

Reverse Shots and Acoustic Ecologies: Marwa Arsanios's and Nida Sinnokrot's 'Fighting Realism'

– Elisa Adami

Abstract: This article examines Marwa Arsanios's film *Part 4: Reverse Shot* (2022) and Nida Sinnokrot's sound-installations *Sonic Faza3a* (2022) and *Storytelling Stones* (in-progress), which in different ways explore alternative modes of relating to and representing the land that seek to call into question colonial and capitalist relations of private property. *Reverse Shot* – the fourth and last instalment of *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* (2017–22), Arsanios's series of films on land struggles – documents the attempt to release a plot of land in Northern Lebanon from the private property regime. Sinnokrot's sound-installations emerge as part of the project of Sakiya, a progressive academy for experimental knowledge production that combines local agrarian traditions with contemporary art and ecological practices, opened in 2019 in the village of Ein Qiniya, near Ramallah (Occupied Palestinian Territories). In their distinct practices, both Arsanios and Sinnokrot propose alternative representations of land and its use by referring back to the practice of *mashaa* (loosely translated as commons): a system of communal land tenure characterised by a periodic redistribution of agricultural plots among peasant cultivators prevalent in the Levant up until the early twentieth century. They further engage with agroecological, geological and microbial modes of understanding and portraying the land, as well as folkloric knowledge, storytelling traditions and embodied performance. Countering the 'instrumental realism' of colonial-capitalist cartographic representations of the land, they critically redefine questions of realism and representation from an anticolonial and non-anthropocentric perspective. As this article suggests, Arsanios's and Sinnokrot's alternative representational practices are not merely invested in the project of critically mapping present social realities but in developing a 'fighting realism' that seeks to imagine possible futures and modes of living beyond colonial-capitalist regimes of private property.

Introduction

In a short essay entitled ‘Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Marble’, Jason W. Moore defines property as ‘a visual technique *par excellence*’.¹ As he elaborates, regimes of private property have been historically defined through and enabled by an apparatus of increasingly complex spatial-visual techniques ranging from the modern survey and planetary cartography to contemporary photographic and satellite-based systems of surveillance. At various junctures, this powerful arsenal of ‘visual technics’ has abetted momentous shifts in the history of capitalist modernity: from the enclosure of the commons in Europe and the colonial seizure of distant lands all the way up to contemporary instances of occupation and land grabbing. Integrated within political, economic and legal infrastructures, the visual imaginary of private property contributed to a reimagination of the world-ecology as an object of conquest and appropriation. If, as Brenna Bhandar asserts, ‘property law was a crucial mechanism for the colonial accumulation of capital’, its implementation depended on cadastral and cartographic procedures that visually and conceptually recast land as an abstract and exchangeable entity, a valuable commodity which could be expropriated, divided up and sold.² By applying Euclidean geometry and linear perspective to the production of property, surveyors’ charts and cartographers’ maps represented land as a space that could be mastered and controlled by an external human observer. Through this illusion of externality, the latter, was in turn positioned as separate and distinct from the natural environment he surveyed.³ As Moore puts it, ‘exclusive territoriality and property rights could be secured only through a new way of seeing humans, the land and webs of life.’⁴ Seen through a disembodied eye standing above, beyond and outside the ‘web of life’, planetary ecologies were reduced to ‘profitable natures’ – heaps of inert resources that could be endlessly exploited and extracted to fuel capitalist development. Moore calls this way of seeing a ‘Promethean gaze’ and shows that its role in ‘the making of the modern world’ is as pivotal as that of ‘any shipyard, cannon foundry, or assembly line. It is not only a means of mental production, but ... a software ... necessary to run the machinery of world accumulation.’⁵

Property’s expanding spatial-visual repertoire has also produced an evolving realist language which, for all its historical transformations and technological updates – from land surveys to aerial photography and drone photogrammetry – maintains an internal coherence through its affirmation of a possessive and promethean logic over nature. After Allan Sekula, we can consider representational projects devoted to the implementation and preservation of regimes of private property as pertaining to the genre of ‘instrumental scientific and technical realism’.⁶ Far from being confined to the bureaucratic-technical space of their application, the realist conventions associated with the survey and the map first, and aerial photography and satellite systems later, have seeped into broader visual culture – from the ubiquity of cartographic representations of the planet and the naturalisation of technically-mediated bird-eye views in photography and cinema, to the everyday uses of satellite maps and their artistic appropriations and detournement. If landscape design and landscape painting, as Denis Cosgrove has argued, provided a visual complement to the physical appropriation of space as property in early modernity, today’s satellite imagery and drone-eye views supply the visual

¹ Moore 2023, p. 3.

² Bhandar 2018, p. 2.

³ Cosgrove 1985, p. 55. Cosgrove connects the use of geometry and linear perspective in land surveys and cartography with the development of realism in landscape painting.

