

The Seed Keepers

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In Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind's Arabic-language two-channel video *In Vitro* (2019), an ecological catastrophe swallows Bethlehem in oil, fire, and smoke. In response, a group of scientists move underground, bringing with them heirloom seeds, human DNA, and an enormous black sphere that serves as a repository of memories of life before the catastrophe. Thirty years later, two scientists, Dunia and Alia, meet in a bunker underneath the city to discuss this cache of genetic material. "The last thing we recovered were the cocoons and the beehives," Dunia tells her young companion. Looking at the austere concrete walls of the hospital where she is confined, she adds, "I only escape the reality of our entombment when they switch on the orchard lights, and I hear the birds, bees, and butterflies."¹ Alia, however, was born in the bunker, implanted with memories that are not hers from the salvaged DNA, and will soon be sent aboveground to rebuild the city. In *In Vitro*, the seeds kept alive by scientists for future replanting become a science-fictional device for exploring the limits of preserving the Palestinian past in archives.

During the disaster, oil had oozed through the city, where it crushed houses, city streets, and the Church of the Nativity. Oil set olive orchards on fire. Oil and toxic air destroyed everything and made the land uninhabitable. In Alia's lifetime, the scientists in *In Vitro* have determined that it will soon be safe to live aboveground because weeds have been growing for several years. It is apt that this vegetal vanguard signals the possibility of return, as fruit-bearing trees, prickly-pear cacti, and other plants have long been national signifiers for rootedness and resilience. But Alia's only reality is the bunker. She is not so much a rooted tree as a scattered seed. As the conversation between the two scientists unfolds, it is clear that Alia stands in for the diaspora. She is ambivalent about inheriting the

catastrophe, images, and memories that are kept for her. Although Dunia and the other scientists keep frozen samples of human and plant genetic material from before the catastrophe to clone, Alia is not convinced that this is a viable path to self-determination. Life is more than what is frozen and reproduced in the archive. The scientists in *In Vitro* may think that by freezing plants and people they are liberating themselves from the colonial powers that oppress them, but they may actually be contributing to their own vanishing into the past.

To serve as an effective ideological force of resistance to colonialism, living things like people, trees, plants, fruits, and seeds have to be subjected to the terminal logic of the archive and imagined as consistent and unchanging. In Palestinian art, literature, and poetry, plants are corralled into the service of national myths. There is a preoccupation with preserving the original and ideal plant as evidence of steadfastness. Consider the conversation between the father and child in Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "My Father and the Figtree" (1992):

At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.
 "That's not what I'm talking about!" he said,
 "I'm talking about a fig straight from the earth—
 gift of Allah!—on a branch so heavy
 it touches the ground.
 I'm talking about picking the largest, fattest, sweetest fig
 in the world and putting it in my mouth."
 (Here he'd stop and close his eyes.)²

Like Dunia and Alia, the poem's father and daughter experience a generational disconnect. The fig has no meaning for the child of diaspora. While the daughter is unimpressed with the dry fig, the father keeps with him only the image of the perfect fig tree, healthy and heavy with fruit.

But plants cannot be frozen in time. To try to plan for the present and future, history must be worked through. Alia carries the weight of diasporic inheritance, which means she must contend with what will be left behind, carried forward, and transformed. She tells Dunia angrily, "I don't care about your nations, their stories, their rituals, their repetition of imagery. This struggle, this land, these seasons. Memory channeled by a handful of tropes. These scents, this fabric, this history reduced to symbols and iconography. A liturgy chronicling our losses. . . . The problem with nostalgia is that it keeps you entertained."³ In Alia's estimation, the repetition of national myths freezes a way of life that no longer exists. It also prevents new art and life from emerging in Palestine today. Alia fears her present is "nothing but a void" because it is always "upstaged by the past" and she must wait to be told what to do in the future.⁴ The challenge for Alia and others who belong to the diaspora is to germinate the

seeds that have scattered, adapted, and changed by force and by necessity. Alia wonders: Does it make sense to cling to past disasters in order to move toward the future? Or is it possible to scatter, adapt, and create something new? Can the practice of seed keeping and seed cultivation point to other forms of community building and world-building? In *In Vitro*, Sansour and Lind open the door to an idea of decolonization that does not return us to an earlier period of imaginary precolonial splendor as many of the botanical symbols of Palestinian nationalism hope to do, but moves us toward an alternative future based on the seeds of the less-than-ideal present.

The purpose of this essay is to theorize the seed as a living, changing, and speculative archive of Palestinian life. Seeds are useful to think with because seeds carry old biologies and inherited histories as well as genetic transformations and new possibilities. Seeds have long been used as symbols of change and revolution, of new growth and new life, and of migration and displacement. The value of seeds lies in their cultivation, transformations, and local adaptations. Alia's refusal to perform the genetically implanted and culturally inherited idea of an unchanging national identity reveals the pitfalls of an environmentalism and archival project rooted in preservation alone. Alia and the plants in the underground orchard point out, instead, that they must be grown in living conditions, associations, and relationships.

In the following sections I show how colonial and Zionist botanical archives detached plants and Palestinians from the relationships and processes of life and how Sansour and Lind's fictional scientists and contemporary Palestinian artists risk replicating this separation in their own impulse to archive. I look at the nineteenth-century American botanist George E. Post's writings, herbarium, and encyclopedia alongside Polish photographer Avraham Malavsky's typological photographs of trees and seedlings, produced between 1930 and 1936 for the Zionist organization the Jewish National Fund. These two botanical archives are of interest to me because of their visual similarities and ideological affinities. Through the individuation and taxonomic recording of particular plants, I argue that Post and Malavsky isolated plants and people from history and vanished Palestinians from their land. I further argue that these colonial and Zionist archives are an opportunity to investigate the nature of the archive and the recent proliferation of archive-based artworks in contemporary Palestinian art, which are characterized by a similar formal organization and orientation toward preservation. By broaching this topic, I do not intend to discount the importance of restoring the lost and endangered histories of Palestinian culture and heritage when the right to remember has been bulldozed by Zionism the way it bulldozes trees, houses, and graves. But I am interested in how works made by Palestinian artists can avoid replicating the organizational

strategies used by colonial archives, which have removed the objects and people contained in them from life and from historical time.

