

## Memory and Community in Larissa Sansour's Films: Universal Relevance in an Era of Disasters

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### Abstract

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Larissa Sansour, a Palestinian filmmaker and artist, explores the lives of Palestinians under colonization in her thought-provoking short films. This study reinterprets her work as a critique of post-apocalyptic human communities in an era marked by widespread disasters. The Palestinian experience mirrors the lasting legacies of post-colonial geopolitics, raising questions about memory and community amid profound loss. Drawing parallels with the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Sansour's films transcend geopolitical boundaries, offering cross-cultural explorations of memory and community. Examining Sansour's four key films, this study analyzes evolving character psychology and its resonance with critical discourses following the Fukushima disaster. Sansour's cinematic narratives and Japanese social critiques emphasize the importance of embracing diverse memories and perspectives in community building. Building on philosophical works, particularly Edith Wyschogrod's, this study explores the concept of an unavowable community implicit in Sansour's films as a potential alternative to traditional community models.

### Key words

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Larissa Sansour, Palestine, Fukushima, unavowable community

## Introduction

Larissa Sansour, a Palestinian filmmaker and artist, has created a captivating series of short films that explore the lives of Palestinians under colonization. Sansour's films shed light on the complex issues surrounding Palestinian identity and Palestinian's place within society. While these works have primarily been interpreted within the geopolitical context of modern Palestine, this study aims to analyze them as a thought-provoking critique of the concept of a post-apocalyptic human community. This essay argues that Sansour's films possess a universal relevance in an era marked by widespread disasters, whether caused by humans or nature. The case of Palestine goes beyond being an isolated example of a state community losing its sovereignty, resulting in the displacement of millions of people; it represents a lasting legacy of postcolonial geopolitics characterized by large-scale military conflicts, population displacement, and mass casualties.

Sansour's works can be situated within the broader realm of postcolonial and post-disaster speculative fiction. She can be likened to the Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, who explored the traumatic impacts of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–91) in their works such as *A Perfect Day* (2005). Hadjithomas and Joreige delve into “the traces and consequences” of the civil war, which persist in “a diffused state, uncontrollable, underground, as if lurking” (cited in Silverman, 2023, p. 697). *A Perfect Day* concerns a deceased father and husband who went missing during the Lebanese Civil War, along with 17,000 others. Similarly, Ali Cherri, another Lebanese-born video artist, poses broader questions about destruction and memory. Cherri's film *The Disquiet* (2013), for instance, reflects on the disruptions in Lebanese history through the analogy of constant earthquakes. In *Somniculus* (2017), Cherri questions the notion of the authentic lineage of artifacts, showcasing culturally heterogeneous objects stored in various museums in Paris. As Cherri states, “there is no point of origin, or a higher authentic past to which these objects need to be returned” (Walsh, 2023, p. 15).

Given that Sansour's films incorporate science fiction elements, her work invites comparison with other speculative science fiction works that explore similar themes. The Otolith Group, a London-based collective comprising Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, created *Otolith* (2003) and *Otolith II* (2007), in which characters from a hypothetical future critically reflect on contemporary conflict-ridden India. For example, in *Otolith II*, a character named Usha contemplates the collective psychology of Indians through the image of a semi-derelict Indian city. In *Otolith I*, the same character reviews records of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and bitterly

observes, “Everyone knew America would invade Iraq, but they protested all the same if only to claim their right to do so” (Milliard, 2009, p. 183).

While the Otolith Group and other filmmakers discussed above offer profound insights into the complex nature of memory and history, their cinematic speculations are largely confined to their national boundaries and local memories. Similarly, Sansour’s films focus on the Israel–Palestine conflict. However, this study suggests that the prolonged exile of Palestinians raises broader questions about memory and community of those who have suffered significant losses. The Palestinian issue can be likened, for instance, to the plight of individuals who lost their homes and loved ones during the earthquakes and subsequent nuclear disaster in Fukushima in 2011. The government’s failure at that time to effectively assist victims continues to be a subject of scrutiny and inquiry by the public. The Fukushima disaster, akin to the situation with Palestinians, exposes the precarious nature of a state community’s reliability. Sansour’s film narratives incorporate science fiction elements such as time travel, virtual reality, and environmental disaster. These universal themes make it possible to read her films as cross-cultural explorations of memory and community.

This study provides a textual analysis of Sansour’s films, focusing on four specific ones: *A Space Exodus* (2008), *Nation Estate* (2012), *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015), and *In Vitro* (2019). These films have progressively developed more complex characters over time. *A Space Exodus* features a silent character portraying a stranded astronaut in a skit-like fashion, whereas *In Vitro* presents dialogues between a survivor of a disaster and an Artificial Intelligence (AI) humanoid. By examining the psychology of the characters as portrayed through their words and actions, the positions they hold regarding the lost community and its memories are extracted. Subsequently, the study demonstrates how the voices of the film characters resonate in the critical discourses that emerged in response to the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Larissa Sansour’s cinematic speculations, combined with social critiques from Japan, illustrate that community building is not primarily focused on establishing a dominant ideology but rather on embracing alternative memories and diverse social perspectives. To further support this argument, this study relies on philosophical treatises that discuss disaster, memory, and community, particularly those authored by Edith Wyschogrod. In this context, the idea of an unavowable community is examined as a potential alternative type of community that Sansour’s films ostensibly promote. The unavowable community refers to a human community in which neither doctrines nor hegemonies prevail but where unconditional acceptance operates as the only governing principle among its members. This

community may arise after the precepts for community—such as economy, technology, politics, and culture—have evaporated. The unavowable community responds solely to the human longing for a “social bond” without considering utility or efficiency. Jean-Luc Nancy rephrases such a community as an “inoperative community” that is “made up principally of the sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality” (1991, p. 9).

