

## Dancing to Transgress: Palestinian Dancer Sahar Damoni's Politics of Pleasure

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### Introduction

**O**n a warm summer evening in 2016, I stood on the grounds of the Beit-HaGefen Arab-Jewish Cultural Center in Haifa, Israel, the setting of a performance event titled “Walking on Thin Ice” featuring four solo performances by Palestinian artists. Knowing that one of the performers featured that evening was the Palestinian dancer-choreographer Sahar Damoni, whose work I had been documenting as part of my study of Palestinian dancers and dance teachers in Israel, I joined the others gathered on the center’s soccer field, eager to observe the performance as well the reaction it received. Afterward, I wrote in my field notes:

Dressed in a flowing, sleeveless red chiffon gown, under stadium lights intensifying the contrasting vivid green of the soccer field, she swirls, calling on the ritualistic dance of the Sufis. Round and round she spins, moving her body, arms, hands, and head to the quickening piano notes that signal an increase in both the momentum and daring. Some of her hand and body gestures are explicitly sexual: on one turn she roughly strokes a breast, her head tilted back, mouth slightly open; on the next she bends forward, lowers her arms to form an angle against her lower abdomen, her tongue wriggling boldly out of her mouth. The rapid, repetitive piano notes she’s dancing to are mixed with the play-by-play of an Arab-speaking, male sports broadcaster amid the background noise of a roaring crowd, offering further counterpoint to the presence of a solo female dancing boldly and sensually in this stereotypically male-dominated space. (field journal, July 21, 2016)

Feminist accounts of women employing their bodies to create spaces of freedom and to challenge systems of oppression inspires my investigation into the aesthetics and politics of contemporary dancer and choreographer Sahar Damoni. A Palestinian citizen of Israel from the Galilean town of Shefa’Amr, Damoni belongs to a small but powerful group of Arab-Palestinian women artists who use their bodies as a means of expression and agency, addressing issues of patriarchal and/

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or ethno-national domination, cultural anxiety toward female sexuality, denial of space and place, and gendered dichotomies of the private and the public (Martin, 2016; Nasrallah 2011, 2018; Ben Zvi 1998, 2001, 2006; Dekel 2015). These women's artistic performances deliver myriad messages—typically of pain, rage, fear, and loss, as well as of power, autonomy, and hope—yet Damoni's performances are unique in their expression and evocation of pleasure and sensual-erotic joy, placing her in a distinct category as a Palestinian woman dancer employing pleasure as politics.

I use *pleasure* in the context of this article to refer to and evoke the sense of satisfaction, gratification, confidence, and elation derived from and expressed by the dancing female body. This movement sensation, whether or not overtly sexual, is permeated with those characteristics Audre Lorde famously pointed to as *eros* and *the erotic*; female sources of power and information that encourage the development of women's sense of self (1984, 54). To Lorde, the erotic is “an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our love, our work, our lives” (55).

Studies of dance inspired by these ideas (e.g., McCoy-Torres 2017; Johnson 2020; Monroe 2017) have employed pleasure, and pleasure as politics, as an epistemological and theoretical lens through which to reconsider the marked dancing body, primarily that of women of color. Pleasure in these accounts is conceived as a resource that allows claiming ownership of one's physical being, offering a means of self-expression, of cultural-communal belonging, and *agency*, challenging the stigmatization of racialized or sexually charged dance practices (such as hypersexualized hip-hop, dancehall, or erotic dance) in which women dancers are often read merely as objects. Embodied pleasure, these studies reveal, may be—and often is—conjoined to pain; yet rooted in the kinesthetic, in the mastery of the body-in-motion, can engender a more robust sense of self and of power. Incorporating this pleasure along with sexuality, desire, and sensuality in the writing, choreography, and performance of dance, then, can serve as a means of “queering a performance” (Croft 2017), that is, of disrupting patriarchal and colonial notions of gendered, racialized, or ethnicized moving bodies by attending to the sensed and nonverbal, and to the generative power of these experiences. This article follows these lines of thought, exploring Damoni's sensual dance performances within the sociocultural and political context of Israel. In the programs she created for her performances, Damoni provides a glimpse into the backdrop for her work, depicting her position as a woman dancer living in a traditional society as a space that compels, for her, an ongoing struggle against the strict societal gender norms that surround her. She describes feeling trapped in a seemingly unchangeable social reality, spiraling within it and seeing no real way out.

In early October of 2018, as I approached Damoni for one of our many meetings, this one in a café in Haifa, I found her reading a book by Nawal El Saadawi about women in the Arab world: *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. Damoni shared how deeply the book was affecting her and that she was awestruck by El Saadawi's courage in confronting some of the social taboos of her society and the ignorance surrounding women's anatomy and sexuality. She sighed and shook her head. Reading El Saadawi myself later on, I could hear Damoni in our many conversations and envision her dancing. “The personal lives of people and their requirements,” writes El Saadawi (2015) in her introduction to the book (originally published in Arabic in 1977),

are the directing and motivating forces which are translated in the final analysis into a political will... This personal life obviously includes the intricacies of sex, the relations between man and woman, and the relations of production and division of labor. Those who see fit to underrate the problems of women, and of sex, ignore or do not understand the principles of politics... It is necessary to see the emancipation of women as an integral part of the struggle against all forms of oppression, and of the efforts made to emancipate all exploited classes and groups in society. (4)

Almost forty years after these words were written, a young, Arab-Palestinian woman in Israel subjected to the various regimes that compose the Israeli-Palestinian gender order—all patriarchal in nature (Sa'ar 2007)—finds meaning, perhaps an echo, in these ideas. Damoni, bringing the personal, sensual, and sexual to the stage in dance, negotiates these constructs, once again politicizing them.