By contrast, the seed maintains the vitality of being in the world. I end this essay with a close analysis of *In Vitro* and a brief discussion of the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library, a seed-keeping project in the West Bank started by Larissa Sansour's cousin, artist and conservator Vivien Sansour, which directly inspired *In Vitro* and its focus on the preservation of plants and people.⁵ Unlike the colonial archive, the seed and the seed library follow the rhythms of life. The seed remembers the past, lies dormant but not dead through periods of scarcity, and when planted, cultivated, harvested, shared, and scattered, it is capable of changing the world.

The Native Palestinian Plant

For nineteenth-century botanists, the practice of collecting plants was a practice of defining, delimiting, and circumscribing borders. Botanists took pains to identify plants that were particular to their geographic area. As art historian Jean Fisher notes, plants are “emotionally bound up with nationalist symbolism.”⁶ For botanists, a major task was to identify “species specific to the region,” which “had to be added or subtracted from the national inventory.”⁷ In this way, botanists participated in colonial constructions of national borders, national identity, and national types, which were reflected by the native flora of the area.

In 1863, the American missionary Post set out for Syria (present-day Lebanon) and entered the field of amateur botany. Once there, Post embarked on a dogged attempt at comprehensively documenting, collecting, and categorizing the plants of the Levant. In the introduction to his nine-hundred-page encyclopedia, *Flora of Syria, Palestine, and Sinai: From the Taurus to Ras Muhammad and from the Mediterranean Sea to the Syrian Desert* (1896), Post explained that the book was assembled with great difficulty. He had few other reference books on hand, and most of the woodcut illustrations in the encyclopedia were based on drawings made from his herbarium, a collection of dried plants, seeds, and seedlings.⁸ In most botanical books and encyclopedias of the nineteenth century, the descriptive text and the accompanying drawings, woodcuts, and photographs of plants were designed to divorce the plant from its cultural, historical, and ecological contexts. Plants were decontextualized in botanical illustrations in the service of apparently transparent and objective views. Unnecessary surrounding elements such as heterogeneous backgrounds and unframed angles were carefully excised. Botanical illustrations of specimens usually featured a “snipped twig, the white borders of an empty sheet of paper, and the focus on the flower to the exclusion of the whole plant and its



Figure 1. George E. Post, *Amygdalus communis*, L. (1886). Herbarium sheet reproduced in *Wild Relatives: Jumana Manna* (Paris: Jeu de Paume, 2017), 19.

cultural and ecological surroundings.”⁹ Flat, frontal views allowed the plant’s various structures and features to be closely examined, including any accompanying flowers, thorns, and seed pods. Post’s herbarium and the woodcuts printed in his encyclopedia hew closely to established visual standards in this regard. In the herbarium, living plants were dried, pressed, and mounted with glue on large sheets of white paper, often with a typed or handwritten label identifying the plant, its location, and date of collection (fig. 1). Clipping and drying plants in the herbarium ended the specimen’s growth and cut the plant out of time and out of history.

Although the plants in Post’s herbarium were visually and temporally decontextualized, the specificity of their location in Palestine, and thereby their biblical significance, was foremost in his mind. The plants in his encyclopedia and herbarium could not be divorced from their context because they were manifestations of the land and people described in biblical narratives.¹⁰ In the introduction to his encyclopedia, Post emphasizes that studying botany in Palestine is special. Palestine is characterized by “a large and exceedingly interesting flora, containing an unusu-

ally large proportion of peculiar species,” and is described as the site of “thrilling and important events of human history.”¹¹ Post’s encyclopedia and herbarium are comprehensive visual catalogs and pedagogical tools for both scientific and spiritual study. As a missionary and botanist, Post argued that the native plants of Palestine carry deep-rooted, historical clues for better understanding biblical scripture. The Bible also served Post as a primary source for descriptions of the land and its vegetation. For example, he bemoans, “The many allusions in Scripture indicate that, at least as late as the time of Isaiah, Lebanon was a forest-clothed range. Of its cedar-forests only a few groves remain.”¹² For Post, the native plant (a witness to biblical events for almost two millennia) and the Bible (a witness to the vegetation in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon) work hand in hand.

Post imbued native Palestinian plants with historical and spiritual significance. In the conclusion to one detailed report of his botanical findings, he notes that “the variety of the flora of Syria and Palestine corresponds with its central situation and diversity of soil, climate, and surface, and the extreme inequality of the meteorological conditions of its different though not distant regions. It will not escape the thoughtful observer of these facts, that the microcosm selected for the development of the chosen people and the revelation of the Word was thus eminently suited to be the physical basis of the world-religion.”¹³ According to Post, plants and people are shaped by the environment. The geographical and meteorological conditions that allowed his cataloged plants to flourish were inseparable from the geographical and meteorological conditions that allowed the Abrahamic religions to flourish. Elsewhere Post makes an explicit connection between the character of the native plants of Palestine and the character of the people living there. The plants in the region are organized “by a special arrangement” by God and “seemingly designed to extend the range of human thought and observation.”¹⁴ Thanks to this wonderful, divine power, there are hot, wet climates and cold, dry climates, which support everything from fruit-bearing trees and hardy oaks and willows to grasses and thorny herbs. Below sea level, it’s possible to find tropical plants “resembling that of Lower India.” While in the mountains, “there is a plant, *Oxygia reniformis*, belonging to the Arctic flora.”¹⁵ The religious context, favorable climate, and diversity of flora all make this place unique, he continues. Anywhere else, “vegetable life” would be “ill-adapted to the development of a hardy independent race, such as inhabited in the mountains of Palestine and Syria.” But in the Holy Land, plants are “more favorably situated for the support of vigorous life.” This also affects “the development of individuality of national character.”¹⁶ For Post, good soil and weather were necessary preconditions for good plants and people. Both were repositories of the national soul.

