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The Archive of Gestures

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This research is dedicated to my second half Nicola Perugini, my sons Emil and Adam, my extended family and the resilient Palestinian people.

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Abstract

Through my practice-led research, *The Archive of Gestures*, I unearth gestures and alternative narratives left out of the Israeli accounts of the occupation in Palestine, dealing with the body as a form and source of archive. I do this by re-enacting, analysing, and commenting on these gestures and the contexts in which they were produced. Most importantly, I develop processes that allow me to engage with the bodies of the audience members through participatory choreographic work. In this way, I aim to disseminate the bodily archives I generate, making them accessible to others, and reflecting on who can create, own, and access archives in the Palestinian colonial context. My research, which I consider a form of a decolonial gesture, collects and revives fragments of a gestural collective narrative in confrontation with the structural erasures of the colonial situation.

In my thesis I engage with different theories—from archive reappropriation as decolonial practice, to the body as a valuable site of the archive, to audience participation theories on creating afterlives of the event and facilitating the emergence of new decolonial subjectivities. I also analyse relevant artistic works from Palestine and around the world that deal with decolonial archives, the body as a source of archive, and audience participation as a form of creating shared experience. My gestural archive retrieves stories related to my own biography as a refugee in the Palestinian diaspora, later as an occupied subject in Palestine, and now as citizen of the world living in the United Kingdom. Methodologically, I construct my bodily archive by engaging with informal archival material (videos, pictures, written documents), oral histories, and imagination. I explore using these different forms of physical archives in tandem with the bodily archives in order to investigate techniques to unearth, as well as revive and disseminate, the movements and gestures in the archived narratives. I also combine theory and practice to discover forms of constructing and transmitting a living archive of gestures as a contribution to the production of new knowledge.
Introduction

“To fight this archival fatigue and make archives actually matter, we need to develop an altogether different approach—one that builds on imagination, future vision, playfulness, creativity, speculation, and fabulation…” Gil Z. Hochberg (2021: ix)

My practice-based research, The Archive of Gestures, investigates how artists can contribute to change by exploring and problematising cultural and political memories. I do this by unearthing and reviving latent narratives of the Palestinian history in the form of a living archive, relying on my body, the bodies of my collaborators, and those of the audience members as the main form and source of archive. I use the skills of interoceptive awareness that my body has acquired through many years of dance training to dig into and unearth the bodily and gestural archives in order to liberate myself from colonial images of myself and the Palestinian people. In this way, I use my dance knowledge as a vehicle to move freely and politically and I distance my practice from dance techniques that I have learnt since the age of seven, such as ballet, modern dance and contemporary dance. I do this because of their rigid expressive forms, links to questions of modernity and coloniality, attachment to the beauty and the sublime, as well as problems related to representation on stage and cultural appropriation.

I consider my choreographic approach to be “choreopolitical”, a term coined by dance scholar Andre’ Lepecki (2013), to describe choreographic processes that plan, practice and experiment with how to move towards freedom and how to move politically. This takes place during collaborative creation processes and collective investigations and extends to the performance space through contact with the audience and the transformation of the performance as a result of the encounter. My choreographic practice can also be situated within Expanded Choreography, which according to dance critic and dramaturg Bojana Cvejic (2017), was born in the 1990s and inspired by Judson Dance Theater’s thinking on choreography as any movement, of any body and of whatever method. Cvejic explains that Expanded Choreography works with choreography as the art of organising movements, speech, bodies, images and things in space and over a certain amount of time in order to propose problems, questions or ideas. It also incorporates different artistic mediums, such as live art and digital media, in ways that serve best the process and allow the translation of the choreography’s concept. This is an interdiscplinary approach that I am also experimenting with in my choreographic proceses.

In my thesis I combine theory and practice in four chapters to discover choreographic processes and forms of constructing and transmitting archives of gestures as a contribution to the production of new knowledge. In the first chapter, “Why Archive, Why Gesture in the Palestinian Context?” I contextualise the question of Palestine within the colonial context, analysing the Palestinian response
of decolonization through creating alternative archives. I situate my research at the centre of this vibrant political, academic, and artistic movement. I also analyse some relevant artistic works of the archive movement, including works I developed prior to my PhD. In the second chapter, “Gesturing Refugees: Participation, Affect, Then Action?” I examine the work Gesturing Refugees (2018), the first piece developed as part of my PhD research and created in the form of a participatory live performance. The performance unearths alternative narratives and gestures of refugeehood, including my own, and experiments with audience participation as a way of disseminating the archive and creating an afterlife of the performance’s gestures and narratives.

In the third chapter, “What My Body Can’t Remember: Body Memory as Archive”, I analyse the second work I have created during my PhD study, What My Body Can’t Remember (2019), a participatory promenade performance. During the performance, I share with the audience the gestures I can and can’t remember from moving at home under curfew during the 2002 Israeli invasion of the West Bank, investigating body memory as the main source of archive and inviting the audience to dig into their own bodily archives. In the fourth and final chapter, “PAST-inuous: Defying Distance Through Remediated Archives”, I discuss the third work developed during my research, PAST-inuous (2021). This work took the form of both a participatory dance video and a live performance with an in-person and digital cast, and was created over a digital platform with 11 Palestinian dancers, most of them third-generation refugees, some living in the diaspora and others in Palestine. The work reflects on the future of the Palestinian refugee cause and its connection to the current global refugee condition through gesture exchange within the group itself and with the audience members during the performance. It investigates ways to defy distance, develops a sense of togetherness through the screens, and creates remediated bodily archives. The thesis ends with a Coda, or a conclusion through prolongation and expansion, to reflect on my contribution to knowledge in the fields of choreography, decolonial studies and archival studies through embodied decolonial processes that keep forming and transforming, rather than rigid ones that have the aim of reaching definite ends within a fixed timeframe.

Although the narratives are related to my biography, I do not consider my research method to be auto-ethnographic, since my aim is to utilise my personal experience—in relation to key historical moments in Palestine—as a way to reconstruct the latent stories and gestures of Palestinian people as a collective. The methodology I am developing aims at producing a living Palestinian archive of gestures rather than a portrait of my gestures and personal narratives. The process I identify with, rather than the method, is what constitutes practice-led research according to philosopher Donald Schon (1992) and what cultural theorist and artist Erin Manning calls the “against method” (2016), and involves avoiding building research on a pre-established method, and instead developing a process for creating knowledge through the practice itself. Manning, like many other practitioners, deals
with art as a way, with a focus on the process rather than the art object, considering practice a form of daily study that produces new processes and new forms of knowledge that do not need to be captured within already existing academic mythodological structures. She argues that these pre-existing structures aim at making an experience reasonable, in that they cut the process before it reaches its full potential. They also create hierarchies of what can constitute knowledge, undermining and suppressing voices that do not follow such pre-determined categories, simply because they do not have a methodology that proves that knowledge was formally attained.

She suggests that having no method does not mean that the process does not invent its own conditions to make itself operational. Following philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1929) she proposes that processes shape their own reason, which is formed from within, rather than outside experience. This type of reason has both a certain anarchy and an openness towards new forms of knowledge, while at the same time shows a direction towards definite ends, and it manages to contain the anarchy and offers the process a specific sense of organisation. This type of reason is informed by technique, which combines unconscious habits and conscious skills; intuition, which is the innate knowledge and sense of speculation that helps the reinvention of technique, allowing it to reach its as-yet unattained potential and experience the more-than of form; and agencement, a type of agency formed in the process, which makes the interval felt, by making the needed adjustments to the process, directing how the event will manifest.

Following Manning, my process of archiving each narrative is constructed in the dance studio, through experience, where the thinking is formed in the doing and reason does not judge the appetite for new knowledge, but rather finds creative ways of guiding it from within experience. I do this by relying on my physical skills and choreography techniques to explore ways of re-enacting, transforming, and deforming gestures, experimenting with dance notions around movement repetition, size, and direction, and means of combining them with video to create bodily archives. I am guided by my intuition about what can be perceived by the audience as a living gestural archive, as well as which approaches of audience participation could function as a welcoming invitation that would allow them to live an experience during the performance and conversely others that would create an intimidating distance, blocking them from participating and developing empathy to the gestures and the narratives. Finally, I use agencement to change and edit the choreography during the creative process and after each performance, reflecting how the participation parts are perceived by the audience and myself during the event and how the participation strategies can be adjusted accordingly.

Artist and scholar Emma Cocker (2013) writes about her practice, which completely abandons pre-existing methods. She explains that she focuses on not knowing during the creative process and researches strategies of developing
readiness, in hopeful ways, for the unexpected during the process. She suggests that the artistic practice should nonetheless be accompanied by skill, reinforced with confidence that the right decision will be made when required and supported by speedy responsiveness to the unexpected, which reflects the three elements discussed by Manning: technique, intuition, and agencement. She also considers not knowing as a generative process that allows one to confront the unrecognisable and the unfamiliar, thus creating new forms of operating through experience. It allows for a delinking with the already known and with certain normative ways of creating knowledge, giving space, freedom, and permission to leave predominant structures behind.

Figure 1. Not knowing at the first day of rehearsals of What My Body Can’t Remember at Dance Base (October 2018) © Farah Saleh

In a similar vein, one of the most prominent contemporary decolonial theorists, Walter Mignolo (2014), analyses the return of embodied and process-based artistic practices of non-Western civilisation, which he reads as a decolonial gesture that aims at delinking from European practices of representation on stage. This involves practices that focus on concepts of beauty and the production of an object of art, rather than the “aesthesis”—the senses, sensing, and sensations that bodies feel while creating, performing, or experiencing art through a process, which he thinks are essential for the creation of collective embodied experiences that would allow for the emergence of new decolonial subjectivities. Similarly to Cocker and Mignolo, I consider my process of research and creation as not knowing: a process
that thrives to create unnamable forms of becoming in experience, that ruptures dominant forms of creating and performing choreographic work and relating to audiences, that puts the aesthesis at the centre of the performance and delinks from aesthetic colonial concepts of beauty, reason, and passive spectatorship.

Practicing a decolonial process that thinks, I intend to address a series of important research questions:

- What is an archive?
- Can a body be considered a living archive?
- And would disseminating alternative narratives through bodily archives constitute a decolonial gesture? (Chapter 1)

- Can the bodily archives be transmitted from one body to another through audience participation?
- Would that guarantee an afterlife for the gestures and narratives? (Chapters 2)

- Would a sheer moving body be capable of performing an archive?
- Or is there always a need for additional mediums, such as text, video, audio, and documents? (Chapter 3)

- Can the internet function as a remediated social and political space for the exchange of bodily archives?
- Would hybrid live in-person/digital performances allow for greater audience participation and gestural exchange between the audience and the performers? (Chapter 4)
Chapter 1

Why Archive, Why Gesture in the Palestinian Context?

In this first chapter, I will attempt to explain why creating archives is crucial in the Palestinian sociopolitical context and how I choose to contribute to the Palestinian archive movement. Through archiving gestures of hidden Palestinian narratives, I have contextualised the question of Palestine within the colonial context, in which archives are looted, destroyed, and appropriated by colonial powers to erase the indigenous people’s narrative and create a distorted version of it, to introduce a new kind of knowledge that justifies the colonial control over the indigenous people’s land and resources. I also explore the Palestinian decolonial response, whereby indigenous people actively work towards the reappropriation of their narrative by creating alternative knowledge and archives, also through the body, that are considered as a repository of embodied knowledge acquired through daily performance and that have a big role in the transmission and transformation of narratives within people. I will do this by examining the theories of post-colonial, decolonial, archive, and gesture scholars and by showing some practice-based examples of archive work in the Middle East, including my own.

Edward Said, the most renowned Palestinian intellectual of the last century and one of the initiators of post-colonial studies, wrote his book, *The Question of Palestine* (Said, 1978), to provide an alternative narrative to counter the image depicted by Israel, and adopted in the West, of Palestinians as inhuman terrorists, extremists, and refugees in the mass media (including radio and television) as well as in films, literature, and academia. Said’s argument is that Palestinians, like other people who opposed the West’s modernisation mission in the “Third World”, were systematically dehumanised and represented as terrorists. He explains how they revolted against the creation of the Zionist, European-driven, state on Palestinian land and the ethnic cleansing of the native population, executed to welcome the Zionist colonisers in their place, a process that gradually started at the end of 1800 and became official and systematised with the Balfour Declaration in 1917. In his declaration, Lord Arthur Balfour, the UK Foreign Minister at the time, promised the Palestinian land as a national homeland for the Jewish people while denying the Palestinian people the right to self-determination.

Said affirms that Palestine, or *Filastin* (Palestine in Arabic), as it was known since at least 700 AD, had survived many occupations, such as the Ottoman Empire between 1500 and 1900 and the British Empire between 1920 and 1948, and had a majority Palestinian population in 1948, when Israel was established on 50 percent of its land. According to Said, Zionism is a colonial project, supported by a European power (Great Britain), which neglected the presence and the demands of the native majority of residents, and aimed at destroying, then rebuilding and modernising, a
non-European territory for and with another foreign group of mainly European Jews, while killing and expelling the native population. Similar to other colonial experiences around the world, the Palestinian population was considered uncivilised and inferior. For Said, therefore, the question of Palestine is mainly a contest between affirming a presence of the native population and its denial and elimination by the colonial power.

Said explains that Zionism was a settler-nationalist ideology adopted in the West by the Jewish communities living mainly in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century—an ideology that advocated for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, and which became more popular with the rise of fascism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Zionism was seen by its supporters as a solution for anti-Semitism in the West through the founding of a new state for the Jews in the Holy Land, after options in South America and East Africa were dropped. Palestine was considered the best option because of the religious bond of the Jews to the land and because they considered it, in spite of the presence of Palestinians, a backward and uninhabited province, where they could easily constitute their homeland with the support of an imperial power like Great Britain. This idea appealed to the liberal and enlightened West, which came to equate any opposition to it and any argument in favor of the self-determination rights of the native people with anti-Semitism.

Said elaborates that even after the Zionist colonisation of Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Western support of Zionism kept growing, celebrating its pioneering spirt, its use of force against the native population, and its kibbutz model of socialist agricultural communities—forgetting that the kibbutzim mainly functioned thanks to the cheap labor of Arab Jews and were constructed on lands confiscated from Palestinians. Zionism fused well with White European imperialism against the colored, “uncivilised” Arabs, because they shared common ideals of civilisation and progress. Furthermore, Said explains that Zionism was seen as an opposition to Islam, which was represented in Western popular and scholarly discourse as savage, vicious, and stupid. This was one of the key elements of tension between the West and the Orient, and made Zionism even more appealing to the West. The creation of Israel was seen as exporting liberalism, democracy, and knowledge to the Middle East and keeping “backward Islam” at bay. That’s why for Said, Israel and Zionism completely correspond with the Western colonial values of progress and modernity and echo the same way colonial powers spoke for the natives and promoted certain preconceptions about them in the West. He claims that Zionism spoke for the Palestinians by creating a new narrative about them and by not allowing them to represent themselves, depicting them as uncivilised and terrorists.

Similarly to Said, Palestinian historian Basem Ra’ed (2010) asserts that the history of Palestine and the Palestinian narrative, especially after 1948, was erased and replaced by the Zionist narrative—a narrative that is based on God’s promise of
the Holy Land to the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible, which is written by biblicists and according to Ra‘ed (and many prominent anti-Zionist Jewish and Israeli historians, such as Ilan Pappe [2006], Shlomo Sand [2009], and Tom Segev [2000]), should be read as fiction and myth, rather than history. In his book *Hidden Histories* (2010), Ra‘ed attempts not only to uncover hidden narratives of the Palestinian history and culture erased by the settler colonial project, but also to invite the reader to undergo a process of unlearning the history of Palestine/Israel, and to question both the historical truth and fictions about the Holy Land created by the Zionist colonial movement, which are now normalised and accepted as historical facts around the world. According to Ra‘ed, Zionists used a “sacred geography”\(^1\) narrative, where Jews are returning to their promised land by God, to justify their colonial objectives in Palestine. Like Said, Ra‘ed instead proposes to situate the Palestine question in the colonial context, to uncover the misconceptions around the Palestinian/Israeli history and to allow the Palestinians to reappropriate their narrative and write their history.

Ra‘ed explains that for the Zionists to support their claims of being the natives returning to their promised land, they first ethnically cleansed the native population, then started appropriating their land and belongings, destroying entire villages and building new towns on their ruins, changing the symbols carved on old houses, and changing streets names. They also started appropriating the Palestinian culture, from embroidery to music, dance, and food, and even started using some Arabic terminology in the newly constructed Hebrew language. They also claimed that the Palestinians—who were the majority of the inhabitants of Palestine at the time of the creation of Israel, working in agriculture in the villages and in small industries in the cities, and who had survived and resisted many previous occupations, most recently the Ottoman and the British Empires—were merely nomad “primitive Arabs”, who did not have a national identity and could easily be pushed to other neighboring Arab countries.

To counter this narrative, Ra‘ed invites all Palestinians to reappropriate their history and their culture with different creative means and to do it actively in a way that does not normalise the existent Zionist narrative and how they are being represented in it. He defines the Palestinian normalisation of Zionist myths as a form of self-colonisation, whereby the colonised interiorise and accept the coloniser’s narrative and their values as superior, as a result of lack of counter-knowledge and historical awareness. This in turn leads to a lack of political action and loss of status. Ra‘ed suggests that self-awareness and continuous investments in oneself and in the community are essential for producing independent thinking, action, and counter-knowledge, as well as helping to prevent self-colonisation, which Zionists achieve

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1. “Sacred geography” is a religious-colonial phenomenon that relies on biblical models to enable colonisation projects, and which in the nineteenth-century intensified in Palestine (Ra‘ed 2010: 30)
through calculated political and mental strategies, including creating a complicit local elite middle class of the colonised, such as the Palestinian Authority, created after the Oslo Peace Accords with Israel in 1994.

**Decolonisation of Knowledge**

Ra’ed’s theorisation of the colonial condition echoes that of Frantz Fanon. Fanon (1986), a psychiatrist and anti-colonial writer, warns of the intellectual laziness of the middle class under a colonial regime, in which individuals sometimes inherit positions of power and end up serving the colonisers. He explains throughout his book how he discovered his dignity through a constant examination of his own experience with racism as a Black person in the Western world and describes how for him liberation starts with conscious awareness, through recognising and challenging how one is represented. He describes how he understood why he himself could hate Black people when he realised that for White people being Black is a symbol of a sin, something that he himself had internalised. He also explains that he did not want to remain stuck at this level of awareness, but was instead keen to go further, to reject and challenge such claims by taking active steps towards the creation of new forms of life that are fully human, where one can self-appropriate and fight for universal dignity, equality, and equity for all humans. This constitutes an idea of universalism, where one can’t disassociate oneself from the future of another person in the world experiencing racism and injustice, which is different from the universalism of the West, which is based on exporting European history and concepts on modernity to the rest of the world.

The question of the effects of colonial knowledge and discourse is central also to the work of Walter Mignolo (2002), who builds on Fanon’s anti-colonial theories. Mignolo examines how European history and discourse were forced on the rest of the colonised world as the only source of knowledge. He claims that following the sixteenth-century European capitalistic expansions to the Atlantic commercial circuit, European enlightenment and the concept of modernity were exported all around the world as the only legitimate knowledge, while local histories and narratives were erased. Mignolo elaborates that this connection of knowledge to a geopolitical space is coined by Anibal Quijano as “coloniality of power” (2000), in which coloniality is shown to be an integral part of modernity, and continues to exist to this day, even though most Western colonies are officially gone, which makes coloniality a new continuous form of colonisation.

Mignolo defines the changing faces of colonialism as “colonial difference”, through which human history is silenced by discourses focused on modernity and Western civilisation. To counter the colonial difference, he invites us first to recognise it, then to delink from it, by decolonising social sciences, art, and education in general, and by giving voice to local thinkers, philosophers, artists, and scientists (be the African, South American, Arab, Indian, Chinese, and so on) who
were silenced throughout the centuries. In this, he proposes the concept of “diversality” in opposition to universality or globalisation, which he considers as new forms of coloniality that propose an abstract project based on European legacy. With diversality, Mignolo proposes an alternative universal project in which discontinuity with the European knowledge system is encouraged by opening dialogues with different types of local knowledges based on the values of justice, equity, and human rights, echoing Fanon’s proposition.

Achille Mbembe (2015), a philosopher and decolonial thinker, continues to build on what he calls Fanon’s theory of decolonisation: the process of self-ownership, self-appropriation, and self-creation. Mbembe argues that the process of decolonising knowledge is relational. It involves reclaiming and protecting one’s rights, image, and history from others by creating new forms of knowledge production and by rejecting pre-existing Europeans models and thinking canons. To elaborate, he proposes that individuals become craftspeople who undergo a continuous process of liberation, through which they free themselves from pre-existing forms, images, and histories that were imposed on them, and by becoming able to see themselves clearly and reappropriate their image. Mbembe borrows this idea from Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986), who considers decolonising the mind to be a continuous process through which individuals start to emerge out of a state of blindness and begin to see themselves clearly in relation to themselves and others in the universe.

Mbembe explains that for Wa Thiong’o, decolonisation does not stop at that level of consciousness, but rather moves towards writing and teaching about oneself. This represents a new level of struggle dealing with what is to be taught to the new generations by recentering the source of knowledge from Europe to other parts of the world, such as Africa, China, and the Arab World, and providing a knowledge that is pluriversal. This echoes Fanon’s idea of the universal that delinks from the European enlightenment universality and Mignolo’s proposition of the diversality of knowledge. My research is inspired by this decolonial school of thought that proposes concepts of pluriversality and diversality of knowledge. More specifically, I engage with these concepts by handling unofficial archive material and creating new bodily archives that delink from colonial archives and the way they produce knowledge, and by simultaneously proposing alternative narratives in the archives and new ways of unearthing them. This is how I conceive my relational and dialectical process of self-ownership, self-appropriation, and self-creation.

**Colonisation and Archives**

According to Ann Stoler (2002), a leading scholar in colonial archives, colonial powers have created colonial archives in order to control the knowledge and history writing of the colonised population, documenting their daily lives and how they were controlled by the colonial powers as a way to construct an image of these
populations that would fit the Western colonial worldview. She also suggests that colonial archives function as cultural artefacts used to produce knowledge that would benefit the colonial states and reproduce their power. In her book, *Along the Archival Grain* (2009), she analyses the colonial documents from the nineteenth-century Netherlands Indies and argues how these archives, like all colonial archives, should be considered as sites of knowledge *production*, not *retrieval*, as they are selected and classified documents that reflect the perception of the colonial power over the colonised population and the violent practices they performed on them. In the book, she invites a critical approach to the colonial archives, arguing that they should be read “against their grain”, an invitation she accepted from French philosopher Michel Foucault (1972), in which he urged people to reappropriate the content of the archives and reverse the relationships of power against those who once constituted them and used them. Stoler also adopts Foucault’s and other cultural theorists’ definition of the archive as any corpus of selective collections that survived until our days, rather than the definition proposed by historians as a collection of documents housed in a building.

According to Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), the archive is situated between language, the system that allows us to make sentences, and corpus, the system that collects the words being spoken. The archive is the practice that enables the statements to emerge, survive and undergo continuous modifications: “the general system of formation and transformation of statements” (1972: 130). Foucault explains statements as units of enunciative function, which in oral or written language can be considered as a collection of signs, figures, or marks, and defines the sum of these statements, which belong to the same field, as a “discourse”. He argues that the fields do not have to be continuous, and can be full of gaps, intertwined together by breaks, ruptures, and transformations and linked by a sense of regularity that can be detected in their dispersion. By that he implies that the archive is heterogeneous, but not open-ended; it always needs a certain internal regularity of principle. For Foucault, to handle the archive is to practice learning about the past by unearthing and constructing its material remains, understanding our relationship to those remains and how they construct the historical meaning that we carry today. This makes us think of the power of the archive and to question the conditions that allow a history to be written.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1999) detects a novelty in Foucault’s discourse that sees enunciation not in the text of what is uttered, but in its taking place, although he opposes Foucault’s criticism of the author of history, the historian or archivist, to whom Foucault does not grant much importance, claiming that discourses can circulate without any need for an author. Agamben is convinced that ignoring the author has an important ethical implication, since they are the person who decides to speak and contribute to the history writing by assuming the role of the witness. He writes:
[In opposition to the archive, which designates the system of relations between the unsaid and the said, we give the name testimony to the system of relations between the inside and the outside of langue, between the sayable and the unsayable in every language—that is between a potentiality of speech and its existence, between a possibility and an impossibility of speech (Agamben 1999: 145).

