Sanctuary, a noun identifying a place of safety, refuge, or shelter, may also refer to a Holy place, or a sacred place. It is also the concept in which I identify a home, a place that is meant to provide fulfilment to our need for comfort, safety, and growth. However, what would become of a home once it is intruded by that which negates its attributes? This question is presented throughout my work. As an extension to the inquiry, my work examines living conditions under conflict, war and diaspora especially within a child's life. Using fantasy and assigned symbolism, this body of work reflects on my experiences, as a Palestinian-American, as well as of others’ who live under such conditions.
A CHILDHOOD MEMOIR UNDER CONSTRUCTION

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and design
East Carolina University

In Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by
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May 2017
I dedicate this thesis body of work to my loving parents, Bashir Abumohsen and Amal Abumohsen. To my awesome husband, Msallam Soboh. To my crazy siblings Yara, Ahmad, Aseel, Rawan, Dina, and Ibrahim.

Thank you all for being my stars.
I would like to thank Seo Eo and Jim Tisnado for their consistent support and generous efforts in making this body of work possible. Thank you both for being awesome mentors and a source of inspiration. Thank you to Hanna Jubran and Scott Eagle for all the work you both put into helping me accomplish in my MFA journey. Thanks to all my studio mates for always being available for lending a hand and answering my questions. You all rock!
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NARRATIVE THROUGH THE FAMILIAR

Identifying Home

What would become of a home once it is intruded by that which negates its attributes? The ability to relate to a home, the place that is meant to provide fulfillment for comfort, safety, and growth, rely heavily on its implied context. For me, my identity of a home is influenced by an account of two experiences: one, by my childhood while living in Gaza, another by my identity as a Muslim Palestinian American. Both experiences existed in a socio-political conflict which resulted in a climate that contradicts the fundamentals of home. As an extension to my topic, my work reveals an accumulation of personal and shared stories that narrates the struggle of identifying home under circumstances of war, conflict, and diaspora. These narratives most of which occurred during my childhood.

To lighten the delivery of such heavily charged topics, I chose childlike fantasy as my method. My work is composed of series of sculptures that presents my narratives poetically, disguised by symbolism and metaphors and embedded in childlike fantasy. In this case, I am hoping that the viewer can enter the dialogue by relating to it through shared universals.

Imagery from Childlike Fantasy

Whether it is through oral culture, religion, or literature, fantasy is a product of the human creative output that satisfies social needs. One use of fantasy that I found to be inspiring to my work exists within children books. In the early psychological development stages of childhood, children mainly rely on imagination to explore their emotions as well as to connect and acquire knowledge regarding the world around them. In this case, the role of artists and writers becomes vital as they creatively simplify and present reality to children. One great example would be The Lorax which is written and illustrated by Dr. Seuss. In The Lorax, Dr. Seuss chronicles the negative impact of industrialism on the environment. In an article titled About the Lorax by Dr. Seuss, Elizabeth Kennedy describes the book as followed “What makes The Lorax so effective is the combination of a step-by-step look at cause and effect: how unfettered greed can destroy the environment, followed by an emphasis on positive change through individual
responsibility.... While the rhyming text and entertaining illustrations keep the book from being too heavy, Dr. Seuss definitely gets his point across” (Kennedy).

This same method of using fantasy to approach complex topics is utilized in the adult world of entertainment. Guillermo del Toro demonstrates one good example in his movie Pan’s Labyrinth, which is anchored firmly in the reality of war. The story of the film takes place in 1944 during the Spanish civil war. Relying on symbolism through mythical creatures, Guillermo del Toro shows the brutality of war through a child's experiences that take place in both a world of fantasy and a world of reality. His movie, geared towards adult viewers, illuminates the nature of the authoritarian rule.

Child-like fantasy is also employed by Sadik Kwaish Alfraji in his work. Sadik Kwaish Alfraji is an Iraqi artist based in Dubai. In his exhibition at Ayyam gallery titled Driven by the Storms “Ali’s Boat.”, Alfraji created work that was inspired by a letter that his little nephew Ali wrote to him. As described by the Ayyam’s gallery site, Alfraji creates “a series of large-scale paintings, charcoal drawings, artist diary sketches, and stop motion video animation in which the artist blends his distinct aesthetics with that of his young nephew, and of his own children. The plight of a young boy wishing to escape the horrors of present-day Iraq is merged with the artist’s own predicament as an exile, unable to return home. In a childlike style—made all the more poignant by the melancholy sadness and gravitas so characteristic of Alfraji’s work—the pieces draw on crucial existential questions such as the wish to live in peace and security, the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment, and the possibility to dream” (Ayyam).
Figure 1. Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *Take Your Boat and Abandon Your Home* from Ali’s Boat series, 2014, installation view, india ink, charcoal on canvas, 270 x 678 cm

