees to “illegals” to potential terrorists. Few raised questions about how they became refugees or what it even means to refuse a people.



Figure 2.9: Facebook update from Arkansas governor Asa Hutchinson that reads “As Governor I will oppose Syrian refugees relocated to Arkansas. As Governor, I oppose any facility or installation in Arkansas being used as a Syrian refugee center. Many of the Syrian refugees are fleeing violence in their own country, but Europe, Asia, or Africa are logically the best places for resettlement or for temporary asylum. Syria is a war torn country and the United States will support our European...”



Figure 2.10: Screenshot of comments on Governor Asa Hutchinson’s post.

An interesting liberal response emerged when white settlers began to say, “we shouldn’t refuse Syrian refugees because my grandmother was a Syrian refugee on Ellis island.” While perusing social media comments and having conversations with people about the “refusal,” I saw this phrase from white people more than once.

Gualteri (2009) documents the early court cases that subsumed a wide range of SWANA people into a category of “Syrian” and “white.” This same racialization allows white Americans to absorb Syrianness, like the “My grandmother was a Cherokee Princess” narrative, absorbing the ambiguous category of “Syrian” into their lineage with a blatant misrecognition and vast inflation of what it means to be Syrian. It is all framed in the absurd performative space where white settlers have the authority to refuse or “oppose” refugees from entering land that does not belong to them. The irony in these screenshots from Arkansas governor Asa Hutchinson’s decision to ban Syrian refugees—there were already Syrians living in Arkansas for decades. Who among us are the bad skittles? What about the white terrorists in the region, who pillage, bomb, and wreak havoc on Black, Native, and other communities of color?

Initially, as Martinez (2011) chronicles, the hierarchy of who’s who in the Americas originated in the Spanish system of *limpieza de sangre*, or a hierarchy that determined who was a “pure” Christian, and who was a non-Christian, impure impostor. The Inquisition was set up to record and archive contestations of blood, as conversos, converted Jewish people, and moriscos, converted Muslims increased hostility and suspicion toward “impure” genealogies. In the ‘New World,’ these categories mutated, as Spanish-born Spaniards came to define indigenous people as sub-human. As new categories emerged, *castas* rose to delineate who was a Spanish-born Spaniard, who was a Spaniard born in America, who was creole, who was indigenous and who was African. In order to justify Europe as the pinnacle of modernity, there had to be an

evolutionary narrative that represented the backward Other, against which the progress of the European project was measured. It was by this process, Martinez argues, that categories of blood come to determine behavior and phenotype. Impurity became a determinant of the behaviors of the irrational, unpredictable non-human. Genealogical fictions came to determine who was eligible for purity, and by that logic, who was eligible to the rights and privileges of the Spanish crown. The castas systems organized the racial logics behind locally specific subordinate roles in relation to Europeans.

Martinez' careful chronology of the shifting racial terrain in the New World makes clear that colonial discourses constantly reformulate categories of the human to fit their historically specific agendas. Byrd (2011) argues that multiple histories collapse onto a subject during colonialism so that they are intentionally misrecognized, just as Columbus "misrecognized" indigenous people as Indios so they occupied multiple categories of Otherness at the same time. This argument connects to the discourse about mixtures of multiple identity categories and the way indigenous people are set up to eventually disappear and become a trace in the colonial body.

Fanon (2008) highlights the ways structures of oppression delineate an Other, what he calls a *damné*. The *damné* leads a life of inevitable damnation in the eyes of the colonizer. The very existence of the *damné* is a nightmare in the colonial subconscious. Wynter (2003) outlines the process by which a colonial triadic schema emerges around this category of the *damné*, and how it ensured that Indigenous and West African people were not capable of being "saved," and thus were rationalized as deserving of death. The internal logic of colonial sovereignty and the construction of who had a soul was based on a longstanding ethical, moral, and legal code that initially was a religious construction and through colonization became concrete and

systematically enforced and reproduced by colonial subjects. It is by this process that the fiction of racial superiority is rationalized and solidified as real during the Enlightenment period of "degodding," or secularizing religious doctrines.¹² The creation of categories of the Other evoke terror and disidentification with their oppositional colonial subjects.

Gualtieri (2009) writes about the instability of the historic racialization of people from Bilad-asham, or Greater Syria, which included parts of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq in the U.S. Gualtieri writes about how early Christian Syrian immigrants such as Costa George Najour were able to appeal to whiteness in the courts to argue for U.S. citizenship. He was granted citizenship on the basis of this appeal, which set a precedent that emerges today in the U.S census classification of Middle Eastern people as "Caucasian," while the U.S. terrorizes and displaces Middle Eastern people from their lands in hyperracialized ways. During the time Najour was arguing for his whiteness, the Klu Klux Klan "used intimidation and violence to challenge the presence of Syrians in the United States," bombing the home of a Syrian family in Marietta, Georgia, and lynching Syrian grocer Nola Romey in Lake City Florida in 1929, racial violence that would continue through the 20th century. What does it mean that early Christian Syrians were able to appeal to whiteness, but were not given the "citizenship" that was granted to them on paper?

The absorption of Syrians into whiteness denies and displaces actual Black and Brown Syrians because our very bodies counter the dominant representation of Syrians as "whiter Arabs" in global racial imaginaries. When a young Black Syrian child was attempting to gain

¹² Wynter argues that this discourse has its roots in Biblical curse of Ham, Aristotelian narratives of natural and civil slaves, the saved/unsavable souls in the Age of Exploration, the dark/enlightened binaries of the "Age of Reason," and the civilized/savage binary of Darwinism and the rise of 19th century imperialism.

citizenship in Germany, he was rejected because German officials did not believe he was Syrian. I have been met with credulity many times in my life when people found out I was Syrian because I'm told I don't "look Syrian" (which is code for: your skin is too brown to be Syrian, when in reality there are millions of Syrians with darker, browner skin than me). There is no "Syrian look," and the assumption of whiteness is another form of violent anti-Black invisibility that erases Afro-Syrians, Black Palestinian Syrians from Yarmouk and elsewhere, Somali-Syrians and many others. In Deraa, where the revolution began, there is a population of Afro-Syrian people whose roots are from Syria for millennia.¹³ What does it mean that those Syrians are being counted as white? And does it mean anything at all if their lived day to day racialized experiences are not of whiteness, but that whiteness denies them access to the slim allocation of resources people of color barely receive from social services and refugee agencies? What does this erasure mean as Syrians and other racialized "Muslim" groups are denied entry in the U.S because of Trump's Executive Order 13769, titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States"?

The misnomer "Muslim Ban" lumps together all SWANA people as Muslim as a discursive, racial, and material category. The witch hunt for #8Syrianscaught and the proclaimed institutional disavowal of Syrian life relates to how Wynter emphasizes that the coloniality of knowledge has a global reach and the category of the *damné* includes the poor, the refugee, and the marginalized.

Journal Entry: February 26, 2020: Muslim Banned

There is a political economy driving why colonial vocabularies do not mention the specific actors in Syria as the U.S formalizes bans against Syrian entry. When Trump got elected, my community was intimately impacted by the Muslim Ban. Sometime after 9/11, around 2009,

¹³ See: *Unmistakably Black: Sculpture and Paintings from Ancient Syria and Anatolia* by Anu M'Bantu for representations of Black Syrians in ancient paintings and sculptures from the region since 1800 BC.

my family was held and interrogated at the airport for twelve hours on the way back from Jordan to the U.S. I was wearing hijab that summer. “Did you attend any madrassas?” the TSA official asked me. “Yes,” my dad answered, with a wink in his eyes. “She attended the local neighborhood mosque school. Madrassa means school in Arabic.” The TSA officials look alarmed. “What was the address?” “There was no address, we just call it Hussein Mosque.” My four-year-old brother was screaming and throwing a tantrum from exhaustion in the glass room we were kept in. My mother ended up throwing out her back from having to carry suitcases that they roughly tossed to us on our way out, and her back was never the same since that day. I think about the aches in our bodies from navigating border violence. Fast forward to 2019...

In November, my great grandmother dies, may her soul rest in peace. My great aunt in Damascus can't come to her mother's funeral, she's trapped in Syria because: Muslim Ban.

Our close family friends, former Syrian political prisoner and Syrian revolution activist—he and his wife and daughter lived with my mom for three years. Recently, he was admitted into a political science master's program in the states. He and his wife and two kids are denied from entering because: Muslim Ban.

My stepbrothers and stepsister can't visit their mom in the U.S. because they are trapped by the Muslim Ban.

The Gendered Syrian Dimension of Hypervisibility

Edward Said (1978) studied how colonial systems of knowledge “invent, replace, transform, and construct ideas, fantasies and bodies that could be feared. Fearing those who are Otherized creates constant tension, uncertainties and struggles within colonial contexts.” As Said explained in *Orientalism*, the less clear and more inaccurate the language used to depict the Other, the more alien the Other becomes. As Sara Ahmed notes in her reading of Fanon, “the other is only felt to be the cause of fear through a misrecognition, which reads the body of the other as fearsome” (2004: 388). A gendered analysis of Said could further his analytic framework by arguing that the construction of Syria as unknowable gendered body is representative of what Jamarkani (2011: 228) calls the “narrative of the imperialist-colonialist civilizing mission, which capitalizes on the images of exotic, oppressed women who must be saved from their indigenous (hyper)patriarchy.” Mino Moallem suggests that the cultural

mythology of the oppressed Middle Eastern woman in need of saving turns the “veil” into a signifying tool where “the cultural mythology of the veil easily becomes a signifying tool among competing patriarchies or imperialisms or both, a framing that constructs Arab and Muslim women as either hidden or revealed objects rather than thinking subjects. The paradox is that, as a marker (supposedly) of invisibility and cultural authenticity, it renders Arab and Muslim womanhood as simultaneously invisible and hypervisible...notions of oppression, tradition, and civilization become animated in the service of imperialist or nationalist agendas that render the mythology, if not the women, hypervisible” (Jamarkani 228-229).



Figure 2.11: The BBC’s “satirical” clip called The Real Housewives of ISIS.

I started this project wanting to understand the violence I felt at various moments of grotesque hypervisibility of Syria and Syrian communities’ suffering. I felt suspicious and sick to my stomach as the BBC released satirical clips like "The Real Housewives of ISIS," which makes fun of Syrian women survivors of sexual violence in extremist dominated zones. I have met and spoken with Syrian women who survived ISIS siege and described forms of rape and gender violence that are too graphic to describe here. Syrians themselves have dry satires of ISIS on YouTube channels, but they are often forms of resistance and not belittling the gendered

forms of torture and terror that women experienced under ISIS controlled areas. In my search for news headlines about Syrian women, I discovered articles with a grotesque level of Orientalist sexualization, that describe “villages full of Syrian lesbians” and harems of Syrian women cowives to ISIS militants. Either Syrian women are absorbed as invisible into the framing of Syria as a gendered body onto which Western and Eastern powers strike and penetrate, or they are made hypervisible through sensationalist scrutiny of their intimate lives and sexualities in war zones.

About 61,700,000 results (0.81 seconds)

Syrian war has left cities full of single women with lesbians free to date ...

www.dailymail.co.uk/.../I-want-husband-satisfy-bed-Syrian-war-left-cities-single-women...

Jun 21, 2016 - EXCLUSIVE - 'I want a husband who can satisfy me in bed': Syrian war has left cities full of single women... but given lesbians freedom to have relationships. ... The absence of young men in Syria is glaringly obvious to any visitor to its major cities. ... As if finding a boyfriend wasn't ...

Images for syrian women



→ [More images for syrian women](#)

[Report images](#)

Figure 2.12: Google Search of “Syrian women” returns headline “Syrian war has left cities full of single women with lesbians free to date.”

In the political cartoon, the panel on the far right paints the Syrian woman in the center as a white woman with blond hair. This projection of white womanhood and Western notions of femininity onto a Syrian women’s body is telling of how colonial epistemologies articulate their identities through a construction of an Other. An imagined white female subject position is representative of the dictatorship’s use of neoliberal state feminism to erase and polarize Syrian women.¹⁴ Wedeen (1999) talks about the ideological project of the Syrian state and the

¹⁴ For a discussion of state sponsored feminisms in North African dictatorial contexts, see Charrad Mounira. 2001.

nationalist propaganda it circulates to construct a “cult of personality.” The president’s picture-perfect secular Western educated white-passing wife, Asma al-Assad, resembles the portrait in the political cartoon. During the 1980s the Ba’ath regime held systematic hijab bans in their rising state-sponsored secular kind of violent feminism using terms like “liberation,” and “oppression,” to describe their veiled Islamophobia. During the 1980s in Syria, the regime held traumatic forced unveilings of women on the streets. These unveilings were terrifying and fed by state violence that they justified against the backdrop of “rising Islamist extremism,” from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Mahmood analyzes the way liberal discourses of feminism and secular democracy coopt the language of liberation around “unveiling,” in order to implement a cultural framing that sees the colonial structure as liberating. Gayatri Spivak (1985) famously called this complex “white men saving brown women from brown men.” In the political cartoon, the left panel reflects several things at once in my reading: both a way to read the “fear” of terrorism driven by Islamophobia, the usage of “oppressed” Muslim’s women’s narrative juxtaposed with white women’s “liberation,” in order to justify occupation, and a commentary on the actual impact of patriarchy and women’s experiences under extremist forces.

A Gay Girl in Damascus: Subsuming the Queer Syrian Voice

As Razzan Ghazzawi (2017) points out in her article, “Decolonizing Syria’s so-called queer liberation,” the Syrian queer experience has been coopted by a white imperialist gaze to justify a discourse of rescue. There is a colonial juxtaposition of ISIS, and ISIS is a representation of Syria itself, with queerness. In 2011, when the Syrian Revolution began, there

States and Women’s Rights. *The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*. University of California Press.

was a famous blog called “A Gay Girl in Damascus” where Amina Arraf, a self-described Syrian American lesbian, posted about her early experiences in the Syrian Revolution (Young 2017). Amina’s blog attracted international attention, which came to a peak when she was kidnapped, and it was revealed that a white American man, Tom MacMaster, was the fraud behind Amina’s character. The regime used the hoax to reinforce their narrative that the Syrian Revolution was brought about by foreign interests to cause instability. In *Terrorist Assemblages:*

Homonationalism in Queer Times, Puar (2007) writes

National recognition and inclusion, here signaled as the annexation of homosexual jargon, is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary. At work in this dynamic is a form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of national homosexuality, what I term “homonationalism”—that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects. There is a commitment to the global dominant ascendancy of whiteness that is implicated in the propagation of the United States as empire as well as the alliance between this propagation and this brand of homosexuality (2).

Arraf was understood as an “exception,” to Syrian society—trapped by her culture and in need of rescue by an international gaze. When it was discovered that her story was fraudulent, actual Syrian queers whose stories are not as palatable were met with doubt. It made it even more difficult for Syrian queers in the revolution to speak. Under a regime that asserts its secular hegemony vis a vis discourse around “women’s rights,” the reality is that Syrian queers and trans community are highly policed in the authoritarian state. There has never been “international” concern around this issue before. And yet when ISIS entered the scene in 2013, Ambassador Samantha Powers held a UN Security Council meeting on “International LGBT Rights and ISIS in Syria.” Additionally, international (imperial) queers from around the world deployed an “LGBT Unit” to fight ISIS on the ground.

As queer nonbinary Syrian activist and former political prisoner Razan Ghazzawi put in a Facebook post,

The creation of 'LGBT Unit' to fight Daesh in Syria proves how the war on the Syrian people has been perpetuated by modern & civilizational claims. Assad tells world leaders he is 'secular' & 'sovereign' and asks them to join his 'war on terror' he started on the popular uprising, and long before the establishment of Al Nusra or Daesh. PYD tells leftists around the world it is advancing 'women's rights & participation' by including women in their armed forces that shot & detained Kurdish peaceful protestors and committed, like the rest of conflicting parties, human rights violations. Now we have imperial queers "fighting ISIS in Syria" and telling Syrian queers they are fighting in their name & "liberation." Daesh will respond to this by killing more Syrian queers.

After the rise of ISIS in 2013, the number of humanitarian reports on the state of Syrian women and queers exploded from agencies like Amnesty International, the UN, Human Rights Watch, and the International Rescue Committee. The reports decontextualized Syrian women's stories to evoke a global sense of urgency toward their cause. This seemingly harmless rationale ultimately implies that Syrian women are victims, void of complex lives or their own theories and strategies for structural change. Oppressed Syrian women are characterized as caught in a floating limbo of apolitical and dehistoricized turmoil. These humanitarian reports reveal less about the real social conditions of the refugee and more about the bureaucratized systems of knowledge accounting for and speaking for refugees (Espiritu 2014).

The creation of gendered, Orientalist images of Muslim women has historically been a way for the West to assert its hegemony over the "Orient" (Abu-Lughod 2013). This dominant representation justified imperial feminist campaigns to rescue Afghani and Iraqi women from oppressive Muslim forces through U.S. invasion and occupation (Husein 2014). The West is framed as humane, developed, and a safe haven for victims of violence, while the Orient is barbaric, inferior, and ravaged with violence and mystery.



Figure 2.13: A nameless Syrian woman is quoted in an Amnesty Report saying “I found out my husband was killed. No one told me-I found out from YouTube.” Source: Amnesty International (2015).

Images like this one from the Amnesty Report (2015) are common. Note that the woman is nameless, and her quote is about her husband. He was killed, in passive voice, by an unnamed violence, and she found out through Youtube. This reference is to the brutality of the prison industrial complex in Assad’s regime where documentations of abuse are only available on Youtube. There is no way to establish context for this floating image. She is holding her child and defined directly in relationship to her husband and child, with no mention of a name, an imposition that is crafted by the framing of her narrative rather than the narrative itself. Amnesty presents readers of their report on Syrian women with a glossy booklet of floating images like this, presented as hard-proof evidence of Syrian women’s suffering and needs, with prescriptive suggestions for Western aid organizations and political briefings on “how to help.” This image mirrors the far-left image in the cartoon. Ironically, the Islamist extremist “painting” of Syrian women matches the Western construction of her image in the humanitarian industrial complex.

Women who actually wear niqab rarely get to speak about it for themselves.

Yen Espiritu (2014) examines how the construction of refugeehood is used to reify the identity and the rights discourse of nation-states. Refugees exist as dialectically in opposition to “free” colonial subjects. Their narratives are depoliticized to justify colonial saviorhood. In the political cartoon, the white woman opposes the “Muslim” woman in a way that contrasts how colonial gender epistemologies conceptualize others as backwards, terrorists who live in empty spaces ready for invasion and in need saving once they are displaced. Using Espiritu’s framework, I can understand how the parallaxic positioning of Syrian refugees as fit for colonial assimilation because of their eligibility for victimhood, but not personhood, ultimately is a representation that serves the interests of empire.

Existing humanitarian reports from Amnesty, the UN, Human Rights Watch, and the International Rescue Committee come to false conclusions about the nature of solving the Syrian refugee crisis. Many are only documenting Syrian refugee women’s narratives as evidence to ask “wealthy countries,” to intervene, in the words of the Amnesty Report (2015). These reports use the decontextualized and disembodied stories of brown Syrian refugees as means to enact a global sense of pity and understanding. I am wary of the urgent tones and selective framing of the refugee narratives as a perfect background onto which Western NGO’s and “wealthy countries” can shape new structures “for the better.”

In “Against Imperialism’s “Development,” Pimental (2015) argues that “too many aid agencies treat development and developing country research as one and the same. Blanket approaches are thought to remedy pressing and persist issues despite any nearsighted assumptions that the strategies and theories at work in “highly industrialized” countries ought to naturally and effectively work in states of altogether histories. There must be a shift from the

pro-imperialism approach that is now in place, which relegate the Global South, its wisdom, and its responses to North Western prescriptions for development.” This seemingly well-meaning Western sympathy embedded in the discourse of humanitarianism is neoliberalism in disguise. Because neoliberalism sees Third World countries as potential sites for economic opportunities, the false conclusion that is inherent in these reports is that “a liberalized [capitalist] global economy maximizes human freedoms globally” (Pimental 2015). This seemingly harmless rationale contributes to exploitation of people in the Third World, who are seen as potential laborpools, void of culturally specific ways of carving their own strategies for economic self-sufficiency. Additionally, it is proven that Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have endorsed border controls in the EU that have led to the death of hundreds of Syrian migrants drowning in the Mediterranean (Nevins 2015). This contradiction touches the heart of the politics of human rights discourse, or what Hannah Arendt (1973) called the “right to have rights,” a notion that interrogates how constructions of human rights are tied to the politics of citizenship and nation states inherently created in relation to “Others,” or non-citizen, non-humans. This ties to what Balibar (2009) calls the “politics of civility,” or “a politics of the second degree, which aims at creating, recreating, and conserving the set of conditions within which politics as a collective participation in public affairs is possible.” Walia’s (2013) *Undoing Border Imperialism* critiques the “universalization and proliferation of the Western state as the defining political institution” that determines notions of citizenship and human rights, notions which would not have been created to begin with if it were not for European imperial divisions of borders to serve capitalist and colonial interests. Essentially, these reports are not really about “humanizing” Syrian women, but about arguing for the creation of conditions that replicate Western ideas of who a human being is and what humanity looks like, inherently tied to white

supremacist, colonial, imperialist, masculinist, and heteronormative notions of citizen and legitimate personhood. The language of “empowerment,” represents a very different set of goals in this case. I draw upon U.S. third world women theorists such as Sandoval (2000) to argue that Syrian women’s resistance strategies are reinventing the notion of empowerment and creating new imaginaries on their own terms.

My project highlights the cracks in this imperialism-veiled-as-humanitarianism discourse because it shows that Syrian women are creating self-sufficient alternative spaces and thereby crafting new forms of economies on their own terms, with their own resources, although limited. It shows the violence inherent in approaching the Syrian refugee crisis in essentialist and Orientalist tones. These reports all focused on individual plights instead of collective experiences that bind refugees together, with pictures of Syrian refugee women and sensational stories. I often wondered how the reports generated such specific accounts of gender violence when Syrians women’s experiences with gender violence are often spoken about in coded ways. As Madlingozi (2010) writes:

The production of authentic victims, or victim authenticity, is an inherently voyeuristic or pornographic practice that, no matter how carefully or sensitively it is done, transforms the position of the ‘victim’ in his or her society and produces a language of victimization for him or her to speak on the international stage... The remove between the human rights professional and the people they purport to represent can reinforce a global divide of wealth, mobility, information and access to audience. Human rights professionals consequently struggle, ultimately in vain, against a tide of bad faith, orientalism and self-serving sentimentalism.

Then again, critiques of the imperial nature of Western humanitarianism ignore the tangible resources and support that on-the-ground organizations provide. Those agencies provide important statistics for the treatment of prisoners and human rights abuses in other contexts, but in the refugee humanitarian industrial complex, they often commit the same erasure and

hypervisibility as the mainstream media.

Women Under ISIS & Extremism: Colonial Violence, Militarized Extremism and Patriarchy Go Hand in Hand

The panel in the political cartoon with the niqabi'd woman could also be making reference to fundamentalism that emerges as a reactionary extreme to colonial violence and often is rooted in colonial violence. It makes reference to the patriarchy within the context of rising militarization, i.e. when ISIS was forcing women to wear niqab. There is no way to understand the extremism caused by militarization without understanding formations of masculinities under those conditions. The type of hypermasculinization that results from ethnonationalist oppositional movements asserts its dominance through gendered policing (Kaplan, Alarcon, Moaellem 2007). Their patriarchal discourse reifies women's positions as victims in war situations and contributes to the way alternative strategies of resistance are patronized because they include traditionally feminized activities such as sewing, cooking, and providing logistical support (Kuumba 2001).

Many of the human rights agencies devote large sections to describing horrific and sensationalist experiences with gender violence under ISIS. While gender violence does exist in horrific ways, the particular way in which it is framed may not accurately represent the complex understandings Syrian women have of their own realities. It also erases Syrian women's voices in articulating their own resistance to and experiences with patriarchal forces in their communities. As I mentioned earlier, after firsthand translation and witnessing of women who experienced horrific kinds of violence under ISIS and the regime, I am critical of the ethical concerns implicated in the framing of sexual violence, which should always be on the victims' own terms.

My focus on documenting women’s creative activism reveals the close ties between militarization and masculinity, as “the process of militarization both draws on and exaggerates the bipolarization of gender identities *in extremis*” (Mama 2013). The masculinization of militarized extremism goes hand in hand with the construction of sexist ethnonationalist logics that drive the agenda and priorities of the revolutionary structure and replicate oppressive systems through rape and other violent, gendered expressions of dominance. This discourse also reifies women’s positions as victims in war situations, instead of capable of also resisting the state in transgressive ways.

To be feared is also to occupy space in settler fantasies and desires. Syrian women in diaspora become imagined as fetishes, with headlines such as “Villages of Syrian Lesbians Left to Date as Men have Fled.” Media headlines transform the war zone into Western harem fantasies, instead of the sites of struggle and resistance they are.

THEME 3: THE LIBERAL VIEW/ COLONIAL PATERNALISM: ANGELS (WHO RESCUE DEMONS)



Figure 2.14: painting Syrians into secular whiteness

Even the most well-meaning of western researchers who write on Syria write from a place of shock and awe, a seemingly moral imperative to allow “us” to “understand” what is otherwise constructed as a chaotic and indecipherable context. They often write with incredulity that Syrians are capable of creative projects. Take for example, *Syria’s Secret Library*, by Mike Thomson (2019), a well-meaning account of an underground library in Daraya. He writes, “At first it was hard to believe. Given that I could not get into the besieged town to verify what I was being told, I wondered whether it was true. Could there really be a secret library filled with thousands of books rescued from the rubble of war? An underground literary sanctuary filled with lovers of poetry, science, history and art, who held book clubs while bullets flew above? It defied every brutal image I had of the Syrian war, and I was determined to find out more.” (Thomson 2019: 5).

These narratives are often structured around a heroic European or U.S. journalist who journeys into war-torn Syria to relay the “truth.” The success of the narrative is evaluated not by accountability to the activism of local communities, or grounded in a way to assist them materially, but rather by other Western journalists and academics who measure the worth of the story. For example, in *Syria’s Secret Library* the author writes the project was a BBC documentary and “it got a heart-warming reception... Among the correspondence I received after the broadcast was a tweet from a Washington-based lecturer on the Middle East. The secret library, he wrote, had given him his first glimmer of hope for the country in many years....In all the time I had been reporting on Syria, I had never come across a story like this. One that inspired rather than depressed and showed how a love of literature, learning and culture had somehow survived, amid all the cruelty and bloodshed” (Thomson 2019: 6). I am amazed at doubt at the possibility of brown people loving reading and literature during a time of siege. It

“gives hope” to lecturers on the Middle East and shifts the dominant perception of despair to incredulity. Hope is not a luxury for people on the ground, it is an everyday practice. Many western researchers and journalists, whose investigation comes from a place of guilt and despair, can’t fathom that people have survived using creative practices on the ground. Could it really be?

What is the threshold for that quantity of Otherness that is admissible (“and admirable”) socially in liberal values? What are the specific measures and markers of being oppressed or unfree in the eyes of the Western colonial order? What happens when these standards or boundaries that mark oppressed people shift their stories into models of perseverance, progress, and struggle?

Heart4Refugees (now Syrian Community Network) was the first organization in San Diego formed to support the influx of thousands of Syrian refugees in fall of 2016. The first post on their Facebook page is a link to an article about the organization: “Heart4Refugees: Angels Bring Light to Lives in Darkness.” I take an interest in Heart 4 Refugees because I was part of the Syrian and Palestinian youth in San Diego who formed a counter-group to support displaced Syrians after we discovered Heart4Refugees, a community of Syrians in San Diego, were accepting money from a Zionist foundation to fund their refugee work. This intra-oppositional work eventually led to the founding of Arab Youth Collective and then Majdal Center, because we listened to community members’ concerns about the discourses Heart 4 Refugees deployed in the name of humanitarianism. The violence of certain terms, like “into the light” from the “darkness,” renders Syrians inherently violent and barbaric people emerging from the terrorist-ridden space of Syria. The journey into cultural and capitalist assimilation in America is a process of “cleansing” ourselves from the dangerous lives we once lived in Syria. As Fassin

(2013) put it, the racialization of people of color in the colonial project involves a heroic rescue mission, “To paraphrase Joseph Conrad, working in the projects meant for them plunging into the heart of darkness” (53). This is not a criticism of the work Heart4Refugees does in supporting community members, but a look into the symbols they deploy to incur support from a presumably white audience.

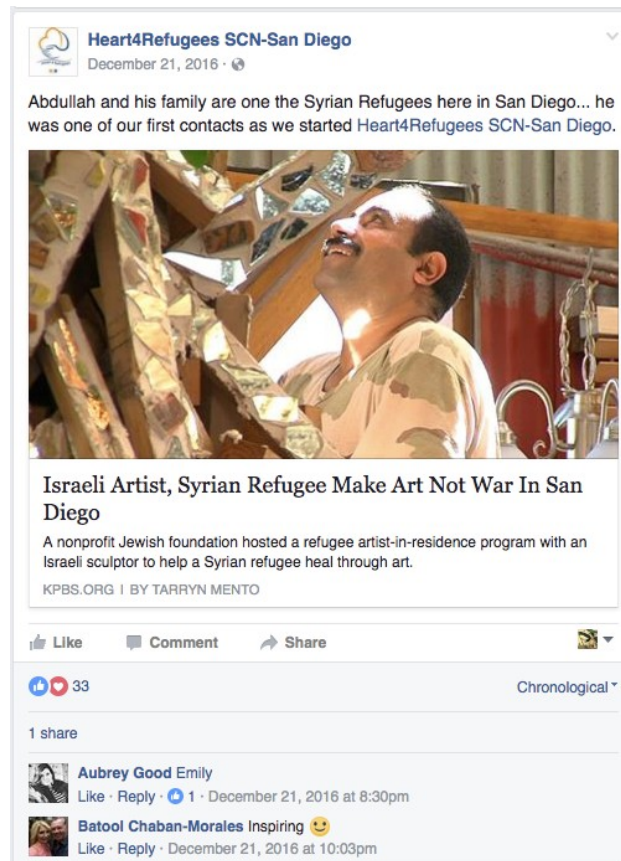


Figure 2.15: Screenshot from Heart4Refugees Facebook Page.

Heart4Refugees created an “Adopt a Syrian Family” program where U.S. families “adopt” recently relocated Syrian people. It reminds me of a protest banner the people of Kafranbel illustrated and circulated on November 28, 2015 It depicts Syrians in a boat, with the revolution flag, labeled “refugees,” fleeing earth. An alien in a spaceship floating in front of them is pointing to them and has a speech bubble that says “Go back.”



Figure 2.16: Banner from Kafnabel Protests. Nov. 28, 2015.

The sense of alienness and non-human abject status Syrians face as refugees already makes them illegible as subjects to people with citizenship. Home is destroyed, and the host space is full of Muslim bans and Islamophobic laws that expect Syrians to go back to where they came from.

In the American settler-colonial imaginary, the relationship is reversed. Because the Orient is already understood as a constantly conflicted place, Syrians are the aliens and U.S. white settlers are the legitimate hosts of the stolen land they are on. It is their civic “duty” as settlers to welcome them and make them feel at “home” in America, by taking them to Disneyland and buying them socks and “adopting” them as their own.



Figure 2.17: Adopt a Local Syrian Refugee Family

The language of adoption indicates that Syrians are being absorbed and infused with the liberal settler colonial values that “make America great.” Despite the fact they have navigated multiple displacements to Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, raised children under barrel bombing and many were active in the Syrian Revolution, survived regime torture or lost loved ones to state violence, Syrian “refugees” need to be taught Euro-American ways of life in order to be intelligible subjects.

There are religious undertones to this rescue narrative. Syrians must embrace their “New Life,” and become cleansed, despite their Muslim Otherness. They are welcomed into the embraces of joyful white women who are their beneficent guides in the New World. These performances of goodwill are more about the subjects enacting them onto Syrian bodies and less about Syrian’s actual needs and realities. “Heartwarming,” “grateful,” “loved,” “rewarding,” “success story”—these are the feel-good investments Euro-American spectators have in

circulating these photos in the virtual world. The headlines discussed earlier and representations influence tides of public opinion and public policy, laws that determine whether or not Syrians are worthy of life or deserve to die the Western cultural imagination. We are only worthy of humanity if we shut up, stay quiet, and prove our worth to the world through “work.” We are Steve Jobs’ kin! “Honestly, Syrians are the hardest workers, the nicest people,” I heard this a lot from people in the past few years. What if Syrians are mean and outraged, politicized, what if they do not want to be adopted or made into a plaything for pity?

In Heart4Refugees’ materials, subjects of the photos are mute themselves, and crowded around glowingly joyful white, feminized subjects. Sophia Armen’s (2018) work, “Unpacking the Middle Eastern Christian Figure: Body Snatchers, Saviors, and the Birth of the Modern American Non-Profit Industrial Complex” delves into the disturbing history of feminized colonial saviorism. Armen looks at the history of the oldest nongovernmental organization in the U.S., the Near East Foundation, formerly the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR) founded in 1915 and how they created images of the suffering “Syrian refugee,”-- who were in reality Armenian and Assyrian children who had just survived genocide, in addition to Syrian Arabs who were being colonized, and how they created these images in order to justify a Protestant Christian colonizing mission through the founding of forced assimilation schools and orphanages for a generation of dispossessed Armenian and Syrian refugees.¹⁵

¹⁵ In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, Lila Abu Lughod (2013) does archival work around this missionizing history. She writes (32-33) “One of my favorite documents from the period is a collection called *Our Moslem Sisters*, the proceedings of a conference of women missionaries held in Cairo in 1906. The subtitle of the book is *A Cry of Need from the Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It*. Speaking of the ignorance, seclusion, polygamy, and veiling that blight women’s lives across the Muslim world, the missionary women assert their responsibility to make these women’s voices heard: “They will never cry for themselves, for they are down under the yoke of centuries of oppression.” “This book,” it begins, “with its sad, reiterated story of wrong and oppression is



Figure 2.18: Screenshot from Heart 4 Refugees Facebook Page.

Syrian refugees in the United States live in constant fear of deportation if they are caught violating U.S. social norms, like being “dirty, unhygienic, and unappreciative” (in the words of a director of a Syrian refugee organization in San Diego who was describing Syrian refugees). What punitive mechanisms become incorporated into the state in order to police who is illegal and needs to be controlled or surveilled because they may threaten the “free world”? Refugees are by definition, outside of a nation-state’s boundaries, and are defined by their dispossession. Arendt famously studied how refugees’ “constant movement casts them beyond the reaches of any kind of legal or political community” (Tuitt 37). Arendt (1973) theorized refugees as constructed in exclusion from a political and social community. These forms of exclusion intersect with sexuality

an indictment and an appeal ... It is an appeal to Christian womanhood to right these wrongs and enlighten this darkness by sacrifice and service.”

and gender and operate within surveillance apparatuses against “illegals,” “migrants,” and “refugees.”

In *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* Eithne Luibheid (2002) analyzes how the U.S. immigration control system surveilled and controlled sexuality in behavioral regimes at the U.S.-Mexico border. Mountz (2010) focuses on the Canadian border campaign, “Keep Watch to Protect our Waters,” as a process designed to militarize the waters during their “hunts” for “illegal” boat migrants. This anxiety to protect the nation’s borders justified a dissolution of the public and private spheres and implemented self-surveillance behavioral practices (Mountz 2010). Like the mermaids of Anathemoessa, the movements of Syrian bodies are threatening because they are unknown.

The invisibility of Syrians rendered in terms of “whiteness” on the U.S. census denies social services to Syrians in real world contexts, such as translation services and cultural support from refugee social services agencies (Qutami 2020). They are lumped together with other ethnic groups. I interviewed the director of the International Rescue Committee in San Diego at the IRC, International Rescue Committee, one of the main refugee resettlement agencies. The director told me “Well, when the Syrians first came, we thought they’d match the Iraqis in terms of cultural needs. Then the previous generation tried to represent them, and we realized this new generation of migrants was much different. Turns out they weren’t Chaldean either.” I interviewed several aid workers in the Syrian refugee community in San Diego, who argued that Syrians are blamed for reliance on welfare and “complain too much.” The irony of the “grateful” and “white” migrant who can perform white cultural values is that as a racialized community, Syrians will always fall short.

In San Diego, many of the Syrians who had survived siege and bombings were beingtold

they needed to assimilate into white supremacist cultural norms in order to be “American.” The local refugee agencies had determined after a length research study that the number one issue facing Syrian refugees was dental hygiene. One of the Syrian moms I hung out with said dryly. “We lost our homes, our loved ones, are in desperate need of jobs, our children are being beaten up at school by racists, we are being told to take off our scarves by refugee agencies, our homeland is burning, and they want us to focus on dental hygiene.”

As Edward Said (1992) wrote, a big part of the Zionist ideological project was presenting Palestine as a problem that needed solving, with specific epistemological questions in the fields of anthropology and sociology that asked how to fix Palestinians in all arenas: education, mental health, physical health. *The same obsession with Syrian refugees’ personal lives and narratives of suffering epistemically functions to erase the structural reasons for their displacement.* Said argued that “in making Zionism attractive—that is, making it attract genuine support in the deepest sense—its leaders not only ignored the Arab; when it was necessary to deal with him... they represented him to the West as something that needed to be managed in specific ways.”

Journal Entry Jan 1, 2020. Welcome to Canada!

My uncle is held and interrogated at the Boston Logan International Airport while we are picking him up. Homeland Security confiscate his phone. “They stole your phone?!?! Is that legal?” I ask him. “It happened last time too,” he says. I look it up—technically at a border you don’t have rights. We contact the Council of American Islamic Relations and file a claim that he was discriminated against because of racism and Islamophobia. I send email after email trying to argue for his rights. In those moments, I’m delegated these tasks because I’m the most ‘American’ one, the one who can speak in the white American English, who can send the strongly worded email, who knows the rights being denied and the ways to appeal or at least try to. The interlocutor.

A few days later, my uncle, father, brother, grandmother, and I drive to Canada together from Boston. We get held at the Canadian border from 9pm to 2am. I am sick that day; my voice is gone. For hours, we watch others come and go, while we stay. “What, do they need to search my purse for bombs?” My grandmother laughs. “Do you know notice anything about the other people being searched?” I ask her, as only Black and Brown families are held for questioning. “They all look Muslim,” she tells me. “It’s sad, you get harassed in your own country, you have no rights there, you have to flee, you come all this way to the end of the universe (akhir al dunya) thinking things are different, but here they harass you because you’re African, you’re

*Asian, you're a Muslim. This is why you always keep your wu'du for times like these, in case you are stuck somewhere and need to pray." she tells me. We are treated with suspicion. Hours pass while we wait on the cold steel chairs with smiling pictures of Canadians plastered on the walls. "Welcome to Canada!" the green sign above tells us. My grandmother takes me to the front desk. "Can you ask them why we're waiting? Can you ask them how long we'll be here? I need to know for my diabetes medicine." I ask the front desk guy and he answers in a hostile tone. "That is classified information. I can't tell you. What, does she need to go to the hospital?" "No, but she wants to know when we're leaving and why we are not being let through.." "I can't tell you that. The only way you're leaving is if she has to go to the hospital. Tell her to go sit back down." I go outside to use the bathroom. On my way back, one of the border officials, an Israeli woman, tells me "Drop your bag in the car. Now." "Um... no, I had it earlier, so I'm keeping it with me." "Put your bag in the car **now**." I guess me having to shit was suspicious.*

*[I flash back to being at the Israeli border with my sister in 2014. "Put your bag on the counter **now**," the official said. "Now show me in your bag where you keep your weapons." "I don't have any weapons." "Then show me," she said.]*

After hours, we're finally called to the counter for pointless stupid ass questions. "Why are you going to Canada?" "When is the last time you were in Syria?" "Why do you travel so often?" "What do you know about the armed groups on the Syrian border?" The border officials return all of our IDs except my grandmother's, which she needs for an upcoming eye surgery. But they refuse to admit they've lost it. After hours of being searched and waiting with no explanation, we are exhausted. The border official says that they must have given it back to us earlier and we probably dropped it somewhere. I raise my voice, which is gone, and hoarsely whisper at the border lady. "Give me my grandmother's ID. Be an adult. Take responsibility for your actions. You lost it!" I hoarsely whisper. "HOW DARE YOU ACCUSE ME OF LOSING IT?" She retorts. "What is your badge number? I am reporting you," I say. "I am not telling you. You are being hostile." "It is my right to report you for negligence. You won't even tell us why we're here, and now you're BLAMING US FOR LOSING AN ID YOU LOST! THIS IS INSANE!" My dad and uncle exchange glances cautiously and tell me to quiet down. My grandmother is egging me on. (Later she says, "if I spoke English I would chew them out and beh'dilon, give them a piece of my mind. I'm glad you said something.") One of the border patrol guys (a white man) tries to normalize by saying "How old are you? Look, when I was your age, I would get held up here too. It happens to everyone. Calm down." This enrages me more. I am tired of watching my family being treated without rights. It is a lie that Canadian border patrol are "nicer," they are sakheef sons of bitches who disrespect elderly Syrian refugee grandmothers. I keep thinking to myself "it's so dumb, and so basic, but we're not terrorists. The premise of this entire thing is that we are terrorists, that we're suspicious. We're being treated as if we are a threat to the country of Canada when we just want to drink tea in my uncle's apartment and see my cousin's babies." They tell us it is our fault the ID is lost. Now Teta won't be able to get her surgery because she's on green card and you need to present two forms of ID in the hospital to receive treatment. It's 2am and we're tired and still not in Toronto. We're not allowed to be on our phones, so there's no way of telling our relatives what's happened. As we drive away, some of the officials wave down our car, shouting. "WAIT! We found it! It was on the floor in our back room."

Theme 4: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MISREPRESENTATION: SYRIA AS CAPITAL

AND ARMS DEALS

“to be Arab is to be simultaneously emphasized and ignored, invisibilized, but hypervisibilized in times of crisis.”