Therefore, testimony, unlike archive, is not about discourse and its taking place, but about the possibility of speaking or not, where subjectivity plays a huge role and allows for the potentiality of testimony to materialise and to act against the impotentiality of speech. Testimony for Agamben is always an act of an author, where an incapacity of speech is challenged by speaking out and recounting lived experience.

Subjectivity is crucial also to Jacques Derrida (1995), a major contributor to archival studies, who builds upon Foucault’s thoughts, reflecting on the power of archive while adding the role of the subject to the process of archiving and handling the archives. He argues that “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory” (Derrida 1995: 11). Derrida considers the preservation of memory as the responsibility of the present and the promise of the future. In conversation with Freud’s notions of death drive, he maintains that people suffer from an “archive fever”, a will to hold back death and forgetfulness by recording, repeating, and recalling through texts, objects, data, and so on, which is the same way we archive, repress, and remove memory in our bodies according to Freud’s theory on memory and archive (1925). Focusing on the connection between memory and archive, Derrida investigates the creation of archives as a response to memory failure. In his work, Archive Fever (1995), he sheds light on the subject and interrupts ideas of objectivity traditionally attributed to the archive since ancient Greece, where archive was conceived as a physical space of power, arkheion, that stores official documents administrated according to specific rules that dictated what to remember and what to forget. In doing so, he challenges the role of the archon, the magistrate, a selected authority figure and gatekeeper of the archives. He considers the archive today to be a space of knowledge, rather than a physical building, that can be constructed by any individual through the process of consigning, retrieving, reproducing, and repeating allowing individuals to appropriate the power of the archive.

As claimed by Ariella Azoulay (2011, 2017), an Israeli scholar specialising in photographic archives, the figure of the archon discussed by Derrida prevented for a long time the outbreak of the archive fever that we witness today. But Derrida’s thinking around the future promise and responsibility of the archive allowed scholars, artists, and archivists to respond to that promise by pushing themselves into the existing archives, reading them with a different lens, and even creating new, alternative ones. Azoulay suggests that the archive fever of today motivates us to
ask “Why an archive?” rather than “What is an archive?” (2011: 2), giving light to
many individual archival initiatives in which citizens are claiming their right to
rearrange and use existing archives as well as create new ones in an attempt to
understand and be involved in how and why the archives are constructed. Azoulay
claims that some of these initiatives are being encouraged through the
democratisation of knowledge, for example, through open-access websites and
social media, where creating, collecting, extracting, and cataloguing of images, texts,
videos, and so on takes place daily and freely, without the monopoly of the guardian
of the archives or the buildings that host them.

For Azoulay (2011), this kind of archive—a shared space that retains the
incomplete past and where citizens are the main actors in accessing, rewriting and
appropriating their history—allowed a decolonial movement of the archives to
emerge. She considers her work to be a part of this movement, through which she
attempts to create a civil archive of photographs reflecting the violence that
constituted Israel in the late 1940s. She aims at suspending the power of existing
state archives by reconstructing the photographs and their narratives of a potential
hidden, suppressed history. One of the photos she re-narrates is an image of a
Palestinian elderly man sitting on the floor that she found in the International
Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Archives. The caption of the photo reads “A
former prisoner of war interrogated in the presence of the ICRC” (2017: 5). Azoulay
argues that as soon as she looked at the picture, she understood that the man
couldn’t have been a former prisoner, as Israeli militias were arresting men aged
between 15 and 40, leaving older men behind with the women and children. She
also understood that this caption was written to hide the man’s gesture of protest as
the Israeli militia was trying to force him out of his village, since the militias’ claim
was that Palestinians fled their villages voluntarily. The man’s gesture of refusal
constituted a counter-story to the official one and dismantled the figure of the
infiltrator, which Israel gave later to Palestinian refugees who tried to return to their
homeland and villages from which they had been violently expelled.
Ariella Azoulay argues that the man in the picture, who she describes as her companion of research, was dispossessed from his archive and narrative, since the Palestinian archives were looted by Israel after the Palestinians were expelled. They were partially destroyed, and partially piled randomly by the newly established state and international organisations that collaborated with them. Therefore, the archives of Palestinians from then onwards were interpreted and narrated according to their occupiers’ narratives and through the same imperial category used by colonial states: the control of the image of an entire culture. Azoulay’s quest is to enter these colonial state archives, with a Palestinian companion, to disturb the oppressive past and contribute to an alternative reading of the archives, restoring weight and voice to Palestinians in the archives, whose narrative was appropriated and distorted by Israel. For her this is a step towards unlearning imperialism, and she calls for other Israeli citizens to take similar steps.

The Looted Palestinian Archives and the Middle Eastern Context

Like Azoulay, Rona Sela (2018), an Israeli researcher in visual history, is interested in Israeli colonial archives and the looted Palestinian archives that exist in them. Her studies systematically map the visual Palestinian archives seized by the Israeli military and civilians, from the Nakba\(^2\) (1948) until today, and argues that Israel

\(^2\) Also known as the Palestinian Catastrophe, the Nakba was the destruction, looting, killing, and displacement of the Palestinian society in 1948 by Jewish militia to construct the State of Israel.
conceals the Palestinian archives not only by looting them, but also by managing them. She explains that the archives are labelled according to Zionist codes, not with the original Palestinian terminology, are controlled by specific laws and rules, and are censored from the public by labelling them as classified material for many years. By these actions, Israel asserts its physical power over the archives, and over knowledge production too. Sela gives the example of the looting of photographs from the Haifa office of Rashid Al-Haj Ibrahim, the Chairman of the National Committee, where thousands of pictures taken by Chalil Rissas, a Palestinian prominent photojournalist, were seized to erase any evidence of the existence of Palestinians before the creation of Israel. The photos had depicted Palestinian lives before 1948. She also gives the examples of the looting of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) archives in Beirut in 1982, which included the Institute for Palestinian Studies, the Palestine Research Center, and the Palestine Film Unit, in which books, research papers, documents, films, and treasures were seized. The PLO archives dated back to the mid-1960s, when the movement was established, to document Palestinian lives during the nineteenth century and to reflect the colonial situation through the eyes of the colonised before 1948 as well as afterwards as refugees. The PLO archives contextualised the Palestinian resistance with their conditions while living in exile, and in so doing aimed to create a Palestinian narrative of themselves.

In 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon and forced the PLO to leave the country, the Israeli military looted the Palestinian institutions’ archives. The Palestine Research Center archive was returned to the PLO a year later after a prisoner swap deal, and only after it was duplicated by Israel. In the 1990s the Palestine Research Center was reestablished under the new name of Orient House by its director Sabri Jiryis. This occurred following his return to Palestine during the Oslo peace process in 1995. In 2001, during the Second Intifada, the Israeli police closed the center and seized the archives, which amounted to a second confiscation, first in Beirut and then in Jerusalem. To this day, the visual photographs and films of the Palestine Film Unit, which documented the daily life of Palestinians in refugee camps, military training, cultural and social events, and interviews with political and intellectual figures, are kept in the Israeli archives. In 2017, the IDF Archives listed the names of 1,200 films and film footage, but only a few dozens were released to the public. Many of the films were shot by Palestinians and documented Palestinian visual history and resistance, but the identity of the institution to which the films belonged was obscured, and they were generically labelled as “PLO Archives”—an institution that has never existed.

According to Sela (2018), Israeli archives contain two types of colonial materials: 1) Israel’s colonial history, which narrates its foundation and development, and 2) the history looted from the Palestinians. In both types of materials, Israel is actively attempting to erase the history of the colonised, turning the colonial archives into sites of knowledge production, where Israel becomes a source of information.
about the Palestinians. Indeed, Israeli looting does not stop at seizing the Palestinian archives, but continues with their censorship, cataloguing, and reading. Sela sees her role as an Israeli citizen and researcher in deciphering the distorted history depicted by the coloniser, and also by challenging the laws and rules of accessibility, storage, and labelling. For example, she explains how she once tried to enter the archives with a Palestinian researcher, who faced obstacles accessing Palestinian materials in particular, whereas she did not face similar obstacles. She describes how she shared her findings with him and how she also needed to be an editor of an official military magazine in order to access certain archives.

Sela argues that the system of concealing, interpreting, and erasing Palestinian history adopted by the Israeli colonial archive is very similar to how other colonial archives were managed even after the official end of colonial rule. She describes how the colonial archives in Algeria were transferred to France despite calls from local researchers to keep them in Algeria, and how Indian colonial archives, which described a long history of oppression against the indigenous population, were transferred to Britain and remained under British control after India gained independence. She suggests that by asserting their sovereignty over the archives, colonial powers to this day distort the history of spaces once colonised, enabling gaps in the archives and allowing those responsible for crimes to escape any accountability. Most importantly, they control the knowledge produced about the once-colonised people, creating false images of them based on Western criteria, silencing their past and present of non-Western culture and practices. To counter that, Sela suggests, there has been a post-colonial “archival turn”, driven by scholars, historians, and artists who felt the urge to challenge the reading of archives and colonial practices by exposing information that contradicts the official narrative, unveiling missing gaps and reappropriating the narrative. Sela situates her archival practice within that context.

Omnia Al Shakry (2015), an Egyptian post-colonial historian, explains how difficult it is to access archives in and about the Middle East, a phenomenon termed as “history without documents” by historian Ibrahim Abduh (1975). She argues that the problem is not only that documents were seized, partially destroyed, and transferred to the colonial power countries to be censored there, but also that the documents that remained in the newly independent states were controlled and sometimes dispersed by the post-colonial established regimes, making them very hard to access and even locate. In the Egyptian case, in order to free archives from the monarchy and colonial past during the Jamal Nasir regime, the documents were distributed between close associates of Nasir and were dispersed across various personal, governmental, and archival locations. This has made the archive sites a subject of dispute since 1954 (the year the Egyptian National Archives were reorganised) until today, when the topic was raised by the demonstrators during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, who demanded easier access to the archives.
According to El-Shakry, this difficulty in gaining access to the archives in the post-colonial Middle East led historians, scholars, and artists to turn to alternative sources of information: oral histories, memoirs, private collections, newspapers, and foreign archives. The aim is to piece together a narrative of events and create an alternative archive, through which the individual attempts to reveal and reconstruct what is inaccessible by chasing the traces of the dead that are incomplete, reflecting even if partially the dead’s own narratives. Indeed, many artists in the Middle East have been working by cross-referencing to construct narratives where documents are completely absent. Walid Raad, a Lebanese contemporary visual artist and founder of the Atlas Group in 1975, took the absence of documents to the extreme to try to imagine a different desirable history. By working with the tension between historical and fictional narratives, Raad attempted to reconstruct the Lebanese Civil War using video, performance, and photography built on cultural fantasies based on material from collective memory, introducing the “what if this happened”. For example, as part of the photographic exhibition *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) _1991* in New York in 2019, Raad displayed a series of eight black-and-white photographs that he found in a book at a flea market in Beirut in 1994. Next to each photograph, he added a caption that mixes fiction with reality. The caption of the photo below is: “My first and most favorite camera, a Nikon F, will suddenly stop working on this street in 1980.” (Silas, 2019:4)

**Figure 3.** *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) _1991 exhibition* (2019) by Walid Raad in Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. © Walid Raad
**Alternative Palestinian Archives and the Decolonial Option**

Similar to Middle Eastern decolonial archival practices, the Palestinian archive movement has developed over the last 50 years. The artists, researchers, and scholars in the West Bank, Gaza, Israel, and the Palestinian diaspora who are part of this movement use different information resources to reconstruct informal personal and collective archives, and by so doing take part in the worldwide “archive turn” of the colonised. The Palestinian archive movement is very active and keeps on growing (Abdulhamid, 2019) due to the continuation of the Israeli colonial project in Palestine and the persistant practice of looting Palestinian documents, treasures, and culture by Israel, through which Israel attempts to erase and distort the Palestinian narrative and history and create an image of the Palestinians as “savage terrorists”. This narrative also serves Israel’s colonial aspiration to present Israelis as the indigenous people of the land who are defending themselves from the “savage Palestinians”. In response to that, the Palestinian archive movement aims at turning the archive into a decolonial site of resistance, where Palestinians reappropriate their narrative and reaffirm their existence, practices, and history in a Palestine that existed long before the creation of Israel.

Emily Jacir, a prominent Palestinian artist, works with the archives to counter the Israeli narrative about specific prominent Palestinian intellectual figures. In her installation and performance work, *Material for a Film* (2005–ongoing), she collects and archives material for an unmade film on Wael Zuaiter. A Palestinian writer and translator, Zuaiter was murdered by Israeli Mossad agents in 1972 in Rome, like dozens of other Palestinian intellectuals in Europe who were made pay the price for the Munich Olympics attack. The material in Jacir’s work includes pictures of the book Zuaiter was holding when he was shot (which received one of the thirteen bullets fired at him), a film he appeared in by Peter Sellers, and a letter from the Italian intellectual Alberto Moravia recommending Zuaiter to Jean-Paul Sartre. The work also includes a performance, during which Jacir shoots at 1,000 blank books with the same type of gun the Mossad agent used to shoot Zuaiter and his book. Jacir attempts to reconstruct the interrupted narrative of Zuaiter, delinking him from the Israeli narrative that depicted him as a terrorist and legitimate target who should be punished for the Munich attack.
Using other media and senses, artist and cook Mirna Bamieh’s project, *Palestine Hosting Society* (2017–ongoing), collects Palestinian traditional dishes and shares them with families in different cities in Palestine. She argues that because Israel has divided the Palestinians between the West Bank, Gaza, Israel, and the diaspora, a lot of the knowledge around Palestinian cuisine is missing, or at least not shared within the Palestinian communities, while Israel keeps on appropriating the Palestinian cuisine and celebrating it all over the world as its own. A different archival project was initiated by Zochrot (2014–ongoing), a Palestinian Israeli NGO, which asks Palestinian refugees to draw their villages and cities from which they were expelled in 1948 and shares the drawings on its website in order to reconstruct an archive of images of these places that were predominantly destroyed by Israel, images of which were looted at the time and are still censored today.

Another important project, and a part of the archive movement, is that of El Founoun Dance Troupe (1979–ongoing). The company specialises in Palestinian traditional dance—Dabkeh—and documents the history and development of the dance through testimonies, field trips to traditional weddings where it is practiced, and archival videos. Then the troupe experiments with the contemporary Dabkeh, while integrating the movements from the archive on stage. Dabkeh is also appropriated by Israel as one of its traditional dances and is presented as Israeli heritage by its most famous companies, such as the Batsheva Dance Company. In addition, the Popular Art Centre, the sister organisation of El Founoun Dance Troupe, archives Palestinian traditional songs, music, and sounds and collaborates with Palestinian musicians to produce contemporary versions of them, since Palestinian music has been appropriated by Israeli singers and musicians throughout the years.

In addition to the individual small- and medium-sized archive projects, there have been big collective projects, such as the Palestinian Museum, which was founded in the town of Birzeit in the West Bank in 2016. The idea was initiated by a
group of Palestinian philanthropists living in the diaspora to preserve the memory and cultural heritage of a trans-territorial nation. Jack Persekian, the museum director from 2008 to 2016, had envisaged it as an empty space to mark the looted objects and land of the Palestinian people, with narratives recounted by Palestinians based in different parts of the world through temporary exhibitions, allowing it to be a museum without objects or borders, reflecting both the dispersal and destruction of the Palestinian treasures and the expulsion of Palestinians all over the world. Moreover, in an attempt to connect the land with its history and offer a sensorial experience to its visitors, the museum was built on a hill, surrounded by historically terraced landscapes and planted with Palestinian traditional trees and plants. This represents hills Israel has been looting in order to build illegal settlements\(^3\) and plants it has been uprooting from Palestinian land then appropriating as its own floral heritage.

Palestinian art scholar Hanan Toukan (2018) explains how the international and Israeli media criticised the museum on its opening day for being “empty of art” and “without exhibitions” because it chose to function as a continuous work of art and a statement in itself, rather than adopting the Western-centric museum mission of acquiring, conserving, and presenting aesthetic objects that aspire at constructing nation-states, which follows the notion of modernity in Europe during the eighteenth century. By that, Toukan suggests that the Palestinian Museum has interrogated and challenged how post-colonial museums could function today and proposed a “decolonial option”, attending to the process of presenting cultural heritage through participatory art practices connecting the past, present, and future of a borderless nation rather than displaying aesthetic objects of antiquity for national identity formation purposes.

\(^3\) The Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are considered by United Nations and the International Court of Justice as Illegal as they violate the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian laws.
The “decolonial option” is a concept coined by Walter Mignolo (2014), defined as a continuous process of confrontation with coloniality from the moment it appears, in which delinking from the Euro-centered assumptions of modernity and domination is the main focus. He argues that the decolonial option, which he also calls “turn” or “gesture” (italics mine) is performative, involves action, and carries a decolonial intention to delink from a colonial already-constituted option, allowing for the emergence of practices that were suppressed by coloniality in the name of modernity and salvation. He describes decolonial gestures in art in which erased rituals, storytelling, and embodied ceremonies of non-Western civilisation resurge as a way to delink from the Ancient Greek mimicry—a practice that relies on the representation of someone or something else following certain rules adopted by Western civilisation and exported through imperialism to the rest of the world as the only form of performance. Moreover, he argues that the European-centric concept of aesthetics, where art has been reduced to objects of beauty that people look at and admire, can be challenged by liberating “aesthesis”. The senses—sensing and sensations that we feel in the body while creating and experiencing art—bring the attention back to the embodied experience of encounter between subjects through art and also contribute to the creation of decolonial subjectivities.

A decolonial option or gesture adopted by all Palestinian alternative archival examples mentioned above and beyond. For example, in *Material for a Film*, Jacir refers to her work as an ongoing process up to the present, where she continues to
collect and create new archive material about Zuaiter’s life and murder, then shares the process with viewers using different artistic media, from performance to photography, in a way that activates the viewers’ senses. In this way she creates an embodied experience for them and allows for an encounter between them and Zuaiter’s story. Through a different artistic practice, El Founoun Dance Troupe also undergoes an archival practice that consists of a continuous process of collecting, cataloging, and re-enacting old traditional dance movements as a way of reappropriating Palestinian dance practices that are in danger of dispossession by Israeli dance companies and the Israeli Ministry of Culture. This archival practice reactivates the senses of the company students and dancers who re-enact the movements, as well as those of the audience members who watch and engage with the traditional dance in its contemporary form.

In my archival practice, I also undertake Mignolo’s “decolonial gesture” through a continuous process of re-enacting, transforming, and transmitting daily gestures, which are present in Palestinian hidden narratives. This is meant to bring back the attention to the embodied knowledge of the colonised and create performances in the form of experiences that activate the senses of the performers and the audience through participation. In this way, I aim at creating spaces of encounter, where subjectivities, performers, and audience members can undergo a process of decolonisation.

**Embodiment and Gestural Performance**

In 1935, anthropologist Marcel Mauss founded a field of study devoted to gesture, where gestures were considered a threefold phenomenon (biological, social, and psychological) that manifests itself through how people make use of their bodies, which he termed “techniques of the body” (1973). Mauss’s research aimed at understanding how the body becomes gendered, classed, and raced through the act of gesturing, arguing that performativity, which determines how bodies achieve social recognition, goes beyond verbal acts. He suggests that the performative act produces multiple interoceptive experiences, which provoke in response new gestural routines, skills, and techniques, implying that gestures are not merely expressive but are shaped and reshaped continuously by culture. Gestures allow societies to express, maintain and spread their values, and also to inspire them through the kinesthetic sensation and knowledge gained from preforming them, to resist certain gestures and propose alternative ones. By that he proposed that the body is the place where social regimes are inscribed and deciphered—but also challenged, suggesting that the social production of the body and the body production of the social are interrelated and happen concurrently and reciprocally.

Carrie Noland, an American scholar specialising in the relationship between art and politics, builds on Mauss’s thought in her book *Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (2009), in which she investigates how corporeal
performance both embodies and challenges culture through repeating daily gestures and resisting others. Like Mauss, she calls the techniques of the body “gestures”, rather than “movements” (2009: 4), because for her gesture indicates a more holistic approach, where embodiment takes place through both cultural performance and biological bodies, allowing any movement—from a daily habit to the intentionally performed choreography on stage—to become a source of kinesthetic feedback and agency. She sees the term “movement”, as used by dance scholars, as limiting because in that context pays specific attention to the anatomical substrate of the body, where biological and cultural variables are often studied separately and movement is abstracted from its social context.

Noland explains that gesturing offers an interoceptive opportunity and kinesthetic awareness that leads people to shift the way they move, offering a variation in performance, and an accumulation of these variations that often results in new innovative forms of resistance to the normative gestures. She proposes a theory of agency based on the body’s capability of feeling itself move, privileging sensory experience and embodiment, to explain how people make conscious decisions to embody, but at the same time resist embodying, certain oppressive gestures, create opposition, and leave an imprint on their culture. She explains that the kinesthetic sensations we feel while gesturing are a specific type of affect that belongs both to our already-constituted physical body and our subjectivity, which is built over time. This suggests that kinesthetic sensations are composed by the embodied history of the subjects, while also determining how the rest of their embodiment process will go. Hence, she implies that the knowledge obtained by kinesthesia is integral to the process of subjectification, allowing the moving body to play a major role in transformation of subjectivities and their daily practices.

Franz Fanon (1986) wrote specifically about racial practices and their relation to gestures, bodily awareness, and agency. In Black Skin, White Masks (1986) he argues that colonisation makes it impossible for the raced subject to experience existence in other ways, referring to the dialectic of identity proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre (1963), in which the subject recognises himself in the other and is recognised by the other in return. Fanon suggests that this dialectic does not occur in colonial contexts, which poses a challenge to the recognition of the Black subjectivation. He also proposes that the racial perception of White others of Black people as “being for another” (1986: 169), which produces in Black people a distancing from bodily awareness, preventing them from living their Blackness in diverse ways. Fanon argues that the construction of the self in the case of the Black man is not based on notions of kinesthetic nature and interoceptive sensations, but rather on historical and racial body schema that have been constructed by the White man’s actions and words. To resist that model of self-construction and self-alienation, Fanon proposes a collective sensory reclamation of the self, through conscious awareness, that allows Black subjects to connect with their first-person experience of the body and replaces the body image they have of themselves, which were based on the racial
stereotypes imposed on them. In so doing, they will construct a body schema based on their ability to feel oneself move in space, undoing the process of subjectivation that was imposed on them by the colonial condition and reaffirming that the Black subject is a being for himself, rather than simply a being for others.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (2005), Fanon builds upon this thought to describe self-ownership as a precondition for the process of decolonisation, where the creation of new fully human forms of life is possible, in which innate rights can be claimed back and protected from others and daily life can be reshaped by rejecting pre-existing colonial forms, gestures, and paradigms. He argues that the colonial theories were based on the *negation of time* of the natives: claiming that they do not have any history, denying them their rights in the present and doubting their capacity for creating change in the future. Therefore, for Fanon, a process of decolonisation must counter that claim and institute itself as a practice in which natives reappropriate their history and propose a different embodied way of being in the present and future, where gaps do not exist between the image and essence of oneself, and individuals can see their image clearly in relation to themselves and to others in the world.

**The Archive of Gestures**

In order for me to join a process of decolonisation in Palestine that is similar to what Fanon describes as self-ownership, in 2014, I started working with the body as archive. This is an attempt to reappropriate hidden and suppressed stories of the Palestinian narrative through reenacting the gestures that belong to these stories by using my body, the bodies of my collaborators, and the those of the audience members. In so doing, I am constituting and disseminating an alternative archive of narratives and gestures to what Israel created through looting, destroying, censoring, and deforming the Palestine archive. While working on the first two narratives (created prior to my PhD studies), *A Fidayee Son in Moscow* (2014) and *Cells of Illegal Education* (2016), which I will discuss in detail later on, I was inspired by the concept of the body as archive, as discussed extensively by dance scholar André Lepecki (2010).

