A Place for/in Place of Identity? A conversation with Larissa Sansour

Silvia Hassouna

In the following conversation, Larissa Sansour talks about her recent film *In Vitro* (2019) and her science fiction trilogy *A Space Exodus* (2008), *Nation Estate* (2012) and *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015). *In Vitro* was presented at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019 as a two-channel film, an installation and an architectural intervention. Sansour presents an apocalyptic and dystopian future, combining themes of progress and technology with the Palestinian experience of displacement and uprootedness in imaginative and uncanny ways.

The interview unpacks different facets of national identity through the themes of loss, belonging, heritage and ecology. Sansour discusses the emancipatory potential in claiming expressive forms that artists from the Middle East are not expected to use. In *A Space Exodus*, the artist lands on the moon as the first Palestinian entering space. In *Nation Estate*, Palestine’s population is restricted to a single skyscraper that looks out over Jerusalem but is separated from it by the Israeli wall. In the trilogy’s conclusive film, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, decorated plates are buried underground for future archaeologists to find and recognise that Palestinians had once existed. We discuss the role of national symbols and fictional objects in today’s political entanglements of myth, fiction and the reality.
Silvia Hassouna  Your artistic work has shifted from the documentary form to science fiction. In one interview, you mention a remark made by Jean-Luc Godard that the documentary was the only expressive form allowed to the Palestinians, whereas Israelis had access to the ‘epic’. Do you think things have changed for Palestinian cultural production? Do you feel that your work is feeding into a wider aesthetics that allows other narratives to emerge?

Larissa Sansour  I think there is a more positive shift in how artists from certain regions are producing work, and also in terms of format. I work with science fiction, which is very male, very white, very Hollywood, very much about countries that are progressive: the first world, with very big budgets. As a female artist coming from the Middle East you are not expected to work in that way. I remember in my early career when I started experimenting with different forms, there was a curator who said that she loved my work but that it ‘looked wrong’ in the Middle Eastern context because she was looking for a grittier style or a work that shows the politics on the ground. This is exactly why my work aims to subvert that kind of idea of how an artist, as a woman, as a person from a third world country is supposed to work. Later it became an obsession of mine to work with projects that are very high budget because I wanted to question what an artist can and cannot do. That is why I am interested in working with this cross-section between film and art, and I think I sit very comfortably there now. It took me a long time to find a way, a reasonable way to do it. It is not a very easy approach to have, because once you start talking about politics and you frame it in that context, it immediately starts creating problems: how do you talk about serious matters while using a language that is not associated with that? I often get asked if I’m running away from present day politics by working with imaginaries and creating my own universes. On the contrary, I feel that the present political dialogue has reached an impasse and is trapped in certain circular dialogues regarding Israel and Palestine. It is like a mathematical equation, if you can’t find a solution to it you need to posit a new one to arrive at a new solution, or not even a solution, but a new approach to that dialogue; so setting up my own universe allows me to have my own language and vocabulary. I don’t have to be dictated to by the political jargon in that way. This is something that people in the art world are more and more aware of, but it is still a sort of uncharted territory to work with all these unknowns such as sci-fi, big budgets, political issues, arts… it is all these things at once that make the work challenging.

SH  You mentioned these changes happened very recently, is there a specific reason for that?

LS  The first video work that I showed in a well-known public institution was in 2002/2003, so we are talking about two decades ago and I can see the shift. Maybe also because I have lived in various countries since, so I have seen different perspectives from different parts of the world. I used to live in the United States, where it is quite impossible to really
talk about the Middle East. The more I worked there, the more I realised that the country holds a solipsistic view; it is quite removed from the rest of the world. Living in Britain, I feel more connected to the Arab world, people are much more aware of what is going on and realise that they have a responsibility to be aware of what is happening, and also because of their colonial past.

SH I wanted to ask you about the role of symbols in your work. They are very much present – the olive tree, the key, the Palestinian flag – but what do they do for you?

