

DORIT NAAMAN

When is Co-creation Possible?

In the early stages of production of the participatory interactive documentary *Jerusalem, We Are Here* (2016), I described the process I had envisioned to a curator friend. She listened intently and then said, “I think you can pull it off, because you don’t have an artist’s ego.” I wasn’t sure whether this was a compliment, but I recalled this statement recently, when I was asked about my position as an Israeli making a project with and about Palestinians, and a metaphor emerged. “I am the central nervous system of this project,” I replied. “But its heart is entirely Palestinian.”

As an Israeli showcasing an actively obfuscated Palestinian past, and as a documentary filmmaker working with non-professionals, I knew from the get-go that I have a lot of structural power: professionally I knew what makes for a good story, and how to go about it. As an Israeli, I also had unparalleled access to archives and libraries and current Israeli residents and realtors, and was thus well situated to obtain information Palestinians are mostly unable to access. I also knew that the stories revealed in the process of our interactions were impacted by my subject position as an Israeli and a Canadian citizen. And I knew that I had (and still have) many blind spots.

The question of how to work ethically within this structural imbalance of power occupied me from the beginning. The first question was my subject position, and my intuition was to make it a co-creation project, to work collaboratively with a Palestinian filmmaker and share the directorial credit. In hindsight I was naïve, and it took a couple of years before I realized that to work equitably internally in the context of an active conflict is almost impossible. Furthermore, since the external context is of severe inequality, such an attempt—if successful—may mask or even “normalize” the historical and material reality of differentials of power. Co-creation, in other words, was not only a utopian ideal, but politically, the wrong aspiration in this context.

Instead, very slowly and organically, emerged another structure: a web of dynamic relations with contributors, participants, the research and technical teams, and a core of five collaborators. Some people shifted positions in a pliable process that created a sound base from which to proceed. Cypriot-born IT specialist Marina Parisinou, for instance, started as a participant, and over a year of workshopping, we produced a short film. But then Marina provided rare footage shot by her great-uncle, Ferdinand (Nando) Schtakleff, traveled repeatedly to Jerusalem to participate in events, and had become a fantastic sounding board and interlocutor.

Afterimage, Vol. 47, Number 1, pps. 42–47. ISSN 2578-8531. © 2020 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2020.471008>



IMAGE 1. Marina Parisinou (left) and Ellie Savidou watching a digitized 16mm reel of Nando Shtakleff (2014); photograph by Dorit Naaman.

When she proposed to help with social media as the project was about to be launched publicly, it became clear that she was no longer a participant, but a core team member, and we decided she should get a credit as an associate producer. Similarly, the company hired to build the interactive platform, Helios Design Labs, had become conceptual and aesthetic partners in design, and it no longer felt that a service provider title is sufficient. Meeting and working with Palestinian-American teacher and amateur historian Mona Halaby and Palestinian linguist and educator Anwar Ben Badis, we realized that an online map needed to be created to allow for a public repository of all the knowledge they both accumulated, and thus the “mapping Jerusalem” side of the platform was created. While Mona and Anwar are leaders in populating the map, information from the public has helped enhance it, and the mapping project continues to grow. I started thinking of myself at times as a director, at others a facilitator, responding more than guiding, and always allowing participants to have the last word on their films. Some great documentary material was left out, because it did not align with the stories participants wanted to tell. A nimble funding structure (from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) enabled these changes in output and titles, and are, to my mind, essential conditions if one aspires to engage with collaborative work ethically.

A second principle was the rejection of a linear documentary format. I was working in a Jerusalem neighborhood, where Palestinians of diverse class and religious affiliations suffered different fates after their expulsion during the 1948 war. I did not want to cohere those into a linear narrative, and felt that a lateral jigsaw puzzle format, with very short films and audio pieces that provide a glimpse into the life of the participants, would be an effective tool in reminding viewers of the gaps, fissures, and wounds that are always at the heart of recounting war and trauma.

The project is built as a virtual walk, where the viewer reaches the houses of participants, and can play short films or audio files produced collaboratively with the resident families.