Lepecki explores the concept of bodily archives through analysing reenactment practices of old dance works in the present by several dance artists, considering the body as a privileged site for the archive, which, unlike traditional archives, can contain and transmit bodily affects and experiences, providing an embodied attitude to history. Lepecki argues that the return of some dancers to old dance works is often criticised by neoliberal thought, which considers such practice as regressive and nostalgic. Instead, he sees this return as a will to reactualise these dances in the present, creating something new through reenactment, transforming the original through repetition and experimentation, and proposing a difference. He suggests that this approach moves away from an “archival impulse”, proposed by art
critic Hal Foster (2004), in the context of performance art, which for him was initiated because of a “failure in cultural memory” and a paranoic wish to be connected to a misplaced history. Instead, Lepecki proposes these practices as a “will to archive” that aims at recreating a different economy of the temporal, where the past, present, and future are being transformed simultaneously through a continuous reciprocal exchange of gestures, affects, and history. In so doing, he echoes Foucault’s definition of the archive as a system for formation and transformation of statements that connect time.

Lepecki also connects his “will to archive” to a sense of responsibility towards the future by telling stories of past experiences for audiences to witness, therefore allowing for an afterlife of the narrative and the performance. This is a practice of storytelling that already was diminishing after the First World War, as noted by philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin in his essay The Storyteller (1969), when he felt that men were coming back from the war poorer, not richer, because they became silent and did not recount their experiences to others, suggesting that wars, capitalism, and oppressive regimes aim at separating people from their history and diminishing their capacity to share and transmit experiences. These regimes do that by introducing a system of information based on newspapers, TV, and entertaining performances, rather than a system of communication of experience based on social encounters and storytelling. This is because using these forms of mass media make it easier to make people feel distant from information, as opposed to an experience they could identify with and be touched by. Therefore, Lepecki sees the reenactment of old dance works as performances in which the audience can again witness embodied experience that transmits narratives, rendering the audience members active rather than passive spectators of an event, which in turn leads to an afterlife of the transmitted experience after the performance ends.

Echoing Benjamin and Lepecki, in the five performances I created while researching the potential for the creation of an archive of gestures, I reenact gestures from past Palestinian narratives and I invite the audience to do the same, intertwining the embodied experience of storytelling, active witnessing, and participation of the audience, aiming for an afterlife of the event.

A Fidayee Son in Moscow

In this first work created in 2014, which takes the form of a dance video installation, I archive gestures of Palestinian children who were sent to the Soviet international boarding school Interdom by their leftist parents after the Israeli war on Lebanon in 1982. The school was built in 1933 in Ivanovo, northeast of Moscow, to host children of revolutionary parents from all over the world as a form of solidarity between nations, including the children of Mao Zedong, Josip Broz Tito, Isidora Dolores Ibárruri Gómez (“La Pasionaria”), and my brother—the son of a Palestinian freedom

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4 Video links and more information about the choreographic work in Portfolio on p.113.
fighter (fidayee in Arabic). The installation portrays a school day at the Interdom from a physical point of view. It provides gestures and movements students used to do in their history, singing, physics and creative writing classes, while also analysing the historical context of the school. The installation asks the public to try to embody these gestures themselves, to make them live traces of the Interdom experience. Using the setting of a classroom furnished with a desk and a blackboard, and after a short extract of black and white archival footage from different periods of the school, I speak from the video directly to the audience, like a teacher would do to students during a class. Giving instructions to the audience, I encourage them to repeat the gestures that I make.

Figure 6. History classroom, Qalandia International Biennial (October 2014). © Diaa Jubeh

The choreography of each class was created by combining archive material, testimonies that I collected over several months, and my imagination of the Interdom reality to fill in the gaps of the narrative and add my interpretation of it. The history class, for instance, prepares the body—the mouth in particular—to salute the Communist revolutionaries the students were learning about. The singing class warms up the left arm to sing all together the Italian Communist song “Bandiera Rossa” (The Red Flag) with a raised fist. The creative writing class is inspired by the content of the letters my brother sent to the family during his stay at the Interdom and reflects his nostalgia for home. The class asks the audience members to write a nostalgic letter to their distant parents. The physics class echoes the greatest Soviet dream at that time, to go to outer space, and prepares the audience members to jump into space.
This artwork is a form of self-historicisation and reappropriation of the history of a certain sociopolitical group, rather than a form of nostalgia for a certain era. Even if the piece evokes some nostalgia, this would be a nostalgia for the future. According to cultural theorist and artist Svetlana Boym (2002), “nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective, but also prospective” (2002: 26). In that sense, the nostalgia present in A Fidayee Son in Moscow is one that reflects on the past and present of the children of the Left within a generation that was active in the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, while questioning the future of today’s Palestinian Left. As André Lepecki suggests on reenactment, “In reenacting we turn back and in this return, we find in old dances a will to keep inventing” (2010: 46). For Lepecki, as also stated above, the “will to archive” is not a result of cultural failure or nostalgia, as some performance scholars suggest. On the contrary, it is the wish to embody creative corporeal possibilities that existed in previous works, by reenacting and transforming them and therefore creating new material for the present and future.

In fact, the central idea behind this piece is, if only for a short time, the audience can live fragments of the school’s life and its historical context in the present moment. This happens while embodying, repeating, and transforming the gestures to something new and also being affected by them, physically and emotionally, after the end of the installation. To further experiment with participation, I transformed the piece into a live performance that I brought to different contexts and countries to further investigate the concept of transmission of the physical archive to the bodies of the audience and how that helped translate the context of the story and the embodiment of its gestures.

Figure 7. History class in A Fidayee Son in Moscow live performance at Dance Base Edinburgh (February 2017). © Brian Hartely
In this new experiment, my physical presence in the space and the direct instructions I was giving to the audience enormously enhanced the participation. While in the installation version the public had the choice to perform the instructions or contemplate the gestural archive, in the live performance they were almost left with no other choice than to join the classes and perform the gestures with their own bodies. Through this latter element I added a further political layer—the question of obedience in the Soviet context—to the piece. In both versions I was keen to create an experience for the audience members in which they are also actors, participating in part or completely, rather than being mere spectators. My aim was to create an event through which they are touched by affect, and at the same time touch one another—a process that would allow for the creation of inter-subjectivities and for an afterlife of the performance, which I discuss in depth in Chapter 2.

**Cells of Illegal Education (C.I.E)**

In this second choreographic work created in 2016, I revisit gestures of civil disobedience carried out during the First Intifada (First Uprising) in Occupied Palestine. More specifically, I attempt to archive gestures performed by Birzeit University students between 1988 and 1992 while trying to continue their education process at a time when schools and universities were forcibly closed by an Israeli military rule. Students and teachers who refused to abide were labelled “cells of illegal education”. The clandestine classes were organised in alternative spaces, such as houses, open-air spaces, cafés, dorms, and university entryways.

Before going into the dance studio with the dancers and starting the creation process, I researched various kinds of archival resources, in particular texts, photos, and videos from the First Intifada. Additionally, I carried out interviews with scholars, former activists and students, then imagined ways of archiving gestures of the First Intifada through our contemporary bodies using a participatory dance video installation as a choreographic form. During the intensive weeks in the studio we intertwined archival material, oral testimonies, and imagination to revisit the gestures of a group of Birzeit University students during their university closure. I chose to work with three pictures and one painting from that historical period, studying the gestures of the students in each one and imagining—while keeping the information I researched in mind—what was happening before and after the moments captured by the pictures and the painting. The four constitutive sections of **C.I.E** were filmed and edited not to be a consecutive narrative; a short text appears before each section describing the situation being narrated by the students. The first section is called “In the Shadow of the Intifada” and portrays students attempting to secretly study in someone’s kitchen. The second and third sections are called “The Forbidden Area” and“A Historical Moment,” in which students manage to violate the Israeli military

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5 Video links and more information about the choreographic work in Portfolio on p.114.
order, break into their closed university labs, and organise an architecture class. In the fourth section—“We Organised a Mock Lecture”—students stage a mock lecture in front of the university’s closed entrance to take a picture to be used for printed propaganda postcards as part of an effort to mobilise the international community against Israel’s collective punishment.

Figure 8. The third section of the video “A Historical Moment”. On the left, architecture students at Birzeit University in 1991, posing after they broke into their university to organise a lecture in the Architecture Department lab. © Salem Thawaba. On the right, the reenactment and deformation of the picture in C.I.E. © Farah Saleh

While identifying gestures and working on reenacting them with the dancers, I kept in mind Jacques Derrida’s key constituting parameters of an archive: a certain exteriority, a technique of repetition, and a place of consignation (1995:14). For that reason, in the choreography I opted for pedestrian movements similar to those that would exist in the four situations of the images, added a certain repetition of the gestures, and used the body as the main place of consignation of the archive. The body is treated as a privileged site of archive, since (as suggested by Lepecki) it combines many levels: affective, political, and aesthetic (2010: 34). After the video was shot at the university’s old and new premises, archive material, such as photos and music, was also used in the editing. And while conceiving the final version of the installation, I again turned to participation, looking for ways to allow the audience to try the gestures of the students and helping them translate the narrative into their own bodies and reconnect with similar civil disobedience acts of the present and future.
Other than recreating the setting of the kitchen table present in one of the video’s sections, instructions were provided to the audience on a piece of paper hung on the door before entering the installation. The first instruction asks them to enter the room one at a time and to leave 20 seconds between each person. This is how the students during the First Intifada used to enter a space so that the Israeli military wouldn’t notice that a group of people was going to meet and study somewhere. The second instruction is for the person to lower their head and watch for any danger before arriving at the kitchen while I put some physical obstacles between the door and the table to make the audience feel the students’ constant state of alertness. The third is to eat a piece of fruit from the plate on the table while watching the video for 12 minutes looping, to make the audience live the familiar and enjoyable situation people were describing in their recounting of popular education at that time. The fourth is to leave from the back door, again one by one, to keep all suspicions at bay and maintain the organised secretive work up to the end.

Participation as a tool for reenacting the past is crucial in this piece. As Palestinian anthropologist Alaa Alazzeh (2015) suggests, during the last few years, a strong feeling of nostalgia for the First Intifada’s acts of civil disobedience has been sensed in Palestine and among international activists, and calls have been repeatedly launched for reactivating the political spirit of this historical moment of revolt. This
was a reaction to the failure of the Oslo peace agreements signed with Israel in 1994, the disastrous impact of the Second Intifada (2000–2005) on the Palestinian struggle, and the ongoing status quo of continuous Israeli occupation and internal Palestinian political division since 2006. C.I.E constitutes a choreographic exploration of this nostalgia and an invitation for it to transform into a prospective act.

Relevant artistic works

These two works that I created before starting my PhD studies were in conversation with two other artistic works created in the same period that aimed at archiving gestures in the Palestinian-Israeli context. The first is Archive by Israeli artist Arkadi Zaides (2014), and the second is Past Tense Continuous (2014) by Palestinian artist Dima Hourani. In his live performance, Zaides attempts to archive gestures of Israeli settlers attacking Palestinians in the West Bank, using footage filmed by Palestinians from cameras provided to them by the Israeli human rights organisation B’Tselem. The cameras were given to hundreds of Palestinians to document the settlers’ violence in their villages. On stage, Zaides often embodies the witness figure, watching the footage on the screen, repeating it with a remote control, reenacting one or more gestures, pausing, repeating the clips and the gestures together, then repeating the gestures without the video. This seems, to me, to be an exercise for the audience to remember the gestures and their meanings and archive them in their own memory.

Zaides's performance creates a strong affective experience for the audience, who sees the original archive material and witnesses Zaides reenact such violent gestures. In so doing, Zaides, as an Israeli citizen, assumes responsibility over the violent acts. Although the experience of the audience members as witnesses allows for a strong affective experience and might leave traces in their memories after the performance, for me, it does not activate the audience-embodied experience the way participatory performance does. The fact that the audience members are not asked to embody the violent gestures themselves does not allow the gestures to leave traces on their bodies and disseminate beyond the performance space. Disseminating gestures might not be the intention of Zaides in the first place, but it is one of my main intentions in my research on The Archive of Gestures.
The second work, by Dima Hourani, is in the form of an intervention that takes place on the sixty-sixth anniversary of the Nakba, the day Israel occupied the first part of Palestine in 1948, resulting in the transfer of 750,000 Palestinians to different parts in the world, followed by a complete occupation in 1967 and the creation of 450,000 more refugees (Pappe, 2006). The intervention starts with an old truck with three refugee families from 1948, dressed as if they were still at the moment of the event with their belongings, entering the main street of Ramallah during the commemoration march of the Nakba. The truck then moves to a renowned cultural centre, where the refugees are distributed in different spaces and reenact in a durational performance what they were doing at home before they were forced to leave. In this way, the members of the public are allowed to witness the actions the actors/refugees were doing, while occupying the same space.

Hourani’s purpose is to revive the image of the Nakba and make it real and tangible, since Palestinians today remember the event solely through images in black and white. She does that by allowing the public to witness and reenact the actions of the dispossessed Palestinians in 1948 in the present moment, when continuous acts of dispossession are still ongoing in Palestine. Like Hourani, the intent of The Archive of Gestures is to connect the past, present, and future of the Palestinian question. In contrast to Hourani, I do not do that through pure reenactment of past gestures, but rather through working with reenactment, transformation, and deformation of gestures to allow the bodily archive to be a dynamic system of formation and transformation of embodied narratives.
Conclusion

In this first chapter, I have laid the theoretical framework of my research by contextualising the question of Palestine within the wider colonial context. I exposed Israeli colonial archival practices, where Palestinian documents and treasures are looted, sometimes destroyed, then used to create an image of the Palestinian people that would serve Israel’s colonial aspirations. This allowed me to reflect on the power of the archive and my urgency to initiate a bodily archival practice that is part of a wider decolonial archival movement in Palestine and in the world. In this reflection, I deal with the body as privileged site of the archive, where gestures and lived experiences are embodied and transmitted to other bodies, enabling the archive to disseminate and survive through time. In the following chapters, I will analyse thoroughly the practice-based investigations that I undertook during my PhD research, through which I explore further some of the formal tools for archiving gestures and the narratives they carry. In the coming chapter I will discuss the process of creating *Gesturing Refugees* (2018), the first choreographic work I realised during my PhD studies, in which I push the participatory element\(^7\) of live performance to its limits in an attempt to better understand the potentiality of an

\(^7\) During the creation period I was inspired by participatory performances by Rimini Protokoll, a theatre group based in Berlin and MOHA, an artist collective based in Amsterdam.
afterlife of an event, delinking from the idea of gesture transmission that I was adopting in previous research and thus adopting the concept of gestural exchange. I do that while unearthing alternative narratives of refugeehood in collaboration with other refugee artists, focusing on the body as the main source and form of the archive, rather than relying on physical archival material (such as video and pictures) to unearth gestures as I did in previous works.
Chapter 2

Gesturing Refugees\textsuperscript{8}: Participation, Affect, then Action?

\textit{Gesturing Refugees} is the first participatory dance performance (45 minutes long) I created during my PhD research, in which I experimented with ways of archiving latent stories of refugeehood using the bodies of refugee-artists—Hamza Damra, Fadi Waked, and myself—and the bodies of the audience as living archives, while also playing with physical archive material, testimonies, and imagination. I chose to unearth archives that include past and present stories of refugeehood to interrogate collective responsibility towards the refugee question and search for bridges between past, present, and potential future refugees. Moreover, by creating embodied archives I intend to perform a decolonial gesture of freedom towards the re-appropriation of the refugee narrative and develop an alternative image that might challenge that of passive victimhood, an image to which refugees are often subjected since the so-called “refugee crisis” in Europe in 2015, when millions of people from Asia and Africa started crossing the Mediterranean Sea, or making their way overland through Southeastern European countries, to seek refuge in one of the European Union countries.

As a Palestinian born in a refugee camp in Syria and now resident in Europe, I find the mainstream narrative of the “refugee crisis” shaped by the European media and politicians to be very problematic, not only because of my personal experience but also because of the Palestinian people’s collective experience even before my existence. The Palestinian issue is a refugee question par excellence: As briefly explained in the previous chapter, in 1948 Jewish Zionist militia expelled 750,000 Palestinians to neighboring Arab countries and other Palestinian cities in order to found the State of Israel and occupy 78 percent of the Palestinian land (Pappe, 2006). In 1967 Israel occupied the remaining 22 percent of the land (the West Bank and Gaza), expelling 450,000 more Palestinians (Said, 1979). Today the estimated Palestinian diaspora consists of 5 million people, of which half a million used to live in Syria until the war started there in 2011. Since then, 300,000 of the Palestinians in Syria (UNRWA, 2018), second- and third-generation refugees, became refugees again inside Syria, and in neighboring Arab countries, Europe, and North America, or lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea, a trend considered to be part of the “refugee crisis”.

Since I consider myself part of the Palestinian diaspora, and from my position as an artist from a refugee background, I felt the urgency to act by unfolding counternarratives of refugeehood and creating spaces of experiences and encounters similar to those that many artists around the world attempted to evoke in response to the crisis and the narrative created around it. As highlighted by culture

\textsuperscript{8} Video links and more information about the choreographic work in Portfolio on p.115.
experts Daniel Gorman and Rana Yazaji (2019), in the past few years, while countries were putting money and energy into closing their borders, artists and the cultural sector were busy enhancing the inclusion of the newcomers, with at least 140 artistic projects and initiatives that aimed at creating new narratives about displacement. *Gesturing Refugees* is part of this artistic movement. Its aim is the reappropriation of the refugee narrative by refugees themselves, whose experiences have often been appropriated in multiple ways for cultural consumption. Moreover, the piece received production grants from art foundations in the UK and the Arab World to support the artists’ fees and production costs, which contributed to a better livelihood for the participating artists, some of whom were going through difficult financial circumstances because of their refugee status and not being permitted to work in Europe.

In their report, Gorman and Yazaji discuss important projects implemented with refugees in the Arab World and Europe, giving recommendations based on the lessons learnt, one of which concerns terminology: they recommend using the notion of “refugeeness” or “refugee community” with caution, as it might give rise to the notion of “otherness” and the misconception of a community of refugees who all think and act in the same way. Although I understand their misgivings, here I openly write about working with artists from a refugee background or refugee artists, a decision that has been agreed upon with the artists involved in the project, as a political choice to keep the refugee label in order to preserve the Palestinians’ right of return to their lands from which they were expelled as a result of the creation of the State of Israel. This is a right that has been maintained only on paper by the UN General Assembly Resolution 194, issued in 1948, which states that Palestinian refugees have the right to return to their home and receive compensation for the loss of and damage to their property.

Another important recommendation in the report is related to the role of refugee artists in the artistic project, which Gorman and Yazaji suggest should be central so as not to produce experiences where the refugees are framed merely as passive individuals who take part in pre-set projects or whose stories are used by others to create touching moments on big stages. I wholeheartedly agree with this recommendation, and indeed, *Gesturing Refugees* is initiated by myself—an artist from a refugee background—and developed in collaboration with other refugee artists who added their voices actively during the creative process and continue to do so by transmitting their narratives to the audience members. The artists I collaborated with are Fadi Waked, a Palestinian born and raised in a refugee camp in Syria, who is now a refugee for the second time in Germany since 2016; and Hamza Damra, a Palestinian born and raised in a refugee camp in Nablus, originally from Haifa, where his family was exiled in 1948. Both are professional dancers, performing hip hop, breakdance, Dabkeh (Palestinian traditional dance), and contemporary dance, and they are both very active in the Palestinian and international dance scene.
In this chapter I will explore how *Gesturing Refugees* could push the boundaries by not being just another performance that tackles narratives of displacement, but by functioning as a performative gesture towards political and social change, using audience participation as the main tool. First, I will analyse the process of creating the performance over digital platforms (due to the impossibility of physical encounter among the artists) and describe how the process can be considered as a political gesture of resistance. Second, I will engage with the literature on participatory performance by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002), Claire Bishop (2012), and Gareth White (2013) to outline my own approach to participation, both during the creation process and the performance itself. Third, I will go through each part of the performance, explaining how participation with the audience materialises, creates tension with, and provokes actions from them. Finally, by way of conclusion, I will discuss Brian Massumi (2002, 2015) and Erin Manning’s (2016) *Sense Lab* project and how they experiment with thinking-moving together to create “the more than” of the event, and consider whether *Gesturing Refugees*, as an event, can have an afterlife in the bodies and intellects of audience members.

**The Process**

The creative process faced many obstacles stemming from the fact that the participating artists were denied visas by UK authorities, making it impossible for us to meet in person in Edinburgh, where the first artistic residency was supposed to take place in the autumn of 2017. This meant that we had to work via online platforms (Skype and Messenger), which added new formal and political layers to the performance. On the formal level, the impossibility of physical encounter raised the question of how gestures can be archived and shared remotely through a digital platform. And on a political level, it raised the question of how the impossibility of meeting can transform into acting collectively towards freedom: freedom of movement, freedom from stereotypes, and freedom of self-determination.

According to philosopher Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958), people can only exist in the full sense of the term, and have rights, if they can appear in public spaces to interact with others through participatory democracy and by creating spaces of appearance, which can lead them to act in concert and generate change. Arendt maintains that people can only do so if they are free from any necessity. However, following American philosopher Judith Butler (2015), in *Gesturing Refugees* I explore how people who do not appear in a public space, but who, being prevented from physically appearing and encountering others in person, can gesture in their houses in front of a computer and still be political bodies that exist, have rights, and that reclaim the right to appear and act in concert. This also demonstrates how the internet can be considered as a public space, which I will explore in detail in Chapter 4. For Butler, contrary to what Arendt suggests, performativity not only entails agency, but also necessity, so that even when people
act out of an embodied necessity—for example the need for food, shelter, freedom of movement, and so on—they still can act for freedom and channel their necessity towards performativity and appearance. Building on Butler’s theory of assembly, I investigate how vulnerable subjects who choose to perform certain gestures as a result of their condition of oppression and dispossession, realise through their performance their condition of collective vulnerability and interdependence and can generate forms of rejection, resistance, and solidarity.

If fact, during our online time together we attempted to archive ordinary gestures in stories told by the artist-refugees ourselves, and those of other refugees we know. These stories include Fadi making jokes with his friends during the long journey to Europe; Hamza holding his brother’s shoulder after being shot by an Israeli soldier; me calling an ambulance to take me to school under curfew; and Hassan Rabah, a refugee dancer friend from Syria, performing a complex choreography of gestures in his room in Beirut days before his death by suicide. During the creation residency, we archived these gestures by sharing them with each other and reenacting them among ourselves. We witnessed each other’s stories and gestures first, then we tried the gestures and, by repeating them, we transformed and deformed them in our own bodies, making them ours and adding them to our own bodily archives. We shared our digital gestural exchange with a small audience during a residency sharing at Dance Base and created a short film to document the remote residency process.
The subsequent creation periods in November 2017 and May 2018 continued from afar, with me at Dance Base in Edinburgh and the dancers in their homes in Nablus and Berlin. At this point, we all embraced the decision to transform the physical distance among us, produced by the UK restrictions to free movement, into a possibility for new forms of archive-making and political resistance. In order to develop these new forms, I worked with a local video artist, Pedro Vaz Simoes, to first record and then edit and connect the online videos, followed by transforming the whole narrative into a participatory performance with the audience, with me and Pedro performing live in a gallery or studio space and the two dancers on pre-recorded videos playing on two screens and a TV, fully operated by me and Pedro from our computers with a remote control to reflect the process of creating the piece and the technical element it required, which often overlapped with the artistic.

Moreover, I decided to experiment with participatory performance—in which the audience is invited to re-enact gestures of refugeehood and make choices during the performance—because I was keen to create an experience for the audience members in which they would also be actors, rather than mere observers, and in which they could be touched by affect, and at the same time touch one another. I conceived this as an event that would create inter-subjectivities and allow for an afterlife of the performance, possibly leading to change and action. Arendt (1958) argues that the central political activity is action and that action is realised by plural human beings capable of starting something new. She also suggests that action is the key to freedom and how people can overcome the gap between power and responsibility, arguing that humans have the capacity to move politically, although they do not yet know how, which poses a risk that the “political” might vanish from our lives. The political, which Arendt understands as the movement towards freedom, requires a laborious and continuous commitment, as well as an inter-subjective action that is practiced, nurtured, repeated, and each time renewed.

