

## 6 “The Art of Death in Life”

### *Palestinian Futurism and Reproduction after 1948*

“That’s the way our family is and why we bear the name Pessoptimist. For this word combines two qualities, pessimism and optimism, that have been blended perfectly in the character of all members of our family since our first divorced mother, the Cypriot.”

(Habiby 2003, 12)

In *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* (2003), the absurdist irreverent novel published in 1974 under the more evocative Arabic title *Al-waqa'i al-ghariba fi ikhtifa' sa'id abi al-nahis al-mutasha'il* (*Strange Events in the Disappearance of Sa'id the Unlucky Pessoptimist*), Palestinian author Emile Habiby consolidates the Arabic words “optimist” (*mutafa'il*) and “pessimist” (*mutasha'im*) to coin the term *mutasha'il* (pessoptimist).<sup>1</sup> The novel brilliantly tells the leitmotif of disappearance – social and political death – prominently found in Palestinian literature published after 1948. Habiby’s neologism offers a discursive aperture to speculate on reproduction, death, and futurity in Palestinian imaginations with the occupation of 1948 Palestine and the expulsion and containment of Palestinian bodies in settings that include 1948 Israel, where *The Secret Life of Saeed* was set and where Emile Habiby lived.

This chapter is concerned with whether demographic competition with Jews has been relevant to Palestinian reproductive desires and practices since 1948, when they viscerally and universally recognized the importance to Zionism of the double action of “Judaizing” and “de-Arabizing” the land. This realization, I argue, did not translate into a Palestinian futurity oriented to reproductively competing with Israel. Demographic concerns have been largely inconsequential to

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Sherene Seikaly for suggesting I consider this novel when I presented initial thoughts on reproduction and futurity at the March 2018 New Directions in Palestinian Studies workshop at Brown University, “The Shadow Years: Material Histories of Everyday Life.”

Palestinian reproductive practices despite their continuing centrality to Zionist settler-colonialism in historic Palestine. The operations of Zionist demographic biopower and Palestinian resistance shift, exist as pluralities in the same time and place, and are never totalizing, as Michel Foucault would have guessed.

Representing Palestinians as hyperbolically reproductive has had at least three consequences. First, it projects and magnifies onto Palestinians what are in fact Zionist and Western pathologies and anxieties reflected in the policies and priorities of their governments, knowledge industries, and foundations, motivated by geopolitical, ideological, and material interests. Second, it misses the range of socio-economic, psychic, and contextual factors that have shaped Palestinian reproductive and anti-reproductive desires and practices. Third, it distorts our ability to see the emphasis on creative, political, and social struggle and regeneration in the face of social and political death in the Palestinian futurities articulated after 1948. Indeed, I found death more relevant than reproduction in my analysis of Palestinian poetry, fiction, and film.

The first section of the chapter questions demographic competition as an explanation for Palestinian reproductive desires and practices even as the establishment of Israel amplified and empowered Zionist demographic anxieties based on religion. The section that follows explores anti-normative African-American, African, transatlantic Black feminist, and Western queer scholarship to put them in conversation with Palestinian reproduction and futurity after 1948. The final section explores futurity in Palestinian literature, film, and decolonial queer activism, showing the primacy after 1948 of political and creative struggle rather than biological reproduction in contexts of ongoing physical and social death.

### **Palestinian Fertility and the Reproductive Family after 1948**

Zionist forces expelled about 90 percent of Palestinians from the war borders claimed by Israel in 1948, making them refugees, not including those internally displaced in the new state. Many Palestinians became refugees twice over when the 1967 war expanded Israel's military borders. Depending on their location in Palestine, resources, and familial networks, 1948 refugees were largely dislocated to the Gaza District, which came under Egyptian jurisdiction until 1967; to the

newly coined “West Bank” region, which included the remainder of Jerusalem and eventually came under Jordanian jurisdiction until 1967; and to Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Palestinians after 1948 continued to differ socioeconomically and by region of origin. New categories and identities joined the old ones, including for well-off families from pre-1948 Palestine who lost homes, businesses, and other properties but continued to carry their social and cultural capital. Those registered as refugees with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon became eligible for medical care and schooling. Palestinians who remained in Israel were eligible for universal health-care. Residency type, proximity to healthcare institutions, and class and wealth influenced healthcare access and health outcomes in every location, although this is not a matter the chapter explores.

The coordinated massacre of Palestinians by Zionist militias in the Jerusalem village of Deir Yassin on April 8, 1948, is a foundational terror event that worked on embodied, symbolic, and discursive levels to communicate the Zionist commitment to cleanse as much land and property as possible of non-Jewish inhabitants. Many elder Palestinian women interviewed for the [PalestineRemembered.com](http://PalestineRemembered.com) oral history project recalled that their family members left in 1948 upon hearing accounts of the Deir Yassin massacre. Signaling the salience and horror of this dimension in Palestinian collective memory of 1948, some mentioned that Zionist fighters had split open the belly of a pregnant Palestinian woman.<sup>2</sup> An elder woman I interviewed, married to a man

<sup>2</sup> The Deir Yassin massacre was one of tens of massacres committed by Zionist militias in 1948 Palestine. On June 22, 2017, I interviewed in the Jalazon refugee camp in Ramallah a survivor of Zionist massacres in 1948 Lyd that killed her husband and largely emptied the town of Palestinians. Fatima `Abdelwafi `Anati (born circa 1924 in Lyd) was mourning the death of her youngest sister twelve days previously when interviewed. She and her daughter-in-law insisted I ask for her account of the 1948 trauma, which I ultimately did. She explained that Zionist militias (“the Jews”) had come to their home and taken her husband with six other Palestinian men “in their trucks.” “They had shot on the mosque the previous night and killed everyone in the mosque.” They ordered the seven men to carry the dead out of the mosque and “burn them.” “My husband, God have mercy on him, said by God I will not burn them. They moved the dead men from the mosque and all refused to burn them. They shot and killed all seven men . . . We walked from Lyd to Ni`lin with my [three] children [the youngest an eight-month-old daughter] and their grandfather [and her other in-laws]. My father-in-law put the children in the pockets of the wool saddlebag of our mule . . . He

killed during the massacre, fled Deir Yassin while pregnant with her third child, a girl born afterward in her natal Jerusalem village. She explained that her eight-month-old son became ill “from fear [*khawfa*]” during the massacre and died soon after.<sup>3</sup>

The violence of Deir Yassin sent a number of sexual and gendered messages to Palestinians. Elsewhere I examine the massacre, its aftermath, and its deployments in Palestinian nationalist discourse after 1948 with attention to the “honor” rather than reproductive dimensions (Hasso 2000). Based on her oral history research with Palestinian refugees in 1970s Lebanon, Rosemary Sayigh writes that Zionist forces, who had studied Palestinian village life, carefully amplified the massacre, using the name of the village in a “psychological warfare” campaign of terror to assure “that the news spread through the Palestinian population . . . In the following months Zionist radio stations and loudspeaker vans were to make good use of the emotive words ‘Deir Yasseen’ to panic villages about to be attacked” and reduce the number of resistance fighters they would face in battles that continued through late summer 1948 as men chose between staying and leaving to protect children and womenfolk (Sayigh 1979, 75–77). Refugees in Lebanon also circulated an account of “the cutting open of the womb of a nine months’ pregnant woman” (76).

Palestinian infant and child deaths were lower in the 1950s, although we have no fine-grained data that systematically track such deaths by socioeconomic status, relevant healthcare institutions, and juridical setting in which a community lived (e.g., Israel, West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria). Data on Palestinian reproduction rates and birth control practices are similarly fragmentary and often gathered based on the priorities of the sponsoring research organization. The nonsystemic data I gleaned from oral histories and my interviews with elder women of reproductive age during the 1940s and 1950s indicate that infant and

would go everywhere looking for water for the thirsty children.” Her sister-in-law’s baby died during the *hijra*, during which “there was no food.”

<sup>3</sup> Fatima Khamis Zaydan was born in 1929 in Rammoun and moved to Deir Yassin when she married. She had her first two children in the British Jerusalem government hospital and the last child at home before the midwife arrived. She never remarried. Interviewed on June 17, 2017 in El-Bireh, Palestine.

child death remained common, but so did a high total fertility rate, particularly among women born in villages.

The massive uprooting and dispersal transformed family life, which always differed by class, wealth, urban/rural, educational, and regional backgrounds, and a family's sensibilities and culture. It would be surprising if the Palestinian reproductive family did not become more central to survival in an existential conflict that left Palestinians without a country or political representation. Socially speaking, the "uprooting" "tore apart the natural groupings of clan and village," some of which refugees "reassembled in the camps" (127). New borders divided scattered populations and poverty made communication and travel difficult for many (127). Uprooted Palestinians did everything they could to reestablish "family solidarity" and "family reproduction" after 1948, including through early marriage (128).