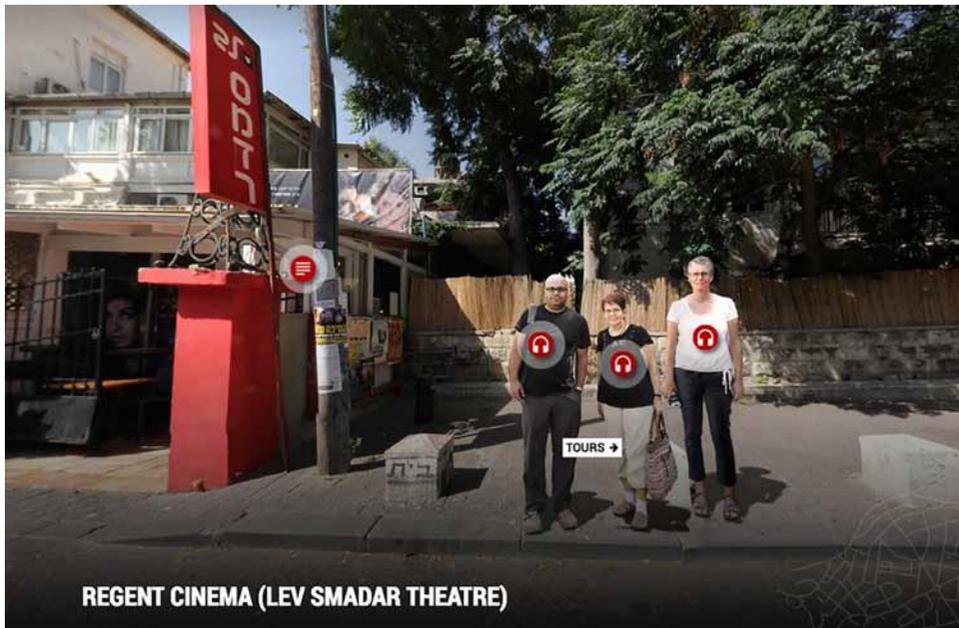


IMAGE 2. Anwar Ben Badis, Mona Halaby, and Dorit Naaman in front of the Regent Cinema (2015); photograph by Lael Klein.

Both the films and audio files range drastically in style from handheld documentary through poetic short films, short video essays, audio interviews, poetry, and animation. Aside from the digital walking tours and the map, the platform hosts a blog space and many resources. The decentralized and lateral nature of the platform celebrates polyphony, and resists reductionism.

Only after the project was released did I become aware of Rosi Braidotti's formulation of the nomadic subject and nomadic ethics, and I felt as if I found a theoretical (albeit nomadic) home for a process that for me evolved rather fluidly. Following Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, and adding a feminist twist, Braidotti proposes an alternative to the European subject, which is set as a binary of universal "self"—white, masculine, heterosexual, property owner, etc.—and its dialectical "others." This European subject embodies a contradiction of presuming universalism, while at once excluding others. Stemming from Deleuze, Braidotti claims: "A subject's ethical core is not his/her moral intentionality, as much as the effects of power (as repressive, *potestas*—and positive, *potentia*) his/her actions are likely to have upon the world."¹ As such, she suggests that accountability is a key process, and that the only way to think of the "self" *outside* of Eurocentric and capitalist models is to think of co-presence, to think of the self as part of a "we":

A nomadic approach demands a great effort of self-analysis, especially when it encounters feminism, which emphasizes the politics of location and immanence. You have to start

1. Rosi Braidotti, "Nomadism: against methodological nationalism," *Policy Futures in Education* 8, nos. 3 & 4 (2010): 413.

from where you are at and acknowledge that you are part of the problem, and then read the situation from there to become part of the solution.²

Following a reconstitution of the subject as in-relation, and a promotion of figurations as a rhizomatic methodology, instead of linearity as the standard mode of communication, Braidotti suggests a nomadic ethics, one that resists what she calls “methodological nationalism.” She writes:

The key method is an ethics of respect for diversity that produces co-synchronizations of the nomadic selves and thus constitutes communities across multiple locations and generations. This humble project of being worthy of the present while also resisting and of constructing together social horizons of hope and sustainability expresses an evolutionary talent that enables “us” to be in *this* together.³

Let me try to illustrate this approach in an experience from *Jerusalem, We Are Here*. One day, while filming, a seemingly small incident jolted me out of my own ignorance about the Palestinian experience in Jerusalem. I was standing with a participant in the project, Nahla Assali, in front of her childhood home, as she was recounting being forced to leave after a bullet entered her mother’s bedroom and hit the mirror on the vanity.

As we were talking, I suddenly sensed Nahla’s body language change, as if she was shrinking. I could tell she did not want to be there anymore, but I did not know why. I glanced down the quiet street to see a bylaw officer issuing parking tickets. On the face of it, this person (who is only tasked with issuing parking tickets) has no power or jurisdiction over Nahla, who is a permanent resident, but obviously, that was only my perception. For people like Nahla, or even Palestinians who might want to visit the houses of prominent Palestinian figures such as Khalil Al Sakakini, Wassif Jawharieh, Abdelkarim Al-Karmi, or Adel Jabre, entering the neighborhood is at best a stressful, and often a traumatic experience.