Women's public expression of sensuality or sexuality in traditional Arab, Middle Eastern cultural spaces, write Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime (2016), is considered subversive, and when embodied in Oriental dance (*raqs sharqi*), constitutes a highly contested, frequently condemned, practice (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003). Thus, "politics of pleasure" as used here refers to the ways a public, artistic expression of bodily pleasure performed by a sensuous, female dancing body can function as a powerful means of challenging social structures of power. Although politics of pleasure has been notably explored in feminist thought on women's sexuality, examining, for example, danger and pleasure in the production of female sexuality (Vance 1984) and pleasure under patriarchy (Walters 2016; Segal 1994), anthropological explorations of the concept in relation to modern-day Palestinians typically address Palestinians' sensual pleasures in social and mundane contexts. Here, they focus on practices such as spending time at the beach or outdoors, drinking and smoking, participating in rave culture or consuming psychedelic drugs—all within the restrictive and oppressive life circumstances Palestinians endure (Khalili 2016; Karkabi 2020). Complementing this line of research, Shanya Silverstein (2016) argues for the public pleasures connected to Syrian Muslim women's negotiation of gender and morality through practices of Syrian popular dance. Female movement, she contends, is central to the production of a moral identity, allowing women to navigate between the constructs of religious authorities and female piety movements, between ideas of autonomy and individuality. Yet pleasure as an artistic representation and experience of Arab-Palestinian women performers, and as their means of publicly reclaiming their bodies and voices, is a much less frequently explored terrain.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing this void and tracing the role of pleasure in Damoni's dances, this article contributes to dance studies' ongoing inquiry into pleasure as politics and to feminist analysis of the ways women artists use their bodies as a medium of political expression and contestation. Conceptualizing dance as politics of pleasure places the argument within a larger frame of political thought recognizing *movement* and the regulation of movement as the substance out of which modern subjects are formed, freedom is theorized, and political struggles are actualized (Foucault 1988; Arendt 2005; Kotef 2015). Linking such theories with feminist thought, I also contextualize my argument within writings on subordinated women's creative political strategies for negotiating marginality (Anzaldúa 1987; Abu-Lughod 1990; hooks 1992; Barakat 2018) and writings on politics of the body (Gökariksel 2016; Mourad 2014), paying particular attention to the expressive moving body (Taylor 2000; Thomas-Krouse 2004; Lepecki 2006; Dekel 2015; Dee Das 2017).

"Without a way to name our pain," writes bell hooks, "we are also without the words to articulate our pleasure" (1992, 2). The dancing body then, as a mode of expression, offers a means of naming both pain and pleasure in the absence—or danger—of words. Pointing the lens to a Palestinian woman in Israel, I argue that Sahar Damoni's creative work opens an avenue for asking about *movement* and the *performance of pleasure* as politics. What does it mean when Palestinian (and other Arab) women utilize the artistic stage as a platform on which to celebrate their skilled, sensual, dancing bodies? What kind of social marking, or understandings, does their movement produce? When, how, and under what terms, "can the subaltern woman dance?"<sup>2</sup>

Drawing upon my four-year anthropological research with women Palestinian dance teachers and choreographers in Israel, this article addresses the questions above, focusing on Damoni's choices of movement, choreography, and space. Although typically performing solo (itself a political stance to which I return later) on stages diverse in both their artistic and ethno-cultural orientations,

Damoni's performances speak to a variety of social groups in Israel/Palestine. Her creative work engages in questions of the individual and the collective, women and men, the permissible and the forbidden, the accepted and the condemned, and in voicing (or performing) women's pleasures within a context marked by multiple regimes of surveillance and control, she claims her position amid these tensions. By overtly tackling social taboos and highly charged politics in her solo, sensual performances, Damoni draws attention to her politicized identity and feminine body, and to the multiple sources and forms of power wielded against her, courageously transgressing these controls through dance. She places her dancing body on stages to be seen, and perhaps understood, lifting social veils that strive to cover and silence it to expose a bold, sensual, elated, empowered, Arab female body. Distancing herself from collective themes and images of suffering typically placed on the Arab-Palestinian female, she refuses to be a national emblem, yet it is exactly these cultural lineaments that inform her aesthetics and politics.

### **A Jewish Researcher of Palestinian Dancers in Israel**

The highly ethno-religious, segregated social climate of Israel posed myriad challenges for me, a Jewish-Israeli researcher of Arab dance practitioners; however, as a dance educator myself, I had an initial door in. Beyond that, I, like most of my interlocutors, grew up in the Galilee, shared their landscapes and passion for dance, was schooled in Western dance techniques in the same institutions, and knew the field and its dominant figures, all of which established common ground for my encounters with the subjects of my research. Still, I lacked other resources: as part of Israel's privileged Jewish society, I was initially a stranger to Arab culture and the Arabic language, and was, in fact, one to be regarded with caution. Dance, though, and to a large extent my gender and status as a mother, mitigated my stranger/oppressor status, as did our mutual acknowledgment of the cultural, social, and political differences and divisions between us. Although they remained always in the background of our meetings, open and explicit discussion of these topics diminished the barriers, and over time, I developed trust and close relationships with the women and one man whose lives and professional work I documented; they all generously opened a door for me to enter their world. From a feminist epistemological standpoint and as a feminist method (Behar 1993; Krumer-Nevo 2009), I shared drafts of my writings with the teachers-choreographers I studied, inviting them to offer suggestions, make corrections, or to eliminate parts of the text with which they were uncomfortable. In this regard, Damoni was particularly meticulous, sensitively differentiating between what was "mine"—my interpretations, my conceptualization—and what was hers: her ideas, her biography, her society, her culture. She made it clear to me more than once—usually when referring to journalists who wanted to interview her—that she did not like talking about her art or explaining it—she liked *dancing* it; she wanted people to experience and understand it for themselves. Thus, my reading of her work in this article uses few of her words and only those she freely offered. I draw mainly on her moving, dancing body, further challenging my position as a cross-cultural interpreter. How do I read this dancing body from a culture that is not my own? Where does Damoni's creative-performing body meet my own observing-interpreting body?

Following Susan Leigh Foster's (1995) contemplation on writing dance history, I argue that, as an ethnographer, similar to the dance historian, I employ my "own techniques of the body—past practices of viewing or participating in body-centered endeavors" (6), as I engage in a kind of "kinesthetic empathy" or "proprioceptive affiliation" with the performer I wish to know. As a woman living on this same piece of land, inscribed by regimes of bodily training, visual culture, and modern ideologies of self and identity similar to those experienced by my subjects of study, yet also shaped by a culture and life circumstances different from theirs, I intimately share their embodied spaces of performance (Mills 2017) and the production of meaning.

Bringing together dance theorization of pleasure as politics (McCoy-Torres 2017; Johnson 2020; Monroe 2017; Dee Das 2017) and anthropological examinations of politics of pleasure of

Palestinians (Khalili 2016; Karkabi 2020), this article offers three main scholarly contributions. First, I provide a nuanced examination of the dance of pleasure as power through a close scrutiny of Damoni's moving-dancing body, analyzing the messages expressed in her bodily movement within its particular gendered, cultural, ethno-national, and historical context. Second, I expand the concept of politics of pleasure to include artistic dance, showing dance as a significant venue for experiencing, displaying, and negotiating sensual pleasure, and for challenging gendered sociocultural values and norms, and ethno-national regimes of power. Finally, my discussion offers a contribution to the broader study of Arab women's creative bodily agency by continuing previous discussions of dance as politics: the employment of the sensual, dancing body as woman's means of articulating a political stance.