Commitment to sustaining kin ties differs from having babies for the purpose of demographically competing with Jews, a sensibility often sloppily projected onto "Palestinians" writ large as if it explains actual reproductive practices and fertility rates. My nonsystematic detour into fertility studies indicates rare efforts to break down Palestinian data by socioeconomic class, refugee/non-refugee status, or urban/rural residency, even in Israel, limiting their value as studies of "Palestinian fertility," which is essentialized, and masking our ability to understand the causal factors at play in different settings and times. Total fertility rates are sensitive to many factors, most of which are not studied with the exception of access to contraception and desire for sons. Systematic fertility data that account for Palestinians' multiple statuses within and across different geographic sites and sovereignties over time are nonexistent.

Some of the problems in the literature on Palestinian fertility are illustrated in an otherwise thoughtful lengthy article by demographic historian Philippe Fargues, "Protracted National Conflict and Fertility Change: Palestinians and Israelis in the Twentieth Century" (Fargues 2000). While the article shows the axiomatic importance of Palestinian fertility to Western powers given the "exceptional political history of these populations [Jewish and Palestinian], in which demography played a major role for both sides in nation-building" (441, 444), the second clause presents demographic fertility as a strategy for "both sides." The discursive framing of the fertility question occasionally traffics in other empirical sleights of hand: "Two extremes of

fertility transition [are] found side by side ranging from barely above replacement level among Jews born in Europe and among Christian Arab Israelis (2.13 and 2.10 respectively in 1992–96), to the highest level recorded in today’s world among Palestinians of the Gaza Strip (7.73 in 1991–95)” (441). Instead of comparing Palestinian Christian, Palestinian Muslim, and Jewish Israeli fertility rates in Israel, which would be closer to “side by side” despite Israel’s apartheid-like geography and legal scaffolding within 1948 borders, Fargues compares Israeli Palestinian Christian, Israeli Jewish, and Gaza Palestinian fertility rates. The fertility of the largely refugee women living in the militarized open-air prison of Gaza frequently becomes synecdoche for Palestinian fertility.

Fargues acknowledges that the “plurality of residential destination is not easily dealt with for Palestinians . . . because their national identity has long been denied or because statistical reconstruction of a population dispersed over the globe, with no internationally recognized nationality, would be a hopeless endeavor” (442, 474n2). While recognizing the unreliable nature of Israeli data on Palestinians, he uses them to explore “the relationship between belligerence and fertility” (443, 442). Fargues posits that demographic transition theory, whose hypothesis is that fertility rates decrease after infant mortality rates decrease in an industrialized society, occurred for Israeli Jews but not for Palestinians, although he also shows the theory does not ahistorically apply to Jews in Israel.<sup>4</sup> The higher fertility rates of Jews who immigrated to Israel from African and Asian societies did decrease over time to match the rates of Jews from Western societies given “equalization of social conditions,” access to birth control, social integration through Israeli institutions, intermarriage, and a common language (448–450). However, level of religiosity challenges the logic of Israeli Jewish fertility conformity to demographic transition theory. For example, a 1987 fertility study showed Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women to have higher fertility in comparison to other Jewish and Palestinian women in Israel. By 1996 the total fertility rate for Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women in Israel was 7.61 children. Ultra-Orthodox political leaders had long explicitly

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of demographic transition theory, see “What Is the Demographic Transition Model?” by Drew Grover (October 13, 2014), PopEd Blog (accessed May 13, 2020): <https://populationeducation.org/what-demographic-transition-model/>.

promoted large families to "increase their weight" in elections and "seize political power within Israel by democratic means" (451). Moreover, the average fertility among Jews in Israel at the time the article was published was higher than in "Tunisia, Turkey, or Lebanon," Muslim-majority countries ranked "far behind Israel in standard of living and political participation" (451). Fargues shows the importance of Jewish demographic dominance to the shape of Israeli law and policy, Zionist anxiety about high rates of Jewish intermarriage outside Israel and low rates of Jewish immigration to Israel, and Zionist concern with "low Jewish fertility" relative to "excessive Arab fertility" in Israel (453–458).

For Palestinians, Fargues argues, migrant work in oil-rich countries fostered "a high Palestinian fertility," as did support for Palestinian refugees from the UN and Arab governments, both of which "alleviated the costs of childrearing" and "may have inhibited fertility decline" (459). He makes compelling and not-so-compelling socio-economic and political arguments to explain fertility differentials between Jews and Palestinians in Israel (460–461), and between Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (462–467). None of the claims, however, indicate that demographic competition with Jews explains Palestinian fertility rates, irrespective of Palestinian pronatalist nationalist discourse that developed in the 1980s and 1990s (468–469).

Demographic reports abound that compare Palestinian to Jewish fertility and life expectancy rates in pre-1967 Israel, with Palestinians usually described as "Moslems" (Schellekens and Eisenbach 2002, 546). The ever-present dilemma for Israeli policy makers is "encouraging the Jewish birth rate without encouraging the Arabs to multiply too," writes Rhoda Kanaaneh in her book *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel* (Kanaaneh 2002, 38; also Yuval-Davis 1989, 92, 94, 95).<sup>5</sup> Israeli policies designed to "curb" the Palestinian fertility rate and encourage Jewish fertility and immigration are continuous, as is the related concern "to counteract negative Jewish demographic trends" exacerbated by the 1967 occupation of the remainder of historic Palestine, populated by Palestinians (Rouso-Schindler 2009, 287, 289–290; Yuval-Davis 1989, 95, 96). Encouragement of Jewish

<sup>5</sup> Kanaaneh's "Babies and Boundaries" chapter is an excellent analysis of the racialized workings of Israeli pronatalism (Kanaaneh 2002, 23–80).

fertility, especially by religious and right-wing parties, has at various points, certainly by the 1980s, competed with “quality not quantity” bourgeois Zionist positions concerned with poverty and lower rates of education in families with more children, which also affected legal debates related to abortion policy (Yuval-Davis 1989, 97–100). On the plane of ideological continuities between liberal and right-wing Zionists, “it was widely known among [Israeli] ministry [of health] employees that approval for a general clinic in an Arab area [of Israel] was difficult to get, but approval was all but guaranteed if the proposed clinic included a family planning unit” (Kanaaneh 2002, 37). Israel made contraceptives available gratis to Palestinian women in Israel but not to Jewish women (Yuval-Davis 1989, 100).

Research findings on post-1948 Palestinian fertility are mixed and variable over time, but show declining rates. Palestinian fertility is difficult to address systematically given that Palestinian communities are dispersed, live in multiple types of settings (villages, cities, refugee camps, etc.), and are forcibly separated from each other in historic Palestine.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, scholarship sometimes rehearses the idea of

<sup>6</sup> I provide a few snapshots of Palestinian fertility. In 1975 the average number of children among married Palestinian women in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, was 5.8, with lower fertility rates for city and town residents and higher rates for villagers (Husseini 1981, 13, table 11). An early 1980s ethnographic study of childbirth and childhood in multiple West Bank villages found that for many women from the Nakba generation it was more important to have babies after 1948, especially boys, because husbands often worked farther from home and in other countries and “girls needed brothers” (Kanaana et al. 1984, 40). In her doctoral dissertation study between 1981 and 1984 of 272 married women in three Palestinian villages, Rita Giacaman found them to continue to marry relatively young, increasing a woman’s years of fecundity. Proletarianization meant more family reliance on grown children for subsistence agricultural work, factory work in Israel, and remittances from abroad. Kinship remained crucial for grown children whose low-wage labor did not provide enough to allow them freedom and distance from their parents (Giacaman 1988, 95–96). In a 1993 study of 301 married women in the West Bank village of Sinjil, Aida J. Hudson found them to marry at a mean age of eighteen and to have a mean number of 3.8 births, spaced by approximately 1.6 years. Fifty-five percent considered four children the ideal number, while 23 percent preferred to have more than four (Hudson 1998, 98, 99). Rhoda Kanaaneh’s ethnography includes a table that lists the following total fertility rates for 1995 in 1948 Israel: 2.63 for European or American-born Jews; 5.86 for Asian or African-born Jews; 3.64 for Jews overall; 7.96 for Palestinians categorized as Muslims; 4.85 for



a Palestinian demographic sensibility, in the process unintentionally skirting over the range of personal and social motivations of actual Palestinian fertility decisions. For example, “The higher the birth rate, the larger the number of Palestinians, and the better future ability to conquer the aggressor, the logic goes” (Giacaman 1988, 96). Or, in Israel, where population policy locates “the site of political contest in women’s wombs,” “Palestinians [living in the Galilee in the mid-1990s] have advocated either having larger families (to outbreed Jews, just as the Israelis fear) or smaller families (in order to afford to modernize them and thus to challenge Israeli domination with the quality of their children