--Jo Kadi, in *Food for our Grandmothers*



Figure 2.19: Screenshot from the Political Cartoon

In the political cartoon, the next panel shows a money bank in place of the Syrian woman. In "Arabiya Made Invisible," Noura Erakat (2010) discusses how the representation of Arab women as passive agents incapable of their own liberation is deliberately constructed in order to justify and finance war. The oppressed West Asian woman necessitates an entire media industry and military apparatus that profits from the idea of saving them (Abu Lughod 2013). There is a direct political economy tied to the construction of Syrian women that makes money and creates entire military-industrial complexes to protect them, but in reality, plays out on our bodies and lands as a battlefield. Theories of transit can help articulate the transnational, interconnected, and constantly shifting nature of systems of power and what is at stake when they profit from the production of suffering bodies.

""Despite U.S. missile barrage, Syria continues airstrikes against rebels," (Washington Post), "U.S.-Led Forces Reduces Attacks on ISIS in Syria After Airstrike," (New York Times), "Syria Airstrikes Added Nearly \$5 Billion to Missel-Makers' Stock Value," (Fortune.com).

This is a glimpse sample of daily news coverage on Syria, and what is called the Syrian "Civil War," and the "Syrian refugee crisis" illustrates how easy it is to normalize the conflict in Syria as an endless barrage of military strategy and video game-like moves. Syria becomes reduced to a conversation about geopolitical war strategy. Weapons and steel are personified and given more human qualities than Syrians killed by the thousands.

Audre Lorde (1984) theorizes on the economic function that the epistemic creation of a categorical Other plays. Lorde argues that "institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people." In order to identify an enemy, power systems work to operationally define the boundaries of who is a citizen, and who is a terrorist, illegal, alien, criminal, and Other. The level of biopolitical and necropolitical power to determine who can live and die in Syria permeates Syrians with a cellular, intimate knowledge of fear.

Angela Davis (2015) argues that neoliberalism profits from creating transnational routes of global oppression that follow direct financial and historical linkages. Davis argues that even as the conceptual frames for discourse shifts, "the technology of regimes, the targets are still the same" (18). Davis shows how disciplinary mechanisms of the state connect transnationally and have direct financial investments, from architectural designs in schools and the carceral technologies they use to discipline Black and Brown students, to the ways that global corporations such as G4S manufacture borders and private prisons from Bethlehem to police weapons in Ferguson to the U.S.-Mexico border. Davis points to how state powers in South Africa, the U.S. and Israeli-occupied Palestine have collaborated at different moments in history to operationally define "terrorists of the state," and how they profit from this category in the global order. She, like Sylvia Wynter (2003,) analyzes how moral codes mutate to secure

assertions about the backwardness and criminality of marginalized people. Davis traces the colonial routes of encounter that inform the specific conditions for the state violence subjugated people face.

A primary example of the political economy around invisibilizing and hypervisibilizing Syrians is in the lack of discourse around the chemical weapons attacks in Syria. On August 27th, 2013, the regime used sarin gas missiles against innocent civilians in Eastern Ghouta, committing a massacre of 1600 people. It had devastating effects on the Syrian people—and the devastating impact of the chemical weapons was felt most intensely by children. It was felt in my own family—I remember my little cousin getting leukemia after that attack, from the chemical residue—his family having to flee. Our close family friends survived the attack themselves. Since then, Assad has used chemical weapons 222 different times (Do Not Suffocate Truth 2020).

In 1938, Sarin gas was bred by Nazi scientists on accident. A chemical company in Nazi Germany called IG Farben was attempting to develop insecticide but accidentally created something called Substance 146, a chemical formula that caused immediate paralysis of the nervous system and was ideal for white supremacist logics of elimination. Britain approved an export license to Syria for the sale of four tons of sodium fluoride for making Sarin gas from 2004 and 2010. Under the Chemical Weapons Convention, Sarin is listed as a schedule 1 substance- it is one of the most highly restricted chemicals in existence. It is not actually a gas, but a liquid stored at negative 150 Celsius. Sarin is dispersed from a canister, rocket, or missile in clouds of droplets that become inhaled in the lungs. It enters the body through the eyes and skin. Sarin has no smell or taste and is colorless, so there is no way to know you are being attacked until people begin to fall around you. It blocks the enzymes in your nervous system

that regulate muscle movement. The “eyes become irritated, vision blurred, pupils shrink, you drool, and vomit. Breathing becomes labored, shallow, erratic, and victims have convulsions. Their lungs secrete fluids when they try to breathe. Foam comes from their mouths, often tinged pink with blood. A lethal dose can be just a few drops and kill in 1 to 10 minutes.” (Sample 2013). As Syrians, we are living in a reality that has eliminated both our ability to live and our rights to die. When the chemical attacks happened again, later with phosphorous, chlorine gas, and napalm, I went to class with tears in my eyes trying to understand how so many children could be massacred using such heinous tools and why both the leftist and mainstream U.S. media did not cover it.

There was no brief acknowledgement in mainstream U.S. media coverage of the chemical gas attacks that the regime used Sarin gas. In fact, the headlines read “Images of Death in Syria, but No Proof of Chemical Attack” (New York Times) and “Is it possible the Syrian rebels (not Assad) used chemical weapons?” (NPR) despite multiple UN and Human Rights Watch investigations that confirmed the regime’s usage of the weapons. Each time, the residents of those areas were referred to as “rebel-controlled territories” or “rebels,” when thousands of civilians who were not in the armed resistance were the real casualties.

After the Assad regime’s chemical weapons attack in Idlib on April 6, 2017, Trump’s subsequent response resulted in liberal hypervisibility and selective attentiveness to the pain and violence Syrians were going through. Their subjectivities became collapsed into the suffering Syrian, either mute or deadly, welcome as potential laborers, or threats to the integrity of the nation state. The lack of media representations about the significance of the gas attacks in Idlib and the hypervisibility on Trump’s airstrike after the attacks glossed over the Sarin attacks in Idlib because they were illegible and incomprehensible to the dominant imagination.

The lack of media coverage about the gas attacks in Idlib was heartbreaking. It felt like shouting into a void. Using this weapon allowed the regime to deprive Syrians of death, to choke them, strangle us, asphyxiate and numb our entire people into invisibility. The next week, Trump selectively decided to steer the news into the realm of hypervisibility. That only served to make the world more suspicious of what Syrians were screaming into the sky was true. Recently, Syrians created the “Don’t Suffocate Truth” campaign and held protests with the message that the reality of the chemical weapons attacks can’t be erased.



Figure 2.20: Do Not Suffocate Truth protest in August 2020 in Idlib.

We are at a loss for how to describe the ways the system is turning Syrians under siege in Syria into post-apocalyptic zombies, worse than dead. Living in diaspora as a Syrian is not nearly as dehumanizing, but in times of hypervisibility, the sheer exhaustion of even the symbolic state violence sinks in and it is easy to feel like a ghost. Part of Ethnic Studies’ function is to respond to genocides and to disrupt how social institutions normalize violence against Black

and Brown bodies transnationally.

SIREN SONGS: SYRIAN FEMINIST IMAGINARIES, CULTURAL PRODUCTION, AND METHODOLOGIES OF CHANGE

I think Syria was victimized at the altar of an institutionalized, long-term apathy and indifference, at the global level, towards whatever happens in the Middle East; and entrenched racism in the forms of Islamophobia and blind support to a racist polity like Israel, consolidated by the rentier states in the Gulf ruled by extremely corrupt and patriarchal dynasties that the West has patronized for a century if not longer. All that converged to make the Syrian struggle against a genocidal, racist regime invisible and meaningless. The Middle East is the name of a space of exception where colonialism has never ended. The US is an integral part of the Middle East system, though it is outside the region geographically. Europe is part of the system as well, and now Russia is entrenching itself therein.

Syria is no longer talked about because the world of governments and media was very successful in inhibiting even an approximate understanding of the biggest struggle this century. They see it as “complicated over there” and turn their backs to what is happening. True, it is complicated in Syria, but it is analyzable in a way that shows the “complicators” in action. Chief among them are Russia, America, and its satellites, Israel for decades. I may add that it is becoming even more significant to better understand Syrian now precisely because the world has been progressively Syrianized. It is only wise for humans to know themselves.

--Syrian leftist Yassin Haj Saleh

In *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson (2021) writes about Jarret Martineau’s work, in which he argues that indigenous creative practices are framed against representation, “arguing that resurgent practice...acts as “noise to colonialism’s signal.” Cultural production creates a politics of affirmative refusal, “a refusing of forms of visibility within settler colonial realities.” Many feminist scholars consider cultural work as important accounts that describe contours in the “global ethnoscape” related to complex identities, politics, and lived experience. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith (2012) argues that the “survival of our people comes from a knowledge of our context” (48). By treating cultural and aesthetic productions as imaginaries to take seriously in knowledge production, these queer and women of color theorists deconstruct positivist assumptions that knowledge revolves around an empirically objective truth. They point out the “ways in which research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism...[a] powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples” (Smith 2012: 2).

The speculative technologies involved in creating multilingual, transnational strategies of resistance are visionary. I am interested in mapping women's activist work to understand how their important visions for solidarity and liberation weave across borders. I am interested in studying the feminist labor of Third World and subalternized women in relationship to the field of Ethnic Studies. These methodologies of change involve theorizing in languages that are unrecognizable to colonial ways of knowing, i.e. through poetic and creative means. I read Syrian women's "sirensongs"—how their voices are rendered either dangerous, a threat to the colonial order, or only decipherable to the ears of other sirens—other mermaid beings who emerge from the shadows, from the underworlds, from the other side of the "light."

Audre Lorde's (1996: 184) work conveys the necessity of recognizing alternate formations for liberation when she says, "in a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action." She names how academic feminism and euroamerican modes of knowing refuse to recognize differences and complexity. She asks, "Am I not reaching out for you in the only language I know? Are you reaching for me in your only salvaged tongue? If I try to hear yours across our differences does/will that mean you can hear mine?" (164). Lorde asserts that women engaging in sensual, aesthetic urges act reveal a knowledge that better worlds are possible. An acknowledgement of the erotic decolonizes the ways we have internalized forms of violence and recovers wholeness from the splits colonial ontologies cause. In the euroamerican tradition, Lorde theorizes, feminized sources of knowledge and poetic imaginaries are not understood as valid strategies for change. Like Anzaldúa, Lorde insists on disrupting Cartesian dualities of thinking/feeling that make illegible the creative strategies marginalized people imagine to survive. As Lorde put it, "for within these structures which we live beneath, defined by profit, by flat linear power, by institutional dehumanization,

our feelings were not meant to survive...But women have survived, and our feelings have survived. As poetry. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden the fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They live in our dreams, they lie in our poems, and it is our dreams and our poems that point the way to our freedom” (187). The pursuit of cultural expression has transformative implications for survival and healing from the violent legacies of European modes of being.

To be clear, I am not arguing for a shift in representation as a solution to the problems that Syrians face. I am arguing for a complete divestment from foreign actors occupying Syria and for the genocidal regime to fall and to be held accountable in the international arena. The dominant representations may never shift because there are so many political and military investments in them. And I am not excited for individual stories that “humanize” refugees because they play into the same exceptionalist narratives of Orientalism that do not actually impact real lives. Instead, I believe in Syrians telling their own stories, on their own terms, taking their own photographs, making their own art, using cultural production as a healing balm for the violence of misrecognition, erasure, and hypervisibility.

Journal entry Feb. 26, 2021 After Biden's airstrikes in Syria. WE NEED A POLITICAL REORIENTATION. ONE WHERE LEFIST MEDIA DOES NOT SOUND LIKE THE SAME TIRED RHETORIC OF THE RIGHT WING. ONE THAT CAN UNDERSTAND THE ASPIRATIONS AND DREAMS OF THE FREE SYRIAN PEOPLE. I AM TIRED OF THE CONSTANT SELF-REFERENTIAL LOOP OF INVISIBILITY & HYPERVISIBILITY. I AM NOT GRATEFUL WHEN PEOPLE SUDDENLY CARE ABOUT SYRIA. BEN NORTON TWEETED IN DEFENSE OF “SYRIA'S SOVEREIGN GOVERNMENT,” AND CALLED THE REVOLUTIONARIES CIA-BACKED ISIS AND AL-QAEDA, RULING THE “LIBERATED HELLSCAPE OF IDLIB.” WHEN SYRIAN REVOLUTIONARIES ARE ON THE GROUND FIGHTING U.S. IMPERIALISM RIGHT FUCKING NOW AND ISIS AND THEIR OWN NEOLIBERAL STATE WHICH IS HELLBENT ON BOMBING THEM. WE ARE ANTI IMPERIALIST AND ANTI-SYRIAN STATE AT THE SAME TIME. THIS MAY COME AS A SHOCK BUT THIRD WORLD PEOPLE ARE CAPABLE OF DOUBLE AND TRIPLE

CRITIQUES AT THE SAME TIME! MY ENTIRE LIFE HISTORY IS WRAPPED UP IN THIS FACT. MY GRANDFATHER FOUGHT FOR PALESTINIAN LIBERATION, MY GRANDMOTHER GAVE BIRTH BETWEEN ISRAELI TANKS IN THE FIELDS. MY FATHER FOUGHT AGAINST THE SYRIAN STATE AND MY MOTHER ORGANIZED FOR SYRIAN PRISONERS IN THE MOVEMENT. I WAS RAISED IN THE ERA OF THE WAR ON TERROR, THE SECOND INTIFADA, THE OCCUPATION OF IRAQ. MANY SYRIANS BEGAN THEIR ACTIVIST CAREERS FIGHTING FOR PALESTINE AND AGAINST THE U.S. OCCUPATION IN IRAQ, THEN JOINED THE REVOLUTION BECAUSE THOSE POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS ALLOWED THEM TO CONFRONT OPPRESSION IN OUR OWN STATE. THERE ARE REVOLUTION PROTESTS TODAY IN THIS "HELLSCAPE" OF IDLIB HOLDING BANNERS AGAINST EXTREMISM, IMPERIALISM, AND THE ASSAD REGIME, BUT NO, WE ARE ALL THE SAME. EITHER TERRORISTS OR HELPLESS REFUGEES WHO YOU TWITTER ASSHOLES CIRCULATE EVERY WEEK WITH NO CONTEXT AND THEN GET TO BE THE AUTHORITIES ON OUR STRUGGLES. IT'S THE SAME RACIST SHIT WRAPPED UP IN DIFFERENT RHETORIC. I AM TIRED OF THE MEMEIFICATION, THE BOMBING OF SYRIA BECOMING A MEME, A PUNCHLINE. THESE ARE REAL PEOPLE WHO I LOVE.

The siren song emerges from a longing, a desire to know what is possible, a kind of desire that is dangerous. The siren is racialized, gendered, and illegitimate. She is the incomprehensible noise, the ululation from the underground bomb shelter. The siren's voice is threatening to power systems but is also sexualized and desired. In "The Siren Song," Nina MacLaughlin (2019) writes, "Sirens sang at the edges. They sang on far rocky cliffs overlooking the ocean. The men who heard their song, it is important to note, were already at sea. Literal sea. Figurative sea. If you hear the Sirens' song, you have already unhooked yourself from life on land, from the familiar conventions and constraints of family and routine. If you hear the Sirens singing, it means you've placed yourself in earshot, opened yourself to new music. It is important to note, too, that what looked like an edge to the men was the center for the Sirens." Syrian women live at the cliff, at the edge, in between borders and the logics of the nation-states who deny them, who shape their realities and represent them or don't represent them at all.

I want to return to the opening in the chapter where I quoted Henry Lowendorf saying

there was a sense of ‘normalcy’ in Damascus. For years, to outsiders, Syria was the epitome of “peace in the Middle East.” It was the stable, serene, seemingly “safe” Middle Eastern country that hosted Fulbright students and Arabic language learning institutes. To an outsider, one might not be able to see the state surveillance and terror. They may see posters of Bashar al Assad plastered everywhere, watching over the citizens, but they might not see the lived reality of the mukhabarat and fifteen military branches carefully surveilling the people’s every word. The state of suppression is not overtly visible in Damascus because it happens underground. It happens under the feet of ordinary people, inside the many underground prisons and security branches scattered throughout the city. In those sites, those who dare to resist the authoritarian state are tortured (Wainwright 2012, Estadoo 2012, Democracy Now 2019). Torture methods in Syria have been perfected to a science—over 200 Syrian torture methods have been developed in Syrian prisons (HRW 1993). To an outsider, the empiricist, who sees to know—there may not be a problem. But if one listens carefully to what is buried, if one excavates deeper into the terror that is the fabric of Syrian society—one can hear the silences are actually screams. They are cries from the underground. From the caves, the prison systems, from Tadmor to Sednaya to Adra, to the shelters where not thirty minutes from Damascus, Syrian mothers hold their children and wait for the bombs to pass. Syrian women’s siren songs come from these underground spaces. And they cannot be understood by a smiling British foreigner who wants to interview people about chemical weapons after they have occurred. They are ululations—cries, the sharp “noise to colonialism’s system” that ruptures, confuses, and embodies a different kind of tongue.

Chapter 3: Creative Protests in the Syrian Revolution

“When our chants shook the earth and caused terror in the hearts of cowards, I saw freedom approaching, and victory being achieved ... I now see it from my world coming closer to you, so be patient, for victory is but an hour of patience. Do not despair, even if the whole world fights you and denies you. Do not stop, even if they block you or erect barriers and obstacles in your ranks. Do not retreat, or they will beat you, destroy you and kill the dream with you. Do not give in and sell our precious blood, and every effort we made in the way of a free and dignified homeland. Remember me whenever the cheering rises, whenever women ululate at the wedding ceremonies of martyrs, whenever a new demand of ours is fulfilled in the way of freedom. Remember me when you celebrate the fall of the regime and the liberation of the homeland from those who abuse it. Remember me every time you plant a jasmine sapling in Syrian soil, every time you lay a brick in a building, and every time you see the future in the eyes of children. And remember that I gave my soul and blood for that moment.”

--Ghaith Matar, a Syrian Revolutionary activist from Daraya, in a letter he wrote to his comrades before being tortured and murdered by state security forces, 2011

In this chapter I look at movement spaces and women’s revolutionary collectives, protests, and sanctuary spaces in Syria from 2011-2021 that enacted creative visions for the future. I look at how Syrians under siege envision creative resistance despite erasure.

This chapter weaves together the interactive maps created by Syria Nonviolent Movement, social media film projects, and the aesthetic production of the Syrian revolution, Whatsapp conversations, and firsthand participation in Syrian activist spaces--an approach that understands their connections to other temporalities and contexts. I cite examples of Syrian activism and artistry that include men’s participation in this work. In this case I would argue that it is gendered in that it counters patriarchal militarized revolution participation while also existing alongside it. What is a protest in the context of patriarchy, authoritarianism, and multiple occupations? I think of gendered revolutionary labor, from sewing flags to painting banners to performing street theatre, as forms of protest (Kuumba 2001). I argue that these collective movements, these “protests,” create alternative imaginaries, economies, and communal forms of care outside of capitalism while establishing a deliberately politicized practice of resistance to the state and extremist forces. This is by no means a comprehensive summary of the thousands of

grassroots gendered protests and actions on the ground in Syria, but a very limited sample that offers a view into some of the liberatory moments that enacted new kinds of visions for Syria's society.

In this chapter, when at all possible, I try to cite only Syrians, particularly Syrian activists who are on the ground in an attempt to center Syrian voices. In order to counter the physical effects of forced social death, Syrian and other Southwest Asian people attempt to preserve forms of cultural life through the digital. During the Syrian revolution, online archives such as the Violations Documentations Centre emerged to collaboratively document the abuses of the regime. Soon other platforms such as Syria Untold launched to record the protest cultures of the revolution and to communicate the voices of marginalized groups such as women, the LGBTQ or Meim 3ein community, youth, and ethnoreligious minorities. SyriaPrints launched to archive the alternative grassroots magazines and publications of the revolution. Activists began to form art, photography, and film collectives such as Zakira, Lensdimashqi, the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, and Aboudanarra, an independent film collective that shoots one-minute clips that satirize the regime and shed light on the absurdity of violence in the regime. I cite these Syrian-created sources to emphasize a form of knowledge production outside of institutional archives and one that is grassroots and emerges from underground spaces of dissent. These sources move beyond the epistemologies that seek to understand and study "the Other" and instead reflect a community-based process of collecting and sharing knowledge.

Syrian creative memory archives are important because they challenge political realities while critiquing the imperialist ideology inherent to structures of archives. These creative productions and activist works embody a spirit of creation, of envisioning better worlds, and affirming life despite the violence of the current system. Digital archives and grassroots

Syrian creative production also form important networks for survival and cross-movement strategizing. They require the use of different platforms to communicate coordination, a process that involves invisibilized labors and cultures of pleasure. For example, Whatsapp is an internet-based phone app where many Syrian women document their lives and circulate videos, jokes, memes, and coordinate networks of resistance. There is an aspect of pleasure involved that Wayne Yang (2007) alludes to in his study of youth protest culture and Myspace.

Even the process of uploading records of cultural revolutionary work in Syria required the guerilla creation of alternate internet routes that could not be monitored by state institutions. In Syria, one activist named Bassel (not to be confused with Bassel Shahedeh, who was an icon of the Syrian Nonviolence Movement and a beloved filmmaker who put on videography workshops for oppositional activists) turned the oppositional digital cultures of the resistance movement into a secret physical space in Damascus. He formed a branch of Creative Commons to open forms of copyright and worked on creating open-source softwares and proxy servers for Syrians. He opened an office in downtown Damascus known as Aikilab for revolutionary journalists (Doppert 2014). He was subsequently imprisoned and tortured and is still in prison today. The security forces were too technologically inept to properly monitor his complex navigation of proxy servers, and it proved to be an effective way of resisting. In fact, the government employed hundreds of Syrian computer science students to create the “Syrian Cyber Army” that would deter such proxy server formations, but many computer science students defected and strengthened the proxy servers while the government remained unaware. Early in the revolution in Syria government coerced these computer science students into hacking into revolutionary activists’ Facebook pages and emails. Many of the students defected and instead hacked the government servers (Syrian Youth Activist Network Conference 2011). Social media

and other forms of digital tools are beginning to transform power structures. They lead to quick organizing and create places of pleasure where women and youth strategize social movements (Yang 2007). Cultural resistance forms when communities unite across liberation struggles and find common affective experiences. The internet becomes a physical space where marginalized people meet and theorize important epistemic possibilities anonymously and intimately. Syrians are creating new forms of archives, using them to record their protests and cultural production, and building platforms that circulate this knowledge transnationally. Most importantly, they are envisioning new forms of protest and articulating joint visions for liberation in creative ways.

THE WOMEN OF THE REVOLUTION ARE NO LESS POWERFUL THAN ITS MEN



Figure 3.1: Syrian activist Wafa Al-Hayek standing atop a car in Idlib Sept. 14, 2018 with a sign that reads “The women of our revolution are no less powerful than its men.” (Source: Women Now Facebook, 2018).

When Syrian women took to the streets in February 2011 independently planning and coordinating candlelight vigils in solidarity with Tunisia, they were beaten by the local police

with no one to report the situation (Atassi 2011). Political pundits and world headlines asked "Where is Syria? Will Syria Rise?" predicting Syrians would not follow the lead of Egypt and Tunisia and start revolting in the wake of the Arab Spring (Wilkstrom 2011). A few weeks later that same February, a group of Syrians in the rural, farmworking area of Dera'a discovered that government forces tortured and imprisoned their children for graffiti'ing the walls of their school with freedom messages. A woman doctor in Damascus discovered what happened to the children while in prison and relayed the information to their mothers. Syrian women and men took to the streets demanding accountability (Kahf 2012). The local police beat them in the streets and told them that their children never existed. (Coupled with threats of sexual violence. "We will give you some children to complain about.") When the protest triggered a widespread popular movement across the country, political scientists and media pundits circulated narratives that the revolutionaries were either jihadist extremists or undercover CIA, thereby rendering invisible the thousands of women who were building popular protest movements from the ground up in the streets, resisting imperialism, authoritarianism, and extremism from all sides (Women of Darayya 2012, Proyect 2016).

Syrian women continued to coordinate the LCCs—Local Coordinating Committees, neighborhood networks of protest committees across the country (Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016). They ran social media pages announcing the weekly Friday theme of the protests in each region with corresponding hashtags (Friday of the Revolutionary Youth, We Want to Live, Friday against Police Brutality and Corruption, Friday for the Prisoners, etc.) When a faction of the resistance movement militarized and formed the Free Syrian Army, an 80-year-old woman locally known as "Mother of the Revolutionaries" (Um Thoreeya) served food to anti-government fighters and formed networks of Syrian women to house people during police raids

and bombings. When the militarization triggered increased government attacks and an escalating humanitarian crisis, Syrian women organized systems of care and informal networks of humanitarian assistance that focused on psychosocial healing and immediate support (clothing, food, child-care) (Syria Untold 2013, 2014; MBC 2012). Syrian women began to film indoor living room protests and post them to YouTube when they could not protest on the streets (Al Jazeera 2012; Women of Darayya on Youtube 2012). When ISIS and Jabhat an Nusra, two Islamist extremist movements, exploited the chaos of the situation, Syrian women created insurgent collectives to challenge them. Yet, the media headlines continued to ask, "Where is Syria?" and later, "Where are Syrian women?"

The Syrian Revolution began in March 2011 as a popular protest movement after youth took to the streets armed with olive branches, roses, and water bottles. Protests swept the streets of rural neighborhoods across the country and for months it remained a significantly woman-led civil disobedience movement. As government forces began to open fire on protesters, members of the Syrian Army defected and joined the disenfranchised protestors in September 2011. They formed an entity known as the Free Syrian Army (Dagher 2019). After the revolution militarized, regime response to the Syrian uprisings escalated into genocide and the largest humanitarian crisis of the 21st century (Violations Documentation Centre of Syria 2020; Syria Justice and Accountability Centre 2021; Rifai and Haddad 2015). Women activists continued to protest as the regime's violence persisted and militant extremists transformed Syria into a post-Cold War battlefield between Russia, China, Iran, Syria, and U.S. and Israeli forces. Kassab and Shami (2016) chronicle the vibrant civil society organizing that was happening in Kafnabel during the revolution. Raed Fare's Free Syria Radio and his comrades at the Kafranbel Media Centre were an activist hub where revolutionaries would meet to play oud, plan out colorful banners and

cartoons, and discuss recent events. The Mazaya Center, a women's center I discuss later in this chapter, also bloomed during this time. Yassir Munif describes the liberation of Manbij when he was there from 2013- 2014. In an interview with Mexican anarchist collective El Rebozo (2017), Munif explained how the city was liberated from the regime and security, police, and the employees of all state institutions fled the city. Half a million people were stuck creating new kinds of political institutions. He writes "it was, on the one hand, a form of decolonial politics, decolonizing the spaces that were previously occupied by the Syrian regime, and also decolonizing culture and institutions and minds. It's a process of getting rid of the old culture, and acquiring a new decolonial politics and rethinking politics and activism and organizing in different ways."



Figure 3.2: Political art from a revolutionary artist activist Moustafa Jacoub in Manbij, 2016. The caption reads: “At least 120 civilians have been killed in US-led coalition air strikes on Manbij town in north Syria, most of them were children. NO to US war in Syria. Stop killing our children #Manbij_Perish #ManbijPerish,” exemplifying the double and triple critiques embedded in Syrian resistance. Source: Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution Archive 2021.

In Manbij, people relied on the horizontal structures of the revolutionary Local Coordinating Committee Councils (a structure often credited to anarchist Omar Aziz but also engineered by many Syrian activist women) and also set up a revolutionary court, along with one of the first labor unions in Syria. As Munif writes “they were rebuilding the city from the bottom up... That was happening in the context of mass violence. The Syrian regime was bombarding those areas frequently to undermine the emergence of any alternatives, because the Syrian regime

feels that the emergence of an alternative Syria, a democratic Syria, a post-Assad Syria, would be the beginning of the end. The Syrian regime feels more threatened by those democratic alternatives than the military dimensions of the Syrian revolution. In many ways, those experiences and those experiments in those liberated areas were making the Syrian revolution possible. They were the backbone of the Syrian revolution. They were laboratories where people were experimenting all sorts of things, creating new media, new culture, new discourses, experimenting with new ways of organizing.” These councils, collectives, and sanctuary spaces Syrian activists made across the country while under siege mobilized creative strategies to provide psychological support for a traumatized community and kept alive a living historiography of the Syrian Revolution’s creative memory. The cultural production and documentation of those spaces reveal new forms of Syrian activism that capture resistance to the post-Cold War blocs that have divided the country, sectarianism, patriarchy, militarism in the revolution, imperialism, and the fragmenting realities of displacement.

Syrian revolutionary women coordinated countless creative resistance projects, social media archives, and protest campaigns. Creative resistance helped preserve the collective memory of the Syrian Revolution. It revitalized grassroots artistic production and embodied a commitment to rebuilding parts of civil society that have collapsed. As Halasa, Mahfoud, and Omareen (2014) write in *Syria Speaks*, an anthology of art from the Syrian Revolution, “Ordinary people...started discovering their artistic natures in a country where free expression was controlled and government regulated. While there are people who do not consider arts activism as an expression of popular culture, for Syrians it was a radical departure from a 40 year long history of silence.” Syria was often called “the Kingdom of Silence” by political pundits because of its staunch restrictions on freedom of speech and freedom of press. Syrians imagining

and conjuring cultural forms of dissidence, through art, music, and theatre in this context cut through half a century of intense fear around non-regulated cultural expression beyond the state.

Before the official March 15, 2011 start of the Syrian Uprisings, women were organizing creative protests and candlelight vigils in front of the Libyan, Tunisian, and Egyptian revolutions to show solidarity with the Arab Uprisings.



Figure 3.3: Syrian women in a vigil outside of the Tunisian embassy, Feb 2011.

Since the start of the Syrian revolution, women have worked side-by-side with men to organize protests, create new cultural terrains, and to make civil disobedience initiatives. One of the first people to be arrested in public for protesting was a woman named Marwa Ghamain on March 15, 2011 during a demonstration in Damascus’s Hamidiah Market (Syria Untold 2014).

Participating in civil society organizing in the revolution gave Syrian women an unprecedented sense of hope. “With the beginning of the uprising, I felt there was a space for personal and public freedom that I had never experienced in my life,” Khawla Dunia said to Syria Untold. “I could raise my voice, speak up, demand my rights, in the streets of Damascus and elsewhere” (Syria Untold 2014). Kahf and Bartowski (2013) write how “street protests, whose number rose to 920 different locations in one week in the nonviolent phase and declined

to fewer than 300 during the autumn 2011 when violent resistance began mounting, played an important role not only in publicizing the movement's message but in giving people a personal sense of empowerment, long absent under the police state. One young activist, "Rose," expressed why protesters did not stop demonstrating, even knowing they could be killed: "We do other activism, but we will not stop demonstrating: to taste freedom, if only for ten minutes!"

Razan Ghazzawi documented that women who were engaged in civil society organizing and activism in the Syrian revolution came from different educational, social, and class backgrounds (Syria Untold 2014). It is important to note that Syrian women activists do not come in any particular demographic--old, young, widowed, liberal, conservative, Sunni, Alawite--Syrian women activists represent a wide array of complex experiences. They participate in a variety of creative and political activist efforts, and some joined the ranks of the militarized rebellion. These categories are not mutually exclusive—creative resistance and nonviolent resistance often overlap, for example. I consider political activism as a woman's participation in larger political processes, from prisons to councils to internationally recognized oppositional political bodies such as the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (formally known as the SNC--Syrian National Coalition.) I use the term nonviolent resistance to refer to direct mobilization, creative protests, and civil society activities. Civil society organizing includes grassroots organizational work such as local council participation. Creative resistance in my definition is when activists mobilize creative forms of protest via music, theatre, performances, films, poetry, passing out flowers to passerby, dyeing the fountains red to symbolize the blood of the people running through the streets, graffiti, storytelling, as well as earth-based and body-based healing methods that can often be a form of community aid. "As militarization gained ground, the role of women decreased significantly, and became mostly

reduced to humanitarian aid and relief,” activist Yara Nassir told Syria Untold in 2014. Syrian women face the oppression of the regime, while simultaneously facing violence from patriarchy and marginalization within the revolutionary spaces. According to Nassir, women in liberated areas were systematically excluded from decision-making and public spaces. Women continued to search for a place in civil society that could hold the space they needed to express themselves freely. Part of the problem was that the revolution did not incorporate women’s rights as its core (Syria Untold 2014). Priorities on the activist agenda and revolutionary praxis lacked an intersectional approach. Khawla Dunia, Syrian woman poet and activist, said “that [struggle for freedom] is what drove Syrians to the streets in the first place, but current circumstances have not allowed this change to come about” (Syria Untold 2014). Despite this, various women-led civil society initiatives promoted the revolution’s initial calls for total liberation.

In 2011, the summer after the Syrian Revolution began, I attended a conference for Syrian activists in Istanbul that would decide the political structure of the oppositional movement. A concurrent conference in Damascus Skyped in and I witnessed as Syrians tried to organize a political oppositional body. After a few days, Kurdish minority groups staged a walkout because the Sunni majority could not understand, despite their relative ethnic oppression under Alawites, that they were still privileged in relationship to Kurdish people and were perpetuating Kurdish erasure. Young people also declared that the old, Sunni men dominating the conference were speaking over youth who started the revolution, so they formed the Syrian Youth Activist Network and planned two subsequent conferences to voice their concerns. Older Sunni men, many of whom had been former political prisoners and exiles suffering at the hands of the regime for decades, felt persecuted and disrespected. I remember being in the convention during the turmoil and noticing that not one woman spoke. I turned to a Syrian woman journalist,

a Syrian news anchor who lived in Abu Dhabi, and told her my concern. She laughed and said, “Can’t you see we have enough to fight about? We will take care of gender after the revolution.” Our sister conference in Damascus was shot up by government officials and several conference-goers died. “Women’s issues” plummeted to the bottom of the agenda.

This dynamic occurs all too often. The impact of ignoring how systems of oppression intersect are detrimental. Women often end up experiencing gendered state-sanctioned violence and perform double the labor as activists but are not allowed the same voice or visibility and valuing of their activist labor as movement men. Khawla Dunia, a Syrian revolutionary woman writer from a minority Alawite sect describes the dynamic of invisibility/hypervisibility well when she says, “Many times, I am invited well after all the details have been agreed on. I receive the invitation not for the discussion, but for the photo-ops” (Syria Untold 2014). She gestures toward the idea of neoliberal cooptation that Ethnic Studies seeks to disrupt—that increasing warped representations without shifting the terms of representation is somehow enough.

This is one of the ways that Arab nationalism failed as a movement and resulted in dictatorial regimes. Thinking about oppression by virtue of one identity and one assumed shared experience, such as a shared ethnicity, not due to an intersection of multiple oppressions, creates a limited idea of who is free in a social movement or who is deserving of rights. It is also deeply racist and inevitably heteropatriarchal. Our visions for the future necessarily have to incorporate a politics of difference as a means of survival because the psychic and institutional levels of settler colonialism have fractured bodies from minds, humans from land, borders from horizons. We need a transformative, imaginative commitment to this kind of intersectional liberation; otherwise, we replicate the same warped systems that fragment us. Yaman al-Qadri is a young woman activist who was imprisoned and tortured for peacefully protesting in 2011. She and

fellow students at Damascus University threw thousands of small pieces of paper with subversive revolutionary messages from their dormitory towers on campus. Security agents spent days picking up the small slips of paper from the ground, which ultimately led to the 23-day torture and detention of 18-year-old Yaman (Kahf and Bartowski 2013). Qadri commented on her underlying political belief that “it doesn’t matter if the regime wins or not, we are here for liberation.” Her insight is profoundly important because it shows that her activism is deeply rooted beyond just defeating the structure and systems of the regime and instead focuses on building new ways of being.

Um Nizar is a 57-year-old Syrian widow from Kafranbel who narrated her story of surviving regime brutality and losses of her loved ones to disease and violence (al Mahmud 2015). After the loss of her husband to blood cancer she raised her seven children by picking olives and making tomato paste. When the Syrian Revolution began in 2011, she saw the possibility of a better life and says the revolution “changed all our lives.” She takes pride in her activism in the revolution. She recalled an incident where she saved a young man from the grips of a regime soldier when everyone else was too scared to intervene (al Mahmud 2015). Her oldest son was abducted at a military checkpoint and has not been seen since. Her story reveals the complexity and hardships experienced by elderly Syrian women as well as the coping strategies they develop to endure--often through their faith, and the avenues the revolution provided to reimagine the status quo.

Another young activist named Laila came from an upper middle class pro-regime family who prided themselves on liberal values (Deeb 2015). She joined the protests in al-Ramel district of Latakia in 2011 and helped plan peaceful demonstrations and days long sit-ins, until a horrific massacre deterred protesters from continuing (Deeb 2015). She soon became a veteran organizer

in the neighborhood revolutionary councils and was recognized by regime agents for her visible documentation of the protests on her cell phone. She was forced into exile and disowned by her family (Deeb 2015).

Razan Ghazzawi's (2014) piece "Seeing the women in revolutionary Syria" offers a personal autoethnographic account of Syrian women's activism from a queer, nonbinary Syrian femme in revolution. Much like Samar Yazbek's (2012) published diaries of the Syrian revolution, *A Woman in Crossfire*, Ghazzawi (2014) traces the challenges and visions she has as a Syrian activist. Ghazzawi (2014) summarizes the women activist figures in the struggle as she is a participant witness to its history. She mentions figures such as Razan Zeitouneh, Doha Hassan, Nura al Ghaman, Rima Flehan, and Mai Skaf as noteworthy women activists in the revolution who represent a wide array of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Ghazzawi's (2014) writings are incredibly helpful in providing a perspective on Syrian women's roles from a queer Syrian vantage point through her own candid first-hand observations. She outlines the main abuses and challenges Syrian women face in activist organizing, such as government institutions that monitor their activities and punish them. The systematic violence women face from the regime is often gendered, such as sexual harassment and assault from regime officials. "I often get interrogated at checkpoints about what I am wearing, where is my family and whether I am married or not, questions that men never get asked," Ghazzawi said. "As if I could not work freely for my own country, the country I own a passport for." Ghazzawi also calls for activists to speak out more about the gendered treatment of women in systematic oppression from the regime *and* from the hypermilitarized, liberated areas and the pressure for queer Syrians to present in more masculine ways in order to not be harassed and to be taken seriously in activist spaces.

One schoolteacher in Syria who traveled from Idlib to Damascus for her work describes in her activist autoethnography how she would traverse three Syrian government checkpoints every day (Eid 2015). In her firsthand account she describes harassment from a government official who points a rifle at her “as a joke” and asks her if she is from ISIS or Jabhat an Nusra. (Eid 2015). Yara Nasseir in her own activist accounts says she has not experienced sexual harassment in the liberated areas and that she has “not heard one of my comrades make distinctions against women.” At the same time, she calls on fellow activists, both from the armed and peaceful struggle, to speak out against the treatment women activists receive in the liberated areas. “I have not heard one of my comrades publicly denounce such restrictions against women,” she said (Syria Untold 2014).

Firsthand Syrian femme and women’s accounts reveal that despite women’s active roles in grassroots organizing, their representation in the political sphere is still grossly limited in the opposition (Syria Untold 2014). Syrian poet and activist Khawla Dunia commented on the tokenization of Syrian women, “women are like spices for men in the political opposition. They use us to add some flavor, but we do not affect the main ingredients. I refuse to take part in this cooking, as long as I am not considered an active participant.” Razan Ghazzawi asked, “How many women are there in the Syrian National Coalition at the moment? And how many men?” Ghazzawi pointed out that this lack of representation perpetuates what the regime has been doing for decades—enforcing “a simple quota for women in the parliament or local councils, without any regard to how active or important their role is. The decision-making process is placed firmly in the hands of men.” (Syria Untold 2014). This critique articulates what Kuumba (2001) identifies as gender differentiated political opportunities, that point to how institutionalized gender norms determine the access women have to participating in oppositional political

activities. This issue was at the heart of Mariam Jalabi's quest to create a Syrian feminist oppositional political body, and she founded the Syrian Women's Political Movement to advocate for gender issues in the larger political sphere (SWPM 2021). As Rula Asad (2020) writes in "Attempting to Organize a Syrian Feminist Movement," "as a Syrian movement, we face an impossible task in a context that could not be more complicated. In the 2011 Revolution, the movement escaped the authority's kidnappings and grasp and found a way to break through regionalism and elitism. However, the peaceful civil movement did not have sufficient time to allow for its values and methods to be engrained, for soon after its emergence, the revolution took on the form of armed struggle. And, as with any armed struggle—in which no sound is louder than that of battle- those who carried the weapons determined the priorities of that moment, until this day. As for us women, we were told that our struggle could wait." Asad describes how even within the Syrian women's movement, the women's movement is largely "limited to defending women's rights, particularly in ending violence and in political action, whereas sexuality, gender, queerness, masculinity, and femininity remain secondary issues and publicly defending them remains shameful." In addition to that, generational divides, geographic difficulties working in exile and communicating with activists inside Syria, and the hierarchical structure of institutional political work around Syrian women's issues have presented obstacles to Syrian women's movement organizing.

In "Strategies for Rebellion: A Queer Reading of the Syrian Revolution," Leel Yousef (2020) writes that the Syrian state often mobilizes homophobia in condemning the revolution, using terms like "immoral" and "indecent" to describe the revolution's impact on Syrian society, calling pro-revolution figures "fa**ts" on Syrian state TV. Yousef documents the impossible dynamic that many of us queer activists embodied in the revolution: keeping your sexuality

private because it could be deployed by the regime in a smear campaign that could materially endanger you and force you to leave. This pressure existed while queer rights and a political discussion about LGBTQIA people remained completely marginalized within the revolution.

