

Yarden Stern

Performing Passing: Contemporary Documentaries by Women Filmmakers in Israel/Palestine

Abstract

This essay explores how three documentaries made in 2018 by women in Israel/Palestine participate in a filmmaking trend that documents Israel/Palestine's relentless culture of bordering. Ines Moldavsky's *The Men Behind the Wall*, Iris Zak's *Unsettling*, and Rana Abu-Fraiha's *In Her Footsteps*, each rely on first-person narrative while intentionally and visibly foregrounding each filmmaker's politics and identity, using a taboo crossing as the impetus for the unfolding of each story. Building on scholarship that explores how the Zionist narrativization of borders in Israel/Palestine mirrors Julia Kristeva's elaboration of abjection, this essay interrogates each documentary's critical and aesthetic relationship with Israel/Palestine's abject conditions. The shared, gendered subject position of these filmmakers does not represent an ethical breakthrough, but instead the articulation of an ongoing dilemma. Across these different documentary exercises, each filmmaker encounters a subjective failure to cross borders and a documentary failure to portray them. Caught within the colonial regime of domination in Israel/Palestine, the films grapple with how borders are incessantly re-performed, re-strengthened and re-enacted.

This writing aims to demonstrate how three documentaries made by women in Israel/Palestine in 2018 participate in a filmmaking trend that documents Israel/Palestine's relentless culture of bordering. From the erection of the separation wall to the sieging of the Gaza territory, the Israeli government has equated securitization with the establishment of physical boundaries, while simultaneously and insidiously annexing more and more Palestinian territories, often under the same auspices. The documentaries highlighted in this paper are underpinned by the following strategies: they rely on first-person narrative, they intentionally and visibly foreground the politics and identities of their filmmakers, and their stories are initiated and propelled by a taboo crossing. Each film depicts a passage privy to the filmmaker that might otherwise go unchecked or unnoticed. In Ines Moldavsky's *The Men Behind the Wall* (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, 2018), the filmmaker passes through military checkpoints in the West Bank to engage in explicit sexual dialogues with Palestinian men, enacting the gendered power relations of the occupation by juxtaposing her own movement with the restricted mobility of Palestinians. In *Unsettling* (Nutz Productions, 2018), Iris Zak, a self-proclaimed left-wing Jew, moves into the Jewish settlement, Tekoa, to engage its residents in a dialogue

which results in both critical discussions about the occupation and humanizing conversations regarding their complicity therein. Zak refutes the possibility of passing as settler, positioning herself as a left-wing citizen toting multiple cameras, a spectacle of documentary which provokes residents to engage in conversation as they pass her by. Rana Abu-Fraiha's *In Her Footsteps* (Ibtisam Films, 2018), in contrast, does not create a moment of physical and social impasse in order to document it, but rather traces the passing aspirations imparted on her by her parents. Abu-Fraiha interrogates their sudden decision to move from their native Bedouin village of Tel-Sheva to the Jewish town of Omer, while coming to terms with her mother's inevitable death due to terminal cancer. I explore multiple, overlapping valences of passing—of identity categories, of borders, of life and death—in relation to the racialized and spatialized dynamics of abjection that animate the occupation in Israel/Palestine. In the context of Israeli documentary, spatial passing is revealed as a privileged action only available to some.

As contemporary documentary filmmakers in Israel/Palestine experiment with this power asymmetry both narratively and structurally, passing emerges as a critical focal point for understanding the gendered conceptions of subjectivity and relationality articulated in the

PERFORMING PASSING

region today. Through my analyses of the films, I read their gendered subject positions as a constant presence within the diegesis of the film and in the mediation of the viewer's experience of the film. None of these filmmakers try to pass as the objective, fly-on-the-wall documentary filmmaker: they each proceed from an understanding that, in this context, their gender position doesn't allow such pretensions towards neutrality or universality. As each filmmaker advances an embodied perspective, they articulate the stakes of this embodied viewing on different registers and through different techniques. They each make a claim for gender's constitutive influence on these borders, materially and psychically, through the particular positioning of their bodies. But the filmmakers are also differently attuned to the intersectional realities of gender and each face different barriers as they negotiate the same physical, colonial borders.

It is important for me to begin with the matter of naming, understanding that the name of the region participates in and initiates a culture of borders, semantic and cemented. Even writing the name "Israel/Palestine" evokes a strained production of historic divisions. In the essay "Words as Intervention,"¹ Julie Peteet notes how political, media, historical and popular discourses originating within Israel, create and maintain a Zionist narrative that erases and obscures Palestinian rights, presence, and history. Peteet advances "Palestine-Israel" as an inclusive term that implies recognition and support for Palestinian sovereignty.² I'd argue that gestures of inclusion which seek to honor claims of origin and primacy around the same territory by the use of a slash or at times a hyphen, cement the two, insidiously to one another through an unironic establishment of a semantic border.³ In Jennifer DeVere Brody's elucidation of the performative roles of punctuation signs, DeVere Brody asserts that the hyphen is a sign that encompasses contradiction, compelling and repelling, acting as a joint with a shifting positionality while "...at other times, the hyphen marks a space of suspension: it performs as a taut tightrope—a trope of perpetual tension."⁴ The slash on the other hand, doesn't evoke continuity as much as a refusal of identification with a unitary system of meaning as it divides and doubles, making one mean at least two things.⁵ For me, the slash, even as it cements two names and experiences with distinctive histories, evokes a necessary pause.