Nineteenth-century botany required simultaneously individuating specific plants and defining their generalized look, or typology. Botanical illustrations and the mounted dried plants of the herbarium share a pictorial strategy with nineteenth-century anthropology, criminology, and phrenology.¹⁷ Art historian Jill Casid has outlined parallels between the disciplines of botany and human biology and their tools for classifying and identifying morphological types.¹⁸ Plants and people had to be divided and enclosed as individuals in order to make them universal types. Travel photographs and postcards of native inhabitants, which were popular souvenirs collected by European travelers in the nineteenth century, also participated in this taxonomic impulse. The photographs and postcards rarely recorded names, instead organizing the people depicted into their ethnic group or occupation, such as “Bedouin” or “peasant girl.”¹⁹ In Post’s hands, the Palestinian plant is not only an ecological type, destined for colonial sorting and identification in his herbarium, but it is extrapolated into a spiritual and national type as well.

Since biblical times, plants contributed to the stability and continuity of Palestinian society, which Post feared was being disrupted by Ottoman Turkish intrusions. Post was able to connect the nineteenth-century plants that he collected and documented to the time of the Bible because in the nineteenth-century Western imaginary, Palestine was at once a timeless, unchanging world and a ruin.²⁰ Western travelers, botanists, archaeologists, and land surveyors imagined Palestine as primarily a vacant space, empty of people, and wasting away as a result of Ottoman mismanagement. The image of neglect and picturesque ruin was a standard trope of nineteenth-century Orientalist art, photography, and writing. The ruined landscape also contained within it the subtle implication that the people who lived there were “lazy, slothful, and childlike” and had willingly “let their own cultural treasures sink into decay.”²¹

Although Palestine was apparently unpopulated and in ruin, travelers and surveyors continued to comment on the botanical richness of the region. In 1879, British surveyor Claude R. Conder claimed that vineyards and orchards stood “half ruined in the wild districts.”²² Yet he was amazed by the sheer variety of plants that he found there and the apparent ease with which they grew. “Merely scratching the ground with the light native plough” allowed barley, wheat, olive groves, wine grapes, cotton, tobacco, indigo, millet, and sugar to grow.²³ Palestine, Conder concluded, was “the garden of the world.”²⁴ To cultivate this rich garden, Conder recommended that British imperialists forcibly remove Ottoman rulers and begin the careful supervision of the native population. Post similarly suggested that “under the good government guaranteed by the European powers” it would be possible to restore “the ancient character” of Palestinian vegetation.²⁵

In the writings of Post and Conder, the native Palestinian plant, and by extension the native Palestinian people, were fixed in time or ejected from time. The ideological aims of these writers determined whether this was a positive attribute, because of the plants and peoples' perceived relation to events in the Bible, or a negative one, because of their perceived relation to political and cultural decay. Scientific images such as the encyclopedia woodcut and the herbarium sheet captured a single moment and presented it as a general, timeless condition. These images visually and ideologically fixed plants and people as objects outside of history. Once fixed on the page, they were no longer historical actors capable of intervening in the world. The fixity of plants and people made them available for imperial intervention and control. Despite efforts by botanists and naturalists to contain flora and fauna within national borders and to render them unchanging in order to better control and administer them, they seldom stayed within their boundaries. Plants defy botanists and grow in unruly ways. The movements of plants, animals, and people make it tricky to define native identity and belonging.

The Native Zionist Plant

In the twentieth century, colonial science and photography were put to use to create a Zionist native plant in Palestine. Since Orientalist discourse maintained that people and the proper care and cultivation of the land were absent, the successfully rooted Zionist plant claimed both the rights of belonging to the land and the rights to own and cultivate the land. As early as 1898, after returning from a trip to Palestine, Theodor Herzl described the natural environment and the work of Zionist settlers in these terms:

In many respects things look sad but a magnificent sky smiles over the desolate, neglected places, and where human hands have been allowed to be active, an inexhaustible nature has cheerfully helped them to bring forth, as if by magic, a profusion of products. The results achieved by the settlers, particularly those who are standing on their own two feet, are nothing short of amazing. One can still see the surrounding rocky, parched area which one such stalwart fellow entered a few years ago—but he coaxed from the soil an orange grove or a lush vineyard.²⁶

The notion of Palestine as a wilderness and as a land neglected and misused by Arab and Ottoman inhabitants, developed in nineteenth-century European Orientalist discourse, was adopted by Zionism as a justification for settler colonialism.²⁷ The existence of trees and crops planted by settlers extended Zionist claims on the land into a deep, far-reaching past. It is a recurrent theme in the writings of Herzl and other Zionists that plants

project backward an eternal Jewish presence and a direct connection to the land.²⁸ Zionists asserted that cultivating the decaying land would “make the desert bloom,” “conquer the wilderness,” and “naturalize the Jew.”²⁹

The ideological and material work of creating a Zionist native plant can be attributed to the Zionist organization the Jewish National Fund (JNF). Since its founding, the JNF has set its sights on “reclaiming” Palestinian land as the collective property of Jewish people and preparing the land for settlement. The JNF is best known for its afforestation or tree-planting campaigns, a project of literally putting down roots and making claims to Palestine’s past. To date, the organization has planted over 260 million trees in Israel and the occupied West Bank. The JNF’s tree planting is not only an ideological practice of making claims of belonging to the land; these campaigns also have material effects. Many orchards have been planted to conceal evidence of the rubble of homes, mosques, olive presses, and farmlands that lie under the soil.³⁰ Through tree planting, the JNF forcibly erases Palestinians and paves the way for ever-expanding settlements.