Yousef writes that:

sexual liberation discourses must be allowed the right to occupy space within the dominant conversations and future nation-building political processes. The transient changes that result from armed conflict often fail to transform the social and cultural discourses and structures. Large-scale transformations take longer to register in the collective consciousness; gradually changing the language of dominant discourses becomes a more effective tool than force. ...The (hetero)normativity of the hegemonic discourses does not allow for the articulation of difference and non-normative ways of being. The problem therein is not existential, for the different “self” does not question its own existence. Rather, it is excluded and made peripheral to a “center” that cannot accommodate these differences. Therefore, this “center” must be decentralized, eradicated or replaced. While doing this, however, we must be cautious not to produce a new binary opposition of center vs. periphery that might force queer identities into a new struggle with yet another “center” that reproduces new hierarchies and privileges a select few at the expense of other groups that remain marginalized.

Yousef is pointing to the problem of homonationalism, as Puar (2007), Habib (2007), and Massad (2007) have written extensively about—the cooptation of a particular kind of queer identity as a fixed practice that then becomes a racialized measure of a nation-state’s “civility.” Ghazzawi (2017) writes about homonationalism in the Syrian context, such as when Samantha Powers made a special committee in the UN for defending LGBTQ people under ISIS, or a leftist battalion that created an LGBTQ military unit to take on ISIS. The way queerness was deployed in these contexts deliberately ignored indigenous Syrian queer revolutionaries and alienated them by often contrasting a liberated “Western” queer subject against a savage, brutal Islamist oppressor, rather than frame the secularist regime itself as a source of gender and sexuality oppression. By also commenting on the “new hierarchies and privileges” that can emerge with another center, Yousef points to the ways gender variant, gender nonconforming

and trans people's issues in Syria are often plummeted to the "bottom" of the agenda, and how many trans Syrian women have pointed out this dynamic is replicated within mainstream Syrian feminist and queer movements (Gorani 2020).

Because Syrian civil society inside and in the diaspora is undergoing several radical shifts, the possibility for gender and queer liberation from patriarchy is also potentially growing. Since most Syrian men are disenfranchised in Syrian communities, many women are becoming the primary caregivers and providers for their communities, which has subverted traditional patriarchal power relations and could restructure Syrian society. In my own firsthand work in Syrian communities, I have seen heteronormative gender roles bend and shift in completely new ways. This phenomenon could be further encouraged if alternate grassroots structures provide adequate resources to compensate women for the emotional, physical and psychological labors displaced Syrian women do in their communities.

Women and feminized activists in the Syrian revolution are clear about what they are resisting against—imperialism, the living legacies of colonialism, the authoritarian militarism of anti-colonial government structures, dictator-like cooptation within the social movement, patriarchy at all levels of structural and intimate violence, sexual violence, all while enduring labors of motherhood, torture from the state—prisons, displacement, destruction, and poverty. Like many women in activist movements, Syrian women are targeted and isolated for the ways they choose to resist (Alabdeh, Ghazzawi, Gorani 2020). Masculinist approaches to movement organizing tended to privilege militarized solutions, leaving their activist work to be belittled or made invisible (Alabdeh 2020, Kuumba 2001). One woman's insight that "I do not make a distinction between the Syrian revolution and women's revolution, to me they are the same" shows how the Syrian uprising opened the possibilities for questioning the norms of a patriarchal

system (Syria Untold 2014). There is an association of the regime with old structures of oppression such as patriarchy that can simultaneously be challenged and dismantled (Syria Untold 2014). When parts of the revolution evolved from a popular uprising into a militarized conflict, new entities such as ISIS rushed to exploit the situation and controlled women's movement and self-expression under their regimes (Syria Untold 2014). Many Syrian women who are activists have made intentional choices to stay in Syria despite extreme regime repression such as barrel bombing, imprisonment, and torture, in addition to violence from extremist forces such as Jabhat an-Nusra and ISIS. Raqqa teacher Souad Nofal said, "We did not take to the streets against Assad to be scared of these ones now!" (Syria Untold 2014).

Activist Yaman al-Qadri articulated important political theory that echoes the work of Angela Davis and Audre Lorde when she said the revolution's goal moved beyond the dismantling of the current regime and was more concerned with total liberation. It is imperative to realize that Syrian women are the only experts on their own realities and can dictate liberation on their terms.

The Free Women of Darayya

Darayya, the hometown of celebrated nonviolence activists Ghaith Matar and Yahja Sherbaji, is a symbol of the Syrian civil society organizing movement (Della Ratta 2012, Syria Untold 2013). The Free Women of Darayya is a grassroots organization founded in 2011 that built the groundwork for the Syrian Civil Movement. "We didn't know each other before the uprising," one of Darayya's Free Women said. "The demonstrations that took so many to the streets to demand freedom and justice united us." (Syria Untold 2013). As early as 2003, Darayya activists worked on citizen street cleaning campaigns and organized protests against the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and Syrian women activists use an anti-imperialist political consciousness to

inform their work. In the Syrian Revolution, the Free Women of Darayya's first initiative was to organize a sit-in demanding the release of political prisoners. The Free Women of Darayya created alternate forms of protest when the streets were too dangerous for feminized bodies to resist in without threats of sexual and physical violence. They regularly posted videos on YouTube of their "living room sit-ins," where they would make a list of their demands and hold an indoor protest. This form of protest reappropriates the historically gendered interior space of the home into a site of public protest and dissidence. In these sit-ins, the Free Women of Darayya reappropriated face coverings as another gendered form of resistance in order to keep anonymous.

In "Algeria Unveiled," Fanon (1959) studied the ways hijab, niqab, galabiyas, and other body coverings were mobilized by SWANA people to resist colonial hegemony. Wearing hijab as abayas during the Battle of Algiers was a gendered form of resistance mobilized by both men and women Algerian anti-colonial fighters against the French, particularly as the French targeted the veil as a symbol of "pre-colonial" backwardness. Alloula et. al (1986) and studied how the colonial gaze literally forced Algerian women to "unveil" for colonial photographs and used the camera as a tool of "modernity" and subjugation. In Syria, the legacy of the regime's forced unveilings in the 1980s reiterates this same colonial impulse to mark the hijab as the antithesis to the secular, rational, "modern" nation-state. In Syrian Revolution, the "masked singers" of Damascus and countless women in protesting groups from Homs to Baniyas would reappropriate the hijab, niqab, and other gendered coverings as a form of protection, anonymity, and resistance to a state that restricted and banned veiling in the past.



Figure 3.4: Screenshots from the Free Women of Darayya’s online sit-in that reads “We are the women of Darayya and we demand what follows: 1. Given the tight security forces and the iron fist on the people of Darayya, we cannot protest next to our brother in the protests. So we have decided we will have sit-ins from our homes.”



Figure 3.5: The Free Women of Damascus, or “the masked singers,” who recorded lively, creative songs on their YouTube channel with resistant messages while concealing their faces with masks, hijabs, and fez’s, and their bodies with revolution flags. This screenshot reads “we are Sunni, we are Christian, we are Kurdish, we are Druze, we are Alawite” as part of their rewriting of the Levantine folk song “3la Dal3ouna.”

By the time Darayya’s free women declared their living room sit-ins, the regime had already detained, tortured, and arrested hundreds of activists. Darraya’s Free Women were also the target of this repression themselves. This is a common thread in Syrian women’s activism—it was targeted in specific ways by the regime in order to dismantle the movement from the grassroots using threats of gendered violence. The organization hosted meetings to plan revolutionary strategies and began teaching workshops to women wanting to engage in the civil protest movement. This was important because the women who would be in danger from protesting could attend these meetings and workshops and participate in the revolution in alternative ways. Their activism was also more accessible for women who were also wives, mothers, and daughters caring for their families under government repression, shelling, and systematic resource deprivation (sieges).

The group began to structure their work into mini committees for communication, public relations, photography, community aid, and psychological support, while archiving and documenting their activism on the group’s website and Facebook page. They spearheaded creative protests such as decorating trees with the names of Syrian detainees during Christmas and gathering letters from detainees’ mothers and children to publicly display on a banner in the streets. The creativity with which they embellished and reappropriated ordinary holiday items like Christmas trees into political symbols of resistance kept a form of revolutionary memory alive, by haunting everyday items with the names of the dispossessed and those whose bodies were in underground detentions centers across Syria. It also acknowledged and welcomed non-Muslim, Christian and pagan traditions into a visual language of resistant symbols. It articulated a politics of remembering the disappeared and forcibly erased by using bright, colorful symbols to bring attention to the violence of Assad’s extensive carceral regime.



Figure 3.6: Christmas tree decorated with the names of detainees by the Free Women of Darayya.

The Free Women of Darayya helped launch a grassroots newspaper, “The Local Grapes,” (Enab Baladi) which documents human rights abuses of the regime and the abuses of

the Free Syrian Army and is still active today. The newspaper enforces a civil disobedience principle of documenting war crimes, detainees, martyrs, and missing people on both the regime side and the Free Syrian Army's side. In the post-revolutionary process, archival projects like the Local Grapes are vital to holding war criminals accountable for the violence they commit and lay the groundwork for conflict resolution stages. The women also organized in solidarity with Syrian women in other towns such as Sednaya to join in resisting the regime's divide-and-conquer sectarianist and regionalist strategies to fragment the revolution. When the regime besieged Darayya in November 2012, most of the activists in Free Women were displaced. Many returned later to find their town completely devastated and their relatives massacred. They returned to their work, focusing on organizing community care and providing humanitarian assistance to those who were still living in the city. Many of the Free Women founders were either imprisoned or displaced, but many continue the fight even in exile and prison.



Figure 3.7: Syrian women and children in Darayya protesting the detainment of child prisoners. Source: Syria Untold 2013.



Figure 3.8: Banner to demand the release of Majd, Sawsan, and Ghada of the Free Women of Darayya who were detained and later released by the regime. Source: The Free Women of Darayya’s Facebook page.

The civil disobedience strategies of Free Women of Darayya are immensely powerful. In his popular think pieces and his recent book, *Syria: Descent into the Abyss*, Syria “expert” Robert Fisk argues “Syria’s moderate rebellion turned into the apocalyptic killing machine of the Islamic State.” Because of Islamophobia, Fisk conceptualizes all revolutionary activists in Syria as right-wing Islamist extremists, when it was those extremists the activists fought against. He joins Max Blumenthal, Seymour Hersh, and countless other global Northern “theorists” who have decided, with their authority, that the Syrian Revolution was a conspiracy. Dominant narratives in literature on the Syrian revolution (Fisk is named one of the “foremost authorities on the Middle East”) tend to erase the backgrounds of civil society activists and assume that their revolutionary activism came out of a vacuum. These “real world” accounts use titles like “Everything you learned about Syria was wrong,” and a binary pro-dictator framework, wherein the solution is either U.S. imperialism or the Assad dictator, when in reality Syrians are

politicized against both. This is a faulty binary to begin with because while Assad claims to be fighting U.S. imperialism in his rhetoric, he and his father supported and collaborated with U.S. imperialist projects, which is documented extensively in Dagher (2019)'s recent book *Assad or we Burn the Country*. Blumenthal got an exclusive tour of Damascus by pro-regime government officials when he visited Syria in 2019 and declared that the only threats were those who were resisting the regime. Scholars who try to assert that the revolution is a U.S.- and Israeli-backed CIA informed project or that revolutionaries are "jihadists" fail to see that Syrian revolutionary women who were anti-imperialist organizers joined the anti-regime struggle in rural cities like Darayya, and that these were primarily women, not extremists, who showed out and contributed to organizing.

The Girls with the Green Ribbons, or Grains of Wheat, the Revolutionary Girls of Tal

Al-Tal, a historically agricultural town in the countryside of Damascus, became home to an influx of one million refugees from other parts of Syria from Assad regime bombardment in 2012. In Tal, the first protests broke out in March 25, 2011, and a large part of the protestors were women. At the first protest, government agents shot a protestor and critically injured him. The city faced a huge wave of arrests and snipers were stationed in high buildings across the city. Tal's residents held a second protest a week later, leading to another wave of arrests. The Syrian Army came in full force and occupied the town, so protestors used "flying protests,"¹⁶ or ten-minute flash protests, to avoid the threat of a potential massacre by government forces.

A short time later, a group of eight young women started a collective called "The Women

¹⁶ Kahf (2012) writes how Wael Kurdi, an Aleppo University student, innovated the strategy of a "flying protest:" in the early days of the revolution, wherein "protesters gathered on the agreed-upon street after announcing a fake location on government-monitored phone lines, marched and video-taped for eleven minutes, dispersed and hid or destroyed banners before security arrived, and went to safe-houses to upload the videos."

Revolutionaries of the Tal of Freedom.” In August 2011, they held a street theatre performance protest where they marched down the streets with tied hands and covered mouths, with green ribbons on their arms. They walked down the main street in Tal until they reached Al-Zahraa hospital, where they held up banners decorated with revolution slogans. The women organized more silent sit-ins and distributed revolution pamphlets in the main downtown areas. Each time they held a protest, they tied green ribbons around their wrists to represent a rejection of the regime’s sectarian division. Their pamphlets included slogans about freedom, unity across ethnic and regional divisions, messages against militarism and violence. The women were soon known through the town as “the Girls with the Green Ribbons,” then later “Our Streets,” and “Grains of Wheat” to include the young men who joined them. The group organized civil resistance campaigns, using humor, creativity, and a radical politics of compassion to resist.

Tal is historically an agricultural town, whose calendar revolves around its harvests—bulgar, olives, and wheat. During olive season, the women created fake wedding invitations, decorated with an olive branch, to secretly invite local community members to protests. This ingenious, gendered form of resistance appropriates quotidian aesthetics to secretly circulate and coordinate protest in an authoritarian context where traditional means of communication are highly surveilled. It also used the knowledge of a rural context, and communal/ancestral connection with olives to communicate a symbolic message of resistance to the people that could not be understood or monitored by the police. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015: 2) writes, the quotidian is a site where struggle for liberation takes place, and a feminist understanding of the “politics of everydayness,” “draws awareness to the routine, intimate, private sites where power is both reproduced and contested.” By taking social spaces such as wedding’s, and resignifying the rituals of invitation, the Women Revolutionaries of Tal exemplified the ways that quotidian

forms of resistance can be sites of subversion and creativity. By appropriating feminized everyday aesthetics, such as wedding invitations for protest messaging, the Grains of Wheat created everyday spaces to confront layers of authoritarian violence.

The women began to organize three activities a week: one day was for marches/protests, one day was for leaflet distribution through the town, and one day was reserved for graffiti activities. The graffiti projects included painting protest murals in the colors of the revolution flag in public spaces downtown and graffiti'ing the names of missing political prisoners (Shamik Ya Sham 2012). This created a living archive where graffiti served as a lasting visual vocabulary of revolution at a time when it was being systemically erased, and literally recorded the names of missing protestors and detainees so that they would not be forgotten. It transformed the aesthetics of the town itself, and reclaimed public spaces that were previously plastered with Assad propaganda.



Figure 3.9: “The Girls with the Green Ribbons,” later called “Our Streets” making a revolution mural on the post office wall with the names of political prisoners written in the shape of the revolution flag. Source: Shamik Ya Sham, YouTube 2012.

The collective also participated in grassroots revolution campaigns that spread across the country such as the Stop the Killing Movement (which I expand upon later in this chapter). They also participated in Freedom Money, a campaign where youth would throw fake money with resistant messages into the streets, again a way that the police would not be able to “see” the protests, allowing them to embed subversive messages into corners of public life. They participated in Friday hashtag campaigns such as We are the Moral Alternative and We Were Born to Live. These were creative, civil disobedience arts-based campaigns coordinated via LCC networks and student networks across the country during the early years of the revolution (2011-2014). The collective threw red paint on the walls in the town to symbolize the blood of the protestors who had been killed. By 2012, the group began to admit male activists, and the women changed the name of the collective to “Our Streets.” Even the name “Our Streets,”

asserts the young people of Tal's ancestral connection and reclamation of public space and insists on an imaginative impulse to envision a future Syria governed by the people, for the people.



Figure 3.10: Woman in Tal with “freedom for Syrians” written on her face coverings as she graffitiis a wall in town. The use of face coverings to render protestors anonymous is a deliberately gendered strategy that reappropriates face veils as a radical form of resistance. Fanon writes about Algerian revolutionaries’ appropriation of the niqab and abaya during Algerian resistance to French colonial occupation in similar ways. Source: Youtube 2012.



Figure 3.11: Our Streets Graffiti Campaign in Tal in Solidarity with Douma, as part of the grassroots Stop the Killing Movement. Source: Rima Dali Syria for All Facebook Page, July 3 2012.

The group continued their activism even after armed opposition groups took over the city. As a stance against militarization, “Our Streets” raised banners with the names of detainees on the post office building as a symbolic stance for continuing peaceful and creative forms of resistance. After yet another siege, Our Streets was forced to change its name to “Grains of Wheat.” Armed opposition forces declared Tal liberated from the regime and in response, the regime began to bomb the town. Most of the original “Girls with the Green Ribbons” and “Our Streets” members were forced to flee, but they returned two months later after Tal was retaken by regime forces. In order to not be rediscovered and targeted by the regime, they changed the name of the group to “Grains of Wheat.”

One of the activists said, “the name came as tribute to the town which is famous for its wheat produce, and as a tribute to the feminine influence in the group as the word ‘grain’ in Arabic is a feminine noun.” The women in Tal reappropriated symbols from the rural nature of the town, in respect to honoring earth in an explicitly feminine way. The first activity the collective did after returning was to pass out candy with the message “In sympathy with the mothers of the martyred, we will have no Eid,” “No Eid without a victory.” And the group threw scraps of paper from the tops of buildings¹⁷ that said, “I will write on the walls of my house: forgive me, but my freedom is dearer than you.” And: “we refuse the reconciliation meetings because they betray those who died in our cities.” The reconciliation meetings were set up between government forces and activist informants in the town to normalize the regime’s response to the violence (Grains of Wheat Youtube Channel 2012). Their YouTube video that documents the protest, “Eid in the Eyes of the Mother of the Martyr,” emphasizes a gendered

¹⁷ They distributed these scraps of paper in Eastern Horna and Western Horna village in Tal and neighborhoods in Tal such as Shalabi Neighborhood, Sahit Huriya, Sahit Shuhada, Sahit al Janinat, Shari3 al-Markiziyah and Wadi Hnoneh according to Grains of Wheat YouTube, 2012.

perspective of resistance, to mourn the slain protestors through the “eyes” of their mothers. The candy protest was also a genius way to resist dialogue with the oppressive system, and reclaimed holiday symbols as revolutionary resistance in a similar way the women of Darayya did.



Figure 3.12: Candies that read “we don’t want Eid, in honor of the tears of the mother of the martyr. The construction of the candies and their resistant messages, which were spread throughout the town.

Tal was not overtaken by radical Islamist extremists, but the Grains of Wheat held protests against the radicalization that was swiftly overtaking other liberated areas. As factions of the armed opposition were beginning to radicalize and commit sectarian violence across Syria, they organized a silent march downtown with blue and orange banners to represent a rejection of sectarianism. Their slogans were “Power to the people, not religion,” “No to guns and no to abayas,” “This is a popular revolution, not an Islamic one.” As the protest approached al Masjid

al Kabir, the main mosque downtown, women hung banners at its entrance and lit candles that spelled the word “Freedom.” Tall also participated in the Stop the Killing street theatre protests, where women and children acted out what regime forces would do when they massacred protestors in the streets.

In Tall, young women were at the forefront of mapping out other realities while acting out the absurdity of the present reality as a form of protest. This is a kind of futurist relationality Muñoz (2009) articulates, enacting “a present that is squarely in the past and in its queer relationality promises a future.”

The Revolutionary Women of Raqqa: Fighting on From All Sides



Figure 3.13 The Revolutionary women of Jana-Raqqa’s Women’s Collective. Image Source: Syria Untold. The Sign reads “Jana Women’s Organization: In Cooperation with Raqqa Relief Commission, Let There Be Bread and Salt Among Us, loafs here from Janna.”

Raqqa was liberated from the regime in 2012, but fell to ISIS and Jabhat an Nusra in 2013 as these extremist forces held the town’s population hostage to their horrific displays of

violence that ranged from public beheadings to cutting off the hands of young men smoking cigarettes (Firsthand experience meeting refugees in Chios who just fled Raqqa, 2016). The women and youth of Raqqa embodied a double critique of activist consciousness-both against the authoritarian regime, and then against extremist violence which occupied the town. In 2013, a group of ten Raqqan women formed the group Jana to coordinate sit-ins, protest arbitrary detentions, and rehabilitate bombed out buildings. They began as protestors against the regime, but once the city fell to extremist forces, they protested against the extremist forces when no one else could. Jana's headquarters were a former hospital that was bombed by regime forces. Jana had rehabilitated the hospital to serve as their center. After extremist forces overtook the town, Ahrar al Sham, an extremist group, occupied Jana's headquarters. The women won the building back after a month-long sit in against the extremists. One of the founders said, "religion is a very personal matter and no one has the right to force it on other people." (Syria Untold 2013).



Figure 3.14: The Women of Jana painting their logo on a wall in Raqqa. Source: Syria Untold 2013.

Jana coordinated a bread distribution campaign called "Let There Be Bread Between Us,"

as a result of food shortages in the town, where they made Arabic bread and attached sayings about peace and justice. In the context of starvation siege, escalating prices for daily commodities, and bread shortages, the distribution of such a necessary staple is a form of socialist ethics of care.



Figure 3.15: Members of the Free Youth of Assembly in Raqqa participating in Let There Be Bread campaign.

Jana also coordinated with other activist collectives in Raqqa on projects such as “I Won’t Leave My School” and “Let’s Share Our Medicines.” I Won’t Leave My School was an activist campaign started by the Raqqa Free Youth Assembly, in which they held an activist campaign to clean out bombed out schools in the Raqqa region (Assembly of Free Raqqa’s Youth Facebook, 2013). They met to sweep up debris and prepare school spaces for children to return to their education despite the occupations. Let’s Share Our Medicines was an initiative Jana collaborated on with a local activist group called Ahfad al-Rashid in which they gathered unused medicines and distributed them to local community members who needed them.



Figure 3.16: Let's Share Our Medicines Campaign—Janna and youth organization Ahfad al-Rashid. Source: Syria Untold 2013.

Jana contributed to building alternate economies by making grassroots, community-led businesses for women, one for sewing, and one for cooking. With the proceeds from these community projects, they funded another rehabilitation of a local high school, Muawiyah High School, which was destroyed from regime bombing.



Figure 3.17: Women of Jana rehabilitating a bombed out high school. Source: Jana Facebook Page.



Figure 3.18: Jana with “Crafts of the Revolution.” Source: Jana, Facebook Page 2016

Jana curated the project "Crafts of the Revolution," where they created and sold revolution-themed art pieces by basket weaving revolution flag colors into beautiful works of art. They used feminized, creative, indigenous forms of artistic resistance by literally weaving their dreams for freedom into everyday items. They sold the items from the “Crafts of the Revolution” project to rebuild more bombed out areas in their town. In a context of multiple occupations and airstrikes, Raqqa people were left to unbury their schools from the rubble and make them usable again. Jana also painted murals on the walls of public spaces to reclaim them from regime forces and extremist violence.

Suad Nofal was one of the founding members of Jana, and one of the earlier protestors in Raqqa in 2011 when the Syrian revolution first began. She was born and raised in Raqqa and worked as an elementary teacher. She began her activist career protesting U.S. brutality and imperialism in Iraq in the early 2000s. During the Syrian Revolution, Suad attended countless protests in Raqqa and became an outspoken activist against the regime. Government security

services investigated her, and she was dismissed from the school where she worked as a result of her activism.

Suad Nofal famously staged one-woman protests against ISIS when they occupied the city. Using homemade, colorful banners she stood in front of the ISIS headquarters and marched through the streets of Raqqa with the message, “Our revolution was sparked by honorable people, and it is being stolen by thieves,” “Release all detainees,” and “Where were you when the crimes of Ghouta happened? Sleeping in your palaces,” referring to the region outside of Damascus that suffered chemical attacks in 2013. Her bright messages contrasted sharply with the visual vocabulary of ISIS’s all black prison-like center.



Figure 3.19: Nofal in front of the ISIS headquarters protesting with a revolution flag. Source: Suad Nofal on Facebook.

Her banner messages read, “Muslims who spill the blood of Muslims are sinners,” “Our enemy is the criminal regime, not the people,” “Don’t just talk about religion. Show us your religion through your decency, your compassion, and your good deeds.” Nofal described how she faced resistance from within her own family because they disapproved of her activism due to

the risk that it put them in. She says, “my family has told me to stop and they say that they will not forgive me if something happens to them. Of course I am worried about this, but Syria needs us all now. How can we abandon our country when it needs us the most?” Nofal was shot when she protested in front of ISIS headquarters and survived through the help of her sister. “No matter what happens, I want to stay. I want to stay in my city. I don’t want others to take over it. Online activism is good, but there is work that has to be done on the ground, and some of us have to stay to do it.” Nofal expresses a politics of refusal, an idea that her very body resists the occupation of the town. Nofal’s message shows a double critique—a critique of the regime, and a critique of the Islamist extremists who came in to exploit the city when it was most vulnerable. She has an anti-imperialist, anti-colonial praxis that is feminist in nature. She resisted displacement actively because she realized, as she herself said, she is one of the few activists who is courageous enough to keep working, even in the face of extremist oppression doubled with regime violence.¹⁸ Her demonstration against ISIS prompted solidarity from all over the country.

Activist Maya Atassi commented, “Today I really needed this feminine source of strength and courage. I wish you the best, Suad Nofal!” She holds on to her banners, full of messages, colors, and cartoons, to remind herself of the Syrian struggle. In contrast to the black symbolism of ISIS, she filled the Syrian landscape of Raqqa with vibrant colors. Her creativity, which is traditionally devalued in activist work, and feminine aesthetics resisted multiple axes of oppression. Nofal said “these banners have kept me company, they have given me strength. They remind me why it is important to keep doing what we are doing. Until we are free.”

¹⁸ Eventually, after an interview that aired with ANA Tv that showed her protesting against ISIS, Nofal was forced to flee Raqqa and is now living in Turkey.



Figure 3.20: Nofal with one of her homemade posters that says no to the oppressive oppressor, no to the ruling regime, no to excommunication (takfir), yes to thinking (takfir). Source: Suad Nofal's Facebook page.

Salamiyah Women's Coordination Committee

In 2014 in Salamiyah, a mostly Ismaili minority population town, the Salamiyah Women Coordination Committee converted houses into protest centers, filmed their creative indoor demonstrations, and distributed them on social media. Salamiyah was one of the first cities to revolt against the Assad regime. The town has a mostly Ismai'ili population, which contradicts the regime's narrative that the protestors were primarily Sunni, Salafists, and radical Islamist extremists.

Salamiyah women are positioned in an important way in regard to debates around sectarianism. Although Salamiyah Women's Coordination Committee is clear in its commitment to civil society and nonviolent activism, the group supported the Free Syrian Army because they

believed that “militarization was an inevitable consequence of the regime’s brutality and massacres” (Syria Untold 2014). At the same time, they rejected Islamist militant extremism and ‘regard groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as an extension of the regime rather than its opponents’ (Syria Untold 2014). They also pointedly rejected and called out moments when the official political opposition, the Syrian National Coalition, employed sectarianist language against the regime, calling on an ethics of movement building that disavows itself from previous investments in ethnic and sectarian division (As-Salamiyah Coordination Committee 2014). This creates the structure for a new kind of revolutionary movement in Syria, one that understands the colonial implications alive and well in the regime’s sectarian strategies cemented by their Arab nationalist Ba’athist ideology.

The regime targeted Salamiyah for its mass participation in the revolution early on via large scale detentions and arrests. The level of crackdown made public protests in Salamiyah extremely dangerous. The Salamiyah Women’s Coordination Committee was created in those circumstances, to creatively maneuver protesting under extreme duress. The Women’s Committee became the center of civil disobedience and resistance campaigns in the city. One of the first activities Salamiyah Women’s Committee organized was a silent march. Protestors held up banners calling for the release of detainees and protesting Assad’s siege on neighboring towns. The march was invaded by regime hitmen and security forces, and a large group of activists were detained.



Figure 3.21: Salamiyah women’s silent march in downtown, May 2012. Source: Salamiyah Media on Youtube.

Like the women of Darayya, Salamiyah women’s coordination committee had to think of other ways to protest that would not put the women in direct crossfire of regime violence. The women of Salamiyah decided to create “protest houses.” They organized the sit-ins from their houses, holding banners and creating statements to express their resistance against the brutality of the regime. These domestic sit-ins were then filmed and distributed on social media. One of the slogans on their posters read: “Our whole revolution can be summarized in these words: We want freedom, we want dignity, and we will demand these until the murderer falls and is finally executed.” In addition to their indoor protest houses, the Salamiyah Women’s Coordination Comitee organized grassroots mutual aid relief to internally displaced Syrians and to the families of political prisoners.

These indoor sit-ins continued for years as the Salamiyah Women’s Coordination Committee continued to fight for liberation and reject the regime’s narrative of sectarianism. They declared “No one can fool us with this lie of protecting minorities. The Syrian revolution is

one for all Syrians whoever they were, and wherever they lived. Its goal is clear, and that is to rid us of the regime of the Assad family and to create a new Syria that is based on active citizenship, pluralism and the rule of law” (Syria Untold 2015). The Salamiyah Women’s Coordination Committee embodies multiple critiques and communicates the important resistance of minoritized ethnoreligious communities’ in Syria protesting from their specific positionalities against the state.

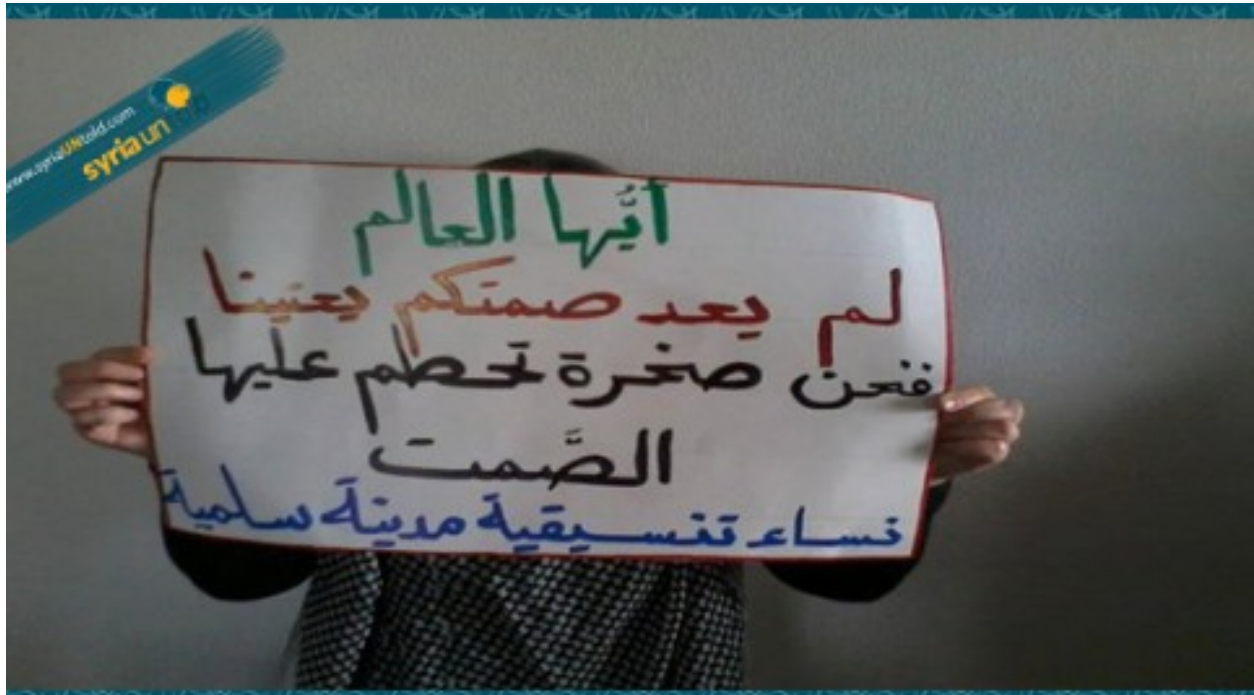


Figure 3.22: A banner from an indoor protest in Salamiyah that reads “Dear World, your silence no longer concerns us. We are a rock upon which silence breaks.” The Salamiyah Women’s Coordination Committee. Source: Salamiyah Women Coordination Committee Facebook page via Syria Untold.

The Mazaya Center

In June 2013, Ghalia Rahal turned her hairdressing salon in Kafranbel, Idlib into a grassroots women’s center called Mazaya (Al Shami 2018). The Mazaya Center became a space for Syrian women to meet and discuss political issues, hold workshops in literacy, first aid, hairdressing sewing, languages, and computer skills (Syria Untold 2013). They expanded across

Idlib and opened eight centers, clinics, and childcare centers, a library, and a school. They also held discussions about women's gendered realities in Syria and held a satirical cartoon contest as part of their women's magazine (Women Now 2014). Their trainings continue to this day and they aim to empower women by creating opportunities for financial independence. The presence of fundamentalist forces in Kafranbel cracked down on its activist movement and targeted women in the town (Syria Untold 2013). In response to rising extremism, women of Mazaya wove a giant Syrian revolution flag and placed it outside their center, saying "We are sending a message to ISIS as well as our fellow revolutionary men, to remind them of how much women have sacrificed in the struggle for a civil state where men and women have equal rights." What I want to reassert here is that gendered Syrian protest movements remain overtly political and begin to build alternate structures for care outside of capitalism and authoritarianism, weaving their political protests with new forms of community. Syrian women reorient their politics to protest against whatever oppressive regime is in place, ultimately rooting in a total liberation from heteropatriarchy, extremist violence, totalitarianism, imperialism, classism, all at once while making new kinds of worlds possible in the process.

The giant revolution flag was also a reassertion of the revolutionary colors in the midst of black flags representing extremist groups. "[This] is a symbol of what we demanded in 2011, what we still demand today" the women of Mazaya declared. On November 10, 2014, the Mazaya Center was burnt down by extremist groups. The women of Mazaya's activist work was seen as a threat to their dominance. In a matter of hours, the women of Mazaya began to clear the damage, rebuild the center, and coordinate a protest against the attack. Nour, the head director of Mazaya at the time, said, "Despite being capable of committing such horrid crimes, you [the extremists] are weak. Your language is murder, theft, and arson, a language we do not

understand.” (Syria Untold 2013). The center was attacked again on January 14, 2015. Islamist militants in Jabhat al-Nusra raided the center because of a newspaper they released called Souriana, which included a message of solidarity with journalists murdered in the attack on Charlie Hebdo in France.

The women of Mazaya protested in retaliation and asserted that the incident would not inhibit their activist work. They recycled banners they had created to protest regime violence that read “I am no longer a liability, I am an asset. We are here to stay.” The Mazaya Center still runs eight centers in Idlib, as well as medical clinics and a women’s magazine (Shami 2018, Syria Prints 2018). During the COVID crisis, Mazaya Center coordinated mask-making workshops for local women and distributed the masks to makeshift refugee camps in Idlib (SY Plus 2020). The women of Mazaya consistently show how women are creating alternate structures outside of capitalism, built on self-sufficiency, mutual aid, and communal care. Not only has the state infrastructure collapsed, it has collapsed on itself, because it is deliberately, systemically targeting its civilians and is not invested in the welfare of everyday civilians. Women of Mazaya have made it their work to create networks and structures of care when the state is not providing that to the people.



Figure 3.23: Women of Mazaya center holding mask-making workshops during COVID. Imagesource: SYPlus, Youtube 2020.

The Stop the Killing Movement

In April 2012, a 32-year-old Alawite lawyer named Rima Dali stood on a downtown Damascus street corner wearing a bright red raincoat, holding a matching red sign that read “Stop the Killing” in bold white letters (Kahf 2012). Dali was staging a flash-mob style street theatre protest, and an entourage of activist comrades appeared to cheer her on and record the video. She and her group of women activist friends began to engage in performative, feminized protests that used the vibrancy of the red color and white lettering to communicate an intentionally ambiguous but subversive demand: stop the killing. The Stop the Killing movement with Rima Dali used feminized aesthetics, flowers, and bright red colors to create a symbolic vocabulary of resistance, one that spread across the country, and then across the world.



Figure 3.24: Rima Dali in her red raincoat and the first Stop the Killing Flash Mob in Downtown Damascus. Source: Syrianrice, YouTube 2012.

The Stop the Killing movement erupted in towns and cities across Syria. Groups of women would distribute red and white flowers with the slogan to vendors, garbage collectors, pedestrians, people passing by in cars. They began to stage protests in malls where groups of women would fall to the ground simulating the regime's live ammunition responses to protests (Dali 2012, Kahf 2020). Augusta Boal (1993) created the Theatre of the Oppressed method in the 1950s-1960s as a way for everyday people to stimulate critical observation and represent reality with their bodies. The street theatre movements allow people to somatically process the violence of the state using performance and point out the absurdity of violence in a way that raises consciousness. By somatically enacting the oppression visually, youth and women were creating a mirror into which they critique reality and imagine other pathways for their desired worlds. Stop the Killing protests spread across Syria in the form of street theatre, flash mobs, graffiti, and passing out flowers with resistant messages and using Stop the Killing red and white symbols across Syria. These acts were filmed in their different sites and uploaded to the Stop the Killing Facebook page and via Youtube. The movement began to spread to rural, disenfranchised

areas such as Tal. In Tal, women and young children reinterpreted the movement in a way more specifically tailored to local circumstances. They used the signs to protest for the release of prisoners of conscience and children used the street performances to act out their hopes for better worlds.



Figure 3.25: Street Theatre for Stop the Killing in Tal, with the Stop the Killing motto: Stop the Killing, We Want to Build a Country for All Syrians. 2012.



Figure 3.26: A Stop the Killing Protest in Damascus. Source: Facebook 2012.



Figure 3.27: The iconic colors of Stop the Killing and the anti-sectarian slogan: Stop the Killing, We Want to Build a Country for All Syrians with photos of disappeared prisoners and flowers.



Figure 3.28: Another Stop the Killing Protest in Damascus.



Figure 3.29: Stop the Killing graffiti in Suweida as part of Syrian Week, an activist campaign across different cities using the Stop the Killing motifs.

Rima Dali's movement became a technology for mass culture and gendered bodies to participate in movement work from which they were sometimes excluded. Because of the great risk of traditional protest to women and children, street theatre became a more accessible alternative. It puzzled security forces and led to a moment of confusion in their response (Kahf

2014). That hesitation is precisely why these performative acts are subversive. As a form street performance is not recognized as protest by dominant powers, so it is allowed to exist for a moment. This resistance is structured by gender because it creates forms of protest with feminized aesthetics that are typically belittled in the context of oppositional movement culture (Kuumba 2001). The bright red color was seen as offensive and overly romantic to male activists in the community, such as the Malas Malas¹⁹ brothers (two Syrian activist brothers who perform comedic skits in videos), who dismissed the wave of Stop the Killing street theatre by satirizing it with online videos bemoaning the “soap opera tactics” of Syrian women and girls (Kahf in Rima’s Red Raincoat Documentary 2013).



Figure 3.30: One of the Stop the Killing Protests in Damascus involved passing out flowers with insurgent messages tied to them. Source: YouTube 2012.

The ultimate feminized aesthetic moment in these protests occurred when Dali and three of her friends marched through a busy Damascene market wearing bridal gowns and holding bright red

¹⁹ The Malas’ Malas brothers’ sister, Oula Malas, has a feminist YouTube channel where she has skits that deconstruct common patriarchal tropes and sexist beliefs.

signs protesting sectarianism and militarism. The visual disruption they caused cut through the everyday social movement of the market. Each of the performers was from an ethnic minority group in Syria. Dali is of the Alawite sect; Randa Jafar is from Salamiya, an Ismaili Shia city; and the other two “Brides,” Kinda and Lobna Zaour, are Druze sisters. Their physical presence as minoritized women is a statement against the anti-sectarian discourse that silences and negates their existence (Kahf 2020). Their performance rejected the double othering of ethnic minorities and the privileging of a faction of Alawite pro-regime elite that is naturalized in Syria. This in turn challenges the origins of sectarian tension in Syria, which emerged from French colonial strategies following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Because the French subjugated Alawites in relation to the Sunni Arab majority, in the post-colonial struggle Alawites were put in positions of power to vindicate those imbalances. Now the structure has reshifted and the Alawite-dominated regime replicates the same oppressive logics that historically subjugated them. Alawite women such as Samar Yazbek, Khawla Dunia, Rima Dali, and Siba al Khadour, who founded “Alawites for the Revolution,” repudiated their social and political privileges to join the revolutionary struggle and disrupt the regime’s sectarian logic of violence. The women uniting across sects is more than a liberal multiculturalist fantasy of pluralism. It is a radical act in the face of structural divisions of power based on ethnoreligious status. It challenges the regulation of minoritized bodies, especially women’s bodies, by asserting space and rejecting how power frames women’s bodies in a public culture of the market, where these power dynamics unravel insubtle but significant ways.



Figure 3.31: The Brides of Peace. Rima Dali, Rowa Jafar, Kinda Zaour, Lobna Zaour. Damascus 2013. From the Stop the Killing We Want to Build a Syria for All Syrians Facebook page.