Palestinians and Russian immigrants categorized as Christians; and 6.58 for Palestinians categorized as Druze. Notably, the 1995 total fertility rate significantly increased for each group in comparison to the rate in 1990. Marwan Khawaja compares the mid-1990s fertility rates of Palestinian refugees with non-refugee or host populations in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, and Lebanon. Age of marriage seemed to be the main factor differentiating women’s fertility rates, given that most Palestinian women have their children in their twenties (Khawaja 2003, 282–284, 287–288, 292). He found that Palestinian refugee women’s fertility was similar to the non-refugee or host population fertility rate except for the West Bank, where refugee women had lower fertility in comparison to villagers. A study of Palestinian fertility between 1991 and 1994 found 4.9 births per woman in Jordan and 5.8 births per woman in the West Bank, whereas in Gaza the fertility rate was 7.7 children per woman (282–283). In a mid-1990s study of 841 Gaza women of reproductive age, Serena Donati and her colleagues found the majority desired four to six children. The study found a gap between “fertility preference and achievement” – women preferred fewer children but had “constraints on free reproductive choice” that included lack of access to healthcare infrastructure and contraceptive services and information (Donati et al. 2000, 843, 845, 848). The total fertility rate for Palestinian women by 2003 fell to 4 children per woman in the West Bank and 5.7 per woman in Gaza. Notably, Palestinians in Gaza are more urbanized than Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza women are more likely to complete high school, although Gaza has higher poverty and unemployment rates (Khawaja et al. 2009, 158, 155, 159). Marwan Khawaja and his colleagues theorize that lowered fertility rates are mostly due to an increased proportion of “never married” women, especially in the West Bank (165–166). About 25 percent of women in Gaza and 23 percent of women in the West Bank reported “unmet need” for birth control (167–170). Analyzing large-scale surveys, Weeam Hammoudeh and Dennis P. Hogan found that by 2006 “contraceptive use accounted for the greatest fall in fertility” among Palestinians in the West Bank, where there was a 16.8 percent decrease, and in the Gaza Strip, where there was a 14.7 percent decrease. Additional factors explaining decreased fertility by order of importance included “fewer marriages in the younger age groups” of fifteen to twenty-four-year-olds in Gaza and “increased duration of breastfeeding” in both the West Bank and Gaza (Hammoudeh and Hogan 2012).

rather than the quantity)” (Kanaaneh 2002, 17–18, 82).<sup>7</sup> In the Coda, I revisit the ideological work of popular rhetoric that frames Palestinian reproduction as motivated by demographic competition.

Idiographic studies of Palestinian women’s reproductive and anti-reproductive motivations and decision-making are notably limited. A short report from a 2011 study that relied on interviews with a sample of eight mothers with between one and six children in the Qalandia refugee camp in the West Bank found that “political reasons” were relevant to fertility decisions for seven of them in the sense that they “feared death or imprisonment of their adolescent sons by the Israeli military.” While most of these women were motivated to “have more children to counter such losses,” mothers with imprisoned or killed sons “had fewer children because of the loss of an income provider and because they were scared of losing another child.” Moreover, mothers who did not articulate a connection between fertility and “national struggle were having many children” (Hansson et al. 2013). Consciously or unconsciously, some Palestinians may worry about needing “a replacement child because this one might be killed,” as an experienced nurse-midwife mused during an interview I conducted with her in Palestine in 2018, which should not be reduced to a *nationalist demographic* motivation. Indeed, none of the “political” reasons given in the Qalandia refugee camp study were based on demographic grounds.

A valuable qualitative study by Gaza public health researcher Khitam Abu Hamad in 2020 based on six focus groups with married women (nine in each focus group) aged between fifteen and forty-nine years who had at least one child younger than five years old offers some insights on the relevance of demographic competition to fertility in present-day Gaza. Abu Hamad divided the women evenly between contraceptive users (three focus groups) and non-contraceptive users (three focus groups) (Abu Hamad 2020). Problematically, the article frames Gazans as living in conditions of “economic transition” of improved “socio-economic conditions” and lower infant mortality rates that should lower fertility rates (1). Abu Hamad describes as high the 4.5 total fertility rate for Gaza women according to 2018 data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (1), although it is significantly lower than the 5.7 total fertility rate in 2003 (Khawaja et al. 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Kanaaneh develops the consumption dimension of Palestinian reproductive modernity in the Galilee in the “Luxurious Necessities” chapter (2002, 81–103).

Abu Hamad's findings from the focus group research are the following: Gaza women and their families viewed having four to five children as ideal and preferred childbearing to be completed in a woman's twenties. They understood children as "an asset and source of social security" in old age (Abu Hamad 2020, 2). They expressed the familiar understanding that their "ability to reproduce, particularly sons," shapes their "social standing, recognition, and marital stability," and discussed the common practice of not using a contraceptive until a son is born. All the women "stated that son preference is one of the main motivating factors for having many children within a short interval" (2). Women were familiar with contraceptive methods, with the IUD the most preferred and used, followed by the pill. Women who did not use contraception noted a variety of reasons, including high unemployment, which led to "spare time" and boredom, encouraging them to get pregnant (3). Religiosity was largely irrelevant to their decisions, although they debated among each other the nature of Islamic teachings on contraceptive use (3).

The majority of women in the study reported that the political conflict affected family size decisions in ways that led to *more* or *fewer* children (4). For those who wanted more children, the thousands of Palestinians killed in Israel's wars on Gaza required "a reservoir" within a family to "compensate" for martyred children. A quarter of the women, in contrast, reported that the wars increased their desire to use contraceptives because of the devastation of having children killed. They explained that "many families do not want to bring children into the world to suffer and perhaps die ['like chickens'] without being able to offer them a good life." It was noticeably more difficult, they shared, to evacuate and protect children during Israeli air attacks when a family had more of them. A mother of six said that she and other women relatives requested insertion of an IUD immediately following the 2014 war on Gaza for these reasons (4). None of the women expressed demographic competition with Israel as a motivation for large family size, although the author nevertheless projected it onto them (3, 6).

Rather than resolving the structural repression of Palestinians, governments and national, international, and bilateral development, population, and public health organizations consistently rely on limited technocratic solutions and hyperbolize fertility, paradoxically magnifying it. Palestinians in Gaza, for example, live in overwhelming conditions of Israeli enclosure and apartheid that penetrate all dimensions of

life, a system largely funded and supported by Western governments, especially the United States. Ending Israel's racist carceral policies and laws and justly resolving the status of refugees and internally displaced Palestinians would have far more impact on their sexual and reproductive agency than another study of fertility. Demographic competition is an unwarranted projection onto Palestinians but is persistent and overwhelmingly documented for Zionism as a settler-colonial project in Palestine.

### Black, Feminist, and Queer Futurities

This section considers African-American, African, Black feminist, and Western queer scholarship on death, futurity, reproduction, and liberation to further illuminate my investigation of Palestinian life and death without analogizing the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, the historical statuses of Black people in the United States or anywhere, or Western queerness and queer debates, to Palestinian conditions. Rather, Afrofuturist and Afropessimist debates and creative production offer insights on Palestinian creativity and biological and social struggle and survival as imperial, capitalist, and settler-colonial powers continue to deliver erasure and death to groups they deem disposable. Queer-inflected deliberations on optimism and pessimism, moreover, invited me to push harder against the seam of Palestinian anti-reproductive desire by considering forms of flourishing and belonging that do not require heteronormative reproductivity.

In 1998 Alondra Nelson used the "umbrella term" *Afrofuturism* to name a listserv designed to discuss "science fiction metaphors and technocultural production in the African diaspora" (Nelson 2002, 14n23, 15n24, 9).<sup>8</sup> The online community's purpose was to explore "theoretical territory" and "incubate ideas" related to "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation" (9). Late-1990s Afrofuturism challenged reigning fantasies of a "placeless, raceless, bodiless near future enabled by technological progress" that excluded Black communities hegemonically framed as on the wrong side of the "digital divide." To Afrofuturist theorists, this reading ignored

<sup>8</sup> Nelson explains that Mark Dery coined the term in a 1993 introductory essay to an interview he conducted with three US Black cultural critics and producers. The listserv and a September 1999 forum held at New York University by the same title focused on "the future of black cultural production" (Nelson 2002, 9).

African-American cultural (music, art, and literature), scientific, and intellectual history and reinforced "preconceived ideas of black technical handicaps and 'Western' technological superiority" (1, 5, 6). Afrofuturists analyze a long history of Black diasporic literary, artistic, scientific, and entrepreneurial creation oriented toward the future but informed by past and present life, including transatlantic enslavement and the institutions of slavery (7). Afrofuturism "relies on not just the injection of futurity, fantasy, and technology, but also an ever-present orientation toward black liberation that draws its strength from liberation movements in the past" (Hamilton 2017, 19).