From here, I will be using "Israel/Palestine" to intervene in Israeli discourses of documentary in particular. I aim to deconstruct that which is named and experienced as Israel as I elucidate the extent to which it labors to disqualify and deny Palestinian presence, which has never been extinguished but exists through, with, and alongside that state formation many refer to simply as Israel.

In this essay, I explore how logics of abjection illuminate matters of documentary form in Israel/Palestine. First, I approach existing theoretical engagements that marry Kristeva's critical writing on abjection to Israel/Palestine. Second, building on the contributions of this literature, I extend the work of Israeli feminist film theorist Yael Munk's meditations on women and documentary to the abject condition of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Lastly, I explore the narrative devices, framing choices, and articulations of subjectivity in three films that seek to dramatize and comment on borders, physical as well as societal, within Israel/Palestine by capturing a number of passing gestures. These three documentaries explore how fear is attached to the process of abjection and how it becomes a structuring condition of Israeli subjectivity, particularly around the fear of the Palestinian other. This essay traces these performative mechanics, and considers how passing, with mixed degrees of success, functions as an exploratory technique to face those fears and mediate power-relations from privileged positions.

Abject Borders in Israel/Palestine

Social scientists and geographers, exemplified by the approaches of Dan Rabinowitz and Joanna C. Long, respectively, incessantly confront the anxiety that surrounds the borders of Israel/Palestine. Rabinowitz, an Israeli political scientist, situates the Israeli body politic and the Palestinian body politic as two separate entities whose accounts of history and futurity vary and clash, arguing that the borders that separate these two bodies are crucial to their own sense of coherence. Rabinowitz points to this clash as it emerges most clearly in the negotiation around Palestinian rights of return:

Palestinian return is a concept that is profoundly stirring for Israelis... Zionism is premised on the idealized concept of

Jewish return from an anguished and dangerous diaspora to a tranquil and abundant (“milk and honey”) ancestral haven. Not surprisingly, claims by Palestinians to have a right of return to the territory is anathema to Israelis. Not only does it challenge Zionist sensibilities about cosmic justice and inherent rights, it also forces Israelis to face the consequences that 1948 had for their Palestinian victims—something the Israeli canon shrouds under thick screens of denial and unarticulated guilt.⁶

According to Zionist narratives and myths, mirroring the typical settler colonial fantasies in many European colonial contexts, the land materializes as a body that was a desolate desert before the arrival of Jewish bodies to the region.⁷ Upon the arrival of Jewish people to the land, the settler colonial ordering began taking place, forcefully ejecting Palestinian bodies that were present within the territory. This ejection, which consisted of the eradication of villages and homes and the violent attempt to drive away Palestinian families, precipitated the erection of borders that secured, both physically and psychically, the establishment of the state of Israel. It is here that the Zionist narrativization of these events becomes almost parallel with Kristeva’s elaboration on abjection.⁸

The Palestinian, the designated loathsome other in the case of Zionism, becomes a presence which pushes “me” (the Israeli) to the edge & border of my own bodily integrity: I can identify, through a process of elimination, what I am not and will vow never to be. “Essentially different from ‘uncanniness’, more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory.”⁹ Whereas the uncanny is understood as a manifestation of a mirrored double which makes one doubt the notion of individuality, the abject necessarily brings on a recognizable other, recognizable as such because it is secure as out of bounds, inherently foreign and external, out of the place of “I” and yet an essential precondition for the formation of that “I”. The other, the deject,

psychically skirts and rubs against this individually devised border. This abjection, which becomes narrativized by transforming the abject into a phobic object, creates conditions such that one must continuously reestablish the boundaries of “I” with that which it deemed disposable. In the context of Israel/Palestine, Palestinian presence – its historical memory and ongoing reality – is denied by Zionists and Palestinians are rendered phobic objects instead of peer subjects. By effacing Palestinians’ indigeneity, the question of Palestine in Israeli discourse is not one of culture and politics, but of existential intrusion and threat.

Rabinowitz likens the Kristevan process of establishing individualized borders to Israel’s history of establishing sovereignty vis-a-vis the expulsion and abjection of Palestinians but stops short of fully utilizing this psychoanalytical framework. Rather than focusing on the way this fear and phobia have shaped and constructed Israeli consciousness, Rabinowitz turns to analyze Palestinian desire, focusing on the right of return. “Return, fetishized in Palestinian discourse as an ultimate panacea and solidified in Israeli canons as the beginning of the end of Israeli time, has turned into a conundrum seen by many in terms of all-or-nothing.”¹⁰ I wish to extend Rabinowitz’s insights, by turning to an engagement with filmmakers who tend explicitly to the demeaning processes of objectification and fetishization that Zionism’s abjection inflicts on Palestinians as individuals and as a society. In foregrounding the gendered dimensions of the occupation’s power asymmetries, each filmmaker approaches and experiments with the mechanics of abjection as the physical and psychic material of Israel/Palestine’s bordered condition.