Photographs produced by JNF staff photographers in the twentieth century played a key role in perpetuating the idea that Palestine was a barren wasteland that had to be made productive and verdant by Zionist settlers. Typical photographs of settlers in the JNF archive emphasized pastoral scenes of men, women, and children at work as well as marking celebrations and holidays. Photographers documented large groups of people building houses, roads, fences, and canals; drilling for water and draining swamps; and laying pipes, train tracks, and foundations and cornerstones for universities, health centers, orphanages, and the Knesset. Under Zionist settlement, the allegedly desolate landscape was transformed by new factories, train stations, water towers, grain elevators, and electricity cables. Not only that, but the land, once “neglected,” “parched,” and “bare,” as Herzl claimed, was now blooming. Photographers documented agricultural schools and their plant nurseries, fields, and chicken coops; eucalyptus groves, banana plantations, apple orchards, and vineyards; as well as the routine agricultural tasks of collecting hay, threshing, plowing, irrigating, and picking and packing apples, oranges, peaches, eggplant, potatoes, jasmine, and tobacco.

The JNF’s tree-planting campaign began at the end of the nineteenth century when Herzl planted a cedar tree during his visit to Palestine. A glass plate in the JNF archive taken by Yaakov Ben Dov documents this very tree. *Origin: A Cedar Tree Planted by Dr. Herzl during His Visit to Israel in 1898* (1917) (fig. 2) features a solitary tree, rising up against the shrubs and the pile of stones that surround it. An unidentified young man wearing a uniform and carrying a rifle on his back poses next to the tree. The title gives the tree specificity and meaning, transforming it into

an individuated tree portrait. The cedar tree documents Herzl's original, symbolic action of putting down roots and naturalizing Zionism in the soil. More importantly, the cedar tree stands in for Herzl himself. Just as Post collected individual dried plants in his herbarium in order to transform the particular plant into a universal type, representing Palestinian native species, Herzl's cedar tree simultaneously stands in for himself as a particular individual and a universal type: the native Zionist plant.³¹

Polish photographer Avraham Malavsky arrived in Palestine in 1925, during one of the first waves of Zionist settlement. From the late 1920s to 1963, Malavsky worked as a photographer for the JNF, and like the other staff photographers, his work captured scenes of intense settlement activity. But nine of his photographs in the JNF archive, taken between 1930 and 1936, stand out for their resemblance to Herzl's tree portrait and might be interpreted as additional examples of native Zionist plants. Malavsky centers each tree in the middle of the frame, carefully cutting out any other surrounding trees and shrubs. The presence of other trees is nevertheless visible in shadows and in the background and sides of the image. What is important is that Malavsky has decided to single out and individuate one tree out of the many that surround it. In the photograph titled *Stone Pine Tree* (1930) (fig. 3), we see a tree with a slim trunk and branches, covered in needles, pointing and curving toward the sky. The stone pine tree also partially obscures another stone pine, recognizable by its branches and needles, directly next to it. Although the archive is silent as to why Malavsky chose this tree over its neighbor, it seems likely to me that this individual tree stands in for the particular Zionist settler who planted it as a part of the JNF afforestation campaign. It is also meant to be a universal type, standing in for all stone pines in the region.

The photograph relies on the idea that it is an objective tool for recording. The photograph can claim that it is a guarantor of truth because it is seemingly a transparent index of the world as it exists.³² This instrumental realism of the photograph is used by Malavsky to pro-



Figure 2. Yaakov Ben Dov, *Origin: A Cedar Tree Planted by Dr. Herzl during His Visit to Israel in 1898* (1917). Glass plate, accession number D735-215. Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet LeYisrael) Photo Archives, Jerusalem.



Figure 3. Avraham Malavsky, *Stone Pine Tree* (1930). Glass plate, accession number 60-021. Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet LeYisrael) Photo Archives, Jerusalem.

vide visual evidence of the native Zionist plant. These tree portraits fail in one important regard, however. They fail to convincingly reproduce a homogenous vision of the individual, which is both particular and universal, because the images include what is typically excluded from scientific botanical illustrations. Malavsky's tree portraits feature additional tree subjects, crowded backgrounds, and varied angles. As Allan Sekula explains, a photographic archive gains meaning thanks to "the unified system of representation and interpretation" which "promise[s] a vast taxonomic ordering of images."³³

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Malavsky also produced ten photographs of seedlings in which he more carefully controls visual variables in order to create a typological record of various types of native Zionist species. These seedling photographs include a rock pine, lupine, cogon grass (called "king of sands"), a eucalyptus, four unidentified grasses, and two other unidentified seedlings. The influence of nineteenth-century herbariums is obvious in photographs of the cogon grass and lupine, where the plants are mounted on a sheet of paper and identified by a typed label in Latin and Hebrew. In the rest of the seedling photographs, Malavsky directly arranged the seedling and its tangled roots on a piece of black or white fabric. In *Eucalyptus Seedling* (1930) (fig. 4), Malavsky successfully reproduces the established visual standards of botanical images. The seedling is placed against a white background and arranged to show its roots, stem, and leaves. In the seedling photographs, Malavsky uses a standard focal length and even, consistent lighting. He places all of his plant subjects at a fixed distance from the camera, in isolated, contained spaces. In the cases of the cogon grass and lupine plant, moreover, the seedlings are categorized and named. In Malavsky's work, classical taxonomy is grafted onto the project of modern nation-state building. His tree portraits and seedling typologies use science and photography to produce the existence of the native Zionist plant as something neutral, objective, and factual.

The visual construction of the native Zionist plant, which borrowed from the universality and truth-telling function of botanical illustrations and photography, displaced and replaced the decaying or dying native Palestinian plant. Unlike the dried plants in Post's herbarium or the woodcut illustrations in his encyclopedia, Malavsky's photographs benefit from indexically recording rich, minute details and capturing vibrant, living

subjects. These plants, which took root in Palestine, were not only visual evidence that the rightful tenders had returned to take care of the land. They stood in more generally for Zionist settlers, conferring on them the status of native people, alive, flourishing, and rooted to the land.