Sansour’s films portray post-apocalyptic communities, in which characters conduct intensive searches for a new form of communal belonging. Their desires for a new type of community resonate with the concept of the unavowable community, highlighting a vision of society built on acceptance and shared identity rather than rigid structures and ideologies.

### The Science Fiction Trilogy and Its Unsung Voices

Through a series of short humorous videos addressing the statelessness of Palestinians, Larissa Sansour solidified her reputation as a thought-provoking artist on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Her subsequent science fiction trilogy, consisting of *A Space Exodus*, *Nation Estate*, and *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, showcased her talent and established her as one of the foremost voices in Palestinian art. Prior studies have examined Sansour’s artistic works through the lenses of ethnic-national identity and territorial politics. According to this perspective, Palestinian identity is intrinsically linked to the land, resulting in difficulties for Palestinians in asserting their identity due to their forced displacement from their ancestral homes. However, the present study proposes that Sansour’s science fiction trilogy exhibits distinct voices that transcend nationalistic narratives, inviting an interpretation that diverges from conventional identity politics.

*A Space Exodus* is a brief five-minute film that showcases a Palestinian astronaut venturing into space and symbolically planting the Palestinian national flag on the Moon’s surface. The protagonist, identified by the name tag “Larissa Sansour,” conveys her Palestinian heritage through the utilization of powerful visual symbols. Her spacesuit is adorned with Palestinian embroidery, and she wears traditional Islamic footwear. Upon taking her historic step on the moon, she declares, “That’s one small step for Palestinian, one giant leap for mankind,” playfully twisting Neil Armstrong’s renowned words. The astronaut’s continuous display of her

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<sup>1</sup> The short video works include *Bethlehem Bandolero* (2005), *Happy Days* (2006), and *Run Lara Run* (2008).

Palestinian identity creates an ironic contradiction with her connection to Jerusalem, a city claiming to be the capital of both Israelis and Palestinians. In the beginning scene, as she enters the moon's orbit, she transmits the message, "Jerusalem. We have a problem. (...) No, everything is fine. We are back on track." Given that Israel effectively controls Jerusalem in reality, it appears implausible for the city's base station to acknowledge the pilot's communication.

Scholars have critically analyzed the protagonists' ethnic backgrounds and unlikely national affiliations, emphasizing their contrasting relationships. According to Nat Muller, the film narrative is guided by the "disconnect" between Palestinian Sansour and her supposed "home base"—this connection to the past and a nostalgic yearning for a Palestine that no longer exists on Earth remain the central themes in the film (2021, p. 129). The protagonist's space journey represents the wishful fantasy of stateless Palestinians to establish a colony on the Moon. However, when the moon walks over the Palestinian national flag, it creates the impression that disenfranchised Palestinians have transformed into powerful colonizers rather than remaining stateless masses (Jones, 2016, p. 135). However, owing to its imaginary nature, the Moon cannot fulfill any promises for the Palestinian. Consequently, the main character faces the inability to restore communication with "Jerusalem," leading to her isolation in the expansive realm of space. Muller's analysis recognizes the protagonist's predicament as a battle between "two competing forms of nostalgia" that hinders her ability to regain the lost state of Palestine and achieve the collective's envisioned future (2021, p. 132).

The portrayal of the Palestinian in the aforementioned comments symbolizes the Palestinian collective. However, this portrayal predominantly resonates with interpretive communities that are well-versed in the intricate complexities surrounding Jerusalem's status. Those outside Arab or Jewish communities may view the narrative of *The Space Exodus* as a satirical imitation of the American Moon's landing. Through the Palestinian's reenactment of Neil Armstrong's famous moonwalk and usage of similar language, the authenticity of the American moon-landing mission is seemingly called into question. It is important to acknowledge that the American moon landing project was conceived as a component of the state's Cold War strategies. After Yuri A. Gagarin successfully completed an orbit around the Earth in the Vostok spacecraft in 1961, James Webb of NASA and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara expressed the following in their confidential report to President John F. Kennedy:

Major successes, such as orbiting a man as the Soviets have just done, lend national prestige even though the scientific, commercial or military value of the undertaking may by ordinary standards be marginal or economically unjustified. (...) Our attainments [in space development program] are a major element in the international competition between the Soviet system and our own. (Logson, 1970, p. 126)

The pinnacle of the space race during the Cold War was reached in 1969 with the Apollo 11 mission when a moon landing was successfully accomplished. In *The Space Exodus*, the Moon landing serves not only as a narrative tool to highlight the implausibility and absurdity of Palestine's territorial expansion but also as a means to challenge the nationalistic motives underlying the iconic phrase "one giant leap for mankind."