“The borders around Israel and Palestine have never been stable,” writes cultural geographer and gender theorist Joanna C. Long, in an attempt to elucidate the continuous and ongoing process of abjection in Israel/Palestine.¹¹ Long connects Kristeva’s theorization to the daily politics that emerge at the border, focusing on metaphors of bodily matter: “the leaking back inside of that which was cast out so that Israel could live, [is] a leak which would contaminate the Israeli body and question its integrity.”¹² Long, similar to Rabinowitz, looks to the matter of Palestinian return, theorizing two figures that, from her perspective, come to symbolize the most dread in the eyes of

PERFORMING PASSING

the Zionist regime in Israel/Palestine: the female terrorist and the pregnant woman. Both, she argues, distill a demographic threat at the border, and recall the popular, phobic Israeli image of a Palestinian woman disguising explosives as a baby bump. “Bodies and nations are productive of one another,” Long argues, foregrounding how Palestinian women’s reproductive roles are fantasized by the Israeli consciousness as violent acts of aggression against the Zionist project.¹³ While Long and Rabinowitz rightly argue that the Palestinian deject is barred from subjectivity and citizenship’s material and symbolic registers, these dynamics of abjection are hardly singular in their effects, differently affecting subjects and intersubjective conditions within and beyond Israeli society. The process of abjection doesn’t neatly cement the border – it opens up a set of porous and volatile possibilities at the limits of political and subjective coherence. Rather than reinforce tropes of Palestinian heroism or destructiveness as they circulate in Israeli discourse, contemporary documentary filmmakers dramatize and confront the unstable ins and outs of the national body. From their subject positions, they elaborate the textures of this border condition’s lived experience, while attempting to engender, with mixed results, new possibilities for relation.

Charting a new approach taken by women documentary filmmakers in Israel/Palestine, Israeli film theorist Yael Munk argues: “Women’s voices have become dominant, not only as a point of view but also in tracing a new approach toward the Other... [this is] defined as a “feminization” of the Israeli documentary discourse.”¹⁴ According to Munk, women have become more prominent documentary voices, creating, producing, and directing more films than ever before, creating a new form of ethical relation. This internal shift in the film industry relates, Munk argues, to a political shift, pulling the focus away from a thematic emphasis on the land of Israel and towards a closer look at the different people populating it. Munk claims that the dichotomous relation between Jew and other has been challenged by this new wave of documentary productions, and that “this new subjectivity, enabled by the cinematic gaze, does not mean that Israeli cinema is no longer political. On the contrary, it has expanded its borders in order to include the revelation of alterity as a form of resistance.”¹⁵

To summarize how this border metaphor gets utilized here by Munk: it is something moveable,

expansive, that doesn’t necessarily keep the other on the outside, but rather allows for an inclusion of alterity while simultaneously accepting its otherness as resistance. To read Munk’s statement through Kristeva’s meditation on the phobic subject is to understand that a settler-colonial desire for division persists, a desire for a subject and an object to be set in place, and a desire for the border to exist. As the border expands it can also retract, and though Munk suggests that women’s increasing visibility in the film industry marks an ethical turn, it becomes difficult not to notice that the only filmmakers mentioned by Munk are Jewish women, documenting and framing either their own lives or the experiences of the designated national other. Munk’s writing exemplifies a systematic, institutional issue within Israel/Palestine: as cultural domains historically available to predominantly white men make space for women and Jews of color, such forms of inclusions elongate the divisive lines that enable Israeli dominance, especially as it comes to representation of Palestinian narratives.

The border, this separation, in short, remains unchallenged and intact, but it does change form: it comes into hypervisibility, rendered so sharply that it becomes overdetermined. Though Munk clearly mentions that the space provided by the Israeli camera is a reminder to viewers that none are exempt from the colonial violence taking place in Israel/Palestine,¹⁶ she is also convinced that the universal position of woman, as marginal within western patriarchal societies, allows one to transgress this border completely, claiming that an essentially feminine perspective and camera “eliminate both cultural and national borders.”¹⁷ The women filmmakers celebrated by Munk for their creation, the same bodies hailed for their capability to transgress, are Jewish women who fulfill this gestural crossing without marking their own compliance and privilege within the colonial order of Israel/Palestine in a reflexive and critical way.¹⁸ For the filmmakers explored in this essay, the separation wall, a heavy-handed metaphor of the desire for security within Israeli consciousness, serves as an important means of critically negotiating representations of physical and psychical borders. By passing through, each filmmaker addresses the monumental status of the wall and its contradictory meanings as a site of stability and fragility. The next section

of this essay will consider in more detail the varied conceptual structures, and varied passing gestures, at the heart of these documentaries' explorations of contemporary Israel/Palestine.