According to André Lepecki in *Choreopolice and Choreopolitics* (2013), Arendt sees the political as intrinsically linked to freedom; therefore, we may interpret her as telling us that “we don’t know—at least not yet—how to move freely,” and that the vanishing of the political in the world is the vanishing of the experience and practice of movement as freedom. Lepecki thus hears a provocation implicit in Arendt’s words, which leads to the injunction, “If we do not yet know how to move politically, then we had better find out how to do it” (Lepecki 2013: 14). He then proposes that dancers can contribute to the reimagining of a politics of movement through what he calls “a choreopolitics of freedom,” a task that takes on increased significance at the present moment, as we experience a growing effort to limit people’s freedom by politics. In that sense, I consider *Gesturing Refugees* a choreopolitical experiment that investigates how to learn, practice, and repeat moving politically with others during the creation process among the artists, in the performance space with the audience, and within society after the performance ends.
**Participatory Performance**

Experiments with participation have been undertaken since the beginning of the twentieth century by artistic movements all over the world, including Dadaism, Surrealism, and Situationism. According to art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), these artists were eager to oppose the eighteenth century’s “modest and rational” version of the world, in which human relations were no longer experienced but replaced with their “spectacular” representation. He explains that while in the 1960s artists were busy with defining art, in the 1990s they started experimenting with art’s capacities of resistance in social spaces, which led to the consolidation of what he calls “relational art”, an art of encounter that conjures new models of sociability as part of the creative process. This form of art-making leads to practices that are new, not only ideologically, but also formally: artworks can now be conceived as encounters, events, festivals, collaborations, and games, which allows for experiences that go beyond the mere aesthetic consumption of an artefact within a defined period of time and a confined space. In Bourriaud’s account, relational art is not limited to one specific style, but is a practical and theoretical search for inter-human relations, a process that aims to link individuals and groups together and transform the beholder into an interlocutor.

Claire Bishop, one of the most important theorists of participation in performance art, argues in *Artificial Hells* (2012) that the most interesting aspect of the participatory arts that arose in the 1990s is their extension of the relationship with the audience during the performance, rather than limiting it to the process as suggested by Bourriaud. According to Bishop, participation by spectators in performance became both a central medium and material of the works produced, leading to a form of art that focuses on the meaning produced through participation, rather than attending only to the process. For this reason, she considers participatory performance as a form of art that aims at democratising art and creating collectivities in an era of individualism and neoliberal world order, engaging both with the aesthetic and the social. In his own reading of such forms of participatory performance, artist and scholar Gareth White in *Audience Participation in Theatre* (2013) also argues that participation, rather than process, is the crucial concept for understanding these works, which could then be said to center on “the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of the performance”, (White 2013: 4) by which the audience is encouraged to engage emotionally and intellectually with the work. My own work stems from a belief in a form of art that is participatory right from the very beginning of the process and continues to be during the performance. It does this through an invitation of exchange with the audience to create an encounter between the audience and the performers, and among the audience members themselves, where people affect each other emotionally and intellectually on matters that are of collective importance.
In this way, *Gesturing Refugees* is the result of a creative process that was participatory all the way through. All artists were invited to share the ordinary stories of refugeehood that each of them felt the urge to unearth, and then we started researching ways of archiving the stories in our bodies by re-enacting, transforming, and deforming each other’s gestures, as well as testing ways of transmitting them to other bodies, not only from one artist’s body to another, but also to the audience’s bodies. During the process I would propose to the artists methods for doing this, and we would discuss them and try them out collectively to find the best solutions. Furthermore, after deciding to work remotely, I was also exchanging ideas with Pedro, the local video artist, to find ways of recording the archived gestures and narratives, documenting and reflecting the process, and using the material to create an experience in the form of a participatory performance. Indeed, the form and content of the performance were handled with the same degree of care throughout the process. The fact that the piece is based on the participation with the audience does not mean that it has no regard for form or artistic quality; much to the contrary, we focused on a new “aesthetic”, or “aesthesis”, as explained by Mignolo (2014) in Chapter 1, intended as the embodied way, through the senses, that art is experienced.

One major formal investigation was on ways of inviting people to participate in the performance from the beginning until the end, through an urgent but friendly speech tone, the creation of a dynamic space, and a playful structure of performance. But most importantly, the investigation dug into how to deal with the audience reaction and input during the performance, which can’t always be predicted and creates a certain uncertainty in each performance. According to White (2013), aesthetics can be considered in participatory performance as the “aesthetics of the invitation,” where the actions and experiences of the audience are aesthetic material that produce certain dynamics and value in the performance. Thus, in participatory art there is no single criteria for the aesthetic. According to White, each artist would have their own implicit definition of what art is and how it manifests within their own practice. For that reason, he argues that where classical aesthetics privileges beauty and the sublime, participatory aesthetics is interested in other effects, such as the unexpected and the uncanny, which would provoke political and ethical thoughts and feelings in the audience. In fact, in *Gesturing Refugees*, the audience members themselves compose the performance, and the subjectivity of each audience member determines the aesthetic consistency of the artwork.

In that sense, *Gesturing Refugees* can be considered a participatory performance that aims at creating a social experience with the public, not only by creating a political work unearthing alternative narratives of refugeehood, but also by proposing a new aesthetic that navigates the tension between content and form, where the “aesthetics of the invitation” is at the core of the work, alongside more familiar aesthetic elements such as devised speech, choreographed gestures, edited videos, costumes, light, and scenography.
The Structure of the Performance

The performance begins in the foyer, intended as a small area found at the entrance of the main performance space, and first takes the form of a five- to seven-minute preparation session for the audience on how to become refugees before entering the main space. When allowed into the foyer, the audience members find me standing in front of them, next to a table with a few objects I need placed on it, such as plastic bags and cups of water, to guide the audience into becoming future refugees. In this preparation session I ask them to re-enact in a playful but urgent tone some stereotypical gestures related to the refugee journey across the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe (a journey that Fadi had to go through when he left Damascus for Berlin)—gestures that are constantly reproduced by mainstream media. For instance, I ask the audience members to hand in their ID cards, passports, or bank cards to me, to take a last selfie before the journey, to put all their belongings in a plastic bag, and have a cup of water in preparation for a long period as they cross the sea. The aim is to do all of these stereotypical gestures of refugees and then undo them, along with the stereotypes connected to them during the performance, by watching and embodying alternative gestures of refugeehood. By alternative I mean gestures different from those narratives produced by the mainstream media, which often represent refugees as passive, suffering victims.

From the beginning, I prepare the audience for the idea that they will be active members in the performance, rather than mere observers, letting them know that they are entering an event, or a “social play” as theatre historian Max Hermann (1981) calls it, where everyone is a player and co-creator. The audience members are asked to make decisions, to act or to refuse acting from the start—some of them hand over all their documents, others none; some refuse to put their belongings in a plastic bag, others put in everything, including their shoes; some drink the cup of water, others only smile. Hermann suggests that events create a social community out of all the singularities of those who are present in the space, who perceive and respond to the “play”. He further argues that performance has its rules, and that they correspond to the rules of a game, which are negotiated by all participants, performers, and audience alike, followed and broken by all equally, interlinking the aesthetic, social, and political in the performance.

Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), a scholar in Theatre Studies, builds on Hermann’s discourse and suggests that events combine the political and the aesthetic, which allows for processes of democratisation to be negotiated and the relationships between the members of a community to be redefined. They do so by distributing power among participants, and most importantly by reversing the roles of empowered and disempowered that are traditionally assigned to artists and spectators, respectively, during the performance. Artists are thus led to abandon their powerful position as the sole creator of the performance, and come to share that authority, in various degrees, with the audience. Fischer-Lichte further argues
that in order for the interplay to take place, there should be a prior empowerment of the artists and disempowerment of the audience, where the audience is exposed to crisis or shock in such a way that they are prevented from taking on the position of distanced observers and are motivated to act. The preparation session in *Gesturing Refugees* plays the role of such a shock factor by, for example, asking audience members before anything else to hand in their IDs, which many experience as intimidating and shocking, as some reported after the performance, because they do not know if they will get them back later on or if I will do something to them. However, the confiscation of IDs also serves to prepare them to act and make decisions during the performance.

The purpose of the preparation session is not to recreate for the audience members a first-person experience of a refugee’s life during their journey from home to their refuge destination. From the start it is clear to the audience that we are in a performance space, where a real-life situation is not being recreated, although elements of it are used to create a “social play”. The audience can clearly tell that I am inviting them in a playful way into a participatory performance; they are not being pushed into a boat or getting arrested, as some participatory performances that aim at recreating life situations do. One of these types of performances is by Bulgarian artist Petko Durmana. In 2020 he created a participatory performance entitled *Three Migrants in a Boat*, during which nine audience members are asked to take up the roles of migrants, smugglers, and police officers in a search-and-arrest operation, while the rest of the audience watches them on the “news” on screens outside of the performance space, waiting for their turn to take part in the performance. Rather, my work can be situated within artistic works produced in the Caribbean and Latin America between the 1960s and the 1990s, which, as Deborah Cullen in *Art Is Not Life* (2008) explains, aimed at provoking critical feelings through artistic interventions that tackled inequalities, without trying to re-create actual life experienced under real repression. It was clear in these practices that art did not equate with life, which is also the case with *Gesturing Refugees*.

After the preparation session I accompany the audience into the performance space, where they find Pedro, the video artist, at the entrance, distributing landing cards for them to fill in while seated on staggered chairs at the center of the space, facing a TV that loops silent footage of the creation process on Skype: video archives of Fadi’s journey to Berlin and choreography footage of Hassan, a fellow refugee artist. The landing cards address ironic questions to the audience regarding, for instance, the minute and second of birth, the type of shampoo they use, and the size of their underpants and boxers. These amplify the very personal and absurd questions refugees have to answer in their paperwork for requesting refugee status, and also in the UK visa forms that I had to fill in for the dancers to come to the UK (and which were denied). The landing cards are printed on simple white A4 paper, with each sheet cut into three landing cards with the printed text presented in a simple font, without the use of a fancy design. This aesthetic choice for the cards
reflects the dull quality of papers that refugees have to deal with continuously, but which are decisive for the future of their lives.

![Landing Card for UK/non UK subjects](image)

In a similar manner, from that moment onwards, the audience experiences the performance based on their answers. For instance, the people who were born before midnight have to raise their arms, stick their tongues out, and follow Pedro to cross the Boxer Line (a physical line created in the space with a pair of boxer shorts hanging on it, echoing one of Fadi’s stories and the personal questions in the landing cards), then watch and reenact Fadi’s funny stories of refugeehood at one end of the space. Those who were born after midnight instead have to follow me and watch and reenact Hassan’s gestures, based on my instructions, at the opposite end of the space. For example, I ask those who sleep for less than six hours per night to help me move the projector from one place to another, and those whose hair is longer than five centimetres to reenact part of Hassan’s choreography. In that way, I aim at creating an event where both artists and audience members make decisions and take responsibility for the performance.

As Fischer-Lichte suggests, the reversal of roles between artists and the audience in decision making through the aesthetic process of the performance sets in motion “a self-generating and ever-changing autopoietic feedback loop,” (Fischer-Lichte 2008:50) which requires the participation of everyone. No participant on their own is able to plan, control, and produce the work, and artists and audience constitute elements of the feedback loop that allow the performance to come about, while staying unpredictable to a certain extent. In fact, the performance would not
come about if the audience members were not there and were not making decisions, or if we, the artists, were not shifting constantly between being the empowering and the empowered. For example, the performance could not continue, or at least not as "planned", if no audience member moved the projector to its designated place, as otherwise the video would not be seen clearly, which puts the audience in an empowered position and me in a disempowered one.

As White (2013) explains, the term “autopoiesis” used by Fischer-Lichte was borrowed from the discourse of cellular biology, where first it designated the self-production of cells and later was used to define living organisms in general. The term evoked the autonomy of organisms insofar that they self-generate, although it should not be taken to imply that they are independent from their environment. According to White, Fischer-Lichte uses the term “autopoietic” to indicate that performance produces itself autonomously after being initiated by the creative work of the artists. In that sense, both the artists and the audience become the resources of the autopoietic system—the performance—to produce and reproduce itself. Fischer-Lichte suggests that all performances, even the more traditional and staged ones, establish a feedback loop between the artists and the audience, referring, for example, to cases in which the action on stage gains or loses intensity based on the audience’s reactions if they laugh or shout, and similarly the audience’s reactions can shift depending on how the artists approach them by standing closer to them or asking them to calm down. Nonetheless, what she calls the “autopoietic feedback loop” exists only in participatory performance that includes “role reversal, the creation of community, and mutual physical contact” (2008: 40).

In *Gesturing Refugees*, we try to enhance the performance’s feedback loop by offering another role reversal moment: when the videos finish, the two groups are asked to go back to their seats, close their eyes, and try to reenact the gestures they have just witnessed and experienced. The audience is thus given time to remember, repeat, and transform the gestures themselves, which allows them to create their own version of the gestures. As Lepecki (2016) in *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance* explains, reenacting gestures from the past can also be a way of inventing something new by suspending the economies of authorship over the gestures, disseminating them, and giving them an afterlife. After a few minutes, the audience is asked to open their eyes and switch sides: now those who were born after midnight would stand up, lower their heads, put their hands behind their backs, and go listen to and reenact Fadi’s funny stories, while the other group would experience and reenact Hassan’s complex choreography of gestures. This time, however, both groups see partially different videos and reenact different gestures in the stories. In so doing, the performance intends to encourage reflection on how people create a point of view depending on the information they receive and how they receive it, and how this can be influenced by us making our own decisions—especially since the audience members continue to experience the performance
based on the answers they chose to write on their landing cards at the beginning of the performance.

On both occasions, I explain to the group who witnessed and experienced Hassan’s story and gestures that Hassan is not alive anymore and that he died by suicide in the summer of 2016, as he couldn’t bear his refugee status in Lebanon. Then I thank them for embodying his gestures, because by doing so we hope to bring his gestures out of Lebanon, to where he wanted to be. This part is often unsettling for the audience and leads them to raise ethical questions about the piece. An audience member at the Avignon Festival in July 2018 felt that they were “tricked into performing the gestures of a dead person” and “without asking the permission of that person,” as I only give the audience the information about Hassan’s death after I have asked those whose hair is longer than five centimetres (first group), or those who do not use Caster Oil Organic Shampoo (second group), to reenact his gestures. I usually respond to the audience members who raise these concerns after the performance by saying that I got permission from Hassan’s family and friends, and that I see carrying his gestures in my body and the audience’s bodies around the world as a political action to counter closed borders that block the passage of bodies and gestures. Also, after each performance, based of my own experience of the performance and the informal conversations that follow, I reworked certain elements of the it, whether in the participatory or movement parts, adjusting the tone of my invitation or making the intention of my movements clearer. Like with Hassan’s

Figure 14. The two audience groups switching videos during the Avignon Festival (July 2018). © Medhat Soody
part, on which I worked continuously, changing the wording and the tone of how I communicate to the audience the news of Hassan’s suicide after they have just reenacted his gestures.

What I find most interesting is that this part of the performance did not raise an ethical issue for people who had experienced vulnerability in certain ways and who could identify with my underlying reason for asking them to embody Hassan’s gestures. In fact, some of the audience members who came to talk to me after the performance—and who expressed how much they were touched by that part and how much they could relate to the reasons behind it—had themselves experienced a physical vulnerability similar to Hassan’s. Their bodies had to ask for permission and fight in order to cross borders as they left their home behind: an Egyptian migrant in Avignon, a Syrian refugee in Berlin, a Somalian refugee in Glasgow, a Lebanese migrant in Amsterdam, a Sudanese migrant in Tangier, and a Mexican migrant in Edinburgh. It is clear, then, that exposing physical vulnerability can generate conflicting reactions: it can produce rejection and a sense that the tragic experience of death is being “instrumentalised”, but it can also create a sense of recognition, especially among those who have gone through similar experiences.

My intention with *Gesturing Refugees* is not to create a juxtaposition between those two reactions, but rather to make them emerge through the participatory act, to create a space where ethical and political feelings and thoughts would put people in touch with their own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others. A space where people can train their vulnerability, regardless of their background. Judith Butler, who tackles physical vulnerability in her *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), suggests that to physically appear and perform, in public or private, means that you are exposing yourself to others, and therefore making yourself vulnerable. By inviting the audience to perform and expose themselves to gestural archives through participation, I attempt to make them realise their own vulnerability, and that of others, by living and realising, physically and emotionally, that what is happening there could happen here—or may even be already happening here. It is through bodily vulnerability, as Butler explains, that activism starts—I do not lose myself, but I accept being transformed by the interdependency and vulnerability of others. When I consent to engage in this way, I begin to self-make and act in concert with others.

Bishop (2008) also considers vulnerability, discomfort, and frustration to be crucial to any artwork and its impact on the audience. She argues that the concern of audience members and scholars over ethics in participatory performance is part of an “ethical turn” that she regards as problematic. In her view, the unease produced by a performance is key to its capacity to influence the audience, not only during the performance but also after its end. She suggests that ethical issues should of course be taken into account, but not by directly unveiling potentially upsetting parts of the performance, such as by writing disclaimers or telling the audience beforehand about
the content of sensitive moments, if not by censoring these parts altogether. Instead, Bishop asks the arts scene to acknowledge that the audience is more than capable of dealing with performances that offer a complicated access to social truth, however extreme, and that the ethics at stake in performances are to be found in the effects that they provoke on the audience and on society.

In a similar vein, philosopher Brian Massumi in *The Politics of Affect* (2015) argues for a situational understanding of ethics, which locates the ethical value of an action in its capacity to transform a situation, and in what emerges out of that situation through the affect experienced in it. Here, affect is a dimension that is open to adventure and hardship, and is concerned with both the revaluation of values and the creation of its own ethics. In that sense, Massumi regards ethics as experimental, since it is not about being right or wrong, but about how people experience uncertainty together. When spectators experience situations in which they need to act and make decisions, they share responsibility for the situation that they find themselves in, which shifts their safe positions and requires them to become co-participants in the action. In that sense, by creating extreme conditions, my intention is to call on the spectators’ sense of responsibility and push them to act within the space of the performance and beyond.

Considering these ideas, I see ethics in participatory performance as a force that is created through the intimacy of participation, through meeting the other in a situation, where affect acts on both spectators and artists alike, enhancing the encounter and showing us the limits of our autonomy, and thus our responsibility to others. In that sense, ethics is where the aesthetic and the political meet. Having said that, I always take ethical considerations that aim to ensure participation without imposing it on the audience. Firstly, I use the tone of an invitation for any action that is suggested, so as to obtain consent from the spectators, who then feel that they are allowed to choose whether to participate or not. Secondly, most actions are performed in groups, so that the spectators will not feel embarrassed or targeted as an individual. Lastly, I only request audience members to follow actions that will not expose their body or life to any danger and can be performed by bodies with different abilities.

It is interesting to notice that Fadi’s video, in which he recounts and reenacts three funny stories of things that happened to him during his journey from Damascus to Berlin, has never received any comments for being unethical—even though the stories are ironically funny precisely because they happen in extreme conditions, without actually being funny at all. At one point, for example, Fadi recounts how one of his best friends fell and was rolling on a dangerous bridge in Macedonia and he couldn’t help him because he couldn’t stop laughing at how fast he was rolling. At another point, he tells the story of a pair of boxer shorts that he bought in Budapest that was imprinted with the image of a middle finger, in order to show it to the Hungarian police if he were to be caught; however, when the police eventually
caught him he was not able to show them the boxers, so in effect, as he puts it, it was the police that gave him the middle finger. Finally, he talks about his connection to Albert Einstein—himself a refugee—and to his gesture of sticking his tongue out, recalling how he documented his journey from Damascus to Berlin by always taking selfies with Einstein’s gesture, and how he visited Einstein’s house in Germany once he arrived there. Fadi also invites audience members to reenact some of the gestures in his stories, depending on which group is watching: the first is asked to reenact the gesture of giving the middle finger to the Hungarian police, and the second is asked to re-enact the act of taking a selfie while performing Einstein’s gesture. Most audience members reenacted Fadi’s gestures without posing questions, which might be related to the humour in those gestures and how audience members might have identified with and felt at ease to connect with other audience members in the same group through laughter.

In his discussion on laughter in performances, White (2013) refers to Robert Provine’s studies (2000) of funny moments, in which he suggests that laughter is an unconsciously intersubjective behavior shared by members of a group and signaling the sense of belonging to that group. In White’s view, performance laughter is the most embodied state of emotion that is intersubjectively shared and which allows performers to read the mood of the audience. Through laughter the audience goes from being a group of individuals to forming a crowd. In this new configuration, their responses are not always controlled consciously, as the experience of laughter allows them to feel that they are in a stress-free situation, and thus more open to accept an invitation to participate. Massumi also explores humour as an affective movement that conveys “singularity of experience” that are specific to each situation (Massumi 2015:13). He argues that through humour we are able to experience the eventfulness and uniqueness of each situation, to navigate it and be immersed in it, instead of trying to control it. This also explains why the group of people who watch Fadi’s stories first have a very different experience of the performance as a whole, as is intended by the piece, since the point is to create a unique experience for the collective of singularities that are present in the room, based on their choices and actions.

After both videos have been watched by the two different groups, everyone is invited to go back to their seats while still reenacting the gestures encountered in the stories they have just witnessed. Then the video artist plays a video on the TV screen that is located in the middle of the space, in which the three dancers (Fadi, Hamza, and myself) can be seen sharing a Skype screen. In the video, Hamza is remembering and reenacting the story of his brother being shot by Israeli soldiers in a refugee camp in Nablus during the 1990s, while Fadi and I try to embody and archive the gestures of his story in our bodies. In the performance space, I also try to re-enact Hamza’s gestures next to the TV screen while the video is running. This part reflects on Skype as a medium that hosts and supports the bodily archive that we are creating, while also reflecting the process of transmitting personal memories...
among the artists ourselves. Audience members can thus witness our exchange process, take notice of the poor quality of the image we were working with (often pixelated or delayed) because of the uneven internet connection, and observe me re-enacting the gestures again live, as well as introducing the next part, which invites them to re-enact our gestures in their own bodies one more time, in their own personalised way.

Figure 15. Hamza in Nablus reenacting his brother’s shooting scene, while Fadi in Berlin and Farah in Edinburgh embody his gestures over Skype. © Farah Saleh

In fact, after the video stops, I start calling the names on the ID cards that the audience members handed to me at the beginning of the performance. In order to get their ID back, I ask them to reenact one gesture they can remember from the stories they experienced. After we hear everyone’s name and we see everyone reenacting gestures, I introduce all the artists by their names, concluding with mine, which allows me to begin recounting and reenacting my personal and ironically funny gestures of refugeehood. The gestures I present here were produced in critical situations and became funny by virtue of the context in which they were produced, as when I had to call an ambulance while under curfew in the West Bank in 2002 to take me to school so that I could take my IB exam, or to get a ride to a friend’s house when I was sick of staying home. By doing this, I connect myself to the other refugee-artists in the piece and to the potential future refugees present in the room: the audience. After re-enacting, transforming, and deforming my own gestures of refugeehood, I also repeat and ask the audience to repeat one last time traces of gestures that were performed throughout the piece while we are all standing in a
circle, in an effort to enhance the embodiment of the gestures and the affective and intellectual exchange produced by the act of feeling-thinking together in the space.

![Figure 16. The closing circle where performers and audience members reenact some of the gestures they have experienced during the performance at Liverpool Arab Arts Festival, 2019.
© Jazamin Sinclair](image)

**The Afterlife of the Event**

In his work on affect and the “more than” that it produces, Massumi in *Parables for the Virtual* (2002) distinguishes between emotion and affect. While emotion is the expression of what a person is feeling at a certain moment through gesture and language, structured by social convention and culture, affect is an unstructured and nonlinguistic bodily sensation that exceeds what is actualised by language and gesture. Thus understood, affect stirs a sense that something is being experienced and initiates efforts to understand what was experienced and to find ways to express it. Building on Massumi’s thought, sociologist Deborah Gould in *Affect and Protest* (2010) suggests that when people try to grasp what they are feeling they often draw meaning from their culture and personal habits. In doing so, they express what they are feeling in an incomplete way that fails to represent the affective experience, because it is a mere approximation of what they are feeling obtained by reducing unpresentable affective states into conventionally recognised emotions through fixed language and gestures. Gould further argues that the distinction between affect and emotions is not temporal, as though affect were something that comes first and then gives way to a fixed emotion. Rather, affect is always there, even if not actualised,
and it is only through it that people may come to feel any emotion. She explains that for Massumi the non-fixity of affect provides enormous freedom, allowing it to be directed and mobilised in new ways. This entails that by diminishing affect into culturally conventional emotions we would be reducing its potential to go past the threshold and realising “the more than” of what is actualised in social life.