Figure 2. Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *Take Your Boat and Abandon Your Home* from Ali’s Boat series, 2014, india ink, charcoal on canvas, 270 x 678 cm
Tammam Azzam is another artist that practices the same method of fantasy to discuss displacement, injustice, and lack of safety due to the civil war crises in his homeland Syria. In his work, Azzam uses iconic artworks of previous famous western artists and superimpose them on images of destructed remains of civilian homes that are the result of war. In his series of collages titled Bon Voyage, Azzam superposes the images and the narrative of the animated Pixar’s children movie *Up* as an entry point to his topics. “Each collage depicts a shell-ravaged building attached to a bouquet of balloons, hovering over various landmarks and political headquarters – The Houses of Parliament, the United Nations office in Geneva, Beirut’s Pigeon Rocks – “involved in the Syrian decision,” each teetering on the edge of destruction via whirlpools, sink holes, etc. The intention is to highlight the ‘fragility of political structures in the wake of revolution’; in a way he’s simply saying ‘look, this could happen to you too, this could happen in your cities.” (Port mag.).
Interpreting Domestic Objects

Whereas the childlike element is utilized in Azzam's work and takes more prominence in Alfraji as they discuss home under war and diaspora, Mona Hatoum takes on a different route. Inspired by her own life as Palestinian in
exile, Hatoum explores cultural displacement and exile in relation to the Palestinian diaspora. Although her work does not employ the childlike fantasy as method, her ability to transform mundane domestic objects to speak of her subject matter draws my curiosity. Described by the White Cube gallery, “her work moved increasingly towards large-scale installations that aim to engage the viewer in conflicting emotions of desire and revulsion, fear and fascination. In her singular sculptures, Hatoum has transformed familiar, every-day, domestic objects such as chairs, cots and kitchen utensils into things foreign, threatening and dangerous” (White Cube). In her installation *Homebound*, Hatoum provides a great demonstration of her conceptual framework. In an essay titled *The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum’s Logic of Irreconcilables*, the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said critiques her installation as followed “Hatoum’s art which, like the strangely awry rooms she introduces us into, articulates so fundamental a dislocation as to assault not only one’s memory of what once was, but how logical and possible, how close and yet so distant from the original abode, this new elaboration of familiar space and objects really is….All this is designed to recall and disturb at the same time. Whatever else this room may be, it is certainly not meant to be lived in, although it seems deliberately, and perhaps even perversely, to insist that it once was intended for that purpose: a home, or a place where one might have felt in place, at ease and at rest, surrounded by the ordinary objects which together constitute the feeling, if not the actual state, of being at home” (Said).

![Figure 7. Mona Hatoum, *Homebound*, installation view, 2000](image)
Gaza Project: A View of Home Through Children's Eyes

I started developing my own framework by utilizing the accumulation of different tools and methods in which each artist, as I have described above, employed in their work. While my interest originated from the idea of symbolism and metaphors like that of Dr. Seuss children books, my first thesis work was inspired from by my trip to Alfraji’s *Ali’s Boat* exhibit. Using Alfraji’s method of collaboration through drawing with kids, I started a project with children between the age 5-10 years old who live in Gaza. This specific age range related to the age in which I was living in Gaza during the war. The aim of the project was to develop a direct connection with the kids through the artwork and to investigate their imagery and representations of home under war conditions.

I started my project by collecting children's drawings from Gaza that were done in drawing sessions held by my cousin Nimer, who is a Fine Art college student. Some of the children's drawing portrayed a generic picture of home, like the one of student's sample 2 below, while many others showed places like playgrounds and neighborhoods being violently attacked. Using that same method of Azzam’s work, I created a collage to sketch out my ideas. The collage included a drawing of a portrait in which I incorporated the children's’ drawings on top, as to sum up my and their experience of war. This artwork, which I titled *A Story from Gaza*, revolves around a child who is caught up between two worlds one being hopeful while the other destructive.

Figure 9. Gaza project, child’s sample drawing 1
Figure 10. Gaza project, child’s sample drawing 2

Figure 11. Gaza project, child’s sample drawing 3

Figure 12. Gaza project, child’s sample drawing 4
Having the opportunity to do the collaboration project with the children had let me to realize essential visual points that I wanted to execute in my work. First, was to retain the sense of home that I found in Hatoum's work. Her ability to portray home as the place of conflicted emotions of fear and comfort, danger and safety, strangeness and familiarity. Second, was to maintain my personal narratives that sustained this idea of home in relation to my subject matter. Just like Alfraji’s and Dr. Seuss's work, the childlike imagery would be utilized poetically to narrate my topic through metaphors and symbolism.
By observing how each of these artists develop a narrative through metaphors, such as Hatoum manipulating the functionality of familiar objects, or Alfraji using children's drawings, I began to search for my own. This set of metaphors would eventually become the visual vocabularies for my narratives. Since most of my stories come from my childhood while living in Gaza, I found it to be fitting that many of my metaphors would come from there as well. In the story section of my work, I will provide a further explanation of the symbolism behind the objects. Throughout my work, there are reoccurring forms that communicate the overall idea of home, such as the crow, jasmine trees, human figures, and multiple of colors.