The protagonist is unexpectedly sent into space without a clear purpose. This outcome is commonly interpreted as "a symbol of failure," as noted by Hochberg (2018, p. 42), indicating that the idea of Palestine on the moon is an unrealizable aspiration. However, this particular scene also signifies the pilot's liberation from nationalist beliefs such as Zionism, Palestinianism, and Pax Americana. The pilot then transforms into Larissa Sansour, a genuine individual who does not rely on any nationalist motivations to shape her identity. In this regard, *The Space Exodus* invites a comparison to the film *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013) rather than the commonly referenced 2001: *A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). In *Gravity*, the female astronaut finds herself stranded in space and faces the challenge of returning to Earth. Throughout this journey, she rediscovers her inner strength, ultimately triumphing over the painful memories of her deceased child. Undoubtedly, the protagonist in *The Space Exodus* faces an uncertain fate, with minimal hope for a positive resolution. She can be viewed as an "impossible subject," a term created by Mae M. Ngai to describe undocumented immigrants and their uncertain situations in present-day America (2004, p. xxi-xxiii). However, released from the confines of nationalism, the stranded astronaut could personify the potential for diverse and unconventional community structures.

In *Nation Estate*, Palestine is represented as more than just a sentimental symbol; it becomes a tangible environment contained within a tall building. The protagonist, a traveler portrayed by Larissa Sansour, visits this hotel-like building and discovers that the names of various Palestinian locations have been rearranged across its forty-seven floors, including three underground levels. The interior of the building is adorned with significant Palestinian cultural symbols, such as the re-

vered olive tree, as well as architectural landmarks like the iconic Dome of the Rock. However, the camera alternates between wide and close-up shots, creating an odd sense of unfamiliarity and detachment for the audience. In reality, as a result of the two wars (1948 and 1967) with Israel, the territory of Palestine has significantly diminished, with only small portions remaining in Gaza and the West Bank. The futuristic rendition of Palestine in computer-generated imagery serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the disenfranchised Palestinian community, emphasizing its state of landlessness. Thus, *Nation Estate* “showcase[s] the absurdity and surrealism of Palestinian existence” (Jones, 2016, p. 135).

Notwithstanding its apparent artificiality, the building upholds its merit by effectively preserving cherished national items, thereby bearing witness to the authenticity of the Palestinian state. Rachel Baasch argues, “The nation-state is an abstract concept that cannot be seen or experienced without specific signifiers or markers of its existence” (2018, p. 37). The building fulfills its role as the repository of Palestine’s national symbols. Visitors, including the Sansour characters, seem to have fully adapted to the environment. However, specific codes of conduct and guidelines must be followed. In the elevator, for example, a prominent wall screen displays the following message: “Remember to have your documents validated for travel. Restrictions may apply.” Who is responsible for imposing these regulations? Although this Orwellian entity is never explicitly identified, it strongly hints at a resemblance to the Israeli occupation in the real world. The building is the container of the national culture but a politically defused one.

Sherwell suggests that the building depicted in *Nation Estate* resembles Rawabi, a planned Palestinian city in the West Bank (Sherwell, 2013, as cited in Baasch, 2018, p. 42). Rawabi, constructed in 2014, emerged through a public-private partnership between the Palestinian National Authority and a private Palestinian investment. Designed as a technologically advanced city, Rawabi aimed to foster market-driven economic growth in Palestine by attracting “young, upwardly mobile, middle-class” residents (Grandinetti, 2015, p. 73). According to Grandinetti, Rawabi assumes two primary roles: first, it aims to remove the political realities of occupation and resistance from the daily lives of Palestinians; second, the city embraces the values of the new middle class characterized by individualism, consumerism, and global perspectives (2015, p. 69). To achieve this objective, the planned city showcases the national symbols of Palestine, such as the Palestinian flag, distinct architectural designs, and meticulously crafted landscaping. This fusion creates a compelling portrayal of a prosperous future in Palestine reminiscent of the depiction in *Nation Estate*. Rawabi goes beyond superficially imitating Palestine’s ap-

pearance; rather, it seeks to shape an entirely new reality for the formerly colonized state, effectively obscuring the ongoing occupation (Gradinetti, 2015, p. 72). As long as capitalist interests support Rawabi, the city will continue projecting its self-serving images of a non-political, market-driven Palestine.

The protagonist of *Nation Estate* enters her room to discover an olive tree enconced within a high-tech chamber, isolated from its natural surroundings. As she tenderly touches the waters of the tree, it evokes the replication of superficial Palestinian imagery, reminiscent of Rawabi's contrived representations. Later, she indulges in traditional Palestinian dishes, such as fatayer. However, these culinary delights come in ready-made cans, serving as yet another symbolic representation of Palestinian identity. The Nation Estate building, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, "substitutes the signs of the real for the real," operating as "a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (1994, p. 2). Nevertheless, there is no denying that the protagonist actively engages with these signs, playing a role in the perpetuation of the artificial reality of Palestine.

The narrative takes an unexpected turn when the protagonist unveils her pregnancy. Standing at the window and overlooking the actual Palestinian territories, she gently strokes her protruding belly. Few analyses of *Nation Estate* have examined the significance of the protagonist's expectant body. In the context of the ongoing discussion, her pregnancy subtly contrasts with the building's reproduction of Palestinian imagery. If the building body engages in simulation, as described by Baudrillard as the act of pretending to possess what it lacks (1994, p. 3), the pregnant female body, in contrast, undergoes a process of regeneration that is distinct from mere imitation or replication. Rather than simulating or imitating existing traits, embryonic life has the opportunity to begin anew from a fundamental starting point. The fetus residing within her body can be likened to the stranded astronaut in *Space Exodus*. Despite their appearance of fragility and limited capability, both possess the potential to reshape collective memories and entrenched nationalistic narratives. In the concluding close-up scene, the protagonist locks eyes with the camera, projecting a penetrating gaze. Her countenance no longer mirrors that of a submissive hotel visitor; instead, it now emanates a neutral expression. This neutrality carries a multitude of messages, akin to a baby brimming with diverse potentials.