Vendors stopped to stare and bystanders began to film on their mobile phones. The appropriation of white bridal gowns away from their traditional, patriarchal, and colonialist signifier into an everyday space as a costume for protest epitomizes the way aesthetics can embody revolutionary consciousness. The Brides of Peace map a world in terms of the relationships everyday people have to colonial, sectarian, authoritarian, and militarist violence (Kahf 2020). By generalizing the violence and saying, “Stop the Killing,” in bright white lettering, the women held accountable all structures of violence and abuse, which both created a subversive way to critique the regime and to critique the violence of the armed oppositional forces. This is a feminist praxis, and could be understood through the lens of queer futurism,

although it is important to understand how the terminology of queerness is complicated in the context of queer acts in Syria. As Palestinian scholar Dr. Nof Nasser-Eddin put it, “In our context, we need to consider queerness as a state of being rather than an identity. Deconstructing queerness means understanding the word in a transnational context, as a political stance, rather than a binary identity. Moving beyond nationalist identity without undermining people’s struggles for land and resources, but working with a transnational social justice agenda, to which we turn the focus on the oppression rather than single identities and practices. And we must accept that we live in a perpetual state of those contradictions.” (QuARC Berlin Queers Against Racism and Colonialism 2020). As mentioned earlier, because of homonationalist attempts to wield queerness as a tool to measure Western forms of progress in Syria, epitomized in the creation of a UN special committee focused on treatment of gay Syrians under ISIS, the usage of the term “queer” in queer futurism would be problematic, particularly when queer Syrians are only an imagined fantasy. The hypervisibility of queerness in Western terms contributes to the erasure of Syrian women who resist heteronormativity through a variety of amorphously subversive and indefinable performances of gender, intimacies, and eroticism. These intimate acts capture what Adorno calls for in great art—they construct an affect—the everyday hope and attachment to the bridal outfit becomes resignified as resistance to power. Following the Brides of Peace performance, the four women were detained by security forces and sent to prison for the next five months. Their ability to envision life outside the prison house quite literally took them there. I interviewed Rima for a documentary I made about her shortly before she was taken to a regime branch of prison notorious for the torture of Palestinian women. In Syria thought crimes and symbolic acts are considered serious transgressions because they threaten the social order in ways that are irreversible.

The Brides of Peace protest was widely ignored by mainstream audiences but circulated online through underground networks of ex political prisoners, exiles, and the Syria Nonviolence Movement (Kahf 2020). The spectacle of the protest and of other aesthetic production in Syria through online distribution allows it to live on in digital realms. Activists used proxy servers to upload content, which is important because it meant the regime can no longer control the means of knowledge production and distribution. Online circulation disrupted historical amnesia that the regime previously deployed to erase resistance and created new forms of engagement with the aesthetic protests, allowing them to live on in cultural memory even as the actors were imprisoned and disappeared.

AN ASIDE: HYBRIDIZED MEDIUMS AND NEW FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT-- THE TECHNOLOGIES THROUGH WHICH PROTEST COME TO LIFE

On Syrian Women Cyberactivists (I was one of them)

Syrian women played vital roles uploading and circulating on the ground events to the rest of the world, which is a particularly gendered labor often overlooked in the revolution. A video by the Syrian collective “Freedom Days,” set to Tracy Chapman’s song “Talking ‘Bout a Revolution,” illustrates the myriad ways that Syrian women participate in revolution via gendered resistance.



Figure 3.32: Freedom Days in Syria’s video “Stories of the Revolution.” Women of the Syrian Revolution and gendered resistance varies from a maternal framing—mothers of martyrs and political prisoners, young girls making art, women’s social media documentation, sewing revolution flags, labors and roles typically sidelined and taken-for-granted in the movement.

In the Arab Spring, women cyber activists played notable roles “[influencing] their fellow citizens to participate in the uprisings, many young women cyberactivists became influential as media outreach coordinators, citizen journalists, and translators, or bridges to the international press” (Radsch and Khamis 2013: 885). So many Syrian women cyberactivists were pivotal in documenting the revolution, becoming citizen journalists, researchers, case workers for transitional justice, coordinating protests between cities across the country each Friday for years via social media, developing complex language and vocabularies for a synchronized vision. They have been targeted, sexually harassed, and murdered for documenting stories from Syria and archiving them virtually. Radsh and Khamis (2013: 885) argue that “in

engaging all of these activities, women were actually cutting across the boundaries between the political and social domains, as well as the public and private spheres, using new media technologies. In that sense, it could be said that citizen journalism was a particularly powerful form of cyberactivism because of its capacity to shape the public agenda and put traditionally hidden issues, like sexual harassment or human rights, on the agenda.” Without this invisibilized form of archival labor of uploading YouTube videos and the creation of platforms such as Syria Untold and the Creative Memory Archive, many of the early movements I write about in this chapter would have disappeared from Syrian cultural memory. Keeping the memory and the reminder of these labors alive is part of understanding the contributions of Syrian women and how they map out alternate worlds with their aesthetic, cultural, and political protest and labors.

Syria Nonviolence Movement

“To be killed is better than being a murderer.”

–Yahya Shurbaji

The Syria Nonviolence Movement was an organization founded in 2011 that coordinated the Dignity Strike, which closed shops, universities, transportations, and public sectors; developed Freedom Days, a series of creative nonviolent civil disobedience initiatives; and included a wide range of other civil disobedience initiatives in the Syrian revolution, from supporting detainees, to awareness raising campaigns, to demonstrations, creating revolutionary proxy servers to facilitate social media activism, providing psychological support to traumatized refugees, engaging the theatre of the oppressed, starting newspapers, and conducting sit-ins. It is driven with an underlying of a deep and interpersonal commitment to a non-militarized society.

Placing radio speakers in Damascus' central squares and playing revolutionary

songs; painting the city's fountain water red to remind the martyrs' blood; blocking traffic in the middle of roads; distributing anti-regime leaflets that looked like Syrian currency notes -"everybody would stop to collect 1,000 Syrian Pounds on the floor!"-are some of the nuanced acts taken in defiance of regime (Ratta 2012).

These strategies are important because they include activists who would typically be excluded from protests, usually women who face extreme threats of sexual violence if they visibly protest in the streets.

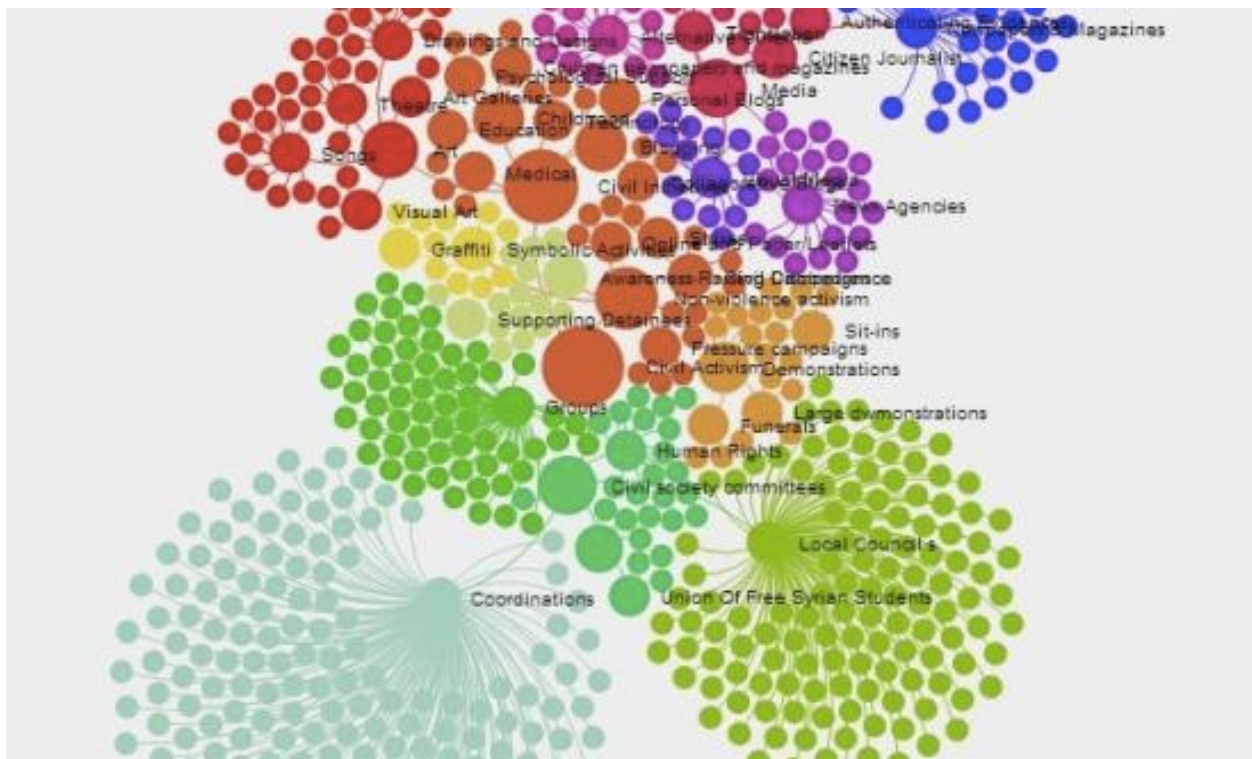


Figure 3.33: An Interactive map that archives the kinds of campaigns Syrian nonviolent resistance held in Syria, from graffiti to student unions, to the creation of songs and magazines. Source: Benedict 2013.

Syrian women were critical in engineering Syria Nonviolence Movement. Maimouna al-Ammar is a cofounder of Syria Nonviolence who was arrested while pregnant early in the revolution (Kahf 2012). She suffered shelling in her town and her two younger brothers were abducted into regime prisons in November 2012. Her powerful use of nonviolence tactics saved

the life of her baby. When regime agents stormed her home and threatened her family, she held her baby in her arms and asked the soldiers, “Do you not have a mother?” and the soldiers let her go (Kahf 2012). While appealing to the conscience of one’s oppressors is not always a successful strategy, in this case, Ammar, who was trained in nonviolent political strategies saved the life of her and her baby.

Ammar’s husband, Usama Nassar, was imprisoned for organizing a silent march against the Iraqi and Syrian regime’s role in endorsing the imperialist and colonialist U.S. occupation. She helped to found the Syrian Nonviolent Movement inside April 2011 and was subsequently imprisoned. Her continued activism shows that the work of creative civil society resistance continues in Syria today.

Syria Nonviolent Movement archived, circulated, and coordinated creative resistance strategies across Syria and created an interactive map platform to document nonviolent resistance in Syria. The map categorized different kinds of nonviolent activities and one could click and see a description and links to the actions. The map has since been deactivated but it documented thousands of protests, prisoner’s campaigns, graffiti movements, funeral demonstrations, songs, visual arts, student activities, and local council activities into one database.

For example, they documented the coalitionary politics of the nonviolent movement in Dera’a, where the revolution began. The Public Commission for Civilian Defense in Dera’a collected water and trash in the liberated territory of Dera’a. They maintained civilian work even in the face of daily regime military assaults and Islamist extremist attacks. Their work safeguarded life for ordinary Syrians, no matter which side they were on, and were vital to creating an alternative civil society not reliant on regime structures (Kahf 2013).

Other activities that fell under the umbrella of the Syria Nonviolent Movement included

activities by the Freedom Days coalition such as the Birds of Peace and Freedom Money. The Birds of Peace was part of a larger series of creative nonviolent protests the students of Damascus University coordinated where they wrote banned freedom slogans on origami birds and threw them from the rooftops. Freedom Money was part of the Freedom Days collective campaigns. Activists printed “freedom money,” or fake money with prisoner’s names, banned revolution slogans, and other subversive messages. They would distribute the fake money to passerby, and because it looked enough like real money, they could spread clandestine revolutionary messages without being monitored and immediately harassed by the local police. These messages could literally “stick” in public places and were anonymous ways to resist the authoritarian state when traditional protests were met with bullets and barrel bombs.



Figure 3.34: A “Bird of Peace” being put on a car in downtown Damascus. Source: Facebook 2011.



Figure 3.35: Freedom Money Campaign. Source: Facebook 2011.

Syrians create new political imaginaries and inspire possibility through their creative protests and survival strategies. Syrians in the nonviolence movement have worked to revitalize parts of civil society that otherwise collapsed and many activists in SNV paid a heavy cost of detainment, torture, and death. These creative strategies keep a living historiography of the Syrian Revolution on Facebook walls and graffiti'd alleyways. Their work also expresses complex critiques and resistance to the Assad regime and the post-Cold War blocs that have divided the country, sectarianism, patriarchy, militarism in the revolution, Islamist extremism, and the fragmenting realities of displacement.

Women Now for Development

Women Now for Development (previously Soriyat for Development) is one of the longest continually running women-led grassroots project in Syria developed by Samar Yazbek in 2012. Women Now began with four centers in Syria and Lebanon and expanded to serve over

10,000 Syrian women from 2012-2020. They run leadership programs, theatre groups, and offer a range of social services. They offer “stress relief” activities such as arts, crafts, singing, dancing, and classes for Math, English, Arabic and other subjects as the school systems have collapsed in Syria (Women Now 2020). They offer classes on sewing, embroidery, hairdressing, first aid, literacy, nursing, technology, gender studies, and leadership courses to help build alternate economies. In 2016, Idlib’s Women Now center helped establish local elections and empower women to participate as leaders. Women Now established two internet cafes inside Syria where they train women in journalistic writing and provide them spaces to communicate the situation of Syrian women under siege, which “enables the women to connect to the world and amplifies their voices. They can speak and write about the situation of women, the siege, the perils of war and are thus able to tell their own stories instead of other people telling their stories for them” (Women Now 2020). They also created a political network of Syrian women, and regularly organize women’s protests while under siege. Women Now (2019) has made significant contributions to the archive of gender justice literature in Syria and created a grassroots community-led research project called “Gender Justice and Feminist Knowledge Production in Syria” to document instances of gender-based violence and feminist activism in the revolution. It was also created to ensure women’s voices are included in future transitional justice process in Syria and to reframe international discourses on gender violence in Syria that don’t take into account Syrian women’s complex realities. Women Now has done critical work in their archival feminist knowledge production and have documented stories of women during key moments under Syria’s siege, such as during the chemical weapons attacks in Eastern Ghouta in April 2018.



Figures 3.36: Members of Women Now hold an underground protest in their basement shelters during the siege on Ghouta in 2013.

In Idlib, Women Now for Development has two centers, one of which is an internet café for women. As mentioned, they often run leadership programs for women in Idlib and many of their graduates have gone on to work in local councils. Their first center in Idlib was established in Maarat al-Numan in 2014 and is run by Muzna al-Jundi, a 30-year-old mother of two and biotechnology engineer. Al-Jundi says that, “women make up 60 to 70 per cent of the population in opposition-held areas, so empowering women to play their roles and make use of their capabilities is very necessary for the whole community” (100 Faces of the Syrian Revolution Project 2020). With Muzna & her colleagues’ oversight, Women Now provided care and support for an internally displaced population from Eastern Ghouta’s in Idlib. It has created a safe refuge for women and become a cornerstone of the Syrian community, women, psychologically, politically, and socially.

Women Now also runs a blog that publishes poetic pieces by Syrian women about patriarchy in Syrian society and gendered experiences of surviving and navigating siege. Syrian

women in Women Now centers often publish political messages and protests from their sanctuary spaces.



Women Now For Development

March 8, 2018 · 🌐

Inside dark cellars of Eastern Ghouta, fear mixed with a desire to participate in International Women's Day, a group of women held banners and wrote their demands. Maybe the international community will hear their calls for peace and security for the people of the Eastern Ghouta.

Figure 3.37: While under starvation siege in Eastern Ghouta in 2018, the women of Women Now held an underground basement protest in solidarity with International Women's Day.

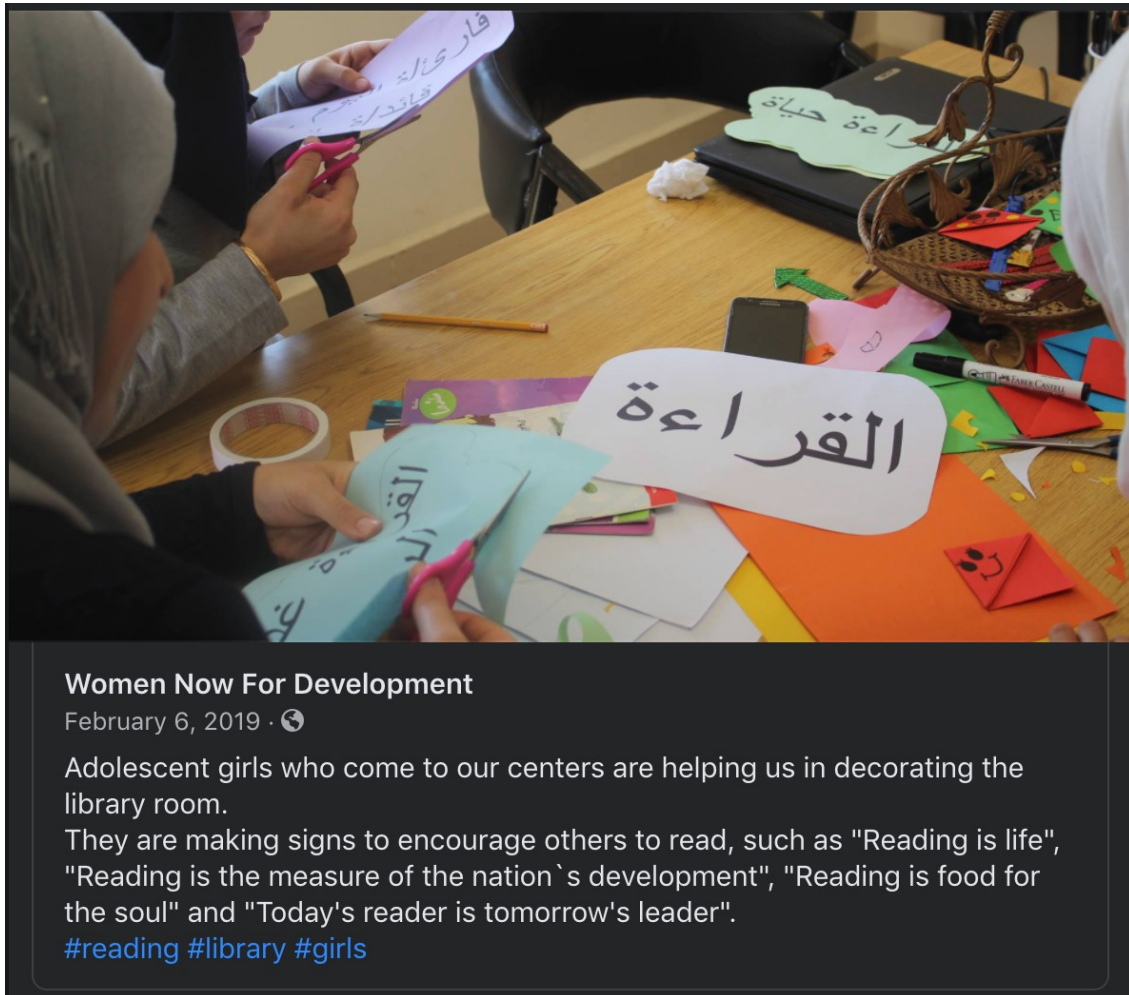


Figure 3.38: Teenage girls in the library program of Women Now are crafting politicized messages about the importance of literacy. Source: Women Now Facebook 2019.

Women Now is an interesting formation because it began as a grassroots collective during the early years of the revolution by Samar Yazbek and other revolutionary Syrian women, that then adapted to the NGO structure while retaining its political integrity and commitment to revolutionary politics. It blossomed out into a cross-regional structure that maintains centers throughout Syria and now in Lebanon and Turkey. Women Now constantly challenges Orientalist and reductionist international legal and political discourses on what issues Syrian women face. Their work is visionary because it is both intergenerational and cross regional,

bridging Syrian women across Syria while also engaging youth and giving them spaces and a platform to express political critiques. They consciously work to build an archive of Syrian women's words and feminist knowledge production, knowingly planning for a future transitional justice process where women's voices and evidence of their gendered experiences will be needed. Unlike many NGOs who were later co-opted and depoliticized, Women Now used the resources it gathered over time and its leverage in international human rights networks to amplify the protests and the words of revolutionary Syrian women activists under siege in an intentionally political way. From the dark underground bomb shelters in Eastern Ghouta, Women Now were holding protests, in a moment when Syrian women's voices most desperately needed to be heard. They expressed the feminized Syrian siren songs that are so often misunderstood and unaccounted for in dominant discourses on Syria, those sharp cries that quite literally come from the underground.

The Syrian Jasmines: Community Aid and Mutual Care Beyond the State

A new challenge facing women's groups in Syria is incorporating thousands of recently displaced refugees who face specific forms of oppression. Idlib as a region has become a microcosm of Syrian society after it was liberated from the regime and millions of Syrians from other regions came to the area after being forcibly evacuated there by the regime. Women from six different Syrian governorates—Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, and Idlib--banded together to create the Syrian Jasmines. The group is also called "Beit el-Mouneh" and was founded as a community care and mutual aid organization. After waves of internal refugees arrived to Idlib from Eastern Ghouta, women embraced the name "Syrian Jasmines." They created projects such as "Together We Stay," which organized free breakfasts for internally displaced refugees inside Idlib who were sleeping outside without shelter during Ramadan.

Families in Idlib have created environmentally sustainable forms of growing and distributing food while under siege. One of Beit al Mouneh's project managers, Muhammad al- Najjar says "We wanted to support poor families, so we established a new system that is the first of its kind in the region, through which families are given electronic vouchers under which materials are delivered to them free of charge, and we have also made available electronic vouchers for middle-income families to buy items at wholesale prices. The idea came as a result of merchants who monopolize and exploit people through high market [food] prices." (Zaiton Mag 2016). The Syrian Jasmines employ recently displaced Syrian women to make pomegranate molasses, pickled eggplant, ground mint, pickled peppers, tomato paste, and olive oils that they then distribute to internally displaced refugees via their voucher system (Halab Today 2020).

Most of the materials they receive is pooled from donations, and the women are paid via the local council of Idlib. It is a community project that allows women to support their families and feel financially empowered. The group's cofounder, Aisha Tohma, says that the group also has a psychosocial support committee and provides emergency aid distributions during sudden influxes of newly displaced refugees. They also have a team for supporting disabled people in Idlib and have opened a center that includes a nursery space for women in the community.

Reclaiming the means of production for food items is a basic but powerful way that the women of Syrian Jasmines are structurally rebuilding another society outside of the regime. The politics of food justice in Syria is deeply tied with the regime as it employs starvation siege as a tactic of control. During the regime's starvation siege on Moadamiya in 2013, regimists famously circulated a social media campaign taking photos of feasts while the people of Moadamiya could not access bread or basic necessities.



Figure 3.39: Syrian Jasmine’s Collective Activities in 2020 with food redistribution. Source: Halab Today Youtube 2020.



Figure 3.40: Women from Syrian Jasmines/Beit al Mouneh prepare tomato paste by hand by drying tomato puree in the sun. Source: Facebook 2020.

Syrian Jasmine uses deliberately politicized messages such as the “Together We Stay” protest to insist on resisting forced removal and systemic resource deprivation. Creating community-based, sustainable foodways and redistributing them to a community that now has over 4 million internally displaced vulnerable people is a form of socialist politics and class-consciousness at its core.

CONCLUSION: WRITING FREEDOM ON THE WALLS



Figure 3.41: Syrian woman writing the word “Freedom” on the wall during a funeral protest for Muhammad Ayman al Samman in Damascus Midan Neighborhood, 2012.

Women in movements are forced to develop quiet and creative ways to resist but again, are mocked and invalidated. They use their words and their art and their poetry but are dismissed as "not doing real work." They plan colorful theatre protests in the streets but are called dramatic. They provide emotional support and reproductive labor and food but even that is taken for

granted. The beautiful, imaginative resistance women create becomes invisibilized and my imperative is to read through and between those histories, to recognize those labors so that history is not narrated through the eyes of another revolution.

I ask questions about how women express their complex realities since the Syrian revolution of 2011 and how those narratives intersect with other strands of transnational feminist theorizing. By aiming to use a critical juxtaposition framework that emphasizes relationality, I want to show that there is no coincidence in the ways that women piece together revolutionary imaginaries from similar experiences in their interconnected social worlds (Espiritu 2014). Understanding the in-between state of consciousness Syrian women's revolutionary activism embodies bridges what Sandoval (2000: 153) writes was "a weaving structure that permitted alliances between varying oppositional ideologies under the mode of differential consciousness." U.S. feminists of color have stubbornly claimed this in-between space as that of the outsider/within (Patricia Hill Collins), of "in-appropriated otherness" (Trinh Minhha), as the "house of difference" (Audre Lorde), or as the unsettled mobility of "strategic essentialism" (Gayatri Spivak)" (Sandoval 152). Difference, Sandoval argues, is a mode of understanding that does not simply deviate from a dominant narrative but is a "deviation towards another meaning," and other realities all together.

Syrian women were a pivotal part of the revolution, and are finding themselves in the shadows, in the places where the state has not cracked their will, in basements, hair salons, homemade libraries. What does an understanding of freedom look like outside of the logics of Western liberal modernity and the structure of the nation-state? How does this rupture ethnonationalist logics such as Arab Nationalism that dominates post-colonial governments in Southwest Asia and North Africa in power today? How are Syrian women creating new

understandings of the word freedom, through the destruction and loss of home, and carved new ways of belonging in that crisis? How are Syrian women imagining new forms of freedom?

Part of our Ethnic Studies imperative is to explore those sites, internally, in our subconscious and poetic worlds where freedom lives. On March 2011, when Syrian children dared to write “Freedom, Freedom” and “The People Want the Fall of the Regime,” on their school walls, they were tortured by the Syrian government. In the tenth year of this ongoing revolution, it is painful to remember the people in my family who have suffered and sacrificed everything in pursuit of something called freedom. What does freedom mean for Syrian women?

Ethnic Studies emerged during heightened moments of the decolonization movements of the twentieth century. These frameworks emerged out of a current of energy pushing the world to the move toward decolonization out of a need for transformation. Lonetree (2012: 7) writes that “Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and a rejection of victimage.” Hall (1978) argued that cultural studies must necessarily be concerned with politics that is “self reflexive, which is constantly inspecting the grounds of its own commitments.” The task of cultural studies and ethnic studies scholars is not only to study systems of power but to understand that “situations can be transformed,” and harness “a belief and trust in our own peoples’ values and abilities and a willingness to make change” (Lonetree 2012: 7). A decolonizing practice involves tracing how dominant ideologies are formed by analyzing cultural production as a visual architecture for other ways of being (Muñoz 1999). Lonetree (2012) writes that decolonization entails being reflexive in “the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degree to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices” (7). Ethnic Studies relates to this move towards a decolonial love and bridging this move toward a decolonial ethics of love into our everyday practices, and the world.

Syrian women create resistant messages that travel beyond the original “moment” of a protest. They use the creativity they’ve been forced to develop from navigating the threats of gender violence from the margins. They engineer ways to create permanent kinds of messages that alter the public sphere and travel across from the private ones, whether via graffiti or in YouTube sit-ins from living rooms and basement shelters. The activism extends beyond the space and time of the protest and into the artistic and creative labors that make revolution possible. This labor includes the acts of recording the resistance, which allows it to live in Syriancultural memory. These Syrian women articulate visions of an anti-sectarian, child-centered future, outside of extremism, gender violence, authoritarianism, militarism, and imperialism.

These are the “siren songs” that express a longing for another kind of world, utterances that are dangerous, that are vulnerable to violence particularly because they are so visionary; patriarchy’s survival is built on vanquishing these voices. Many of these Facebook and YouTube records are often erased from that fear, that knowing of the risk of violence. It is my hope this research supports keeping alive the cultural memory of these revolutionary gendered actions that so often get absorbed into a void of forced silence and forgetting.

Chapter 4: Poetics, Performances, and Pedagogies in the Syrian Revolution

“For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories, we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world. It is this language, and the grace and pleasure with which they played with it, that I find celebrated, refined, critiqued in the works of writers like Morrison and Walker. My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.”

--Barbara Christian, *The Race for Theory*, 1987

“The word “art” is something the West has never understood. Art is supposed to be a part of a community. Like, scholars are supposed to be a part of a community... Art is to decorate people’s houses, their skin, their clothes, to make them expand their minds, and it’s supposed to be right in the community, where they can have it when they want it... It’s supposed to be as essential as a grocery store... that’s the only way art can function naturally.”

— Amiri Baraka

In Syria, the revolutionary movement has given birth to a new form of poetics, pedagogies that reimagine and decolonize education, and performances that give youth spaces to feel free. Syrians in the countryside of Ma’arun al-Nu’mān took an old military checkpoint and transformed it into a revolution school. A theatre troupe, Stage Live, wrote and toured a play called “The Withdrawal,” performed in Ghouta, Eastern Damascus under starvation siege in September 2016 and created a mobile youth collective space to teach and perform it. In al-Aisha village in the rural countryside of Qunaitra, Syrian activists opened a freedom school for Syrian children. Because the examples are so numerous, I divide these forms of creative resistance into three rough and overlapping categories: poetics, performances, and pedagogies.

I begin by looking at creative production in the Syrian revolution more broadly. I use Ethnic Studies and Gender Studies frameworks to understand why it is significant that Syrian women heal through creative practices despite dominant narratives that erase their subjectivities

and silence what I term their “siren songs.” I ground my research questions in analytic lenses from Chela Sandoval’s (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed* and Audre Lorde’s understanding of the poetic to highlight the discursive erasures Syrian women navigate and the imaginative cultural work they create. I draw upon the concept of cultural work from Toni Cade Bambara (2012) and other U.S. third world women of color feminist theorists. I use U.S. third world women and queer of color feminist theory in conversation with Syrian cultural productions because U.S. settler colonial formations impact everyone in the Third World, and U.S Black and Brown women have been positioned inside the borders of empire itself—theorizing on poetry, cultural work, and art as radical forms of resistance against anti-Blackness and the settler colonial reality. Black and Native women in the Americas in particular are at the heart of decolonizing theories on cultural production as resistance because they ancestrally and materially live the history of genocide and enslavement that are the backbone of modern capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and its transnational routes of oppression—a capitalist system that forms the structure and logic of many oppressive neoliberal and neocolonial regimes around the world. For example, connecting Syrian women’s work with U.S. women of color theorists helps explain why, in the U.S., former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke expressed support and admiration for Bashar al Assad, calling him a modern-day hero against demonic forces, or why white supremacists at Unite the Right rallies in Charlottesville were wearing Assad shirts (el Kateb with Transnational Solidarity Network 2019). What does it mean when the logics of white supremacy inform Arab supremacist regimes, and who are the “demonic forces” in the margins, theorizing against those interconnected webs of state terror? How can we connect the work Syrian women create under siege in contexts of U.S.-based women of color theorists as Syrian women activists are already in and enter the U.S./global north as racialized and gendered

subjects? As M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) put it, “we are not born women of color. We become women of color. In order to become women of color, we become fluent in each other’s histories...We cannot afford to cease yearning for each others’ company.” How can this exchange happen with respect to the important differences and histories that Syrian women and Black, indigenous, and other women of color groups carry and the ways they are triangulated against each other in settler colonialism vis a vis indigeneity and anti-Blackness? While scholars often frame U.S. feminists as reaching “transnational” vistas, Syrian women cultural theorists transiting through multiple occupations and displacements are also transnational and can be put in dialogue with those generative U.S. based women and queer of color cultural theorists while also rooting in their specific contexts and cultural forms.

THE DEATH OF REALITY IN SYRIA

In “Art, Society, Aesthetics,” Adorno (1984) critiques art’s failure to live up to its revolutionary potential in the wake of modernity’s violence. In 2012, Syrian film director Orwa Nyrabia declared that reality had died in Syria. At the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, citizen journalists live streamed daily videos of regime brutalities in order to document its abuses. Because the Syrian people live under a cult of personality characterized by a complex web of government control over every aspect of knowledge production and social life, these documentations were revolutionary and dangerous (Wedeen 2019). Aesthetic creations that emerge from the Syrian revolution record the traumatizing realities of repression. These aesthetic objects create a “counter realm of their own” (Adorno 1984: 2). Artistic productions become a counter realm of their own because they create feelings that are carried in bodies and alter/transform us in some way. They leave a trace, a memory that ignites the viewers and those

who engage them. Adorno's critique was not that art should be more responsive to its historical present and political realities, but that art springs new worlds into life on its own. Art in the Syrian Revolution emerges from specific political contexts but is not bound to them. These aesthetic creations embody everyday moments of Syrian life to imagine new forms of cultural memory and new technologies of resistance. They digitize and restructure current realities with bright, feminized colors, street theatre performance, and new genres of film. For example, the CreativeMemory of the Syrian Revolution Archive created a map that gathers all of the creative productions of the revolution, from theatre, to songs, to political art, that over 1,000 Syrian activists contributed to jointly creating.

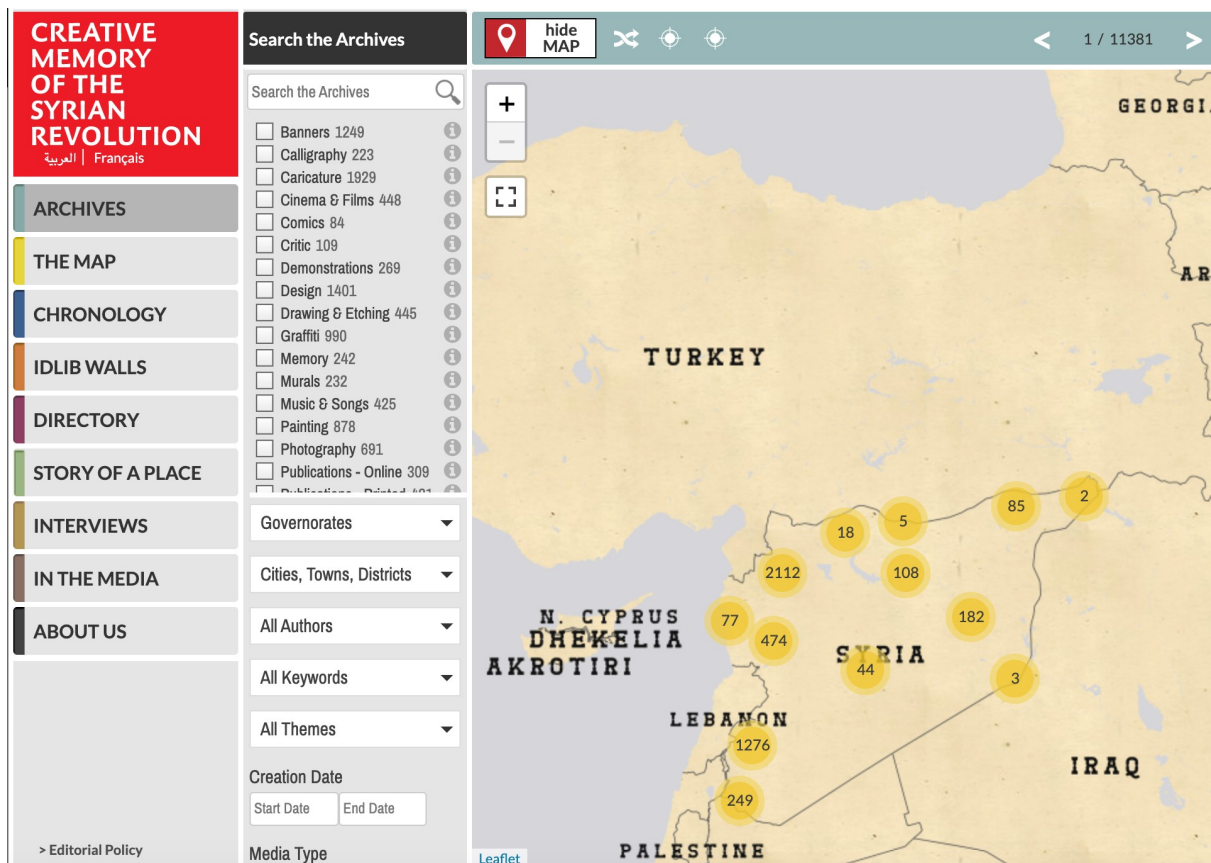


Figure 4.1: Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, mapping different kinds of Syrian revolutionary art and cultural productions, similar to the Syria Nonviolence Map presented earlier.

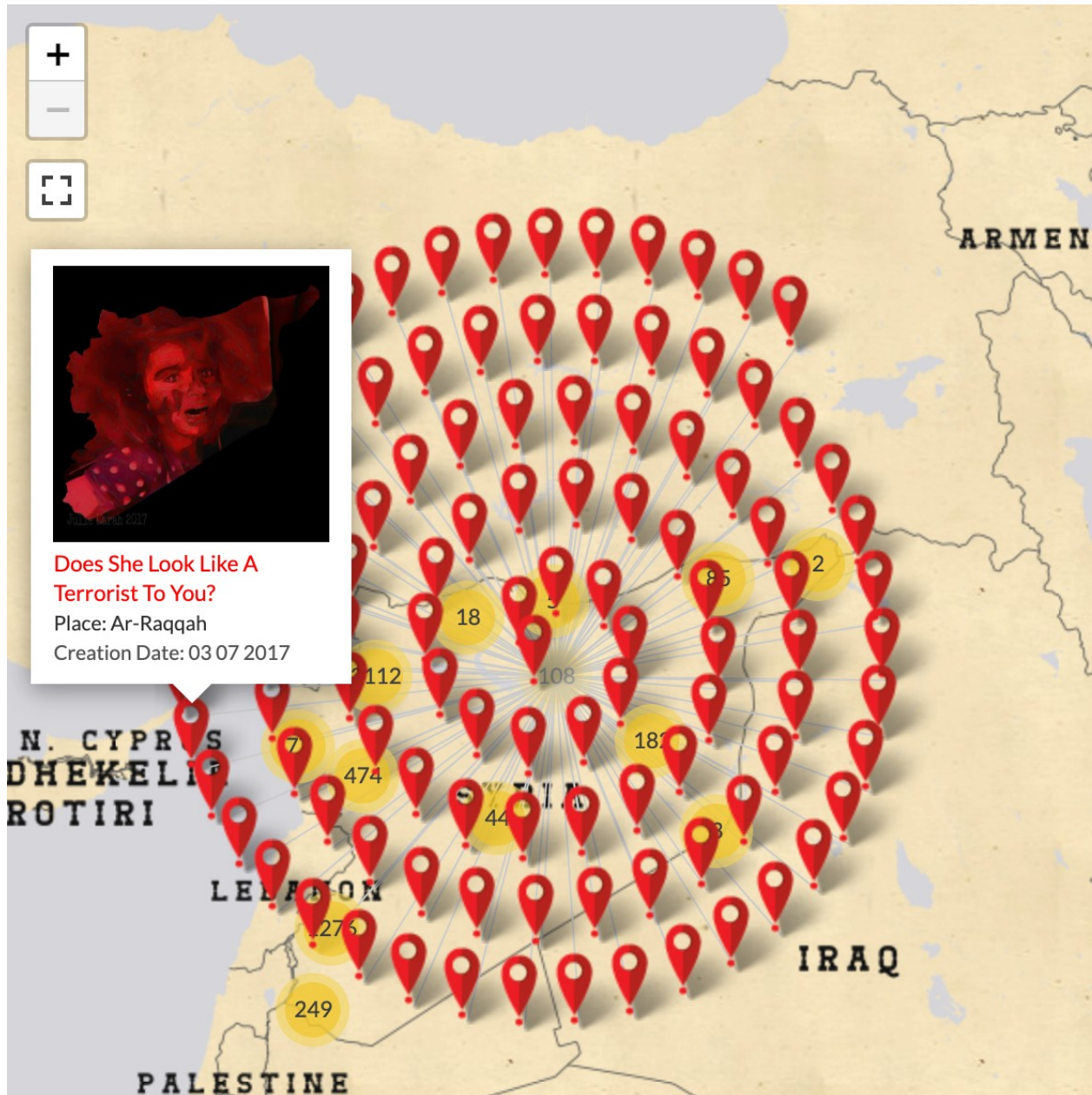


Figure 4.2: Clicking on Raqqa, Syria and seeing a sample view into the cultural productions that Syrians have made there, via Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution Archive.

As Sandoval (2000) writes

I am my ancestral and cultural memories embodied — here, now. How to understand our contemporary historically-active being-ness, how to translate that, and how to speak this across all our differences is the method that we active-witnesses are similarly seeking. We're all interested in creating blueprints that callup history, that recognize how history has carved our very

bodies, souls, psyches, minds and speech forms — while at the same time generating a “present-speak” that can free us from our pasts in order to create nows and futures full of hope.

Cultural memory—the textures, colors, stories, songs we tell about our people and how they survived and how they resist—is one of the most important technologies of resistance. For example, roses and water bottles became imprinted in Syrian cultural memory as peaceful, creative symbols of the Syrian Revolution, because nonviolent protestors would approach regime agents with water and roses as a form of resistance. This image of roses and water stood in sharp contrast to regime police gunning protestors down in cold blood. The art of the Syrian Revolution becomes a living world imprinted into our collective cultural memories when reality has “died” in Syria. Art is an affirmation of subjectivity, a creative truth that exists for itself. It also aesthetically embodies what Jose Muñoz (2009) calls a methodology of hope, a futurism, a form of queer utopia which takes the form of everyday aesthetic and performative practices.

Syrian art and cultural production respond to political violence, synthesizing the bare elements of that violence into new forms that challenge and disrupt totalitarian, imperialist, and patriarchal systems. Syrian revolutionary art is a rupture against the aesthetics of colonial modernity, and it insists on a will to live in cultural and somatic memory. Art and creative resistance create an emotional response that is remembered in the body, and more largely, in the collective.

