

# “I Want to Tell You about My Life Now”: The Voice of Palestinian Refugees in *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*

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## **Abstract**

Many individuals and institutions – from scholar Edward Said to media watchdog Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting – have noted the Western media’s imbalance in presenting the struggles of the Palestinian people, particularly during the ongoing Al-Aqsa Intifada. Yet as the mainstream media continue to under-report violence against Palestinians and misrepresent the occupation of Palestinian lands, Palestinian filmmakers have begun to generate their own images, often through the genre of the documentary. This article examines one such documentary, Mai Masri’s *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*, a study of the daily lives of children living in Shatila and Dheisheh refugee camps. It argues that Masri’s film, through its restoration of the lost voice of the refugee child and its insistence on Palestinian narrative, provides an essential alternative to the exploitative images of the institutionalized media.

## **Résumé**

Bon nombre de personnes et d’organismes, parmi lesquels l’intellectuel Edward Saïd et le groupe de surveillance des médias Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting – ont eu l’occasion de souligner le déséquilibre qui caractérise la façon dont les médias occidentaux présentent la lutte du peuple palestinien, tout spécialement durant la période en cours de l’Intifada Al-Aqsa. Toutefois, alors même que la presse continue de sous rapporter les violences commises contre les Palestiniens et de donner une fausse image de ce qu’est réellement l’occupation des terres palestiniennes, des réalisateurs palestiniens ont commencé à pro-

duire leurs propres images, souvent sous forme de films documentaires. Cet article examine un tel documentaire – « *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* » (« Frontières entre rêves et frayeurs ») – de Mai Masri, qui est une étude de la vie quotidienne d’enfants habitant les camps de réfugiés de Shatila et de Dheisheh. L’article soutient qu’en redonnant sa voix perdue à l’enfant réfugié et en privilégiant le récit palestinien, le film de Masri fournit une précieuse alternative aux images exploitées par les médias institutionnalisés.

*We are here near there, the tent has thirty doors.  
We are here a place between the pebbles and the shadows.  
A place for a voice.  
— Mahmud Darwish, “We Are Here Near There”*

Writing in September 2001, almost one year after Ariel Sharon entered Jerusalem’s Haram al-Sharif and sparked the second Palestinian intifada, Edward Said suggested that “never have the media been so influential in determining the course of war as during the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which, as far as the Western media are concerned, has essentially become a battle over images and ideas.”<sup>1</sup> And as many critics have pointed out, it is a battle that the Palestinians are losing. In their survey of U.S. media coverage of the uprising, Ali Abunimah and Hussein Ibish highlight a number of distressing patterns, including the under-reporting of violence against Palestinians, a refusal to acknowledge Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and the demonization of Yasser Arafat.<sup>2</sup> Their examination of editorials over a three-month period reveals the extent of the imbalance. In the *New York Times*, for example, twenty-

five of thirty-three op-ed pieces devoted to the issue of Palestinian-Israeli relations strongly supported Israel's position.<sup>3</sup> A recent survey by the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) shows just what effect such media representations have on the U.S. public: only 4 per cent of Americans surveyed knew there was an Israeli occupation, and most viewed Palestinians as “uncompromising” and “aggressive.”<sup>4</sup> All of these trends form part of what Said sees as the overall dehumanization of Palestinians and the erasure of their stories through the mainstream media.

But voices do emerge from what Homi Bhabha has called the spaces in between,<sup>5</sup> between the pebbles and the shadows, the fences and the guns. For even while the intifada closes in on the people of Palestine, leaving them literally confined to their own homes, and narrows the spectrum of dominant media opinion, the range of Palestinian cultural expressions still grows and shifts. Committed, political art of the twentieth century sought, in Kyo MacLear's words, new “passages into events” and struggled with “representational clichés which condense[d] history;”<sup>6</sup> now, for a Palestine of the twenty-first century, such a commitment means struggling to create narratives beyond the endlessly repeating images of stone-throwing boys and flag-draped martyrs. And just such a struggle is taking place, in the work of Palestinian poets, diarists, filmmakers, curators, and artists. The Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah, for example, is currently hosting a memorial exhibit that aims to give a name and face to each of the first one hundred people killed in the intifada. The Sixth Biennale of Arab Cinema in Paris in July 2002 included an extensive program of Palestinian film, and earlier, in May 2001, the Al-Jana Arab Centre for Popular Culture in Beirut hosted the Palestinian film festival “Between Two Intifadas.” In the U.S., American-based internet sites such as the Electronic Intifada provide analysis, photographs, and war diaries from the ground. In many different locations – in exile, in Israel, in the occupied territories and refugee camps – Palestinians are resisting their own erasure by filling silences with sound and replacing simplified icons with a plurality of images and stories.