*In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* appropriates a time-travel trope commonly found in popular science fiction. The narrative unfolds through an interplay of still images and moving scenes, where meanings are derived from the



dialogues between two characters: the protagonist, who identifies as a “narrative terrorist,” and her interrogator. The protagonist adopts the term “narrative terrorist” due to her involvement in crafting a pseudo-historical tale, burying forged crockeries, chemically processed to appear much older than they are. The descendants intend to assert their rightful ownership of the land, presenting the discovery of ancient porcelains scattered throughout the area as evidence of their ancestors’ historical ties to the land. Through this approach, the protagonist envisions that these carefully crafted archaeological findings will open the door for future generations to reinterpret and reshape the past.

The main character and her interrogator avoid explicitly mentioning the Israel–Palestine conflicts. However, the pictures in their dialogue show Palestinians and Israelis, serving as a reminder of the ongoing struggles between the two nations. In one image appearing around the fifth minute of the story, the protagonist is seen digging a hole, with two Palestinian soldiers on the left side of the frame and three Israeli counterparts on the right. In her grasp, the shovel mirrors the appearance of the rifles carried by soldiers on both sides. Through the composition and iconography of the scene, it becomes evident that archaeological sites can become like battlefields, where military conflicts coincide with conflicting historical narratives. Historian Ilan Pappé makes the following arguments:

Zionism secularised and nationalised Judaism. To bring their project to fruition, the Zionist thinkers claimed the biblical territory and recreated, indeed reinvented, it as the cradle of their new nationalist movement. As they saw it, Palestine was occupied by ‘strangers’ and had to be repossessed. “Strangers” here meant everyone not Jewish who had been living in Palestine since the Roman period (2011, pp. 34-35).

The combination of biblical prophecies and nationalistic motives has sought support in archaeological projects, although some of these may seem unlikely or far-fetched. For instance, according to Ned Carter Miles (2018, p. 79), in August 2017, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu posted a picture on Facebook of a coin found by an eight-year-old girl in Halamish, a place in the West Bank. Netanyahu claimed the coin was 2,000 years old and proved a strong connection between the people of Israel and Jerusalem. But soon afterward, he removed the post because the coin turned out to be a 15-year-old souvenir made by the Israel Museum. *In In the Future...*, the “narrative terrorist” seeks to subvert the Zionist historical narrative by burying counterfeit porcelain. Through this act, she imitates

the art of constructing archaeological fiction. She goes to such extreme lengths that she even devises a plan to chemically process her own deceased body, envisioning it as potential evidence of her descendants' ancestral heritage when excavated in the future. However, her pursuit of an all-encompassing grand historical narrative may inadvertently lead her to the same fallacy that she seeks to challenge.

In critical reviews of *In the Future...*, the protagonist is normally depicted as an insurgent actively challenging the ruling historiography of the victorious state. Tom Emery comments that “the lead character aims to create a new collective identity for Palestinians, with the current collective identity proving to be a genuine danger” (2016, p. 395). The reviews also note that the resistance leader's younger sister was tragically killed by a stray bullet fired by the ruling army. The insurgent leader qualifies her sister's death in her statement, “death is no longer about the single life lost. It's not even personal. It's what we are as a whole that qualifies us as targets.” Therefore, the lost girl “synecdochically stands for a whole people” (Duggan, 2020, p. 80). Therefore, heartbreaking loss must have served as the fundamental driving force behind the leader's involvement in the crockery burying activities. Curiously, however, whenever the interrogator broaches the topic of the deceased sister, the protagonist appears emotionally hindered from delving deeper into it. If the deceased girl truly fueled the survivor's insurgent activities, she must continue to serve as an unwavering source of inspiration. Yet, the survivor realizes that her sister cannot recognize her, concluding that her sister “can't communicate with the future.” These emotional barriers suggest that the absent sister offers little support for the survivor's act of vengeance.

Despite communication challenges, the younger sister consistently remains in the lead character's awareness. She appears to hold a message that her older sister has not yet deciphered, but one she still wishes to convey. Instead of embodying the collective desire, the deceased girl may have harbored personal aspirations that remain unfulfilled. The ongoing conflict between nations comes at the expense of silencing individual voices and overshadowing their dreams, passions, and memories in collective historiographies. Indeed, the dichotomy between the collective and the individual has frequently come under scrutiny in historical writings concerning Palestine.

Honaida Ghamin, for instance, criticizes resistant Palestinian poets for their “symbolizing the national catastrophe as collective family honor loss and turning the national freedom project into a manhood project of rehabilitation” (2009, p. 38). Although the poets called for freeing women from the system of patriarchal control, they still used the same traditional male-dominated language to express

their ideas (Ghamin, 2009, p. 38). Manar Hassan (2009) argued that the urbanization of Palestine had been in full swing before it lost its statehood due to Israel's creation in 1948. The urbanization entailed fundamental social changes; most prominent among them was "the increasing presence of women in the public sphere" (Hassan, 2019, p. 15). As Hassan (2019, p. 3) contends, both Zionist and Palestinian historiographies have predominantly depicted Palestinian society as historically rural and backward. This view stands at the cost of the presence and contributions of diverse professionals such as "female nurses and seamstresses, fashion designers and factory workers, together with journalists, doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers, principals, and government officials" in the Palestinian labor force before 1948 (Hassan, 2019, p. 3). Little attention has been paid to these female individuals, and their voices remain sparsely recorded in historical archives. Considering these circumstances, it should not be too far-fetched to say that the deceased girl in *In the Future*... serves as a poignant symbol, bearing testimony to the forgotten demographics of the past.