The Men Behind the Wall

Ines Moldavsky's documentary, *The Men Behind the Wall*, winner of the prestigious Golden Bear award at the 2018 Berlin International Film Festival, engages in autofiction, confronting in a very straightforward way the phobia of miscegenation¹⁹ instilled in Israeli consciousness.²⁰ The premise for the documentary came from the supposed boundless reality of the internet, as Moldavsky examines what would happen if she dared to open a dating app while approaching the separation wall and pass through physical barriers in search of sexual exploration. The film garnered much attention both for its award-winning status and for toying with a contentious, Israeli taboo.

The documentary begins with a shot of Moldavsky's Tinder account's and the writing "Finding people near you." The next frame shows the separation wall, caught from a camera on the move, accompanied by a voiceover of a man speaking Hebrew with a noticeable Arab accent. He and Moldavsky are engaged in an explicit sexual conversation on the phone. The image of the separation wall is used throughout the film, repeatedly featuring the physical representation of the border as a reminder for that which separates her from her Palestinian counterparts, who often appear as voices without bodies (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An Image of the border with English captions capturing a conversation between Moldavsky and an anonymous suitor. Moldavsky asks her suitor if he has ever fucked a Jewish girl and he informs her she will be the first one. Screenshot from Ines Moldavsky, *The Men Behind the Wall* (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, 2018).

A constant sense of conjured danger emerges: from checkpoints and walls to the anonymous phone conversations layered on top of images of borders and the projecting of private dating profiles on screen – Moldavsky is seeking risk, and in order to find satisfaction, she ventures beyond the wall, passing through the border to discover what is hidden from her. "Most people she told about her project thought she was crazy, [Moldavsky] says. They told her people don't go to the territories, that it's illegal and that she'll surely be killed there. And to go alone to meet men she didn't know and talk to them about sex! Who does something like that?"²¹ Moldavsky seems to be centering herself and her cinematic project around phobia; though aspiring to surpass it, I argue that she ends up repeatedly reestablishing this border whilst reaffirming her own phobic desires.

Moldavsky's sexual conversations are intimated to have manifested into real life encounters, as she features three of those dates in the film, all taking place in the West Bank, beyond the wall. Using her freedom of mobility, Moldavsky easily passes through the Israeli checkpoints to pursue her desire, a nebulous desire that may be earnest or perhaps be concocted for the sake of the film. Moldavsky positions herself behind the camera, adjusting it and reframing the men she captures in the midst of their dialogues. This is not to say that her bodily presence is absent from the documentary; on the contrary, Moldavsky feels very present, as the film is spliced with vignettes of her in a bright orange dress positioned, intentionally, in contrast with her surroundings at different physical manifestations of borders, sometimes holding the microphone or another piece film equipment (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Moldavsky stands in a bright orange dress in the middle of the road in the West Bank, holding a boom above her head. Screenshot from Ines Moldavsky, *The Men Behind the Wall* (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, 2018).

PERFORMING PASSING

She is variously featured at the separation wall, standing on a traffic island in Ramallah, and sitting by herself at a café surrounded by men. The wall is reinstated through a feeling of isolation, but the one who is positioned in solitude and struggling against this impenetrable feeling is actually Moldavsky herself, not her Palestinian counterparts. Moldavsky establishes the feeling that by passing through to the other side of the wall she is bravely crossing the barrier to otherness, which becomes clearest in her last encounter with a Palestinian suitor at a café in Ramallah.

A young man sits back on a sofa. Their exchange at first seems amusing, but then it upsets him, as Moldavsky argues with him, claiming that he must be scared of her. “I’m a woman and I’m also Israeli.” “So?” He responds, annoyance registered in his body. “You’re not scared of me?” She asked for a third time. He quietly responds “no,” looking away. Flaunting this desired fear rather than confronting it, Moldavsky seems to think that by reaching out and connecting, the crossing is actualized. But it becomes clear that more than anything she fails to grapple with the phobic desire which structures her exercise, sealing and externalizing it in an attempt to obliterate the fear. For Kristeva, the phobic subject doesn’t desire security but desires the very insecurity that the border conjures through its potential porousness. The phobic subject is oriented *around* fear: they do not seek to be rid of it but actually to rehearse and manifest this fear. Phobics reestablish the border over and over again, affirming a desire for fear, “...that edges up to it and runs along its edges.”²² The impulse in Israeli documentary to transgress the border and have contact with the other, as manifested in Moldavsky’s film, literally and figuratively runs along the edges of the border.

While Moldavsky’s goal in *The Men Behind the Wall* might be a humanizing discourse, her interrogation of that which is behind the wall does not present fully realized humans but “good” Palestinians. Moldavsky has stated as much, without irony, in prominent interviews about the documentary.²³ The film is not critical about the Israeli desire for walls, the conditions they create nor the rationales behind them; a reflexivity about Moldavsky subject position, which allows her to stage such a passage in the name of sexual freedom is also gravely absent. Moldavsky demands gratification whilst exploiting desire through the ease of her privileged passing. She enters the lives

of these men as an experiment for herself because she is able to do so. Her subjects are certainly aware of being filmed throughout, but issues of consent remain murky. While Moldavsky may have intended to explore how her subordinate position as a woman informs and inflects her position of colonial domination as an Israeli, the end result is a reflection of Moldavsky’s own ignorance about the totalizing nature of the occupation. This asymmetrical relation to borders, a porous construction for Moldavsky and an ironclad, almost impermeable structure for the men that she pursues, leaves the dividing lines of nation, gender and culture intact. The border and the desire for fear remain unchallenged.