Amongst those resisting oppression, documentary filmmaking has had a historically significant place. While documentary makers and theorists in recent years have argued over concepts of reality, authenticity, and form, the importance of the independent documentary as a tool to interrupt the flow of dominant visual norms and reimagine more radical forms of democracy remains. Fittingly, independent documentary has played an important role within Palestinian artistic communities since the start of the intifada. Both David Tresilian, reviewing the Sixth Biennale of Arab Cinema, and Viola Shafik, reviewing the Al-Jana Film

Festival, note the large number of documentaries being produced by Palestinian directors. In the catalogue of the Sixth Biennale, coordinator of the Palestinian program Michket Krifa considers the reasons for this new flourishing of documentary, and suggests that “the younger generation has now moved in to occupy the field of visual creativity, due to its vital need to express the reality of Palestinian life. To correct images provided of Palestine by foreign television, these young people have decided to produce their own images of a region sometimes called the most mediated on the planet.”<sup>7</sup>

Palestinian-American filmmaker Mai Masri, who has in a short time built a significant body of work, must be counted among this new generation of documentary makers intent on producing their own images. Since the 1980s, Masri has directed or co-directed seven documentaries. These include *Wildflowers: Women of South Lebanon*, a biography of Palestinian intellectual and political leader Hanan Ashrawi, and three films focused specifically on refugee children – *Children of Fire*, *Children of Shatila*, and *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*. Masri has garnered several awards for her documentaries, which have been broadcast on television stations around the world, including Channel Four, France2 and PBS. Her most recent work, *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*, focuses on the friendship that develops between two Palestinian girls, both third-generation refugees. Mona Zaaroura, living in Shatila Camp in Beirut, and Manar Majed Faraj, living in Dheisheh Camp in Bethlehem, form a friendship through e-mail and letters. As the girls' friendship – and the filming of it – progress, two historic events occur. The first is the Israeli army's withdrawal from South Lebanon, which allows many of the refugees of Shatila Camp to see their homeland for the first time. The second event is the beginning of the intifada, which disrupts the girls' already chaotic existences. Although many children appear and speak in the film, and even become minor characters, the film's loose narrative structure is based on the evolution of the friendship between Mona and Manar, and the two girls provide all its voice-over narration.

In considering the large number of documentaries presented at the Al-Jana Film Festival, Viola Shafik divides the offerings into two broad categories: those films which “operated rhetorically, underlining the emotional repercussions of the occupation” and those which she deems more analytical and self-reflexive, and which favour irony or a sense of absurdity over realism.<sup>8</sup> *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* she places firmly in the category of the rhetorical film, noting what she calls the “director's desire to promote sympathy and solidarity” and even referring to the film as “tear-jerking.”<sup>9</sup> Yet such a categorization – and even covert dismissal – of Masri's film overlooks the film's political pur-

poses and its radical content. Admittedly, *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* does not use Brechtian “distancing” techniques of filmmaker intervention employed in many post-modern productions and favoured as a way of “demystifying” the documentary and countering false realism. On the other hand, Masri does use anti-realism techniques such as music, impressionistic sequences, voice-over, and symbolism to create what she calls “lyrical layers.”<sup>10</sup> These techniques are, in fact, as Shafik suggests, used to create sympathy and identification with the children’s lives, but as Diane Waldman and Janet Walker write in *Feminism and Documentary*, a stance that encourages identification and a spectatorial response is not always objectionable, especially when the subjects are suffering from oppression.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, Masri does not shy away from either the emotional reactions of her subjects, nor from the intent to create emotional responses in her audience; as a long-time advocate of the rights of Palestinian refugees, she seems to embrace emotion as a vehicle for change. But perhaps the most important element missing from Shafik’s categorization of Masri’s work is “the significant nuance of who is doing the talking.”<sup>12</sup> *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* gives voice to a group of people – adolescents, and in particular adolescent girls – whose words are rarely heard and who are mostly inaudible in mainstream ideological constructions of national identity – be they Palestinian or otherwise. If *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* is about advocating for change – and it is – then Masri is clearly showing us that these young women’s complex experiences as refugees, and their personal histories of poverty, politics, friendship, family hardship, and violence – histories rendered almost invisible by the Western media – must be taken into account.