*In the Future*...(2015) begins and ends with the same speeches given by the protagonist:

Sometimes I dream of porcelain falling from the sky, like ceramic rain. At first, it is only a few pieces falling slowly like autumn leaves. I'm in it, silently enjoying it. But then the volume increases, and it's a porcelain monsoon, like a biblical plague.

She initially savors the porcelain rain due to its promise of redemption, sensing a glimmer of hope within it. However, as time passes, she discovers its transformative power, capable of obliterating individuals from the annals of history, becoming a devastating force. To visualize this idea, the final scene depicts a Last-Supper-style shot, showcasing clergies, politicians, soldiers, and starving children seated at the table. As the scene unfolds, they gradually vanish, leaving only the protagonist, who stares directly at the camera. As Hochberg (2018, p. 54) points out, however, "Sansour's dystopia is itself presented as a forceful return of the excluded."

In Sansour's films, the characters—a stranded astronaut, an unborn infant, and a deceased girl—vividly portray marginalized members of society. Their limited dialogue underscores their role as silent casualties of seemingly triumphant national utopian undertakings. In reality, they epitomize the opposite side of any collective ideology and its shortcomings. They transcend the confines of Palestine, becoming

symbols of a broader global community unified by a shared encounter with “global dystopia” (Hochberg, 2018, p. 54). This universal significance makes Sansour’s films both relevant and relatable worldwide. Through these characters, the films shed light on issues of exclusion, marginalization, and the aftermath of unrealized utopian aspirations that resonate across diverse cultures and societies.

Another Sansour film, *In Vitro*, stands out significantly as it grants a voice to those marginalized and excluded from dominant collective identities. The film unfolds against a post-apocalyptic backdrop, featuring two central characters: an elderly woman and an android. Their profound dialogue revolves around the theme of a lost community and its potential for recovery. However, a notable disparity arises between the two; the android possesses only implanted knowledge about the community, rendering her unable to share the woman’s nostalgic passions. The android becomes the spokesperson for the silenced characters from Sansour’s previous films. By presenting two different positions on the loss of community on an equal footing, *In Vitro* also prompts a comparison between its characters and real-life individuals who, for instance, endured the natural and nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan. The subsequent discussion engages in a cross-reading between *In Vitro* and the critical reflections on the disaster in Japan. Through this process, it also explores the potential concepts of the community envisioned by marginalized individuals within the context of widespread devastation.

### Empty Nostalgia and the Unavowable Community

*In Vitro* opens with a cataclysmic scene, as a torrent of black water engulfs a Middle Eastern city.<sup>2</sup> The vertical line dramatically bisects the screen, serving as a visual rhetoric symbolizing division and conflict. The significance of this partition becomes evident when two characters, Dunia and Alia, step forward to express their contrasting perspectives on their lost communities. Dunia, portrayed as an elderly woman lying in bed, advocates for the restoration of the past, emphasizing its importance. However, Alia, an android entrusted with preserving the lost community’s official memories, becomes skeptical of her creators’ nostalgic passions. The juxtaposition of these two characters and their differing beliefs add depth to the narrative, inviting the audience to explore the complex themes of memory, preservation, and human connection in the face of catastrophe.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Net Muller, *In Vitro* was filmed in the Ottoman villa in Bethlehem (2019, p. 17).

These two characters, along with other survivors, have been living in underground bunkers for years since the worldwide destruction. The origin of the worldwide catastrophe remains ambiguous; obsidian waters engulfing the city evoke images of a tsunami, yet their viscous obscurity also alludes to petroleum, implying a predominantly human-induced calamity. What becomes apparent, in the end, is that this disaster possesses a worldwide nature and is presently undergoing continued propagation. Dunia says, “Others were beginning to experience what we had seen for years,” and “Elsewhere eventually caught up and had their own doomsday” (*In Vitro*). Should the catastrophe be of human origin yet unyieldingly pervasive, a parallel instance of reality would be a nuclear disaster. The following portrayal furnishes a tangible illustration.

On March 11, 2011, an earthquake and tsunami, which were said to occur once every thousand years, struck the Tohoku region of Japan. The following day, a hydrogen explosion occurred at the first nuclear power plant operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) in Fukushima Prefecture. This led to a “catastrophe” known as nuclear meltdown, resulting in tens of thousands of people abandoning their homes and seeking refuge. Even five years later, at present, nearly one hundred thousand individuals remain displaced due to radioactive contamination and are unable to return to their contaminated hometowns. (Seo, 2016, p. 49)

The ensuing nuclear meltdown transforms the area into a desolate wasteland, rendering any hope of return to one’s homeland impossible. One can scarcely fathom the reactions of the survivors in the face of such abrupt calamities. Two distinct attitudes can emerge: the first entails rejecting the events while longing for a return to normalcy, whereas the second involves confronting reality and accepting it as an inescapable truth. These two stances are clearly illustrated by the main characters in *In Vitro*. Dunia fears leaving the bunker, convinced that “disasters are evolving more rapidly.” As her fear intensifies, she clings more tightly to the past, memories, and nostalgia. On the other hand, Alia appears more proactive, calculating when they can escape their underground life.