LS It might sound weird but I never really liked working with symbolism. However, I am interested in how symbolism functions in relation to national identity and in how symbols become signifiers for a culture that feels it’s about to be lost. In the case of Palestine, we all experience this ‘traumatic identity’ that is a black hole, a limbo, and we are always holding on to what happened in the Nakba (catastrophe) in 1948, and also projecting a future state. Yet, the present is kind of disappearing; while we are discussing the past and how we want our future to look, more and more land grabs are happening on the ground. The present is not really there, we are kind of in-waiting. So in Nation Estate you see all these symbols resembling artefacts in an empty sterile museum. They are just there for display and we are kind of commemorating them; we all know what they mean, but
they are just empty vessels. This is part of the question of what is national identity; why do we hold on to these symbols and when do they become just empty vessels? In the film I made after Nation Estate that is called In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain I decided I wanted to do a ‘historical intervention’. By this I mean that I wanted to find a way to reactivate those national symbols. So the protagonist of the film who calls herself a ‘narrative terrorist’ takes various plates that carry the Palestinian black and white keffiyeh pattern and plants them in various parts of Israel-Palestine for future archaeologists to find. These plates have fictional origins in that they are taken from Nation Estate, and this conversion from fact to fiction is essential. It was essential to find something that belonged to a purely fictional world. It is a provocative comment to say that even if we don’t exist now, these pieces will secure a future in which archaeologists will find us. The work did not really feel complete until I took these plates and actually buried them in various places in Palestine and Israel, in fifteen different locations. It was not easy to bury them in places controlled by Israel, such as Jerusalem or Eilat. So these plates are currently in the ground for future archaeologists to find. It is also a take on how archaeology works, because in most places, and surely in Israel-Palestine, archaeology does not confirm historical fact, it confirms narratives. Israel-Palestine was never about rational arguments or truth, it was always about persuasive narratives. How do we come up with these narratives and do they have to be real? Does archaeology have to be based on truth, does history have to be based on truth? So this play between myth, fiction and the real is very much present in my work and I find that whenever you start working in shifting contexts new meanings can arise. This is part of the reason why I work with science fiction.

Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain, 2016, 29 min, film still, courtesy of the artists

I understand that yours is a critique of holding on to fixed icons and symbols, but I feel that there is a difference between abstract symbols, like pictures of the al-Aqṣā mosque
featuring in Palestinian homes and Facebook profile pictures, and those used as an ordinary object like the keffiyeh that is also used as an everyday scarf. I will always remember my aunt wrapping a keffiyeh around my cousin’s stomach to protect him from cold because he had a stomach ache. How strange it felt to see a national symbol used in an act of care and intimacy. But I guess in your work you focus more on what we project onto these symbols…

LS I am quite interested in how Palestinians living in Palestine relate to their identity vis-à-vis Palestinians living in the diaspora. This interest came because I left Palestine when I was fifteen, during the first Intifada in 1988. All schools were closed, and in order to continue higher education some parents sent their kids alone to other countries. Most of the kids came back, but I never returned to Palestine. So I have been part of the dialogue outside of Palestine for a very long time. I am interested to know how the world perceives us and how Palestinians think about Palestine even though they have never visited it. So part of In Vitro is about the struggle between two generations: a generation that carries their memory from being on the ground and a generation that was only born on the ground but has never seen the face of it. Their experience is so severe and they feel that their memories are so real, as if they have been programmed to think that they themselves have lived them. That was part of why the film has the cloning programme, almost to say that the new generation is living their parents’ experiences, but really those things didn’t happen to them.

SH This is a feeling that most Palestinians can relate to, to a certain extent, but do you think it is something that the new generations in the West Bank feel as much as someone who has to imagine Palestine as the homeland from afar?

LS I think that the more distant you are from Palestine the more you hold on to these things that you find precious as signifiers; it is almost a sacrilege to say that you don’t believe in the keffiyeh and all these other symbols, but it is also very reductive for an identity. So when you are in Palestine and having grown up in it, you feel that you are more objective because you are so close to all of this that you can be dismissive because it doesn’t take the same conceptual or religious pathos. Living outside Palestine, I keep being invited to dabkeh parties and traditional Palestinian folkloric clothes, ceramics and food markets, but I am more than that as a Palestinian, you don’t see that happening to cultures that haven’t experienced trauma in the same way. So this reduction of identity to symbols I find very problematic and it signifies to me the fact that for us national identity is in trauma, and I think that much of this can be related to the Jewish identity as well. This is not just about the Palestinian situation but a more universal consideration, it is about understanding what this means for definitions of identity. When we are talking essentials it becomes problematic, it certainly raises more questions than answers.
Absolutely. I found the inter-generational dialogue in *In Vitro* very powerful. I believe that it captures an anxiety about memory that is very present in the Palestinian cultural field; there is a sort of disagreement on whether it is better to move forward in some ways or to hold on to the past. On the one hand, people worry that the new generations won’t know what their country looked like even twenty years ago, while on the other this debate is very critical of how memory is produced and by whom.