To portray the dark side of war, I have chosen the crow. The crow is meant to represent the unpredictability of death, the lack of security and comfort, and the disturbance of home. In many cultures, the imagery of the crow is associated with war, death and mystery; this holds true to cultures of the Middle East and of Europe. However, my most profound affiliation with the bird comes from my grandmother as she always associated the crow with misfortune and the carrier of bad news.

The symbol of home in which it represented growth, security and happiness is projected through using trees and flowers. Frequently flowers and plants acquire symbolism from cultural practices within its specific context. For example, within American culture red roses resemble romance, whereas daisies resemble innocence and purity. However, most of my flower and organic forms in my work are an abstracted expression of jasmine trees that grew on fences around people’s homes in Gaza. What I found to be intriguing about those specific trees, is that many people grew them on their wall to create a barrier to protect their home privacy from strangers who might be walking down the street.

The child figure and the child related items, such as the bear, stand as a formal representation for the kids or the individuals who are conditioned in the various situations. In most of the work, the figure presented in the sculpture will interact with the other elements of the sculpture in accordance to the specifics of the corresponding story. In some sculpture the child might be present and in other the child is not. In any case, the figure presence is meant to guide and personalize the experience for the viewers as if it was a one-on-one conversation.
Color is another method that I have utilized as a form of symbolism. Like previous example of symbols, the connotation of color is pertained by its specific cultural context. My approach to colors is acquired from meaning within Western culture. Lighter and warmer colors such as pink, yellow and orange are usually associated with care, joy, enthusiasm, and positive energy. On the other hand, darker and cooler colors such as blues and purples are associated with depression and loneliness. For example, we often hear people say the phrase “I am feeling blue” referring to feeling sad. Black, while not a color, its connotation contributes greatly to my metaphors. Black exist as state of absence of colors and light. Black absorbs and suppresses the life of all colors to the point of non-existence. In American culture, we often associate it with death, loss, and misfortune. (Wright).

By combining all the metaphorical elements that I have described above, I create my sculptural work. The state of home in which it provides comfort, joy and growth is represented through the trees and the flowers. In this state, the plant-like shapes take on the brighter and happier palette. In some cases, these forms grow from or around my figures providing a visual sanctuary or protection for them. This sanctuary gradually loses its warmth to the cooler and darker palette once it is inhibited by the dark bird that usually rests on top. The black is meant to creates a sense of heaviness that suppresses everything beneath it. All elements come together to portray a child’s home housing both comfort and danger, fear and fascination, life and death.
In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson states the following: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." (Ushsitory) Perhaps those are the words in which the American Dream is rooted. Many of the immigrants that relocate to the United State, including my family, come in the pursuit of American Dream.

In the year 2000, my father traveled to a conference in the United States as part of a pharmaceutical research team. When my dad arrived in the United States, he saw it as an opportunity to fulfill a couple of his dreams. Both of my parents wanted us to be bilingual, grow up in a diverse community, receive a good education and have access to travel the world. But most importantly, they wanted a safe home, away from all the political conflicts that we were facing in Gaza. It took my father two years of hard work from a newcomer to the United States, to getting his license to practice his nursing profession and applying for our visas to come here.

After a long process of having to travel back and forth to the American embassy in Cairo, Egypt, we received our visas to the United States. While living in Gaza, we grew up very close to our families, neighbors, friends, and community in general. Leaving our home and everyone behind was one of the hardest experiences in preparation for our travel. Nevertheless, in December of 2002, we made it to the United States after a very long trip.

A New Home, New Identity

We were all very excited as we arrived at our new home in Lumberton, North Carolina. This home was much different than what we were used to in Gaza. The first thing we noticed is the smell of wood that is very recognizable once you walk into the house. We were fascinated by the fact that our home was made from wood since we were used to houses made of concrete in Gaza. This home was much warmer, due to the installed heating system and the carpet floors instead of the cold ceramic floors that we usually walked on in our old home. We felt much privileged in the fact that we now own our beds, had lots of new toys and clothes. Some of the exciting things we got to explore were grocery stores, foods, and children parks.
While Christmas bells rang all over Jerusalem and Bethlehem in December, Christmas in Gaza was almost non-existent because the place was closed off, and the vast majority were Muslims. However, most people shared the Christmas spirit by watching T.V. Kids would watch and hear of Papa Noel (Santa Claus) and his gifts, and they would often fantasize about him. Luckily for us, when my father was allowed to come home around December, he would bring us new toys and tell us that it was from Papa Noel. That 2002 December in Lumberton, we fully celebrated Christmas for the first time. Our neighborhood shined with Christmas joy and bright lights. My father’s friends wanted to welcome us in, so they brought us a Christmas tree that we set up at home and filled it with lights and ornaments. Our home was a magical place, every day my father would come from work with his car filled with wrapped presents from his coworkers at the hospital, and we would run with excitement to his vehicle screaming for the new toys. We felt very welcomed and embraced by their generosity.