## Method and Context

This article is based on a wider anthropological study conducted between 2013 and 2017 with (mostly) women Palestinian dance teachers and choreographers in Israel who teach, dance, and choreograph Western forms of concert dance (ballet, modern and contemporary dance, as well as jazz and hip-hop) to young Arab-Palestinians—most of whom are girls.<sup>3</sup> Centering on the dance studio in Arab communities in Israel as a unique social arena, where familial, state, and national/ethnic patriarchal regimes of power are negotiated and challenged (Ophir 2018), my research focuses on the formation of gender and Arab-Palestinian identity as it occurs through a Western-dancing physicality, and on the possibility that bodies written upon may also write (Foster 1995, 15), thus on the agency of the dancing body and the power of dance to alter behaviors and beliefs (Noland 2009). I also explore the manifestations of and maneuvering in the tension between traditional Arab cultural values and norms and the art of dance in Arab-Palestinian dance studios in Israel, where bodies—mostly girls' and women's bodies—are cultivated and staged.

Sahar Damoni was one of my study's fifteen participants (fourteen women and one man), whose ages ranged from early twenties to midforties, and who, as a whole, comprise the vast majority of Arab-Palestinian dance teachers and choreographers active in the field. I conducted an in-depth interview with her, as with all other participants, in an early stage of the project, and we have since had numerous, extended conversations at different times and occasions. I also observed dance classes she taught in studios located in two different Arab towns, and attended performances and presentations of works in progress as she developed her career as an independent professional choreographer and performer. Damoni is exceptional among her fellow Palestinian dance practitioners in that she was, at the time of my study, the only dancer-choreographer among her peers who was performing on her own (others primarily presented works for groups) in pursuit of a career as an independent artist.

My field site is of particular importance, as this exploration of sensual joy through concert dance documents practices carried out by a woman of Arab origins whose culture maintains complex relations with the body and dance (Shay 2008; Martin 2013, 2016; Tatios Yessayan 2015), as well as strict surveillance of women's bodies and sexuality (Masarwah Srour 2017; Medina 2014; Azaiza et al., 2009; Accad 2005). Further, within the wider context of the state of Israel, Arab culture is itself closely monitored and controlled (Hamdan 2007; Jamal 2017),<sup>4</sup> while Palestinian land, demographics, and ethno-national consciousness are strictly surveilled and regulated (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2017; Rouhana and Sabbagh-Khoury 2017). Within a highly segregated public space constructed to reflect modern Hebrew, or Jewish-Zionist national identity (Yiftachel 1999, 2011; Jamal 2007; Rouhana 2017), Palestinian citizens of Israel (often referred to within common discourse as "minorities," "non-Jews," "Arab-Israelis," or "Arabs of Israel," terms misrecognizing this group's collective national identity [see Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005])<sup>5</sup> are subject to structural exclusion and marginalization. Although enjoying procedural citizenship rights—most

prominently the right to vote and run for office—Palestinian citizens of Israel suffer from discriminatory political, economic, and cultural policies, rendering their citizenship devoid of substantive meaning, and their personhood diminished (Jamal 2007). Addressing this topic, Nadim Rouhana (2017) argues:

The substance of Arab's citizenship rights are emptied not by simple discrimination policies that can be remedied, but by the settler-colonial structure from which these policies are derived such as: their exclusion from the state's definition of the "public good"; the state's deliberate efforts to erase Arab's history and culture, deny their collective identity; expropriating their resources—mainly land—and their treatment as enemies in cases of land ownership, and as unwanted in cases of immigration. (6)

Jewish ethnic privilege, then, results in multiple forms of exclusion, deprivation, and marginalization of Arab-Palestinian citizens and the Palestinian identity, engendering in many a deep resentment and alienation toward the Jewish state, as well as mixed feelings and an ever-present wariness and suspicion toward the Jewish-Israeli population.

Seeking access to socioeconomic and artistic opportunities, though, some Palestinian artists in Israel leave exclusively Arab towns and cities on the periphery and move to the urban-artistic hub of central Israel, to what are referred to in Israel as "mixed cities" (Haifa or Tel Aviv-Jaffa). Here, lines of demarcation are less rigid and they can enjoy an environment better capable of supporting their art, albeit still surrounded by the stigmatization, alienation, and hostility of the dominant Jewish-Israeli, Hebrew speaking culture (Hackl 2020). Damoni, however, has continued to live in the Arab town of Shefa'Amr with her parents, mainly for financial reasons. Yet at the same time, she does not avoid platforms where the audience and culture are primarily or exclusively Jewish-Israeli, as most Arab-Palestinian choreographers and dancers in Israel do. Consequently, as an active Arab-Palestinian choreographer and performer, she is, for the most part, lone among Jewish choreographers and lone among Palestinian dance practitioners, making her an exception among her peers as she moves between and among communities and artistic stages that are typically highly segregated.<sup>6</sup> An examination of her artistry, then, provides unique insight into intricate workings and transgressions of gender, ethnic, and political boundaries—politics expressed through the movement of the body in dance.

In what follows, I look at three of Damoni's performances that took place within one year in Israel. Each of these pieces was performed in locations and spaces that contribute to the meaning and politics of her work. In the first, at a Tel Aviv fringe bar in front of a primarily Jewish-Israeli audience, Damoni's performance is a display of overt sexual pleasure, as she embraces the symbolic image of the whore to address gender and state oppression. She uses her power as a woman performer in the role of the seductress to forcibly invade the audience members' space, to confront them and rock—if only slightly and momentarily—gendered and national power relations that typically function to degrade Palestinians in general and Palestinian women in particular. The second performance, again for a primarily Jewish-Israeli audience, portrays a rebellion against Arab societal gender norms, yet also challenges the highly ethno-national, segregated public sphere of Israel by presenting a solo, autobiographical work on one of Tel Aviv's most prestigious stages. In this piece, Damoni lavishly conquers space, beating a path of her own rather than remaining within the confines of the path she is expected to follow. She employs her sensuality and the symbolic use of color, water, clothing, and Arab pottery to blur boundaries between the private and the public, continuity and change. In the third performance (referenced above), for a mainly Arab audience, Damoni once again threads gender, Arab ethnicity, and place, expressing these as her chains and restraints, but also as her roots and identity. Whirling in a trance-like manner, her face and movements conveying sensuality and power, she transgresses boundaries through the expression of female pleasure in movement and dance.