This article, then, is an examination of Masri’s film as a radical intervention into current Western reporting of the intifada and the experiences of Palestinian refugees. The article itself is divided into three strands, which consider representations of Palestinian children, Palestinian histories, and Palestinians’ relationship to the land. Though these broad bands provide the structure of the essay, I also try to weave in other important considerations, such as nation, identity, and gender. Each of the three main strands is divided into two parts. In the first, I analyze how the mainstream Western media have represented the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in general, and the Al-Aqsa Intifada in particular – how they have framed, fetishized, omitted, or denied various elements of the Palestinians’ uprising. In the second half of each strand, I consider the way that *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* confronts such representations, providing an alternative point of view through its restoration of lost voices and images and its insistence on narrative and

history. Ultimately, what I want to suggest is that Masri’s film is a corrective (as Michket Krifa suggests) and an emotionally charged work of advocacy (as Viola Shafik suggests) but that it is also more than that. It is a means of interjecting story in a media environment obsessed with 10-second clips; a way of creating spectatorial identification against an institutionalized discourse that consistently pathologizes and “otherizes” Palestinians; a strategy of honouring historical memories at a moment when the Palestinian past is in danger of being erased; and, finally, a way of interjecting the unheard voice of the child refugee into formulations of nation and national identity.

### *The Contested Image of Palestinian Childhood*

Perhaps most disturbing amongst the host of misrepresentations of the Palestinian struggle is the creation of a new symbol of “Palestinian violence” – the Palestinian child. Indeed, Palestinian children – their activities, their lives, their bodies – have become contested ground. In the militaristic battle that has transformed the streets of the occupied territories, countless children and youths have lost their lives at the hands of Israeli soldiers, deadly shootings that many believe are deliberate.<sup>13</sup> But the children of Palestine are not only the targets of military warfare; they are also markers in the corresponding war over “images and ideas.” In the Western media, young Palestinians are often portrayed as the instigators of violence. Filmed and frozen in the act of throwing rocks, their desperate gestures are rarely contextualized to include the heavily armed Israeli soldiers at the end of the street. “Terrorists” and “attackers,” writes Omar Barghouti, are the words commonly applied to these young people.<sup>14</sup> When the flow of horrific images won’t allow this portrait, the mainstream media reconfigures the Palestinian child not as perpetrator but victim of violence. Such was the case with twelve-year-old Muhammad Al-Durra, whose death in his father’s arms was caught on film and broadcast internationally. Immediately, Muhammad (who, unusually, was granted a name and an age) became a symbol of Palestinian suffering. Yet even the dubious distinction of victimhood can be easily erased; within days of showing the damning, tragic footage, American news outlets began to report that the boy had earlier been throwing stones, as if to justify his murder.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, another disturbing distortion concerning the assignation of blame is also occurring in the West. As a number of media watchers, including Abunimah, Ibish, and Said have noted, the American media have made widespread claims that Palestinian parents are deliberately sacrificing their children, pushing them into the line of fire in order to further the Palestinian cause. Such accusations not only absolve the Israeli soldiers of responsibility for the children’s deaths, but work to dehumanize the Pales-

tinians; such accusations, says Hanan Ashrawi, are "the essence, the epitome of racism."<sup>16</sup> Yet whether as terrorist, victim, or sacrificial pawn, the Palestinian youth, in the lens of the Western media, is always caught in a present moment of violence, never permitted to live inside her own, unfolding narrative.

In *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*, Patricia Zimmerman regards this category of violent, static, repetitive visuals as iconic "fetishes," suggesting the obsessive nature of the Western viewer, in need of a nightly "fix" of spectacle. These fetishized images, which thrive during times of war, exist outside of time and place, in a space of "non-sense and antinarrative,"<sup>17</sup> and are used as a means of pacifying the viewer and silencing rational debate. In the case of Western coverage of the Palestinian intifada, these fetishized images are, as Michket Krifa describes them, "a series of stereotypes in viewers' minds – the child martyr, the suicide-bomber, the stone-thrower, the mother-in-tears,"<sup>18</sup> images of the child-at-war. Without context such images have become emptied of meaning; rather than sparking dialogue, they appear as definitive answers to questions we were never able to ask.