It is a deadlock in a way and the film (*In Vitro*) doesn’t really side with any of that, I just present a problem that we all need to start discussing. I think a lot of things are detrimental to progress, to taking the next steps; we are still in our parents’ generation’s mode of thinking and there is a great need to move on to other strategies. You are constantly being dictated to about who you are as a Palestinian. New imaginaries are almost forbidden to cultures that have experienced trauma. You almost fear that if you do that… if you go beyond the current expected narrative, then you are no longer a Palestinian.

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**A short extract from *In Vitro*, courtesy of the author Søren Lind and Larissa Sansour**

The town of Bethlehem has been destroyed by an eco-disaster. A group of scientists have created an orchard in a bunker underground. Dunia, played by Hiam Abbass, is one of them. On her deathbed she talks to Alia, played by Maisa Abd Elhadi, a young woman who was born underground and has never seen the town above her head.

**ALIA:** I was raised on nostalgia, the past spoon-fed to me, my own memories replaced by those of others. They appear personal and intimate. They’re not real, but seductive… like lavish illustrations in a children’s book. Out of touch with life down here… like a bacteria planted in me.

**DUNIA:** We were all raised on someone else’s nostalgia. Our own experiences blending with the stories we are told. Your memories are as real as mine.

**ALIA:** I disagree. The pain these stories cause are twofold… because the loss I feel was never mine.
SH  Who do you have in mind when you produce your work, if you have anyone in mind at all?

LS  I don’t believe that art can function in a vacuum, so I always think of an audience. I think of the audiences I am familiar with: American, European, Australian, and also the Arab world. Mainly I am negotiating between European and Middle Eastern audiences because the United States is quite restrictive, they happen to find anything I produce provocative and I can’t self-censor myself like this all the time, whereas in the European context I don’t feel like I have to abide self-censorship.

SH  When talking with different people about cultural production I am often put in front of a very sharp distinction between that which speaks to a Palestinian audience, where the ‘local’ often takes a positive connotation, and that which speaks to an international audience, where the ‘international’ often takes negative connotations and refers to a language that Palestinians don’t understand. While being critical of the power relations that influence cultural production in the Middle East, I always feel uncomfortable with such sharp distinction between the local and the international. Nevertheless, I understand that there is an uneasiness to be explored there. Have you come across anything of the sort in your work?

LS  I think it is a self-defence mechanism to define what is or isn’t local. I think we are speaking a universal language, I don’t understand the point of local anymore. We are living in a globalised world and we are concerned with the same problems really. Even if as Palestinians we need to deal with checkpoints, we also have to understand how the other world is living in order to understand why we are being treated like this, so in that way we just have to be part of that language. Everyone has to be smart about it. It is not just about which countries you speak to, it is about the context that you work in. I end up speaking to the academic world and the art world more than the general public. I enjoy the fact that the general public can be interested in my work, but I also know that it is not
I wanted to talk about the idea of verticality in your work. Whether it is about going up to the sky or going underground, you present worlds that unfold vertically. In *A Space Exodus*, the first Palestinian goes to the moon; in *Nation Estate*, you have a skyscraper; and in *In Vitro*, life only exists in an underground bunker, so it feels like you are saying that the only way to exist is ‘vertically’. I know that each of your films are accompanied by a critique of violent changes on the ground, such as land grabbing, urban speculation and global warming. Is vertical space a necessary consequence of forces that ‘push and squeeze’ us, or is there more to this vertical Nation?
It is an interesting point, and I often get asked about this. Nation Estate, like you said, is really just the result of urban imprisonment. Whenever I go back to my hometown of Bethlehem, I see how it is becoming completely suffocated by settlements, and you can see they are invading the city; soon they will completely choke it. You can actually see it from a certain area where you are completely surrounded by settlements and the Israeli separation wall. It is like an open air prison, and this is happening everywhere in Palestine. So the fact of imagining a revived Palestinian State on different pockets of land seems an ironic thing: you will only be granted a State that is really just a ghetto, but a very convenient ghetto where you don’t have to go through checkpoints anymore, you can go from one city to another via elevation. In A Space Exodus, I am the first Palestinian astronaut that lands on the moon and I try to get in touch with Jerusalem and fail. In a way this is very biographical, because I was born in Jerusalem but I am not allowed to enter it, so I haven’t been there in the last ten years. I have a Palestinian ID, and even though I have other passports, once you are Palestinian you are always Palestinian. This work is also vertical because I reach the moon, but in my head it really was the fact that for me it is easier to reach the moon than to get to Jerusalem. It also refers to colonialism through the fact that whoever plants the flag first gets a chunk of that moon. In In Vitro, the bunker speaks of a more universal problem that is the global climate catastrophe that we are facing, and it is actually quite urgent. Yet we are still using a vocabulary that belongs to ‘our world’. For example, Trump is denying global change. Or we could think of the UK and Brexit. We are busy trying to kind of define who we are in relation to others and what our national identity is while the world is falling apart. We don’t know
how we are going to actually protect ourselves in the face of such a not-so-distant reality, while the rise of nationalism appears stronger than ever. So In Vitro talks about national identity in relation to this wider problem of what happens when all that we know disappears. What kind of vocabulary do we need to tackle these challenges? Can we keep using the same structures? In that way the ‘vertical’ just comes as a side effect of these topics and not intentionally.