## First Scene: The Seductress—*Hexenküche*:<sup>7</sup>A Late Night Symposium with Valeska Gert and Friends. Directors: Lee Meir and Roni Katz, the Tmuna Theater, Tel Aviv

This single-night performance, a collaboration of performance artists and intellectuals staged at a fringe theater in Tel Aviv, was an homage to the German-Jewish artist Valeska Gert (1892–1978), a dancer and performance artist whose early work took place in the avant-garde scene of 1920s Berlin, and whose Jewish heritage resulted in her being banned from the German stage. A radical and provocative artist, Gert raised questions concerning the role of art in resistance, as well as of gender, social behavioral codes, and life amid the condition of modern times. This evening was part of an annual dance festival held in Tel Aviv, dedicated that year to the theme of resistance.

For her dance piece, Damoni chose the role of the whore—the objectified and occupied body—employing her skilled and charismatic dancing body to reverse the lens of shame and degradation typically pointed toward prostitution to proclaim “shame on you” toward her mostly Jewish-Israeli audience. While in some ways echoing traditional Palestinian artistic portrayals of women as metaphorical fertile land, Damoni in this role challenged the power relations between herself—the whore, the occupied—and the patriarchal dominator to become a moral mirror, expressing a pleasurable sense of power as the confident seductress who can see and do what others cannot.

The evening was a collage of events, some occurring as people entered the theater’s main hall, set as a nightclub. Upon entering, audience members were asked to attach “resistance labels” to their clothes, name tags bearing terms such as *occupation*, *violence*, *homophobia*, *dishonesty*, and *ignorance*. Gaudily dressed women performers in neon clothing, heavy makeup, and artificial wigs wandered about, two of them tossing a ball back and forth while commenting on the labels affixed to the clothing of audience members passing by on the way to their seats. Once everyone was seated at a table or the bar, the evening’s host, a woman in a short blonde wig, came on stage to tell Valeska Gert’s story and explain the historical context of her time in Berlin. A second woman performer was then called to the stage to demonstrate the German “proper body,” mimicking gymnastic training photos displayed on the wall behind her—photos from the 1920s and 1930s depicting this proper body as masculine, young, robust, natural, and healthy. Deviations from this body, the audience was told, were what captured Gert’s attention: marginal social figures such as beggars, prostitutes, nomads, street dwellers, and cabaret performers. The host then introduced Damoni, whose Arabic name disclosed her ethnicity to the audience. In my field notes, I documented her performance:

She begins from the top of a back staircase, the spotlight directly on her. Dressed in checkered pantyhose, tight black shorts, high heels, and a shiny blue jacket, she’s smiling provocatively, accentuating her brightly painted red lips. The resistance label attached to her jacket reads “occupation.” Her performance is daring and uninhibited: as she comes down the stairs, shoulders held back to emphasize her breasts, she turns her head away, then back to make eye contact with audience members, her tongue winding, licking her lips. She moves her pelvis in large, round movements, then swings her leg over and above the handrail to display her crotch (Photo 1). Stepping onto the floor, she lustfully flirts with people seated nearby, bringing her face near theirs as she slowly, deliberately undulates her arms, chest, and pelvis at them, playfully interacting with them, extending her tongue toward some and her butt toward others. When she reaches the main hall, she leans back and lets her hair down, shaking her head and setting free her long, wavy, dark hair, then takes off her jacket and throws it into the audience, revealing her white T-shirt painted with large red circles around her breasts. Now, moving sensuously among the seated audience, she seduces both men and women, bending over



Photo 1. *Damoni in Hexenküche* (Photograph: Avi Golran).

them, trespassing boundaries to force her impassioned body into their private space, playing with her hair, looking them in the eyes while moving her arms toward them and along the outlines of her body, emphasizing her pelvis and legs. She holds her breasts and massages them in front of audience members' faces—some of them freeze in their seats, others slightly recoil. My own body is tense, my jaws stiff—a sense heightened as she comes closer to where I'm seated; I fight the urge to lower my gaze. Damoni then bends over toward a man, cigarette between her lips, motioning a request he light it for her. Finally, on her way back up the staircase, she pulls a piece of chewing gum from her mouth, stretching it with her hands and using her tongue to play with it in her mouth, extravagantly playing the whole scene, the whole character. (field journal, July 30, 2015)

One of two Palestinian women artists in a cast of eleven that night (the rest were Jewish Israelis), Damoni chose to play the whore. In a conversation immediately following the performance, she told me with excitement that she had experienced great pleasure in doing so. Later, after reading a draft of this article, she explained that she chose this role with the intention of provoking an experience of what it feels like when one's space, one's territory, is invaded and violated: "As a whore, I'm exploited and dominated, true," she said, "but I also have power in this position, I can manipulate the situation, take advantage of it in some ways. As a performer I can invade people's privacy, penetrate their personal space, make them feel uncomfortable, rob them of something that is theirs. I can let them feel what occupation is like."<sup>8</sup> The audience members' body language in the presence of this performance, behaviors such as freezing in place, recoiling, tensing up, or feeling an urge to turn away, may attest to a sense of unease or discomfort, yet perhaps also to arousal and anticipation. Either way, the audience is fully in Damoni's hands in these moments when she penetrates their space, embarrasses them, or teases them and then dismisses them. She has the power here, and her message seems to be that she's fully enjoying it.

In these performances, however, Damoni does more than manipulate the emotions of her audience. In what may be termed "prostitution-as-symbol" (Golden 2003, 88), women's performance of sexual pleasure or of unruly sexual behavior transgresses societal and gendered orders (Sa'ar 2004), provoking fears that these behaviors threaten the moral ties of the family and, by implication, those of the nation (Lemish 2000; Golden 2003; Bahooora 2015). Although women's fertility is



praised in both Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian cultures, as women are esteemed for their role in birthing the nation (Kanaanah 2002; Berkovitch 1997; Donath 2015), intractable sexuality poses a moral threat to the collective. By playing the whore then, Damoni places herself outside nationalistic or collective projects: she cannot be “othered” and excluded by Israeli Jewish society (as she is in real life) because, as a whore, she excludes herself and signals disinterest in belonging to or obeying any social confinements or order. Neither can she be appropriated by Palestinian society, as she refuses to conform to norms of respectability or to reserve her sexuality only for procreation. The zone of performance allows her to play with social boundaries and transgress social orders. She moves between social groups and categories, participating in neither. Thus, through movement and through the performance of pleasure, Damoni is carving a space for freedom as she plays with the meanings and symbols of her time, space, and identities—a woman, a dancer, an Arab, and a Palestinian citizen of Israel, performing in a Jewish city in front of a Jewish audience. She claims her sexuality, her autonomy, and her independence, compelling Jewish Israelis to *see* her and acknowledge her power, presence, and humanity.