Seedtime

Many recent works by artists such as Nour Bishouty and Jumana Manna create new archives and reconstruct colonial archives. Ann Laura Stoler has identified this proliferation of works as an “archival surge” in Palestinian art-making and museology.³⁴ The increase in scholarly writing describing and assessing these archival works and exhibitions also suggests it is worth exploring the nature

of these archives more closely. Artists, activists, and archivists are collecting and digitizing posters, photographs, music, and ephemera as documents of daily life.³⁵ Although they are not involved in making official or state archives, these artists adopt the visual and conceptual strategies of ordering used by institutional collections.³⁶

For example, Nour Bishouty’s artist book, *1–130: Selected Works Ghasan Bishouty b. 1941 Safad, Palestine—d. 2004 Amman, Jordan* (2020), compiles and indexes works from her father’s oeuvre. She describes it as akin to “a repository like a storage unit in the basement of a museum.”³⁷ Bishouty is not alone in curating her family’s archive. Cultural historian Sherene Seikaly has described the trove of documents she inherited from her aunt, which includes her great-grandfather’s personal and business letters, memorandum forms, stocks, land deeds, handwritten and typed reports, passports, and photographs.³⁸ In three essays and a forthcoming book, Seikaly reckons with her biases and interventions that inform how she presents and interprets these documents. Her attempt to narrate her great-grandfather’s story, she writes, “requires destabilizing the authoritative claims of state-administered archives as the main reference against which we weigh all other narrative forms” in favor of writing histories that move beyond “the epistemologies of national boundaries, as well as the logics of triumph, defeat, and shame.”³⁹ I am interested in how these new archives, which sit

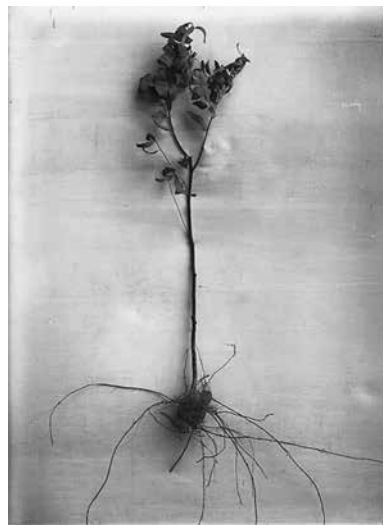


Figure 4. Avraham Malavsky, *Eucalyptus Seedling* (1930). Glass plate, accession number 60-008. Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet LeYisrael) Photo Archives, Jerusalem.

outside of the state and academy, negotiate their function as repositories of life before and after the Nakba while resisting the impulse to mummify or “museumify” those lives. In Rana Barakat’s definition, museumification transforms living cultures and communities into lifeless ruins which derive value from their potential to become artifacts.⁴⁰ Barakat fears that the preservation of culture in archives and heritage sites plays into Zionist goals of vanishing Palestinians from their land.⁴¹ These forms of record-keeping fetishize objects from a lost or disappearing community, and without a vision for a transformed future, these archives can unwittingly repeat and normalize racist, Orientalist ideas of Palestine as belonging only to the past. At stake here is the double bind of preserving culture by consigning it to death while also recognizing that it is living and evolving.

How can this current archival surge resist museumification and develop an approach to archiving that maintains the vitality of being in the world? How do artists resist replicating the colonial archive’s logics? In other words, can the archives made by Palestinian artists be less like a storage unit in the basement of a museum? Mimicking the practices of institutional collections may risk reinforcing the colonial stories these archives tell. For artists, the most common strategy of resisting the archive’s systems of sorting and evaluating objects has been to read colonial archives against the grain. They intervene by collaging, reordering, and adding narratives to the images and objects contained within the archive. This is certainly the case in Jumana Manna’s installation, *Post Herbarium* (2016) (fig. 5), which reworks Post’s colonial botanical research. One of the objects in the installation is a set of seven wooden reproductions of archival sheets of flora from Post’s herbarium. The wood has been laser-cut so that the boards are punctured with plant-shaped holes. In several of the reproductions, Manna has grouped more than one specimen and arranged them with jagged edges overlapping on a single wooden board. With multiple specimens crowded on a single board and flowers, leaves, stems, buds, and other identifying elements cut out entirely, the herbarium sheet loses its capacity to organize, individuate, and generalize. Interventions like Manna’s, which question the colonial archive’s validity, are much-used tactics in contemporary Palestinian art.

As artworks rethink the form and function of archives, the seed is a helpful alternative model of what an archive as a repository could be, who can do archival labor, and what it means to archive as an activity. Seeds resist the fetishization of the unique object in the archive because they must be replanted and replenished. Seeds are living, mobile, and adaptable to changing environmental conditions. To cultivate seeds, moreover, requires collaboration between seeds and people. Unlike the colonial archive’s presumed solitary researcher who singlehandedly deconstructs the archive’s imperial intentions, seeds must be shared and grown in com-



Figure 5. Jumana Manna, *Post Herbarium* detail of *Storage* (2016). Metal shelf, wooden print cut-outs of biblical flora from the *Post Herbarium*, dimensions variable. Installation view, Liverpool Biennial, 2016. Image courtesy of Jumana Manna and Tate Liverpool. Photo: Richard Ivey.

munities. Lastly, the seed is not subject to the archive's finality of death, because seeds belong to multiple temporal and spatial registers. Seeds traffic in sleep and wakefulness, in absence and presence. The time of seeds is a time of potential and of speculation.

The Seed Keepers

The scientists in *In Vitro* are the ideological inheritors of the nineteenth-century herbarium. They register, record, and archive memories, human DNA, and plants' genetic information in order to preserve an authentic native plant and pure national identity. Dunia and the other scientists organized their underground heirloom orchard using vertical farming and



Figure 6. The underground orchard. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In Vitro* (2019). Film, two channels, 28 min.

aquaponic farming techniques. Trees, palms, vines, and other plants are neatly stacked across four levels of concrete platforms and steps. Like the botanical illustrations and photographs which carefully excised plants from their environment and suspended them in white space, in the underground orchard there are no grasses, weeds, or soil to surround each plant. Plants stand solitary on individual steps or are carefully spaced across each platform (fig. 6). Their isolation and individuation suggests that the scientists draw on the same colonial logics of botanical classification that gave rise to the idea of an unchanging native plant.