If such fetishized images produce a mute collective trance, then the way to break open that trance is through speech. Zimmerman suggests that it is the voice of testimony, a voice that embodies history, memory, and narrative, that can break through the non-sense of the spectacle. And this is precisely what *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* does. Confronted with images of children caught in an endless cycle of destruction, Masri excises these visuals by resuscitating the story and speech of the Palestinian child, and in doing so releases the confined image into the open space of narrative, and dispels the limiting binary of victim/ victimizer.

One of the ways in which this liberation is conducted is through Masri's profound commitment to the words of the Palestinian refugee child. Simply by choosing to place the child's voice foremost in her documentary, Masri performs a corrective of the silent, anonymous images of the mainstream media. But Masri goes beyond this, celebrating the girls' language, and allowing it to give rise to their own individuality. Indeed, Masri chose to focus on Mona and Manar chiefly because of their use of language, Mona for her poetic voice, and Manar for her articulate political expression.<sup>19</sup> As each girl is introduced to the viewer, her characteristic speaking voice is heard through voice-over: Mona, walking through the muddy, garbage-strewn alleys of Shatila Camp, says, "I wish I were a bird. At first I wanted to be a butterfly, but, then a butterfly is so beautiful that people catch it and imprison it in their notebooks. I don't want anyone to shut me in. The camp is like a bird's cage.

A bird that's cut off from freedom. No electricity, no water. Nothing. This bird would die of loneliness." Manar, walking through the streets of Dheisheh Camp, past graffitied walls that declare in English and Arabic "No peace without the exercise of our right of return," narrates, "I'd like to photograph the writing of the walls of the camp. I'd like to photograph the streets and the downtrodden people and the children who have nowhere to play but the streets." In "Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity," Trihn T. Minh-Ha warns against the danger of a documentary form that cuts out "language as voice and music – grain, tone, inflections, pauses, silences, repetitions" and replaces it with "a commentary that will objectively describe/interpret the images."<sup>20</sup> But Masri never gives in to this objective impulse, instead allowing the emotion, political urgency, and defiance in the children's voices to guide the audience's visual experience of the camps.

But perhaps the most important element in Masri's commitment to the radical potential embodied in the child's act of speech is her strategy of allowing Mona, Manar, and their friends to comment on their own experience of significant political events. When the intifada begins, for example, and Dheisheh Camp is involved in the uprising, no adult voice or "outside expert" intervenes to explain this historical moment. Instead, we understand the rapid and often simultaneous series of events through the girls' lived experiences. Manar, filmed writing a letter to Mona, narrates, "I want to tell you about my life now. I'm very worried these days. I've changed a lot. I don't know whether it's fear or sadness. Our school is in the war zone. Every time we hear a plane we're frightened and we scream. I don't sleep properly anymore." Mona replies with details from her own life in Lebanon; "Manar we've been demonstrating but we're not achieving anything. We're under so much pressure that we feel we're going to explode." And it is also the girls who *interpret* the events of the intifada, giving them their meaning. As Manar is filmed throwing stones, she explains, "If we have to live under occupation and injustice, then why live at all? When I throw a stone, it means I reject injustice. I want to be free, safe." As she flings each stone, she proclaims, "This one is for Samar. This one is for Mona." With these words, Manar – and Masri – reclaim the oft-seen image of the Palestinian youth throwing stones by explaining the political intent, solidarity, and resistance embodied within the gesture.

While this displacement of the mainstream representation of the Palestinian child is mostly created through spoken language, it is also reinforced through a number of short distinct scenes focused on the children's activities. Two of these are worth mentioning. The first of these scenes shows the children of Shatila involved in a group project.

Using cardboard, string, and pens, but most importantly the words and memories of other children, the children create “keys to Palestine.” After cutting out the cardboard keys, they circulate amongst their peers and ask them to write down details of their home villages. “What do you know of your town? What is Jaffa famous for?” Mona asks a younger girl. What they don’t know the children look up in books. After filling up their keys with words and history, the children display them around their necks. Here, the act of making the keys becomes a process of retrieving memory to create an imagined home, a place where one is “free, safe,” and takes the children out of the realm of violence to show them in innovative, imaginative acts of change. The second scene also shows children acting creatively. Here, Manar films Mona’s village using a digital camera. Masri’s camera – and the viewer – follow Manar as she films the abandoned village. This simple scene echoes Edward Said’s words in *After the Last Sky*. Commenting on Jean Mohr’s photograph in which two Palestinian girls hold the camera and direct it at the photographer standing above them, Said writes, “we too are looking, we too are scrutinizing, assessing, judging. We are more than someone’s object. We do more than stand passively in front of whoever, for whatever reason, has wanted to look at us.”<sup>21</sup> Manar walks through the village, comments on the destruction, records what is left, and in the end announces, “Mona, you have a beautiful village.” Holding the camera, not held by it, she looks, assesses, judges – not the object of the media’s gaze but the subject of her own, Palestinian eyes. No longer trapped at the violent checkpoints of the Western gaze, the child pictured here actively creates, forging for herself a story that includes a past and a future, and building friendship, solidarity, and a community of peers.