Performance art, argues Dror Harari (2014, 29), constitutes a liminal site in postmodern culture, very much as ritual did in traditional society, carnival did in agricultural society, and theater did in industrial society. Performance art’s “spatial, temporal and symbolic ‘betweenness’ allows for dominant social norms to be suspended, questioned, played with, transformed” (McKenzie 1998, 218). Damoni takes pleasure in her dancing/transgressing/performing body; the crossing and challenging of social boundaries made possible by performance has an emancipatory power to it, as it suspends the typical order of everyday life. In an oppressive and restrictive environment, performance art has the power of producing freedom, joy, and elation for a Palestinian woman in Israel. Continuing Harari’s (2014) analogy of performance art and the carnival in other times and places, and adding Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) theorization of the carnival and laughter as “build[ing] its own world versus the official world” (88), the importance of performance art, as of carnival and laughter, is in “its indissoluble and essential relation to freedom” (89). At this performance event, an homage to a Jewish artist and activist who performed in Germany in the 1920s, Damoni not only finds pleasure in her own dancing sensual body, but also in turning the political lens (and spotlight) on herself, a Palestinian woman performer in Israel/Palestine, 2015.

## Second Scene: The Rebellious Girl—*Fi Al-Talm*:<sup>9</sup> Curtain Up Festival, Suzanne Dallal Theater, Tel Aviv

I was born and raised in a traditional society that confronts me with many conflicts. As a woman who chose to fulfill her aspirations in the field of dance, I struggle with social conventions and strict rules. In my work I wish to bring these conflicts to the stage through the body, a site of clashes between the forbidden and the allowed, the desirable and the existing. (Sahar Damoni, Curtain Up dance program, November 2015)

In this work, the first-ever performance of a solo Arab woman dancer in Tel Aviv, Damoni not only clearly defies the norms of the gendered public/private dichotomy but also the highly segregated public sphere of Israel. She does so first by performing solo on one of Tel Aviv’s most renowned stages in front of a (mainly) Jewish audience, and second by “hanging out the dirty laundry,” displaying her traditional society’s patriarchal norms on that stage. She refuses to remain unseen in the Jewish artistic public sphere, and thus refuses the position of an invisible “good Arab” (Hackl 2020) (though adhering to the label by avoiding overt national politics), yet also rejects the role of a suffering victim or the facade of an “appropriate” Arab.

Damoni performs this work primarily solo, yet another woman performer, dressed in white, is at the side of the stage, lit in a soft yellow light. With slow, deliberate



Photo 2. *Fi-Al-Talm* (Photograph: Tamar Lam).

movements, the girl in white pours water from a large, deep clay bowl into a second copper bowl nearby, using a clay water jug. She does so continually, again and again and again. Her figure evokes time, or perhaps life or tradition: an ongoing flow of water; a cyclic, perpetual background occurrence; a woman routinely doing her work. Opposite her is Damoni, dressed in tight black pants and a black shirt, dancing. In her dance there is a motif of fingers roaming her body (Photo 2): first her back, with her arms wrapped around herself, then moving on to other parts of the body. Her toes, too, are “walking” on the floor, while she lies down, rolls, and stretches across the stage. Fingers and toes travel—and the body follows. Is this a journey of searching and transformation against a set and stable reality? An adventure vis-à-vis tradition? Damoni’s body is flexible; it folds, stretches and twists, then at times contracts, imprisoning her, and at others breaks free, producing intensity as her movements become dynamic and fierce. Quick, snappy twists of the head and torso, whipping arms or throw of a leg, a fall to the floor. She “swallows up” the stage with her movement, reaching every part of it—in contrast to her stationary partner. Creating tension between confinement and freedom, she switches between closed, limiting positions and free-flowing pleasurable dance, hinting at traditional Middle Eastern dance with its sensual, undulating movements of pelvis and arms, tossing her hair with an expression of joy on her face. Breaking free of tight restraints continues in surges of bursting energy and defiant sexuality—her hands touching the groin and face, her pelvis and tongue movements directed toward the audience. At one point she reaches the bowl of water, kneels facing it, then puts her hands and face in the water. Dry and wet, white and black mix together; order is disrupted. It is a dramatic moment. After a long moment, with her head down, she sits up again, gently rubbing her wet face and neck, stroking her hair, soaking herself and the floor around her.

As the dance comes to an end, Damoni removes her wet clothes on stage, remaining for a moment in only her underwear, her back to the audience in an up-stage corner. She changes into a red satin evening dress and high heels and walks back to the edge of the stage. Facing the audience, she gently moves her hips from side to side, shifting her weight from one leg to another. She positions her hand as if she is holding a glass, perhaps of wine. She smiles. (field journal, November 13, 2015)

In *Fi Al-Talm*, Damoni draws a world of oppositions: one woman is in white, stationary, constant, modest, and reserved, while she, in black and mobile, is dynamic, sensual, changing, and daring. Her fingers and toes, the ends of her body, pull or lead her in a journey, at times a struggle, at others a game, between these poles. Her body twists, folds, and stretches, almost tears apart, trying to follow these mischievous fingers. She triumphs, in a way, in the match between these ends as she reclaims her body, her sexuality, her language, and sense of self—to recall Audre Lorde. It is a bittersweet joy though, as she is now wet and worn out from this fierce struggle, and on her own. Pleasure here, too, as noted in other studies of dance and of sexual pleasures, is conjoined to pain.

On her journey, or *path*, Damoni occupies space—a lot of space—rather than confining herself to the smallest amount of it, as girls and women are often conditioned to do (Young 1980; Bartky 1988). In my field journal, I wrote that she “swallows up the stage,” giving an impression of a gorging of space, as if she cannot get enough of it. “Path,” the title of the piece, connotes a certain course that Damoni and other young women are expected to follow. In a society that constructs a narrowly defined path for women to follow, either to remain a virgin and live with her parents until marrying at a young age (Sa’ar 2004; Erdreich 2010), or to take on what is considered a proper lifestyle or vocation (as Damoni expresses above, and as similarly accounted in Martin 2016), Damoni makes a powerful statement by choreographing her own path, explicitly taking up space and unmuting her body.