Dunia hesitates to return to the surface world, which resembles Japan’s Difficult-to-Return Zone, designated after the 2011 nuclear disaster. Entry into this zone is forbidden owing to hazardous radiation levels, and restrictions on residency will persist in the future. Numerous rural areas within the Fukushima

Prefecture experienced the effects of nuclear radiation and were designated Difficult-to-Return Zones. Nevertheless, according to Japanese journalist Shinnami Kiyosuke's account, the enduring presence of agriculture and livestock imparts a landscape that could be likened to "a spectacular vista bestowed with the gifts of nature" (Shinnami, 2018, p. 20). Mirroring the Fukushima situation, Dunia's recollections in *In Vitro* center on the pristine landscapes before contamination. To escape the somber reality of "entombment," she seeks solace in photographic images of orchards, accompanied by the soothing melodies of "birds, bees, and butterflies." Before escape, she remembers releasing "the cocoons and beehives into the orchard, ensuring a harmonious cycle of pollination in the natural environment." Dunia's wistful passions reflect the human longing for unspoiled landscapes, with only subtle hints of nationalist sentiment.

Nevertheless, for Alia, these picturesque scenes merely accentuate their conspicuous absence. Additionally, Dunia's recollections have been transposed onto Alia, who, as an AI entity, has never encountered them directly. She complains, "The past is spoon-fed to me," likening it to "a bacteria planted in me." To this, Dunia responds, "We were all raised on someone else's nostalgia," adding, "Our own experiences blend with the stories we are told." The issue at hand is that Alia was never granted the opportunity to engage in discussions with her creators, which would have allowed her to internalize their histories personally. Similarly, she has never participated in the construction of the community's emerging narratives. In Dunia's words, Alia was "born into purgatory," never knowing "anything but absence." While Alia perceives the implanted memories as "intimate" and "seductive," a sense of detachment pervades her emotional experience. Each memory fragment intertwines a past event with its corresponding emotions. However, the current emotional state can also overlay these recollections, potentially reshaping the emotional essence of the past based on the prevailing sentiments during recollection (Bookbinder & Brainerd, 2016, p. 1315). Alia remains disconnected from the innate emotions of the past, instead projecting her prevailing emptiness onto those historical moments. Alia's endeavor involves deciphering the possibly authentic emotions that Dunia experiences while reminiscing about the past. It becomes evident, however, that Dunia's nostalgic sentiments are also flavored by broader communal narratives.

Dunia's remembrances trace the narrative thread woven through "plagues, disasters, and exodus." The subterranean community is entrusted with upholding these memories as part of the national mythos. Dunia's individual recollections concerning the "struggle, land, seasons" reiterate the patterns of the national

storyline. Alia asserts that all these memory components are only “fairy tales,” and that nostalgia merely offers amusement. Yet Dunia contends that “Facts alone are too sterile for a cohesive understanding” and posits that “Entire nations are built on fairy tales.” There is no denying that every nation stands on its mythical narrative. However, the narrative of *In Vitro* introduces a profound and cataclysmic rift between the established and surviving communities. As outlined by Benedict Anderson, the foundation of nationalism relies on ancestral recollections, wherein “people and events in danger of oblivion” (1983, p. 199) are unearthed to enrich the collective awareness of a nation. From this perspective, the historical schism becomes less of a forfeiture and more of a prerequisite for shaping “national genealogies” (Anderson, 1983, p. 201). To bridge this rupture, the national consciousness establishes a notion of “homogeneous, empty time,” wherein the present unfolds as a natural outgrowth of the past (Anderson, 1983, p. 204). Moreover, the national concept of time operates through a distinctive mechanism termed “up time” by Anderson (1983, p. 205). The construction of this national temporality diverges from conventional genealogical approaches, commencing instead from what Anderson describes as an “originary present” (1983, p. 205). Dunia, within the context of *In Vitro*, echoes Anderson’s perspective through her own interpretation: “At any given point, the present imposes its language, and projects the meaning of this very moment back onto the past.” The demands of the present consistently mold the contours of the past, often necessitating a significant allocation of effort toward acts of forgetting and fabrication.

The concept of “up time” within the realm of national discourse is exemplified in the case of postwar Japan, where two cities were devastated by atomic bombings in 1945. In 1955, the Japanese government enacted the Atomic Energy Basic Act to facilitate the exploration and advancement of atomic energy. Notably, Kishi Nobusuke, who held the position of Minister of Trade and Industry during the Pacific War and later served as Prime Minister in Japan from 1957 to 1960, articulated the following observations in 1958:

Nuclear technology has the potential for both peaceful applications and military deployment. The decision on which path to pursue rests upon national policies and the determination of the state. While Japan has firmly committed, in accordance with the will of the nation and its citizens, to refrain from employing nuclear energy for weaponry and instead focusing solely on peaceful applications, advancements in technology inherently carry the potential for military utility (Yamamoto,

2011, p. 18)

Paradoxically, the nation ravaged by atomic bombings is actively pursuing avenues for national reconstruction through atomic energy. Moreover, Kishi Nobusuke openly expresses his personal aspiration to introduce atomic armament to Japan. Social critic Yamamoto Yoshitaka contends that Kishi's overarching objective was not directed solely toward addressing the country's energy requirements using atomic technology but rather aimed at establishing Japan as a potential nuclear-armed entity capable of manufacturing nuclear weapons at its discretion (2011, pp. 18-19). In Kishi's conceptualization, pre-World War II Japan was characterized by its regrettable lack of atomic capabilities, whereas post-war Japan, equipped with atomic armaments, could potentially rejuvenate its national morale. Hence, before its military defeat, Japan existed as a spiritual entity in perpetual anticipation of material resurgence.