Afropessimism, on the other hand, describes a range of theoretical orientations and positions expressed in artistic production, cultural studies, and economic, legal, and philosophical analysis that are arguably negative regarding the potential for decolonization and freedom for Black people in African and African diasporic settings. The main reason for this negativity is the assumed universality and permanence of anti-Black racism after slavery given its necessity to the consolidation and survival of white supremacy. Some Afropessimist scholarship is articulated in the vein of "what went wrong" in postcolonial African settings (Rieff 1998/1999). Philosopher Achille Mbembe, for example, maintains that postcolonial African politics and philosophy made renaissance difficult because they too often lacked "self-reflexivity," instrumentalized "knowledge and science" in the "service of partisan struggle," reproduced colonial fictions of racial purity, and "reenchant[ed] tradition" (2002, 253–254, 243, 255–256, 265). He contends that while the transatlantic slave trade was a "co-invention" of Western actors and "African auxiliaries seeking profit," too many contemporary African politicians deliberately forget the shame of this collaboration (262). The "value of things," he argues, has come to surpass "that of people," leading to "massacres of civilians, genocides, various kinds of maiming" (268).<sup>9</sup>

Mbembe shares the anti-humanist critique at the heart of Afrofuturist and Afropessimist theories and practices. Liberal humanism always required an excluded, subordinated, expellable Other (Mbembe 2019, 157–166). His inter-articulated analysis depends on an equivalent critique of capitalism (177). Capitalism was from the

<sup>9</sup> Writing about the continent, Boulou Ebanda B'éri and P. Eric Louw offer a useful critique and analytical overview of Afropessimist social science scholarship, dividing its approaches and arguments into strands (B'éri and Louw 2011).

beginning “effectively impelled” by “three sorts of drives”: “the constant manufacturing of races, or species (as it happens, *Negroes*),” “seeking to calculate and convert everything into exchangeable commodities (law of *generalized exchange relations*),” and “the attempt to maintain a monopoly over the manufacture of the living as such.” The “civilizational process” “tempered” these drives at various historical moments in modernity, but “all the dikes collapse” in “the age of neoliberalism,” which abolished “taboos” and released “all sorts of drives” to serve “an endless process of accumulation and abstraction” (177–178).

The transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Western hemisphere forcibly separated African-origin peoples from their families and communities of birth (Wilderson 2010, 10–11, 17, 18–19, 27), the definition of social death. Black feminist scholars in Afrofuturist and Afropessimist traditions theorize the embodied, reproductive, and family dimensions of such displacement and violence, exploring its continuing ideological (embedded, for example, in law and policy) and material (reflected, for example, in less access to resources and disproportionate subjection to chronic illness and early death) effects (Sharpe 2016). In her classic article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense J. Spillers (1987) draws on Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts to argue that African-American women are overdetermined split subjects because of an “American grammar,” or symbolic system encoded into the legal system, produced by the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. This grammar is oriented to disrupting “Black African culture” and Black family life by disconnecting mothers and fathers from their progeny (66, 68, 72, 80). “Living in/the wake of slavery,” writes Christina Sharpe, “is living ‘the afterlife of property’ and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother. That inheritance of a non/status is everywhere apparent now in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children” (Sharpe 2016, 15).

Jared Sexton and other humanist critics wrangle with the implications of some Afropessimist ideas. A lively debate refuses the inscription of Black (ontological) pathology and “a certain conflation of the fact of blackness with the lived experience of the black” person historically and in the present. Sexton argues, for example, that “the concept of social death cannot be generalized [to all Black people across time, place and situation]. It is indexed to slavery and it does not travel”

(Sexton 2011, 21, 22, 24). The more important matter may be to "speak of a type of living on that survives after a type of death" (23). For Sexton, Afropessimism does not claim there is "no black (social) life." Rather, it posits that "Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space" (28), creating imaginative and practical spaces of escape. In African and African diasporic literature, art, and music, for example, the figure of the "Afronaut," or Black space traveler, imagines and creates possibilities for "finding safe spaces for black life" in sites "out of reach of racial stereotypes" (Hamilton and Bristow in Hamilton 2017, 18).

Lee Edelman takes on the reproductive dimensions of futurity in his polemical *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Like Spillers, Edelman relies on a Lacanian approach (8, 114), but challenges the value of the innocent child as a figure to whom the future is transmitted, as well as ideological deployments of the reproductive family as extra-political (2–3). Queerness, in this analysis, names the position of those who do not fight for the children (3, 13). Queerness should accept its negative figural status as representing the death of child-centered futurism and the social and political order's death drive (4, 9, 11, 14, 115). Allow the queer to represent "reality's abortion," Edelman insists, the undoing of a heteronormative reproductive futurity, and encourage its disturbance of identity (7, 17, 116, 132).

Edelman's anti-normative *No Future* has drawn a range of its own anti-normative critical scholarship for its unidimensional framing of "the child" in class and racial terms, its unacknowledged male embodied positionality, and its equation of queerness with anti-relational and anti-political ontologies. Jennifer Doyle, for example, notes that Edelman is "hailed" by an antiabortion billboard framed around the belly of a pregnant woman in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Edelman, Doyle points out, makes a correspondence between "abortion and queerness" as "against" reproduction, futurity, and thus life (Doyle 2009, 27, 29). Edelman is not interested in abortion as a normal part of women's lives, the termination of a pregnancy. Doyle contends this signals that the figurations and embodiments in Edelman's queer anti-futurity are male (26–28). Doyle highlights Edelman's rejection of "reparative" and "overly political commitments" in queer scholarship, which Edelman argues are normatizing (28). Doyle draws on feminist scholarship and practice that detach sexual and reproductive agency from liberal theory's autonomous subject and imagines an "alternative

politics” that is “deeply relational,” including in how it imagines the fetus or embryo in relation to the pregnant woman’s body (30–46).

Drawing on the works of a long genealogy of playwrights, scholars, artists, performers, and poets, the late José Esteban Muñoz (2007) argues for “a counter-narrative to political nihilism, a form of inquiry that promotes what I am calling queer futurity,” even a “queer utopia” and “queer temporality” that “sidesteps straight time’s heteronormative bent” (353, 360). Queer futurity “is not an end but an opening or horizon” (360). While sympathetic to Edelman’s negative reading of reproductive futurity centered on the child, Muñoz refuses “to give up hope on concepts like politics, hope, and a future that is not ‘kid’s stuff’” (361). Anti-relationality “is imaginable only if one can frame queerness as a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from the larger social matrix.” Just as “all queers are not the stealth-universal-white-gay-man invoked in queer anti-relational formations, all children are not privileged white babies to whom contemporary society caters” (363).

James Bliss also challenges the unraced child figure at the center of Edelman’s analysis and calls for reckoning “with antiblackness as a structuring force in the contemporary world” (Bliss 2015, 85, 86, 89). Bliss proposes “reproduction without futurity,” taking exception to “interventions called queer negativity” and their politics of “hopelessness.” Black feminist theory, he contends, contains the “prefigurations” of a politics of hope even as it “anticipates or, rather, haunts the political imaginary articulated in queer negativity” (83). Edelman, Bliss argues, “does not account for those modes of reproduction that are not future-oriented, the children who do not register as such, and the ‘families’ that are not granted the security of nuclear bonds” (86). Bliss recommends theorizing “from the vantage of Black female subjectivity” in order to “think the utopian without being beholden to the dictates of hope” or “mired in futurity” (89–90). He argues for the “beautiful or generative” in pessimism and the possibility that embracing it “might also create space for thinking beyond the nuclear family, for thinking a Black feminism that follows neither the father nor the mother, but that embraces the sorts of queer kinship networks that have always shaped Black life in the New World” (94).

Analyzing Octavia Butler’s 1987 science fiction novel *Dawn*, which articulates a post-nuclear war reproductive futurity of human/non-human hybridity whose unwilling mother is the Black woman survivor Lilith Ayapo, Justin Louis Mann advances the ambivalent



concept of “pessimistic futurism,” which “couches the prospects of tomorrow in the uncertainties conditioned by the past and present” (Mann 2018, 62). Referring to a scene in the novel, he writes, “trapped though she is in a limiting situation, Lilith consistently chooses survival over self-abnegation, retreat or forfeit” (63).<sup>10</sup> Mann reads Afropessimism and Afrofuturism as “complementary” projects, the “critical mode” he understands Butler uses in the novel. The pessimistic futurism at whose core is reproduction under conditions not of ones choosing “looks to the potential that lives in the future, acknowledges the unknowability of that future and then speculates about the possible position of black subjects when the future arrives” (65).

Palestinian literature and film after 1948, I show in the following section, rarely set a stake in biological reproductive futurities, reduced Palestinian women to their reproductive lives, capacities, and potential, or offered reproductive competition as a path to victory over Zionism. These works of poetry, prose, and film, which sometimes rely on speculative form, are most likely to express conditions of social and biological death even as life and struggle go on in insecure and often devastating conditions not of Palestinian choosing.