Unsettling

Iris Zaki’s *Unsettling* explores the multiplicity of internal borders through the palpable tensions between the Israeli left and Israeli right. Zaki, a self-proclaimed left-wing activist, ventures outside of the liberal bounds of Tel-Aviv by moving to Tekoa, a settlement located beyond the green-line, for thirty days. The premise of the documentary, similar to that of Moldavsky’s, is one that is initiated by a filmmaker’s boundary crossing, which brings about an event worth documenting. Zaki and the settlement residents deal with their projected notions of the (Israeli) other through this unlikely meeting and rarely uttered dialogue. For Zaki, the move to a space dominated by right-wing settler politics is unnerving and possibly dangerous. She repeatedly speaks of her various fears during her encounters with residents. Zaki presents the familiar, phobic narrative of the left-wing, liberal Jew – admitting she is frightened by the reactions the settlers might have towards her while at the same time sharing how fearful she is of the Palestinian population in the villages surrounding the settlements. While the viewers are led to believe Zaki is courageously passing through social barriers to further a dire humanistic cause, it becomes apparent that this is also a self-exploration brushing against Zaki’s self-image. Zaki’s own identity is central to this exploration. She expresses an understanding regarding the building of illegal settlements as “...a burden, and an obstacle to peace,”²⁴ but remains loyal to a narrative of intra-societal repair. This is clearest in the way that Zaki actively distances the film from the experiences

of the Palestinians who reside directly outside of the settlement's borders, making them secondary to the story. Left and right-wing Israelis, secular and settler citizens: these are the binaries which animate Zaki's vision, occluding the structuring conditions of land theft by a settler population that crosses state lines without remorse and with abandon, fulfilling a fantasy of domination.

Zaki is known for a signature style of filming, where she positions three cameras around herself, capturing any interactions with the settlers of Tekoa from several angles while also capturing the filming itself. Zaki positions herself and the cameras in front of the settlement's convenience store, awaiting the local populace to pull up a chair and enter into dialogue with her (Figure 3). As Zaki notes in a New York Times opinion piece published upon the release of the film:

The act of becoming a settler, however briefly (and against my own political ideology), allowed for a rare intimacy to emerge between camera and subject. Only through this discomfort is it possible to reach something deeper, and more essential, about Israel's fractured society, but also, in a wider context, about trying to establish an honest dialogue between people of different perspectives.²⁵

Zaki's film is also underpinned by a humanizing mission: the settlers interviewed by Zaki present varied approaches to the question "Why live in a settlement?" and they mostly seem eager to engage with someone from a different ideological background. While most do not deny the oppressive reality forced upon Palestinians, they proclaim to feel helpless to change it, denying their own complicity in the escalation of the problem as they continue to occupy a territory considered globally to be the emblematic hindrance to a peaceful regional solution. During one dialogue, Assaf, a self-proclaimed leftist living in Tekoa, describes a feeling of apathy that develops because injustice is seen so frequently it becomes routine and devoid of meaning.

Zaki's own image waiting at the storefront is juxtaposed with a repetitive aestheticization of



Figure 3. Iris Zaki sits in-front of a convenience store in the settlement of Tekoa, surrounded by three cameras. Screenshot from Iris Zaki's *Unsettled* (Nutz Productions, 2018).

the border. Miraculous images that show vast, unbounded land appear frequently, corresponding with the Zionist narrative of the founding of the state mentioned in the beginning of this essay. This imagery is supplemented with visual reminders of the oppressive state that allows for such a settlement to flourish. Guard posts, barbed wire gates, and soldiers often appear in the frame, capturing the securitized character of her new surroundings (Figure 4). Throughout the film, Palestinians are talked about abstractly and homogeneously. The bountiful land that Zaki captures is depopulated and Palestinian presence is represented only once in a shot of construction workers cramped into a narrow line entering the village. Images like this one are a familiar rendering of Palestinians caught through an Israeli lens: voiceless, they find inclusion as an abstraction of violence. These images play on the dual meaning of structure: caught in an overarching social stratum that they are literally constructing.²⁶ This duality structures the documentary, drawing attention to the violent divisions within Israeli society desperately needing repair and the way that those divisions



Figure 4. Zaki sits in a pool with her back to the camera, overlooking a vast desert view. Screenshot from Iris Zaki's *Unsettled* (Nutz Productions, 2018).

PERFORMING PASSING

are informed by and predicated on the occlusion of Palestinian perspectives within Israeli discourse.