The contrast between post-war Japan and the setting portrayed in *In Vitro* is stark. The latter pertains to either a post-apocalyptic Middle Eastern city or, presumably, the displaced region of Palestine. Nevertheless, a common thread emerges: both the real-life Japanese politicians and the fictional character Dunia from *In Vitro* draw upon a shared wellspring of "up time" nationalistic visions to navigate their current impasses. Considering this perspective, it is worth noting that the tsunami and nuclear disaster in Fukushima have rekindled nationalistic slogans, reminiscent of those that held prominence in post-war Japanese politics. In 2023, during his address marking the 12th anniversary of the Fukushima disaster, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio (2023) emphatically declared:

Our nation has experienced several disasters that could be regarded as national crises. Nonetheless, we have overcome every crisis with courage and hope. The present generation is now determined to follow the path of our ancestors. We will walk forever facing forward, extending a helping hand to each other.

Embedded in these statements are contemplations of lineage, underscoring the significance of the Japanese nation as the primary entity that its citizens must safeguard throughout the course of generations. This stance professes unity but tends to be exclusive, as not everyone subscribes to it, exemplified by Alia's self-perception as an outsider in the world of *In Vitro*.

Alia never intends to abandon her community; her struggle lies in her inability



to fully embrace Dunia's prevailing nationalistic ideology. Alia is searching for an alternative concept of community that can accommodate her sense of non-belonging. However, she fails to articulate this directly, employing only rhetorical devices to convey her sentiments. In the concluding moments of her conversation with Dunia, Alia raises a query: "Perhaps a loss of memories is essential to starting over?" In response, Dunia counters, "Forgetting makes you vulnerable to mistakes you already made once." Unyielding, Alia persists, "Maybe next time they won't be mistakes." In Alia's speculations, "a loss of memories" may imply the shedding of collective ideologies. Although Alia cannot articulate what comes next, her vision may extend beyond the confines of logic and language. A split screen that defines *In Vitro* suggests a realm beyond words. The dividing line not only illustrates the conflicts between characters but also carves out a third space where suppressed, unheard voices may reside.

The voices that Alia champions but struggles to elucidate are those of the deceased or those that remain impervious to any established official ideologies. Following the Fukushima disasters, Japanese theologian Isomae Jun'ichi keenly experienced the challenge of portraying the victims, so he could only describe their voices as "the murmurs of the departed" (2015, p. 64). Reflecting Alia's contemplations in *In Vitro*, Isomae emphasizes the importance of reclaiming the individuality of marginalized voices.

The owner of the voice is not me, but someone else. An inexplicable presence speaks through my throat. However, it's not easy to listen to this voice of unknown origin. I must follow the voice as a part of it without letting my consciousness be dominated by it. (⋯) Right now, like a statue of Avalokiteshvara standing among the ruins, a presence is needed to pick up the true stories that shine in the darkness and polish them clean. It's when I lend an ear to the voices of each individual victim that I come to realize that the intricate stories cannot be bundled together under the name "disaster victims" (2015, p. 117).

When a survivor endeavors to communicate the aftermath of the disaster, they grapple with a sense of estrangement. This detachment assumes the role of a victim, yet the victim's voice remains far from singular. The "inexplicable presence" perceived by the survivor encompasses multiple voices that occasionally diverge. This is precisely why Isomae finds it necessary to include a transcendental entity such as Avalokiteshvara to serve as the ultimate intermediary. However, it is still



Figure 1. Alia (right) struggles to embrace Dunia's seemingly nationalistic vision of restoring the lost community in *In Vitro*. © Larissa Sansour & Soren Lind, Palestine/Denmark/UK, 2019, 28'

important to note that the survivor also evolves into a subject where heterogeneous voices coexist. In *In Vitro*, Alia, an AI entity, carries not only the implanted memories of the vanished community but also the memories of earlier AIs that preceded her and failed to survive. Alia depicts her emergence within a “void,” a perpetual detachment from the concept of the “now.” However, it is within these existential conditions that marginalized and suppressed voices find their place. By recognizing these unfamiliar voices, Alia possesses the potential to envision and transform the existing community.

Non-conforming positions, such as Alia's, do not inherently ensure the emergence of alternative communities. However, they bear witness to the idea that communities are fluid, defying any singular definition. Communities are intimately connected to concepts such as memories, ideologies, and personal identities. Once it is recognized that these concepts are fluid and not set in stone, communities too can become indistinct. An indescribable community that still functions as a cohesive unit becomes especially significant in the context of contemporary large-scale disasters like those in Palestine and Fukushima.

Theologian Edith Wyschogrod suggests that the concept of community takes on new meanings in response to the widespread occurrence of “man-made mass death,” a term she uses to describe the modern world from the twentieth century onwards. Wyschogrod discerns three distinct attitudes toward the community among those who have experienced significant losses. The first is a “community of memory,” which views memory as a way to represent an original past (1990, p. 169). The process of reconstructing this original past involves narrating a “heroic past” (1990, p. 170). These recovered memories are meant to serve the community's present and future needs. However, Wyschogrod contends that striving for a purely original representation involves “a deception rather than a negation of

truth, as there is no true original but rather a form of self-deception” (1990, p. 170). The next type of community is more extreme—the “community of terror.” This community emerges when its members seek to justify their existence at the expense of other potential communities. Communities of terror control their members through normative language filled with prescriptive statements and lacking descriptive content (1990, p. 172). Examples of such normative language can be found in fascist rhetoric. While the community of memory is geared toward the original past, the community of terror aims at the future of purity.