## Death and Futurity in Palestinian Literature and Film

Waste no regrets on S  
 Fixed on the star’s deception  
 She brought the art of death in life  
 To perfection.

“The Woman” – excerpt of poem by Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Jayyusi 1992b, 183, trans. Jayyusi and John Heath-Stubbs)

Palestinian nationalist movement discourse after 1948 reproduced masculinist modernist motifs, including a self-critique that blamed the defeat on “backward” investments in family honor (Hasso 2000), but it rarely expressed a futurity that fetishized women as reproducers

<sup>10</sup> I taught the trilogy by Octavia E. Butler, which begins with *Dawn*, in the Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies senior seminar at Duke University in spring 2019 and spring 2020. I am grateful to the students who enthusiastically participated in the endeavor, even in pandemic conditions. *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* are the second and third novels in the trilogy (Butler 2000).

in a demographic battle with Zionism. Mary Layoun foregrounds familiar nationalist tropes in the Palestinian Declaration of Independence released on November 15, 1988: “We render special tribute to the brave Palestinian woman, guardian of sustenance and life, keeper of our people’s perennial flame” (Layoun 1992, 407). This gendered and heteronormative statement expresses political and social rather than biological reproductive futurity. In comparison to nationalist rhetoric, which rarely reflects ambivalence or opacity, this section makes the case that a prominent theme in Palestinian literary and cinematic work after 1948 is the coexistence of social and political death with social and political resistance and regeneration. While such cultural production is similar to nationalist motifs in not linking emancipation with demographic competition and in foregrounding political and social survival, it is much more likely to express nuanced and contrapuntal sensibilities and negative futurities. My readings of the selected texts do not address matters of form and style, which I leave to creators and scholars of Palestinian literature and film.<sup>11</sup>

Repeated destruction of Palestinian social worlds and separation and dispersal of communities inevitably informed Palestinian literature in the second half of the twentieth century (Jayyusi 1992a, 3, 4–5, 16). Poetry is the privileged Arabic artistic form (Jayyusi 1992a, 2; Rahman 2015, 6). After 1948 the most widely read Palestinian poets in Israel lived in villages under Israeli military rule until it was lifted in 1966. Given they were “highly influenced by communist notions of a backward/progressive dichotomy, as well as Marx’s contention that religion is the masses’ opiate, Palestinian poets criticized cultural and religious values that they believed subjected their society to reactionary conditions and brought defeat upon them” (Ghanim 2009, 30). The poems often made sense of the past and articulated Palestinian futurities that amplified the value of land, family, and notions of honor invested in chastity and masculine valor (33). These are gendered tropes, certainly, but not concerned with Palestinian reproduction in a demographic battle.

The following thematics and concerns emerged from my analysis of post-1948 writing in Salma Khadra Jayyusi’s *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (1992b): unstable temporalities (flashbacks, fluidity of time, mutability of time, disrupted time, stretched time,

<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Nadia Yaqub and Dima Ayoub for their generous comments and source suggestions for this chapter.

waiting), alienation, suffering, exile, grief, longing to return, resistance, redemption, and survival. Writers occasionally refer to reproduction and fertility, but not in the service of a demographic futurity. For example, the final verse of "A Song," a poem by Yusuf `Abdel `Aziz, links heteronormative reproduction to creating future strugglers, a not uncommon theme in Palestinian visual and literary culture:

She stretched her hands out to me  
and we embraced at the gateway of defeat,  
breeding fighters in all directions.

"The Song" – excerpt of poem by `Abel `Aziz (Jayyusi 1992b, 85,  
trans. May Jayyusi and Naomi Shihab Nye).<sup>12</sup>

Writing about three decades before `Abdel `Aziz, poet and novelist Tawfiq Sayigh "was among the few early authors to . . . incorporate the fertility myths that became very fashionable in Arabic poetry in the late fifties" (Jayyusi 1992b, 21). In such myths, "the god arises from death and the world is again filled with fertility and life," which Jayyusi reads as reflecting "a profound hope in the resurgence of the Arab spirit after the catastrophe of 1948, a renewed faith in the possibility of resurrection after symbolic death" (22).

Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) is the most celebrated Palestinian poet and authored significant works of prose. He understood, writes Najat Rahman, that "all poetry is preoccupied with a future and is in this sense political" (Rahman 2015, 10).<sup>13</sup> Two of the "most significant themes" in his work, writes Ibrahim Muhawi, are "memory and presence" (2009, 5). Collective death, moments he randomly survived, and his own impending death are also important concerns in Darwish's

<sup>12</sup> Born in 1956, `Abdel `Aziz became a refugee from his West Bank village during the 1967 war, after which he and his family were dislocated to Amman. He likely wrote this poem in the 1980s given his birth year and the 1992 publication of the anthology.

<sup>13</sup> Darwish, "a lyric poet with a capacity for ceaseless innovation," drew thousands of fans to his poetry readings until the end of his life, although he was ambivalent about his designation as a "national poet" or "resistance poet" (Rahman 2015, 3, 16, 18; Muhawi 2009, 6–7). In a 2007 interview with a journalist Darwish complained of "the Palestinian who wishes to imprison me in my old poems, and the Arab who wants modernism for himself, and bad poetry for me" (Muhawi 2009, 6–7). The discourse around the museum dedicated to his life and work in Ramallah, which includes a mausoleum for his body, arguably participates in this confinement, for example, referring to "safeguard[ing]" his "cultural, literary and intellectual legacy": <http://mahmouddarwish.ps/en/article/6/About-the-museum>.

work, I found. I explore reproduction and death in two iconic Darwish poems, “Identity Card” and “The Dice Player,” the first from early and the second from late in his career.

Darwish was born to a middling peasant family in the village of Birweh in northern Palestine, which Zionists emptied of its Palestinian inhabitants in 1948, appropriated, and settled with Jews. The family “infiltrated” Palestine from Lebanon after a year. They relocated to Galilee to become “present-absentees,” an Israeli legal category for dislocated Palestinians and their descendants present in historic Palestine but deemed “absent” from their appropriated properties (Rahman 2015, 17). Darwish became fluent in literary Hebrew and left Israel for multiple exilic destinations in 1970 until he “returned” to Ramallah in 1996, after it came under the limited jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority, “but exile remained at the heart of his poetry” (18; also Muhawi 2009, 3).

Darwish authored the renowned poem “Identity Card” (*Bitaqat Hawiyya*) in 1964 at age twenty-three (Darwish 1964), which led to Israel imprisoning him. The early verses, addressed to an Israeli state that refuses to hail Palestinians as such, are typically interpreted to promote Palestinian demographic competition with Israeli Jews. The poem relies on repetition and expresses Darwish’s recognized musical style, influenced by classical Arabic meters (Rahman 2015, 18):

Write down  
 I am an Arab  
 and my identity card number is fifty thousand  
 I have eight children  
 and the ninth will arrive after a summer  
 Will you be angry  
 Write down  
 I am an Arab  
 I work with my toiling comrades in a quarry  
 and I have eight children  
 I produce for them bread,  
 clothing and notebooks out of the stone  
 I do not beg for charity nor demean myself  
 at your doorstep’s tiles.  
 Does that anger you?

“Identity Card” – excerpt of poem by Darwish (Darwish 1964,  
 consolidated translation sources, including my own)

The remainder of the poem expresses the steadfast determination of a Palestinian people rooted for generations but victims of displacement and theft, as well as the danger to Israel of their anger and hunger. Overdetermined by the racialized demographic logic of Zionism, the poem's reference to eight children and a ninth on the way is often read as a Palestinian reproductive threat. That is only one reading, I suggest, given the multiple messages in the poem and the dynamic and nuanced understanding of belonging in Darwish's work (Rahman 2015, 20–21). It is reductive, I insist, to understand the verse as a manifesto that encourages Palestinians to have more children to threaten Israel demographically, let alone that Palestinians used the poem as a manual for a fertility-based liberation struggle. Notably, Darwish was twice married but did not himself have children, truncating his own biological line. His poetry and prose till the fields of suffering and death more than they do reproductive futurities.

Darwish struggled with heart disease and other ailments from childhood (Jayyusi 1992a, 73n16). He died in a Houston hospital on August 9, 2008, three days after a nonemergency open-heart surgery (his third) that he had scheduled for August 6 (Muhawi 2009, 9). Muhawi, who translated one of Darwish's major works of prose, *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982* (Darwish 2013, trans. Muhawi; original Arabic 1986), which reflects on the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and 88-day siege of Beirut, speculates that the chosen surgery date was significant to Darwish because it remembers other deathly events. During the war on Beirut, "the Israeli air force dropped a vacuum, or concussion, bomb on a twelve-story building, leveling it to the ground . . . The book . . . condenses the whole siege into a single day, August 6." For Darwish, August 6 remembers this act of war on civilians and "Hiroshima . . . Vanquished remnants of the Nazi army in Berlin . . . Headlines that jumble past with present, urging the present to hurry on. A future sold in a lottery. A Greek fate lying in wait for young heroes . . . on this day, on the anniversary of the Hiroshima bomb, they are trying out a vacuum bomb on our flesh, and the experiment is successful" (Darwish in Muhawi 2009, 9).