In the midst of barrel bombing, gas attacks, the brutality of the secret police and shebeha (literally the Arabic word for scary phantoms, referring to Syrian regime gangs), Syrians used art as a way to insist on the validity of their realities in an energetic I call the “poetic.” I draw on what Alexis Pauline Gumbs wrote about Sylvia Wynter’s theories of the poetic, that “the poetic [is] the production of an impossible relation that interrupts the narrative of capitalism by

describing, creating, and modeling an alternate relationship.” In “Ethno or Sociopoetics,” Wynter (7) calls poetry an “exploration of an alternative mode of cognition, ideologically suppressed in ourselves, yet still a living force amidst large majorities of Third World Peoples.” She theorizes that poetry is a mode of cognition unrecognizable to the dominant western colonial epistemology, in which poetry refers to a general term describing the art Third World people create. She looks at how European civilization defined itself against a perceived negation of culture in non-Western societies, how the poetic forms of art and storytelling were seen as coming from a non-human void and could also be used as a weapon against the colonial domination for this reason. As Wynter (13) writes “the poet names the world.” She writes that the poet names destitution, a form of accusation that relies on naming where violence comes from. The poem is an event, “a field force that reinterprets and reinvents anew the meaning of the sign.” And as she writes, “to name, to create a sign, is to conceptualize: to draw into a universe of meaning” (14). This connects to Moten’s (2013) notion of the “undercommons” and “living in the break,” a space of refuge and community with others who are disenfranchised live, beyond just critique and instead in a form of mutual creation. As Halberstam (2013: 10) writes in the intro to *The Undercommons*, “We must all change the things that are fucked up and change cannot come in the form that we think of as “revolutionary”—not as masculinist surge or an armed confrontation. Revolution will come in form we cannot yet imagine.”

Syrians are using their “poetics”— art forms under siege, to take on their specific local contexts of violence, to signify and represent them on their own terms, to theorize their meanings and create alternate ones. The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution archive map exemplifies this; as one clicks on the map in different areas, different cultural productions emerge related to the specific local violences the people in those areas face. For example,

artwork in Qamishlo responds to Turkish airstrikes and against regime violence. Artwork in Adra revolves around women's strikes in prisons and the sexual violence women face in the notorious Adra prison. In Manbij and other areas that experienced U.S. airstrikes, cultural forms take on critiques of such airstrikes. These critiques weave through all of the artistic productions and also emerge as artists' direct responses to the forms of dominant violence and dispossession in their areas, revealing an important and layered collage of all of the kinds of ways Syrian revolutionary artists in Syria critique and make meaning of their realities.

Many citizen journalists had few resources and used crude forms of documentation, so YouTube videos were often accused of being staged because of the almost-fantastical level of violence they depicted. During protests, activists would make sure to hold up signs with the date, place, and often the Friday Hashtag or what they were protesting against, but once the violence became widespread in the form of bombing, it was harder to capture what was happening through the smartphone. Activists began to strategize for better ways to amplify their narratives. Syrian women revolutionaries began to perform street theatre in Al-Tall and Damascus as I discussed in Chapter 2, to show the absurdity of violence they experienced. Syrian filmmakers and graphic design artists began to upload digital media to online collectives such as Estayqazat and Aboudanarra. An unspoken coalition between on-the-ground activists and artists was formed; activists became artists and artists became activists. Reality had become so unreal that art was the only way to express truth. In the process, art allowed Syrians to heal from violent war by envisioning other futures. While the art was shaped by highly charged political circumstances, many Syrian artists used subtlety, color, and irony to create an aesthetics of survival during the revolution. These are what Kapadia (2019) calls "insurgent aesthetics," in reference to the cultural productions Arab and Muslim artists create in the context of U.S. imperialism, what he

calls the “forever wars.” As Kapadia writes, quoting Laleh Khalili, these cultural productions happen under the “unseen and disembodied technologies of secrecy and terror.” These are “freedom dreams flecked by inscriptions of wartime’s death and dispossession...the creativity and fugitive beauty that emanate from the shadows of the terrible violence.”

As internet viewers became inundated with contextless livestreams of massacres, a few desperate activists began to distort the facts in their films and narratives in an attempt to stand out and gain support. This led the credibility of all citizen journalism to be questioned. Danny Abed Dayim was a citizen journalist who was in Homs while the government was bombing the city. He and his fellow citizen journalist friends were filming on a rooftop for his YouTube channel. The regime was not bombing the afternoon they were filming, so Danny and his friends famously burned tires in a lot behind the building so they could say there was bombing behind them. As our comrade Razan Zeitouneh told us in on a phone call in 2011— “I just returned from a protest where 4,000 people were commemorating a four-year-old girl they think is dead who is not dead. When her parents went to the hospital to check on her, the regimist security guards lied and said the child died. They wanted to mock the parents and create a reaction. Later the parents returned and discovered their daughter was still alive. The youth who planned the protest knew she wasn’t dead, but they needed a symbol and so they used her to unite the marchers together.” A few activists, out of a desperate need to mobilize a larger audience, doctored images and mobilized around them in a way that then destroyed the credibility of citizen journalism in Syria. Syria’s art became the only way for non-Syrian audiences to understand everyday political realities on the ground.

Adorno (1984) troubles the direct links between aesthetic life, art, and sociopolitical realities because he claims that quality art is liberated from the confines of one historical

moment. Adorno says that art pauses time—“art is and is not being-for-itself” (9). Syrian revolutionary art expresses this dance between reality and freedom from it in the way Adorno articulates. It rejects what Muñoz (2009) calls the prison house of the here and now of neoliberalism’s confines and creates other forms of life from under those spaces. Since the 1963 Emergency Martial Laws, freedom time in Syria has stood still. Syria scholar Lisa Wedeen (2012) describes the tightly controlled epistemological project of the regime as a “cult of personality,” an aesthetic propagandic dominance of the dictator’s discourses and image that regulates everyday life in Syria from the grocery stores to neighborhood spaces. The regime’s cult of personality that mythologizes the president as divine hero stagnates cultural and aesthetic production because the regime censors and regulates what is produced to reflect the president’s image. Signs of dissidence are erased or pathologized and punished by torture and death.

When Syrian revolutionaries create art, they are well aware of the danger of their transgressions. But as Bloch (1987) puts it, hope implies a consciousness of danger. Syrian revolutionary art embodies the Blochian possibility of abstract utopia because it transforms the possibility of a future from a temporal event into a space, an “ocean” away from the land of reality. As Syrian refugees are forced to flee the country in millions, the possibility of future survivals is what propels the painful process of leaving home in motion. The oceans of possibility are mired with death, but the creative life that emerges from crossing become roadmaps for survival. The act of leaving bravely rejects the brutality of reality in Syria to pursue alternatives. For Muñoz, it is queerness that achieves this disruption of the present because queerness restructures desires to design life beyond the present. Queerness performatively propels itself into the future. Like Syrian revolutionary aesthetic life, which is often queer and feminized, it is “an insistence on potentiality for another world” (2009).

Syrian Revolutionary artists balance between experiences of everyday violence and pragmatic needs to survive with the idealism of abstract utopian desire. This dialectic carves out an aesthetics of survival in the face of social death. Syrian revolutionary art becomes a consequence of current realities but does not orbit around them exclusively. This art vibrantly propels audiences across time and space. Syrian revolutionary art embraces a quotidian hope and rejects the prison house of the here and now. This decenters the structures of violence and creates spaces to articulate the day-to-day experiences, desires, and dreams of Syrian people.

In what follows, I analyze aesthetics created by Syrian activists during the revolution across multiple cultural forms and media using Barbara Christian's (1987: 52) concept of the "hieroglyph," forms of subterranean theorizing found in Black and Third World narrative forms, "both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative." Because reality on the ground in Syria is characterized in dominant imaginations as chaotic, volatile, empty, violent—I understand these aesthetics as ways Syrians are expressing unbelievable realities and speaking despite not being heard. I argue that these aesthetics affirm methodologies of hope through the delicate ways they emerge from political and social realities. Creative production in the Syrian Revolution has created new forms of intimacy that affirm collective survival and express creative memory, through film, digital manipulation, and performance. They are the blueprint to architectures of affect emerging from the wounded state of Syrian suffering and the depth of Syrian resilience. Through this aesthetic production comes a mapping of utopian desires for wholeness and spaces to be free.

The online anti-regime Syrian feminist collective Estayqazat uses Facebook as a platform to dramatize the experiences of women in the revolution. The film "When I Heard My Voice," asks several Syrian women to describe the first experiences of protesting. The narrator makes

anonymous the voices of the women, which allows for more honesty and intimacy in answering. These kinds of projects articulate utopian longing, an affective gravity that pulls the viewer. The technology of a viral video also makes their experiences materially real. Ironically the medium of an online viral video work of art reinforces Adorno's fear that the "aura" of authentic art is lost in circulation. This is what led to the death of reality in Syria—the circulation and inundation of millions of violent videos with little context and civilian journalists with no training to document realities in ways that could be understood by other audiences. But by naming the specificity of their experiences and creating new technologies of circulation, Estayqazat demands that the contexts of their original feelings be heard. Their insistence on articulating silenced realities is a necessary political process, to vocalize is a powerful act, one that Angela Davis (1998) calls for in "Art on the Frontlines."

Syrian artist Tammam Azzam's "Freedom Graffiti," is a photoshopped image where Azzam superimposed Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss" onto a war-ravaged building in Homs. It uses new forms of technology to engage viewers through multiple sensory processes. Azzam's artist statement characterizes his work by his use of "hybridized forms" of various medias to "create depth, texture, and space, achieving a striking balance between ordinary objects and the expanse of the picture plane despite visible tension" (Azzam 2017). The name suggests that the piece was a mural, a living street art artifact that became a part of the city itself. But Azzam used photoshop to fuse the two images together because his exile made the act of physically installing the image impossible. This process echoes the very dialectical process Adorno explains—that art becomes a living thing that dances between the historical moment and the possibilities of other futures. It is intimately shaped by its context but not dependent on it; it is a synthesis of that moment, its materials, and the audience who receive it. It blurs the ghost of the present—the dilapidated

reality of a war-ravaged place and its aesthetic—into a digitally imagined new space. The two merge together to form not a utopian possibility per se, but a reminder that beauty and sensuality can still live in the imagined spaces, between the cracks of a bullet ridden building in Homs.



Figure 4.3: Tammam Azzam's Freedom Graffiti (2013).

Bloch (1987) explains that art illuminates the process of identifying representational practices used to detect the not-yet-conscious, the utopian feeling. Art identifies the contours of hope. It expresses astonishment and creative solutions to navigate and cope with everyday violence. Adorno's and Bloch's conversation about utopia illuminates how a "death of realism," or a rejection of reality at the present, is a necessary step toward creating an aesthetics of

survival dependent on hope as a methodology for change. Bloch and Adorno specify the different processes by which art can become a tool with which utopian fantasies can be articulated and imagined—it is what helps utopian fantasies transform “space into time.”

Hussam Khadour’s “Point Zero,” a four-minute YouTube performance where the artist dances in the remains of his old theatre department in Damascus does this work. The artist expresses dissent through a subtle rumination on the vibrant possibilities his past memories provide for the future. At the beginning of the video, he walks into his old university, which is abandoned and mostly in wreckage. He finds the dance studio still intact but covered in dust. He begins to dance and roll his body over the dust layers on the floor. Soon a ghost of himself appears behind him and the scene fades into a montage of him laughing, breakdancing, and playing music with his friends at the university. As he dances, Khadour breaks through the limitations of time, and in turn, uncovers the unknown space for an unknown that awaits him at the end of the video, where he stands still, with his back to his past self who has dissolved inside of him. Khaddour’s YouTube video is less a rumination on the temporal moment of the past and more a recollection of multiple historical realities and their synthesis into a new world. This process is a phenomenological testament to the proof of another reality. The act itself, of imagining that reality, allows it to come to life, and enacts a space for it to thrive in the “then and there.”

The Aboudanarra Film collective is a group of anonymous Syrian revolutionary filmmakers who responded to the ethical responsibility that Davis calls for in cultural production by creating short one-minute clips about Syrian life under repression. They say that cultural work “[is] our responsibility as filmmakers when our people are on the street protesting every Friday and demanding freedom and dignity.” They root their work in other historical moments where

Syrian cultural life emerged. A member of the collective articulates how the historical moment propels them into imagining alternatives:

In 1860, the question was the same. Then, Syria was also mired in a civil war, and an artisan, Gergi Bitar, invented a new art form, the Syrian wood and mother-of-pearl mosaic. Bitar unified marquetry with wood imported from Europe and commonly found in churches with Arab and Islamic motifs in mother-of-pearl inlay. He invented a new and fantastic art form in a crucial period of Syria's history. We decided that we, too, have a duty now to invent something new during this crisis... We felt that, as filmmakers, we had the responsibility to honor that call. The people were confronting the army on the streets. We had to find a way to do this through films that embraced an ethics of responsibility" (Bayoumi 2015).

In one Aboudanarra clip, "All Syria's Future's," Bashar al Assad is walking in procession to the national anthem when the scene cuts off. The screen fades and sounds of technical difficulty begin to beep. The scene cuts to a black screen that reads "SORRY FOR THIS TECHNICAL FAILURE. PLEASE KEEP ENJOYING THE SPECTACLE." Their disruption of the quotidian performance of the president's procession with a "technological difficulty" reveals the illogic of a system that reinforces its cultural life with violence. The demand to "keep enjoying the spectacle" ironically gestures toward the unacceptability of oppressive performances and how they hegemonically entrap viewers to participate. This relates to Wedeen's (1998) concept of "as-if"—"a politics of "as if" registers complicity and the regime's power. But like all demonstrations of obedience, inducing complicity by enforcing public dissimulation also has its limitations." Part of the way oppression manifest in Syria is having to "play along" in daily rituals of state obedience, even as the state commits heinous acts of violence with contradictory discourses that perpetually glitches onto itself.



Figure 4.4: Still from “Silvered Waters,” created by Kurdish woman documentary filmmaker Wiam Berdixan and Ossama Mohamed.

The short film “Silvered Water: Syria, Self-Portrait” captures utopian longing from a child’s perspective. Wiam Berdixan, a Kurdish woman filmmaker, follows a young Syrian child as he directs her through the street in Homs, rummaging through street rubbish collecting flowers and holding a toy gun. Birds are chirping and debris crunches between their feet. The woman holding the camera is narrating with a voice-over that counts “...5%....10%...20%... 70% uploaded...” as the scene progresses. She includes the way the video is being uploaded as part of the documentation of affect and a record of the technologies mediating the scene, pointing to the difficulties of self-documentation through the highly controlled and erratic internet under siege.

As the child takes her around the neighborhood she narrates “All that you see...isn’t as it was.” In the beginning of the clip, the child declares with excitement “Oh my god, there’s a flower!” and runs towards it. In the scene, the child looks to her and explains “At night there’s

no light. There's light in the morning." After he says this, the sound of an explosion goes off in the distance. When they reach the end of the neighborhood block, the woman holding the camera says "Here we run, here is a sniper." The small child gestures and shrugs, "Here? Here we have to run?" He sighs. "I have to run with all these?" The child is more concerned with dropping his flower and his toys than with escaping from the danger itself. He even insists that they walk, saying "he's not shooting yet!" with the same insistence a child would have begging to go to a candy store or to stay at a friend's house. The film's ability to capture the everyday astonishment of the child embodies Muñoz's (2009) appreciation of the quotidian as route to access utopia. The child holds on to his roses and toys not to make a spectacular statement about holding on to life under barrel bombs and constant attack, but because of the delight they bring him. This captures what Bloch (1987: 17) says in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, that "the thinking subject is not the place where knowledge and object collide... Hope is surrounded by dangers, and it is the consciousness of danger and at the same time the determined negation of that which continually makes the opposite of the hoped-for object possible" (17). Something as simple as a child explaining electricity blackouts as "in the morning, there is light." It is this attention to the everyday, something as simple as a walk around the neighborhood that reveals the sheer immensity of the violence and the way it impacts children's realities. It is also this return to the child-like curiosity, creativity, and insistence on another reality beyond the trauma of the present but that is still located deeply in the political realities of the present that holds potential as a site where freedom can live. These Syrian cultural productions during the revolution synthesize the violence, allow for space to somatically process and understand its impact and its inscription into cultural memory, while gesturing toward other temporalities and possibilities beyond siege.



Figure 4.5: Stills from Silvered Waters that read “At night there’s no light. There’s light in the morning.”

SULEIMA AND WHEN I HEARD MY VOICE: SYRIAN WOMEN’S SIREN SONGS AND THE GENDERED LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM IN NARRATIVE ERASURE

In *This Bridge Called my Back*, Anzaldúa describes how silences come about. “What lies between the lines are the things that women of color do not tell each other. There are reasons for our silences: the change in generation between mother and daughter, the language barriers between us, our sexual identity, the educational opportunities we had or missed, the specific cultural history of our race, the physical conditions of our bodies and our labor.” *Estayqazat* examines the contours of gendered Syrian silence that live in oppositional cultural memory—the silences around sexual violence in regime prisons, the gendered forms of surveillance, the trauma of forced hijab removals, and the general terror of the state compounded with navigating patriarchy from within, and how the revolution cut through those moments.

Hall theorizes that cultural resistance emerges as popular opposition to dominant ideology. Syrians respond to dominant ideology by creating counter-spaces of artistic and cultural production that open ways for the world to understand different realities and ways of being (Wedeen 2013). The Syrian feminist collective *Estayqazat*'s short films, “Suleima,” and “When I Heard My Voice,” embody gendered counter-ideologies that are critical to dismantling the genocidal logics of the state. The film *Suleima* (2015) opens with references to Syrian human rights activist Rima Dali and the Stop the Killing movement, the street theatre protests and performances that swept the early years of the Syrian Revolution from 2011-2014. In the film, the protestors, mostly women, are holding signs that read “Stop the Killing.” As discussed in Chapter 3, the Stop the Killing Movement began when Rima Dali disrupted a downtown Damascus street corner with a bright red raincoat and a flash mob to protest police killings. Sandoval writes that democracies are a process of empathetic collective organizing that creates performance spaces for freedom to be enacted, which is what the Stop the Killing movement did in real life when it called for radical collective rejection of state violence deeply rooted in a

feminist praxis (Ghadbian and Thiong, Rima's Red Raincoat.) The Stop the Killing protests swept Syria and the international community, and groups of protestors would coordinate flash mobs in bright red clothing as a revolutionary performance—a disruption of the everyday. The meta representation of Stop the Killing by Syrian revolutionary women in this illustrated cartoon speaks to how Syrian women were impacted by the Stop the Killing moment. Using her body, the main protagonist is protesting in the street when she gets harassed by the police.



Figure 4.6: Stop the Killing in *Suleima*, a short film by Estayqazat.



Figure 4.7: Still from Suleima that reads “48 years and 3 months... I regret nothing.”

The bultajjiyya – the Assad regime’s hitmen - push Suleima to the ground. She watches one of her revolution sisters being pulled away by the bultajjiyya. The men blur into each other. The scene fades out to the same men dragging Suleima backwards on the street. “The worst thing...” her voiceover narrates in Arabic... “is to walk on the street without seeing it.”

In a later scene, Suleima is taken to an interrogation room and blindfolded while a military officer screams in her face. She flashes back to her childhood during Hafez al Assad’s totalitarian regime, as a little girl in braids down the sidewalk. Her father holds her hand. She watches two men harassing and beating a young person on the other side of the street. Young Suleima looks up at her father and asks, “Baba, who are they? And why are they beating him?” To which her father does not say anything. In the next scene, young girl Suleima presses, “Dad, were those his parents?” “No dear,” her father responds. “They aren’t his parents.”

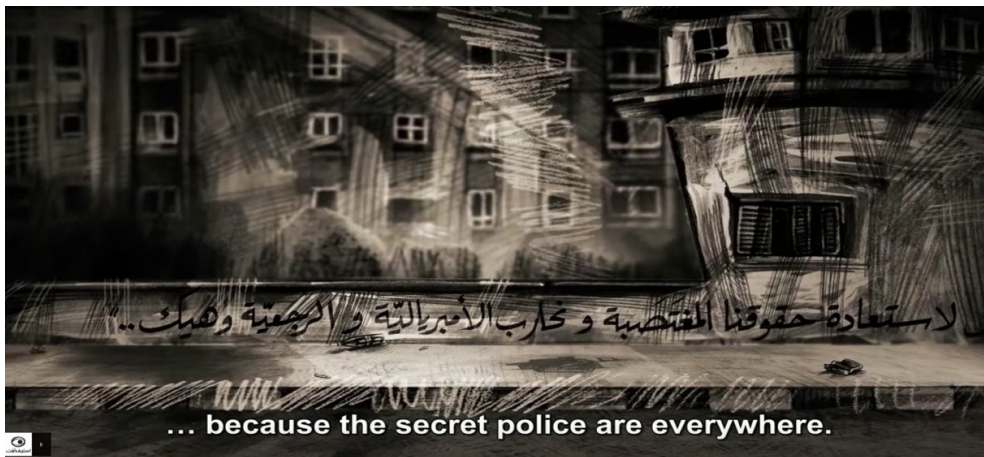


Figure 4.8: From *Suleima*, “Even in the house one needs to whisper...because the secret police are everywhere.” Still of a young Suleima is being shadowed by cameras as she walks down the street.

A commercial/propaganda ad for the state police plays on her television. “It was the first time I knew what the secret police [mukhabarat] meant...” Suleima’s witnessing of the suppression of dissent and the experience of totalizing control, enforced through surveillance and policing, reveals how the silencing of Syrian women in protest is more than just a symbolic move in news headlines, but a part of their everyday reality and collective memory.

These erasures play into the level of internalized fear that culturally Syrians know all too well—that to speak is shameful “and that even inside the house one needs to whisper...” (Estayqazat 2015). When Suleima disrupts these silences and joins the Syrian uprisings, and the street theatre movement “Stop the Killing,” she begins to confront the silences suppressing her in her own home. She begins to challenge her partner’s patriarchy. She begins to decolonize her spirit, break free of the limitations that imprison her in every aspect of her life, and embody a differential oppositional consciousness, “a political technology, a body of knowledges, arts, practices, and procedures for re-forming the self and the world” (Sandoval 2000: 3).

Suleima provides context for silence and state trauma’s gendered suppression of Syrian girls in every public and private facet of their lives, at school, on the street, even inside their own homes. There are many silences here: silence from colonial suppression, silence from the post-colonizing forces that justify their abuses of political prisoners, and silence from patriarchal forces within resistance movements that U.S. Third World feminists knew all too well.



Figure 4.9: Stills from *Suleima* that read “the revolution arose against oppression, and when women took to the streets, they did so not only to protest against the regime, but against all oppression.

Sandoval (22) wrote about “survival skills developed under subordination that revolve around the manipulation of ideology.” Suleima develops skills to resist multiple forms of silencing, whether from the totalitarian violence she witnesses at a young age, the interrogation and intimidation from secret police as a protestor in the revolution later in life, or the suppression she faces from her patriarchal husband who is also an activist silencing her from within the revolution, and even from her own children, who side with him.

Syrian women’s cultural productions during times of revolution and displacement capture important critiques of patriarchy within the context of colonialism, authoritarian regimes, and class that are lost in larger discourses. Amina Mama (2013) theorizes that women’s narratives in contexts of war challenge militarized masculinities and highlights the gendered intersections of colonialism and internal power dynamics within resistance movements. The silences in Syrian women’s work reveal utopic longings, as Jose Muñoz (2009) put it, or what I call siren songs: creative assertions of resistance to cultural hegemony. They capture the interlocking nature of Syrian women’s oppressions, the layered critiques of multiple systems of domination embodied in their creative work, and a site, a story, where silences are not only broken but challenged.

In the short film, “When I Heard my Voice,” Estayqazat poetically captures the brilliant, dazzling feeling embodied in moments when women mobilize their creativity as a form of defiance and confronting silence. The accounts are from interviews with Syrian women activists and artists about the feeling of protesting for the first time in 2011. The first woman narrates, “The beginning was different. I never expected to participate in a protest and cry ‘Freedom!’”

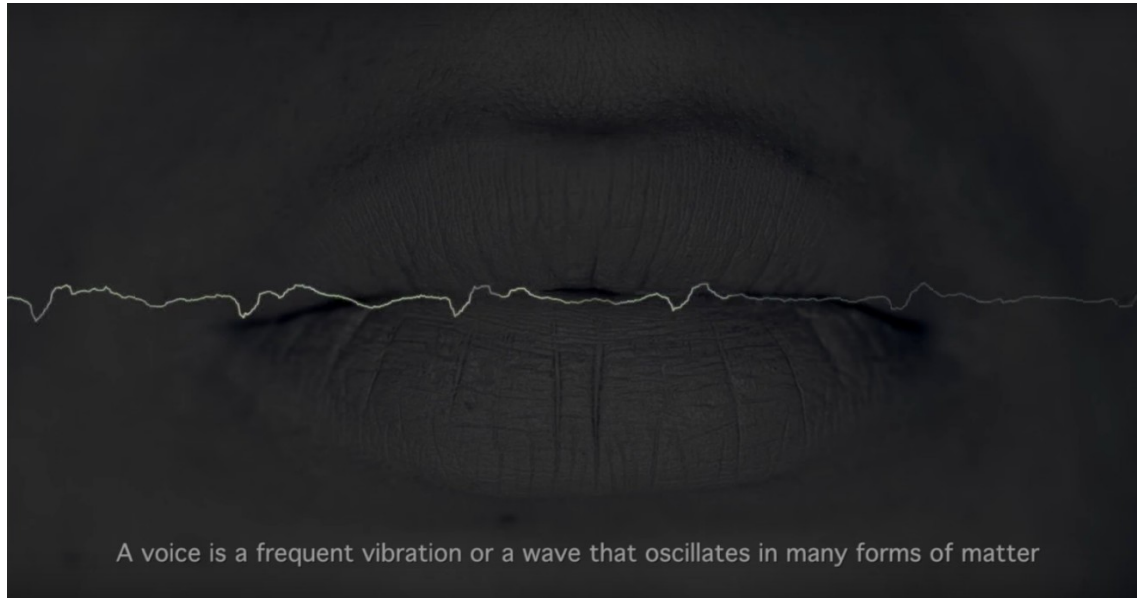


Figure 4.10 from “When I Heard my Voice” that reads “a voice is a frequent vibration or a wave that oscillates in many forms of matter.”

The second woman chimes in. “The first protest was like a magnet...Awawl mthahara kan maghnateez.” The film cuts to the image of a sun swelling and rising against a red sky, while freedom chimes ring in a tonally lovely sound. A third woman cuts in. “I shouted ‘Freedom! And though I’m a quiet person, I looked around, people are shouting suddenly without noticing I raised my hands and started to shout... Then I felt the deep meaning of freedom. It wasn’t just about a loud voice shouting. No, there was indescribable feeling that I can’t express.” This woman describes how her throat started to hurt as the physical embodiment of self-silencing and suppression. She describes the yearning she felt to participate in Deraa’s protests and Haresteh “Where I saw from my window, when I didn’t dare go down” (2:45). She describes how her husband called her and reprimanded her for going out on the streets and facing the regime. She says, “I threatened [him]- do whatever you want to - and don’t hesitate!”



Figure 4.11: Still from *When I Heard My Voice* by Estayqazat that reads “My voice, low at the beginning, then louder and louder...and tears began to run down my face while shouting.”



Figure 4.12: Still from Estayqazat of the sun overlaid a person's mouth

She adds, "Maybe the protests had allowed me to liberate myself from a whole era of silence regarding my rights -- at home and outside" (3:12). When I heard my voice, my whole life changed... We saw a sea of people...the scene was dreamy! People were flowing out from the streets like waves. The roar of their voices was tremendous!" The elation of that moment of cultural resistance against the silencing technologies of the state is an example of how Sandoval (2000:143) argues that revolutionary love occurs outside ideology, but exists as a form of totalizing liberation, in outer spheres and in internal sites, in the "seen' and unseen spaces.

Another woman proclaims at the climax of the film, "I started to ululate. I felt something it was nothing but Pure Freedom... When you shout for freedom in such a moment you break all barriers of fear and subjection" (5:25). She says, "I didn't even know I had that tone of voice! Everything was astonishing, like love!" Chela Sandoval (2000: 146) writes that freedom creates decolonizing love, a prophetic love, a new realm of consciousness that narrates "an erotics of being," or 'soul.'" Sandoval's framework understands the critical iterations of U.S. Third World women as acts of prophetic love, and Syrian women in our revolution today push towards a similar liberatory, "multidimensional flow" that is involved in freeing the mind, body, spirit, and

soul, as part of a larger collective movement toward decolonization and liberation.

Chela Sandoval writes about theory uprising, and how it is a psychic and embodied self-reflective push to decolonize. This creates, Sandoval argues, a mode of understanding that does not simply deviate from a dominant narrative but is a “deviation *towards* another meaning” and other realities all together (153). The fact that Estayqazat documents, animates, and creatively amplifies virtual, sonic, and virtual storytelling to explain Syrian women’s complex realities, and then shares their labors in cyberspace, is an act of love that holds decolonial potentials.

Estayqazat’s “siren songs,” emerge from what dominant culture might understand as a void, a vortex where Syrian women’s voices cannot be heard on their own terms, and they use technologies developed by subjugated women to “ensure survival, transform[ing] power...all the while (under the guiding force of the methodology of the oppressed as articulated by Fanon and the rest), carrying with it the integrity of a self-conscious awareness of the transformations desired, and above all, a sense of the impending ethical and political impact that such transformations will perform” (Sandoval 2000: 176). In “On the Issue of Roles,” Toni Cade Bambara (1970) wrote that you can’t be a revolutionary saying “fuck whitey” in the streets if you’re at home treating your wife like shit. You can’t call yourself a revolutionary if you’re carrying a megaphone in the streets talking about human rights and then returning home to treat your children like sub-humans. In Estayqazat, Syrian revolutionary women exemplify the series of transformations that the revolution brought about in our societies, one that I have witnessed firsthand in Syrian communities around the world. Women and femmes were not only revolting against the dominance of the state, but against abuse and oppression in all forms, in all places. Because the revolution was ushered in by the radical art that children created against the state, it centered the most vulnerable bodies from the beginning, no matter how they were ignored and

marginalized later. Women's pivotal roles in the revolution also meant that in their artistic and cultural productions, they recorded the ways they felt transformed enough to decolonize spaces beyond just the state and in their intimate, daily lives.

POETICS UNDER SIEGE

“Poetry is a political act because it involves telling the truth.”

June Jordan

“Words are to be taken seriously. Words set things in motion. I've seen them doing it. Words set up atmospheres, electrical fields, charges. I've felt them doing it. Words conjure. I try not to be careless about what I utter, write, sing. I'm careful about what I give voice to.”

— Toni Cade Bambara

In the besieged city of Zabadani, Syrian women organized workshops called “I am She” for women who were detained in Assad's prisons to heal from sexual trauma and discuss everyday gender violence. They host workshops for women who were detained in regime prisons and experienced horrifying sexual torture. Syrian women in “I am She” also launched a monthly magazine called *Suwar* to exchange survival skills specifically as rural woman targeted by the regime. They use the newspaper and workshop spaces to communicate about their felt, everyday lived realities. To frame the significance of “I am She's” work, I look at the methodological approaches of Third World writers who understand the capacity of women's creative power to dismantle the logics of colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy and to imagine other ways of being outside them.



Figure 4.13: “I am She” collective meeting in Tal Khanzeer, Zabadani to discuss the issue of violence against women.

Lorde (1996) theorized the transformation that occurs in “naming the nameless.” “Poetry is not a Luxury” is a manifesto about the role of creative power in intervening in structures of violence. The creation of the epistemic split between mind and body is crucial to how white supremacist patriarchy orders the world and determines what is knowable and what is mysterious, feared, ordered into a non-space and backwards in time and therefore must be conquered. To speak--to utter a sound in protest- to ululate to the sky like the rural Imaghizen women in *Battle of Algiers* who pour down from the mountains to join the revolutionary fight against the French—is to embody the unintelligible sound that Western modernity fears so much. Lorde’s theoretical intervention into feminist theory and Ethnic Studies is to “train ourselves to respect our feelings, and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so they can be shared.” Lorde disrupts Cartesian dualities embedded in the logics of white supremacist colonialist patriarchy because “we cannot rely solely upon our ideas to make

us free.” Toni Cade Bambara wrote that “our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism...depending on your viewpoint and your terror. Our energies now seem to be invested in and are in turn derived from a determination to touch and to unify. What typifies the current spirit is an embrace, an embrace of the community and a hardheaded attempt to get basic with each other.” The “I am She” campaign in Zabadani reflects the creative power of Syrian women who are not creating art to be heard, but to connect and to heal from the traumas that have fractured them. This kind of soul-centered human being praxis is in polar contrast to the glorified patriarchal revolutionary hero narrative that is centered around intervening in dominant narratives instead of embodying one’s own voice as a site of healing and connection.

The experience of Syrian women and sexual violence is completely silent in mainstream coverage on the Syria crisis and in leftist work on Syrian resistance. The revolutionary women in Zabadani are speaking through the cracks of multiple discursive silences. Women of color writing down their dreams is important within a context where we need to urgently change the state of the world. As Lorde put it, “there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They lie in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. They are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare.” The “I am She” campaign in Zabadani reflects the creative power of Syrian women who are not creating art to be heard, but to connect and to heal from the traumas that have fractured them. This kind of soul-centered human being praxis is in polar contrast to the glorified patriarchal revolutionary hero narrative that is centered around intervening in dominant narratives instead of embodying one’s

own voice as a site of healing and connection.

Before women in Syria started a revolution, a seventeen-year-old girl named Tal Malouhi wrote poems on her blog. “If I were president,” she imagined... The words were taken down and Tal was detained in Syrian regime prisons where she remains to this day. The act of writing poetry, of envisioning an alternate future to totalitarianism and recording it in virtual space, was a threat to the state. Recently, Dareen Tartour, a resident of the Galilee village of Reineh, near Nazereth, Palestine, was released after being arrested by the Zionist state for posting poems online. One of them was called “Resist, my people, resist them.” After she was released, she said “At last I’m free, and I will continue writing. I will not stop. Of course I won’t. The whole case was about a poem.”



Figure 4.14: Image from the “Free Tal” Facebook campaign to free 17-year-old writer and poet Tal Malouhi, 2009.

Poetry is how we take history and our present realities and the future world and put them all in conversations so that the same massacres won't happen again. Poetry is a way of countering displacement. Poetry, like all creative work, helps Syrian women leave proof of themselves behind.

Mohja Kahf translates into English Syrian women poet's writing from Khawla Dunia and the writing of the Syrian revolutionary actress Fadwa Suleiman. Khawla Dunia is known for breaking silences about Syrian women who were forcibly disappeared in Assad's regime prisons.

Kahf translated Khawla Dunia's poem, "Sniper":

Finger that does not rest
Limb that leans on fate,
a fate ruled by a dumb rifle, and you
Have you known who I am?
Who taught you what you are doing to me?
Who froze you in the blunder of this moment?
This moment which joins us:
your eye,
a bullet,
and me
It is this moment, then,
that unites us.
It divides me from my dream
and gives you your name,
Sniper.

By appealing to feeling, "Sniper" insists on rejecting colonial logics of oppression that operate on dominance and resisting state violence. The line "Who taught you what you are doing to me?" ruptures the logic of militarism at its core. As June Jordan (1989) theorized, poetry has the capacity to throw out "the death-obsessed, extravagantly depressed and depressing doomsayers around." Jordan argued that "as a woman, as a Black woman, as a Black woman poet and writer, I choose to believe that we, women and Third World peoples, will in fact succeed in saving ourselves, *and* our traditional assassins, from the meaning of their fear and

their hatred.” Syrian women’s poetry critiques the internalized abuse of violence on all sides, and disrupts their erasure from the revolution’s imaginary of who resists and what activism looks like. June Jordan argued “We will not survive by joining the game according to the rules set up by our enemies; we will not survive by imitating the doublespeak bullshit/nonthink standard English of the powers that be” (1989: 77). Jordan’s liberation through poetry embodies a rejection of the hero-turned-dictator trajectory that produced political realities in Syria. Jordan’s philosophy of poetry embodies the life-affirming collective civil society/non-violence work women in Syria were mocked for doing in the revolution that has allowed them to survive until this point. As Audre Lorde (1984) put it, the masters tools will not dismantle the master’s house. And yet, within our own social movement context, when Syrian women refuse logics of dominance, they are often denied the right to speak.

In “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Lorde says, “Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary and demand the implementation of that freedom.” For Syrian women in particular, when we have been displaced from our bodies, lands, and voices, our creative work and our voices are a witness, not only to the systems of oppression outside of our homes—Israel’s occupation of Syria, U.S. imperialism, French colonialism, the Assad regime’s brutality, and the violent extremist forces that took advantage of the instability in Syria--but also it is a witness to the systems of oppression within our own movements, our own homes. Syrian women are writing themselves into history in poetry, in YouTube activism, in freedom school spaces.

In my analysis, poetics is a site that involves a gendered epistemic labor of transcribing our dreams and translating those desires and the pain of revolution, writing ourselves into the archives where we are being erased. June Jordan (1989) said, “we are all of us working on the same poem of a life of perpetual, difficult births.” Poetry is how we take our histories, our

present realities, and put them all in conversations so that the same violences won't happen again. Poetry is a way of countering displacement and the erasure of our memory. It is creative work that helps women leave proof of themselves behind.

PERFORMANCES UNDER SIEGE AS A LIBERATION ZONE, FREEDOM'S DOME

“And yet I tell you, I love these women for facing up to the ugliness there.
No romance, no roses, and moonlight and pure love” (56).
Aurora Levins Morales, “And Even Fidel Can't Change That,”
in *This Bridge Called My Back*

“To tell the truth is to become beautiful, to begin to love yourself, value yourself.
And that's political, in its most profound way.”
June Jordan

In the rural countryside of Homs, in Tilbisseh, Syrian children perform a play called Knowledge and Ignorance (Step News 2017). At the beginning of the YouTube video, recorded by a youth volunteer, a girl is pictured with her little brother while under pretend bombing. She says “Dear Baba, where are you? I don't want to be scared and cold anymore. Will you come home?”

Later in the same recording, two young girls passionately recite in rhyming Arabic. “I want to open all your eyes and show you the crimes. Look: We desire a sky that is a home for birds instead of warplanes. To throw flowers on the ground instead of mines and destruction. To plant hope (*amal*) instead of pain (*alam*). To light a flame that wipes away oppression. We are children, and among our rights is the right to live in peace.” In *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, Joshua Chambers-Letson (2018: 25) writes how Danielle Goldman describes “performance as “a practice of freedom.” To think of freedom as practice and/or performance (as that which is ephemeral, embodied, and flickering in and out of being) is to understand it not as something to be had or used, but instead as *something* to be collectively

improvised, produced, and made by and for the undercommons.” As Letson-Chambers (2018: 25) writes, “I think of freedom...as an ephemeral sense and a practice of becoming that is performed into being by the body within tight and constrained spaces.” These children are using their bodies as a way to create mobile practices of freedom, wearing colorful costumes and declaring in loud, clear voices their demands for a future beyond oppressive circumstances, affirming their rights to live.



Figure 4.15: “We want birds instead of airplanes... Hope instead of pain.” A little girl says at 2:45 in the video.

Birds Instead of Warplanes: Children Naming Their Visions of the Future

New Shreya collective in the West Bank of Idlib organized a children’s play to reflect the realities of regime violence and express political messages to the “larger world.” (Smart News 2017). Another Syrian theatre group, Stage Live, toured cities under siege in fall 2016 with their performance of *The Withdrawal*. They held a performance in Ghouta, Eastern Damascus Province where they performed before an audience while under starvation siege with messages

about resisting displacement and refusing to become refugees. On June 17, 2018, in the city of Idlib, one of the last liberated zones, a group of youth put on a play called the Governor and the Fisherman for children in the city (Smart News Agency 2017). One of the actors, from Eastern Ghouta, said the purpose was to hold plays in liberated zones outside of Syrian regime control that would allow children to be removed temporarily from an atmosphere of shelling and bring joy to their faces.

Acting Out the Absurdity of Violence in Atmeh Refugee Camp

Women of the Ata'a ("Giving") Collective organized a children's play in Atmeh refugee camp in the countryside of Idlib. The play depicted everyday realities the children experience under Assad regime siege and created a space for children to process the trauma of their displacement (Smart News 2017). The play starts out with a little boy dressed as an old man, shaking his head and muttering, "Dear lord, what kind of catastrophe brought us here." A girl in a lavender scarf plays the young boy's "wife." A piece of a cluster bomb strikes their pretend-son Hatem, a toddler in the group who falls to the floor, wounded. The first little boy shakes his head and says, "Oh my god, oh my god. Is that our son Hatem?" The young girl and boy pick up the toddler and carry him to the next scene where townspeople gather for a funeral. The kids cover him in a white sheet and play-mourn the horrific death of their toddler "son."

The next scene shows the kids with their arms uplifted to the sky. One little boy acts as a border patrol official screaming out the names of families on the registry to forcibly leave Syria. The family of the fallen son Hatem enter a new scene in a refugee camp. The young children mimic the body movements of weathered adults, swaying from side to side, stressed. A young girl approaches the "mother" of Hatem—"Is that you?" She embraces the girl in the lavender hijab. In the new space, they reunite with their loved ones who are also displaced.



Figure 4.16: A child in Atmeh Refugee Camp acting out a character who has been hit with a cluster bomb while his parents recover his body. Source: Step News YouTube 2017.



Figure 4.17: The children in Atmeh Refugee Camp's performance act out a play funeral. Source: Step News 2017.

Syrians in besieged areas write plays and hold performances to cultivate space for children to heal from violence and express political messages. The play depicted everyday realities the children experience under Assad regime siege and created a space for children to process the trauma of their displacement. One of the little boys explained, “What we did in this play, it was exactly like what happened in my village. In my village my uncle died in this way. His body was like that, like the guy Hatem in the play. A rocket came and the roof collapsed on him. He had been selling clothes when the roof fell on him.” The woman who wrote the play said “Most of these kids have lived through terrifying horror under bombardment. Most of them have lost someone in their own family from airstrikes. They have lived these experiences. So we wanted to show the world, through the play, that this situation...For them, this is not fiction. Our point was to show the world that these children, all they want, is to return to home.” The performance itself is eerie and disturbing, watching children pretend-wrap a body with a shroud and act out the harshness of border officials screaming at people to get in line after they have experienced the death of a loved one. The children are able to emulate the performances of power they observed and experienced firsthand in their lives, which itself expresses a political reality.