### ***Telling Omissions: The Restoration of History***

A recent study undertaken by the Glasgow University Media Group reveals the Western media’s distortion of the Palestinian past. Published in *The Guardian* under the headline “Missing in Action,” an article by director of research Greg Philo summarizes the group’s findings. These include an analysis of eighty-nine television news stories collected during the first days of the intifada, which reveal that of 3,536 lines of text, only seventeen explained the history of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Not surprisingly, when a sample audience of young adults aged seventeen to twenty-two was later asked where Palestinian refugees had come from and how they had become refugees, 80 per cent did not know. As well, the study found that while British journalists (unlike their American counterparts) sometimes used the word “occupation,” they did not explain that it was the Israelis occupying Palestinian land. Again, this omission

appeared to have a direct impact on audiences’ perceptions; in the focus group, 71 per cent did not realize that Israelis were occupying the territories. In fact, 11 per cent believed that the Palestinians were occupying the territories, while only 9 per cent knew it was the Israelis. Philo suggests that without discussion of its origins, the intifada appears to audiences as a disruption of normal life caused only by Palestinian bombs or riots.<sup>22</sup> It becomes clear, then, that what is “missing” in the “action” of television coverage is history itself.

The findings of the Glasgow University Media Group underline the complex anti-historicism of coverage of the intifada, an anti-historicism that not only omits the occurrence of events such as the 1948 *Nakba*, or catastrophe, the 1967 occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, and the 1982 invasion of Lebanon but also denies the experiences of exile, dispossession, occupation, and life in the refugee camps. While the Western media has failed to provide adequate context in its coverage of the Palestinian struggle for many years, this failure has deepened during the second intifada. Many observers, including Ali Abunimah and Hussein Ibish, link this crisis in history with a rise in the “clash of civilizations” notion popularized by Samuel Huntington in his eponymous 1997 book. As described by Abunimah and Ibish, the clash of civilizations is an inherently racist and reductionist cliché which sees the West as a coherent, distinct and superior segment of humanity that is being increasingly challenged by inferior but highly dangerous “Islamic” and, to a lesser degree, “Confucian” civilizations. In the case of the intifada, Israel is represented as an outpost of the West surrounded by the rival civilization, as represented by Palestinian protesters.<sup>23</sup>

The application of this theory to recent events in Palestine denies any notion of a historical basis for the intifada, claiming instead that Palestinians are acting out of instinctual and inexplicable behaviour inculcated by their “volatile” Arab and Islamic civilization. Mostly ahistorical in its suppositions, the clash of civilizations occasionally dresses up as history, but only of the most diaphanous kind, often referring to vague notions of the ancient past, or introducing old images from the crusades. In the *New York Times*, for example, Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA official, says that “the Muslim reluctance to concede that ‘Muslim lands’ can ever legitimately be relinquished to infidels is age-old, imbedded into Islamic law and custom.”<sup>24</sup>

Ervand Abrahamian has also suggested that the “clash of civilizations” cliché has not only been used to cover up Palestinian history, but has, since September 11, been used to cover up any mention of Palestine at all. He notes that “by placing the September 11 crisis in particular and the question ‘Why is the U.S. so unpopular in the Middle East?’

in general within the framework of Islam and the clash of civilizations, one can avoid the dreaded P word – Palestine – and the even more dreaded term ‘Occupied Territories.’”<sup>25</sup> He suggests that the press has deliberately avoided linking September 11 to the U.S.’s economic and political support of Israel, and their rejection of Palestinian claims. “This severance of the Palestinian plight from September 11,” he writes, “fitted in nicely with the official mantra that ‘we are attacked not because of what we do but because of who we are.’”<sup>26</sup> In such an atmosphere, the intifada becomes severed from its precedents – including the increase in Israeli settlements during the peace process, the continued denial of the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and the steady weakening of the Palestinian economy – and instead typified as an outburst of irrational “hatred.”