A couple of weeks later, before school started my father gathered the family in the living room and gave us instructions on how to answer some questions when were asked in school. First was when people asked where we were from, we would respond Jerusalem rather than Palestine. Second, we should try not to engage in conversations related to politics or religion. My father explained these precautions should be taken so that we would not be endangered due to some of the aftermath of 9/11 tragedy. This aftermath included the rise of misconception and discriminations against the Muslim community in the US. Later, I found out that it was not just my family that was taking these precautions, but most of the Muslim community in Lumberton. Women especially were encouraged to wear hats instead of hijabs, since the hijab was an obvious signifier of their Muslim identity.

We were beginning to adapt to our new culture by getting to know our community through our neighbors and their kids, our schools and teachers. Since this was a new culture, in some respects, it was the beginning of a new identity for me, one that I had to familiarize myself with. However, in some situations even as a child, I felt strange while trying to adapt. This strange feeling would come through when people would ask me where I was from, and my answer would be Jerusalem. Responding with such answer; it was almost as if I was answering a question about someone else. A year later, in seventh grade, I was asked by substitute teacher where I was from, and my response was Jerusalem. The man thought that I was an Israeli, and perhaps this confusion was the main reason that my father's preferred for us to use Jerusalem over Palestine. After assuming that I was an Israeli, the substitute told me
how much he hated the Palestinian and that they were thieves that stole the Israeli land. I waited for him to finish, and I said that I was a Palestinian. He was shocked and immediately changed his tone and told me that he had many Palestinian friends. Another situation that I have encountered was on a school bus while coming back home. That day, I was asked about my religion by a little girl, I remember responding with a wave of fear and hope for acceptance “Muslim,” the girl ran to the back of the bus and sat with her friends, and I felt sick to my stomach.

While not fully understanding the baggage of the political climate between the Middle East and America, from the age of 12 I was beginning to be aware of the position in which some American have taken against the Palestinians in alliance with the State of Israel. Some of the support for this alliance is tied to the fact that most of the Palestinians are Arabs who practice Islam as a religion. Within the context of the 9/11 tragedy, which was shortly before my family's arrival to the U.S., Arab and Islam has gained a mainstream negative connotation.

After the terrorist attack of 9/11, many U.S citizens adopted an Islamophobic attitude towards the Muslim community. According to the Center for Race and Gender at the University of Berkeley “Islamophobia is a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure. It is directed at a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economic, political, social and cultural relations, while rationalizing the necessity to deploy violence as a tool to achieve "civilizational rehab" of the target communities (Muslim or otherwise)” (CRG). The rise of Islamophobia has impacted the Muslim community to a great extent. An article published by the New York Times describes hate crimes against Muslim American post 9/11 as followed “Hate crimes against American Muslims have soared to their highest levels since the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, according to data compiled by researchers, an increase apparently fueled by terrorist attacks in the United States and abroad and by divisive language on the campaign trail. The trend has alarmed hate crime scholars and law-enforcement officials, who have documented hundreds of attacks — including arsons at mosques, assaults, shootings and threats of violence” (Lichtblau).

Years have passed while living here in the United States and the close ties that I have managed to build with my teachers, friends, and community generally defined home for me. These relationships constituted what safety, love, and comfort mean. However, growing up in this political atmosphere was not easy. While trying to fit into my
community, being exposed to such conflict made me feel threatened at home. In my adolescence years, as I was developing a sense of identity through the exploration of my beliefs, goals, and values I often found myself conflicted while trying to find my place in society. Oppressed, weak, backward, and terrorist are some of the negative images that stereotyped a Muslim girl. These ideas were cultivated mostly from my exposure to mainstream media, hate comments on the internet, and comments made by people whom I encountered and were unfamiliar with my culture.

My father's advice of not being politically engaging was for the sake of keeping us safe. However, I often felt the need to share the series of events that my family went through while living in Gaza under the war that had emerged after the second Palestinian uprising. Though that has always been my intention, I often felt conflicted going back to my father’s advice and perhaps trying to blend in. Through visual art, I have found the safe place for me to express, explore, and navigate my childhood while sharing it with others. These stories I share were not just of my experience, but they also give an insight to many who lived and still live in these conditions.

Gaza

Fields of red poppies, stone textured walls, a swing under the grapevines and big glass windows, are all part of faded memories of the place where I was born, Jerusalem, in 1991. Dragging my rosy-pink plastic tub in the heat is the first memory that I could recall of Gaza and the first Israeli checkpoint I had to cross, Erez, in 1996. I was only five years old when my family decided to move from Jerusalem in the West-Bank to Gaza. My family, at the time, consisted of me, my younger brother, and my parents moved into a room in the family house where my grandmother and uncles lived. The house was in Block J in Rafah city in Gaza which is a refugee camp that had transformed into a settlement. According to research that “Rafah is a city of 71,000 residents, 80% of whom registered as refugees with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) (PCBS, 2006)” (Haysom and el Sarraj). These refugees fled different parts of Palestine in the 1948 War also known as the 1948 Palestinian Exodus.