The Spirit of the Revolution Never Dies: Children Acting Out the Syrian Movement

Miriam Cooke (2017) writes about the healing power theatre plays in the lives of internally displaced and externally displaced Syrian women. She writes “Syrian women’s refugee theatre is [a] forum where trauma is being negotiated, communicated, and performed.” I argue that beyond negotiating trauma, the plays offer children, youth, and women an opportunity to articulate their political realities, satirize them, and also perform them in ways that deliver messages about the repression they are under to the outside world. For example, in October 2016

in Eastern Ghouta, while under starvation siege, a youth collective created a political play called “The People, According to their Demands,” where the children acted out the story of the children who started the Syrian Revolution, with the graffiti of the children of Dera’a. One child played the dictator, others played the militia, and one little girl played the hope of the Syrian Revolution, which lived on while everyone else in the play died (Orient TV 2016).



Figure 4.18: Screenshot from the Play, “The People, According to the Their Demands.” Source: Orient TV 2016.

During the performance, some of the boys laughed as one of the children mimicked the president’s speeches and condemnation of the protestors. The boy explained, “I am the authority in this play, I am the kind of person who betrays his own people, bombs them, and who doesn’t let them protest.” Another girl explains, “My name is Batool. I am playing a Syrian mom in the play. I try to convince my daughter not to protest and write graffiti. I tell her we’re going to get bombed, and at the end the authority hits us with chemical weapons and we do end up dying. None of us are left.” Batool’s character is representing, to youth, what many elders said at the

beginning of the revolution, discouraging youth from engaging in protest. At the end, all of the participants die and fall to the floor, but the little girl who represents the spirit of the revolution lives on.



Figure 4.19: The dictator and his power system after killing the protestors of Dera'a.
Source: Orient TV 2016.

One of the youths in Eastern Ghouta who organized the play said “the hardest part of all of this was rehearsals. In the conditions of this area, with the bombing we have, it was difficult to bring twenty kids together for 2-3 hours every day, for three months, to rehearse while they are under siege. It was really hard to get them to come in those conditions, but they did.” The production of the plays themselves are extraordinary—creating costumes, sets, rehearsing, assembling an audience while still experiencing bombing. Then this labor involves recording and uploading the play itself to YouTube, where they often receive very few “views.” Then, after a few years the plays are often deleted for many different reasons, likely because of the resistance they represent. In these ephemeral, deeply understudied moments, we see Syrian youth

organizing themselves to create sites of freedom and theorize revolutionary change.

Where is the World? Children's Theatre As a Political Intervention

In the countryside of Idlib, an English teacher helped his students organize a community play called “Where is the World?” about the experiences of children under regime bombing in Syria. One teacher said, “My role is the silent world. That is, both the silent west and Islamic world institutions. I have the easiest part. I don’t have any opinion, or any problem with what’s going on in Syria. On the contrary, I turn my head the other way so that I don’t have to hear them.” One child says, “my job was to play the role of Syrian children, who endure destruction, bombing, and chemical weapons attacks.” The children chose to learn a new language, English, because they said they wanted people who are in charge of the decisions that impact them to hear it. One child said, “I hope this play shows the world the condition of Syrian children, the destruction we have faced, and so that the world can help us face the realities we have suffered here.”



Figure 4.20. A child in the play tells his plight to “the silent world,” who does not respond.



Figure 4.21: The youth and their teacher fall to the floor, mimicking being killed from regime airstrikes.



Figure 4.22: Play from the Countryside of Idlib, Jisir Shugur called “Where is the World?”
Source: Orient TV, 2016.

I am a Child and Among my Rights is the Right to Play: Knowing Your Rights Through Theatre and Games

On International Children’s Day in 2019, a school in liberated Idlib held a festival of miniplays for Syrian children about the rights of children under siege. Syrian woman activist and the director of the school, Hala Ghidb said “On International Day of the Child, we organized several plays that show the rights of the children, and to emphasize how exactly the Syrian child is deprived of rights. We wanted to give a message to the whole world the extent to which the Syrian child is denied their rights. The Syrian child should be distanced from all of these problems—politically, militarily, all forms of war. So that the child may have a right to education, a right to learn, a right to play, right to live. This is something we expressed today through silent plays. It is to show the whole world the necessity of these rights, and especially to protest the cutting off of aid to educational services in liberated areas” (Syrian Media Form 2019). Regime blockages prevented many NGOs and relief agencies from providing educationalservices to the Idlib area, which caused local teachers to go on strike, discussed later in this chapter in the “pedagogies” section.



Figure 4.23: Syrian girls hold a banner that reads “Among my rights is my right to play,” and “Among my rights is the right to education,” in the countryside of Idlib, 2019. Source: Syria Media Forum, 2019.

The girls alternated between silent plays acting out their rights and reading monologues they had written about their experiences under siege. They also played clap games and sang songs and created installation art pieces about their rights. One of the young girls who participated in the plays said “we were all really excited to join in the plays. We presented the play together. All of us girls in the class, we don’t have any distinctions between non-disabled and disabled, we are all friends. It was a really sweet play for us.” The children in the play circle their friend who is in the wheelchair, creating a flower formation with their bodies, showing that they are not erasing her disability but quite literally centering her in their protest-performance. Another girl said “We had a lot of fun today, it was girls, boys, and little girls who participated. And among our rights is the right to live in safety.” The plays were also an educational tool, used to teach the children what their rights are in a fair society.



Figure 4.24: Banner from the festivities that reads “I am a Syrian child. Among my rights are the right to live, to education, safety, food, and healthcare.” Source: Syrian Media Forum 2019.

In Al-Atareb, Western Aleppo countryside, during another International Day of the Child celebration, Syrian children and youth presented a play about the experiences of children under bombing. “In this play,” one of the youths explains, “the Syrian child has lost everything. There is no place to sleep. He doesn’t have a school to study in. His friends have died. Everything nice in his life has gone.” Syrian children performed skits, dances, and more monologues. A group of Syrian girls held signs that read “I’ve lost my mother, I’ve lost my father, I lost my house.” The children are being given spaces to creatively express their experiences and reflect upon their political realities in a way that both affirms their subjectivities and identifies the rights they deserve that have been violated by oppressive systems.



Figure 4.25: A youth who plays the symbolic Syrian child holds a sign that says “Let us live in safety.” Source: Syrian Media Forum 2019.

Puppets, Bedsheets, Dabke and Bright Ribbons: The Political Implications of Joy

On October 8, 2017 the *Thiqah* (Confidence) Centre for Psychosocial Support held a

children's theatre festivity and graduation ceremony in as-Swaysah, in the southern Qunaytrah province. Children performed traditional dances and skits during the opening celebrations. In al-Asha village in rural countryside of Quneitra, Syrian activists opened a freedom school called Basma School, including support for disabled Syrians kids in December 2017 (Step News 2017). Syrian girls performed a twist on a traditional Palestinian-Syrian dabke dance using brightly colored ribbons at the opening, pictured here. At the school's opening, young girls dressed up as old women discussing the importance of educating their children (Channel of Jisr Station, YouTube 2017).



Figure 4.26: Opening of the Basma School in al-Asha. Source: Step News 2017.

Khotoat, or Small Steps, was an organization that partnered with other youth collectives to hold theatre and puppet shows for Syrian children. They also had pottery-making lessons and coloring activities while under siege in Eastern Ghouta and Deir Ezzor. Using bedsheets as costumes, the young girls of Deir ezZour performed using everyday materials found around them. These performance videos from these insurgent educational spaces and women's

collectives exist in the hundreds in Arabic tucked away on Syrian YouTube channels, virtually unseen and unshared. The views on each video are typically under 100, and no scholarly attention has understood the significance and the risk of Syrian women and youth recording their creative resistance under siege. Many journalists have given attention to Syrian art and male artists, but little work exists on the transformative cultural work of Syrian women and children. The YouTube videos often disappear after a few years, speaking to the ephemeral nature of their work and the difficulty of the archive when it can be dangerous. I began to download and save these YouTube videos around 2016, and many of the ones discussed here are no longer available online.



Figure 4.27: Through the Khotowat (Small Steps) program for creative arts, the young girls of Deir Ezzor act out a play using handmade puppets. Source: Khotoat.Org. “Theatre and Finger Puppet Project” Photo Gallery.

As Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud (2014) put it in *Syria Speaks*, an anthology of art from the Syrian Revolution, “creativity is not only a way of surviving the violence, but of

challenging it.” What methods would allow for an understanding or an ethical witnessing of Syrian women’s creative protest strategies and performances, without speaking for, claiming to represent, but still communicating the urgency of a dire reality? How can writers understand the significance of Syrian performances and healing spaces as the creators intend for them to be understood?

When the infrastructure for schools and state institutions have collapsed, Syrian women, children, and youth create performances as ways to express political messages, to bring joy to children when there are few resources to do so. Imagination and the body itself become animated to envision stories and capture the attention of little ones who have seen it all.



Figure 4.28: A puppet show in Idlib, April 2019. Source: AP News

PEDAGOGIES OF LIBERATION

“A woman survives silence or memory
dismissive regimes, dictators, or death
She who mourns to remember
what the governed rather forget
We are who raises us
A story
Every child is an old ending
a new list of demands
Broken taboos and treaties
She who chose hijab over veiled spirit
Crazy horse over oil canteen
who sifts soil in teargas canisters for flowers
She who surrenders with honor
A woman’s sword sharpened by wind’s teeth
Her voice never dies.”

From “Her” by Aja Monet

Under conditions of extreme deprivation, Syrians have taken teaching into their own hands in insurgent and creative ways. These creative pedagogies emerged directly in relationship to the political context of the Syrian Revolution and school sites became places where freedom could be expressed and practiced, similar to the ways the poetics and performances operate as sites of worldmaking. In Syria, over 3.2 million out of 5.7 million Syrian children are out of school (UNHCR 2020). A quarter of schools are no longer functioning. Syrian teachers have created underground sanctuary spaces with their own homemade curriculums outside of the standard Ba’athist curriculum for children to be educated in new ways while under siege.



Figure 4.29: Image from Khotoat’s now erased website, depicting an arts activity that happened in a bomb shelter during electricity outage. Source: Khotoat.org.



Figure 4.30: Image from Khotoat’s website depicting their arts-based activities. Source: Khotoat.org.

In many cases, Syrian families are forced to send their children to work rather than to

school, so education is already a luxury for many Syrian students. In regime-controlled schools, the Ba'athist education system glorifies the Assad family and the Ba'ath party. Since 2011, many Syrian teachers were recruited to serve in the army, and many others fled for fear of forced conscription. In liberated areas, the tightly controlled curriculum of the Ba'ath party has been removed and displaced teachers added their own curriculums with subjects such as philosophy, and literature. In areas some areas under the Kurdistan Workers' Party, people were able to teach Kurdish in schools when it had been banned under Ba'athist modernization programs.

When ISIS and other extremist groups occupied regions in Syria, they printed new textbooks that removed "blasphemous" subjects such as music, arts, and philosophy. ISIS imposed educational content with strict interpretations of Islamic texts and that imbued the values of the armed struggle against "infidels." ISIS forced all teachers who taught in ISIS-controlled areas to abide by their curricula. Many parents chose to not send their children to schools because of this extremist revisionism (Ashkarah 2016). In opposition-held Douma Munir Abdel Aziz, who works for the educational administration, said that local schools in the area decided to use old textbooks but add their own changes. He added, "We follow the same curriculum followed by the Ministry of Education, with amendments and deletions of the lessons related to the system."

In Aleppo, some schools came under the control of Syrian opposition fighters. Many teachers had to teach in underground basement shelters in order to protect students from Assad's barrel bombs and the crossfire of rebellion fighters. One teacher in Aleppo said, "We have had to open houses fit for use and convert them into schools, but the student suffers. There is no space for a picnic, no space for play. Teaching is at risk, and the areas are vulnerable to bombing." (Ashkarah 2016).

Teachers' Protests and Makeshift Spaces in Liberated Areas

Teachers in liberated areas, such as at al Manahil School in Northern Aleppo, have regularly held protests for their rights as teachers, for higher wages, and for better supplies for students (Syrian Media Forum 2019). The principal of Al-Miskhat school in Haritan posted a video calling for humanitarian assistance for books, protection against the cold winter, and the debilitating conditions students and teachers live under (Syrian Media Forum 2019). Teachers in Haritan decided not to go on strike so as not to impact the students who already struggled accessing school regularly in the liberated areas, but the teachers regularly post protest videos demanding humanitarian assistance of their students and for teachers after organizations cut off aid to the liberated schools. “We are teachers and we want our right to teach,” one teacher said, holding a protest banner to the camera (Syrian Media Forum 2019). Another teacher says, “We will not stop teaching, no matter what, but we urgently need all aid organizations and representative bodies, from Inqaz [the Syrian Political Opposition], to all aid organizations that support education, to witness us and support us in teaching our children” (2019).

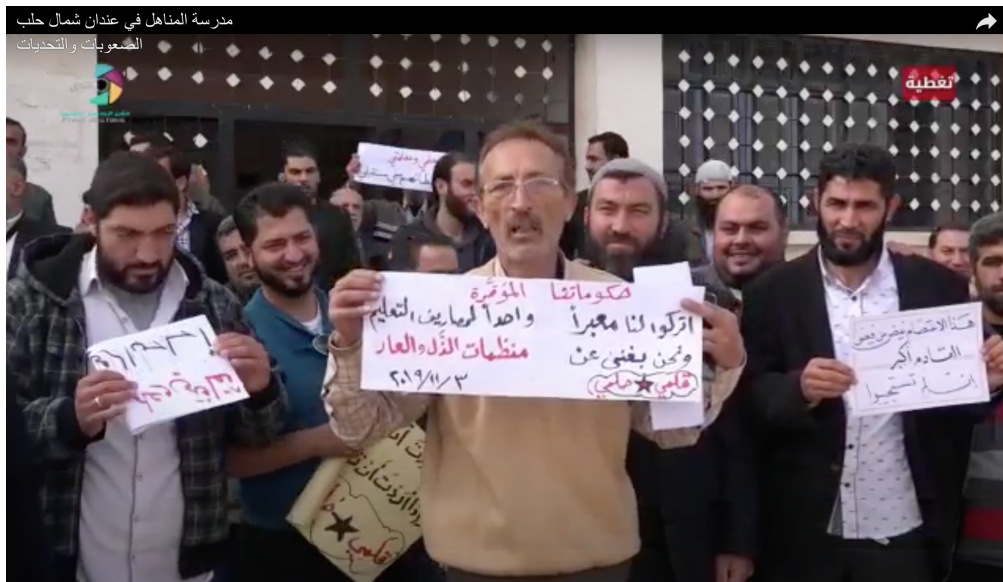


Figure 4.31: The principal of a school, Hisham Radwan Bahritaan says “We did not strike and we will not, but we will still shout to demand our rights”: Source: Syria Media Forum 2019.

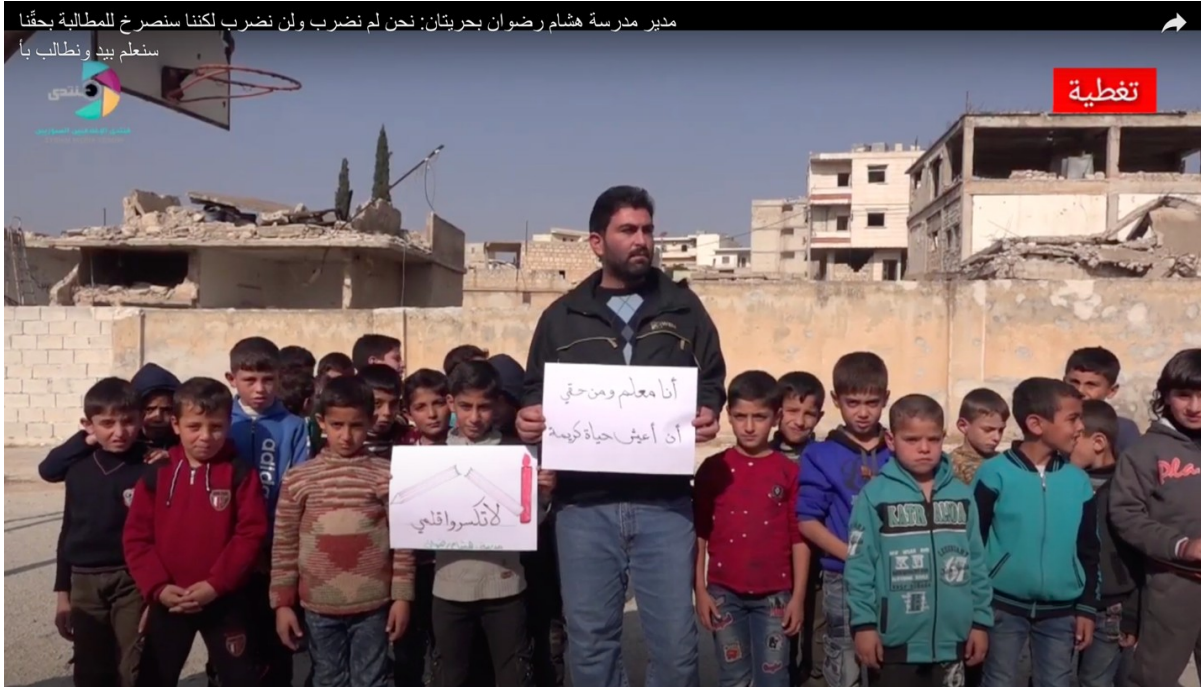


Figure 4.32: Students photographed with their principal at Mishka School in Haritan, who holds as sign to explain the difficult conditions Syrian teachers suffer from.

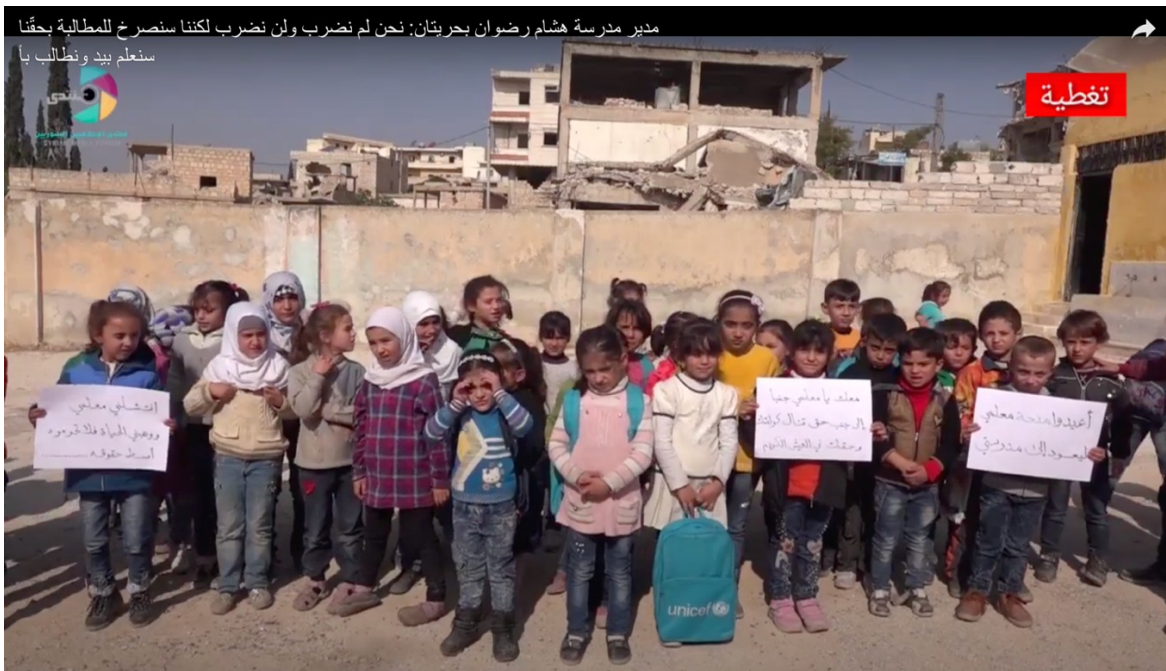


Figure 4.33: Students and Teachers protest desperate conditions in Northern Aleppo schools in liberated areas. Students hold signs that says, “I want my teacher to be able to return to school.” The teachers held signs that say, “I am a teacher and among my rights are the right to live in dignity.” Source: Syria Media Forum 2019.

A Military Checkpoint Converted into a School called Syrian Hope

Syrians in the countryside of Idlib in the city of Ma'arun al-Nu'man took an old regime checkpoint called Wadi Deif that guarded a military training camp known as a “death camp” by local residents because it trained the soldiers who kill them during protests and sieges (MMC, YouTube 2015). Local activists and grassroots organizations rehabilitated parts of the checkpoint from under rubble and transformed it into a sanctuary shelter and school called Syrian Hope. Abd al Latif Rahum, the education supervisor of the Basma Amal Organization which supports the school, said “that the school was used by the regime because of its position at the top of the city, and we brought life back to this school. Currently more than 250 children are receiving their education here.” (Zidan 2015).

Coloring Books: Imaginative Ways to Navigate Siege

In Aleppo's countryside, a youth organization designed coloring book materials to teach children what to do if they find an unidentified body or encounter different kinds of toxic debris. In the video one of the women uses storytelling and interactive games to help the kids navigate reality under threat of chemical weapons and siege. “Why do we color these parts red?” one of the teachers ask. The kids respond: “Because it's an unsafe zone!” Youth collectives have designed countless educational materials to teach children how to identify toxic areas while under siege, how to cope with emotional stress and loss, and how to identify their emotions.



Figure 4.34: Western Aleppan Countryside Coloring Book Activities. Source: YouTube.



Figure 4.35: A poster in the awareness campaign a group of youth designed in the Western Countryside of Aleppo to teach about the hazards of war debris.

Making “Cake” Under Starvation Siege

The Local Council of Darayya held an event where they had local kids make pretend cake out of dirt to raise awareness about the siege on bread and sweets in the town (Local Council of Darayya, YouTube 2016). They made pretend “cakes” and the children embellished them with fake flower decorations. In a context where food is scarce, local teachers and activists pointedly used the resources they had to teach children under siege in a creative way, that still created an atmosphere of normalcy and play for the children, which is a radical act in a situation of siege.



Figure 4.36: Stills from “How to Make Cake Under Siege,” by the Local Council of Darayya. Source: Facebook 2017.



Figure 4.37: The final products of the “cake” in Darayya. Source: The Local Council of Darayya Facebook Page.

The Cave School of Termla

In the village of Termla, Idlib governorate, dozens of students met in a cave for four hours every morning to take Arabic, English, mathematics, and other lessons. Ali, a 14-year-old student in the cave school, originally from Hama governorate, said “I study in a cave. The conditions are not good, but the teacher and his wife treat us very well We sit on the ground and often we do not see clearly because the cave is dark.” The teacher, Muhammad, and his wife, whose name was not available, opened this underground shelter to educate 100 displaced children in the area. Because the schools themselves were targets for Assad’s siege, teachers have created their own spaces with the resources they have. Muhammad says that his school sinks in the water when it rains, which forces him to teach children outside in a tent, although he prefers the safety of the cave. He says “the cave is the safest place from shelling and airstrikes,

and all our students are in one place (Ashkarah 2016).



Figure 4.38: The Cave School of Termla. Source: Ashkarah 2016

The Butterfly Effect Library in Idlib

In Maarat Misrin, rural Idlib, a group of women launched a community library called Athr al Farasha, or the “Butterfly Effect.” They converted an old Arabic style house, created furniture from boxes and collected books from all over town to create the library. “Despite the simplicity of the library, I found the books I searched so long for in Idlib city,” Marah al-Ahmad, a university student who frequents the library (Enab Baladi 2019). Marah said the best part of the library is that you can borrow books for free until you’re finished reading them, and that the library has a diversity of books, from scientific books to novels to children’s books. The project opened with less than 100 books and soon blossomed when young women created a campaign to gather more. Ruba Yassine, the Butterfly Effect’s director, said that the young women have gathered over 450 books less than a month after the initial launch. Yassine said the target

audience was women with an interest in reading, especially students and children (Halab Today 2020). Yassine emphasized the importance of these kinds of projects, especially with the lack of books available in Northern Syria during the conflict. Children frequent the Butterfly Effect library each day for reading groups and to spend time in its outdoor reading space. The Butterfly Effect hosts weekly book clubs for women, a children’s program, space for political discussions, and special events for teenagers. “Butterfly Effect” library serves 10 women and 20 children a day—some stay in the library to read, while others bring the books home. The Butterfly Effect is part of a larger push from collectives and local councils in Idlib to activate cultural life in the region. The local councils recently renovated Idlib City’s cultural center and a theatre stage and reopened a museum in August after it was closed under siege and targeted for looting.



Figure 4.39: The Butterfly Effect Library. Source: Syria TV, YouTube 2019.



Figure 4.40: The Butterfly Effect Library. Source: Syria TV, YouTube 2019.



Figure 4.41: The children's section of the Butterfly Effect Library. Source: Syria TV, YouTube.

The Butterfly Effect creates a sanctuary space for children and women under siege to enter other worlds through reading. In a context of multiple layers of violence—patriarchy, extremism, regime bombing, Turkish airstrikes, and other international actors playing out their

violence in Idlib, women creating a space where other women and children can feel safe is important. The state institutions and their neoliberal structure has collapsed, after stripping the region of its resources, its cultural and material power. Reading is a form of time travel, that can especially empower children to learn other histories and imagine possibilities through storytelling. Libraries can be radical community spaces for recovering from the violence of neoliberalism and enacting a new kind of refuge.

Dream interlude: Our relationship to the land in every place
I get invited to Alaska because I've won some kind of award. I show up but the people giving it are like where is she? They can't see me. No one is listening or understanding me talk so the spirits in the room tell me to start talking about THE LAND, OUR RELATIONSHIP TO LAND. So I ask people in the audience to name the indigenous peoples of the land. No one knows except this young Brown guy and he plays a YouTube video of all the tribes in Alaska and where they are, it's hard to hear but there are so many. Then I start talking about arts therapy & how Syrian kids need to be in nature to regulate their nervous systems, how they need to connect with the land.

Schools under the Olive Trees: Alternature Futures

In “Imagining Indigenous Futurisms,” the authors describe how the native slipstream is a portal in time where “time and space are distorted,” where a survival story without violence is central—the native slipstream is an alternate timeline. Due to COVID and multiple displacements, children in Zummar camp in Northwestern Syria near Armanaz cannot attend school (Syria Untold 2020). Mostly women volunteers gather to teach Arabic lessons to children under olive trees. Syrians teaching classes under olive trees are building alternature societies. Here I am conjuring the term *alternature* (alternative but not as in the Latin definition of alternative — different or oppositional to the native) as an alternative future that linguistically emphasizes the environment and mother earth. These are practices that dismantle capitalism through cultivating life in the form of plants and natural spaces, valid gendered contributions to

revolutionary change that play a huge part in cultivating our futures. These spaces exist because Syrians have literally been pushed out of institutional regime-controlled walls, and they exist with many challenges, including weather interruptions, flooding, and a lack of resources to buy books and supplies. And still, they persist.



Figure 4.42: Mohammad Sweidan teaches his outdoor class under the olive trees in Idlib in 2019.
Source: Zamanalwsl.net.



Figure 4.43: Pedagogy is political. On the whiteboard, the teacher has written “I have a right to education, I have a right to education, I have a right to education,” which the child is copying underneath.



Figure 4.44: Photograph of Idlib’s outdoor schools in Dec. 2020 by Muhammad al Homsî for Syria Untold.

The Hurras and the Child Friendly Spaces

The Hurras (The Guardians) of Eastern Ghouta manage a center that uses art and other unconventional pedagogies to care for children psychologically, spiritually, through education, and creative storytelling as ways to process war trauma. Ghouta is an area known for surviving the Assad regime's 2013 chemical attacks, and for surviving ongoing starvation siege.



Figure 4.45: The Hurras Child Friendly Spaces—mobile spaces that bring arts and educational activities to Syrian children. Source: RFS YouTube 2016.

Hurras expanded to create over 400 mobile CFS's (Child friendly spaces) in two provinces in Syria. This includes stand-alone child friendly spaces in the Hurra's office and child-friendly spaces integrated in 390 public schools. In the schools Hurra activists train school staff in how to create a space for extracurricular and remedial education for vulnerable children. Each space is supervised by a Hurra's activist who identifies and refers vulnerable children to community services. The third type of CFS they created were mobile libraries, a customized minivan loaded with hundreds of storybooks and other psychosocial support materials. The mobile libraries visit children in rural areas with a team of professional psychosocial support providers. They offer play activities, build awareness on protection messages that help children

navigate the physical and emotional impact of the siege, and offer activities such as reading stories, playing games, singing, and painting. According to the activists, the CFS's are “A safe place where children can express their feelings of fear or loss, through creative play and social interaction” (2020). The Hurras also join in political protests against the regime and the negligent conditions that internally displaced Syrian refugees experience inside Syria.



Figure 4.46: The Women of the Hurras Network protesting the conditions in a refugee camp for internally displaced people in Syria.



Figure 4.47: Women of the Hurras Network protesting the conditions in an internal refugee camp in Syria, Jan 2019. Source: Hurras Network Facebook.

Syrian women and youth’s creative resistance in the revolution also keeps track of the worlds that Syrian women imagine (their lifetimes as Tadiar puts it) and articulate strategies to survive. It is important to note that the Syrians organizing these pedagogical spaces are continuing to protest and center politics as they create these spaces. These pedagogies are not occurring in a vacuum, but instead in response to the decades of totalitarian rule that Syrians have been under. These spaces are just as much a part of the Syrian uprisings as the creative protests Syrian women and youth designed using roses and olive branches. They create momentary experiences of freedom in unfree circumstances, and come from a deliberately political context that cannot be psychologized or framed as an exceptional refugees-surviving-in-contextless-destruction, briefly circulated heartwarming stories (not that people circulate these

pedagogies often, likely because they are so political.) I call these spaces “pedagogies of liberation,” arts-based and somatic-based politicized curricula and mobile school spaces that develop from the Syrian Revolution to encourage new forms of consciousness. The pedagogies of liberation Syrians develop use arts for a reason—art is a technology of resistance, a way to interactively engage with children’s imagination, that offers children tools to express themselves more fully. When there are few resources, arts become a way for Syrians to create engaging, disability-centered (as I discuss in the next section) child-friendly spaces, mobile experiences that cannot be divorced from their revolutionary origins. Syrian children are the heart and soul of the Syrian Revolution; their art and subsequent torture is why people took to the streets. The cultivation of child-centered, art-centered pedagogies of liberation, coupled with protests while under multiple forms of occupation and siege, decolonize what “school” means and create blueprints for new kinds of institutions, ones that live beyond walls and liberate rather than oppress, ones where students and teachers are constantly responding to the political realities shaping their lives.

DISABILITY IN PEDAGOGIES UNDER SIEGE

In Syria over 27% of the population, or 3.7 million people live with disabilities (HNAP 2019). The Assad regime’s siege and genocide, along with multiple international militarized forces occupying Syria, have directly contributed to this number, which is almost double the worldwide average (Ahmado 2019). It is no secret that living under war, siege, and debilitating systems of oppression cause huge environmental and health impacts. A family member of mine used to practice traditional Arabic medicine in Eastern Ghouta after the Assad regime’s chemical weapons attacks. She described to me how thousands of children had missing limbs, breathing difficulties, and experienced a huge upsurge in various forms of leukemia and cancer from the

radiation. I know family and community members with disabilities as a result of being in extreme situations of trauma and stress in Syria, children who are no longer able to speak because of what they have seen. Many refugees receive asylum on the basis of seeking treatment or support for medical conditions the war caused. In Syria, activists have created innovative spaces for people with disabilities in the revolution to express themselves. In Idlib, over 175,000 Syrians live with disabilities (Human Rights Watch 2019). According to Ennab Baladi (2018), the “War-Disabled People’s Association,” collective was founded in Idlib by disabled Syrians. They provide psychosocial support for disabled members and insist on the right to live active lives. They created the Facebook page “My Injury is not a Handicap,” to reframe narratives around disabilities in a way that does not see them as deficit.

Golden Bridge School for Children with Disabilities and the Idlib Center for Children with Down Syndrome

In the Western countryside of Aleppo, Ms. Noor al Huda Hifar reopened a play-therapy based school for children with special needs, even after having to flee the city of Aleppo in December 2016 (Orient TV 2019, The Day After 2019). She centers children with disabilities and creates a safe space for specialized therapeutic forms of education.



Figure 4.48: Ms. Noor al Huda’s school for children with disabilities in the Western countryside of Aleppo. Source: Orient TV, YouTube.



Figure 4.49: Ms. Noor at her school. In the space Ms. Noor uses arts, craft, and play therapies. She herself has fled a regime that forced her out of her home, and from her decades-long skillsets as an educator, she carried her knowledge of how to center disabled children into a new space. Source: The Day After’s Documenting Forced Displacement Project.



Figure 4.50: Noor al Huda and a teacher with one of her students. Source: Al Jazeera 2019.

Nirmeen has total paralysis, and she attends Noor al Huda’s School every day. She is thirteen and every day she visits with fifty other students with special needs of different ages and types to receive special therapeutic education (Orient 2019). Ms. Huda says that “People in the streets and at home call these children handicapped (In Arabic: *لقين* .) We want to change this view. These children have special abilities.” Ms. Huda says. Her school is called *للجسر لاذهبي* or Golden Bridge and she uses crafts, arts, and interactive games to teach children with disabilities in their context of siege and displacement (Orient 2019). She is creating systems of education outside of the regime, prioritizing art, play, and the senses, for children who are at multiple intersections of violence.

In my family’s hometown in Syria, when someone with autism, epilepsy, or Down Syndrome is born into a family, there is a saying. *Kan 3al barakeh*. This translates to “he or she is [born] a blessing.” Meaning, it is a blessing from God to have this person in the community. The family is blessed by having this child because they are so beloved and necessary to the whole

society. This is not to romanticize the conditions that disabled people have to navigate, which are incredibly difficult depending on the circumstance, but rather to point out a significant paradigm shift. Having a child with a disability is a *blessing* to the entire community, simply because they exist. They teach us all how to be more compassionate, more aware, more tender with each other. They carry special gifts and wisdom. This is a drastically different perspective from the way disabilities are framed in global northern societies, as a hinderance, as something inconvenient to accommodate, as something to pity. What if, in global northern societies, the paradigm was shifted in this way? Where instead of being seen as a burden, as an impediment, the disability itself was seen as a blessing, something that we all learn from and can cherish? As other systems in Syria begin to be challenged, such as sexism, authoritarianism, and the ongoing impact of colonial occupations, ableism is also being interrogated, particularly as a vast portion of Syrian society is disabled by the state and conditions of war, if they are not already disabled.

In Syrian society, particularly in liberated spaces, it is important to note when pedagogies center the needs of children with disabilities rather than just seeing them as a group to be accommodated. In Idlib, Abdullah Muhammad, a pediatric nurse, his wife, Bara'a Abdullah, and a team of women volunteers recently opened a center to support children with Down's Syndrome who previously had no other centers for play and for school (Damon 2021). In the center, they use dance, arts, and play to help children feel safe, receive physical rehabilitation, and express themselves. One child who had survived being buried in rubble and stopped speaking began to playfully interact with other children after only a day at the center. When we attune our movement and revolutionary spaces to the needs of people with disabilities, and center them, rather than place them off to the side somewhere, *we all benefit*. People with disabilities are at the crosshairs of so many forms of oppression. They embody the wisdom and the knowledge of how

to make better worlds, because they are navigating the parts of society that able-bodied people may never fully come to understand as inaccessible. The way Syrians under siege have carefully centered and honored children with disabilities, particularly after the state has disabled them, is the key to liberation.

CONCLUSION: CREATIVITY CREATES ALTERNATE VISTAS BEYOND CAPITALISM

When children are given space for creativity, as Audre Lorde put it, it is “a way to pursue magic and make it realized.” This is about the miracles feminized people create when fighting to hold onto joy. This is about Syrian women and their children who, crouched in underground shelters with no electricity, water, or light, still operate on creativity and connection when they are made to feel alone and scared. For the brave people in Ghouta, Deir Ezzor, who give the kids clay pots to paint and write magazines about what to do if their parents go missing or get killed from weekly airstrikes and starvation siege.

Creative activities for Syrian women and youth, like so many women of color/Third World women, is one ritual in many reproductive labors that has potential to heal and liberate us on our own terms. Our imaginations can often be the only thing we have left when our basic rights to water, food, safety, and shelter are violated. Gloria Anzaldúa beautifully described the creative process as way to alter the present—it is a way of “rereading and rewriting of reality...Creativity is a liberation impulse, an activity that transforms materials and energy,” a synthesis of those bare elements into something more (2015:40). This creates *conocimiento*, a healing consciousness, a merging of “*technologies of political activism (protests, demonstrations, and speakouts) ...with spiritual activism...*Conocimiento pushes us into engaging the spirit in confronting our social sickness with new tools and practices whose goal is to effect a shift...a transformation.” (Anzaldúa 2015, 40). This connects to how Jose Muñoz

theorized that performances are a way to imagine other realities and create visions for lives outside of capitalism beyond the prison house of the here and now (Muñoz 2009). While materially deprived, our dreamscapes are all we have left to inhabit.

Marlon Bailey quotes Jose Muñoz (2013: 18-19) when he says, “world-making delineates that way in which performances--both theatrical and everyday rituals--have the ability to establish alternative views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views of perspectives: they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of “truth” that subjugate minoritarian people. Oppositional counterpublics are enabled by visions, “worldviews,” that reshape as that as they deconstruct reality” (18-19). Performances and cultural work have the power to shift narratives and imaginaries that shape who is deserving of rights. As adrienne maree brown (2017) puts it in *Emergent Strategies*, “we are in an imagination battle” right now (18). brown writes, “we must imagine new worlds that transition ideologies and norms, so that no one sees Black people as murderers, or Brown people as terrorists and aliens, but all of us as potential cultural and economic innovators. This is a time travel exercise for the heart. This is collaborative ideation—what are the ideas that will liberate all of us?” (19).

In her work with youth, June Jordan (1989) outlines an exhilarating process of envisioning worlds outside of the ones in which we live. Working with children changed Jordan’s political and poetic voice and made it more future-oriented. Jordan traces the changes in her subjectivity when forced to translate political urgencies with relevancy and groundedness to a young audience. She was forced to pay attention to “rhythm as a vertical event and/or rhythm as the cohesive structure of a poem only emerged as a central quest as I found myself face to face with children, and teenagers, who have a natural affinity for movement as in palpable momentum.” Jordan reminds us that working with children forces us to ground our work in

accessible ways. To pay attention to our rhythms and re-structure our language so that it will catch their ears and stick. So that they do not have to feel so alone fighting the same battles their ancestors fought and we lived again and again. Once Jordan worked with children, the voices within her were awakened “to another dimension of live, and of struggle.” Jordan explains how working with children was the catalysing force that connected her spirit to a collective voice of other poets---"we were all of us working on the same poem of a life of perpetual, difficult births.”

Ethnic Studies was a field created from the urgency of not being heard. It is the only academic field that claims to directly support the communities it is writing about. The transnational circulation of a virtual archive through YouTube videos is ephemeral in nature because shortly after I watch the videos they are often erased for fear of imprisonment and torture under the regime in Syria. Centering the creative and cultural work of Syrian women is an important epistemic labor. Writing about what Syrian children and women are doing is more than sharing so that We who are not living under starvation siege are made Aware. It is so that one day my sisters might find this and hear us and feel us there. I read Barbara Christian and June Jordan and Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde despite the institutions that suffocated them and killed them. Their words heal me. These women left us with their words so that the revolutions, pains, and stories would reach us one day in another space and time.

Creativity for Syrian women, like so many women of color/Third World women, is one ritual among many reproductive labors that has potential to heal and liberate us on our own terms. As Sandoval (2000:29) writes in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, “the war zone...thus stands as a metaphor not only for describing the psychic zone of postmodernism, but also for describing the metaphoric space *where survival against all odds and the creativity of revolt*

under domination take place. Out of this other, third kind of war zone in which bodies and minds are shattered into so-called nonstandard forms, practices, identities, and worldviews develop that are unique to a new kind of rationality. This rationality can be translated as a theory, method, and practice that provides the kind of cognitive mapping for which Jameson longs. The oppositional consciousness it generates travels differentially but with literacy across and through cultural spaces: it is a mobile, flexible, diasporic force that migrates between contending ideological systems.” These creative strategies echo the theories of Black feminist thinkers and Latina feminist thinkers who created methodologies of the liberation. And Syrians don’t need anyone to teach us these creative strategies, like many NGOs are modelled around teaching. These are images you will not see in the media because it is invested in creating an industry, an NGO complex where refugees are helpless objects that need saving, not complex activists, mothers, and human beings with careers, identities, intelligence and livelihoods, knowledge. We joke about the apocalypse (which usually refers to the collapse of capitalism) but Syrian women have already survived it and shown us how.

Using a framework of decolonial and transnational feminist theory allows for space to analyze women’s activist labor in resistance movements (Kuumba 2001) and how women’s resistance in siege articulates important critiques of multiple systems of oppression—colonialism, patriarchy, authoritarian regimes, and class, particularly after forced migration. Women’s experiences of resistance in these contexts challenge militarized masculinities and highlight the gendered intersections of colonialism and internal power dynamics within resistance movements. And yet the vast majority of literature on Syria today does not center Syrian creative contributions or the mobile spaces of freedom they developed under siege, despite these sites being central to the uprising.