In light of such distortions, one of the most important functions of Masri’s *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* is its role in the process of restoring Palestinian histories. Masri undertakes two projects in this regard. First, in the historical void created by the mainstream media, she asserts the importance of Nakba as a marker in contemporary Palestinian experience. In “Palestine’s Tell-Tale Heart,” Omar Barghouti notes that the Nakba, in which 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes, has dominated political discourse since the start of the second intifada, and that many Palestinians, young and old, feel a renewed link with the past.<sup>27</sup> Though it rarely makes its way into the mainstream media, 1948 plays an important role in Palestinian constructions of identity and self. In her narrative of “generational intersections,” for example, Isis Nusair writes, “Both my grandmother and mother related to the year 1948 as a demarcating event in their lives. In 1948, my grandmother’s life was turned upside down. My mother would subsequently bear the results of that new situation of poverty and fear of the unknown.” Nusair goes on to note “the continuity between the experiences of my grandmother, mother and myself” and the way she herself is linked back to that date.<sup>28</sup> The narrative of *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* also returns to 1948. The film begins with a short text that reads, “This is the story of 2 Palestinian refugee girls whose grandparents were forced to flee from their homes in Palestine in 1948.” Thus, Masri makes it clear that the girls’ refugee status is a direct result of the actions their grandparents were forced to take in 1948. The next two sequences, in which a map traces the grandparents’ route out of Palestine, followed by a wide sweep showing the crowded squalor of the refugee camps, reinforce the link between 1948 and 2000. Later, as Manar and her grandfather are filmed making a trip to their village, a title appears reading, “Ras Abou Ammar village, destroyed by

Israel army in 1948.” Once there, the two of them walk through the remains of the mostly destroyed family home. As her grandfather takes her through the ruined rooms and narrates his life there and the eventual loss of the family home, Manar is filmed in tears. She – and the audience through her – understand that the 1948 dispossession has also had an impact on her, particularly when the beauty of the overgrown village and wide valley nearby are compared with earlier shots of the cramped streets of Dheisheh Camp and later shots of the violence that erupts in those same streets.

Masri’s second restorative project is her recognition of family memories as a means of understanding and honouring the past. As both Isis Nusair’s narrative and Manar’s filmed excursion suggest, one way to make the link back to 1948 is through family history. In Masri’s documentary of the first intifada, *Children of Fire*, eleven-year-old Hannah recounts a complex family narrative of loss and disruption that rings with the political history of occupation left out of mainstream representations: “My mother was told not to nurse me when I was a baby because she was depressed. They had arrested her brother and sister and demolished the house. My grandpa, her father, died of grief. And when my mum gave birth to my brother my father was in jail.”

In *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*, too, Masri chooses to emphasize the importance of family history. Mona’s, Samar’s, and Manar’s family histories are all recounted by the girls near the beginning of the film. Mona, speaking to the camera, explains how she lost her father to a heart attack when she was two, a speech that ends in tears; Samar, reading her diary to her friend Mona, reveals that her father was killed in a massacre and that her mother abandoned her; and Manar, in a voice-over, explains that her father was in prison when she was born. The revelations of the girls’ family histories encapsulate the past experiences of many Palestinians – depression, trauma, arrest, loss of home, loss of family, imprisonment, death. These family histories also posit a connection between past and present, but what we see here is more than just continuity – the events of the past resurface forcefully in the girls’ lives, often as waves of difficult emotion or memory. The Palestinian past in *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* not only exists, and impinges on the current moment, but is experienced as recurring memory that troubles any simple understandings of the present. It is these memories, these links with the past constructed through family history – and their public expression through documentary – that have the power to displace the distortions and disfigurements of Western media, and to reveal the exploitative nature of images that flatten history, memory, and culture into one-dimensional, consumable spectacle.

### ***The Censorship of Geography***

History and geography, temporality and space – these are of course deeply intertwined in the plight of Palestinian refugees, for it is the Palestinians’ connection to *place* that has been radically disrupted through time. Geography, then – as land, people, and their relationship – requires some examination here, particularly as Edward Said has noted an almost total “censorship of geography” in mainstream American media representations of Palestine. This censorship occurs on a number of levels. The first is the simple but profound absence of maps. Said notes that during the first months of the intifada, none of the print or broadcast reports in the U.S. showed a map to help explain the crisis.<sup>29</sup> Yet there are many maps that could reveal a great deal about the conflict. Maps of historical Palestine, maps of Israeli settlements and barricades, maps showing the complex system of governance set down under the Oslo agreement, maps showing distribution of wealth, water, or employment – all would reveal the source of the Palestinians’ discontent and help to contextualize the intifada, yet all are strangely absent from media discourse, constituting, in Said’s words, not simply an omission but a deliberate “misrepresentation.”<sup>30</sup>