Though danced solo, Damoni’s struggle is not hers alone. The struggle for gender freedom and control over one’s own body, desires, and sexuality is a recurring theme of Arab women artists, Palestinian women among them (see Eileraas 2016; Nasrallah 2011; Ankori 2006; Ben Zvi 1998, 2001). As a Christian, middle-class woman citizen of urban Israel, Damoni may actually be enjoying greater freedom and possibilities than other Arab and Palestinian women,<sup>10</sup> yet it is her profession, her expressive body as a dancer—which she experiences as “a site of clashes”—that attracts fire. Women’s bodies “put out of place” (Eileraas 2016, 198), here scantily dressed and passionately dancing on an artistic stage, challenge social conventions and “disrupt sacrosanct gendered dichotomies of public/private” (199). Damoni visibly unsettles the gendered space, but she also disturbs the sharply divided ethno-national space by being and performing “out of place.”

Damoni’s performances, her transgressions, raised fierce reactions within her own community. A few days after the show I met with Laila,<sup>11</sup> one of Damoni’s colleagues, at her hometown studio, and we shared our views of the dance. I was careful in choosing my words, but Laila was blatant: “It’s not a good work!” she declared. “Why present Palestinian women this way?! As we are told what to wear?!” Referring to a part of the dance during which Damoni speaks out against authority, she continued, “Like, showing us, Palestinian society, as dark, and you, the Israeli audience, as enlightened.” A little surprised, I tried to explain how I saw the piece and the reasons I found Damoni’s movement language interesting. “You Israelis see an Arab dance and say, ‘How nice,’” she replied. “You’re forgiving because she’s an Arab. But the work is poor; it has no depth to it.”

Laila’s fiery criticism of Damoni’s work as “having no depth to it” and as reproducing ethnic stereotypes of Arabs, sheds light on the sensitive ethno-national lines that may have been challenged by this performance. Rather than joining an “us”—Palestinians in a shared struggle for equality and dignity—Damoni presents an “I”—woman-Palestinian-dancer and artist—but also creates an “us”—women, perhaps all oppressed women or simply all women. Dancing solo but portraying

a much wider experience of women, Damoni's staged rebellion expresses freedom and embodies full humanity: the freedom to move and occupy space; the freedom to be sensual, sexual, playful, curious, mad, joyous, irresolute; the freedom to create. Her performance thus creates a political space and political action, as "the meaning of politics is freedom" (Arendt 2005, 110) and freedom of movement. As a work of art, a performance event, and a lived experience, "Path" brings forth the power, the liberty, and the pleasure of dancing and expressing oneself. The struggle in the piece is resolved in a standing-tall, confident, sensual woman facing her audience.

### **Third Scene: The Sensual Feminine Whirling Dervish—*Spirala*:<sup>12</sup> "Walking on Thin Ice" Performance Event, Beit HaGefen Arab-Jewish Culture Center, Haifa**

The location in which *Spirala* took place is significant to this performance, as it is both symbolically and politically charged: a soccer field, strongly gendered, in an Arab-Jewish cultural center embodying a highly disputed ideology of coexistence<sup>13</sup> and located in Wadi Nisnas, one of Haifa's oldest neighborhoods. Prior to 1948, Wadi Nisnas was the flourishing urban area of a mostly Arab city, and remains the center of Arab life in Haifa today. Although it is not actually her own hometown, Damoni is very much "at home" in this environment, among her friends and fellow Palestinians, in a familiar cultural setting.

It is a warm summer evening; people gradually arrive at the open courtyard of the Arab-Jewish Culture Center, where fruit, cheeses, and drinks are laid out for the guests. Most of those present are young Arabs—they seem to be local Haifa residents, associated with the art scene in town or simply part of the urban-bourgeois secular class. Most are speaking Arabic, there are very few Hebrew speakers around—some, I get the impression, are artists or art teachers. The atmosphere is pleasant, smiles and warmth are being expressed in encounters between people. In one of the conversations, I hear a young woman saying to her friend: "No Hebrew." I interpret this as "let's keep this space ours. Of *our* language and culture."

The evening, curated by Fadwa Naamna, a Palestinian curator and artist based in Haifa, is comprised of four performances of Palestinian artists and is arranged so that when the performances are set to begin, the audience moves to a specific performance space, and when the performance ends, they move on to the next. Damoni performs first, on the Center's soccer field adjacent to the courtyard. As the audience walks onto the field, Damoni, dressed in a long, sleeveless red chiffon dress, her dark hair in an elegant updo, signals them to gather along the lines of the rectangular penalty box marked, as on all soccer fields, by white lines, two extending from the goal line on either side of the goal, and one across the field in front of it. Some people sit on the synthetic turf; others remain standing (Photo 3). Damoni moves to the center of the penalty box, the spotlight directly on her, the upper, massive field lights adding brilliance. The visual is impressive as well as symbolic: the green turf, the rectangular goal painted black and white, and the dancer in red, colors typical of the flags of Arab nations. In the background, emanating from large speakers, is a sound collage of up-tempo, repeating, almost frenetic piano chords, and the sounds of a soccer game: crowds roaring as a loud, masculine sports broadcaster's voice calls the game. Inspired by Belgian choreographer De Keersmaeker's work *Fase*, according to the event program, this piece presents Damoni's take on "continuity and endless patterns," reflected for her in "a social reality marked by gender boundaries, in which she is trapped."



Photo 3. Spirala. (Photograph: Sicilia Hashoul).

The dance is comprised mainly of continuous spinning, a movement originating in Sufi dance. The ritualistic dervish dance is called forth both in the technique of the turn itself (the way she places her feet and the direction of the turns) and the position of her hands and head: both arms are extended outward, slightly above shoulder level; the right hand facing the sky while the left hand is facing the earth; the head tilted to the right. Damoni's spiraling perfectly contrasts the linear, side-to-side movements typical of a soccer field and its goal-oriented versus her expression-oriented movement. The goal here remains empty. Nothing enters or exits it. A woman's solo dance on a field typically inhabited by a group of men also demonstrates contrast and emphasizes the theme of this performance: a woman in a man's world.

The movements accompanying the ongoing whirling are performed mainly by the arms, hands, fingers, head, and face, like a sign language enacted on a spinning carousel, so that no one can follow everything expressed, as only parts of words (or signs or positions) can be seen by each spectator. Parts of this "talk" clearly express sexuality and struggle: hand holding a breast, rubbing it forcefully while the other hand twists above; both hands pointing to the groin in rhythmic movements, forming the pudendal triangle; tongue winding. These moments are clear, strong, and confrontational, dissolving in subtle, sensitive movements of the elbows into softer, calmer sequences. At times her rhythm is slower, at others accelerated; her gestures shift between soft and lyric to more forceful, yet she remains centered, maintaining a repetitive, continuous motion. A small part of the piece involves falling to the ground, rising, and falling again, depicting a vertical plane, once again contrasting the horizontal movement characterizing those typically produced on a soccer field. But the majority is performed on both feet, in continuous whirling, which grants the dance its mythical and artistic power.