In her questions, Zaki introduces and interrogates the element of fear in Tekoa. One of Zaki's most meaningful meetings is with Michal, a Jewish woman who committed to coexistence work following a violent encounter with a Palestinian. Michal is considered an anomaly in her views and is treated as such by Zaki and her surroundings. She proclaims her mission to orchestrate a coming together of Israeli settlements and proximate Palestinian villages, stating that "we must work to soften the borders." Zaki successfully sheds light on such settlers who are not zealots as much as casualties of circumstance and opportunism, elaborating how a portion of them understand the superstructure of the occupation and wish to challenge it from within. In spite of this important sentiment that disrupts the settler as a static political actor, I am left struck by the narcissism of the film's dramas of recognition which occur entirely between Jews. By asking participants whether they feel scared living so close to Palestinians, Zaki reveals the phobic disposition that underpins this exercise. The violent fantasies that the film focuses on are those of Palestinian threats toward Israelis and their resonance with Zaki's own fears. While Moldavsky's documentary ultimately cannot help but reify sensations of danger that prescribe and overburden the representations of Palestinians, Zaki's film, positions Palestinians solely as phobic objects rather than fully realized subjects. They are always out of frame or behind the scenes, entering into the minds of settlers only as fantasy or memory. Passing as a thought-provoking social experiment, Zaki dramatizes her acceptance of, not her challenge to, the terms of this settler-colonial reality.

In Her Footsteps

In Rana Abu-Fraiha's *In Her Footsteps* the stakes are palpably different. Unlike Moldavsky and Zaki, Abu-Fraiha does not engage in a social experiment as the means for documentation. Instead, she attempts to trace the social mobility of her parents that affected much of her life. The daughter of a Palestinian mother and a Bedouin father, Abu-Fraiha begins her documentary with the place that was left behind, the Bedouin township of Tel-Sheva. Wandering around, she is approached by a woman in a headscarf who asks

Abu-Fraiha in Arabic if she has come to see how the Bedouins live. When she assures the woman that her father is Bedouin, the woman suddenly realizes who she is, throwing her body into convulsion in excitement, her hands affectionately reaching out to touch Abu-Fraiha's face, caress it and cry for her, knowing about the recent death of her mother, Rodina (Figure 5). This nonlinear beginning sets the tone for the documentary's exploration of the internalized borders in Israel/Palestine that emerge through relations and people, rather than physical barriers and walls.



Figure 5. Rana Abu-Fraiha holds and is held by an elderly Bedouin woman, crying for the loss of Abu-Fraiha's mother. Image from Rana Abu-Fraiha's *In Her Footsteps* (Ibtisam Films, 2018).

The misrecognition that opens the movie follows Abu-Fraiha as she negotiates her own fractured and bordered identity through her mother's terminal illness and imminent death. Though the film opens in Tel-Sheva, the Bedouin township where Abu-Fraiha's father, Oudah, was born, it mostly takes place across the road in the wealthy, Zionist, predominantly Jewish-Ashkenazi town of Omer, where the Abu-Fraiha family raised its five children, including Rana. The Abu-Fraihases chose to move their five children to Omer stealthily, in the dark of night, in hopes of a better future for them, a belief they repeat throughout the film. Omer is a Jewish town and, consequently, it only has a Jewish cemetery, even though it is required by law to provide burial plots to all of its residents. This law is put into question when a Muslim body is concerned. Rodina's dying wish to be buried in Omer compels the family to break through these lines of discrimination and fulfill her unlikely request, while setting the documentary into motion.

While the towns of Omer and Tel-Sheva are geographically adjacent, they seem to be worlds apart. Abu-Fraiha processes having both these disparate locations as essential parts of her

identification through the use of camera work, which features the boundaries of each locality, but not through repetitious representations of physical walls and borders as highlighted in the above documentaries. Both the townships are filmed through a moving vehicle, but the edited footage plays with sequence and directionality in a meaningful way. Tel-Sheva, the Bedouin township which should be representative of a “backward” culture, is filmed with the direction of the car, progressing, moving forward in an approach.²⁷ Omer, the location of Abu-Fraiha family’s social ascension, is filmed looking through the rear window of the car, against the direction of the moving vehicle. This maneuver instills a sense of expulsion and backwardness. The shots of Omer are disorienting and routinely accompanied by phone conversations with the municipality’s secretary as Abu-Fraiha attempts to claim her mother’s right for a fair burial. These moments are as comedic as they are devastating. In one instance, we hear a clueless municipal worker attempt to answer a question regarding the ultimate moment of passing between life and death. In another, Abu-Fraiha simply asks her, “When Arabs die in Omer, where do they go?” *In Her Footsteps* marks the phobic as something that is lived with, not transcended. Despite the excellence of the Abu-Fraiha family – model minorities who have pressured their children, successfully, to take unique advantage of the opportunities afforded to them in society – they are caught up in Israel’s crisis of incorporation. This is both dramatized by the failure of the municipality to offer just funeral arrangements for Rodina Abu-Fraiha and captured in subtle and profound ways through Abu-Fraiha’s de-centered narrativization of her own subject position.