In his account of the politics of affect, Massumi (2015) himself elaborates on the potential of passing the threshold and experiencing a change through affect, explaining that during an event one is always both affected and affecting in return. Thus, Massumi views affect as transversal, as something that cuts across the subjective and the objective simultaneously, provoking a process of feeling that touches both the body and the mind. In affect the subjective qualities and the object that gives rise to them are equally involved, as are freedom and constraint: “you could say that sensation is the registering of affect... the passing awareness of being at a threshold—and that affect is thinking, bodily—consciously but vaguely, in the sense that it is not yet a fully formed thought. It’s a movement of thought, or a thinking movement” (Massumi 2015:10).

Massumi suggests that when you affect something you are at the same time being affected, making you transition from where you were before, by however small a degree, through which you are led to step over a threshold and experience a change. Through affect, then, each situation is able to access its potential, and people are reminded of the fact that we do not live in isolation, that we are interdependent with others and with things around us, allowing for the fluidity of each person’s subjectivity. According to Massumi an encounter should not be understood as creating intersubjectivities by melting two or several subjectivities into each other. He argues that the notion of intersubjectivity can be misleading, as it might allude to the established existence of pre-constituted subjects who come to experience the artwork. Following Guattari and Deleuze (1987) he claims rather that the subjects in the room are engaged in a constantly ongoing process of formation through which they reemerge and reconstitute continuously. To frame this process in terms of intersubjectivity would be to reduce it to an exchange between subjects, while it is actually more like a transversal exchange involving subjects as well as objects.

Massumi thus prefers to describe the encounter as “the coming together of the world for experience”, a “bare activity” (Massumi 2015: 52), and an event in which each of its elements affects the others. This exchange among fluid singularities is initiated by microshocks, interruptions or cuts that emerge in our everyday lives and offer a change in focus and microconceptions. These shocks may go unnoticed at the beginning, but they begin to enter conscious awareness as they unfold, causing us to pass a threshold and feel the change by which the “more than” of the event becomes manifest. Massumi suggests that such encounters lead to action in the future, depending on the person’s past and how they experience and perceive the microshocks in the present. For this reason he conceptualises the event
as micropolitical, where the prefix “micro-” should not be interpreted in the sense of “small”, but as denoting the way in which an event happens as it generates a moment of experience, causing us to grasp the novelty and complexity of a situation and inspiring ways of going forward.

Brian Massumi and Erin Manning have been exploring the connections between the micropolitical and the aesthetic-political in SenseLab, a series of events initiated by Manning in 2004 in Montréal and conceived as a space for the intersection of philosophy, art, and activism. SenseLab is a sort of “laboratory for thought in motion”, where the event is not recognisable as a conference, an installation, or a workshop, and requires participants to experience it as undefined and in the process of forming along with them as they continuously self-constitute and transform. No one is asked to deliver a constituted work, and people are urged to bring into play the tendencies, techniques, obsessions, and inclinations that drive them in their processes and to take part in a constitutive work that is in the process of being created with the present group. With this approach to event-making, Massumi and Manning aim to break the expectations that confine the efficacy of the event and extend the duration of the shock created by the unusual, allowing it to pass the threshold of perceptibility and become consciously felt as potential, stopping it from transforming into an automatic reaction to a stimulus.

To do so, they adapt hospitality as their model, thinking of spatial setups as “enabling constraints” that would break expectations in a gentle and inviting way. They thus try to anticipate the obstacles that traditional events tend to confront, such as the difficulty of finding concrete ways to encourage different temporalities of entry so as to establish different kinds of dynamics. Working in this direction, they allow people to enter the space in different ways, and once they are inside, they are urged to engage in group dynamics by being divided into smaller groups where they will not feel intimidated to participate, before moving into one big group. To achieve this, they rely on what they call “techniques of relations”, which they devise specifically for each event. In one of the events, in order to divide the participants into small groups, they provide pieces of fabric with different textures and colours and ask people to pick the pieces that they find most attractive and interact with them; as this happens groups slowly begin to emerge, so that a common experience will have been created even before anyone speaks. After people in each of these groups have spent some time working together, each group is asked to share its process with the bigger group—not by describing it from an outside perspective, but by creating it and performing it again with the group as a whole. As Massumi explains:

It’s like the event’s content was becoming its form, or vice versa. Nothing was going to happen unless everyone helped make it happen. So everybody owned the results. Everyone was actively implicated in making the event. They didn’t deliver, and neither did we. Without the participants’ active involvement, nothing would have happened. Since there was nothing on offer,
there was nothing to be had, except what the group collectively made happen (Massumi 2015: 76).

According to Massumi, this is how the thinking-feeling continues to be part of the process in SenseLab, never complete and resolved. The subject thus becomes engaged and contributes to the micropolitical, rather than merely judging the macropolitical. Indeed, people perceive the macro as situated at a level higher than their own, allowing them to stand outside of the event and judge from a position of purity and correctness. With this in mind, Massumi and Manning urge for the creation of micropolitical events, during which people are pushed into participating and facing constraints rather than judging from outside. For them, this way of doing things sets the conditions for an emergence of collectivities, thought, and change.

In her book *The Minor Gesture* (2016), Manning defines the microshocks mentioned by Massumi as a minor gesture, as the living variation of experience “that opens space for disturbances and new modes of expression” (Manning 2016: 2) allowing new tendencies to emerge by placing emphasis on the process and transforming everything into an event. According to Manning the minor gesture is always political, because it awakens new ways of encounter and creates new ways of experiencing life-living, a “way of thinking life with and beyond the human”, which allows us to perceive our lives as part of a bigger whole (Manning 2016: 8). She also argues that the minor gesture contributes to the creation of the undercommons, a concept developed by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) and explained by them as a collectivity that is born in the encounter and becomes a commons not simply through co-existence but mostly through an ecology of practices generated by the encounter. These are practices that aim at creating conditions to reveal ways of thinking and trying to understand unsolvable problems. In that sense, Manning suggests that the minor gesture allows individuals who engage in an ongoing process of self-constitution to become researchers in the experience, led by intuition and moved by affect.

**Conclusion**

In *Gesturing Refugees*, I experiment with the ways in which participatory performance, in the form of an event, can contribute towards the interchange between subjectivities, the creation of future responsibility, and the potential of action after the event. In that sense, the work aims to be an event in which the audience is considered as a collective of singularities and is invited to feel-think together, through a series of microshocks or minor gestures, and where they are led to experience alternative stories and gestures of refugeehood by reenacting, transforming, and deforming them in their bodies and carrying them beyond the performance space, creating an afterlife of the event that could materialise in different degrees and forms. This is made possible, for example, by allowing people to gain a more accurate understanding of the asylum-seeking process by having them fill in the ironic landing
cards themselves and bringing them home, where they can look at them again and keep them as a physical trace of the experience. People are also urged to consider the mainstream media's depiction of refugees under a different light after taking their “last selfie at home” during the introductory section, which they can later find in their phones when they are back home. After archiving them in their own bodies during the performance, they are enabled to share and transmit these alternative stories and gestures of refugeehood with a friend, in a process that may lead them to eventually host a refugee in their home or to contact their MP or other government representative to advocate for a change in the asylum-seeking procedure.

As Lorna Irvine, dance critic for The List, puts it in her review of a performance of Gesturing Refugees at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow in June 2019:

It is an unforgettable piece, dedicated to refugees past, present, and future, and hard to categorise: part performance lecture, part workshop, and fortified through these funny, sad, chilling testimonials from others, it pulses like a heartbeat and makes the skin prickle. It is a very special and transformative work, with love—and dance movement itself—as a true weapon of resistance. Gestures can be passed down as stories, never to be forgotten.
Chapter 3

What My Body Can’t Remember: Body Memory as Archive

In Chapter 2, I experimented with how the participatory performance of *Gesturing Refugees* (2018), in the form of an event, could contribute towards the interchange between subjectivities, the creation of future social responsibility for justice, and the potential for action after the event. In this chapter, I will analyse the process of promenade performance for *What My Body Can’t Remember* (2019), the second choreographic work I created during my PhD research, to investigate how my own body memory can act as an archive and focus on how the return to embodied knowledge can be considered as a decolonial gesture. In fact, in this performance, I explore what my body, the main source of archive, can or cannot remember from me performing daily gestures and dancing at home in my city Ramallah during the 2002 Israeli reinvasion of the West Bank. During that period, we had to stay home for many months under curfew. This was both a frightening and generative condition that brought me back to dancing after years of interruption, transforming a private domestic space into my only means of physical freedom.

In the performance, I research ways of archiving the story, relying on my body and its embodied experience as the main source of archive, rather than also working with physical archives as I did in the previous narratives. I do this to investigate body memory as archive and challenge the ephemerality of performance. To initiate the exploration, I undertook a series of artistic residencies between October 2018 and February 2019 at Dance Base in Edinburgh, through which I attempted to remember the movements I had performed in 2002. First, I invited video artist Owa Barua to help me document my daily process of remembering. Then, I decided to make my practice of remembering accessible to an audience, considering my body as an archive opening its doors to the public during the period of the performance, and the audience as witnesses of that archive with whom I also exchange thoughts on body memory, while simultaneously inviting them to access their own living archives, their bodies. In this chapter, I intertwine the analysis of my research in the studio and in the performative space with the underpinning theoretical research questions that have nourished my experimental process. I also examine other artistic works that are in dialogue with my own in order to further develop my thoughts on body memory as archive and the practice that allows the audience to first go through the process of witnessing a bodily archive before accessing their own.

*Background: Siege*

9 Video links and more information about the choreographic work in Portfolio on p.116.
In 2000, more than a decade after the First Palestinian Intifada of 1987, the Second Intifada\(^\text{10}\) (“Second Uprising”) erupted in the Palestinian Occupied Territories as a response to the deadlock in the Oslo peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. The peace process started in 1993 with the promise to put an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which would lead to the creation of an independent Palestinian state. The promise was never fulfilled, and peace never materialised. Instead, Israel’s illegal colonies built on Palestinian expropriated land continued to mushroom while political leaders were still talking about finding a solution to the conflict. Paradoxically, peace translated into more dispossession for Palestinians (Thomas, 2011).

During that time, I was a high school student and practicing modern dance at a local cultural center. But the uprising exploded, and with it demonstrations, violent clashes, and bombings of Palestinian cities by the occupying military. In 2002, Israel took the decision to escalate and weaken even further the Palestinian Authority\(^\text{11}\) by reinvading with its troops and tanks the main West Bank cities, including my city, Ramallah. I was in my last year of high school then and had stopped dancing since the beginning of the uprising because of the tense political situation. It was frustrating to stop dancing during that time, as movement had been my main language of expression since the age of seven—and like everyone else, what I needed most was to exteriorise my feelings and thoughts during those disastrous times. But the state of siege prevented me from doing so.

During the invasion of the West Bank, civilians were put under curfew by Israeli military rule. For several months we were confined to our homes with irregular food supplies, regular electricity and water cuts, and systematic home incursions. In addition, schools, universities, and cultural centers were, like all other services, closed. On top of that, I was home alone with my older brother, as my father was in hiding because of his persecution by the Israeli military for being a member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (he escaped a targeted assassination and his office was bombed) and my mother was stuck in Jordan, where she was attending a conference right when the invasion occurred, with all border crossings closed and preventing her from traveling. To survive the dire situation, I started creating my own rituals at home. First, dancing and playing cards in the living room while listening to MTV music—when there were no electricity cuts. Second, sleeping for long hours during the day in my bedroom to escape time and the sounds of explosions in the city. Third, cooking creatively with what was left in the kitchen, which was exposed to the Israeli snipers on the road. My movements in the kitchen were anxious, entering and exiting it as quickly as I could. In *What My Body Can’t Remember*, I revisited all these memories that my body recorded—we could speak of my “embodied

\(^{10}\)The Second Intifada (2000–2005) followed the First Intifada (1987–1992) It was a popular uprising that, like the first, had the aim of putting an end to the Israeli occupation in Palestine.

\(^{11}\)The Palestinian Authority is an interim self-governing body established after the first Oslo Accords in 1993 between the Palestinian Liberation Movement and Israel.
memories”. To explain how I delved into my memory, I start by explaining my **somatic approach** to it, in which body and mind unite to revive gestures from the past in the present moment.

**Between Matter and Memory**

Memory is generally conceived by scholars as the ability to recall stored information for future use. According to French philosopher Henri Bergson (1911), who wrote on the connection between memory and body action—and is widely studied by media, movement, and archive scholars (some of whom I will discuss below)—there are two types of memory. The first kind is “senso-motorial”, which concerns habit and actions learnt in the past, inscribed in the body, and repeated in the purpose of present action. The second kind is “pure memory”, which represents the past and is registered in the form of “image remembrance”. The latter is of a spiritual kind, in the sense of intellectual and immaterial, and therefore is not related to the physical body. Bergson (1911) believed that the spirit belongs to the past, while the body belongs to the present, and it is through consciousness that the past acts in the present and the body and spirit are united. In that sense, he sees the difference between body and mind residing in the temporal domain rather than the spatial one. In fact, he refuses the dualistic discourse in the realistic and idealistic theories, where in the former memory is located in the nervous system, thus is reduced to matter, and in the latter it is located in the mind, thus reduced to spirit.

Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* (1896) was written in response to psychologist Theodule Ribot’s *The Maladies of Memory* (1882), in which Ribot claims that memory is located within a particular place in the nervous system, thus within the brain, reducing memory to a material nature. Bergson considers memory to be at the intersection between mind and matter. According to him, the brain has a practical function to influence present action by feeding relevant memories from the past. By that he also opposes philosopher George Berkley’s idealistic claims (1710, 1713), in which Berkley considers matter a representation that exists only in and for our minds, but not in reality, thus reducing matter to the perception we have of it. Bergson instead defines matter as “an aggregate of ‘images’” and images as “more than that the idealist calls representation and less than that the realist calls a thing” (1911: xi). Bergson maintains that the image exists independently of the subject who perceives it, thus the object is self-standing.

The French philosopher explains that we perceive images through our senses, creating representations of them in our mind, including the image of our body. Bergson considers the body as a special image because we get to know it from the inside by affections and from the outside by perceptions. He suggests that images always act with and react to each other; therefore, the body is acted upon by other images in the universe and it acts upon them in turn. In that sense, it is a center of action and impacts the images around it. In addition, according to Bergson
perception and remembering are interconnected and penetrate each other continuously. On the one hand, “image remembrance” assists us in choosing actions in the present based on past experience. On the other hand, perception is active in the present through the senses, which activate memory and affections, triggering old memories and allowing recollections to emerge. This implication that in the process of remembering, the body acts as a bridge between past, present, and future, is what is now known as Bergson’s theories on duration.

Suzanne Guerlac (2006), an American literature and visual arts scholar who studies Bergson’s work extensively, suggests that in the 1930s during the rise of new rationalism in structuralism, European philosophers accused Bergson of irrationalism and his writings were marginalised in universities. It was not until the 1990s, after philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s book Bergsonism (1966) was translated into English, that Bergson’s work was rediscovered and subsequently reacquired scholarly validity. Although for Guerlac, Deleuze’s book has constructed a “New Bergson,” where the metaphysical disappears and all the features that distinguish humans from machines vanish, making Bergson sound more rational. She argues that in his writings (1966), Deleuze separates duration from physical and psychological experiences, framing memory mainly as “pure memory” that is completely virtual and disconnected from subject, body, or agency, thus redefining duration as “virtual coexistence”. Guerlac argues that Deleuze appropriated and deformed the virtual part of Bergson’s thoughts on duration and memory and employed it in his work on cinema and machines, which sometimes made the lines that divide the human and the machine vanish.

Guerlac writes that Brian Massumi (2002), another philosopher who engaged with both Bergson’s and Deleuze’s works, takes Bergson’s ideas on duration, memory, and the relationship between body and mind in a new direction by reintroducing movement and sensation at the centre of cultural studies, focusing on “the process of becoming of culture”, which brings the attention back to the subject, the body, and its lived experiences. In fact, based on Bergson’s theories on duration, in which the present, past, and future of people are connected through perceptions and affections, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) ideas on the continuous structuring of the self and of society through the process of feeling and thinking together, Massumi develops a certain notion of affect. He suggests that affect can be felt as potential that extends for the duration of an event, making it possible to pass the threshold of perceptibility and start informing the event through the feeling-thinking together, without the aim of resolving the event consciously and instantly, but rather allowing it to extend to the future. In this way, he also excavates a third type of memory, one that is felt in the future, where one consciously recalls backwards and remembers forwards towards a “not-yet” of an event:

[T]here are at least three kinds of memory: a nonconscious memory of the present, which is the past actively contracted into the cut of the present instant
(what I call the “here-and-now” to differentiate it from the specious present that encompasses and unifies its fractal teeming and gives it the continuity of a duration); a memory of the past, which is a rear view of the past from the perspective of the consciously experienced specious present of lived duration; and a felt memory of the future, which is the quasi-causal force of tendency taking effect, governed recursively by the futurity of the terminus towards which it tends. All of these forms of memory can operate at the same time, and in our waking lives they usually do. They are complements of each other. (Massumi 2015: 62)

I find Massumi’s somatic approach to memory very relevant to what I encountered in my studio investigations. While I was attempting to remember my gestures under curfew in 2002, I had to truly delve into images from my memory of 20 years ago in order to inform my body and reenact the gestures. Otherwise, my body would mechanically enact gestures that belonged to the present and more specifically to its habit of moving. For example, since I am a trained professional dancer, some technique movements emerged while moving my body. This often happens if I do unguided improvisations without setting a specific task, thinking consciously of a certain image, or writing a score.

To assist my process of remembering and recalling images, I decided to give myself a spatial structure of remembering and concentrate on three parts of my house in Ramallah where recollections were more intense. Accordingly, I divided the studio space into three rooms: the kitchen, the bedroom, and the sitting room. In addition, I added a few objects to each room that had appeared in my “pure memory”. Then I entered with my body into each reconstructed room, which activated my “senso-motorial” memory and allowed me to reenact gestures and movements in the present that I had performed and learnt in the past. According to Laurajane Smith (2018), a scholar in museum and heritage studies, when people enter museums or memory sites—like the one I recreated of my house by dividing the studio into rooms and placing objects in the space—the objects present in them act as tools from the past that help people remember old experiences. And since remembering is an active process, it continues reshaping the experience of memories. In that sense, when we enter a memory site, embodied performances are produced with emotional, physical, and intellectual responses to how we process our understanding of the past in the present moment.

To document the process of remembering and notice the emergence of certain gestures that I performed in 2002 over and over again in my practice, other than taking personal notes, I collaborated with video artist Owa Barua to film my practice of remembering on a daily basis. The filming was also a tool to connect time: having me reenact the past in my body, while having Owa archive the present process for future use. Indeed, the video materials were edited to create a short visual archive of the process, which is shared with the audience at the beginning of the promenade performance in order to invite them into the process of remembering,
first by witnessing it and later by experiencing it together in the event yet to be formed.

The Video

At the beginning of the studio investigations each day, I would say while looking into the camera the number of the day of my practice of remembering (for example, Day 1, Day 5, Day 9, and so on). Then Owa would follow me through the space into the three recreated rooms of my house and accompany my movements with his camera, so that we could get a clear idea and detailed vision of the gestures reenacted. After two weeks of research, Owa and I watched the footage and noticed the differences and similarities in gestures appearing in my memory of each day.

To share my practice of remembering with the audience at the beginning of the performance, we edited the footage into a 4-minute video to reflect 1) the process of remembering, with me saying the number of each day of practice and moving from one room to another spontaneously, with similar gestures appearing and new ones occasionally erupting and 2) how memories and gestures were erupting not linearly, but in a fragmented, repetitive, and transformed manner. This was also reflected in the sound of the video, which included the sounds my gestures were creating in the space, as well as fragments of songs and other music that were erupting from my memory that I was listening to at the time of the siege, while dancing and performing daily gestures at home. The same editing process was applied to the sound: presented not in a linear fashion, but reflecting how it was fragmented and distorted in my memory throughout the studio investigations.

Figure 17. The audience members watching the video documenting my studio practice of remembering during the work in progress performance at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh (February 2019). © Chris Scott
**The Promenade Performance**

When the audience enters the space where I perform *What My Body Can’t Remember*, they see me standing in the open, semi-empty space with a few objects lying around in three designated areas representing the three rooms of my house: the living room, bedroom, and kitchen. I greet the audience and invite them to stand in a half-circle in front of me. Between myself and the audience, there is a long mic cable that functions to initiate the autopoietic feedback loop (as described by Fisher-Litchte (2008) discussed in the previous chapter), which suggests that there is an ever-changing reversal of roles between artists and audience during the aesthetic process of participatory performance. In *What My Body Can’t Remember*, the feedback loop occurs each time I remember my gestures of 2002 in front of the audience, allowing them to witness my process of remembering and my daily gestures of that period. Then I use the mic to address the audience after I finish remembering in each room, to share with them ideas and theories around body memory as archive, asking them to actively think about these ideas and to delve into their own body memory. In this way, they become the actors of the practice of remembering and I become the witness of their process.

When I grab the mic for the first time from the floor after all the audience members enter the space and stand in half-circle, I start by welcoming them to my practice of remembering and inviting them to join the practice, first by watching the video of me remembering during the studio investigations, and then by following me around the space, into each room, to witness and experience the practice live. After the video ends, I move with Owa—who films me during the performance while I remember, just like during the studio investigations—and the audience to the bedroom, where a blanket lies on the floor and a mic hangs from the ceiling. Before laying under the blanket to allow my body to remember my memories of sleeping and sleeplessness under siege, I say out loud the number of my day of practice (day 20 for example), just like I did daily in the studio investigations, to continue the genuine practice of remembering in the performance space and allow the audience to witness it.

After I finish remembering, I take a moment to exit the vulnerable state of accessing my memory and start to address the audience again:

Can you guess what I just remembered? No? Yes? OK, I remember that I remembered this gesture [touching my stomach with both hands, which always erupts in my memory] … do your muscles tense, twitch, or move when seeing me doing this? Or do you recognise it from your past experience in your belly or inside of you? Some scholars say that when you see someone moving, you actually start moving yourself, reflecting what you see; others argue that it’s actually your past experience that allows you to feel, read, or maybe even act when seeing others moving. Thinking about these two ideas, how do you respond to this? [I throw the hanging mic towards my face, then move away at the last moment.]
With these opening questions I am introducing the audience to the ideas of inner mimicry and embodied knowledge, both of which involve analysis of how to perceive and sense the movement of another body. I ask these questions so the audience can reflect on and experience them with their bodies, and also so that I can witness their reaction, thus swapping our roles of witnesses and actors.

![Figure 18. The moment I ask the audience if they could guess what I had just remembered during the work-in-progress performance at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh (February 2019). © Chris Scott](image)

**Kinesthetic Empathy**

Performance scholars Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (2012) look at the viewers' experience from the lens of kinesthetic empathy, trying to find relationships between arts-based and neurological definitions. They study kinesthesia, a term coined in 1880 and generally understood as the body's awareness of its own movements through sensory organs and explore the role empathy plays in the body's relationship to other people's bodies and objects. Drawing from dance critic John Martin, they explain that spectators experience “inner mimicry” when watching a performer move, referring to their muscular and emotional reactions that affect their physiological state, suggesting that kinesthesia provides the spectator with greater awareness of both their own body and the body of the other. They explain that Martin’s claims were supported by the “mirror neurons” theory initiated by Giacomo Rizzolatti and other neurocognitive psychologists at the University of Parma in the 1980s. This theory suggests that mirror neurons are cells in the
monkey brain that carry out the same activity when the monkey is performing an action and when it is observing another animal performing it.

Building upon these findings, further research by the same team was undertaken in the 1990s to show the existence of a similar mirroring system for movement recognition in humans. The research claims that there is evidence that humans can understand the actions of others by observing them move, which would also entail the capacity of sharing sensations with them by activating the neural substrates corresponding to their state. The research team proposed that this would lead to intersubjective communication through motor-based understanding, and to emotions that are embodied and shared by the observer and the observed at the same time.

In my own practice, the time I found the mirror neurons theory most pertinent was during my Archiving Gestures workshops, taught between 2017 and 2021 in different contexts and countries. During the workshops, I asked the participants to form groups and share a few gestures each from a memory that is precious to them while standing in a circle or facing each other, then asking each group to reenact the gestures of one person at a time. I noticed that the participants were reproducing the gestures of their colleagues with the emotions they perceived in them, and not merely copying the movements. When I later asked them to perform the gestures learnt from everyone else while facing the front of the space, the gestures lost the emotions in them and became more mechanical. I find it interesting to notice how the participants copied the gestures, including the sensations in them, by observing the person performing the gestures, which created both an intersubjective understanding of them and communication of how they feel. This almost completely disappeared or became only theatrical when the group went from copying the gestures while facing each other to facing the front to perform the gestures.