The performance ends after twenty minutes, in a non-end ending in which Damoni



leads the audience away, just as she invited them in, through gestures, on to the next performance. (field journal, July 21, 2016)

On the football field, Damoni is a stranger: a body completely “out of place” (Eileraas 2016, 198). As I wrote in my field notes, she plays with her strangeness in the space; she uses it to grant power and meaning to her performance. She dances in front of the goal—but never enters or otherwise relates to it, suggesting she is not playing this game; she is on her own—where twenty-two male players are usually present, emphasizing both her individuality and her gender. As opposed to being one of a group (often associated with a nation or another collective), she chooses to dance alone and have her freedom; as opposed to competing aggressively, she dances sensually, portraying courage, power, and pleasure, but also vulnerability. Basing her performance on the Sufi male ritualistic dance, though, amid the vibrant colors typical of Arab countries’ flags, Damoni indicates, “I’m from here. I belong. Arabness, with its rich cultural heritage, is part of who I am, part of my roots and my identity.” In this sense, Damoni ties herself to the group, but to one that exceeds the narrow limitations of geography and norms. A woman whirling dervish, portraying “a welcoming, accommodating Islam of aestheticized embodied performance” (Gökarıksel 2016, 240), contrasts the combative masculinity of male soccer players (and the language describing their actions), as well as that of other blatant masculine images so common in the violent public sphere of Israel/Palestine. Damoni’s dance of sensuality, spirituality, and pleasure is political, as it brings to light the dissenting, nonpoliced moving body in “a persistent—even stubborn—iteration of the desire to live away from policed conformity” (Lepecki 2013, 23).

In front of a mostly Arab-Palestinian audience, also consuming pleasure by attending this performance and sharing its space, Damoni touches the yearning body, women’s intimacy with her own body, her ambivalent relations with men—as institutions and as individuals, and perhaps also the intricate interdependence of the sexes—loaded with power relations (at times violent) but also with love and tenderness. These tense situations are created and untied in her body, challenging social conventions or, as she wrote in the evening’s program, “breaking through borders of a conservative society.” Indeed, she is breaking through courageously—but she also comes back to spinning in circles. The Sufi whirling protects her, but at the same time dictates her possibilities.

## Closing Curtain

*Spirala* evolved into a new piece titled *Pirg’in*, which merges two words, *pigeon*—an Arabic nickname for the penis (*hamame*), and *virgin*—a significant Arab cultural construct (an “obsession,” as Damoni put it) underlying the gendered societal order (Sa’ar 2004; Shalabi 2010). *Pirg’in* explores this cultural preoccupation with virginity and with controlling women’s sexual desire and pleasure. Damoni premiered the piece in Tel Aviv in November 2016 and received positive reviews, and later performed it at the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival and at other dance festivals in Europe and the United States.

Following the premier of *Fi Al-Talm* in Tel Aviv in November 2015, Damoni performed the piece for Palestinian audiences in several locations: at the Palestinian National Theater El-Hakawati in east Jerusalem, at the annual Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival, at the Al-Midan Theater in Haifa,<sup>14</sup> and in her hometown of Shefa’Amr. For the most part, her work received positive and encouraging reactions, though there were some critical and even abusive ones as well. In a telephone conversation a few days after the Haifa performance, Damoni told me she did not care. She liked that her work raises debate and controversy: “It’s my role as an artist to raise these issues, it’s time we start dealing with these matters in our society. That’s why my voice has to be raised in the Arab society and not in the Jewish society in this country” (July 24, 2016).

However, raising her voice in her own society, as soon became apparent, was a constant struggle. Her opportunities to perform her dances were scarce; she had to modify her works in some cases (for example, when performing in her own hometown, she did not completely undress at the end of the piece when changing into an evening dress so as not to embarrass her family), and rejection of her work soon marked a formidable borderline. After two years of performing at the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival, she was rejected in the third year and told they wanted “new artists,” and for a curated chamber-dance evening in Nazareth she was rejected based on the belief that her work was too sexual and too blunt, and the fear that people may be offended by it. In a sense, Damoni reached a plateau in what she felt she could do with her art in her homeland and therefore is currently working toward creating new paths and directions for herself.

## **Conclusion: Movement as Politics of Pleasure and the Limits of Dancing Subjectivity Under Hegemonic Eyes**

In her solo, sensual performances in front of Palestinian and Jewish audiences, Damoni claims her voice as she dances against the grain. She plays with and expands Palestinian cultural symbols and aesthetics, such as water, colors, or the Sufi dance, by introducing female sensuality and pleasure and including herself as a woman. Water, for example, a daily substance in women’s chores, or a revered element of tradition and ritual, takes on an element of the erotic in a dramatic scene in “Path” when used to douse Damoni’s exhilarated body and then signal the dangerous blurring of rigid boundaries. In *Spirala*, the male ritualistic Sufi dance lends itself to a woman’s sensual body, while the colors green, red, white, and black—associated with Arab nationalism, hence Arab masculinity (Massad 1995)—take a turn to evoke women’s sensual expression. Damoni’s performances, then, do not portray universal concepts or ideas detached from a concrete material life, nor do they yield to limits and orders of “the official world” (Bakhtin 1984, 88) or to common themes of Palestinian women’s art. Damoni places herself as an individual—strong, sensual, and upright, though vulnerable and exposed—refusing to play the (national or ethnic) team games of her surroundings, or move to the gender tune she is expected to follow. Actively creating spaces for herself to move and be seen, and taking pleasure in her moving-dancing transgressing body, Damoni strives for social, political, and sexual freedom, hence performs politics.

Following Hannah Arendt (2005) in conceptualizing freedom as political and referring to the linkage she draws between being free, beginning something new and leading (128), I argue for Damoni’s unique position in the performance landscape of Israel/Palestine, blurring social-national-gendered lines yet still deeply culturally rooted. It is in fact *movement* itself that allows her to disturb or unsettle stabilized (ordered) bodies set within “national imaginaries” (Manning quoted in Kotef 2015, 15), gender being part of this imagination; it is movement that affords her freedom—if only partial and momentary. Freedom as akin to movement in liberal thought (Kotef 2015) materializes here in Damoni’s dance and in her mobility through spaces. It manifests itself in feminist readings of women’s passages and action within domestic, public, and virtual spaces during the Arab revolutions (Hasso and Salime 2016; Gökarıksel 2016; Mourad 2014); of Arab women’s strategies for extending their independent, un-surveilled travel outside their homestead (Abu-Lughod 1990; Erdreich and Rapoport 2006; Barakat 2018); and, in a less tangible sense, of subordinated women’s maneuverings with language, looks, and representations (Anzaldúa 1987; hooks 1992), where they create “shared imaginative space[s] of freedom that do not require permission” (Benyoussef 2016, 58).