*La'ib al-nard* ("The Dice Player") is one of Darwish's last poems, which he read during his final public performance at the Ramallah Summer Cultural Festival in June 2008 (aired on Al Jazeera television) (Joudah in Darwish 2008a). Fady Joudah, who translated the poem, writes that Darwish knew "he was walking towards death, in full

dignity, not without a hope for life through a surgery against the odds” (Joudah quoted in Darwish 2008b).<sup>14</sup> The poem, which begins with Darwish reflecting on his birth in 1941 in Birweh, expresses the randomness of life and death and the impossibility of living as if a secure future is possible:

Who am I to say to you  
 what I say to you?  
 when I'm not a stone burnished by water  
 to become a face  
 or a reed punctured by wind  
 to become a flute . . .  
 I'm a dice player  
 I win some and lose some  
 just like you or a little less . . .  
 born by the water well  
 and three lonely trees like nuns,  
 without parade or midwife,  
 I was given my name by chance  
 belonged to a family by chance  
 and inherited its traits, features and illnesses:  
 First, arterial disease and high blood pressure  
 Second, shyness when addressing my parents  
 and the tree – my grandmother  
 Third, a hope in being cured of influenza  
 with a cup of hot chamomile

“The Dice Player” – excerpt of poem by Darwish (Darwish 2008b,  
 trans. Fady Joudah)

In the remainder of the poem, the narrator makes clear he had little hand in his birth, was by coincidence born a male, “did not try hard to find a mole” in “his most private body parts,” could have been like “my sister who screamed then died” an hour after birth, coincidentally did not take the school bus in which other children died in an accident, and by chance survived “the sea” he played in as a child. He could have become “an olive tree, a geography teacher.” “Who am I to say to you/I could have not been who I am/I could have not been here/The plane

<sup>14</sup> The poem “employs a quieter lyric and more conversational tone that he has been developing since 2002 with [the poetry collections] *State of Siege* and *Don't Apologize for What You've Done*: a rebirth that exhibits . . . how he always coaxed his readers beyond a fixed reading of his work” (Joudah quoted in Darwish 2008b).

could have crashed/with me on board that morning/but it is my good fortune that I sleep in/I could not have seen Damascus or Cairo the Louvre or the magical towns/ . . . And had I been a fast walker/I might have become shrapnel" (Darwish 2008b, trans. by Joudah). If anything, Darwish's creative oeuvre is pessimistic, ruminating on social and biological death, a ubiquitous theme in Palestinian cultural production since 1948, not reproductive futurity in its biological or demographic registers.

I opened this chapter with an epigraph from Emile Habiby's 1974 satirical novel, whose protagonist is Saeed, "the Pessoptimist" (Habiby 2003), which I maintain is concerned with social rather than biological reproduction and transformation and, similar to work by Darwish and other Palestinian artists, is not oriented to an optimistic futurity. Habiby, a member of the Communist Party throughout his life, was born in Haifa, Palestine, in 1922 and died in Nazareth, Israel, in 1996 (Jayyusi 1992a, 33).<sup>15</sup> The novel meditates on the political and ontological condition of being present and absent at the same time.

In the first of the novel's three "books," the narrator reports the account of Saeed ("happy" in Arabic) from Haifa, who had written a letter asking that his "strange" story be told since he has "disappeared," as he had wanted and "expected all his life," but was "not dead." Rather, Saeed the "office boy" is in "outer space" in the "company" of "creatures" with whom he is "soaring" (Habiby 2003, 3–5). His father, a collaborator with Zionist forces, was shot and killed (presumably by Palestinians) in 1948. Saeed escaped death "because a stray donkey came into the line of fire." The ass "died in place of me. My subsequent life in Israel, then, was really a gift from that unfortunate beast. What value, then, honored sir, should we assign to this life of mine?" (6, 9). Under no circumstances is Saeed a fighter or a resistor; he is "remarkable" because he is like "the rest" (7). The "nobility" of his "Pessoptimist" family, he explains, is traced to a fourteenth-century "Cypriot girl from Aleppo" who "ran off with a Bedouin" who divorced her because of an affair she had with another man who also divorced her in Beersheba (8). He continues:

<sup>15</sup> *Saeed the Pessoptimist* "was published serially in *Al-Ittihad*, the Arabic newspaper of the Israeli Communist Party, as a response to the 1967 June War" (Mir 2015, 143), before it was published as a novel in Jerusalem in 1974.

“Our forefathers went on divorcing our grandmothers until our journey brought us to a flat and fragrant land on the shore of the sea called Acre, then on to Haifa at the other side of the bay. We continued this practice of divorcing our wives right up until the state [of Israel] was founded” (8). At that point, the family scattered to live “in all of the Arab countries not yet occupied” (9).

When 24-year-old Saeed and his remaining family ran out of money in Lebanon by the end of 1948, he returned to work as a collaborator for the same “Mr. Adon Safsarsheck” who had employed his father (9, 11, 27). Saeed, a self-serving dim-witted coward, is never sure whether he is a pessimist or an optimist since if “harm befalls me during the day, I thank Him that it was no worse” (12, 15, 43). His Israeli espionage assignment is to pretend to be a member of a Palestinian workers’ union and to target Communist activists (43). He reconnects with his adolescent love object, Yu`ad (“shall return”), until the state deports her for being “an infiltrator” (61–62). In return for an obviously mendacious Israeli government promise to allow this first beloved to return, Saeed continues to spy on Palestinians until he comes to reside in a `Acca mental institution in the early 1970s (65).

The second book centers on Baqiyya (“the remainder”), “the girl who stayed,” and is again narrated by a person who received a letter from Saeed. Saeed writes he is living with his “brothers from outer space . . . in the catacombs of Acre, safe but not secure” (69). Saeed has a secret he needs to tell the world; it is Baqiyya’s secret, who he married by arrangement of his Israeli employers, who wanted to control her family (78, 87). Baqiyya wants Saeed to help her return to her village of Tantura and find a hidden family treasure (88–89). He now has two secrets to keep, that he is a collaborator and Baqiyya’s family treasure. His Israeli boss forces them to name their only child Walaa (“loyalty”) (97). Saeed and Baqiyya continue looking for the treasure as their son grows up (98–99). In 1966 Saeed’s boss informs him with rage that the sixteen-year-old Walaa, who had learned to speak little out loud during his life, had become a Palestinian guerrilla fighter. Baqiyya had told him and his friends where to find the treasure, which included “weapons and gold” (106). When his parents find him in a hiding place “in the ruins” of Tantura, Walaa “resolved to die a martyr rather than surrender” (107, 108). Saeed’s Israeli employers, “out of compassion” for Saeed and his mother, want them to “persuade him to abandon this



adolescent death wish" and threaten to kill all of them if he does not (108). After a long conversation between Walaa and Baqiyya, she decides to join him in the cave, taking one of the machine guns (112). Mother and son escape by "diving into the sea" until "they had disappeared into the water" and were likely one of the units that fought in the 1967 Israeli war (113, 114).

Book three, titled "The Second Returner [Yu`ad]," once again begins with a narrator reading a letter from Saeed, who has awakened "on top of a stake," although he isn't sure if he is in a nightmare (117–118). Saeed decides it is best not to risk finding out by waking up "until I met Yu`ad once again and felt warm for the first time in a thousand years" (118–119). During the 1967 war, he explains, he was imprisoned and expected to spy on Palestinians in the Shatta prison; prison guards beat him badly to prove he was not a collaborator (122, 129, 130). In prison, he briefly cared for and was impressed by a badly wounded younger Saeed who had crossed into Palestine from Lebanon to fight and had a twenty-year-old sister named Yu`ad, with whom the older Saeed quickly becomes infatuated (132–133). Saeed has little choice but to continue working for the Israelis as a spy in and outside of his fake prison stints (134–135). At various points Saeed repeats his pessimistic family's intergenerational rationalization, or "philosophy," of "how there is a kind of death which is better than another, and one, indeed, better than life itself" (145).

The novel's form relies on repeated cross-generational reproductions of the status quo and interruptions by younger doubles. The young Yu`ad ultimately reveals to the protagonist Saeed that her dead mother was Yu`ad, his love from long ago. In addition to naming her daughter Yu`ad, she had named her son Saeed, the beaten young guerrilla fighter Saeed cared for initially in prison (150–151, 153–154). In a scene that almost exactly repeats events from decades earlier, Yu`ad fiercely fights the soldiers as her mother had, but they deport her for illegally entering Israel; she promises, "I will return!" (155). In life or a dream, Saeed continues "holding on tight to his stake" despite various figures from his life encouraging him to leave Israel or join the Palestinian fight (158–159). He ultimately turns to another being from the sky, apparently God, who says: "When you can bear the misery of your reality no longer but will not pay the price necessary to change it, only then you come to me" (159). In the

epilogue, we learn that all the letters were postmarked from an Israeli mental hospital in `Acca (161).