A second misrepresentation circulated by the American media concerns the relationship of the people to the land. Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century was constructed by many Zionists as a wasteland, a desert in which only a few nomads – a term used pejoratively – straggled across the barren land. In such a configuration, with the land seen as empty, the new Israelis were not colonists, or even settlers, but pioneers intent on making the desert “bloom.” The production of this image continues today through the selective use of geographical terms, or what Israeli new historian Ilan Pappé has called “lexical weapons.”<sup>31</sup> For example, Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting has noted that, in the American media, Israeli settlements are called “neighbourhoods,”<sup>32</sup> thus disguising the fact that they are settlements built on the land confiscated by Israel in 1967. Similarly, the words “occupied” and “occupation,” which once had some circulation, have become taboo. Words such as “bantustan” and “segregation,” sometimes used in independent media to link Israel to apartheid South Africa, never make an appearance. Again, these representations appear to have an impact on public opinion; the recent survey undertaken by the ADC showed that most Americans believed Israelis to be a “pioneering” people<sup>33</sup> rather than settlers, colonizers or occupiers, legitimizing and honouring the settlers’ link to what is, under the Geneva Convention, illegally occupied land.

The third geographical misrepresentation concerns Palestinian immobility, and is perhaps the most complex. Since the start of the second intifada, the already limited move-

ment of the Palestinians has become even more restricted, yet the full effects of barricades, bypass roads, checkpoints, security zones, curfews, road closures, and travel permits are not fully reported. While individual aspects of this network – such as checkpoints or curfews – may be shown, they are never revealed in their totality as a system which confines people in their homes, leaving them unable to attend schools, universities, or workplaces. Ironically, in fact, many North Americans may have exactly the opposite image of Palestinians. Stephen Prince’s study of Hollywood representations after the Persian Gulf War shows that the people of the Middle East are depicted as an enemy which “occupies no terrain specifiable on a map’s coordinates but is rather a hazy, nebulous, threatening Other,”<sup>34</sup> in other words, the Middle Eastern “enemy” is depicted with limitless boundaries to commit “terror,” and vast powers of movement and subterfuge, an image that is even more pervasive after the events of September 11. And now, as the media attempts to equate Palestinian protesters and PLO leaders with members of the Al-Qaeda network,<sup>35</sup> the true restriction of the Palestinian people becomes even less apparent, lost to an image of the “international” terrorist.

These layers of obscurity around the relationship of Palestinians to the land of Palestine are dense and seemingly deliberate, but in *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* Masri employs powerful visual strategies to reilluminate that relationship and reveal the media’s powerful “lexical weapons.” The first of these visual strategies is a straightforward corrective to the absence of maps. Masri uses maps throughout the film, both as a pedagogical tool for audiences and as a visual symbol of the connection between Palestinians and the land. The initial and most prominent map appears within the first two minutes of the film. Fittingly, this map and the people signified on it undergo change and movement in a series of steps. In the first step, a map shows the historical shift from Palestine in 1948, before the Nakba, to its division into Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. In the second, the movement of the girls’ grandparents out of Palestine and into the West Bank and Lebanon is traced with arrows. Finally, the girls’ birthplaces in Shatila Camp and Dheisheh Camp are located on the map. Though simple, this sequence clearly illustrates the original expulsion of the Palestinians and explains the girls’ refugee status. It also suggests the limited space on which Palestinians now live, a suggestion reinforced photographically by the wide pan of the crowded buildings of Shatila in the following shot. But maps make at least two more significant appearances in the film. In the first of two closely linked scenes, Manar and her friends research the location of Mona’s village. In order to find it, they take down a large, framed map entitled “Palestine, 1948” from the walls of

the family home. In a follow-up scene, the girls plan the journey Manar will take to reach Mona's village of Saffouri. A close-up shot converges on the map and follows the girls' hands as they trace the route and, together, recite the names of the towns and regions Manar will pass through. The initial scene, in which the family map is framed and publicly displayed, presents the land as both treasured memory and a source of identity; the second scene, uniting the map and the girls' hands, implies a physical connection to the land, a connection that appears in many Palestinian narratives. In her meditative essay "Yaffawiyya [I am from Jaffa]," for example, Souad Dajani asks "Are the sights, sounds and smells of Jaffa encoded in my genes?"<sup>36</sup> – a question that suggests a connection to the terrain that is historic, familial, even bodily.