Choreographer and dance theorist Susan Foster also experiments with the mirror neurons theory in her lecture performance Kinesthetic Empathies and the Politics of Compassion (2011). In her danced lecture, she tackles the ability to empathise with moving bodies by witnessing their gestures, which she suggests is learned and shaped through sociopolitical parameters rather than solely biological ones. To unfold her thoughts, she dances in the lecture and presents herself as an example of the subject she’s lecturing about and then comments on the format of the lecture itself. For example, she balances on a bucket while explaining French scholar Louis de Jaucourt’s theories on empathy (1751–1772), in which he uses the example of the audience witnessing a tightrope artist to explain how the viewer is affected by the circumstances of the scene. Foster also recruits audience members to come on

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12 Intersubjectivity is not intended here as the melting of pre-established subjectivities into each other, but, as Massumi thought, a transversal exchange that involves fluid subjectivities and their environment (as discussed in Chapter 2).
stage and mirror each other’s gestures while she reads about how people see similarities as well as differences when seeing another body moving, and how that triggers movement in them.

In her book, *Choreographing Empathy* (2011), Foster argues that people do not perceive, feel, or understand the movements they see all in the same way, because of the different embodied knowledge and cultural distinctiveness each person carries—for example, from training in a certain dance style or experiencing certain life events, which creates unique corporeal, emotional, and conceptual memories in each person. By this argument, Foster underpins the connection between kinesthetic empathy and cultural values, rejecting a universal experience of a dance performance and supporting both the “corporeal turn”, in which performance is felt both physically and emotionally, and the “cultural turn”, in which great importance is given to individuals’ lived experiences in perceiving and producing meaning and action.

Indeed, in my process of choreographing empathy in the performance, I rely on each audience member’s embodied knowledge in feeling and reading the gestures I was performing under siege. For example, after performing *What My Body Can’t Remember* in Marseille in January 2020, I spoke with several people. Two women talked to me about the way they experienced my gestures. One woman was from a Palestinian background and had lived through the Israeli invasion in 2002. She described how she experienced the performance in a visceral way and how her memories from that period were also triggered while watching me remember as she was being asked to dig into her own personal memories. The other woman, a French dancer and choreographer, said that she was fascinated by how my gestures transformed each time I repeated them, something her trained body was experiencing internally while watching me remember.

After I performed *What My Body Can’t Remember* for the first time since the global pandemic at InSpace Gallery in Edinburgh in November 2022, I again spoke to audience members. I specifically asked some if experiencing my process of remembering in a confined space brought back memories, rituals, and gestures from their own confinement during the lockdown, without of course making parallels between a military occupation and a health emergency. One person said that the bedroom section reminded her of restless and sleepless times during the lockdown and beyond. Another person shared how the performance revived her memory of pacing around the house, exercising, and playing physical games with her kids and how the whole confinement period became a conscious physical activity for her. Interestingly, by their individual experiences of the performance, some audience members could now relate to their own embodied experience of confinement as they witnessed mine being revived.
After throwing the hanging mic towards my face, I move with Owa and the audience to the kitchen area, where two chairs and a table are placed close to a wall, reflecting the setting I recall of my apartment in Ramallah under siege. There, I start remembering fragments of gestures from when I was cooking, eating, and moving quickly and anxiously. After I finish, I exit the kitchen area, passing through the audience members and grabbing the mic in the middle of the space. Again, I take a moment to exit the vulnerable state of remembering and I start addressing them about my thoughts on body memory and archive:

I am wondering, what is the difference between memory and archive? Memory is the ability to remember information for future use, right? Some scholars argue that memory is private, forgetful, and dies with us, while physical archives are collective and could survive for the future generations, they even set some parameters for what an archive is.

Then I move back to the kitchen and I explain the three parameters Derrida gives for the archive (1995): a place of consignation, indicating the table and chairs; a technique of repetition, repeating the gesture of putting the chairs on the table; and a certain exteriority, placing the mic on the floor facing the table and chairs to give them a voice. Then I continue by saying:

But can we consider an archive that lives? A place of consignation [indicating the body from head to toe], a technique of repetition [performing a repetitive
eating gesture], and a certain exteriority [laying down on the floor with my mouth in front of the mic as I speak]. An archive that keeps transmitting knowledge and dispersing it to other bodies...Can everyone please put your hand on the shoulder of the person next to you? ...You can let go now, and take a moment to reflect on how you were touched by your neighbour’s living archive.”

This part of the performance reflects on Michel Foucault’s ideas of the archive as “the general system of formation and transformation of statements” (1969: 130) and Jacques Derrida’s investigations of the archive as a response to memory failure (1995), discussed extensively in Chapter 1. Linda Caruso Haviland (2018), a dance scholar writing on sentient archives, suggests that Foucault and Derrida have both contributed to the changing notion of the archive, allowing artists and scholars to consider the body as a cognitive system that can store, retrieve, and transmit experiences and memories. She proposes that their take on the archive gives a certain openness to the possibility that knowledge can be embodied, therefore not accessible only through text, but also through physical states and actions. Thus, the body here can be considered as a repository of both knowledge acquired by lived experience and cognitive processes—a living archive informed by remnants of personal and cultural history and the ability to recognise, retrieve, and perform its memories at unconscious and conscious levels.

Laura Millar (2006), a specialist in archival studies, also tries to understand the relationship between memory and archive by comparing the way memories and archives are created, stored, and retrieved and by investigating the concept of individual and collective memory. She argues that humans see their memories (belonging to the past, keeping them in their brain, organising them in a certain order, and retrieving them when needed) as being similar to an archive, which belongs to the past, is kept in a storehouse, and is where information is ordered in a certain way and retrieved when needed. The process of creating and later triggering a memory is selective; it comes with a sensation, a situation, a picture, or something else, and is similar to the process of archiving, where only some documents and narratives are acquired, preserved, and made accessible. But Millar identifies an important difference between the two: memories are not static. When people remember old stories, the stories become clearer to them and may even undergo variations to the original, as the present emotions related to the past memory influence how they remember it today. This explains how memory is a process that involves emotions and where information is not merely copied into our brains and retrieved for future use, but is constantly transformed.

According to Millar, the role of emotions is absent in the archives, which makes them “touchstones” of memories, rather than memories themselves. In that sense, by archiving we create pieces of evidence to allow us to remember. Also, Millar argues that when the records in the archive belong to another person’s memory, they allow us to not only remember, but also learn about others’ memories,
acting as a device to transform individual memories into a collective remembering. And through this process, individual memories are transmitted from one person to another, allowing the personal to become collective, and thus creating a shared experience and collective memory. When members of the society have access to the lives of others, they develop an understanding of the others and a sense of collectivity.

Building on Foucault’s theories on the archive as a system that keeps transforming, Derrida’s investigation into the process of the archive in relation to memory, and Millar’s investigation into the relation between individual and collective memory, I maintain that embodied memories play an important role in creating shared knowledge and intersubjectivity. Therefore, they should be well articulated in the performance, made accessible, and transmitted to other bodies. To ask the audience members to touch the shoulder of the person standing next to them is for me one way to first put them in touch with their own fluid subjectivity, then to create this sense of intersubjectivity. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote in 1945 that people cannot feel if nothing touches them, and in that sense they must be touched to feel (2002). People start experiencing feelings only when they are touched by others both physically and emotionally, because then they are confronted by something other than themselves, which allows the emergence of their own subjectivity that keeps forming and transforming. Anthropologist Maurice Mauss (1935) explained 10 years earlier that the intersubjective element of the touch does not only lie in the fact of being touched, but also in how people are touched, since each gesture, or what he describes as an acquired touching “technique”, is socially and culturally constructed.
After that moment of creating intersubjectivity, I move again with Owa and the audience to the sitting room area, where I usually remember for a longer period of time, as I was spending most of my time during the siege in that area of my house and lots of memories erupt when I re-enter it physically. In the sitting room area, I placed a mirror, since I remember checking my dance movements in a mirror for corrections, and once placed in the rehearsal space, it helped me to remember the movements I was originally enacting. I also placed a pair of socks in reference to my brother’s socks, who was always present with me in the living room and had to change his socks very often, because he could be arrested and captured at any moment by the Israeli army simply for being a Palestinian man. When arresting men, soldiers often put their socks in their mouths, in a gesture of humiliation and as a form of torture. For me, placing the socks in the sitting room space brought me physically and emotionally to my state of tension of waiting for my brother’s arrest, which was always looming but fortunately never took place.
The objects are relevant to me when I am trying to remember in the presence of the audience, but they also function as an invitation to the audience to remember and create their own relationship with the objects in the space. As Joslin McKinney (2012) explains, objects and scenography allow for kinesthetic awareness to emerge and for an experience that appeals to the whole body of the viewer to materialise by enabling an understanding of the spatial positioning of the self in relation to the objects. McKinney claims that both the placement of the objects and their quality are crucial for the self to become a creative agent that engages with these objects and forges a personal relationship with them.

These objects-memories are tools that allow me to remember through the body; they also serve as elements that can help the audiences of my performances become part of my archival process by triggering their own imaginative and remembrance processes. When the audience members witness me remembering the gestures of many years ago in relation to the objects in the space, this also allows them to identify their own relationship to these objects and the memories that might erupt. For example, one audience member I talked to after my performance told me he remembered the image of a dead body when he saw me covered by the white blanket. Another audience member saw the table and chairs in the kitchen as a torture room.
After remembering in the sitting room, which is usually very intense and exhausting, I usually take a longer time to get out of the physical and mental states of remembering and start addressing the audience for the last time:

Now that you have experienced my process of remembering, I invite you to close your eyes and remember, remember a memory that is precious to you, remember how it felt and how you were moving. It can be everyday movements or gestures, or a small dance from a party or class. While keeping your eyes closed, try to reenact the movements, it can also be very small...now open your eyes and continue remembering and reenacting with your eyes open.

While the audience members are remembering, Owa films them and documents their process of remembering, and after they open their eyes while they are still remembering, Owa plays the video he recorded of them to let them observe their own process of remembering and access their own living archives. After thanking them for taking part in my practice of remembering, I also inform them that the video that we recorded will be deleted. They even witness that happening as the last thing of the performance. This last gesture is a final reflection on the power of archives: Who decides what’s in the archive? Who owns it? And who can access it?

Figure 22. The audience members watching themselves remember during the work-in-progress performance at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh (February 2019). © Chris Scott

Resisting the Ephemeralty of Performance

In order to deliberate on the relationship between individual and collective memory, I
experiment with different ways of disseminating and dispersing my embodied memories to the public during the performance, making that knowledge exteriorised and allowing it to survive beyond my body and after the performance finishes. Although some performance scholars, such as Peggy Phelan (1993), argue that performance by definition is fleeting, transient, and ephemeral, and that it is realised only in the present and through its disappearance afterwards, in my approach I take quite the opposite view: How can we consider a live performance as a living archive, which keeps on forming and transforming each time it appears in both the body of the performer and the audience?

When studying knowledge creation and the transmission of cultural tradition in Latin America, Diana Taylor suggests that performance is capable of transmitting embodied social knowledge and cultural memories by leaving immaterial traces of memories and embodied knowledge from the performance experience with the audience (2003). Taylor considers the embodied memory as “repertoire” and an extension of the material archive, which is made of stable objects. The transmitted repertoire offers another layer of knowledge, which parallels that of the material archive, and is able to leave behind tangible traces that cannot be seen. Taylor’s argument underlines the importance of the presence of the body in the space and explains how that facilitates the embodied experience, but she still considers the repertoire as ephemeral, unlike the material archive. For her only the bones of human bodies can be considered as an archive because they carry embodied memory that endures the passage of time. In this instance she follows traditional thought that defines the archive as merely material and sets fixed parameters for how it functions.

In my research, I argue that the living body is an archive, and I explore unconventional methods of archiving through the body and transmitting the knowledge to other bodies through performance, allowing the continuity of the archive. In his essay “The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances” (2010), dance scholar André Lepecki explores the notion of the body as archive, investigating the role of the body as an archival site. He analyses practices of re-enactment in dance, where the body functions as a medium for the re-enactment of past dances through archiving performances of others. In doing so, Lepecki bypasses the difference between the repertoire and the archive, explaining that the works archived through the body do not rest, but keep forming and transforming. He suggests that the artists’ interest in archiving stems from continued engagement with the works in the present in a desire to create a future for the old dance works, rather than creating an archive that is frozen to prevent a failure in cultural memory. By looking at the function of the archive through a different lens, Lepecki allows for the concept of bodily archive to emerge, as discussed thoroughly in Chapter 1.
My research tries to push Lepecki’s insights further. I do not re-enact historical dances, but instead experiment with ways of archiving hidden stories of the Palestinian narrative by re-enacting the gestures of those latent stories. For me the bodily archive is a point of access for the traces of the latent stories that are not archived in the material archive. The body plays the role of a privileged archival site, where a valuable and more layered knowledge exists and, in which affect and emotions, which cannot be replicated or accessed in physical archives, occupy a prominent space. In *What My Body Can’t Remember*, I experiment with ways of allowing the embodied archive to survive beyond my body and after the end of the performance through disseminating the knowledge to the audience members’ bodies. Indeed, from the beginning of the performance the audience is invited to witness my process of remembering and retrieving movements and gestures performed by my body many years ago, first in a video documenting my practice of remembering, then with the practice performed live. By observing the process, the audience—composed of visitors of the archive and living archives—read, feel, and act from within in response to what they see. They take away the embodied experience with them after the performance, and they creatively produce an afterlife of the memory, preventing it from becoming ephemeral.

**Conclusion. Dissemination: From the Private to the Collective**

According to French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009), the spectators become active when you allow them to decipher what they see based on their own experience. It is the power of association and de-association that emancipates them and transforms viewing into action. Rancière writes this as an analogy between theatre and pedagogy, in which he casts artists as masters who want to collapse the distance between theatre and spectators in order to teach their pupils certain knowledge, considering themselves more intelligent than the viewers. Rancière dismisses such methodologies, especially participatory ones that invite the viewers to action, and calls for an opposition between viewing and acting, which for him would secure the autonomy of the audience and imply respect for their intelligence.

André Lepecki (2016) disagrees with Rancière and suggests that when performances entail embodied narratives and storytelling, there is an urgency to share affective experience, which might include, for example, convulsions, tears, or repetitions, and transmit them to others, turning the audience members into witnesses of these affective memories and testimonies. Lepecki argues that a witness is never a self who needs distance from the performance or looks for private introspection. He lays out the difference between the audience as witness and the audience as spectator as follows:

The former embraces and fosters a public that is aware of the political-aesthetic power of sharing experience, and that the transmissibility of experience, of memories, of the narration of events that one has lived through
is an imperative in our age when experience is diminished. Conversely, the audience as spectator is the silent accomplice in the crime scene, the one who obeys the cop and opts to remain silent, lest whatever they say is used against them in some future court of law (even if the court and law are implicit ones, symbolic ones, quotidian ones: the courts of social conformity and aesthetic “taste”). (Lepecki 2016: 179)

Lepecki also affirms that there is a risk in considering the spectator watching passively as being already emancipated because of the power of association and de-association with what he or she is seeing, as this would affirm the neoliberal idea that we are only individuals and not members of a society, which would thus take away the role we play in the future historicity of the event. He proposes to bypass individuality altogether and go towards a trans-individual, where the repetition of an embodied story goes beyond personal survival, instead transmitting, translating, and persisting beyond the self into the collective.

In What My Body Can’t Remember I consider the audience members as active witnesses rather than passive spectators of my practice of remembering, effectively creating no distance between the audience and the work. Not only are they invited to follow me into the three rooms of my house in Ramallah to witness my vulnerable state of remembering, but also they are invited to think-feel when I address them about theoretical questions on body memory as archive and to act themselves when I ask them to delve into their own personal archives and re-enact their memories. This reflects on the autopoietic feedback loop of Fisher-Lichte (2008), which suggests the reversal of roles between artists and audience during the performance between witnesses and actors.

What I ultimately investigate in What My Body Can’t Remember is how a live performance in the form of an open practice of remembering can deal with the body as an archive that opens its doors to the audience during the live event and closes right after. I also research how making bodily archives accessible can transform embodied experience from being individual to being collective. I do this first by not considering my memories as merely individual, but part of the collective Palestinian experience under siege during the Second Intifada, which I try to reenact through my practice. Second, I do this by experimenting with my memories becoming collective through their transmission throughout the performance to the other bodies in the space and how the audience members can relate them to their own personal memories.

In the performance, the audience members are considered to be the first visitors to the archive, and they actively witness it unearth itself through my gestures. Then carry their experience beyond the performance space by remembering the gestures, repeating the narrative, and so on. In addition, I perceive the audience members as living archives themselves, fluid subjectivities who carry embodied
experience and can access their own memories and sense of oppression and resistance. As Lepecki formulated it during a talk we had in December 2020, through my practice, I invite the audience to train their kinesthetic empathy, regardless of their previous background and the degree to which they had experienced injustice before. Indeed, my ultimate aim is to connect the latent Palestinian narratives and gestures under occupation to the international audience, creating a sense of kinesthetic empathy. In this regard, my archive is also an archive of the future, a way of triggering transnational solidarity that can help build a transnational future of justice.
Chapter 4

PAST-inuous\textsuperscript{13}: Defying Distance Through Remediated Archives

In this chapter I will analyse the process of creating the third and last choreographic work of my PhD research, PAST-inuous, a participatory dance video and performance created over a digital platform with 11 Palestinian dancers, most of them third-generation refugees, some living in the diaspora and others in Palestine. Two of the dancers are in Edinburgh, two are in Berlin, four are in Gaza, and three are in Nablus. I also worked in collaboration with four video artists, one in each location, plus a composer and a costume designer. The idea was conceived in November 2019 (before the pandemic) and developed during the pandemic in 2020 to reflect on the ongoing Palestinian refugee problem created in 1948 by the founding of Israel on Palestinian land and the expulsion of Palestinians across the world, now estimated to be 5 million exiles (UNRWA, 2020). This work, like my other two works developed during my PhD research, Gesturing Refugees (2018) and What My Body Can’t Remember (2019), deals with the bodies of the 11 artists as living archives. It attempts to dig into these archives to find connections between the artists’ daily gestures in the present and the gestures of their expelled grandparents in the past. By doing this, it aspires to reflect on the future of the Palestinian refugee cause and its connection to the current global refugee condition in a form of a decolonial gesture.

The reason why I chose to work with the other Palestinian artists over a digital platform for PAST-inuous was to research further the formal and political choices taken during the development of Gesturing Refugees, discussed in Chapter 2, and What My Body Can’t Remember performance, discussed in Chapter 3. During the creation of Gesturing Refugees, UK visas for the two refugee artists who were involved in the project were denied just a few days before the residency started in 2017, which pushed us to work over Skype and Messenger, adding new formal and political layers to the research. On the political level, we became busy finding ways to defy the distance between us, unearthing personal and non-stereotypical narratives on refugeehood, and sharing them with each other remotely. On the formal level, we started researching ways to remediate the distance through the internet, allowing gestural archives to be developed and performed through video calls, first during the rehearsals and later during the performance itself using a combination of pre-recorded videos and live presence. In What My Body Can’t Remember, I chose to work with the process of collective remembering, which I touched upon at the end of the performance when I asked the audience members to close their eyes and remember a precious memory of their own and reenact its gestures. But when I started working on PAST-inuous, I felt the need to push the previous research further and experiment with the possibility of exchanging

\textsuperscript{13} Video links and more information about the choreographic work in Portfolio on p.117.
memories and gestures between myself (I am performing in this work), the other performers, and the audience members.

What I also researched further in *PAST-inuous* was how the impossibility of the physical reunion of Palestinian third-generation refugees spread all over the world because of the ongoing Israeli occupation could be remediated through sharing gestures and memories among its members. More specifically, in this work I am interested in how these gestures can be archived remotely, via a digital platform, and exchanged with audience members around the world. I am interested in investigating the process in two ways: first, through a participatory dance video, and second, through a participatory live performance that includes all the dancers performing live on a Zoom call from where they are based, along with two performers physically present in Edinburgh, Dundee, and Glasgow, where the performances were presented. My aim in *PAST-inuous* is also to dig more deeply into how working remotely, with each performer appearing physically in a different space and time zone, can still constitute a form of collective political action. I deal with the internet as the space of appearance for this action. As an imperfect space where technical issues and delays caused by specific political conditions of disadvantage can arise during the work, to reflect the creation process and involve the viewers, especially that it was developed during the pandemic, when working at distance through online platforms became a collective global experience. To reflect on these questions, I will frame my work in conversation with relevant theoretical concepts and discuss pertinent artistic works by filmmaker Raed Rondini (2017), sound artist Muqata’a (2019), choreographer Jerome Bel (2019), and theatre group Station House Opera (2016).

**The Process**

I approached 10 third-generation refugee Palestinian dancers in Palestine and in the diaspora. The grandparents of the dancers living in Gaza and Nablus were expelled from their villages in areas of Palestine that were occupied by Israel in 1948. The grandparents of the dancers living in Berlin were expelled from Palestine to neighboring Arab countries; their grandchildren were subsequently displaced to Europe at a later stage, during the recent “refugee crisis”. The performers living in Edinburgh, including myself, had the chance to travel for work and education. I knew and collaborated with some of the dancers previously, while I met the others through the other dancers in the group. Before starting the online creation process in August 2020, I asked them all to collect stories that they could remember from their grandparents’ daily lives before they were forced off their lands by Israeli militias. I also asked them to bring archive material from their family archives, such as pictures, objects, or recordings, which some did, and I then kept in a collective folder as an archive of the creation process. We exchanged these stories, the archive material, and gestures starting on the first day of the creation residency over Zoom, which lasted for two weeks. Each day of the residency we continued the exchange
and tried to find resonance in our families’ gestures in our own daily gestures in the present, where each of us is now based. At this point, I decided to use Zoom rather than Skype or Messenger, as it was widely used during the pandemic due to its better quality and multiple functions, such as the recording function that we used to document the process, but also to create the work.

The experience of that exchange among the group had a strong impact on me personally, but also on the other dancers, as reported by them. Everyone was curious and asked questions when one of us was recounting a story and showing some of its gestures. It felt as if the stories were familiar, yet still had some novelty. They were romanticised and realistic at the same time. They were personal, but at the same time collective. The whole exchange felt like one long awaited encounter between grandchildren of Palestinian refugees, whose aim was to help the group trigger collective memory and knowledge of themselves, their families, and the Palestinian people. As proposed by French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory* (1992), a memory can be reconstructed when it is located within a totality of memories that belong to other people, such as a family or members of the community. He explains that this is because memories follow their own logic and exist within a context familiar to all participants, in which members of the community have similar interests and recall the memories at the same time. He also explains that even if people remember something individually, it can only be fully understood when located within the shared thoughts of the relevant group.

Halbwachs’ argument on the need to localise a memory within the totality of a group’s memories was criticised by sociologist Paul Connerton (1989). Connerton viewed this as underestimating the system of transmission of memories between individuals and across generations, as this would make memories always dependent on the group that lived them, ignoring the possibility for memories to be transferred from one individual to another and from one generation to the next. Connerton considered the acts of transfer of memories within family and community members essential to understanding the formation of social and cultural memory. Karien Goertz (1998), a scholar in Jewish studies, stresses the importance of memory transfer even more by explaining how memory transmission from Holocaust survivors to their children has created a “post-memory”, a term she borrows from another scholar in Jewish studies, Marianne Hirsch (1992), and which describes a memory that has a generational distance, but retains a deep personal connection. Goertz explains that although the new generations did not witness the atrocities of the Holocaust directly and are considered secondhand witnesses, they can still have a strong relationship to the event and it can constitute an integral part of their identity. Most importantly, she explains how these new generations are not interested in recording historical facts about the Holocaust, but are rather finding ways of how they can remember the facts and make sense of them in their daily lives in the present.
In the creation process of *PAST-inuous*, the transgenerational connection with the daily lives of our grandparents, the transfer of their memory to our generation, and the processes of group remembering, were crucial aspects of the archival process. For example, when Dima, a dancer from Gaza, was sharing the ritual of olive picking and oil making that her grandparents were doing at Al Masmiiyya village before the occupation, we all were contributing with what we remembered we were told or even experienced ourselves from such rituals, which are often recounted by Palestinian families in the diaspora and still practiced by Palestinian families in Palestine. When Abdallah, a dancer from Nablus, was sharing his grandfather’s story and gestures in stone mines in Al Majdal city, he was revisiting the narrative and its gestures with his parents at family meals during our creation period, and at times I was also able to contribute to the gestures, since my grandfather had also worked in a stone mine in Haifa before 1948. As a group, we were not busy reconstructing the facts around each narrative; rather, we were revisiting them and their gestures with each other, looking for their remnants in our bodies, reflecting on what they meant to us today and how they resonate or not with our daily gestures now in Gaza, Nablus, Edinburgh, and Berlin. Most importantly, we were examining our continuous state of refugeehood since 1948 and what remembering together could contribute to that state in the present: from checking in with our fellow artists in Gaza during Israeli airstrikes that occurred during the creation process, through meeting each other as friends online or in person, to discussing internal Palestinian politics together and trying to help each other’s asylum or visa applications.