SH So verticality in your films happened to be the answer to different problems?

LS Yes

SH You said that there needs to be a different vocabulary when it comes to today’s national identity and nationalism, and that that vocabulary is not fully formed yet. What kind of sources help you in your search for an alternative language?

LS There are so many fields I draw on: philosophy, art critique, political discussions and political events. I really like Andrei Tarkovsky as a filmmaker and Ingmar Bergman. I navigate both the worlds of art and films and I can show my work at film festivals as well, and I feel good about this – not being constricted to one field or the other. I want to comment about what you just said about national identity. I think that the trouble with Palestine is that we never achieved self-determination, so in that sense it is problematic to compare what is happening in Palestine in terms of nationalism to nationalisms elsewhere because Palestinians are trying to be recognised as a people. Nationalism in that sense is self-determination, whereas in the rest of the world nations have been fighting for years. Finally, after years of fighting in Europe, we have the EU, and, again, the example of Brexit is very disturbing. I don’t see why people went back to that. Is it because we are unable to understand ourselves without defining it against an Other? What kind of mechanism makes us want to do that? I think these kinds of questions are interesting. For example, when people say ‘why don’t we all work towards a one-state solution?’, I think that Palestinians need to have self-determination first in order to being able to define what this is – before we start playing the same game that the rest of the world is playing. If the rest of the world does not accept us being defined as a people, we can’t start playing that game. This is why symbols become so important in this discussion, because Palestinians are still trying to convince the world that ‘that is who we are’. Other countries have already achieved this, but we are still trying to receive acceptance on that point. So, for me, the baggage of trying to define who you are as a people comes from this limbo state that comes from not being recognised.

SH In form of a conclusion, have your views around belonging and national identity been changing over time throughout your artistic production?
LS They have not necessarily changed, but it has made me understand how layered this issue is and how complicated this is to talk about. It is not just a matter of one’s point of view or where we stand, it is a more complicated equation. So in my early work it was more about trying to say ‘well, I have a voice and it should be heard’ in relation to other artists who are working with a medium that I am not expected to work with because I belong to the Third World. At first it was a way to claim agency. Now that I have established where I am as an artist, I am more interested in the nuances of what national identity, belonging and heritage are. My work has become less humorous and less busy with trying to please or win a Western audience. In the beginning I wanted a Western audience to listen to the Palestinians in a way that does not elicit sympathy; for them to be fascinated, rather, by the Palestine question – this is how A Space Exodus was thought. Earlier works were very much about having people fascinated by what they see without feeling sorry for us, as well as questioning who decides which category anyone belongs to. Now, I am more interested in creating my own world.

Silvia Hassouna is a doctoral candidate in Human Geography at Aberystwyth University, Wales. Her research focuses on contemporary cultural identity, cultural production and museums in Palestine. Her broader research interests are nationalism, belonging, border politics and collective memory. In 2019, Silvia received the Frederick Soddy Research Award from the Royal Geographical Society to research environmental-artistic approaches to heritage preservation in the West Bank.