The threads of expulsion, disappearance, intergenerational conflict, struggles to return, and the paradoxes of living under settler-colonialism bind *The Secret Life of Saeed* (Habiby 2003). It is difficult to argue, however, that the novel grounds pessimism or optimism in biological proliferation of the family. For one thing, the novel at various points forecloses Palestinian biological reproduction. After her husband was killed in a crane accident while he was working at the port of Haifa, Saeed's brother's widow ran "off with another man two years later and he turned out to be sterile. When my mother [also a pessoptimist] heard that he was so, she repeated her favorite saying, 'And why should we not praise God?'" Saeed follows by rhetorically asking the reader, "So what are we then? Optimists or pessimists?" (13). Male sterility comes up again when the wife of Saeed's missing great uncle, who during the Mandate period had gone in search of a treasure lost for centuries but never returned, "found another husband, one who was not sterile" (29). Saeed and Baqiyya limit their own progeny to one child after their son, Walaa, is born in Israel: "Since I realized birth control was a proof of loyalty, we had no more children" (97).

*The Secret Life of Saeed* invests in younger Palestinian generations the hope of return and political and social regeneration: "Walaa, my only son, that shy, skinny young man, whose dinner any cat could steal, had become a *fedaiy*, a guerrilla, and had taken up arms in rebellion against the state!" (106). Walaa, who turns out to be more his mother's son, with "two of his schoolmates, had founded a secret cell. Then he had retrieved, from a cave in a deep hollow in the rocks off the deserted beach of Tanturah, a well-made strongbox, shut tight so that no moisture could penetrate it. It was filled with weapons and gold." When Saeed reprimands his wife for telling their son, Walaa, the secret of the treasure, she replies: "But Saeed, Saeed, our children are our only hope!" (106). Similarly, the younger Saeed, son of the expelled lover Yu`ad, is the fighter who crosses the border into Palestine.

With the exception of his beaten down and resigned mother, women characters such as Saeed's lover Yu`ad, his wife Baqiyya, and Yu`ad's daughter Yu`ad are distinctly bold and courageous refusers. Some of them marry and have children, but they also join the resistance, search for resources, and socialize children to remember and fight for existence. The majority, however, termed "the rest" by Saeed, do the best

they can in their conditions. The novel challenges authenticist and biologist definitions of belonging and does not traffic in honor discourse, puritanical sexual norms, or heteronormative family values. It does, however, harshly judge Saeed and others like him who will do anything to survive, even as it shows the impossible absurdities Palestinians must negotiate and the choices they make to do so.

The ontological state of being dead yet alive connects Habiby's novel to another published forty years later by Palestinian author Ibtisam Azem titled *Sifr al-Ikhtifa'* (*The Book of Disappearance*) (Azem 2019, trans. Antoon). The novel opens with the voice of Alaa, a single forty-year-old Palestinian with an apartment in Tel Aviv who describes his fearful mother running through the streets of the `Ajami neighborhood in Jaffa searching for his grandmother "from house to house" (1–3). Alaa ultimately finds her dead "on an old wooden bench gazing at the sea" (5). Azem describes contemporary Jaffa as a scene of haunting, the aftermath of an ethnic expulsion and continuing politics of death: "All the Jaffans who stayed here see a shadow walking next to them when they walk through the old city. Even the Jews say they hear voices at night, but when they go out to see who it is, they don't find anyone" (4). Alaa's grandmother had refused to leave Jaffa in 1948, although her natal family and husband left and were unable to return. Speaking in the present tense about 1948, she explains to her grandson: "I'm six months pregnant. What would we do if something happened on the way there? How could one leave Jaffa anyway? What would I do in Beirut?" (10–13).

Like Saeed, Alaa wrote a story of the self and Palestinian past and present. He purchased a "red notebook" from a stationary store and began "writing his memoirs" (13), "addressing you directly" (14), speaking to his grandmother, whose stories about the past, he realized too late, had many "holes" (15). His grandmother was expelled from her home in al-Manshiyye neighborhood in 1948 and "forced to live in `Ajami," which the new state barbed in with its remaining Palestinians; Jaffa was emptied of all except four thousand of its one hundred thousand Palestinian residents (16–18).

In the fourth chapter *The Book of Disappearance* introduces "Ariel," a liberal Jewish newspaper journalist whose father had insisted he learn Arabic to "know thy enemy" (79–81). Ariel was friends with Alaa and lived in the same apartment building in Tel Aviv, on a lower floor (23). Alaa was not seen again after a party the

previous evening.<sup>16</sup> Chapter nine, titled “A Building,” makes clear that *all* Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza have completely disappeared, disrupting an Israeli normalcy that relies on their existence as marginals (49–53). For Israelis, “the Arabs are gone” (56). By chapter fifteen, Ariel had used Alaa’s “spare key,” which they had exchanged in case they were locked out, to enter his apartment and closely explore it. He begins thumbing through Alaa’s memoir (75–81), followed by sleeping in his bed and taking over his apartment.

From Alaa’s memoir, read by Ariel, we learn that his mother decided to have a hysterectomy early in her marriage (121, 122). Deliberate self-extinguishing of biological futurity is an overriding message in the novel, as is the ontological status of living death for Palestinians in an Israeli settler-colonial context. For Jewish Israelis, in contrast, the novel ends with a massive celebration to mark the disappearance of all Palestinians from historic Palestine, “the biggest festival in the young country’s history.” “In modern states people chase the future. The victors never look back. They only look forward.” Part of this Zionist forward motion is to finalize the erasure of traces of Palestinian existence, including replacing Arabic names of streets and places with Hebrew or English names (219). At this point, Ariel has moved into Alaa’s apartment permanently because he much preferred it to his own.

*Wedding in Galilee*, *ʿUrs al-jalil* in Arabic (Khleifi 1987), is the first feature-length Palestinian film made in historic Palestine by a Palestinian. The film is iconic and relevant to my focus on Palestinian reproduction and futurity. As with Habiby’s novel, it is ambivalent in its treatment of marriage and thus reproductive futurity. Set in a contemporary “extremist” Palestinian village in the Nazareth area that was under military curfew for “blood shed” four months previously, the story centers on a father (Abu ʿAdel), the *mukhtar* of the village, committed to holding a wedding to marry off his son despite bans on large gatherings. The Israelis agree to allow the wedding on condition that Abu ʿAdel invites the military governor as a guest. Abu ʿAdel agrees but makes the entourage commit to stay through the very end of an elaborate wedding with its food, clothing, music, and ritual

<sup>16</sup> Four chapters follow that offer snippets of Palestinian-Israeli labor and social interactions in Israel, including on a “flower farm,” at a “bus stop,” in “Prison 48,” and in a “hospital.”

dimensions, which lasts a day and a night, during which the curfew is suspended. The conditions for the wedding divide the family and villagers. Abu `Adel's adult nephew is a collaborator with the Israelis who is in charge of maintaining peace and security during the wedding. Many dramas and narrative threads unfold during the film, including homoerotic scenes and an ultimately foiled plot to kill the military governor by young village men who had suffered Israeli torture.

The son, `Adel, who badly wanted to get married, is ashamed about the conditions for the wedding. His mother replies, "We have no choice." Most interesting for my purposes is that the consummation between bride and groom is unsuccessful because `Adel is unable to have an erection despite repeated attempts initiated by himself or Samya during a long evening, although the couple make love. They cannot provide evidence of blood from a broken hymen, which devastates both sets of parents, who seek each other's counsel outside the bedroom and turn to prayer while events continue to unfold. `Adel's father is especially frantic since he views his honor as dependent on signaling successful penetrative consummation and recognizes that the plotting against the military authorities while the festivities continued outside was increasingly dangerous.

In the bedroom, `Adel tells Samya in frustration that the only solution is for him to kill his father, who he understands to be the source of his suffering and failure, to which she replies, "violence does not solve anything." *Wedding in Galilee* expresses the bitterness of Palestinian children against ineffectual fathers understood to have conceded their dignity to survive under Israeli authority. Samya ultimately decides to "protect everyone's honor" by undressing and penetrating herself with her hand, producing blood evidence on her white nightgown. Before doing so, she asks `Adel, "If a woman's honor is her virginity, where does one find evidence of the honor of men?" The marriage is publicly completed when Samya forecloses biological reproduction by queerly penetrating herself. Anticlimax and failure are the messages in *Wedding in Galilee*. An uncle who disapproves of the wedding held under the imposed conditions nevertheless foils the plan by younger men to kill the military entourage. The internal foiling of the attack on the entourage is the definition of a defeated people. The Palestinian wedding in Galilee ultimately occurs under the conditions set by the Israeli military authorities.