Gaza, located in western Palestine, contains an area of 139 mi², and it houses a population of 1.8 million people. Gaza is considered one of the most densely populated areas in the world as well as one of the most violent due to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. There are currently three governments that control the borders that would allow for the
economy to grow and for people to travel in and out of Gaza: the Egyptian government, Hamas (Gaza’s government), and the Israeli government. However, since 2007, due to the complex current relations between the three parties, all the borders are under blockade making it tough for the people in Gaza to move in and out and for the economy to survive.

In Rafah, there were many narrow routes that people could only walk through to reach their homes. These rocky routes were also used by children as a playground when the school day was over. They shaped my memory of the neighborhood both in its most graceful and most violent nights. The routes were surrounded by the exterior walls of houses, and in most cases, different houses would share walls. People who lived between these walls lived in big families, and some extended families also lived in same neighborhoods.

The route behind my grandmother’s house, which was only about a couple of meters in length and about a meter in width, led to a Bedouin community. Stepping into the Bedouin community was like stepping into a different world, so it appears to me as a child. The Bedouins spoke very strangely and behaved so differently than I did. The culture in Gaza is influenced by two major factors for the different groups of people that gathered in the refuge after the 1948 Exodus. First, the original culture that each distinct group inherited from their previous lifestyle. For example, the Bedouin, the farmers, the first locals of Gaza (which referred to as the Moatneen), and the city residence were all different groups that continues to be distinct even in their dialect while speaking the primary language, Arabic. Second, by the Islamic traditions that each group adapted to their lifestyle.

The Sunni Muslim make up 99.8% of the Palestinian population in Gaza Strip. To many people, Islam practiced as a way of life. Therefore, it is the construct that runs the socio-politics of the region. Since diversity in religion was almost nonexistent in Gaza, people practiced Islam as a natural way of being in the world. Five times a day the Imam of the mosque would call the prayer through loudspeakers that echoed a sound in every route and house in the neighborhood. When prayers called, people would take a break from their daily chores and perform the Salah (prayer).
When we moved back to Gaza in 1996, we stayed at my grandmother house for a period; then we moved to the house that my parents built. My parents’ house was located right next to Egyptian border. I remember the border's high concrete walls with barbed wire extended beyond what my eyes could see. Israeli soldiers would travel on a road that is behind the concrete walls. Most of the events we experienced during the Second Intifada were in my parents’ house. The Second Intifada is referring to the second Palestinian uprising against the state of Israel.

According to Jerusalem media and communication center that “The intifada or "uprising" resulted from a combination of the failure of the Oslo process in creating conditions for an independent Palestinian state, and failure of the preceding Camp David summit.” (JMCC) It was a period of intensified violence between the Palestinian and the Israeli that lasted from 2000 to 2005. Most of the stories provided in the next section occurred at the time of the intifada and what had followed.
1. “Sleep Child, You Are in the Hands of God”

My mother walked in the room locked the door and placed a bucket right behind it. Five of us kids had brought our mattresses in, laid them on the floor as we prepared to go to sleep. She instructed to my little cousin, Inas, who came to spend the night with us that if she wanted to use the restroom, she must not leave the room but rather use the bucket.
Right after the second Intifada, the area in which my parents built their home became one of the most dangerous areas in Rafah, Gaza. Right behind our house was the Egyptian border, which is the place that Israeli tanks and military cars would come in for attacks. The attacks were violent, the constant bombing and shooting lasted for hours. Sometimes they were directed towards a target that is shooting back at them and many times they were random hitting civilians residencies. However, the attacks that were launched to demolish homes were the most intense. The demolishing was performed by airstrikes and ground attacks. Most of these attacks happened at night.

To keep us safe, my mother made us all sleep in the room that was surrounded by the most walls in the house and tried to ensure that we don’t leave at night. That night in the dark, my mother laid on the bed, and all of us laid on the floor giggling about the fact that my cousin would have to use the bucket to pee. All the sudden Inas asked “auntie, how bad does it get here? Am going to die?” being kids we all laughed at her fear. My Mom responded “everyone be quiet. You all should repeat this Quranic verse after me”. After citing Quranic verses, my mother said: “Now we are safe, you all should sleep and if any of you is afraid, remember you are in the hands of God.” Later that night there was an attack, and we had to flee our home.