In contrast to Moldavsky and Zaki, who constantly position their bodies in front of the camera in the present, Abu-Fraiha narrates her story and her family’s story with temporal disruptions. The film begins with and returns to the aftermath of her mother’s death, narrating her passing while splicing together fragments of childhood films taken with her father’s camcorder. These nostalgic home movies focus on the children but actually feature interesting moments of the Abu-Fraiha’s parents; as Abu-Fraiha and her sister stand in the living room and perform a Zionist song, “the country is all flags,”²⁸ the parents seem incapable of containing themselves as they break

out in uncontrollable laughter. Kristeva marks out laughter as parallel to disgust, both reactions to feelings of abjection.²⁹ This moment of rupture displays to viewers how radical the move to Omer was; her parents see their daughters being shaped by Zionist ideology and can’t help but laugh as the “I” which they seek to preserve brushes up against borders in many simple, profound ways. Their hearty appreciation is filled with palpable ambivalence.

As Abu-Fraiha’s mother’s health deteriorates, it becomes clear that the municipality will not accommodate her dying wish to be legally buried within Omer. The Abu-Fraiha’s are told that they are not equals, neither in life nor in death. This double form of abjection, this buffer zone between life and death, opportunity and entrapment, is played out tragically in the final scenes of the documentary. While the parents imagine themselves as model citizen minorities, the specter of inequality returns to haunt the family. The film ends with Rodina Abu-Fraiha’s passing, her burial far from her desired resting place, a devastating if predictable failure.

This is thematized by Abu-Fraiha in the final scene, which positions her father Oudah in a vast desert with no borders in sight and the horizon encroached by the preponderance of sand. He climbs a hill and waves to Abu-Fraiha to come join him atop it. As they both tread through the sand, Oudah cautions: “When you walk where no one walked before, it still is hard” (Figure 6). Though Abu-Fraiha displays anger and frustration regarding her parents’ decision to move to Omer, in the end, with no direction plotted in the desert surrounds, she takes ownership of the hardship which her parents inherited rather than created. *In Her Footsteps* is a film of mourning not only in the immediate sense of Abu-Fraiha’s mother; it is a mourning about the condition of the border, which is not external and resolvable but internal and ever-present.



Figure 6. Oudah Abu-Fraiha walks up a sand dune as English captions describe him saying to Rana, “when you walk where no one walked before, it is hard.” Image from Rana Abu-Fraiha’s *In Her Footsteps* (Ibtisam Films, 2018)

PERFORMING PASSING

“When you walk where no one walked before”

The three films I have highlighted in this paper each focus on the navigation of a subject through mechanisms of securitization – of the self and the nation – and the insistent visual tropes of the border’s display. By centering movements and passages within the documentaries, I theorized how *The Men Behind the Wall* & *Unsettled* relay a desire to relate and interact with that which is deemed abject but fall short due to an initiated and performative passing which recenters the filmmakers as the subject and phobia as central. In *Her Footsteps* manages to carefully trace the abject as a subject position and a psychic condition one lives with and not surpasses. In a society in which phobia is central and aggressively spatialized so as to appear natural, its display cannot undo fear, but rather complicate its location. In the filmmakers’ attempts to transcend barriers in innovative ways, what becomes apparent is both a subjective failure to cross borders and a documentary failure to portray them. In the colonial regime of domination within Israel/Palestine, borders are incessantly re-performed, re-strengthened and re-enacted. In contrast to Munk’s assessment of documentaries by women enabling a new set

of ethical possibilities, it is more accurate to say that these women filmmakers brush up against gender’s constitutive role in the dynamics of occupation and its persisting relational dilemmas rooted in colonial discourse’s adamant division of self from other. While both Moldavsky and Zaki investigate phobia as a structuring element of Israeli subjectivity, reinscribing the fears and limitations of the Israeli psyche, Abu-Fraiha registers another kind of documentary language developed and related to subjective failure: focusing on the internal, psychic, and performative nature of border discourse within Israel/Palestine. It is each filmmakers’ engagement with the potential of such failures – reckoning with phobia’s naturalization, its insidious and mundane locations, and its breadth and its depth – that distinguish their challenges to dominant regimes of visual representation, those which relegate minorities outside of the frame, never allowing for a fully realized and complex rendering of their subjecthood and experience to be documented. Despite my different assessment of these films’ success in depicting complex human relations and interactions, Moldavsky, Zaki, and Abu-Fraiha all confront a pivotal question of belonging: can we acknowledge that fear is central, not only to our hatred, but to our bonds?

Yarden Stern is a PhD candidate at New York University’s Department of Performance Studies, where he has completed his MA. His dissertation research is focused on issues of borders, queerness and disruption in Israel/Palestine. His work has appeared in *Protocols, women & performance, Dancespace Project & The Drama Review*.

Notes

1 Julie Peteet, “Words as Interventions: Naming in the Palestine – Israel Conflict,” *Third World Quarterly* 26 (2005), 153-172.

2 Peteet, 167.

3 For a prominent example of this linguistic and political move, see Sarah Schulman, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*. (Durham, NC: Duke Press, 2012).