The summer of 2015 I taught English to a community of displaced Syrian people in Amman, Jordan. Pedagogically I wanted to create a radical space to talk about power in Syria and heal from collective traumas. I knew my goals were utopic and idealist. I looked at decolonial strategies, read bell hooks and Freire and Yang's critiques of Freire to prepare. But I was not prepared for the contradictions that would emerge. Because education in Syria trains children for military life, the expectation of a teacher is to discipline and not to facilitate. In Syria many teachers are military generals. The curriculum material is tightly controlled by the regime and the classroom is a space of physical and emotional abuse. I had trouble being taken seriously because I did not use the same kind of demeaning pedagogical power structures so normalized in our communities. I had to grapple with a reality where I was self-critical of the imperialist dominance of teaching English and my material privileges as a U.S. citizen while also trying to be respected enough to express the liberatory potential of different literacies.

Creative prompts became the tool through which students articulated visions for their own worlds and began to decolonize the normalized power dynamics of classroom space. We did projects where students designed political candidates and had to make creative campaigns articulating their visions for better worlds. We acted out skits. We wrote poetry about home and about the meaning of freedom. We explained and deconstructed etymologies through storytelling that animated the crustiness of English to fit the drama of Syrian colloquialisms and its melodies. We had fierce debates about gender roles, where almost all of the women coming from a variety of age, class, and religious backgrounds countered some of patriarchal ideologies of men in the classroom.

When asked "what is Freedom?" one student said, "I can create freedom wherever I go. When I am unfree, I can sit with myself, I can meditate, and I become free." Another

student, Yusuf, said it freedom made of two things: free and dome. You can't have freedom without a dome, a space to be free. His answer illuminated how other worlds are being created from the margins of power every day. Utopian longing for freedom in a daily life under siege is a combination of the material and the dream world. It is the series of steps the child in "Silvered Waters" took to rummage through the dirt for more interesting things to play with. It is Rima Dali's bridal gown. It is Tammam Azzam's use of photoshop. It is the girls with the green ribbons passing out protest invitations disguised in olive branches and wedding invitations. As Walter Benjamin (1935) put it, emerging mediums of art restructure the sensory connections viewers make. They challenge the subject/object relationship of those who view aesthetic objects and the object "meets the beholder halfway," and spring to life.

The Syrian Revolution is characterized by intense mourning and suffering in Syrian collective memory because it is continuously erased and misunderstood. The vibrancy of aesthetic details that emerge are the only way to reject the violence that people have come to know. The theorists of the Frankfurt school were responding to the violence of Europe in the early 20th century and women and queer of color theorists have been theorizing on state violence for centuries. The aesthetic sphere becomes a two-way mirror that is not only bound to that reality but creates a portal into other spaces. This space is a utopia, a dome where freedom lives.

Zenobia has a dream about the revolution

In my dream I see
Syria looking back at me.
Blood floods the earth,
like spilt honey
on the kitchen floor.

In Dera'a I see
children armed with crayons
carving freedom's name

on school walls,
I see their hearts stolen,
bodies swollen, tortured
and so small.

In Damascus I watch
students write
forbidden words
into the wings
of origami birds

I see teenage girls in Tal
Paint names on the post office
walls of all the prisoners
whose stories we do not know

I see mothers
hunger strike
in Moadamiya under
starvation siege.

I read women's
last words
in Darayya
their lost letters
to the world.

Barrel bombs fall
and gaseous
chemicals fill
children's lungs
in Douma.

Babies
in Ghouta
with leukemia
and lost limbs.

Rubble and glass,
In Deir ezzour,
A city fear will not
kill anymore

Syrian women flood the streets.
ululating to the sky,

dying to be heard.
In Aleppo I cry when
the last doctor dies

In Damascus
I hold the Barada
as she lay dying,
bruised from abuse
and heartbreak.

The water wheels of Hama
have lost their ancient fuel.
There is no more space
to bury the dead.

I see the world
glance at our
mangled corpses
and stolen dreams
with indifference.

In my dream I watch Palmyra
collapse this home a city
I revolted
against Rome
to keep.

But dreams do not die
my daughters,
they only transform

In my dream
home is not destroyed.

She is alive,
singing quietly,
finding ways to be free.

This is a poem submitted for publication with Dzanc Books. The dissertation author was the sole author of this material.

Conclusion: The Zenobia Freedom School Method & THE NGO'ization of Revolution

“...Marginality as much more than a site of deprivation. In fact I was saying just the opposite: that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.”

bell hooks, *Marginality as Site of Resistance*

“If you an alien, you gotta not apologize for being an alien. You gotta join with the universe and just be.”

Dizzee, *The Get Down*

“We need a revolution capable of healing our wounds. If we're the ones who can imagine it, if we're the ones who dream about it, if we're the ones who need it the most, then no one else can do it.”

--Aurora Levins Morales in “Even Fidel Can't Fix That,” *This Bridge Called My Back*

What are the networks, exchanges, late night meetings, and intense energies that create what we call “communities”? What is the gendered labor it takes to build these efforts, to hold the protest, to make the banners, to coordinate, to plan, to put on the performance, to open the school space? I know what it takes firsthand because I've been in it, in countless places—Amman, Chios, El Cajon, Atlanta, the Bay area. Summer after summer, week after week, organizing with community members, usually mostly women, to create visionary spaces where youth can feel free and everyone can express deliberately political messages. In El Cajon, it began as the Syrian Family Refugee Council. I would drive down late nights after class for Arabic coffee and sweets at displaced Syrian women's apartments and be the scribe, writing in English and Arabic the demands of the community to the state.

When 400 Syrian families were relocated to San Diego in 2016, I and a group of youth from Palestinian Youth Movement helped create the “Arab Youth Collective.” Our core mission was to support the Syrian community from a perspective that was rooted in the liberation of

Palestine and in an appreciation for our arts, culture, and creativity as forms of community liberation. We formed Arab Youth Collective in response to a local organization created by Syrian Americans called Heart 4 Refugees, which accepted a \$50,000 grant from the Leitchtag foundation, a Zionist organization whose goal was to create “friendship” between Jerusalem and North San Diego. I and another organizer had attended Heart 4 Refugees founding meetings, where we witnessed previous generations of Syrian immigrants yelling at current refugees when refugees were sharing about oppressive situations they were facing in San Diego. “You should be grateful for everything America has given you. Here, you have rights! You have a Congress that democratically decides your future!” one older uncle passionately declared in Arabic at the meeting after a refugee mom explained how her disabled 15-year-old son was being pressured to work and provide for the family because there was not enough income. “Syrians are so ungrateful, when I came here I had to work for what I got. They just get handouts,” another Syrian American shared with me, at a time when Syrian and Congolese refugees were left in side-of-the-road motels with nothing but canned foods, no transportation, and no can opener during their second week in America, human rights abuses the San Diego International Rescue Commission would later be under investigation for perpetuating.

It was from this disheartening and Zionist normalizing reality that we banded together as Arab youth and created our collective, which would center the needs and experiences of displaced Syrians and Palestinians. We would stay up late nights with Syrian aunties in the community who would ask me to take notes on the ways the refugee agencies and Heart 4 Refugees were failing them. From these conversations emerged the Syrian Refugee Family Council of El Cajon, which joined with Arab Youth Collective. It was from this grassroots, community-based process that AYC eventually formed into the first ever youth center for Syrian

and Palestinian youth, called the Majdal Center.

And every Sunday, at the suggestion of displaced Syrian moms, I would haul art supplies to the local park and we would hold arts-based somatic activities for the youth, which included painting, soccer, yoga, planting flowers in flower pots, decorating cookies, breakdancing, and field trips. We had a teens' group that met at a coffee shop and after the kids' activities, a children's group during Sunday Funday, and a volunteer group including students from UCSD's Pan Arab Association and Muslim Student Association. When the youth expressed to me that they wanted to hold a protest for Aleppo in December of 2016 during the ongoing siege, I met with local moms, who graciously offered their homes as sites for banner-making. We held a street theatre protest in downtown El Cajon and marched with the banners they made. At the protest, one of our youth, with a young girl whispering these words in his ear, held the megaphone and declared "they can take away our homes, they can try to bomb us and destroy everything we love, but they can't take away our voices."

When local non-refugee San Diegan Syrians joined AYC, a fierce debate about "politics" (the Assad regime) emerged. "We shouldn't allow the kids to get political, it's not right." At every Sunday Funday, kids were painting revolution flags on flowerpots talking about the oppression of the state that made their families flee. They were painting birdhouses and having conversations with us about diaspora and home and explaining that the bird could have a mobile home whenever it needed. Some of the teenagers had been in protests in Syria themselves and organized as local revolutionaries. The arts space was not just a psychological one, but a political one, something that I knew was also going on in Syria and was the entire inspiration for writing this dissertation.

You Have to Bring the Children

In “When Research Becomes a Revolution: Participatory Action Research with Indigenous Peoples,” Cora Weber-Pillwax (2009: 59) writes, “I go out on the lake to pull the net, and that is PAR within an Indigenous knowledge paradigm. My father, who passed in 1988 to the spirit world, comes and has this conversation with me. “You have to bring the kids, my grandchildren. You have to bring them here so they can fish like this. They have to have the experience, they can’t learn without the experience. You can talk about it but that is nothing, it doesn’t mean a thing. They have to do it and they have to do it repeatedly. Repeatedly, because if you try to do it only once, it is not going to be part of who you are. In other words, you will not be transformed, and you will not be enhancing somebody else’s experiences, which is what transformation is about.” She argues that this transformative co-creation enacts indigenous epistemologies and forms of embodied resistance outside of the settler colonial experience, providing vital worldmaking tools for children to cope with settler colonial devastation. The arts-based spaces we created for Syrian children and the performative protests, theatre, breakdancing, yoga, painting, and exploring they were doing were political, particularly for children who survived multiple displacements.

In AYC, we would take the kids to local museums and parks as field trips. Once we were invited in by the “House of France” group at Balboa Park. I was chaperoning a group of children in our collective and driving them to the activity. In the car, the kids raised a critical conversation about how France was Syria’s former colonizer. “Yeah, didn’t they occupy us? Why are we getting invited now when they took all our stuff before? Will they say sorry?” “Now the U.S. is coming in to Syria like France did before and creating more war and destruction for their own gain,” a middle schooler chimed in. Then, a tiny voice chimed in from the youngest boy in the car. “Teacher, teacher... (in Arabic: ainsa, ainsa) I don’t know if you’ll believe me but...my

grandfather says he *remembers* the French! He told me *fought* against the French!” “I believe you!” I said. “Teacher, teacher, and, I don’t know if you’ll believe me but... That’s why I speak French! And I speak four languages! Turkmani, English, Arabic, and French.” “I believe you!” I said.

I believe you. I believe the Syrian child who speaks multiple languages, who is held in ESL classes and overdisciplined, underestimated, forced to perform tokenism, who the colonized space will only know one side of, who will not understand their political and social world. His phrase “I don’t know if you’ll believe me but...” exemplifies the uncertainty of a siren song. It assumes a misunderstanding, remembers a default rejection of the subaltern subjectivity; it anticipates misrecognition because misrecognition is the usual. Who will believe the realities of Syrian children? Who will really listen as they poetically and artistically reflect on the multiple forms of displacement and the knowledge of surviving genocide that is in their bodies, their ancestries? Who will listen to the dreams of Syrian children? What if their knowledge is the key to our liberation, the embodied wisdoms of the future?

Children reclaiming their bodies after being dismembered by the state

A Flood in Ba’ath Country is Omar Amiralay’s (2003) final film—he was hired by the regime to film state propaganda in the 1970s in a documentary called “Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam.” It was supposed to be a tribute to the “greatest development project” of the Syrian regime. The process of making the film politicized him as he spoke to rural Syrian families on the outskirts of Deir Ezzour, who described the realities of the regime’s Euphrates Dam Modernization Project. As a result, Amiralay (1974) created “Everyday in the Life of a Syrian Village,” a haunting archival film that shows the reality of the neoliberal environmentally destructive projects that devastated rural populations in Syria. In 2003, he returned and created

the film *A Flood in Ba'ath Country*, about another regime modernization project in the village of al-Mashi. He documented the militarized school system in Syria and the way children are forced to perform obedience for the state. He shows how part of the regime's propaganda strategy for the dam project was having children recite a God-like story about how the president "mastered" nature and carved new worlds from clay in the name of his people. Amiralay films the daily rituals Syrian students are familiar with—singing Ba'athist anthems, saluting each other in military formation, of their compulsory military class in the junior high level and daily forced recitations of the glories of Arab nationalism. How all students are forced to wear Ba'athist military uniform from the seventh to twelfth grade with different symbols for each grade.



Figure 5.1: Screenshot from *A Flood in Baath County* in which children recite from a Ba'athist textbook, "in my country, we change the lives of rivers."

In Syria, from the 1970s until the early 2000s, seventh through twelfth-grade students were required to take Madit al Qawmiyah—a required class on Ba'thism--once a week, which continued until the bacheloria (high school exam) was finished. In this class, you receive indoctrination for the Ba'athist Party. In junior high, students were made to attend military

training classes where they learned to use Barudehs (old Czech rifles), including how to de-assemble and reassemble the guns. In the 10th grade, there was a required twenty-day summer military camp where students were assigned certain missions by the state (Dagher 2019). For example, in my father's year, students were assigned to plant trees and do hard labor at the High Institute for Ba'ath Party, or al Al-3idad al 7izbi, the highest institute for Ba'athist training. At the camp, students were required to perfect the salutations they learned at school and they also learned how to shoot on the Barudehs. Former low-ranking Ba'ath officers oversaw this mandatory field trip for boys and girls. Some could take exemptions for health and personal reasons, but the vast majority came to the camp in the morning and returned late at night, although in some villages students were required to stay overnight.

From the 1970s until the 1990s there were also extracurricular Ba'ath organizations that students could join—in elementary school they were called al Talai'3 al Ba'ath and in junior high and high school these programs were called Al-Shabiba. If students joined, they received certain advantages and attended private meetings where they received training on how to monitor fellow non-Ba'athists. In these programs, created after the North Korean model, students learned from party members how to write reports about any subversive activities that other children might be participating in (Dagher 2019). In high school, students could opt to take Muzaliyin and Muzaliyyat or parachuting training. If they finished this training jumping from parachutes from airplanes, they received extra points on their high school exit exam.

Wedeen (1998) and others document how Syrian students accepted Ba'athist indoctrination with sarcastic and rebellious slippages, which varied based on where they were in Syria and the level of dissidence allowed to slip in during ritual performances. For example, my dad would recall how every morning students would have to stand in the line outside the school

and recite the values of the Ba'athist state. The 3areef, or general, would come and chant the “Nashid al Ummah al 3arabiya”—the manifesto of the one Arab Nation—Al Wa7deh, al 7uriya, al Ishtirakiya—the three goals of the Ba'ath party, unity, liberty, and socialism. Students would make fun of the slogans and mumble “Wa7da 7orma Nashteria,” which translates to “one burglarwoman.” In his town, my dad recalls a young philosophy teacher who was required to teach the Madeh Qawmiyeh and taught them the philosophies of the state with sarcasm.

To many children in Syria, school is a symbol of the authoritarian regime. It's where you began to learn what to do and what not to do. As my father says, “In our specific village, which cannot be generalized to all, the political culture was not friendly to the Ba'athists, although we had Ba'athists. They were never the majority. We always felt like we had space to express our dissident views, make fun of their slogans. When we were little, we passed by the school building on our way to the fields. As we walked by, we would throw rocks to break the windows. To us it was a symbol of the government. One time we were throwing rocks, and this old guy came and yelled at us. ‘This is your school, our village pays for this, this is a space for us, a space where you learn. You should appreciate your education.’ We were scared he might tell our parents, or worse, that he was in the Ba'ath party and would tell the police.”

These stories embody the mixed ambivalence toward the school as a public space that is both the result of the community's labor and for many children, a symbol of the dominance of the state, especially because physical abuse is sanctioned as a consequence for not complying with the militarized ritual. These militarized aspects, physical punishments, and forms of resistance exist to this day, and were the launching pad of Syrian's revolution. In 2021, videos go viral on Facebook that document the new forms of militarized rituals, where children in Syrian schoolchildren are made to recite how the current revolution is a terrorist instigation and that

Bashar al Assad is the rightful father of the Arab state.

In an episode of the Syrian drama “Qulub Sagheera,” Rima Fleihan, a Syrian woman director and TV producer who would later become a key Syrian revolutionary activist, depicts an episode of a woman lawyer who is called to an apartment where a deaf child named Wafa’a lives. In the episode, the child became deaf after a male teacher hit her so hard at school that it made her lose her hearing. The parents and family are supportive of the child and sell their house to give her an operation. The child decides to go to sign language school and teach other deaf children. Fleihan exposes the ableism inherent in the Ba’athist authoritarian regime educational system, one that operates on dismembering and disabling children for expressing themselves in the school, which becomes a site for transference of military values.

Let’s return to the roots of the Syrian Revolution again. The children of Dera’a were resisting in one of the most militarized places in Syrian society—their school. They reappropriated the walls of their school as a political canvas onto which they could reflect their political aspirations. They could echo the exhilarating slogans of the Arab Spring that were travelling through networks across the region on television sets and social media: “Freedom, freedom”; “The people want the fall of the system”; and their own personalized creative slogan, “Time’s up doctor.” The children were tortured and maimed. They had their fingernails pulled out and their genitals were mutilated. But the regime did not kill them. They dismembered them and allowed them to live to serve as an example of their brutality. This was a message; that this is the punishment for resisting. If this is what the most vulnerably members of society will receive, imagine what the rest will endure. The children of Dera’a still live today and carry this trauma in their bodies, in all our collective memories. They are told they are to blame for the ruin of our country.

Syrian children post videos of themselves performing theatre, using the arts, and protesting in creative ways. These videos are allowing the most vulnerable, marginalized, targeted members of society—children—to express overtly political messages using their bodies, to somatically embody visions of freedom, resistance, and express futuristic vistas. These arts-based practices, often silent plays, literally let them use their bodies as a form of resistance and a channel for storytelling. It allows disabled children to be at the center of resistance. Disabled children, which I would argue includes most, if not all, Syrian children to a degree who have experienced the traumatizing realities of war and siege, deliver political messages that insist on their right to play, and their right to exist in a capitalist, totalitarian regime that operates on the dismemberment of the Syrian child. The entire Syrian revolution began because the Syrian state used what Jasbir Puar (2017) called “the right to maim,” the way state violence physically debilitates targeted communities. The knowledge of the children of Dera’a, their mutilated, beaten faces, their tortured genitals, this was what began the revolution. I argue that in the Syrian Revolution, disability is being mobilized in a political way via arts-based practices—the state has disabled youth for making art—graffiti—and these children are disabled because they chose to make art, and now they are making art from their disabled bodies. That is the antithesis to militarization. It is healing.

PEDAGOGY IS A POLITICAL POSSIBILITY

Dream Interlude: Oct 6th 2020: The role of arts in healing/ My dreams keep illuminating pedagogies, I wake up with the phrase in arabic on my tongue: dor al finoon fil 3laaj

دور الفنون في العلاج the role of arts in healing. What is the role of arts in healing? In my dreams I see young girls holding school spaces, young women using clay pots and painting to teach kids about numbers and letters and how to piece together words. “It builds their confidence,” the

women in the dreams tell me. I wake up to a post on “Syrian Youth News” about a little girl in Istanbul who has put together her own neighborhood school with local kids.

This past year, a sixth-grade Kurdish girl from the Hasakeh region of Syria made a creative, mobile school for Syrian kids out of school in Istanbul during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her name is Gholstan Mustafa. She made desks and table out of cardboard boxes and created fun activities to teach the children math, languages, and social studies. Her father said his daughter’s idea came from her love for education and that Gholstan made sure to take into account social distancing and mask-wearing protocols for COVID in her initiative.



Figure 5.2: Gholstan and her school. Source: First Istanbul 2020.



Figure 5.3: Gholstan and her school. Source: Aramme 2020.

When there are few resources, youth exhibit amazing forms of creativity when given the space to envision the kinds of spaces they want. Just as the girls and youth in Tal reappropriated the walls of the post office as an archive to record the names of local detainees, youth are mapping out new forms of institutions as capitalism collapses in Syria. Post offices where the names of imprisoned people are visible as you walk in; schools that are mobile and open-air, in fun personalized containers. They don't need much to design their own worlds.

In San Diego, many volunteers in AYC hotly debated whether or not refugee children “needed” the arts. The group voted for what they believed were “real, practical” skillsets—ESL, computer coding, and shifted to providing social services and becoming an NGO structure, which was deliberately not part of the original vision. What was frustrating was that the original refugee families whose visions led the collective had their voices left out during the NGO’ization process. The arts program got cut, the name got changed, and as the collective moved into a new space—which was a huge victory and groundbreaking moment—they also began to move into

the “walls” of institutional limitations. As Arundhati Roy wrote about the NGO’ization of resistance, “[NGO’s] real contribution is that they diffuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. They alter the public psyche. They turn people into dependent victims and blunt the edges of political resistance. They have become the arbitrators, the interpreters, the facilitators of the discourse. They play out the role of the “reasonable man” in an unfair, unreasonable war.” The NGO complex become a friendly alternative, an inevitable next step, the way so many radical collective spaces become coopted and trapped by accountability to funders rather than to the people who made them.

NGOization: A Funded and Friendly Way to Kill Revolution—Survival over Futurism

As Razan Ghazzawi (2021) put it, if you talk to many of these original organizers from the creative protests in Syria, they are probably still on the ground organizing, most likely in a liberated area, displaced, imprisoned, or dead. Many were forced to flee because of the work they did. Many tried to even return and work in liberated areas. And many are working for NGOs in Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon.

Journal entry 30 July 2013 who is an orphan?/ with the Syrian Women’s Association in Amman

*during eid clothing distribution with the refugee center today we were split up into groups and i went over to help with shoes for the kids and one of the other subayya (youth) w an annoying name like tokka or neefi decided to assume magic authority of the operation which usually runs pretty collectively, with everyone doing what they can to facilitate the chaos. she took the lists and started telling us to make people wait and divide them up between orphans and non-orphans. i was like girl hold on...these kids are traumatized enough now you’re gonna divide them up by tragedy? let’s try to be a little more sensitive. she’s was like, we need to know for collection data or some shit but then proceeded to be fucking rude and condescending to the families, like Name? Huh? What kind of name is that? Where’s your card? I don’t see you on the list? Oh you’re orphans? Orphans?? you’re not an orphan. Are you *sure*??*

it got to the point where one of the older women refugees was like YES THEY’RE ORPHANS

OKAY and tears started streaming down her face. wtf is it with people loving to assume magic positions of power over others? is this an arab thing or what

In “The Revolution will Not be Funded,” INCITE! Collective (2016) writes “Despite the legacy of grassroots, mass-movement building we have inherited from the 1960s and 70s, contemporary activists often experience difficulty developing, or even imagining, structures for organizing outside [the NGO] model.” Incite describes how they were denied a major grant from the Ford Foundation because of their position on Palestine. As Arundhati Roy put it, “in the long run, NGOs are accountable to their funders, not to the people they work among. They’re what botanists would call an indicator species. It’s almost as though the greater the devastation caused by neoliberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs...Nothing illustrates this more poignantly than the phenomenon of the US preparing to invade a country and simultaneously readying NGOs to go in and clean up the devastation.”

One of the consequences of NGO’ization in the Syrian context is the depoliticization and erasure of the Syrian Revolution. As Yassir Munif (2017) put it, “The people who have been working with the refugees oftentimes disconnect the refugee question from the larger Syrian conflict. They, for the most part, have an ahistorical, apolitical take on the refugees. They view them simply as individuals who need help and support. I think that’s unproductive. I think that the refugee question is an extension to the Syrian revolution. It’s a byproduct and should be understood in that larger context of the Syrian revolution and should be politicized.” In a lot of Syrian refugee agencies and NGOs, apolitical Syrians, what we call “ramadi,” or grey, who are purportedly “neutral” but often regime and Zionist normalizers take pride in their humanitarianism and divorce it from its political origins. This can deeply harm our movements. These are often people who believe in playing by the system, working with “civility” and navigating the NGO humanitarian industrial complex as if it is the only way to make our

systemschange. In “The Crack in the Wall: First Notes on the Zapatista Method,” the Zapatistas (2015) wrote about those who approach the wall, or the system and who believe in making the wall “friendlier,” softening it up, creating “change from within.” But the wall still remains.

Art is an accessible human experience that academic and colonial institutions can, at times, obscure and often over-intellectualize. The work of becoming embodied, resisting the NGO’ization of our revolutions, is stitched together through an epistemic labor, by paying attention to the rural, gendered labor of creative activism and weaving those histories into conversation with one another. Part of the illegibility of Syrian women and youth’s siren songs is in language. Scholars, NGO workers, and leftists can’t “hear” or “see” Syrians marching in the thousands on YouTube, or Kurdish Syrian women such as Hervene Ashwi leading their communities because they’re recorded in different languages that don’t belong to the dominant tongue. That’s why the scholarly contribution should be around translation. Less knowledge on behalf of Syrians, more making accessible what they have already shared into more languages so it can be circulated. This is why I am committed to publishing the archive of videos I have translated and subtitled into English into an archive and teaching tool called Teaching the Syrian Revolution (teachingthesyrianrevolution.tumblr.com). The field of Ethnic Studies was created in the 1970s to include more "Third World" and alternate non-colonial epistemologies, as an intervention into the European dominated fields of traditional social sciences. It emphasizes research that materially benefits marginalized communities. I created Teaching the Syrian Revolution, and a short film that visually circulates the creative practices Syrian women were engaged in in order to stay accountable to a formative Ethnic Studies principle, that research should be accessible, useful, and of benefit not only to the academic world but to non-academic readers.

A SEA OF GHORBA: DIASPORA AND THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT ACROSS BORDERS

We are in a constant state of Ghorba, constantly looking for a home. It is more than exile, more than immigration, it is an emotional state, a removal. As a queer woman, you feel it everywhere. When I'm in Berlin, I feel estranged from my Palestinian identity, because it's being oppressed all the time. My first and last struggle is to tell my story, whether inside Palestine or outside. And that's what I'm looking for, I want a space to speak, to tell my story.

-Rasha Hilwi

Part of the NGO'ization and cooptation issue is the way those in diaspora are trying to reconfigure their roles in a revolution when half of the population has been displaced. How can our collective revolution spaces move into diaspora? How can the revolution live beyond the walls of the institutions that claim to serve, manage, and represent them?

Ghareeb means stranger in Arabic. It comes from the noun ghorba, which means estrangement, exile, a state of liminal being, the act of being a stranger. Giorgio Agamben argued that the category of "bare life" refers to subjects who are denied political and legal representation. The stateless refugee exemplifies living in the category of bare life. Downey (2019) and others suggest that political prisoners, the disappeared, victims of torture, and the dispossessed also in the "safety net of the nation-state" and within realms of international law represent "zones of indistinction" to which "bare life" is consigned. Ghorba is a state of bare life, a liminality and a position that exists prior to displacement in multiple ways in Syria.

There are multiple forms of "ghorba" even prior to the displacement from the initial country, forms of ghorba caused by sexual, ethnic, and other identities. As Razan Ghazzawi said on the QUARC panel, "Being Palestinian in Syria, you are expected to shut up and be grateful. Everyone says: "Don't you see how many rights Palestinians have here?" You are exiled inside Syria" (2020). Estrangement, or ghorba, becomes an emotional state, a removal that is both internal and external. Feeling exiled inside Syria because you are queer and Palestinian and in

the revolution—then being exiled from Syria because you chose to resist the state that exiled you in the first place. Syrians occupy multiple forms of displacement before they even leave Syria. This is also true for the IDPS—the millions of internally displaced peoples who exist in a liminal state inside Syria in refugee camps, who are expected to disappear but are stuck in a limbo between displacement and return.

Halberstam (8) wrote that “the path to the wild beyond is paved with refusal. If in *The Undercommons* we begin anywhere, we begin with the right to refuse what has been refused to you.” Many Syrians resist leaving to begin with and disrupt the “grateful refugee” narrative. Many Syrians do not want to go to the white supremacist and colonial countries that in part led to their multiple experiences of ghorba to begin with. Refugees have the power to refuse gratitude for their circumstances and in doing so, reiterate the radical politics of the revolution of fighting for a sovereign homeland that led to their displacement to begin with.



Figure 5.4: Sign from Idlib’s protests on Sept. 14, 2018 that reads: “We don’t want to go to Europe. We want to go back to our cities.” Concept: Syrian refugees do not want to join the colonial spaceship and actively refuse the myth of freedom in Europe they know not to be true.

In diasporic spaces in Lebanon, inside IDP camps in Syria, in Turkey, in Jordan, in El Cajon, in Chios, arts-based spaces that Syrian women and youth create have come to life at the same time as they were happening in Syria. In Lebanon, this looks like Basmeh and Zeitouneh and artists such as Diala Brisly holding arts workshops in the camps. In Turkey this looks like Karam House who curate “houses” that are creative studio spaces where Syrian refugee children work through problem-solving scenarios together in a way that heals trauma and builds collaborative teamwork skills. They put on workshops for youth, from culinary creation to photography to how to engineer prosthetics. Even as COVID hit, they shifted to virtual spheres and refugee youth engaged in online “houses” when they couldn’t enter the physical ones. Kids in our collective knew about breakdancing and yoga because they were doing those practices in refugee camps. I saw them rejecting the colonial narratives of gratitude and using our spaces to theorize the racism in their host countries using mediums like Arabic rap to express their anger and rage. In the refugee camps in Chios, refugees were using theatre in the local school to negotiate state violence and learn new languages. In Amman, I was part of a women’s collective that emerged from Syria and traveled to Jordan upon displacement, using theatre to confront issues of domestic violence and build emotional intelligence among women in the community.

SIREN SONGS & SYRIANS IN SPACE: EXTRATERRESTIAL SUBJECTIVITIES, ALIEN TONGUES

In Lebanon, a group of Syrian refugee women and Lebanese women held a play about being displaced to the moon. Some of the storylines in the play include a character who carries her dreams in a sack to the moon, with vision glasses that help her overcome the state of loss. Characters carry an inter-galactic passport in the event of the presence of military barriers on the

moon. One character has left her lover on earth and has to decide if she will accept deportation from the moon and return home to her lover even as earth is unsafe. There is one character who keeps searching for something she has lost during the crossing but can't remember where it was lost. The audience comes to realize that she represents a mother who has lost her son en route to space (symbolizing mothers who lose their children crossing the Mediterranean sea). In the play, the displaced women come to realize their fates are intertwined and that they all have some kind of forbidden love, and how a reclamation of singing as a stigmatized practice draws them together. The primary question in the play is: should the women return to earth? Some women want to love freely and explore the stars and go to the moon, where life is not guaranteed, while the woman who lost her son wants to return to earth to search for him, while others are afraid of returning to earth because of death and pollution. At the end of the play, the women remain in the in-between state and there is no resolution, no final decision.

The director and participants based the script on focus groups with Syrian refugee women who came up with the concepts. The director, Sarah Atallah, encouraged women to use their bodies with limited words and express the story through movement. Using frozen motions, they designed a code of simple expressions that would communicate feelings of fear, anxiety, and love that audience would understand. I recall when one Syrian youth collective in Gaziantep put together a silent play to tell the story of Syrian resistance (Orient TV 2016). They said "Without words, we wanted to embody the Syrian struggle. Words don't mean anything anymore, but when we embody the feelings, we can show the world what we're going through."

Ayham al Jabr designed a series of futuristic apocalyptic Syrian futurist collages, where an unknown alien invader comes to take Damascus. The alien invasion creates a new kind of world, new forms of power and control that come from above, just as they come horizontally. Syrian

visual art and protest culture exemplifies the screams and the silenced “siren songs” that emerge from the underground spaces as invasion continues from above and launches Syria into a dystopic and apocalyptic hyper-colonial space. Stephany Sanossian created a similar Syrian futurist glimpse into the future, a brilliant window into the power of cultural production and the stories we tell about ourselves as a people. It is a hakawati, a traditional Syrian storyteller, pictured with his audience floating in the vastness of space with earth far in the distance behind them. Above earth, in Arabic is written the phrase “let us live.” She captioned her work: Imagine it’s 2050, the Hakwati telling stories about how we survived despite everything.



Figure 5.5: Damascus Under Siege Part 1: A fleet of martian spacecrafts besieges and surrounds Damascus, the oldest capital in the world, with as they claim, “We Came for Peace.” And ends in the total annihilation... To them.” By Ayham al Jabr

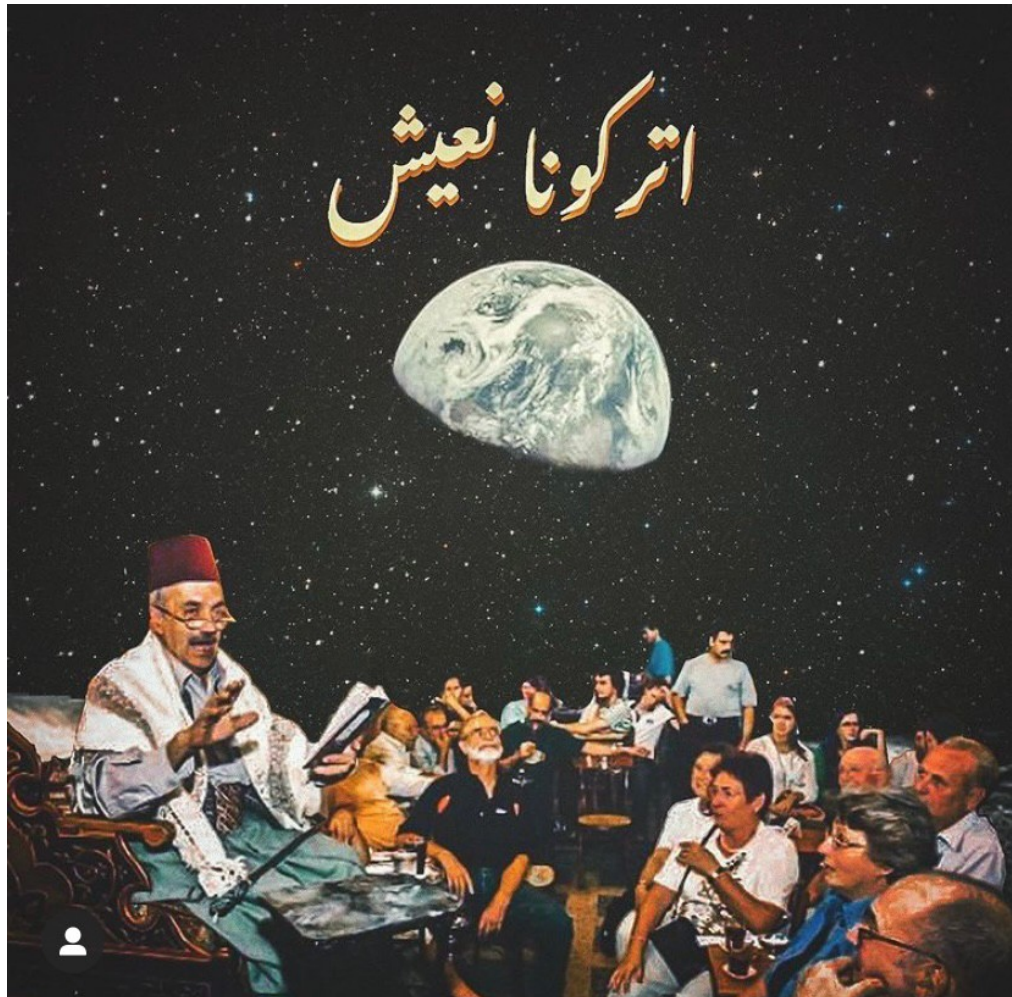


Figure 5.6: Let us Live by Stephany Sanossian (2020).

In “Palestine in the Sky,” Ronak Kapadia (2019) looks at how Palestinian diasporic artists challenge the colonial logics of elimination and create a queer relational promise of the future by looking towards the stars. He looks at how Palestinian diasporic artists such as Larissa Sansour mobilize images of outer space and use digital manipulation to challenge the spatial logics, “from above and below,” of settler technologies that surveil and violate Palestinians. Ayham Jaber’s interpretation of a Syrian future involves this vertical web of colonial security apparatuses and settler violence from other alien worlds. Sanossian’s *Hakawati*, like the *Kafranabel* banner discussed in Chapter 2, place Syrians in a future where they are navigating

their own alien-like dispossession and confronting the void with their technologies of culture.

In April 2015, nonviolence activists across Syria launched the “Planet Syria” campaign, asking groups across the world to end the authoritarian and imperialist violence in Syria, and particularly for a call to stop Assad’s use of barrel bombs after a UN resolution banned barrel bombs and they continued to fall. Eighty-five different nonviolence organizations, representing 17,000 Syrian activists, came together with two demands in “Planet Syria”: 1. An end to the Assad regime’s barrel bombs and air strikes and 2. Negotiations between all Syrian groups and the 87 countries involved in killing on all sides. The call was for solidarity from other “aliens” around the world to stop the regime’s genocide and international complicity and participation in the destruction of Syria. In the Planet Syria video, activists use theatre and creative props to act out the devastating impacts of Assad’s barrel bombs on the community and how international actors contribute.



Figure 5.7: A screenshot from the Planet Syria video calling for support from other communities to support from Al Badael Team in Al Ataereb City in Syria.

Oula Ramadan, a Syrian woman activist and co-organizer of the campaign, said “*We have called it Planet Syria because we sometimes feel as if we are from a different planet. Our demands for freedom and democracy are treated by many as if they are completely alien and unrecognizable.*” Ramadan describes the abject non-human feeling many Syrians embody as displaced and disenfranchised people whose struggles have not been made legible in international political and activist spheres unless for cooptation. In the video, Syrians are yet again mobilizing their bodies as expressive mediums to communicate political messages. There is a kind of aesthetic production that emerges from these contexts that is still made illegible to activists and decision-makers, as desperately as people on the ground want their messages to be heard, partially because they are homemade, in limited English, and not “high tech” or with glossy or minimalist kinds of aesthetic. (Later on, the NGOs come and do this work, of making the stories clear and crisp in glossy pamphlets with polished graphic design, so that the suffering is legible and “shareable,” palatable enough in its decontextualization.) Syrians embody what I call *syrena subjectivities*: an in between abject non-personhood, forever migranta between the celestial and subterranean, doubly alien, speaking in tongues or siren/syrienne songs, in ululations from bomb shelters, who are desired, repulsive, whose voices cause colonizers’ ears to bleed, who are desexualized and hypersexualized, who are a spectacle of suffering or a threat, who are never human but pre-human, pre-Christian God, whose voices embody a silence that is really a sharp cry that is really a kind of liberation song.

Journal Entry: September 29, 2016: I can talk to you/ I had this beautiful conversation with my friend from the refugee camps in Greece the other day that made me want to cry. It touched on so many things, but we were talking about diaspora and how important it is as a Syrians in diaspora to provide psychological and spiritual support for people entering that space now. She was like U know what is the best thing? I can’t talk to other Syrian refugee women about my

trauma because they've been through worse. I can't talk to the psychologists because this country provides us these racist ones that just want you to relive the terror. But I can talk to you because you understand me, you speak our language in these multiple ways. Not just culturally but you understand the conditions of our leaving. And I love hearing about your life. Going to university and helping community. I can't relate to other Syrians because we are all too depressed to function. But with your distance, and your closeness, I feel so heard. I escape my own pain and find relief in the hopeful ways you talk about the world. And I realize something I've never had to see before, that everyday I'd rather be in Syria under torture and bombing than be in a place where I don't belong in every sense. I don't think people understand what that feels like. When I talk to you it's like I want to live, I want to know a future like yours for my kids and our kids, like I'm with a sister and you're always there

This is like the 3rd time I've heard something like this from different Syrian women recently. I've never felt connected to a Syrian community because no one shared my family's experience of forced displacement, disappearances, dissidence, terror, kidnapping, exile. For the first time there are people I can talk to who don't invalidate my pain. Ironically it is others previously displaced in diaspora invalidating me constantly. I feel like this deep thirty-year-old wound is being stitched together and I want to cry and I don't even have a way to articulate how beautifully profound these diasporic moments are. I hate the ways people from privileged positionalities in the diaspora are so dystopic when hope is not a luxury for people on the ground. It does nothing but recreate the intimate ways power and state violence have repressed our psychic lives and abilities to express any kind of hope for this already hellish world. This is why we need poetry and art and conversation to survive. This is how we ensure the revolution never dies.

Considering the Syrian refugee population is the largest refugee population in the 21st century, important ideological, academic, and political labor must occur to include the visions of Syrian refugees in the contemporary world order, particularly when they have experienced and continue to experience multiple and interlocking systems of violence.

There are new projects circulating from the Syrian diasporic community that shift the concept of the nation-state beyond borders into a different kind of shared identity. For example, Syrian Association for Citizens Dignity (SACD) is a cross-diasporic Syrian social movement organized to affirm the rights of displaced Syrians as Syrian. They created the “We are Syria” campaign to reconceptualize what it means to be Syrians, as half the country is now displaced. They reimagine what diaspora means in reclaiming the role of the displaced in the political future of the homeland. In the video “We are Syria” (2020) displaced Syrians argue that without

their voices and rights respected, a democratic transition, a new constitution, and free elections cannot be held in Syria. They affirm the rights of Syrian refugees for a safe, voluntary return so that they can participate in rebuilding Syria's future. As Gayatri Gopinath (2005) put it "If conventional diasporic discourse is marked by this backward glance, this "overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for 'times past," "a queer diaspora mobilizes questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia for radically different purposes. Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles' (4). Syrians today are reconfiguring diaspora in a way that brings displaced people into the present political reality of Syria's revolution and Syria's future, and insisting that displaced Syrians play a role in the rebuilding of Syria's future.