Masri's second visual symbol – the heavily guarded barbed-wire fence that separates Lebanon from Israel – is depicted in three major scenes throughout the documentary, and evolves into a potent and complex representation of Palestinian refugees' longing for the land, restricted movement, and familial separation. The first of these scenes is a celebratory one, in which Mona and her peers arrive at the border just after the Israeli evacuation. Mona, ecstatic, declares that it is the first time she has ever seen Palestine. Much of this hopeful scene focuses on groups on the Lebanese side dancing and singing; seeing the land for the first time produces a joyous, kinesthetic reaction. The second scene is made up of a series of vignettes. Families reunite, kissing, hugging, and holding hands. The two groups of children from Shatila and Dheisheh Camps meet and discuss their lives, joking, flirting, and searching for common ground. Gifts – watches, fruit, t-shirts, necklaces, bread – are exchanged. Yet each of these joyful encounters holds a visual paradox; the routine acts of affection between friends and family are punctuated by the fence, which restricts movement and defers the attainment of union. The final scene, after the start of the intifada, is the darkest. A young girl looks at the border and cries, asking, "Is this the fence separating us?" A montage of hands is shown gripping the rolls of barbed wire and, this time, the reunions are met with an anguish that causes people to cry, yell, even faint. In the progression of these scenes, the fence becomes a symbol loaded with the weight of separation from land and from others, producing not just grief but a visceral, bodily reaction. We are taken back to the start of the film in which Mona announces, "I don't want anyone to shut me in," snapping her hands shut for emphasis, a gesture and a sentiment which reinforce the confinement and separation experienced by many so Palestinian refugees, yet so rarely acknowledged in the mainstream media.

### Conclusion

"In this country, we all get filmed," says filmmaker Azza Al-Hassan in her experimental documentary *News Time*. "Cameras are running all the time, recording every move we make. Camera people come from all over the world. From France, Italy, Germany and other places. They say we make good news." Palestinian refugees have much to struggle with, politically and economically, but how to counter this callous foreign insistence that Palestinians "make good news" is surely a central question. As Michket Krifa suggests, one solution is the production of uniquely Palestinian images. And Palestinians have shown there are many ways to do this. In *News Time*, after commenting on the constant presence of the media, Al-Hassan declares, "Still, we try to look our best," and follows with a montage in which ordinary Palestinians primp and preen before having their picture taken in front of various "exotic" backdrops. A similar send-up is used in Sobhi Al-Zobaidi's mock documentary *Looking Awry*, in which American television producers in Jerusalem search for perfectly framed shots of a mosque, synagogue, and church, even as the second intifada erupts in another part of the city. This ironic impulse is an important tool in deflating the power of the mainstream media to control the images and lives of Palestinians, but there are other methods too. In her documentary about the first intifada, *Children of Fire*, Mai Masri includes numerous scenes in which she is forced to turn off her camera by Israeli soldiers, revealing the fact that only some views of the uprising make it to the screen. And in the final sequence of *Chronicles of a Disappearance*, Elia Sulieman suggests the very problem of Palestinian apathy to the importance of media images, as a couple sleeps in front of a television screen flying the Israeli flag and playing the Israeli anthem.

All of these various representations – whether verbal or visual, satirical or direct – are necessary attacks on an institutionalized media that has routinely misrepresented Palestinians throughout the course of the second intifada. And their variety is essential. Edward Said, still one of the few to comment on a unique Palestinian cultural presence, says in an interview with Salman Rushdie, "There are many different kinds of Palestinian experience, which cannot all be assembled into one. One would therefore have to write parallel histories of the communities in Lebanon, the occupied territories, and so on. . . . It is almost impossible to imagine a single narrative."<sup>37</sup> Plurality, then, is the key to Palestine, as shown in the new variety and energy of Palestinian filmic voices. Amongst such voices, *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* is an important contribution. It is, in Masri's words, a "lyrical" attempt to counter the mainstream media's powers of representation with a combination of symbolic visuals and the voices of that most



under-represented group, adolescent girls. With an intelligence that vibrates with emotion, the film shows the girls addressing the most urgent issues of Palestinian refugees – homelessness, poverty, violence, family disintegration – in a way that both underlines the loss and affirms the possibility of a changed future. Bringing to the surface suppressed memory, imagination, and longing, it enters new narratives in the changing frontiers of Palestine.

### Notes

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