In memory of that night, I have created “Sleep child, you are in the hands of God.” It is a depiction of my mother’s words comforting us while trying to put us to sleep within the circumstance. The sculpture portrays a surreal image of a child sleeping with beautiful forms growing out of her body. These lively vivid colored flowers-like forms represent the safety and comfort of the state of sleep. Hunted by a nightmare, these forms overshadowed by a dark crow that rests on the top. Wherever the crow appears the forms lose its lively vividness and it becomes sharp and dark. The crow stands as a representation of horror and fear of the unknown.
On one night, I had a dream of my brother walking towards the concrete walls of the Egyptian border to pick flowers from a tree that had grown on the concrete. I shouted at him in fear warning him that he will die if he were to go near the tree, but he continued to walk and eventually picked up the flowers. I woke up that night in a panic and was relieved that it was just a dream. A couple of days went by as I carried a feeling in my gut that my brother was not safe. Shortly after, on an afternoon, my brother and his friends were playing soccer in a field right behind
our house when loud sound shook the foundation of our home. I ran out of the shower wet as my mother screamed “The boy is gone” referring to my brother. That moment my heart was so heavy that I could barely breathe realizing that the field where they were playing just got bombed. My mother ran to the window screaming for my brother as she was relieved to find him and a couple of his friends hiding behind the house walls. The bomb had fallen on the other side of the field closer to our neighbor’s house which resulted in an injury of one of the kids that were closer to that house.

The time were an individual finds themselves in when they are not able to know if family members or close ones are safe in times of crises is overwhelming. Growing up in Gaza I had watched many times people fall into helplessness now and then when attacks were launched, and they are not able to locate their children, mothers, fathers, or loved ones. “The boy is gone,” is a sculpture I have created and named in according to the intense fear of losing my brother as my mother shouted the “the boy is gone.” Using the playground as a link to my brother’s story, I built a sanctuary for the child made of the vines and twisted to shape an arched gate. On top of the arch sits the crow overshadowing the child’s sanctuary. The gate resembles the passing from one side to the other, and perhaps, in this case, it resembles life and death. The swing hangs referencing the state of child’s play on the arched gate; it could take the child to whichever side. In the sculpture, the child’s figure is missing, leaving the viewers in the unknown.
I stood at the door of my Grandmother’s room as she proceeded to pack some of her belongings into large mesh plastic bags. That night was one of the first nights that Gaza was given a warning of an airstrike attack launched by the Israeli military. My uncle walked into my grandmother’s room and asked her what she was doing, she replied by saying “they are going to take over. We must evacuate. I must prepare myself” my uncle laughed and asked, “where are you going to go?” she replied “I am going to cross the Egyptian border. I am sure that if it gets dangerous that people will put down the concrete walls to flee”. He laughed again saying “I don’t think that we are going to be able to go anywhere. You should stop unpacking”. My grandmother shook her head and continued to pack as my uncle left the room. When my grandmother said that she would go for the Egyptian border, my thoughts were full of
questions such as will she get shot? Where is she going to go? What about her home? Are we all going? Perhaps this is what she did when she was a child.

Growing up, my grandmother always spoke of her home as a child in Yafa. She spoke of the olive groves and orchards that her family owned and the many activities that happened around the harvest season. She also talked about how her family was divided, part fleeing into Jordan while others to Gaza after the 1948 Palestinian Exodus.

“all is gone and here we are” she would end her story.

On September 2, 2015, the three-year-old boy’s body came to be washed up dead on the shores of Mediterranean Sea in Turkey. This was Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian child whose family fled from Syria to Turkey due to civil war. Aylan along with his brother and mother drowned while trying to cross on a smugglers dinghy boat to Greece. His father, who survived the tragedy, explained that they attempted escaping to find a new life in Canada in which they have dreamed of having a better life. Aylan’s story has incited the public attention to a crisis that has been building for years. Many people like Aylan family set out seeking refuge and ended up falling victims to human trafficking.

In my sculpture “Refuge,” the story of Aylan and the story of my grandmother ride on the same raft. Both had to cross the journey of the unknown seeking refuge. A journey that taken on a bid of finding comfort. My sculpture rests on a bed of black sand resembling the dark journey. On top is a raft carrying a child and his sanctuary. The objects on top of the raft overwhelm its size, making it almost unbearable to take and therefore risking it all. The boy figure in the sculpture hovers in his sanctuary looking forward.
4. In Memory of Situe’s (Grandma) Home, In Memory of Mama’s Home

Plate 4. *In Memory of Mama’s Home*, stoneware, underglaze, acrylic paint, 18”x17”x36”, 2016
Situe's (Arabic for Grandma) home had an open courtyard with a lemon tree and olive tree planted in the middle. There was so much life that happened around Situe's tree's, many family dinners, cookie making, family fights, weddings, my uncle chasing us as we played hide and seek, and my mother shouting at us to do our homework.
Since the courtyard was partially sheltered, me and Situe would often sleep in it during the summer. I would ask her to tell me a bedtime story and my mind would travel in her weird dysfunctional romantic tales.