We moved on from the bylaw officer, and never discussed it, but the moment was a catalyst for my process. It was shocking to me that I never understood how disempowered and disenfranchised permanent residents of the state feel. It may seem silly now, but when I embarked on the project I wanted to create an installation in the neighborhood. I imagined short films projected on houses in a nightly installation, where people walk from house to house, converse, and meet each other. As an Israeli I had a strong urge to bring the Palestinian stories into Israeli discourse, to make the Palestinians somehow present in the space, even if just virtually. I knew that the majority of Palestinians have no access to Jerusalem: those in the Arab world cannot enter at all, and those in the West Bank require special permits that they rarely receive. But until we watched the bylaw officer, I did not realize how inhospitable the space is even for Palestinians who have legal access. While the architecture and gardens are powerful reminders of the origins of the neighborhood, the Palestinians themselves are largely missing, and when present, they are always suspect, always at risk, made to feel like intruders.

2. Rosi Braidotti and Lisa Regan, “Our Times Are Always Out of Joint: Feminist Relational Ethics in and of the World Today: An Interview with Rosi Braidotti,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 28, no. 3 (2017): 192.

3. Braidotti, “Nomadism,” 417.



IMAGE 3. Anees and Nahla Assali in front of Nahla's home in 2015 (projected), and at the screening at The Regent in 2018; photograph by Natasha Dudinsky.

Now I was at a crossroads: for two years I had been working with Palestinians to collect their stories, and together we produced short videos. I developed relationships of trust, respect, and mutual interest in the project taking a public life. Many happy and sad memories were shared with me, and we discussed what could and should become public. But if we created an installation in situ, it would primarily serve Israeli audiences. And while I still wanted to bring this story to Israelis, I did not want to treat the Palestinian participants as utilitarian subjects in an education process of Israelis (myself included). It is perhaps impossible for Israelis to learn the Palestinian story without Palestinian testimonies, but it cannot be the burden of the Palestinians to educate us, Israelis, about their loss, their catastrophe. I felt intuitively that my relationship with the participants demanded reciprocity. And within a few days of standing in front of the Assali house, I knew the platform for the project had to be online—and make the neighborhood accessible to all Palestinians without them having to go through checkpoints, surveillance, fear, and humiliation.

This story illustrates a broader process of figurations, self-reflection, and nomadic ethics, which became a core in the production of *Jerusalem, We Are Here*. I moved beyond my position as an Israeli in a binary relationship with Palestinians, and instead started to treat space and history both vertically and laterally, mixing and foregrounding not only the Palestinian story, but also my “part of the problem,” my blind spots, and my responsibility to intervene. This intervention was not from above, with benevolent good will, but structured as a relational practice, working together and apart, but always in commitment to a larger than me, “we.” In this essay, as well as whenever I present the project, I move fluidly—but deliberately—between writing in singular and plural first person. In production and

distribution of the project there were various “I”s and different configurations of “we,” depending on what was at stake, and how the power (im)balance played itself out in different junctures. Nomadic ethics are humble, but they demand a relational and self-aware approach by the nomadic subject, as Braidotti writes:

Remembering the wound, the pain, the injustice—bearing witness to missing people—to those who never managed to gain powers of discursive representation—is central to the radical ethics and politics of philosophical nomadism.⁴

For the ideals of co-creation to be realized, it seems to me that nomadic ethics—with the disavowal of a single stable ego (and author)—should be taken as core principles. But while those principles are necessary, they are in-and-of themselves insufficient conditions for co-creation to occur. Even when co-creation is a desirable outcome, our funding structures, a social obsession with the artist as a singular genius, and the economical emphasis on product, narrative, and climax—rather than process, figurations, and relations—all pose serious impediments for co-creation. ■

DORIT NAAMAN is a professor in the Department of Film and Media, and an affiliated faculty to the Cultural Studies Program at Queen’s University in Toronto. Her interactive documentary *Jerusalem, We Are Here* (2016) models digital witnessing, and has screened in festivals in Canada, the United States, Israel, and Palestine. She writes on Israeli and Palestinian cinemas and media from postcolonialist and feminist perspectives.

4. Braidotti, “Nomadism,” 414.