The collective memory proposed by Halbwachs can be understood as collective insights that create shared elements of individual memories and do not aim at constituting a national memory or one single coherent narrative. Rather, it allows for gaps to appear, offering reminiscences of multiple shared narratives. In a similar vein, Edward Said in *After the Last Sky* (1999) attempts to reconstruct the cultural memory and political imagination of the Palestinian people through shared yet unique recollections of exile. In collaboration with photographer Jean Mohr, mixing text and photography, he tackles Palestinian subjectivity through fragments of discontinued scenes of dispossession, ways of expression, landscapes, and heroism. His main aim is to render the consciousness of the Palestinian community, built on suffering and exile, through Palestinian eyes and at a distance from Palestine. He believed that it was essential to reappropriate the image of the Palestinian people through integrating public and private realities, involving a huge variety of Palestinian individuals and distinctly Palestinian activities, since Palestinians often have no control over their image and are mainly represented as stateless and dispossessed subjects. To do so, Said shows daily gestures and settings such as a wedding in a refugee camp in Tripoli, a street vendor in Ramallah, and a big family meal in Amman, while commenting on the social, historical, and political contexts of each picture. He explains how Palestinian human and social contacts have multiplied in the diaspora to compensate for the loss of the physical
space—Palestine—and to allow Palestinians to embody their experience and return to themselves, the Palestinian people.

In *PAST-inoous* we were similarly using the collective remembering of narratives and exchange of gestures as a way to return to ourselves, to our bodies and stories, to see ourselves clearly in the present and try to envision a future together. As philosopher Achille Mbembe (2015) suggests, building on Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s decolonial theories (which I discuss in detail in Chapter 1), self-ownership is a decolonial process that starts with the return to oneself, first by seeing one’s image clearly, then by producing new forms of knowledge about oneself and the world, contributing to change and the creation of a different future. In doing so, one defies the major canon of colonial thought, which is based on the negation of the time of the colonised people, consisting of the negation of their history, their rights in the present, and their capacity for creation and change in the future. In *PAST-inoous*, we go through the process of decolonisation, first by returning to our family’s narratives and embodied knowledge from the past, then by reflecting on that knowledge in our daily lives today as third-generation refugees living in the diaspora and in Palestine, then by sharing that knowledge with an audience in order to reappropriate our image in the world and contribute to a better future. Most importantly, as an invitation to new ways of knowledge production, we ask the audience to exchange their own family narratives and gestures with us, by way of a return to embodiment and collective remembering processes, delinking from colonial disembodied ways of creating knowledge.

The process of collective remembering has become more and more present in Palestinian artistic work. *Ghost Haunting*, a hybrid documentary by filmmaker Raed Andoni (2017), also experiments with collective remembering—not in relation to exile, but to political imprisonment, which is another major collective Palestinian experience. According to MIFTAH (2012), a prominent Palestinian NGO, since 1967 more than 750,000 Palestinians have been imprisoned in Israeli jails for political reasons. In 2016, Andoni decided to place a newspaper advertisement looking for former prisoners of the Moskobiya interrogation centre, where he himself was imprisoned 30 years earlier. In the advertisement he asks that candidates have experience in acting, construction, or architecture, as his aim was first to rebuild the interrogation centre collectively, mostly from imagination and sense of direction (since all prisoners were blindfolded when in the centre), then to remember and reenact fragments of the traumatic experience of torture and humiliation together as a form of collective remembering, healing, and public sharing of such a horrendous experience that is still ongoing. In fact, according to the Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association (2022), there are still 4,650 Palestinian men, women, and children in Israeli jails to this day, and some still go through interrogation and torture at that same center. Also, while the documentary was being filmed, the families of the ex-prisoners, some of whom were imprisoned themselves in that same centre, were invited to the reconstructed space to exchange feelings, thoughts, and images
with the film team. Unfortunately, after the film was screened, two of the former prisoners in the film were imprisoned again, and others saw their family members imprisoned, including the son of the main character of the film, who re-enacted scenes of rape by his interrogator and who happens to be a choreographer like myself.

Figure 23. A reconstructed torture scene in *Ghost Haunting* (2017). © Raed Andoni

However, unlike Andoni, my aim in *PAST-inuous* was not to reconstruct the houses, villages, cities, or workplaces of our grandparents in Palestine before the occupation in order for us to remember their narratives; neither was it to re-enact the exact movements and life events of our grandparents. Rather, the idea was to 1) focus on, via our Zoom video calls, the process of our encounters as third-generation refugees and the exchange of our grandparents’ narratives and gestures of how we remember, or even imagine, them and then 2) to share our exchange with the audience, first through the medium of a participatory video, and second through a hybrid performance with in-person and Zoom video call live presence. I was keen to keep the participatory element with the audience present in both versions, even though it succeeded more in the second version, which I will discuss in detail at a later point. By comparison, Andoni extended the remembering together process only to the families of the ex-prisoners during the shooting of the film and did not continue the process of collective remembering during the screening of the film, which could have extended the life of the event further and invited people from Palestinian and non-Palestinian backgrounds to share their own experience of imprisonment and torture with the film team.
Remediation

During the creation process of *PAST-inuous* and later on during the tour, Zoom encounters, rehearsals, and performances brought us spatially closer and helped to bridge the physical distance between us. These virtual meetings acted as a remedy for our forced separation and dispersion. According to Walter Benjamin (1936), technical reproduction of art aspires at modulating physical and human distances by bringing the distance closer. But this wasn't always the case during the process of *PAST-inuous*. Sometimes, when we became keen to meet as friends and work together in person, or when we were experiencing regular internet problems, especially in certain locations—often due to political reasons (for instance in Gaza, where the Israeli siege had reduced the available daily electricity to four hours)—meeting and performing over a digital medium marked the distances even more. So in this case, could we still consider our process a form of remediation?

Media scholars Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter (1999) consider mediation as the use of media, understood as objects within historical, cultural, and economic systems, to navigate meanings and values of the world and reconcile reality. For example, the use of photography produces images as artifacts, which have a cultural value of what these specific images can signify and do. For Grusin and Bolter, remediation can be considered as a mediation of mediation, since media are continuously reshaping, refashioning and replacing each other, by that reforming reality and reflecting on how people perceive that experience. They propose that remediation functions through two types of media: first, through transparent media, such as TV, immersive installation, or video calls, all of which aim to erase the media they are using and give the viewer a sense of immediate contact with the image; and second, through hypermedia (or opaque media), such as applications and multimedia programs, that continually reference other media and contents without wanting to erase them. While transparent media strives for a real and authentic experience that would evoke an immediate emotional response from the viewer, what they called hypermedia in the 90s and we call today digital media, emphasizes the process and the performance rather than the finished artwork. Building on Grusin and Bolter, I conceive the whole process of rehearsing, creating a choreographic work, and performing it—in defiance of physical distance and over a media that was originally created for work meetings—as an act of remediation or a mediation of mediation, that uses both transparent and opaque media.

In fact, during the rehearsal period for *PAST-inuous*, when we were warming up and exchanging stories and gestures over Zoom video calls, we all felt the authentic experience of working together on the same choreographic project. For short periods of time, we even managed to forget that it was mediated through a screen over distance. We succeeded in following each other’s movements during the warm-up, telling family stories, and witnessing and re-enacting each other’s gestures. But as soon as there were cuts and delays in the communication and we
had to text each other to know what was going on, or needed to send voice messages or pictures via email or Whatsapp for archive purposes, the media we were using became very present again and the process of trying to overcome the distance between us became more tangible. In that sense, transparent media allowed us to experience an immediate and emotional response to the exchange, while the use of multiple media outlets to defy our distance made us feel the multi-layered process of remediation. The different experiences of transparent and opaque media were also felt by the viewers of the work in both its forms (as a participatory dance video and a hybrid live/digital performance), which I will discuss in detail below.

In the first instance, this digitally mediated encounter and exchange of stories and gestures resulted in a three-part dance video. The first part consists of a two-minute introduction using speaker view in Zoom (Figure 24), in which four dancers, one from each location, explain a gesture and invite the viewers to try it when they see it performed in the choreography. For example, Duaa Sabbagh, a dancer based in Berlin who was born and raised in Al Yarmouk, a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, shows and explains the gesture of her grandmother hand-washing clothes in the village of Al Tantura in Palestine before 1948. Another dancer, Amir Sabra, born and raised in Balata refugee camp in Nablus, re-enacts his grandfather’s gesture of honing knives, which he used to do daily before he was forced out of the Palestinian
The aim of explaining some of the gestures to the viewers at the beginning of the video—including the context in which they were produced, then asking them to re-enact the gestures when they spot them in the video—is to transmit some of our bodily archives to the bodies of the viewers, allowing for our personal and collective archives from before expulsion from Palestine to disseminate into the viewers’ bodily archives. As Lepecki explains in *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance* (2016), and discussed more in depth in Chapter 1, re-enacting gestures from the past allows us to invent something new by suspending the economies of authorship over the gestures, disseminating them, and giving them an afterlife.

In the second part, which consists of a nine-minute choreography, each dancer contributes with family stories and gestures from before 1948, reflecting on whether the gestures have reminiscence in our bodies and are connected to our daily gestures of today. For example, dancer Mohanad A. Smama from Gaza re-enacts a fishing technique that was used before 1948 in Gaza and is still used today by fishermen, himself included. Meanwhile, I share the gesture of protest my grandfather used to perform during workers’ strikes against the British Mandate in Palestine during the 1930s, which is a gesture I still practice when I go to demonstrations against the Israeli military occupation in Palestine, as well as against other repressive regimes around the world. During the choreography, the viewers can witness and sometimes re-enact the archive of gestures as the dancers unfold them. This archive collects fragments of the gestures present in all the stories the
dancers recount and is in dialogue with the three constituent parameters Jacques Derrida (1995) suggests an archive should have (which I expanded on in Chapter 1): a certain exteriority, a technique of repetition, and a place of consignation. In fact, to make the gestures available to the viewers, the dancers re-enact and explain the gestures to the viewers before asking them to re-enact them. They use a technique of repeating the gestures, changing their speed and distance from the floor and position in relation to the camera. Finally, they archive the gestures, choosing their bodies as a consigned place for the archive and inviting the viewers to do the same.

In the choreography part we use the gallery view in Zoom (Figures 26, 27, and 28), thus the screen is divided into four video calls, with dancers in each city (Gaza, Nablus, Edinburgh, and Berlin) present in the same call, whenever possible. The screen functions as a stage and the choreography aims at orchestrating the attention of the viewers by using choreography tools, such as having the dancers move in sync, leave the stage, stand still, repeat a gesture, or come very close to each other or to the camera. In the first days of rehearsal, it was possible to have all the dancers in the same location on one screen, but then a lockdown was imposed in Gaza because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the dancers there had to work from home with limited electricity due to the Israeli siege. We had to find ingenious technological and choreographic solutions in order not to have more than four screens at once, since the image becomes too small and the gestures become difficult to see, read, and re-enact. Therefore, the nine-minute choreography was divided into three subsections.

In the first subsection, there are four screens most of the time, with two dancer in Edinburgh, three dancers in Nablus, two dancers in Berlin dancers and only one dancer from Gaza, in which we focus on the gestures unearthed by the Nablus, Berlin, and Gaza dancers, such as orange picking, family feasts, and cooking. In the second subsection, our focus in on Gaza with only the four dancers in Gaza appearing on four screens from their homes, focusing on their own narratives of bread making and olive picking. Finally, the last subsection brings back four screens from all four locations with a different dancer now joining from Gaza, focusing on the narratives from Edinburgh on protest and entertainment, with the virtual background element introduced in all four places. The virtual background is designed by our set and costume designer Zephyr Liddell and is inspired by the fragmented archive material that the group provided: pictures, stories, and objects. We use the virtual background as an ironic comment on the transparent media we have been using to appear as if we are all together in one place, while one can easily notice that we are not actually in the same place and that the virtual background does not work well because of technical, political, and financial issues that prevented us from being together in person. In fact, in the virtual background we created, one can see only fragments of our bodies and gestures, just like the fragments of our archives in the choreography (Figure 28).
Similarly to what we did with the virtual background, we collaborated with music and sound designer Muqata’a to help create a unified soundtrack that would bring us closer together for the video. The soundtrack was based on the transformation of our gestures’ sounds such as footsteps and loud breathing, the noises coming from each location during the Zoom recording such as cars passing by and birds singing, the archive material we shared with Muqata’a such as oral narratives, pictures and documents, and most importantly his personal archive as a fellow Palestinian third-generation refugee now based in Berlin. Muqata’a himself is interested in music archives, and one of his recent projects has been in collaboration with other music artists, digging into forgotten Palestinian songs that were found in the sound archive of the Popular Art Centre in 2019.

**The Two Versions**

In the first version of the work, which took the form of 12-minute participatory dance video, the full choreography was created, rehearsed, and recorded through Zoom with all the dancers present at the same time, as if we were recording a live performance on Zoom, and very small edits were undertaken on the recording. To include the creation process of the choreographic work itself, the choice was made to record the choreography all in one shot. Lucas Kao, the video artist, would press record, which would give us the green light to start the choreography and at the end of the last section, he would stop recording. The recorded videos were stored automatically on Zoom icould files and on my computer in both Gallery view and Speaker view. The circumstances of working digitally, in different geographical areas
because of the political situation (and at the time also because of the risks related to the pandemic), raised technical issues such as slow internet connection, image delays and pixelation and low-quality video owing to low-resolution computer cameras and Zoom recordings. By leaving these technical issues intact in the final video, we were hoping to reflect the daily creative process to the viewers and allow them to relate to both the content and form of the work, since many people around the world have worked remotely and are likely dealt with similar technical issues. To involve the viewers even more in the process, five instructions are given to them at the beginning of the video:

- **Watch the video on a computer**
- **Put the computer on a table in front of you**
- **Clear most objects from the wall behind you**
- **Don’t stop or skim the video once it starts playing**
- **You can watch the video again once it is finished**

The instructions are aimed at inviting the viewers to go through a process similar to that we went through while creating the video, such as putting their laptops on a high object so their hands are free and they can move easily, and clearing the wall behind them of any objects so that the gestures can be fully visible. The last two instructions encourage the viewer to pay attention to the screen and eliminate distractions so that they will be able to witness and reenact the gestures. To enhance the experience for the viewers even more, dancer Amir Sabra asks them in the last part of the video to reenact in their own way a few gestures that were performed by the dancers in the choreography that they felt were close to their own personal archives. He also asks them to film themselves while doing these gestures and then post their video on a private social media group, where all artists involved in the project can see and try the audience member’s gestures, in what would be an exchange between the viewers’ and the dancers’ daily gestures. With this participatory approach, the aim was also to allow the viewer, just like the artists during the creation process, to experience a twofold relationship with the medium, transparent and opaque. An authentic connection with both the artists and their gestures, when watching the choreography part, forgetting about the remediation of the video. And the need to use multimedia to keep this established connection, such as filming oneself and posting the video to a social media platform.

The video was premiered online in January 2021 and was kept open for one month, during which it was viewed over 250 times. Although a few viewers contacted me personally via social media and explained how the video put them in touch with their own family memories and gestures, they said that they were happy to witness our gestures rather than re-enact them. Moreover, only two people filmed themselves doing the gestures and posted their videos in the project’s private Facebook group. This made me think that the video was probably not allowing for
the autopoietic feedback loop (which I discuss in Chapter 2) to establish. Fischer-Lichte (2008) describes the autopoietic feedback loop as the experience that establishes itself between all the individuals present at the same time during a performance, audience members and performers alike. In this experience, there is a constant reversal of roles between the former and the latter, which allows for all the participants to feel like active participants in the performance, defining how it could evolve, feeling themselves interdependent with others in the space rather than autonomous subjects, and feeling responsible for the performance. Fischer-Lichte explains how the physical presence of the performers generates the circulation of shared energy in the space, which can be sensed by all and is considered by her a major factor in the initiation of the autopoietic feedback loop. This was obviously missing in the participatory dance video, as the viewers were watching a prerecorded video on their screens with no direct contact with the performers or the other viewers. They did not feel a responsibility towards contributing to the work by embodying our gestural archive or sharing their own, to allow the dancers to re-enact the gestures and archive them in their own bodies. Also, each viewer was experiencing the video on their own, which did not create a collective experience and did not make them feel responsible towards the other viewers. On the contrary, they felt shy sharing their gestures with them on Facebook, even if in a private group.

That's why I was keen to experiment with a different version of the work that involves live presence, both in person and digitally, to see if that would change the audience’s attitude to the participatory part and create the autopoietic feedback loop. In 2022, I rehearsed again with the dancers and managed to transform the initial Zoom choreography into a 20-minute live performance, with me, dancer Jamal Bajali, and video artist Lucas Kao present in person with a screen, a projector, two laptops, and a table, and the rest of the collaborators (the dancers and the video artists), present on a Zoom call from Berlin, Gaza, and Nablus that is projected on a white screen. I decided to use the projection as a medium to expand the space and time of the performance, by sharing the stage with artists present in four different countries and living in different time zones. My aim was not to illude that we are in the same space and time, but to highlight our spatial and temporal separation, even by writing explicitly the name of each location in the space allocated to the name of the Zoom participant.

This use of the projection in a live performance can be considered as a form of Digital Scenography, which according to digital media artist and scholar, Néill O’Dwyer (2021) is an expanded scenography that uses digital technologies as spatial practice and that has roots in theatre, dance and live art since the 1930s. Johannes Birringer (2002, 2010), a media choreographer and writer, explains how artists have been using Digital Scenography throughout the years to move into other spaces through derived, interactive, immersive and networked environments or performances. More specifically, he explains that derived performances use motion capture data and projection to create images based on live choreography, such as
the performance *Conversations with Eve* (2023) by dance artist Bishop May Down. During the performance, the artist initiates a live conversation with Eve, a friend created through Artificial Intelligence and ends the conversation with a dance between the two that is generated through motion capture data of May Down’s movement on stage and the projection of dancing dots representing Eve dancing with them. Birringer clarifies further that interactive performances use sensory devices to track the motion of the dancers and generate real-time data during the performance. An example on that is *Pixel* (2015) a performance by hip hop choreographer Mourad Merzouki and digital artists Claire Bardainne and Adrien Mondot. The artists use a translucent screen to project illuminated units or pixels and throughout the performance eleven dancers interact with the pixelated projections, by moving through, around and between them to distort the audience perception of time and space. Regarding immersive performances, Birringer explains that they are based on virtual reality technologies to bring the audiences to difference spaces, blurring the line between reality and illusion. Such as the performance *At Home in Gaza and London* (2016) by Station House Opera, which I will discuss later on in detail, aims at creating an illusion of a third space where artists from Gaza and London can meet and share their daily lives with one another. Finally, Birringer delineates networked performances as ones that use cameras, microphones, and networks to communicate and create collective performing spaces for people present in different physical spaces, without wanting to delete the physical distance between them, which is the case of the live, in-person/digital performance *PAST-inuous*.

In *PAST-inuous*, the projection extends the space of the stage to other locations, to include the movements, at times delayed and pixelated, of all eleven dancers in the same performance space, and it doesn’t have any derived, interactive or immersive functions. The Zoom call livestream allows the dancers to perform at the same time, follow each other’s movements, listen to the same music track and exchange gestures with the audience members at the end of the performance. The call is projected on a screen directly from the laptop, in order to display the process and technical gear of the communication among the artists and later on, during the participatory part, between the artists and the audience members. The size of the projection varies slightly from one venue to the other, in order to have a big enough size for the content to be clearly visible, but also a small enough size to keep the intimate setting. The performance was presented in gallery and studio spaces in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Dundee with live audiences present in each location. In order to keep the performance experience intimate, as initially conceived, we limited the maximum number of audience members to 20 and repeated the performance four times a day, over five days in total. The structure of the performance was kept the same: I would start, as I do in the video, by saying:

*Hi everyone.*
*I will show you now a movement that my grandfather used to do in the 1930s in Haifa during the workers strikes against the British Mandate in Palestine.*
When you see us doing this movement in the performance, try to do it with us in your own way.
Thank you.

After showing them my grandfather’s gesture, Duaa from Berlin also greets the audience, shows and explains her gesture, and invites the audience to reenact it when they see us performing it in the choreography. Abdallah from Nablus and Mohanad from Gaza also do the same, just like in the video, with the difference now being that the audience members can see us live—as we can also see them—and feel our presence and the presence of the other audience members as we speak directly to them. After the opening part, we move to the nine-minute choreography section, which is basically the same choreography as the video, but with a few differences: Jamal and I perform the choreography live next to the screen, while the audience can also see us on the screen inside the Zoom call. They can also hear our gestures’ sounds as they occur, not just as sounds coming from the track composed by Muqata’a. They can also see Jamal and I leave the performance space to come stand next to them when we are not part of the Zoom choreography.

![Figure 29. Dancers Farah Saleh and Jamal Bajali present in person and in the Zoom call at the Fruitmarket Gallery (April 2022). © Chris Scott](image)

These differences were essential to get the audience members involved in the performance and feel a responsibility towards the performers and the rest of the audience members. The majority of them did re-enact the gestures that we explained to them at the beginning of the performance when they saw them in the
choreography. It was very moving for all of the Palestinian dancers to see their gestures disseminate into other bodies’ archives, especially for me, when I saw my 5-year-old son, a fourth-generation refugee, re-enact the gestures of his great grandfather in Palestine from before 1948. The live presence also made a huge difference to the participation of the last section of the performance, when dancer Fadi Waked from Berlin thanked the audience members for re-enacting some of our gestures and asked them to share their own personal and family gestures with us. As I rephrased after him:

As Fadi just said, we hope that you tried some of our personal archives that we shared with you. Now we are interested in learning about YOUR gestures and YOUR narratives. If any one of you would like to share with us one or a sequence of gestures from your own personal archives, please stand in front of this computer, so we can all try them together here and now.

At that moment, the video artist, would turn my computer towards the audience, through which they can now take part directly in the Zoom call with the rest of the dancers and see their image streamed using my computer’s inbuilt camera. In each performance, between three and eight people shared their family gestures and explained what they were, while the performers and the rest of the audience each re-enacted them and repeated them more than once, transforming them and archiving them in their own bodies. This was a remarkable shift from the video version, when only two people shared their videos with us. The difference is probably the result of people being able to complete the collective experience of exchange, or what Fischer-Lichte calls the autopoietic feedback loop, by first witnessing our gestures in the live version, then choosing to re-enact them during the performance and feeling ready to share their own gestures at the end of the performance. Two audience members I talked to after the performance explained how sharing the gestures of family members who were no longer alive, and seeing those gestures being re-enacted by the performers and the audience, made them feel the presence of these family members once again. One other audience member explained how our request to share personal bodily archives created an internal conflict for them—they were keen to share their own archives with the performers, but not with the wider audience, since they did not feel comfortable sharing their narratives with people who might be still contributing to regimes of oppression. This opens up the question of allyship and why our aim in PAST-inuous is to undergo a process of decolonisation ourselves, and then to invite the audience members to join the process of decolonisation: first, by meeting together as third-generation refugees to exchange narratives among ourselves as a form of self-ownership; second, by sharing our narratives and their gestures with the audience in order to reappropriate our image; and lastly by inviting the audience members to join the process of decolonisation through sharing gestures and returning to their bodies as a way to produce new knowledge, delinking from Eurocentric, disembodied and mind-centered ways of learning and being in the world.
In the second version, the remediation at stake was mostly through digital media, which allowed the audience members to live the process of re-purposing a Zoom video call to a performance space. They were able to witness video artist Lucas Kao sitting with his computer next to mine, managing the music, the screens, and the virtual background and to see me and Jamal enter and exit the performance space/screen. None of that was hidden, as we did not mean to obscure the mediums we were using or create a real sense of being in the same space as the other dancers. The hybrid in-person/live digital performance and acknowledgement of the experience of remediation allowed the audience members to feel involved and active in the performance. In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin (1936) writes about the power of using technology in art and how that contributes to creating active viewers by involving them in the process of art creation and how, in general, the mechanical reproduction of art can be seen as a potential for democratising art. Like Benjamin, many scholars today see in remediation through digital media a form of democratising information, making it easier to create, store, and distribute data. Art critic Boris Groys (2013), for example, discusses how the internet enables artists to bypass museums and the dominant regimes under which art long functioned, providing them with different prospects for producing and distributing their art. He also suggests that the internet allows artists to engage with and influence social and political events not only in the present, but also the future. It does so by functioning as an archive, where artworks survive for future generations, allowing artists to take part in shaping past, present, and future social and political events.