Dunia’s nostalgic yearnings for her community’s past echo the community of memory. Similarly, when Prime Minister Kishida Fumio characterized the natural and nuclear catastrophes in Fukushima as a national crisis, he homogenized both survivors and victims into national subjects. Given that Kishida’s nationalistic discourse suppresses the plurality of voices, including counternationalistic ones, his conception of Japan resonates with the community of terror. Significantly, in *In Vitro*, Dunia also frequently gravitates toward the community of terror, particularly when she envisions reclaiming the pristine past as a prerequisite for her community’s future.

In positing a third form of community, Wyschogrod introduces the concept of the “unavowable community,” a term she borrows from Maurice Blanchot. In his work, *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot delves into the inherent impossibility of love, asserting that “two beings try to unite only to live the failure that constitutes the truth of what would be their perfect union” (1983, p. 49). According to Blanchot, lovers pursue doomed relationships because their love can only find fulfillment within their individual imaginations (Blanchot, 1983, p. 48). Extending this notion from the union of lovers to the community of lovers, it becomes evident that such a community remains unattainable. Thus, the very concept of community itself appears unachievable as well. It is also understandable why communities frequently turn to fabricated memories or doctrinal principles to legitimize their existence; these are used to conceal the inherent void within such communities. An unavowable community emerges when its members no longer identify with collective memories or governing ideologies. This situation often arises when disputes over these memories and ideologies intensify, leading to heightened conflict and potential destruction of the community. The impending threat of extinction compels individuals to humble themselves and show respect for each other, rendering allegiance to higher causes unnecessary. Wyschogrod interprets the unavowable community as “the desire for the preservation of human existence in the face of the possible extinction of humankind” (1990, p. 173). Yet,

the prospect of extinction should not exclusively pertain to all aspects of humanity; events such as the displacement of Palestinians or the evacuation of nuclear disaster victims in Fukushima can be equally devastating occurrences.

In the context of the unavowable community, a notable transformation occurs in the traditional relationship between the self and others. Here, the self no longer plays a central role in communal life; instead, emphasis is placed on the other (Wyschogrod, 1990, p. 174). Furthermore, those who have been deprived of the ability to communicate find opportunities to express their claims for material or spiritual well-being (Wyschogrod, 1990, p. 174). According to Wyschogrod, to actualize the concept of the unavowable community, one must relinquish one's focus on abstract values, rules, and justice, and instead direct one's attention toward fellow human beings (1990, p. 174). This entails renouncing the exercise of power and making one's resources available to others. While this perspective may appear idealistic and perhaps overly simplistic, the notion of the unavowable community remains significant, as it sheds light on the moral stance that survivors should adopt in the aftermath of catastrophic events.

In *In Vitro*, Alia may be imagining a community that bears a resemblance to the unavowable community. Being an AI entity, she carries within her the foreign memories implanted by her creators. However, Alia regards these memories as "too vivid to dismiss as somebody else's." It is worth emphasizing that Alia never succumbed to these imposed memories or their self-justifying ideologies. Instead, she has offered her body as a vessel for the preservation of diverse voices, affirming that "[t]he structures of individual and collective memory are multidirectional, they prove difficult to contain in the molds of exclusivist identities" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 19). Alia essentially embodies what could be described as an "eros of powerlessness," a notion that aligns with the essence of the unavowable community (Wyschogrod, 1990, p. 175). Powerless individuals are those who possess unofficial and marginalized memories of their communities. Like the victims of the Fukushima disaster, their perspectives often go unnoticed in official accounts. Paradoxically, it is precisely their marginalized status and diverse experiences that challenge the established collective norms, weakening their hold on society.

This paradox leads to the emergence of an avowable community in which members prioritize mutual acceptance over the pursuit of power. Although not programmed to convey this concept, Alia grapples with the task of articulating it in her own way. Her mission aligns with the implied duties of the mute characters in Larissa Sansour's short films: *The Palestinaut*, the unborn infant, and the narrative terrorist's lost sister.

## Conclusions

Larissa Sansour's series of short films, which delve into the lives of Palestinians under colonization, offers a profound and thought-provoking critique of the concept of a post-apocalyptic human community. While these films have primarily been considered within the context of modern Palestine, this study has shown their universal relevance in an era marked by widespread disasters, whether natural or human-made. Sansour's films transcend geopolitical boundaries to explore themes of memory and community, resonating with the experiences of not only Palestinians but also individuals affected by disasters like the Fukushima nuclear incident. These cinematic speculations align with broader social critiques, emphasizing the importance of embracing alternative memories and diverse social perspectives in the face of disasters. Sansour's films echo the political philosopher Nancy Fraser's claim that "disputes that used to focus exclusively on *what* is owed to as a matter of justice to community members now turn quickly into disputes about *who* should count as a member and *which* is the relevant community" (2010, p. 72). The notion of an "unavowable community," as discussed by scholars like Edith Wyschogrod, emerges as a potential alternative type of community that Sansour's films purportedly promote. In an era marked by ongoing geopolitical conflicts and global challenges, Sansour's work serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring human quest for connection and identity in the wake of catastrophe.

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