Two more recent Palestinian short films address reproductive and anti-reproductive futurities. *Bonbone*, a crowd-funded production by Rakan Mayasi released in 2017, opens with a few young Palestinian men in an Israeli prison showering. After returning to his cell, the male protagonist deeply inhales the fragrance of a piece of candy wrapped in two layers of plastic, one green and one clear, unwraps it, and tries to masturbate in bed but is unsuccessful. Arriving on a bus with multiple women the same day, his wife visits with him after an Israeli woman soldier wearing latex gloves slowly searches her naked back, loosens her long hair, rubs her scalp, and has her crouch to search her anally. The husband and wife communicate by phone separated by a glass partition whose seam was broken by other prisoners and visitors to create a small opening. The plan had been for him to hand semen to her through the opening. She asks, “if it turns out to be a boy, what would you name him?” Revisiting the motif of male sexual and reproductive failure, he explains with shame that he could not ejaculate. “I am damaged” (*kharban*). She responds by seducing him through the glass until they both have orgasms. He wraps the semen into the two layers of the small candy wrapper, twists the ends, and slips it to her through the seam. Before the long bus ride home from the prison begins, she sets a six-hour timer. When twenty-two minutes are left, she decides to inseminate herself on the bus, which is half full of mostly dozing women, some with children. She takes off her heeled shoes, crouches on the seat, and inserts the semen into her vagina. The film ends with a panel of text informing viewers that West Bank Palestinian women have conceived more than fifty babies with imprisoned husbands thus far using such methods.

Mohammed Hamdan (2019) analyzes the Palestinian smuggled semen phenomenon among men sentenced to life in prison,<sup>17</sup> arguing they are “biopolitical acts of resistance” to a carceral system designed to cut the men off from the outside world physically and communicatively (528–530). Using a Derridean analysis of masturbation and semen transmission, Hamdan argues that Palestinian women’s use of IVF to conceive in such cases has the unintended consequence of

<sup>17</sup> Five thousand Palestinian men are serving life sentences “for offences that range from stone throwing and burning tires to killing Israeli soldiers. They are normally classified by Israeli authorities as security prisoners, a designation that subjects them to extra restrictions by Israeli prison laws, especially the denial of conjugal visits” (Hamdan 2019, 526).

empowering them by alienating the biological father from reproduction (529–530, 538–539). This strategy, he contends, reclaims a futurity invested in nationalist reproduction despite Israel's imprisonment of activists (527–528). The resulting "child/trace not only comes as present affirmation of the absent Palestinian other/father who is denied by the Israelis; the child/trace also manifests the prisoners' nonorigin in their society only to affirm their powerful return to presence and symbolize their resistance to the Israeli policing of subversive correspondence" (527). The born child "symbolizes a state of aspiration – the aspiration for the impossible, or the reworking of the impossible" and "proof" of the prisoner's existence (531). Sperm smuggling and successful insemination cross the barriers made when Israeli settler-colonialism "cuts" Palestinians from the land and each other (531, 532).

I find persuasive Hamdan's reading of sperm smuggled out of prison as a missive or correspondence that communicates presence – not unlike the letters Saeed sends from a mental institution and the memoir written by Alaa and read by Ariel after he disappears. Hamdan's provocative reading of sperm smuggling is more optimistic than mine, however, regarding the potential for women's empowerment when reproduction occurs outside coitus. Reproduction within marriage, ideally of a son who will be counted toward the patrilineal line, is an authorized Palestinian cultural aspiration and accomplishment and source of great social pressure. I am unconvinced that nationalist reproductive futurities motivate impregnation in such circumstances, although I concede it is impossible to pull apart stated from unstated motivations, let alone the unconscious workings of desire. The desire to fulfill the requirements of a gendered heteronormative status quo can easily explain Palestinian efforts to reproduce despite settler-colonial carcerality.

Celebratory sperm smuggling and nationalist reproductive accounts leave little space for Palestinian *anti-reproductive desire* and the difficulties of fulfilling it in settler-colonial conditions. *Condom Lead* (2013), a short film by Gaza brothers Tarzan Abu Nasser and Arab Abu Nasser, illustrates this very dilemma, among others. Set in an upper-floor middle-class Gaza apartment, the film features a married couple in their thirties who repeatedly try to have nonreproductive sex but are foiled by the overwhelming, nonstop sounds and lights of war in a screenplay with no dialogue except

for the occasional gurgles and terrified cries of a toddler child. The film opens with the baby crawling among multicolored pastel balloons we later learn are unused condoms the father has blown up. In the evening, the constant sounds of drones and warplanes in the sky and sirens on the ground take up all sonic space and often move the mother to comfort the terrified toddler awakened or unable to fall asleep as a result. Weariness is the overwhelming affect produced by living in Gaza, a prison whose land, air, and water borders Israel guards. After he washes his bearded face, the male protagonist watches staccato news clips while his wife takes her turn looking in the bathroom mirror, washing and stretching her face, releasing her hair. Lying in bed side by side, facing upward, she touches his feet and then his arm; he reaches for her and as they caress, he opens a condom wrapper.

As the baby listens to a drone become louder and louder, clashing into a crescendo that includes shooting and sirens, she starts to cry and the woman once again leaves the bed to rock her cradle. The husband blows up and ties another condom balloon, illustrating the incessance of Israeli violence and the repetition necessary for Palestinians to continue. A few days later, another attempt to have sex, another explosion, flashing lights of war illuminate the apartment through its windows, another terrified cry by the child, and another balloon is on the floor. Twenty-two days later, tens of blown up transparent condoms gently float on the apartment floor. In the last scene, the male protagonist is on the balcony in the morning. We look at his back and watch with him dozens of blown up empty condoms floating over the skies released by other Gazans.

Palestinian geographer Walaa Alqaisiya (2018) takes Palestinian anti-reproductive desire a step further in her “decolonial queer” analysis of the activist and intellectual work of alQaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society. AlQaws challenges “the racialized worldview that informs Israeli social life, which divides the world into binaries of civilized versus uncivilized, pride versus homophobia, democracy versus terror” (32). Working within the geographic frame of historic Palestine, and thus persistently crossing the physical walls, borders, and barriers separating and compartmentalizing Palestinians, alQaws “has a presence in Haifa and Jaffa ... East Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bayt Jala” (34, 36). Decolonial queering “rejects singling out sexuality as a discrete site of oppression disconnected from



the power structure of settler colonialism" (36). AlQaws, Alqaisiya argues, "dares to image Palestine otherwise."

Decolonial queering aims for a politically and sexually transformed Palestinian futurity. While not taking "an anti-national stance," it challenges the "heteronormative reproduction of [a] Palestine" that foregrounds heroic masculinity and disavows homosexuality, nonmarital sexuality, and sex work, which are condemned as sources of collaboration with Israel and dishonor (36, 37). It "provides room for gender and sexual performances that *disidentify* with the dominant gendered paradigms enshrined in Palestinian nationalist thought" and the queer assimilation requirements of Zionist LGBTQ frames (38, 35). It challenges the nationalist silencing of "queer and native feminists" and insists on recognizing that the edifices of Israeli settler-colonialism are "heteronormative structures" reproduced in "Palestinian imaginings of liberation." A Palestinian decolonial queer futurity refuses liberation on the terms set by these systems of "subjugation" (39).



This chapter challenges the assumption that Palestinians after 1948 absorbed the demographic competitive logic of Zionism and followed it in their reproductive decision-making. It shows how demographic research on Palestinian fertility, however, often reproduces Zionist ideological assumptions and projections. These methods leave little space for Palestinian motivations and desires – which span the range of possibilities – let alone Palestinian thriving. The second section draws on African diasporic, Black feminist, and queer scholarship on reproduction, futurity, and death to illuminate my analysis of death and reproduction for Palestinians after 1948. Drawing on a selection of iconic and newer post-1948 Palestinian poetry, prose, and film, the final section shows that Palestinian creative work has been more likely to express pessimistic futurities, dwelling on the grounds of social and biological death rather than reproduction. It extends the book's argument further by making an affirmative case for Palestinian anti-reproductive desire as another dimension of the Palestinian past and decolonized present and future. As a whole, the chapter offers additional substantiation for my argument that a racialized demographic logic has been the central compulsion of *Zionism* as a settler-colonial movement that always required ethnically cleansing the land of its

indigenous inhabitants by all available means and appropriating their lands, natural resources, and built environments. The coda concludes *Buried in the Red Dirt* by tracking and analyzing the rise of an explicitly reproductive Palestinian nationalist theme in 1980s and 1990s discourse and iconography and briefly dwells on the multifaceted ways Palestinians have addressed death, struggle, and regeneration in life and art.