The titles of the video in English (*In Vitro*) and in Arabic (*The Laboratory*) call attention to the conceptual importance of genetic preservation and the controlled breeding of plants and people to the plot. The video's storyboard imagines scenes of the laboratory and its breeding program that were cut from the final edit, including an image of “multiple tubes with live foetuses [*sic*] on black, in formation so as to appear as a breeding lab.”⁴² When Alia confronts Dunia about the laboratory's preservation and cloning program—“I am not the first me,” she says—we learn that she is a clone germinated from the DNA of an “original stock of heirloom children.”⁴³ Dunia and the other scientists bank genetic diversity and cultural diversity with the intention of freezing and preserving life through endless replication. They do not allow life to be dynamic and evolving. The result is that Alia, like the plants in the orchard, does not emerge from or live in a changing, living community. She belongs to a suspended past.

In *In Vitro*, the trauma of exile and dispossession is not only passed on through stories, memories, and archives, but it is also “genetically

manifest” in the cloned children.⁴⁴ The scientists set the parameters of acceptable performances of national identity by genetically reinforcing them through epigenetics. According to Larissa Sansour,

Epigenetics studies genetic inheritance not associated with alterations in the DNA sequence, meaning changes passed on genetically through generations in addition to what is delivered by DNA. One item that epigeneticists are studying as potentially inheritable is trauma. So although trauma has no impact on the DNA sequence, it can still be passed on genetically, meaning that children born of parents having experienced significant trauma could themselves carry this trauma.⁴⁵

This area of scientific research is given “a sci-fi twist,” Sansour continues, “and it is implemented in the film as a means to present history as a genetically inescapable circumstance.”⁴⁶ Rather than allow plants and people like Alia to evolve in their biocultural contexts, the scientists use epigenetics to make sure that genetically modified seeds and genetically modified people are clones of the previous generation. In this regard, their project resembles nineteenth-century herbariums as well as twentieth-century seed banks and blood banks. The banking of genetic resources, as historian Joanna Radin points out, is characterized by a conservation strategy that freezes life in “a supposed state of suspended animation.”⁴⁷ The success of genetic banking is measured by the scientists’ ability to keep these materials in static, frozen samples.

But the scientists’ project is flawed from the beginning because the plants, people, and archival objects that they preserve have complex origins and are changed by their local contexts. What seems to be missing from their work is the understanding that seeds simultaneously carry inside them the historical memory of what came before as well as the unknown promise of what is to come. Seeds are the product of coevolutionary relationships between plants, people, the elements, and the land. Anthropologist Thom van Dooren has maintained, “Seeds need to be kept growing (and being harvested, processed and eaten) *in living communities*.”⁴⁸ Donna J. Haraway adds, “Seeds are brought into being by, and carry along with themselves wherever they go, specific ways of life.”⁴⁹ Together, Van Dooren and Haraway point out that seeds are the result of living practices, associations, and relationships. Seeds are not simply copies of each other. Despite the scientists’ attempts to fix seeds and human DNA in time, they remain mobile and adaptable.

The mobility and adaptability of genetic information is particularly important to Alia. In the video, she struggles with the implications of being a copy, which leaves little room for her own personal history, opinions, and desires. Scattered throughout *In Vitro* are scenes of Alia and an unnamed young girl who mirror each other, with subtle differences

(figs. 7–8). Alia is a clone of this girl from aboveground, Dunia’s daughter, but the slight variations in their behavior reveal that she is not a perfect copy. Alia’s genetic inheritance entails a betrayal and transformation of the original.

This problem of betrayal and transformation is explored in both the narrative of the video and its installation environment. *In Vitro* was first screened at the Danish Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, for which Sansour and Lind reproduced the tiled floor of the Ottoman villa where the pre-disaster domestic scenes of Dunia and her daughter’s life were filmed. Larissa Sansour has explained that representatives of the tile-making company, Anan Tiles in Nablus, were doubtful that the tiles were of Ottoman or Palestinian origin because of their art nouveau style. It was more likely that the original owner of the villa had the tiles imported from Europe. Installing the tiles in Venice, says Sansour, “gave a sense of returning them to their place of origin, Europe, but the tiles have undergone a transformation and are reintroduced as examples of the Palestinian heritage they have become part of during their century-long exile.”⁵⁰ Despite once being European objects, in the space of the exhibition, the tiles now read as Palestinian.

Alia, the tiles, and the seeds in the orchard have been replanted in a foreign environment and they make a more complicated claim on native particularity, authentic cultural heritage, and belonging. They also point to a path toward self-determination that does not attempt to isolate, freeze, and suspend life. The process of evolving and adapting to local contexts and situations takes us to a new way of organizing life in the wake of disaster. *In Vitro* takes place at a moment of potential. Catastrophe has happened, but a new society has not yet been built. Larissa Sansour has described time in the bunker as “liminal,” “no time, lost time,” and even “the ejection from historical time.”⁵¹ She observes, “Whenever I try to reimagine a future that is different from the future that we know, it stops looking like the future. When you start thinking of a Palestine moving forward, it stops looking like Palestine.”⁵² But it seems to me that Sansour’s liminal time is also a time of speculation and potential. Alia and the orchard plants stand at the cusp of creating a new world. They are latent seeds who have spent decades underground, yet still have the potential to germinate.

Despite Sansour’s concerns about the future, there are models in cooperative agriculture and informal seed-keeping initiatives that can help us imagine what this postcolonial, post-disaster society might look like. Sansour’s cousin, artist and conservator Vivien Sansour, who conceived the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library, explains that the seed is “a subversive rebel, of and for the people, traveling across borders and checkpoints to defy the violence of the landscape while reclaiming life and pres-



Figure 7. Alia and the young girl. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In Vitro* (2019).
Film, two channels, 28 min.

ence.”⁵³ Her library is perched on the hillside of the village of Battir, a few kilometers south of Jerusalem and west of Bethlehem. A nearby hill is covered in pine trees planted by the JNF. The trees are a visible reminder of the Zionist settlements that hem in homes and farms in the West Bank. The JNF’s pine tree is a native Zionist plant that displaces and replaces Palestinian people and their crops. “The tree is both the criminal and the victim,” Vivien Sansour points out. “You can see the difference in vegetation between this hill and that one. But if you look through the pines . . . there is so much biodiversity, so much to harvest and cultivate: pomegranate, old pear varieties, all cultivars that are disappearing around the world.”⁵⁴ According to Sansour, heirloom seeds and plants continue to live and flourish in between the trunks of the Zionist pine trees. They weave their way through the infrastructure of occupation.