As Nada Elia said during a talk on queerness and Palestine, "The fact that some of us in the diaspora are now unrecognized as Palestinians, as a result of our forced exile and dispossession, must not eclipse the reality that we are all Palestinians and that our assertion of this identity goes beyond the cliché of solidarity. Indeed as we enact the homeland in our everyday life, some of us do not identify with Palestine as a nation-state but rather as a state of identity." (176) Syrian and Palestinian identity are becoming forms of collective identity practices that move beyond nationalism as the concept of the state is collapsing. A queer diasporic practice of the homeland creates a space for cross-movement solidarity politics that understands the materials between settler colonial and authoritarian networks. Part of who can "hear" the siren songs are other sirens. During my summer teaching in Amman, a white supremacist named Dylan Roof committed a massacre against Black churchgoers in Charleston.

I asked them to research the event and return to class with their analyses. Students returned with analysis they probably didn't find on CNN: sharing with me it was an act of white supremacy, enabled and enforced by the police, deeply tied to the prison system and the U.S. system of oppression against Black people rooted in histories of violence. Many students reflected on connections between resisting police in the U.S. and in Syria, especially because prisons and police violence are so rampant in Syria.

As an undergraduate, while I was at Spelman, a historically Black college, we would do activist campaigns on campus with the Women's Resource and Research Center such as Save our Syria and founding a Students for Justice in Palestine in solidarity with Syrians and Palestinians. (Angela Davis wrote about our activism in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*.) We were continuing a long history of Black-Palestinian and now Syrian solidarity (acknowledging these categories overlap), without erasing the important conversations that Syrians had internally about perpetuating anti-Blackness. This summer as police violence tried to repress Black Lives Matter protestors across the U.S, Syrian activists around the world gathered to hold conversations about political solidarity and what dismantling anti-Blackness in our societies looks like. Kurdish, Alawite, Assyrian, Palestinian-Syrian, Arab and other Syrian activists, many of whom had survived Assad and ISIS detention, created internal statements and a #Syrians4BlackPower video to circulate among and around our community in order to explain the necessity of fighting against anti-Blackness in every part of our society. At different moments our collective struggles have intertwined and formed a solidarity project that is a continuation of long histories of this kind of collaboration (Lubin 2014). It is in this way we "hear" each other's siren songs, without bypassing Syrian complicity in structures of anti-Blackness—instead turning toward the internalized oppression our communities carry and deeply

interrogating those violences. In many ways, the Syrian revolution has forced a reckoning with the ways we both perpetuate and receive violence from each other and the state.

THE REVOLUTION IS SOMATIC / THE REVOLUTION IS EMBODIMENT

“I find myself obsessed with the notion of “home” on many levels. I have not only been removed from my homelands, I have also been removed from my erotic self and continue to journey back to my first homeland: the body. We were stolen from our bodies/ we were stolen from our homes.”

—Qwo Li Driskill

rape is a vital part of imperial/settler colonialist mentality and strategy, whether it's promoting rape within the military culture on civilians, used as a tactic to torture and humiliate (e.g. the role of rape in abu ghraib) or labeling certain parts of the world/certain geographical spaces as feminine, thus (in patriarchal imperial logic) a place welcoming and ready to be “raped” or “penetrated.” Much of the earlier Orientalist discourse in the West viewed “the East” as such, especially Africa/ME and it's no surprise that Gaza is being depicted as a woman with a caption “Bibi, finish inside this time —Civilians for invasion”. This type of knowledge-production is important in showing how Israel views itself, and how Zionists/Israelis view Gaza, and the Palestinian people in general.

--khofnak via tumblr

With the prevalence of state-sanctioned child abuse at school, and the school as a site of violence under the Assad regime, creating alternative forms of school is a revolutionary act. By inventing new forms of popular education, from a survival space where there are limited resources, Syrian students and teachers are envisioning new political possibilities.

To return to my central question: How can our communities be in their bodies? It starts and ends with earth, with returning to our indigenous herbal and medicinal healing practices, the Tub 3rabi, or “village medicine,” we all know so well.

Where do we feel free? What does this feeling feel like to us? I have taught Syrians and been taught by Syrians in many places, where I see new forms and networks of creativity-based, body-based pedagogies emerging. I call this the Zenobia freedom school movement. Zenobia was a woman in 270 AD who revolted against the Roman occupiers of Syria. I grew up with Zenobia as an icon, as complicated as she may be. I believe the Zenobia Freedom School Method is about embodying mobile spaces where we feel free. It is a form of time travel, allowing us to

curate the feeling of freedom into any space where we are in. The idea behind knowledge production in these mobile freedom schools is that ultimately it takes the specific shape of all actors in the space and transforms us in some way.

Dr. Ghalia Akkad is a Syrian psychologist who was forced to flee Syria due to the escalation of violence in early 2014, when extremist factions were on the rise. She ended up in Amman, Jordan, and developed a 12-part course for Syrian women where they could process the trauma of war, gender violence, and displacement. The course is called “Ana wa Tufli” (My Child and I). It uses theatre, visual arts therapy methods, and creative writing exercise to teach sexual education, emotional skills for coping with grief and loss, and education on cycles of domestic violence. Each session has a subject: “How to build trust with your child,” “How to adjust to a new society,” “How to identify and express emotions,” “How to intervene in child and domestic abuse.” The “repercussion” for arriving to class late is chosen by the students and ranges from baking desserts to providing a round of affirmations for the group. Each teacher arrives equipped with a kit of craft items, such as cutout papers with emotions written and illustrated on them, balls, buckets, and art supplies.

I had the privilege of sitting in the course in 2019 with a range of Syrian women, many of whom had recently been displaced, and a separate specific group who were not formerly educated/could not read and had never experienced a classroom setting before. On the first day of class, we were told to jot down or draw a moment when we felt pure joy. Many of the women couldn't think of anything. Our teacher then passed out illustrated cards that helped us identify feelings that bring joy, such as Alaman (security), Ala7tiram (respect), Hubb (love), and Horeeya (Freedom). The woman next to me passed me a note. She drew a picture of a woman crying, with tears flowing down the page. It read in Arabic “I did not want to cry, but the traumas of this

world made me.” Later in the course I learned about the losses the woman next to me had been processing when she passed me that note. On another day, we were assigned hypothetical scenarios and told to act them out in a small skit. My partner and I drew a scenario where she was to play a five year old boy who recognizes someone who looks like his father who died in bombing, and I was to be his mother. From my insider-outsider position, I witnessed and experienced firsthand the sense of liberation that occurs when women are given spaces to process the trauma of living in the crossfires of war, rural poverty, sectarianism, xenophobia, racism, forced migration, environmental devastation from chemical weapons, and domestic violence. I remembered the transformative possibilities that the classroom space provided for psychosocial healing, and for empowerment on a societal level. By the end of the course, women had reported back that they had left abusive situations, been able to manage difficulties with their children, and felt empowered to identify and express their emotions at ease.

While at the center I asked my aunt to tell women that I was doing research on Syrian women’s experiences of change in diaspora. A group of women in the class came up with a way for me to do focus groups. One of the biggest issues the women mentioned was the prevalence of child abuse and racist bullying Syrian children experience in Jordanian schools. How can the classroom become a less violent space? How can it be more friendly to mothers and children? How can it make a home for the wanderers and the women in crisis? Is it possible to recognize what Barbara Christian (1987) says are the multiple forms that theorizing takes? Trauma is an intense energy that creates a physiological disruption in the system. Many Syrian children and women are suffering from chronic and generational PTSD. How do we create a space that can help organically release the build-up of adrenaline and cortisol stress energy? In many cases, nature and embodiment are the way. Nature is the arena where we heal from capitalism on a

cellular level. It is a built in grounding practice in the classroom. A social justice movement mentor, Taj James, told my sister a few days ago: “your people’s medicine to the planet is that you know what it means to fight to stay. You know what it means to fight to return. You know what it means to build sanctuaries wherever you go. To root deep during times of upheaval.” At the heart of this dissertation is a question: How do we build sanctuaries when our homes are burning? How can the body become a sanctuary?

What does it mean that as I wrote this, my Syrian sister friend was murdered, my Syrian cousins were killed in airstrikes, my Syrian family was banned from entering the U.S., and I, a Syrian, was sexually assaulted? In “Stolen from our Bodies,” Qwo Li Driskill makes a deliberate choice to write about their experiences with sexual trauma “because sexual assault, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are entangled with the history of colonization.” (51). What does it mean when the university as an institution pressures students of color from targeted communities whose bodies are at the multiple intersections of colonial violence, authoritarianism, patriarchy, transphobia and other systems, to continue with capitalist outputs of productivity as they survive and navigate the systems that abuse them (and that scholars from outside their communities profit from studying) and tokenize these struggles while perpetuating them in the process? How can the writing process itself be reclaimed as a process of pleasure and joy in that context?

I came to graduate school because I wanted to get paid to read and write and, in my context, receiving a U.S. education was the set of privileges that could lift you from refugeehood when everyone else was undocumented and had to stay in the homeland. I come from a family who was forced to flee in part for reading and distributing banned literature. Reading and writing itself were framed to me as fugitive activities that have the possibility for liberation. As Ana Louise Keating (2015) quotes Gloria Anzaldúa in *Luz in Lo Oscuro*, “because language, the

physical world, the imagined, and nonordinary realities are all intimately interwoven, words and images matter and *are* matter, they can have causal, material(izing) forces. The intentional, ritualized performance of specific, carefully selected words had the potential to *shift* reality (and not just our perception of reality)”. Because words and poems in particular are so dangerous in Syria, it must mean they carry a possibility for change. My intention in this work was to understand how Syrians are conceptualizing practices of freedom, and to theorize beyond traditional European epistemic modes of thought.

How can we move outside of the conventional European knowledge system to theorize the intimate abuses of colonial violence? How can I do that as a queer, non-binary Muslim and Syrian? I come from a tight-knit extended family (who became hyper-religious as reaction to the secular fascist state) and the shame of writing from a space of fullness haunts me and my work, especially because I will likely delete these words out of fear prior to being published. What if, for a moment, I could tell the whole story? How we began a community-based project for liberation based on the arts and embodiment? How the NGO industrial complex sank its claws into us, and patriarchal and selective amnesia framed our community’s liberation into more palatable form of social services? Which narratives are celebrated and upheld in our revolutionary struggles, at the expense of the ghosts of many women who gave their labor to build our movements?

I want to someday write an ethnography of the movements because I see the same dynamics repeat themselves. In the Syrian revolution, men who would post videos mocking Syrian women’s creative activism and circulate videos of them in bikinis saying, “they’re not real activists because they go swimming in pools while the rest of us are dying.” What are the stories we can’t tell out of fear when our communities are already under attack, the stories of

patriarchy, of endemic ableism, of internalized community policing? The text messages sent before the opening of the liberation center police what women wear: “keep in mind our communities are conservative, so no short sleeves or anything that might show skin.” Since when are our communities “conservative” and to what degree do diasporic looking-back narratives of our homelands reinforce an orientalism that understands our cultures as stagnant, changing, stuck in the past?

Journal entry Sept 19 2020: the third anniversary of your murder

When we were together that summer, my first Syrian revolution sister, Halla Barakat, we wandered into artist galleries together. You showed me this beautiful painting of the Arabic letter “wa,” which means “w,” and it means “or” and it means “and.” You told me “in one stroke, in one letter, the artist shows us a proclamation, a bridge, the possibility of more. In one small brush of black ink, the artist shows us a route to infinity.” The wa, the bridge in this bridge called my back, the feeling & frequency of freedom, which lives beyond death. It survives destruction. It lives in our memories & blooms from our dreams, from our desires, from creativity. The “wa” we are the bridge between now & tomorrow. My mama’s back broke the day we were interrogated for hours at the border. It broke because she tried to carry all of the bags herself. We were all tired and she threw her back out for days. She was never the same. The border official asking me if I ever attended a terrorist camp, my brother throwing the fit, my dad’s subversion and sarcasm, my mom carrying the load of us all. The state took a toll/takes a toll on our bodies. I know Syrian women, mothers, daughters, brown skinned palestinian-syrian companeras, femmes, trans women, who have survived all there is to survive on god’s green earth, every type of violence there is, and who continue & who write their stories in secret, whose stories academics mine for accolades, whose voices are coopted and exploited and so we say No more. No more war, no more colonization. We cannot live like this anymore. We will wish we spent more days dreaming up for the “day after.” Ahh yes, the day after project, but only after making space for those who were there, who witnessed, who spoke quietly in the night beneath the sound of shelling & fires in the road.

THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION TODAY

Over forty different women’s collective spaces are still active in Syria, and at one point during the revolution thousands existed throughout the country (Ghazzawi and Ramadan 2015).

These spaces, like Dawalty, Women Now, Mazaya, Zanolbia, Start Point, 7arrarna, still hold protests, build alternative infrastructures, do leadership trainings, make libraries and art spaces

for kids as of 2021. This is a direct continuation of the revolution, curating spaces of freedom in more permanent, albeit still dangerous and constantly threatened spaces with few resources. One of the most interesting projects recently launched in Idlib is a decolonial university called Sham (Greater Syria in Arabic) University. The university offers classes in political science, philosophy, literature, a Bachelor's in Arts and a Bachelor's in Science, and connects diasporic Syrian scholars with Syrian students on the ground via zoom and in person to learn about subjects that were previously censored by the state. Students are envisioning new spaces for learning and growth at every level (Sham University 2020). As recently as March 18, 2021, the predominantly Alawite area of مدمسرخو, Demsarkho, broke out in protests against the regime, and were immediately cut from internet and from the media (information shared on Clubhouse via Jomana Hassan and Sema, two Syrian women activists).

On June 8, 2020 the predominantly Druze area of Suweida broke out in protests. For a week, protestors gathered in Suweida's central square to call for immediate democratic change. Security forces dispersed the demonstrations with violence. An eyewitness said that "the police and mukhabarat started brutally beating up participants and arresting many" (Shimale 2020). One protestor, Safaa al Sayyid, using a pseudonym, said that "What is happening now is a twin revolution of 2011, one with the same desire for change," she said. "People in Syria need to breathe; that will never happen until we enter a transitional phase led by honourable people, preparing for a constitution, elections, reconstruction, and revival of the Syrian economy. Syrians have the right to this, and it is not difficult if the will exists; people want democracy, dignity, and freedom." (Shimale 2020). She said that "we now need a new revolution against the corruption of the Syrian opposition and government." Safaa pointed out how "criminals took advantage of the suffering of civilians in the name of the revolution, and in the end, after they destroyed the

country, they reconciled with the regime. Over the past years, the biggest loser has been civilians. Enough is enough, we want to live in dignity and this is our right."(Al-Awad 2020). Protestors used slogans from the original 2011 revolution protests calling for the regime's fall, emphasizing the unity of the Syrian people from Latakia to Tartous, and calling for an ousting of all international actors. At the next demonstration on June 16, between 600 and 700 intelligence and police forces gathered at the planned protest site (Violations Documentation Centre 2020). "I went to warn people as the protest was postponed because there were ongoing negotiations being held to free the detainees," one protestor said. "The policemen spotted us and starting running behind us. I made it, but my friend, who tried to distract them to help me escape, got arrested." The regime pressured protesters into reducing demands by negotiating prisoner's release in order to stop calling for the overthrow of Assad. The protestor added that "the uprising is going to continue no matter what. People have had enough from this regime and will no longer be silent in spite of their fake rallies. We will continue our protest until this regime changes and Syrians have their freedom." (Shimale 2020).

These protests in Suweida were significant because they reiterated the original spirit of the revolution and were not in a liberated area but in an area known for its Druze residents. They criticized the regime's violence and the corruption of the official political opposition of Syria. Today, protests also continue in Idlib and other mostly liberated areas such as the rural outskirts of Aleppo against Assad's upcoming elections (YouTube 2021). The main calls are for international actors to respect UN Resolution 2254, which reaffirms the Geneva Communique in calling for the creation of a Transitional Governing Body (TGB) in Syria. The original Geneva Communique called for clear steps in democratic transition with a constitutional drafting that would be subjected by popular approval and with free and fair multi-party elections (Article 9,

section d). Resolution 2254 established a timeline to these events and set a schedule for the drafting of the new constitutions and free and fair elections that was to be held eighteen months within November 2015. After Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia and the regime held a series of Astana talks to essentially distract from the creation of the transitional governing body and divert through the creation of a constitutional committee (Ghadbian, personal conversation 2021). The international diplomatic sphere has been coopted by a Russian-led push to present a constitutional committee and focus on redrafting Syria's constitution over the creation of free and fair elections and a TGB. The UN has focused increasingly on creating the constitutional committee with negotiations that began in 2019, instead of respecting the call of the free Syrian people to create a sovereign transitional governing body. Syrians today also advocate for the repatriation of refugees to their homeland and full disarmament in their political demands.

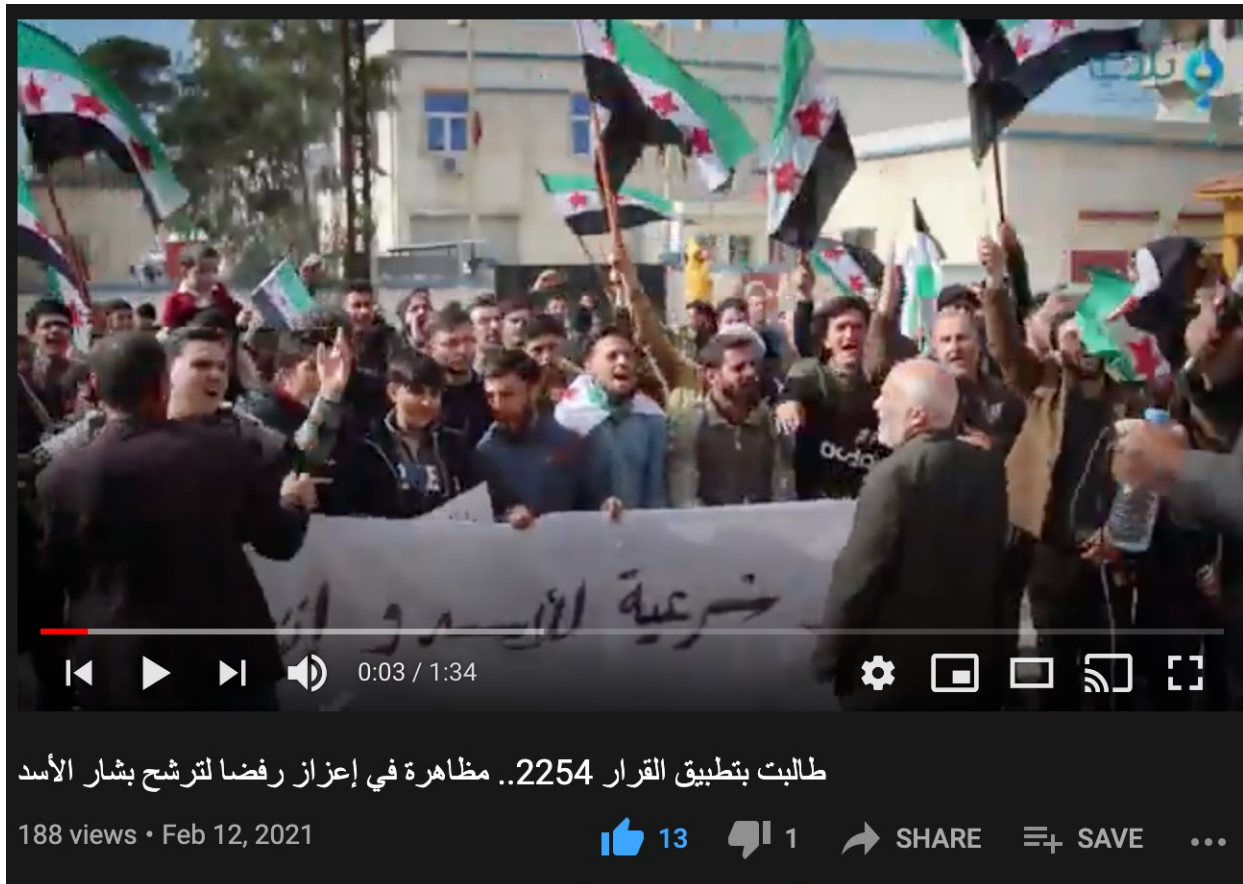


Figure 5.8: Syrians in Protest Feb. 12, 2021 against Assad’s upcoming elections and for political demands of Resolution 2254 to be met.

The Syrian Revolution emerged from layers of politicization: We resist genocide from so many different sides

“We are the Syrian people. What we started as a revolution, Assad turned into a war. Assad persists on killing until this day. But we continue our revolution until we reach our dream of a democratic Syria for all. I promise you that the Syrian Revolution will change the whole face of the Middle East because it is changing human beings from the inside. Because revolutions are ideas and ideas cannot be killed with weapons. Assad, ISIS, and all extremists choose to kill, choose death. We, the people of Syria, we choose life and we want to live. There is no flower more beautiful than one that defies death, chaos, and destruction. It blooms and radiates hope.”

--Raed Fares (1972-2018), murdered activist and community visionary from Kafnabel, may his soul rest in peace

I began my dissertation project because I was fascinated by representations of Syria and how they were inherently gendered—how processes of militarization and imperialism and dominant English-language media institutions imagine Syria as a passive, gendered body onto

which militarized subjects that are often the U.S., ISIS, pound, strike, and penetrate. I want to know why Syria became “incomprehensible,” when for Syrians the struggle for justice and truth has always been simple and clear. I wanted to know why messages Syrian activist women and youth put together were not being honored. In my chapters 3 and 4, I situate the political theatre that youth and women perform in a context of Syrian revolutionary activism because refugee theatre and Syrian art are so often understood as separate from the revolution, when in many ways they were born from that cultural dissident space.

I wanted to express how any Syrian in revolution could tell you that politicization for us, being positioned in the place we are, at the crossroads of Africa and Asia, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, has happened in layers. My great grandfathers fought against French colonialism and were part of third world liberation struggles against the French. My grandfather was in the front lines fighting for Palestinian liberation. As a young person growing up in a post 9/11 U.S. context rife with Islamophobia and the ongoing “War on Terror,” my life was defined around the second Palestinian intifada and U.S. imperialism in Iraq. Many Syrian activists were politicized against their own state because of politicization against the colonizer. These processes of colonization, occupation, and authoritarianism inform each other and politicize Syrian activists in the intersections of these historic and political processes. My grandparents and parents would not have become politicized against the regime if Assad and his father didn’t cooperate with Israel and the U.S. to begin with, target Palestinians doubly, commit what has been called another Nakba in the bombing of Yarmouk camp, and devote a specific branch of regime prison to the torture of Palestinian-Syrians. The regime has never, in practice, been on the side of the Palestinian struggle. Many Palestinian-Syrians can attest to this. From the moment Hafez al Assad supported the Lebanese Phalangists with U.S. support and committed a massacre of

Palestinian people in Tal al Zaatar, allied itself with Israel while besieging the Karantina and Tal el Zaatar camps where over 2,000 Palestinian people were slaughtered in 1976, to when Hafez al Assad imprisoned hundreds of Palestinian dissidents in the Palestinian Popular Community and the Party for Communist Action in the 1980s, to the thousands of Palestinians who have languished in Bashar al Assad's prisons, to his bombing of Yarmouk in 2012, to the current siege in Yarmouk little access to food, water, and medicine, the Assads have preached Palestinian solidarity while torturing, bombing, and massacring Palestinians to death when it served their political interests and when Palestinians were critical of the authoritarian violence (Dagher 2019).

A more expansive political and historical Palestinian-Syrian Feminist framework would allow more people to understand that our ancestral land is one, beyond colonial borders. We are greater Syria. Historically. Geographically. Bilad al-Sham. Winston Churchill bragged about creating Jordan on a Sunday afternoon—these artificial colonial borders have become codified in the last century. Israel occupies modern day Syria in the Golan Heights. Israeli occupation is on Syrian soil. So, we know this, and we fight a revolution against the colonizer but also against the colonizer who looks like us, the neoliberal, so-called “progressive” one, who is claiming to fight for us. When you add the women's struggle and the queer struggle within those axes of power—we are in a revolution within a revolution within a revolution.

And that is why some of the queer and feminist critiques coming out of Syria are so brilliantly visionary; we are resisting genocide from many different sides at once. And when you add leaving Syria, entering new spaces and forms of racialization, becoming politicized against white supremacy and islamophobia and xenophobia in new ways, you resist from even more sides all at once. It means that our communities are vulnerable to violence but also ripe with

resistance. It is no surprise that in our Syrian arts collective, we were engaged in coalitionary organizing with the local movement for Black lives, *Collectiva Zapatista*, *Anakbayan*, and other refugee communities. Even so, we have a long journey ahead of us as a community, particularly in addressing centuries of Arab anti-Blackness and internalized forms of oppression via colorism, regionalism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia that create deep trauma across Syrian society. Many of our youth are traumatized from surviving chemical weapons attacks, barrel bombings, the loss of their homes and their loved ones, but they also carry the embodied tools and skills of survival and resistance, what Ronak Kapadia (2019) calls “the creativity and fugitive beauty that emanate from the shadows of terrible violence... freedom dreams flecked by inscriptions of wartime’s death and dispossession.” We have a long way to go.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes about how trees in a forest synchronize survival strategies through “mycorrhizal symbiosis,” wherein underground fungal networks appear and create bridges between the tree roots. These subterranean networks of fungi in the underground redistribute mineral nutrients and deliver them to the trees. The trees create a system of communication through these underground routes, a “web of reciprocity, [where] all flourishing is mutual” (20). As adrienne maree brown (2017) writes in *Emergent Strategy*, if our movements took a cue about how to organize by studying the organic practices of the earth (what she calls a practice of biomimicry) rather than structuring our spaces according to capitalism, we would begin to see that the potent value in our illegible, underground expressions as subalternized people. As we weave our “ululations,” together, our sharp cries, the feared affective, feminized noise that comes from surviving colonial violence and creating practices of joy in spite of our systemic death, if we connect these siren songs through *careful listening*, through movement, we

create a system that liberates all of us, an alternative society. We move beyond systems of extraction and performative solidarity, we weave ourselves into a deeply interconnected, rich and indestructible network of consciousness and change, one that may be threatening to colonizing systems because it is so hard to detect, but that in itself is what makes it a success.

Through my own embodiment as a poet, a dancer, a dreamer, a sheikha-in-training, my words counter binary narratives of authenticity and return. I write with a longing for my family's home, our little fela7 ('peasant', farmers, plant growers, and earth knowers) community, the places I could never know. I write with gratitude for the Syrian women activists I have loved and the Syrian children who inspire me in every place. As millions of Syrians flee our homeland because of the Assad regime's bombardment and international complicity, creating the largest displacement crisis on planet earth today, our bodies become a new kind of home.

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

I. أهداف المجلس السوري بإسم السوريين:

بند رقم ١: تقوية المجتمع السوري

أ. تقوية روح التكافل والتضامن بين المجتمع السوري والمجتمعات الأخرى

ب. تقوية المجتمع السوري معنوياً ونفسياً

بند رقم ٢: تثقيف المجتمع السوري

أ. تعليم اللغة العربية والإنجليزية

ب. ثقافة فنية وحضارية

ج. تنظيم فعاليات تقوية للأطفال والشباب/الشابات (فنون، رياضية، أدب، تكنولوجيا)

بند رقم ٣: مساعدة المجتمع السوري للاندماج مع المجتمع

بند رقم ٤: تقوية المجتمع السوري اقتصادياً

أ. افتتاح مشاريع صغيرة

ب. التواصل مع السوريين مع باقي منظمات

يوجد مشاريع بدون تحويل بطريقة أخرى

بند رقم ٤: تقوية المجتمع السوري اقتصادياً

بند رقم ٥: مجلس اصلاحي عامة جاليات مختلفة وخاصة

بند رقم ٦: نشاطات اجتماعية و ترفيهية

بند رقم ٧: غرس القيم الديمقراطية والأخلاقية و احترام الآخر

بند رقم ٨: التربية على التعامل وفق الحقوق والواجبات وحق استعمال مساحة الحرية التي يتمتع فيها كل فرد

بند رقم ٩: تمثيل الجالية السورية في الكاهون

١٧ مارس ٢٠١٧: تجهيز إجتماع مع منظمة حكومية ٢.

II . تمثل المجتمع السوري

-غير منظمات لا تعمل على تقوية المجتمع السوري

-في المجتمع الجديد المجلس سيقوم على التركيز على تعليم اللغة الانجليزية لمساعدة المجتمع السوري في الاندماج
-نهدف إلى التركيز على النشاطات الفنية والتراثية والمهارات التكنولوجية
نهدف إلى دعم الاقتصاد السوري وبناء مركز للجالية السورية وبناء نظام للقرارات الرئاسية
-و نحن نعيش الواقع والمعاناة والمجلس جزء من المجتمع اللاجئين السوريين و واعي لمشاكل واحتياجات المح
-المجلس يقوم على أساس الاحترام المتبادل ويحترم حرية الأفراد وكرامتهم و حقوقهم

المجلس هو صوت المجتمع السوري في سان دييجو، ويتم اتخاذ القرارات على مبدأ ديمقراطي مشاكل وأولية المجتمع السوري ونريد العمل على الاندماج مع المجتمع الأمريكي

III. استراتيجيتنا

1. المقابلات مع الأهالي...والاستفسار عن الأشياء التي يعانون منها
2. وجود المكان وبناءه وتقسيمه.
3. الإعلان عن المجلس بين الناس وعلى النت
4. البدء بعدة اجتماعات مع الأعضاء والتنسيق للبدء بتنفيذ ما وعدنا به... واحتياجات الناس
5. بعض التجمعات مع العائلات للفت أنظارهم للتجديد الدائم بالقوانين الجديدة والتجمع باستمرار للتواصل باستمرار معهم
6. المحاولة بتواصل العائلات مع العالم الخارجي... وبناء علاقات فيما بيننا جميعا.....وبإذن الله سننال ما سعيينا لأجله

IV. قيمنا

1. احترام للأخرى
- التعاون الداخلي لإظهار الوجه الحسن للسوريين ٢.
- تبادل العلاقات مع المجتمع الجوار ٣.
- عدم التفرقة والتمييز الداخلية بين السوريين ٤.

In the name of God, the most beneficent and the merciful,

The Syrian Council of El Cajon

I. Values and Goals, by and for the Syrian community:

1. Strengthening the Syrian Community.

- A. Strengthening the spirit of unity, solidarity, self-expression among Syrians and the larger community.
- B. Providing the Syrian community psychosocial and ethical support.

2. Building awareness and education of Syrian culture and society.

- A. Providing educational activities such as Arabic and English language classes.
- B. Organizing enrichment activities about Syrian civilization and culture for children and youth (through fostering the arts, recreational sports activities, creative writing, and technology skills).

3. To ensure the Syrian community is empowered to navigate American society.

- A. We will implement this by opening and supporting small business projects
- B. Connecting Syrians in the community to employment agencies and opportunities

4. Development of a self-reliant Syrian economy.

5. Provide infrastructure for reconciliation processes and conflict resolution with internal and inter-community issues.
6. Encourage social and recreational activities that contribute to community well-being.
7. Implementing democratic and ethical values and emphasizing respect for each other.
8. Educating the community about their rights and duties according to fundamental human rights every individual has the right to exercise and enjoy.
9. Representing the Syrian community in El Cajon to promote collective autonomy and positive community relationships.

II. How does the Syrian Council plan to represent the community?

Other organizations do not focus on long-term empowerment for the Syrian Community.

Syrian Council aims to foster community empowerment by providing English and Arabic educational learning programs and forum spaces to focus on helping Syrians navigate American society. Additionally, we have a strategic plan to empower the Syrian community through series of workshops that will focus on enhancing technology skills, provide recreational opportunities, and arts-based development programming for children and youth. We also aim to focus on the development of a self-reliant Syrian economy by supporting community business and projects. We will implement our strategic plan by acquiring a center or meeting space, which we are currently in the process of securing. Additionally, our council will provide a forum where the community will meet weekly for updates on legislative and governmental decisions that may impact our communities, and in order to communicate the rights and duties Syrian refugees have in their host society. Because members of the Syrian council live the realities and other organizations are comprised of people who are not in the community itself, we believe that the Syrian Council will provide an apparatus to amplify the voices of the Syrian community that are currently not being heard. The Syrian Council promotes values of respect and valuing each individual's freedoms and contributions to the community equally. The Syrian Council represents the Syrian Community in San Diego and will begin the foundational work of constructing a democratic space to identify the problems and issues Syrians face and work to alleviate them. Most importantly, it will provide a space where recently resettled Syrians can provide a respectful, culturally specific, effective network of support for community members struggling to navigate facets of American life.

III. Our strategic six point-implementation plan:

1. We will begin surveying community needs and concerns this Sunday during youth activities in Wells Park and attempt to gather as much information about the community's specific needs as much as possible.
2. We will secure a place to begin meeting regularly.
3. We will circulate and advertise our plan for the council in community networks and online groups.

4. We will begin individually meeting with families and follow up with them, and plan a large group meeting which will be the first of regular meetings.
5. We will initiate our planned activities and programming in order to build positive relationships with other communities, institutions, and organizations. We will focus on community building and strengthening our collective together in order to achieve our outlined goals such as community empowerment and eventual self-sustainability.

IV. Our Values

1. Respect
2. Internal Cooperation
3. Reciprocal Relationships
4. Making intentional efforts to avoid discriminatory treatment between Syrians

Speech at City Heights Annex, March 4, 2018

Here was the speech that caused the English-speaking media to pack up their gear and leave that I mention in Chapter 2:

Ghoutha region in Syria used to be an oasis where the ancient river Barada flowed into a delta from Damascus. It is known for its cherry blossom trees in the summertime and its lush farmlands. Ghoutha is a few miles East of Damascus, and its major cities are Harasta and Douma and it is home to several other farming villages.

Ghoutha's people have refused to stop resisting the dictatorship in Syria, the Assad regime. And has paid a price of seemingly endless barrage and assault from Assad warplanes, and internationally banned chemical weapons including napalm, phosphorous, and sarin.

And so we cannot talk about Eastern Ghoutha without acknowledging something called the Syrian Revolution. And to make it brief, the Syrian revolution was an uprising that began March 15, 2011. A group of fifteen schoolchildren ages 9-15 year olds in a rural area called Dera'a had heard slogans from Egypt, Tunisia, where people were ousting their decades-long dictators, slogans like Horeeya Horeeya, freedom, freedom, and al sha3b ured asqat as nizam. The people want the fall of the system. And they took markers and crayons and wrote those slogans on the walls of their elementary school. They did not come home from school that day. So their mothers went to the local police headquarters to ask what happened to their children. The police laughed in their faces, and threatened them with sexual violence, "your children never existed, but we'll give you some children to worry about." A woman doctor discovered the children had been abducted and tortured in a branch of the Assad regime's notorious prisons in Damascus. The children had their fingernails pulled out and their genitals mutilated.

I don't share these details to make it grotesque but to show you the level of inhumane terror that we are dealing with. So fast forward, several years later, when a group of disenfranchised youth in Assad's army defect and create what is called the Free Syrian Army.

That debate around taking up arms to fight was a turning point because the revolution, which already had little recognition and was hugely suppressed by the regime, was labelled as "civil war," when in reality it was a widespread, systemic collective punishment against all areas that had decided to uprising. The regime called upon its allies and escalated its assault on the Syrian people, only in the regions that protested. A major turning point was on August 21, 2013, when the regime used Sarin gas to attack Eastern Ghoutha, where an estimated 1,729 people died, not to mention 3,600 injured, and countless impacted by the toxic effects of sarin. In 1938, Sarin was bred by Nazi scientists on accident. The chemical company IG Farben in Nazi Germany attempted to create insecticide but accidentally created something called Substance 146, a chemical formula that caused immediate paralysis of the nervous system.

Under the Chemical Weapons Convention, Sarin is listed as a schedule 1 substance- it is one of the most highly restricted chemicals in existence. The regime targets this area in particular with this scale of weapons because they say Ghoutha harbors "terrorists," when in reality, the terrorists they are talking about are children and women, civilians. I want to stress that the siege in Ghoutha is not just a ten day intensified attack, although these past two weeks have been arguably the worst it has ever been. On February 20th, 2018, over 201 people died in 48 hours, which has been among the bloodiest 48 hours in Syria's entire crisis. Over more than 450 people were killed 18 February 2018 until February 24.

On February 25-26, in the town of Shefoneah in Eastern Ghouta Region, the regime used chlorine gas to suffocate civilians. A child was killed, and several civilians have had suffocation cases.

Military aircraft launched **88 air raids** on the cities and towns of Eastern Ghouta so far: 17 air

raid on the city of #Douma / 25 Air raids on the city of #Arbin بين

10 air raids on the town of #Ein-tarma من ترما

8 air raids on the of city #Zamlaka / 7 air raids on the town of #Kaferbatna

5 air raids on the town of #Haza / 5 air raids on the of town #Hamouriya ورية 2 air raids on the city of #Saqba / 2 air raids on the neighbor of #Jubar

2 air raids on the town of #Mesraba / 2 Air raids on the town of #madiara 1 Air raid on the town of #Alaftris / 1 Air raid on the town of #Harasta

1 Air raid on the town of #Hazerma / In addition to the bombardment of 62 explosive barrels from flying helicopters:

20 Explosive barrels on the city of Arbin

13 Explosive barrels on the town of Ein_tarma 7 Explosive barrels on the town of Hamouriya 6 Explosive barrels on the city of Zamalka

4 Explosive barrels on the town of Otaya وأتايا

4 Explosive barrels on the city of Saqba 4 Explosive barrels on the city of Douma

2 Explosive barrels on the town of Hosh_alsalihia 2 Explosive barrels on the town of Beit Sawa

In conjunction with artillery shelling targeted residential neighborhoods in each of the (Cities of #Harasta, #Douma, #Arbin, #Saqba, #Zamalka, #Haza, #Kaferbatna, #Ein_tarma #Hamouriya, #Chiffonia, #Nashabia, #Almarj, and #Jubar).

In addition to the bombing of six elephant cluster rockets, including: 4 missiles targeted the town of #Hamouriya

2 rockets targeted the city of #Arbin

1 rockets targeted the city of #Haza 7eza

21 Land-to-land missiles target residential neighborhoods in city of #Harasta

In addition to the bombing of a surface-to-surface missile on the town of #Hazerma and several missiles on the town of Douma.

In conjunction with the bombing of rocket launchers targeted residential neighborhoods in the cities of Arabin, Zamalka, Douma and towns of Haza, Kaferbatna, Asha'ari and Chiffonia.

Leading to the death of 91 civilians:

20 people in the town of Kaferbatna, including 15 people yesterday. 9 people in the town of Haza

42 people in the city of Douma 6 people in the city of Arbin

5 people in the town of Hamouriya 4 people in the town of Alaftris

3 people in the town of Masraba 2 people in the town of Jesreen

I want to share some recent testimonies from Syrian women living in eastern Ghouta, including one from our comrade Maimouna al-Ammar.

From photographer Firas Abdullah on Facebook on Feb. 25, 2018: The situation in #EasternGhouta is in its worst period ever since the beginning of the siege of the Syrian government army until now, it's really out of explanation, hundreds of missiles and mortars are being dropped, tens of airstrikes, most people still live underground in their basements, shelters, flats and houses, children may have breathing problems and other health cases by living in dry conditions and far from the sun, very huge distraction in the neighborhoods, no opened shops, people are depending on what they have in their homes, and some are going in rush to the nearest shop to buy their daily meal.

On Feb. 25 from the activists at Women Now for Development, Eastern Ghouta Center:

#Ghouta mornings as described by our colleagues:

Sharifa:

I just emerged from the basement, which reeks horribly and unbearably of sewage. My grandson is crying non-stop because he is hungry. There has been no food for any of us for 2 days.

Some people in other basements further away were given some food, but we are near a health clinic, so the bombing is hysterical and continuous.

Tahani:

The feeling when the bombs fall is terrifying; the whole of the earth shakes + we have no time to hold on to anything.

There is no flour; no bread; there is dirt, cold, hunger, fear.

My son Anas was dug out from under the rubble of another building that was bombed, where he and his father were.

Impossible to sit anywhere or take a bath. The filth is horrible.

Fatin:

There is no water in the basement. We managed to fill a few containers just to survive the non-stop bombing, which destroyed the sewage pipes.

Sewer water has flooded our shelter. The smell is unbearable.

To get rid of the flooding, we need the suction system to work. But there is no electricity. The children are ill from the poisonous air they are breathing in.

None of us have money to buy anything. The men are all unemployed and exhausted.

The greatest hero is the person who can manage - against all odds - to bake some bread from fodder.

We've run out of water again. No one can go out to fill the canisters, because the bombing is relentless.

From Maimouna al Ammar:

Peace to you all. I have two messages, maybe my last in this world, the first urgent and the second strategic but also urgent, to the true advocates of nonviolence and peace who are people of privilege and are people from the powerful states (and I don't mean that derogatorily, just realistically).

The first (inspired by Osama Nassar), is that there is a way to stop the cascade of blood in Ghouta and elsewhere. If some of you are the sort who would sacrifice yourselves for others

like Rachel Corrie who stood before the bulldozing of Palestinian homes and was able to prevent it from happening in that moment, or at least to delay it and reduce it for a time. We cannot help but imagine that maybe the blood that is spilling [here] is just water, when we see how different thereactions are when one of you is endangered or sheds one drop of blood.

The second and more important message is for activists to work ceaselessly to revoke the right of veto (it's really a wrong, not a "right") in the United Nations Security Council. It allows a small fraction of humanity to control the destinies of the majority of humanity. And, in many instances from when it was first instituted, it has hindered the prevention of atrocities being committed by criminals. You may not be able to save humanity in the Ghouta today, or in Syria, but you would be able to save millions in the future. And you would make us humans worthy of the honor God bestowed on humankind.

My sisters and brothers, I do not mean by this to load you with responsibility, or to accuse you or hold anything over you. I'm just suggesting what I see as possible to make a difference in the suffering of humanity. To whoever wants to help.

Friends, at this point, if you could please help to our message across to those to whom it is addressed, and to translate it into English.

If my voice departs, your voices will be there.

Maimouna Alammar
Director, Southern Branch of Hurras