**Internet as Social Space**

Diana Saco (2002), a scholar in digital media, considers the internet a social space. Following French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991), she sees social spaces as three-dimensional: physical, conceptual, and lived. Where spatial practices allow the perception of physical experience, representations of space allow the conception of mental experience, and the spaces of representation allow the living of social experience. Building on Lefebvre’s framework, she creates a direct link between
spatiality and social change, arguing that the internet can be considered a social space and a catalyst for change. To do so, she first explains how the internet has the three dimensions of social space as discussed by Lefebvre: the physical that takes place through not only the bodies of people and their devices, but also (and most importantly) through the movement of data that constitutes spaces of networking; the conceptual through the emergence of discourse on what the networked space should be about and how it should function; and the lived through the rise of certain forums, communities, and even movements over the internet. Saco then claims that the internet is a space where participatory democracy can also be practiced while being mediated through the screen—and not only in person or through immediate encounter as originally proposed by scholars like Hannah Arendt (1958). Paradoxically, Saco uses Arendt’s own theory of participatory democracy to explain how it can also be practiced over the internet.

Arendt’s definition of participatory democracy was based on her understanding of the Athenian polis (city-state) public realm, in which citizens meet in a public space or what she calls space of appearance, to discuss and act on collective concerns, rather than bodily necessities, which she describes as private concerns. Arendt wrote her book as a response to democracy in modern society, where in her view everything is based on private matters and individualism. She also wrote it in critique of technology, which for her was a leading catalyst of the new modern life of an automated mass society of individuals. This makes Saco’s choice of using Arendt’s ideas to support her argument on the internet as a public space in which participatory democracy can flourish very interesting. In fact, Saco acknowledges these elements in Arendt’s theory and argues that even though Arendt wrote in critique of private spaces and technology, her theory offers an open definition of what spaces of appearance can be and how participatory democracy can concretise. She explains that Arendt does not describe the spaces of appearance as merely physical spaces, but insists that “not Athens, but the Athenians were the polis” (Arendt 1958: 95). It’s the meeting with others, discussing and acting in concert, that constitutes the spaces of appearance and allows for participatory democracy to take place. In that sense, mediated public spaces like the internet could function as spaces of appearance in which people can discuss and act in concert about collective concerns towards social change.

Saco concludes by saying that although she proposes the internet as a mediated space in which social change can take place, it still has many challenges, such as inaccessibility to certain people. These challenges do not allow the internet to replace immediate, face-to-face spaces and bodies, but at best it can complement them or maybe transform them. Similarly, urbanist and theorist Therese F. Tierney (2013) reflects on the use of social media during the Egyptian revolution in 2011, and how technology was instrumental in the initiation and organisation of the social movement, functioning as a supplement to the actions that were held on the streets. She explains how social media became the latest version of the ongoing debate on
mediated spaces and experiences and how, in her view, as much as social media shows that it can contribute to political activism, it also demonstrates important challenges related to decontextualisation, anonymity of the participants, uneven accessibility, and surveillance. She argues that the private companies that own the social media services not only surveille the actions of their users for commercial purposes, violating privacy laws, but also they make agreements with governments to censor certain political content, violating political rights. She concludes that the complexities of networked technologies give them powers that are both liberating and limiting—powers that allow some people to appear and others to disappear.

We also experienced these possibilities and limits of public mediated spaces during the creation of PAST-inuous and its presentation as a participatory dance video, in which most viewers chose, for privacy or other reasons, not to participate by posting their gestures on the private Facebook group, deciding not to appear or even to disappear from the mediated spaces of appearance that we were trying to create. This led us, as explained above, to create a hybrid in-person/digital performance and experiment with how networked technologies as mediated spaces can support immediate spaces rather than become their alternative. In a similar vein, French choreographer Jerome Bel (2020), who decided to stop flying in 2019 for work-related reasons in response to the climate crisis, started creating his shows only over Skype. After a few months, however, he had to ask a dancer or two to be with him in the same physical space in order to explain better to the dancers behind the screen what he was looking for and what he was trying to do from a movement point of view. This again demonstrates how difficult it is to rely completely on mediated spaces, yet how urgent it is to allow for mediated experiences to materialise and use them to defy distances brought about by political injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the climate crisis through the creation of hybrid spaces that involve both immediate and mediated experiences.

In 2016, the London-based theatre group Station House Opera (2016) collaborated with 20 artists, 10 in London and 10 in Gaza, on the hybrid performance At Home in Gaza and London. The work aimed at creating a third space in which artists from both cities could share daily experiences in each other’s homes and public spaces through mixing live-streaming, recorded video, and live presence in front of audiences in London and Gaza who could see and interact with each other. The company also mentions on their website that the project is political because it aims at crossing boundaries and creating a space in which people can meet. In the performance (which I could see only parts of online), the artists in London, using a live-streaming software, would appear as ghosts in spaces in Gaza or sometimes merge with the bodies of the other artists by re-enacting their exact gestures. This suggests that the company is using transparent media to try to erase the media used, while at the same time erasing the distance between the artists. The physical presence of the artists, along with their set and equipment, in front of the audiences in Gaza and London seems to allow the audiences to also experience the process of
making the piece through digital media, but without any interaction between the artists and the audience in either city.

In the hybrid in-person/digital version of PAST-ious, we are more interested in acknowledging the distance between the artists and creating a space to exchange narratives among them and with the audience to deliberate on the past, present, and future of the Palestinian refugee cause. From what I understand, At Home in Gaza and London also takes the form of a humanitarian project initiated by a British theatre company, in which all the artists involved in the project are volunteers dedicated to liberating the physical existence of the artists in Gaza, enabling audiences in London to connect with the artists’ daily lives. In PAST-ious, our aim is not to show the human side of the Palestinian people, but rather to meet as empowered professional artists who go through a process of decolonisation together and invite the audience members to do the same.

![Figure 32. An artist from London appearing on the roof of the artist in Gaza. © Rob Harris](image)

![Figure 33. Images and gestures of artists in Gaza and London overlapping. © Rob Harris](image)

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I interrogated ways of using the internet to defy distance between Palestinian refugees created by Israel’s regime of dispossession. I did so by 1) experimenting with how a digital platform can be remediated into a creative space for rehearsal, creation, and transmission of bodily archives through a participatory dance video with the viewers, and 2) reflecting on the technical issues and delays caused by specific political conditions of disadvantage that arise during such a process and exploring ways of using these issues in the video itself to reflect the creation process and involve the viewers, especially now that working at distance has become a collective global experience. Next, I explained how using solely mediated spaces did not fully involve the viewers, and how that led me to exploring hybrid spaces—immediate, through live presence, and mediated, through Zoom video calls—to create a sense of collectivity in the space and allow for the participation with the audience to concretise.

As Benjamin suggests in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), it’s easy to fall into “l’art pour l’art” (art for the sake of art) in a
world changed by technology, where people look for experiences of pure pleasure, sometimes even accepting their status of distracted viewers. To challenge that, he urges artists to respond through politicising art and engaging viewers in the work of art. The media we use to remediate the distance of our political or pandemic exiles make no exception. Indeed, in PAST-inouous, when using a digital platform to come together and share our grandparents’ narratives and gestures, we undergo a process of decolonisation by returning to ourselves and learning to see ourselves clearly. Then, by using transparent and opaque media to share our gestures with an audience, we reappropriate our image, which is a major part of the process of decolonisation, and lastly, we ask the audience members to share their own gestures with us, to invite them to reconnect with their bodies, delink from Eurocentric mind-centered practices, and in doing so, propose alternative ways of creating and sharing knowledge with others and the wider world.
Coda

“It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men [sic] will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You? At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.

My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man [sic] who questions!” Frantz Fanon (1986: 181)

Like Fanon, in my practice-based research *The Archive of Gestures*, I relied on my body, the bodies of my collaborators, and those of the audience to question how bodily archives of colonised subjects can be unearthed, revived, and exchanged with others as part of a wider movement of decolonisation, and how that can create and disseminate alternative knowledge about the self and the world in confrontation with the structural erasures of colonial projects, such as the Israeli one in Palestine. In this thesis I have analysed in four chapters the practice I have developed throughout the years of my PhD research, engaging with relevant theory and pertinent artistic works created by other artists and by myself prior to the PhD studies.

In Chapter 1, I contextualised the question of Palestine within the wider colonial context, in which Palestinian documents and treasures have been looted, destroyed, and used to create an image of the Palestinian people that would serve Israel’s colonial aspirations. This allowed me to reflect on the power of the archive in the reappropriation of one image, as discussed by Azoulay, and explain my urgency in initiating a bodily archival practice, as a form of what Mignolo calls a decolonial gesture, to be part of a wider decolonial archival movement in Palestine and in the world. Following Lepecki, unlike other practices that rely on physical archives, I deal with the body as a privileged site of the archive, in which gestures and lived experiences are embodied and transmitted to other bodies, enabling the archive to disseminate and survive through time. By that I also answered my research questions on what is an archive, if bodies can be considered as living archives and if disseminating alternative narrative through bodily archives can constitute a decolonial gesture.

In Chapter 2, I analysed my choreographic work *Gesturing Refugees* (2018), in which I experimented with participatory performance in the form of an event, where the audience members are considered as actors rather than mere spectators, as a result of what Fischer-Lichte calls the autopoietic feedback loop between the
audience and the performers. They are approached as a collective of singularities and invited to feel-think together, through a series of minor shocks, as Massumi and Manning call them, to experience alternative stories and gestures of refugeehood by reenacting, transforming, and deforming them in their bodies and carrying them beyond the performance space, creating an afterlife of the event and possible action that could materialise in different degrees and forms. In this chapter, I answered my initial research questions on whether bodily archives can be transmitted from one body to another through audience participation and if that would guarantee an afterlife for the gestures and their narratives.

In Chapter 3, building on Foucault’s theories on the archive as a system that keeps transforming, and Derrida’s investigation into the process of the archive in relation to memory, I investigated how What My Body Can't Remember (2019), as a live performance in the form of an open practice of remembering, can deal with the body memory as an archive that opens its doors to the audience during the live event and closes right after. I also researched, building on Millar’s investigation into the relation between individual and collective memory, how making bodily archives accessible can transform embodied memories from being individual to being collective and how that would create shared knowledge and intersubjectivity. First, in connection to the Palestinian collective experience under siege, and second in connection to the memories that arise for the audience members when asked to dig into their personal memories after witnessing mine, which can be related to instances of confinement, isolation, and injustice. In this chapter, I answered my research questions on the possibility of a sheer moving body to perform an archive, with the support of additional mediums, such as text, video and set to give a context to the embodied memories.

In Chapter 4, building on Grusin and Bolter’s theories on remediation, I examined how PAST-inuous (2021) explores ways of defying distance between Palestinian refugees through rehearsing, creating, and exchanging bodily archives with an audience over a digital platform. Then, following Saco, I explained how using solely mediated spaces did not fully involve the viewers, which led me to experiment with hybrid spaces featuring in-person and online performances to create a sense of collectivity in the space and allow for the participation with the audience to concretise. Most importantly in PAST-inuous I examined various levels of decolonisation through bodily archival practices: first by returning to ourselves and our gestures as third-generation Palestinian refugees, then by sharing our reappropriated image with an audience, and lastly by asking the audience members to reconnect with their gestures and embodied knowledge, delinking from the Eurocentric mind-centered practices of knowledge creation and dissemination and developing Mignolo’s concept of diversality. In this last chapter, I answered my research questions on whether the internet can function as a remediated social space for the exchange of bodily archives as a form of political action and if hybrid live in-person/digital performances allow for greater
In its totality, I see my research contributing to the production of new knowledge by proposing inventive decolonial practices for creating a living archive of erased narratives in a colonial context, such as the Palestinian one. A bodily archive that keeps forming, transforming, and transmitting embodied knowledge through collaborative and participatory choreographic processes. Following Lepecki, my choreographic processes can be considered as choreopolitical, since they investigate ways of learning, practicing, and repeating, moving politically with others during the creation process among the artists, in the performance space with the audience, and within society after the performance ends. **By that my research in its totality contributes to the fields of archive studies, decolonial studies and choreographic studies.**

Throughout my research, the choreographic works were all performed or screened separately, and the video versions for some of them\(^\text{14}\) were open to the public on my Vimeo page as a way to disseminate the archive. But towards the end of my studies, I was keen to present all the works created within the context of my research for *The Archive of Gestures* in the same space, to explore further the potentiality of the living archive. To do so, I presented all five choreographic works in collaboration with the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh over three days in April 2022. The works presented included those created before the PhD research—*A Fidayee Son in Moscow* (2014) and *Cells of Illegal Education* (2016)—and the ones created during my doctoral studies—*Gesturing Refugees* (2018), *What My Body Can’t Remember* (2019) and *PAST-inuous* (2021). Some were performed live, between two and four times a day, and others were presented through looping videos. Two days of rehearsals open to the public took place before the performances began. A source room was created with a few of the readings I had engaged with while creating the works, and finally a conversation with collaborator Claricia Parinussa concluded the one-week event. Some audience members experienced one work, others a couple, and a few managed to experience them all, including the talk. As I told Claricia during our conversation (2022), the living bodily archive in the form of a longer and repetitive event made me feel “full” and “energised” by the gestures and their narratives, by sharing them with the audience, and by reenacting the audience members’ gestures and narratives. It also had a strong impact on the audience, as reported by some of them. One audience member told me that after experiencing three of the works, two live and one on video, she was not sure which gesture belonged to what performance, but that she felt them all floating in her body and memory.

This experience made me think of the potency of creating a living museum of

\(^{14}\) The video documentation of the live performances is not open to the public as I don’t feel that the participatory element and embodied experience of the audience would be achieved by watching them.
gestures, wherein “museum” is not intended traditionally as a building that hosts permanent or temporary exhibitions about historical events, but as a living space that would host not only finished gestural choreographic works, but also processes through which gestures and their narratives are unearthed, revived, and disseminated: rehearsals, discussions, encounters, workshops, and research, all of which could take place over short or long periods of time and would appear then disappear, leaving gestural reminiscences in the bodies of the people who experienced them. Such a museum would function as a decolonial option, gesture, and turn that proposes embodied ways of creating knowledge about oneself and the world, contributing to the creation of decolonial subjectivities.

To some extent my Museum of Gestures resembles The Dancing Museum of French choreographer Boris Charmatz (2014), with which he proposes the abolition of the idea of the National Choreographic Centre and the adoption of a decentralised space for dancing that is at once local and transnational, and is for all, not just for dancers and choreographers. The main difference between my museum and Charmatz's is the motivation behind it. While Charmatz aims at raising awareness about dance and its processes, and about traditional museums and the problematics connected to it with collecting treasures of the past, my museum aims at creating a confrontation with Eurocentric, mind-centered processes of living in the world and creating new knowledge about it. This includes the dance techniques and processes used by Charmatz and the Western dance school he belongs to, which are rooted in cultural appropriation, aesthetic concepts of beauty, and the tendency towards abstraction of movement and individualism rather than gestures, embodied narratives, and collective memories.

During multiple formal and informal conversations with Walter Mignolo in the summer of 2021, and in context with the TanzDialog online series organised by Tanzplatform in Leipzig (2021), I shared with him my idea for the Museum of Gestures. I asked him whether he thought that experiencing bodily archives for the duration of a 45-minute performance or even a one-week event would constitute a decolonial gesture, or whether people need longer and continuous contact with alternative gestures and narratives in order to contribute to the decolonisation of the society. Mignolo answered that for him, any contact with these gestures and narratives would create direct confrontation with the “coloniality of power” and would assist the long, vast, and continuous process of decolonisation—that is, decolonisation of the self, its image, and that of the world. This is a process Mignolo himself said he went through when he was a student in France and was studying only European literature about semiology and philosophy, then decided to delink from such Eurocentric thought and look for and contribute to the creation of “diversal” knowledge.

I feel that through my practice-based research, The Archive of Gestures, I also have been going through a personal process of decolonisation. The practice
pushed me to question the image that was created of me as a Palestinian subject, in Palestine and the diaspora, and how it was generalised on the Palestinians as a collective. Then it allowed me to reappropriate my image through unearthing, reviving, and performing alternative Palestinian gestures and their narratives, delinking from the Israeli colonial narrative. It also assisted me in sharing my re-appropriated image with an audience by creating bodily archives in the form of participatory performances, eventually inviting audience members to join the process of decolonisation and engage with embodied memories and alternative ways of creating and disseminating knowledge. Furthermore, during the research period I also started interrogating the mainly European readings I engaged with during the first year of my study, which directed me to pluriversal sources of knowledge by writers from the global south. I also started working more with processes that keep evolving, rather than with pre-established methodologies that aim at attaining final products in the fastest way possible, thus allowing myself to become through a practice that thinks and ending this thesis with a Coda, a conclusion that prolongs the ideas and hints to their expansion and continuous transformation in the future. As Erin Manning puts it, “It is the uneasy balance between seeding a practice and becoming with practice” (Manning 2016: 63).

*Figure 34. Continuing the practice of becoming at Dance Base (December 2022). © Farah Saleh*
Bibliography


HAVILAND, L. (2018). The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory,


Further reading


After the 82' Israeli war on Lebanon, the Palestinian leadership shattered all over the Arab World and the PLO future was uncertain. Hoping to secure a safer and a more stable life to their sons, some of the Palestinian left leaders decided to send their sons to an international boarding school in the Soviet Union, the Interdom. The school was built in 1933 in Ivanovo North-East of Moscow to host children of revolutionary parents from all over the world as a form of solidarity between nations, including the children of Mao, Tito, La Pasionaria and my brother. This participatory video dance installation portrays a school day in the Interdom from a physical point of view. It provides gestures and movements students used to do in their history class, singing class, physics class and creative writing class, while also analyzing the historical context of the school. The installation asks the public to try these gestures themselves as an attempt to make them live the Interdom experience. This work is a form of self-historicization and re-appropriation of the history of a certain socio-political group, more than a form of nostalgia for a certain era, and if so, it would be for a nostalgia that is prospective, which reflects on the past and present of the children of the left of a certain generation, while questioning the future of the current one.

Award
Young Artist of the Year Award 2014 by A.M Qattan Foundation (Ramallah) October 2014

Exhibitions

Performances (the work was also transformed into a live performance in 2016)

Talk

Video
https://vimeo.com/user13826099/albums
Cells of Illegal Education (C.I.E) is a participatory video dance installation that tackles the closure of schools and universities by military rule for long periods during the First Intifada, one of the many collective punishment methods used by the Israeli occupation regime in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during that period, with the longest closure of 51 consecutive months. To resist the punitive measure, a few months after the closure was imposed students, teachers and activists from the Intifada popular committees started organising the so-called “Popular Education” in alternative spaces, such as homes, cafes, open spaces and dorms. School students were taught part of their curricula and university students focused on continuing their university requirements, while all were introduced to new revolutionary concepts inexistent in the formal education system. Seeing this act of civil disobedience as a threat to security, the Israeli military forces labeled the disobeyers as “Cells of Illegal Education” and started punishing them, often with imprisonment or the destruction of their houses and other spaces they used for popular education.

Article
Archiving gestures of disobedience, Contemporary Theatre Review, volume 27.1, 2017

Talks
“Cells of Illegal Education” at the conference “Bodies of Evidence” at DOCH/University of the Arts of Stockholm (Sweden) January 2016.

Exhibitions

Video
https://vimeo.com/156087439

©Eyad Jadallah
**PhD choreographic works**

**Gesturing Refugees (2018)**

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

©Medhat Soody

**Gesturing Refugees** is a participatory performance that intends to archive latent stories of refugeehood using the bodies of refugee artists and the audience as the main archive, while playing with other archive material, testimonies and imagination. The archives includes present, past and even future stories of refugeehood to try and interrogate collective responsibility and find bridges between the past and present. The re-enactment, transformation and deformation of the alternative and personal memories of refugees by refugee artists allows the re-appropriation of the narrative of refugeehood and develops a collective gestural identity that might challenge that of passive victimhood to which refugees are often subjected. The performance already faced many obstacles related to visa denial to artists and the impossibility of their physical encounter during the creation period, which added up another formal and political layer to the performance.

**Video documenting the first residency May 2017**

[https://vimeo.com/225664219](https://vimeo.com/225664219)

**Performance at The Fruitmarket Gallery April 2022**

[https://vimeo.com/722120756](https://vimeo.com/722120756)

Password: Gesturing Refugees

**Permanances**

Avignon Festival in July 2018 (Avignon), Ifa Gallery in Feb 2019 (Berlin), CCA at Scottish Refugee Festival in June 2019 (Glasgow), Bluecoat for Liverpool Arab Arts Festival in July 2019 (Liverpool), RedZone Festival in October 2019 (Tangier), Veem House for Performance in December 2019 (Amsterdam), The Fruitmarket Gallery in April 2022 (Edinburgh).

**Review**

[https://list.co.uk/article/109388-gesturing-refugees/](https://list.co.uk/article/109388-gesturing-refugees/)

What My Body Can’t Remember is the fourth story in Palestinian dancer and choreographer Farah Saleh’s Archive of Gestures – an ongoing project through which Saleh archives hidden stories from the Palestinian narrative.

In this participatory promenade performance, Saleh attempts to archive her personal story by exploring what her body can and can’t remember of her life in Ramallah in 2002 when, living under curfew, Saleh returned to dancing after years of interruption.

Working with filmmaker Owa Barua, Saleh recalls the daily gestures of her life exploring her memory of a period when her domestic space was her only site of physical freedom.

Trailer
https://vimeo.com/306777685

Video
https://vimeo.com/397924357
Password: Marseille

Performances
Fruitmarket Gallery February 2019 (Edinburgh), Dance International Glasgow Oct 2019 (Glasgow), Festival Parallel January 2020 (Marseille), InSpace Gallery November 2022 (Edinburgh).

2020 dates were canceled because of the pandemic.

Review
https://www.list.co.uk/article/106973-farah-saleh-what-my-body-can-t-remember/
PAST-inuous (2021)

PAST-inuous is a participatory dance video and hybrid in-person/digital live performance created through an international digital collaboration with 11 Palestinian dancers and video artist Lucas Kao. The dancers, most of whom are third generation refugees, currently live in Palestine and the diaspora including Edinburgh, Berlin, Gaza and Nablus. The idea was conceived to reflect on the ongoing Palestinian refugee problem since 1948, by the creation of Israel on Palestinian land and the expulsion of Palestinians all around the world, now estimated to be 5 million. The work considers the bodies of the eleven artists as living archives. It attempts to dig into these archives to find connections between the artists’ daily gestures of the present, and the gestures of their expelled families in the past. In doing this, it aspires to think about the future of the Palestinian refugee cause and its connection to the current global refugee condition.

Video
https://vimeo.com/478381811
Password: Digital version
Live performance
https://vimeo.com/722127264 Password: Angle A
https://vimeo.com/722128919 Password: Angle B

Screenings
Dance Umbrella in November 2020 (London), Cultural Resource in January 2021 (Beirut), Refugee Festival Scotland in June 2021 (Glasgow), Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival in July 2021 (Ramallah).

Performances
Dance International Glasgow at Tramway (Glasgow), Dundee Rep Studio (Dundee) and The Fruitmarket Gallery (Edinburgh) in April 2022.

Review
https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/theatre-and-stage/dance-review-past-inuous-tramway-glasgow-3629397