For Mama building a home was one of her biggest dreams. When my father would come to visit from Jerusalem, he and my mom would often take us on walks. I remember them standing in a land full of orange trees and planning where they wanted to build their home. Eventually, the land was put for sale; Mama had sold her jewelry, and combined it with the money that she and Dad saved up and borrowed. They were able to buy the land and eventually started on building our home. We moved into our house as it was still partially under construction. Both of my parents would often set around the house planning what kind of furniture, tiles, colors would fit, however, all would have to wait until they can afford it. Both of my parents felt that building their home was one of their biggest accomplishments, one that they were proud of around their family and friends.

Shortly after coming to the United States, we received the news that the Israeli military demolished both Situe's home and Mama's home. My mother was devastated by the news; she mourned over the house as if she lost someone who was close to her. However, I was not able to put anything into perspective until we paid a visit to Gaza in 2006. In the summer of 2006, I stood in my neighborhood which all have been transformed to concrete piles. My grandmother home was gone, my parents’ home was gone, the streets, the routes were gone. Everything was much lifeless, smaller and narrower than when I have left as a child. This was a place that I was foreign to.

“In memory of Situe’s Home” and “In Memory of Mama’s” home are two sculptures I have created to commemorate my family homes that we lost to the war. In comparison to my other representation of the sanctuary, these two sculpture are lifeless in the sense that they are colorless. Flowers which I often use to represent the living are no longer present. The sanctuaries are dead and abandoned overwhelmed with darkness. Blue is the only color that runs across the sculpture as a representation of the memories the still lingers around these places.
Plate 6. *El Burj*, stoneware, acrylic paint, 11"x 8"x 35", 2017
“Did you hear?” one of the girls in my class had asked me “a girl was walking home from school on the street beside the border and she was shot and killed” the girl continued “it was from El Burj. I am not taking that road”. El Burj, which is the Arabic translates of “The Tower”, was Israeli gun tower that overlooked my neighborhood. The Burj was perhaps the most frightening thing that existed in my area. Even though that it was located far away from my house we were fully exposed to it. The tower stood like an invisible monster; I was always certain that I am being watched by something unknown and that at any moment I could get shot. My fear of being exposed to the tower shaped the way I would navigate my home and walk through the streets. In our home, I often sat in the rooms that had the most walls separating me from the tower. In the balcony, I would make sure that I sat where I was not exposed. I would often take the back stairs in our home also to avoid any exposure. However, there were times that I could not escape the exposure. An example would be when my mother would send me to collect the laundry from air drying on the roof of the house. Another was when I had to cross from the porch of my house to the street that I would take to go to school in the morning. In those times, I would stand and think to myself that in the next step I could either be dead or alive. In fear, I would stand on the porch repeating Quranic verses to keep me safe before I was exposed.

A visual expression of the gun tower that existed in my neighborhood portrayed through the “El Burj” sculpture. The sculpture takes the shape of an ambiguous tall structure that is textured and surrounded by sharp objects resembling bullets. As the eye moves upward, the object gradually becomes black, pointing to the space that housed the danger. The flowers that would retain the warmth and comfort are projected cold in color.
I was walking from my parents’ home to my grandmother’s, where she lived a couple of blocks away. My body stood frozen as the noise gradually got louder and louder. I closed my eyes and put my hands on my ears. At some point, I could feel my body vibrating, and I’m not sure if it was the loud sound getting closer, my heart beating fast, or a combination of both. I could feel the question in my stomach, is it going to drop a bomb? Those were the F-16 planes flying low to the ground in my neighborhood. They were often used in air strikes attacks.
It seemed that these airplanes were much different than the one my father spoke of. When my father was around, he would put us to sleep by singing to us. Many of the songs that my dad sang contained a narrative. One of my favorite songs was called “The Boy and the Kite” by the Lebanese composer Marcel Khalife. From the Boy and the Kite, my father only sang the first part, up until the skies supposedly told the boy its secrets. The words of the Arabic song translated as followed:

There was once a little child
Playing in the village, searching for a string to fly a kite
He looked around and said, "I don't know what that is shining"
"Look, look the plane"
"It's coming towards me"

"It's a big plane (kite), I don't need a string"
"And its wings are bigger than the neighbors' house"

His heart fluttered and flew on the wings of the plane
And the whole sky told him its secrets

(Marcel Khalife, English translation)

I always wondered about the rest of the song, though the story seemed incomplete the way my father sang it. The boy’s fascination of the plane that my dad spoke of was something that I could not relate to; however, there was much comfort in song’s melody. It was not until I reached my teen years that I found my younger self in the song. The rest of the lyrics goes as followed:

He stopped in the square and called to his friends
This roar of the plane was more powerful than all the voices

The boys gathered and stopped their game
And the country shook, a story like a lie
And the roar became a big cloud of smoke, I don't know what happened
The siren sounded
The plane carrying stories and poems
Set fire to the land and destroyed the home
It destroyed the home, destroyed the home

And flew off into the borders
The borders that birthed me, lightning and thunder bombarded the world
The game flew away, and with it the story
And the boys became shards of the story

The story written on the village terraces
The timid village lit like a candle

And the candle shone bright, and the scream reverberated
Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah!