4 Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Punctuation: Art, Politics & Play*. (Durham, NC: Duke Press, 2008), 85 and 107. Follow Brody, I’d argue that the formations ‘Israel-Palestine’ or ‘Palestine-Israel’ performs a contention while simultaneously embodying a deferral, not making so much a political statement as a neutralizing form of colonial domination, reductively marking the discontinuity of these specific subjects by wrongfully equalizing both on a continuum.

5 DeVere Brody, 9.

6 Rabinowitz, Dan. “The Right to Refuse: Abject Theory and the Return of Palestinian Refugees,” *Critical Inquiry*, 36.3 (2010): 498.

7 Ella Shohat. *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*. (London, UK: I.B Tauris, 2010).

8 Julia, *The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982).

9 Kristeva, 5.

10 Rabinowitz, 515.

11 Joanna C. Long. “Border Anxiety in Palestine-Israel,” *Antipode*, 38.1, 110.

12 Long, 112.

13 Long, 112.

14 Yael Munk. *Ethics and Responsibility: The Feminization of the New Israeli Documentary*. *Israel Studies*, 16.2, 152.

15 Munk, 153.

16 Munk, 157.

17 Yael Munk. *On Women and Borders*. In Perry, Erez & Faingulernt, Avner, Eds: *Cinema South*. Israel: Sapir Collage Press, 2009. P.89.

18 In both these essays Munk offers specific attention to the documentary film “Detained” (2001), where two Jewish female directors document the lives of two Palestinian women living illegally at a building block located at the border. Munk states that though there seems to be an invitation for a postcolonial critique of the film it eventually is a register of “boundary breaking of marginalized women who for the first time voice their cry to the world, a cry against Israeli occupation, a cry against discrimination in their own community, a cry against any marginalization” p.91 “On Women and Borders”, 2009 (emphasis added and quote translated by the author). The disqualification of post-colonial critique by Munk is a reminder that the Palestinian narrative is acceptable as long as it is supported and bolstered through an Israeli framing. The Palestinian women in the film, according to Munk, have been given a voice that would have never been their own and they would have never been able to demonstrate any dissatisfaction with their predicament, unless it was for their Jewish counterparts who were able to grant them this gift.

19 Moldavsky’s toying with the concept of miscegenation is directly linked to the rise of the far-right, anti-miscegenation group “Lehava” (an acronym for ‘Stopping Miscegenation across the Holy Land’) who commit violent crimes against young Palestinian men who they view as threatening Jewish women.

20 Though Moldavsky never uses this term to describe her own production, I believe we can apply this genre allows for a reparative reading. Throughout the viewing experience it remains difficult to determine the true biographical sense and intent the director attempts to harness, at times seeming extremely genuine while still performing some unknown intent, one that doesn’t seem to clarify throughout the documentary. Even in interviews she has given, Moldavsky remains opaque around the notion of self that emerges through the conversations in the documentary. I read this opacity as intentional, and assign the term auto-fiction, a form of fictionalized autobiography, to credit Moldavsky for cultivating a fascinating artifact.

21 Nirit Anderman. *Flirting on the Green Line: Israeli Filmmaker Chronicles Her Tinder Dates with Palestinians*. Haaretz, June 12th, 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-israeli-woman-dated-palestinians-on-tinder-then-she-made-a-movie-1.6171099?fbclid=IwAR0JhxfhTNxzyqKXy9y4bmSCe1thqsDpGezhHXZTZZbunIbC5_e9JyJfbrU.

22 Kristeva, 38.

23 “I hope people will see in this film a different and new representation of Palestinian men, as people who are gentlemen, tender and sexy. This is so different than presenting them as terrorists – the usual way Palestinians are portrayed in the media.” In Anderman, Nirit. *Flirting on the Green Line: Israeli Filmmaker Chronicles Her Tinder Dates with Palestinians*. Haaretz, June 12th, 2018. https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-israeli-woman-dated-palestinians-on-tinder-then-she-made-a-movie-1.6171099?fbclid=IwAR0JhxfhTNxzyqKXy9y4bmSCe1thqsDpGezhHXZTZZbunIbC5_e9JyJfbrU.

24 Iris Zaki. *Natural Born Settlers*. The New-York Time, March 19th, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/opinion/israel-settlements.html>

25 Zaki, 2019. Readers may notice a resonance between these Zaki’s comments and admonitions by liberal Americans to “reach across the aisle” in the wake of the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

26 For a full exploration of this structural bind, see Andrew Ross, *Stone Men: The Palestinians Who Built Israel*. (New York: Verso, 2019).

27 This again is represented mostly through the way Rana’s parents talk of Tel-Sheva and the reasons they decided to leave it behind as they moved to Omer, which involve their own regurgitation of a mythical murder of a cousin who defiled the family honor, told to Rana frequently as a cautionary tale.

28 This song dates back to the foundation of Israel as an independent state and is known as a Zionist anthem that is taught to children in kindergarten and schools to prepare them for Independence Day celebrations. Palestinian communities regard Israeli Independence as a period of destruction and national mourning, called the Nakba, which is commemorated annually in mid-May.

29 Kristeva, 8.