Vivien Sansour’s collection of seeds is an informal affair. Forty-seven different varieties are kept in glass jars on a handful of shelves. The jars jostle for space alongside books, folded napkins and aprons, and potted plants. In the seed library, it is possible to find *jazar ahmar* (purple



Figure 8. Alia and the young girl. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In Vitro* (2019). Film, two channels, 28 min.

carrot), *abu samara* (wheat), *bamyeh* (okra), *khyar abyad* (white cucumber), *kusa* (a Levantine zucchini), *yakteen* (a bottle-shaped gourd), *battiri* egg-plant, *baladi* tomatoes, and *jadu'i* watermelons. As an archive, Sansour's seed library takes up, in Jacques Derrida's words, "the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow."⁵⁵ The seed library offers the possibility of an archive and archiving practice that is fluid and evolving. Seeds are not inert inheritances for Sansour. Rather, their value lies in the constant practice of cultivation and transformation. "Our objective is not just to collect the genetic code and keep it in a freezer for a doomsday scenario," she makes clear. "The idea is actually to keep a culture alive through these little seeds."⁵⁶ It is only through cultivation that heirloom seeds are developed. Planting and harvesting seeds is necessary for developing heirlooms in the future.

For example, in 2018 Vivien Sansour noticed that some of the fava beans she had planted stayed green longer than others, even after the rains ended. She saved those seeds in order to produce a more drought-resistant

variety in the future. Farmers and artists both deal in speculation for future planting and growth. Sansour observes that farmers “have to imagine new possibilities and try them out, which is what artists do. A lot of imagination had to have taken place for our grandparents to develop seeds. It required a lot of patience, attention, and imagination to say ‘I want to try this to see if it works better.’”⁵⁷ The Palestine Heirloom Seed Library now works with dozens of farmers and recruits interested families through meals and conversations to continue to develop heirloom varieties with properties that adapt to changing political, cultural, and environmental conditions.⁵⁸ Unlike the cloned plants and children in *In Vitro*, life in the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library flourishes precisely because it encourages speculation, circulation, and change. The seed’s value lies in its constant cultivation and its adaptation to local communities and environments.

Scattered Seeds

Alia and the seeds push against a form of nationalism that wants to return to a Palestinian society before colonialism and before climate disaster. Alia feels that the past is a burden, unwillingly inherited as a result of cloning and memory transfer. But her attempt to reject the past entirely is not a viable solution either. Although the diaspora experience cannot be defined by national essence or native purity, narratives of the past position Alia. Alia’s present and future can only be made under the circumstances given to her by the past. Like seeds, which are transformed every seed cycle, and the genetic differences between Alia and the sibling she is cloned from, historical and cultural continuity persist alongside difference and transformation.

Palestine has been transformed, and it cannot be recovered by freezing plants and people. This situation requires new approaches to how we think about archives and the practice of archiving. While not denying the persistence of “traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies,” Edward W. Said points out that human life cannot be about the separation, distinction, and classification of identities.⁵⁹ Rather, it is “about the connections between things; in [T. S.] Eliot’s phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the ‘other echoes [that] inhabit the garden.’”⁶⁰ The seed is useful for attending to these echoes inhabiting the garden because it is both an archive of history, identity, and cultural continuity, and a sophisticated technology, capable of adapting to changing climates and futures. Alia must return and rebuild Palestine “by another route,” through what it has become as a result of transformation and difference.⁶¹

Here it makes sense to return to the closing lines of Nye’s poem “My Father and the Figtree,” because it deals with the mutual transformation of seeds, people, land, and home:

The last time he moved, I had a phone call,
my father, in Arabic, chanting a song
I'd never heard. "What's that?"
He took me out to the new yard.
There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,
a tree with the largest, fattest,
sweetest figs in the world.
"It's a figtree song!" he said,
plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,
emblems, assurance
of a world that was always his own.⁶²

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Notes

Thank you to the members of the Yale Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration writing group and the anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions enriched this essay. Marie Buck ably shepherded me through editing and production. Finally, thank you to Larissa Sansour, Søren Lind, and Jumana Manna for providing the images and planting the seeds.

1. Sansour and Lind, *In Vitro*.
2. Nye, "My Father and the Figtree," 6.
3. Sansour and Lind, *In Vitro*.
4. Sansour and Lind, *In Vitro*.
5. Sansour and Downey, "Epigenetics and Speculative Research," 59.
6. Fisher, "Importance of Words and Actions," 9.
7. Fisher, "Migration's Silence Witnesses."
8. Post, *Flora of Syria, Palestine, and Sinai*, 24. A contemporary alternative to Post's herbarium is the botanical garden of the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability and Palestine Museum of Natural History at Bethlehem University, which focuses on living plants and food sovereignty. See Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability at Bethlehem University, "Annual Report."
9. Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 171.
10. Biblical parallelism is a branch of biblical scholarship that attempts to find continuities between biblical and present-day narratives of daily life in Palestine. Salim Tamari and Ilana Pardes have shown that it has been practiced by botanists and ethnographers in the twentieth century. See Tamari, "Lepers, Lunatics, and Saints"; Pardes, "Rechnitz's Botany of Love."
11. Post, *Flora of Syria, Palestine, and Sinai*, 22–23.
12. Post, *Botanical Geography of Syria and Palestine*, 36.
13. Post, *Botanical Geography of Syria and Palestine*, 46.
14. Post, "Flora of Syria and Palestine," 123.
15. Post, "Flora of Syria and Palestine," 123.
16. Post, "Flora of Syria and Palestine," 123.
17. Sekula, "Body and the Archive," 11.

18. Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 6.
19. Dedeyan, "Wild Relatives."
20. Nochlin, "Imaginary Orient," 122. For further discussion on the role of biblical studies in constructing the Palestinian landscape, see Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," 180, 187.
21. Nochlin, "Imaginary Orient," 123.
22. Conder, "Present Condition of Palestine," 7.
23. Conder, "Present Condition of Palestine," 7.
24. Conder, "Present Condition of Palestine," 11.
25. Post, *Botanical Geography of Syria and Palestine*, 37.
26. Quoted in Eisenzweig, "Imaginary Territory," 281.
27. The legal concept of *terra nullius* ("no one's land") was used by European colonizers to ignore Indigenous people and to expropriate the lands they lived on. The conventional use of the term does not apply neatly to Zionist settler colonialism because of the regular, continuous acknowledgment by settlers that the land was already occupied. Marcelo Svirsky relates a story about David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, closing his eyes while touring the country to avoid looking at the Palestinian villages around him. "Settlers did not imagine the land to be empty," Svirsky points out, "rather, they brought about its emptiness" through violent removal ("Production of *Terra Nullius*," 225, 244). Alexandre Kedar, Ahmad Amara, and Oren Yiftachel add that land was also emptied out through policies and "distorted legal interpretations of Ottoman and British statutes" that denied "customary law, property regime, right to return, land control, freedom of movement, and collective culture" ("Introduction," 5, 12). Land was transformed into *terra nullius*, an uncultivated wilderness with no deep-rooted human presence, by force and by law. What I want to emphasize here is that agrarian enterprise was brought in to fill the emptied land. Like the British, French, and Spanish settler colonial projects described by Allan Greer, Zionist colonizers were "planters" and the work of colonizing was the "planting" of people, crops, and settlements (*Property and Dispossession*, 7).
28. Mostafa Hussein has nevertheless shown that nineteenth-century Zionist intellectuals such as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, David Yellin, and Israel Wolf Horowitz relied on Islamic and Arabic-language sources to learn about the flora and the history of Jewish presence in Palestine. They adapted and exploited information from native Arab inhabitants to encourage Jewish people in Europe to renew their relationship with a land they had never seen and to encourage settlement. See Hussein, "Intertwined Landscape."
29. Bardenstein, "Trees, Forests," 158, 161, 164.
30. Bardenstein, "Threads of Memory," 8–9.
31. Individual trees stand in for individual settlers. Consider historian Simon Schama's description of tree planting in Israel: "The trees were our proxy immigrants, the forests our implantation. . . . What we did know was that a rooted forest was the opposite landscape to a place of drifting sand, of exposed rock and red dirt blown by the winds. The diaspora was sand. So what should Israel be, if not a forest, fixed and tall?" (*Landscape and Memory*, 14). See also W. J. T. Mitchell's analysis of this passage in "Holy Landscape," 195–96.
32. Kim, "Unpacking the Archive," 57–58.
33. Sekula, "Body and the Archive," 16.
34. Stoler, "Archiving Praxis," 571.
35. Stoler, "Archiving Praxis," 573–77.
36. While my focus is on artists producing archives as an aesthetic project,

archivists for the Palestinian Oral History Archive at the American University of Beirut have employed a mixed method that uses the cataloging and indexing standards of institutional collections, while maintaining the “immediate, localized, and contextual knowledge” of the interviewees (Sleiman and Chebaro, “Narrating Palestine,” 71). Hana Sleiman and Kaoukab Chebaro describe this approach as both top-down and bottom-up. See “Narrating Palestine.”

37. Estefan and Bishouty, “Gathering Place for Objects,” 329.

38. Seikaly, “How I Met My Great-Grandfather,” 6, 18.

39. Seikaly, “How I Met My Great-Grandfather,” 18. Seikaly provides context elsewhere in the essay about the shame she felt acknowledging that her great-grandfather was simultaneously “an enslaver and a refugee, a colonial agent and a colonized subject” (19). For further reflections on her family archive, see Seikaly, “Matter of Time”; Seikaly, “Reading in Time.”

40. Barakat, “Lifta,” 7. For Achille Mbembe, archives are born out of death. This makes the archive a sepulcher and archiving a practice of laying to rest. See Mbembe, “Power of the Archive,” 21–22.

41. Barakat, “Lifta,” 10. Lila Abu-Lughod disagrees with Barakat on this point. Institutions like the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, she writes, demonstrate that museums are not always heritage projects that silence Palestinians by relegating them to the past. Her analysis of the Palestinian Museum suggests that the museum can be “one of the many ongoing experiments with alternative sovereignty” and self-determination (Abu-Lughod, “Imagining Palestine’s Alter-Natives,” 23).

42. Sansour and Lind, “Research and Production Materials,” 54.

43. Sansour and Lind, *In Vitro*.

44. Sansour and Downey, “Epigenetics and Speculative Research,” 64.

45. Sansour and Downey, “Epigenetics and Speculative Research,” 62.

46. Sansour and Downey, “Epigenetics and Speculative Research,” 64.

47. Radin, “Latent Life,” 500.

48. Van Dooren, “Banking Seed,” 389.

49. Haraway, *Modest_Witness*, 89.

50. Sansour and Moore, “Suspended between the Past and the Future,” 129.

51. Sansour and Mekiwi, “Disrupted Pasts, Displaced Futures.”

52. Sansour and Mekiwi, “Disrupted Pasts, Displaced Futures.”

53. Sansour, “Palestine Heirloom Seed Library.”

54. Novak, “Palestine Heirloom Seed Library.”

55. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 36.

56. Quoted in MacGreigair, “Seeds of Ba’al.”

57. Leifer, “Seeds of Resistance.”

58. MacGreigair, “Seeds of Ba’al.”

59. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 336.

60. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 336.

61. Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 232.

62. Nye, “My Father and the Figtree,” 7.

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