(Marcel Khalife, English translation)

This was the treacherous bird, it was the Fighting Falcon F-16.

In the poetry of the song, I found the depiction of the child’s experience to be most fitting to my core idea of home. The child’s innocence curiosity and imagination bombarded by the violence of their current events. It is a story of betrayal to the child’s most fundamental rights. In my sculpture The Treacherous Bird, I try to explore the song and my experience as it relates to many who live under the F-16. The statue shows the child in their sanctuary curiously looking up. In opposition of the child is the bird flying over. In this case, the bird is representing the plane. With the color change, you begin to see the bird’s darkness taking over the child’s light.
7. Reaching for the Stars

My cousin, Soboh, and I were born in the same year, 1991. Soboh lived in Gaza with my grandmother on my mother’s side. We grew up watching an Egyptian version of Sesame Street and playing hide and seek at his house. When report cards came around, I was invidious of Soboh. He was very dedicated to his studies and often ranked among the top three students of his school. He was hard to beat and his star always shined among my family.

In the year 2012, at the age of 21, Soboh was getting ready to start his graduate studies in astrophysics at al-Aqsa University in Gaza. 2012 was also the year that the 21-year-old Ihab Abu Nada set himself on fire in one of the hospitals in Gaza, Shifa hospital. Desperate of trying to find a job to support his struggling family, Ihab lost his life to his protest. The story sent a shockwave among the many communities in Gaza, since this act was not very usual. Ihab’s story underscored the growing despair among the Palestinian youth. However, it received no recognition by Gaza’s government, Hamas (CBCnews). Despite the increasing hopelessness among many of the youth, Soboh continued pursuing his dreams. In 2015, Soboh graduated with his Master degree and published a book that received high recognition among many Palestinian scholars.

However, Gaza is the reality in which Soboh lives in, and he eventually found himself in the same trap. Unemployed, unable to pursue more education, and limited to his resources due to the blockades. The current state of affairs of Gaza is described by the WorldBank.org as followed “Blockades, war and poor governance have strangled Gaza's economy and the unemployment rate is now the highest in the world according to the latest World Bank economic update…The report estimates that Gaza’s GDP would have been about four times higher than it currently is if it weren’t for the conflicts and the multiple restrictions. It also states that the blockade in place since 2007 has shaved around 50 percent off Gaza’s GDP. Unemployment in Gaza is the highest in the world at 43 percent. Even more alarming is the situation of youth unemployment which soared to more than 60 percent by the end of 2014” (WorldBank).

Growing up, we were often told that if we were to work hard enough, we would be able to reach for the stars. However, reaching for the stars does not fully depend on the individual’s ability to perform a task, but also on the socio-political context that sets the limits to the rewards of that effort. My sculpture “Reaching for the Starts” commemorates and honor those who lost themselves in the cause of poverty and those who continue to persevere.
The figure in the sculpture is no longer a child but rather a grown young adult. The tree on top of the figure is no longer holding the jasmine but rather red poppy flowers. The poppy flowers are used to memorialize all that is lost in the pursuit of finding dreams under war and poverty conditions. The figure lay down on the bottom of the sculpture still trying to reach for the star that hangs around the dark bird. In this case, the bird resembling the authority.
CONCLUSION

This body of work started with the examination of the extent in which political conflicts can affect our fundamental rights as human beings. One of which, our ability to feel safe, included, and at home within our community. By adopting a childlike fantasy as a method of representation, my body of work explores issues of war, conflict, and diaspora that are related to my experience as a Palestinian American and to others whom I encountered. Through examining several artists who are working with similar issues concerning their context, I developed a set of tools that I found to be adequate to my method of presentation. In the pursuit of creating an imaginative space where one could envision themselves in conditions under such circumstances, my work reveals a series of personal stories which occurred during war and conflict.

Carrying on from what I have learned by creating this body of thesis work, I am hoping that my future research will further expand on what I have done so far. One would be addressing more topics that are related to the issues discussed in my work, concerning different contexts. Another would be investigating different methods of shaping the viewers’ interaction with the work. An example would be transforming one of my sculptural pieces into an installation that takes over space and guides the audience ability to navigate the environment.

The space in which my work offered me to share my story as a Muslim Palestinian American is perhaps the most valuable aspect of the process. My experiences as a child who lived in Gaza and as an individual who faced discrimination while growing up in United States is an experience that is shared by many who may or may not come from the same context. My hope is that my work becomes part of a discussion that does not reproduce the problems that cause such situation to occur in the first place. What would it be like if you were on the other side? Is the question that I will leave for myself and my viewers.
REFERENCES