As a moving bodily art form, dance allows Damoni to avoid obstacles that come with language and words—and their definitions or connotations, which can be subject to censorship or punishment—and to play in a freer, perhaps more abstract, medium of expression. In this sense “dance is a subversion—both in the dissident meaning of the term and as a sub-form of expression and meaning-

making” (Kohavi 2007, 3). Dance, then, provides Damoni a venue for experiencing and displaying the uninterrupted, nonpoliced moving body and for claiming space and finding agency.

At the same time, however, it is this same corporeality that may configure dance as a threat to the social order. As a concrete, recognizable entity that cannot altogether be abstracted and detached from humanness, the moving body provokes strong emotions and connotations. These grant dance its artistic and political power, but also cause trouble because there is no way of covering what the body does and no means of controlling the ways it is interpreted. When Damoni has only limited access to Israeli funds and opportunities, and when she is denied the space to perform for a Palestinian audience—either by the organizers of the most important dance event in the area or by her colleague in the largest Arab city in Israel—she is faced with the limits of dancing subjectivity, of exercising a “performative power, as the possibility of life to be constantly invented and reinvented” (Deleuze quoted in Lepecki 2006, 8). Whether by estrangement from the Jewish-Israeli dance scene and environment, or as a result of the rejection of her work in Ramallah and Nazareth, Damoni’s artistic course seems paved with obstacles and setbacks. Off the beaten path she stumbles along, rises and falls, spins in circles, and fashions new paths, new spaces for finding meaning and freedom.

## Notes

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1. An exception—a subaltern woman dancer who played overtly with pleasure and sexuality in concert dance—is African American dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham (Dee Das 2017). Despite recurring criticism of her performances as reproducing racial stereotypes of Blackness as hypersexual and primitive, Dunham continued to use these themes, insisting on sensuality and pleasure being part of a full and vibrant human being. Although Arab women are not perceived as hypersexual—on the contrary, they are often seen as asexual or that they ought to be so (Sa’ar 2004)—they, too, are subjected to denunciation for expressing sensual pleasure—and more so for doing so on stage.

2. Paraphrasing Spivac’s (1988) “Can the Subaltern Speak?” I too direct my question to the feasibility of “speaking for oneself” through dance under colonial and gendered regimes.

3. Dance practitioners in my research, though deeply invested in questions of identity and belonging, tended to distance themselves from folk dance–based productions and practices. All formally schooled in Western dance traditions, they reported to me in interviews that they considered Western genres of dance training and physicality as universal, a common language, better providing them tools for artistic expression. Some of the teachers-choreographers did occasionally incorporate folkloric elements in their work but did not include these practices in their standard syllabus.

4. Recent examples of surveillance, punishment, economic sanctions, or intimidation of Palestinian artists and culture institutes are: the five-month jailing of the poet and social media activist Dareen Tatour for “inciting violence” after releasing her poem “Resist My People, Resist Them” (*Qawem Ya Sha’abi Qawemahum*) on YouTube (2018); the police questioning an art student at the Bezalel Academy of Arts after the student put up a poster of Netanyahu with a noose in front of his face and the word *ROPE* (a play on Barack Obama’s presidential campaign poster with the word *HOPE* at the bottom) (2016); the withholding of state funding from Al-Midan Arabic-language theater in Haifa, which was embroiled in controversy over a production of a play in 2018 (see note 14); the threat of withdrawing funds from the Tel Aviv Cinematheque

over its festival about the *Nakba* (catastrophe—the Palestinian term for the 1948 war leading to the creation of the state of Israel), featuring movies by Palestinian and international filmmakers (2015).

5. The Palestinian citizens of Israel are those Arabs remaining in what became Israel after the 1948 war, and their descendants. The *Nakba* (catastrophe), as this war is termed by Palestinians, resulted in the dispossession and expulsion of about 730,000 people who became refugees, mainly in adjacent Arab countries (Sabbagh-Khoury 2004). Within just a few months, the bulk of the Palestinian population of mandatory Palestine was displaced (3). The 156,000 Palestinians who remained, out of which about a third were internally displaced, became a minority in an exclusively Jewish state (3).

6. Chamber dance performances, solo or duet works of Arab choreographers and dancers (some of whom collaborate with Jewish choreographers), have been rare occasions since 2012, presenting work by Adi Boutrous, Shaden Abu Elasal and Manar Zuabi, and Sahar Damoni on different artistic stages in Israel/Palestine. This is a gradually growing occurrence in the past two years, when younger choreographers, such as Ayman Safiah (of blessed memory), Samaa Wakeem, Rand Ziad Taha, and Hala Salem, present their solo or duet dance works.

7. “Witches Kitchen”.

8. Sahar Damoni, conversation with author, July 15, 2019.

9. Literally: “in a furrow.” Both in Arabic and Hebrew, this expression means “following a beaten path.” The English title of this piece is “Path.”

10. Christian Palestinians are a small minority in the largely Muslim Palestinian society, but overall they are wealthier, more educated, and represent a larger number of the Palestinian elite (Sa’ar 1998; Mansour 2012; Abu Oksa Daoud 2012). Unlike the majority Muslim Palestinians, Christian Palestinians, argues Moshe Shokeid (1998, 239), have tended to adopt the Western behavioral norms that entered their society prior to the establishment of the state of Israel through Christian-European missionaries and as a result of European influences in Palestinian cities.

11. Pseudonym.

12. Spiral.

13. Coexistence is a common concept for describing an ideology of bringing Arab and Jewish children, youth, students, women, families, or movements together through numerous venues and activities, which are initiated, supported, and organized by private, municipal, or other institutions. These projects are aimed at building foundations for a common and peaceful life for Arabs and Jews in Israel. In recent years, this ideology has been heavily criticized by some Arabs and left-leaning Jewish activists, who argue that participating in this ideology without acknowledging the inherent inequality of Arabs and Jews in Israel helps normalize this inequality and consequently contributes to the ongoing and escalating oppression, exclusion, and discrimination against Arabs in Israel.

14. Al-Midan, an Arabic-speaking theater in Haifa, was since shut down due to a political dispute with the government over a play in the theater’s repertoire based on a diary written by a Palestinian prisoner involved in the murder of an Israeli soldier. The ministry of culture stopped funding the theater, resulting in its inevitable collapse.

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