⁴ Moore 2023, p. 7.

⁵ Moore 2023, p. 2.

⁶ Sekula 1986, p. 16.

foundations to contemporary settler-colonial and neocolonial projects of land and resource grabbing and exploitation.⁷ The main function of this ‘visual ideology’, rooted in instrumental realism, continues to be the naturalisation of colonial and capitalist relations of land ownership. How, then, are we to undo this realist visual imaginary of private property long entrenched in techniques and technologies of imagining and seeing? How, as Moore asks, are we to articulate a ‘*radical visual [and aural] culture*’ that can sustain the ‘revolutionary reimagining of planetary justice’?⁸

In this essay I consider two artistic projects which, in diverse ways, seek to disentangle specific plots of lands from the colonial and capitalist property relations in which they are embedded. In their distinct practices, Lebanese artist Marwa Arsanios and Palestinian-American artist Nida Sinnokrot fashion alternative modes of relating to and representing the land. Arsanios’s film *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (2022) – the latest chapter in a series devoted to land struggles – documents an attempt to extricate a depleted quarry in Northern Lebanon from the socio-economic construct of ownership. Sinnokrot’s sound-installations *Sonic Faza3a* (2022) and *Storytelling Stones* (in-progress), which I examine below, stem from the larger project of Sakiya, a progressive academy for experimental knowledge production set up by the artist and Sahar Qawasmi in the occupied West Bank. Opened in 2019 in a rewilded hillside by the village of Ein Qiniya, 70 km west of Ramallah, Sakiya – Art | Science | Agriculture combines local agrarian traditions with contemporary art and environmental ecology as part of an effort to advance a praxis of land liberation in the context of Israel’s brutal settler colonial and apartheid regime.⁹ Through a range of legal and agroecological interventions, as well as through the concurrent elaboration of alternative representational strategies, both Arsanios and Sinnokrot can be seen as attempting to, in Bhandar’s words, ‘resist contemporary forms of dispossession without replicating logics of appropriation and possessiveness’.¹⁰ Stemming from what Moore describes as ‘forms of knowledge and praxis that flow from the love of the surface of the earth and the process of life’, both artists engage the land through geological and microbial registers in an attempt to escape the seemingly overarching reach of colonial capitalism and its scopic regimes.¹¹ In shifting between macro and micro scales, they both seek to displace dominant capitalocentric and anthropocentric perspectives by speculatively adopting the standpoint of the land and by magnifying the non-human forms of life that animate and populate it.

Importantly, Arsanios and Sinnokrot also look back at the recent past of the Mashriq region to recover alternative modes of holding and using the land that precede the full-fledged advent of capitalist agriculture. Specifically, both artists draw from the interrupted history and practice of *mashaa* (loosely translated as ‘undivided common lands’). Prevalent across the Levant up to the early twentieth century, *mashaa* refers to a system of communal land tenure and cooperative resource management (including farming, grazing, foraging etc.) characterised by periodic redistributions of agricultural plots in rotation among peasant cultivators (*fellahin*), typically at one to five years intervals. Deriving from custom and based on conceptions of Islamic property, this system privileged collective usership rights over ownership. Rather than being inscribed in legal deeds, land possession was guaranteed through its collective cultivation for common use. For centuries, the agrarian and social

⁷ Cosgrove 1985, p.46.

⁸ Moore 2023, p. 8.

⁹ See Sakiya’s website: <https://sakiya.org/>

¹⁰ Bhandar 2018, p. 18.

¹¹ Moore 2023, p. 3.

practices of *mashaa* contributed to creating sustainable rural communities and to consolidating a complex system of traditions, rituals and mythologies based on cooperative labour and commonality. With the introduction of the Ottoman Land Code in 1858, however, a process of mapping, registration and privatisation of land was set in motion that would effectively contradict and endanger the informal laws and practices upon which the system of *mashaa* rested. Part of the Tanzimat (or Reorganisation) – a series of top-down internal reforms inspired by European ideals of modernisation promulgated across the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1878 – land tenure and fiscal renting reforms instituted legal categories of ownership, established rights of succession and attempted to impose a system of title by registration known as *tapu*. While the Ottoman administration was unable to impose its reforms at village level, with many farmers resisting the law and refusing to register their land,¹² the process of privatisation, and the concomitant abolition of *mashaa*, was further implemented and institutionalised in the 1920s under the British Mandate in Palestine and Jordan, and the French Mandate in Lebanon and Syria. While French officials were more prone to *laissez-faire* policies, their British counterparts were instead particularly determined to eradicate *mashaa*, as they considered the practice economically detrimental and incompatible with the imperatives of European agrarian capitalism.¹³ In Palestine, their view was further backed by Zionist agronomists who saw in the abolition of *mashaa* an opportunity to facilitate Jewish land purchases.¹⁴

Tapping into local traditions that precede the full commodification of land within capitalist and colonial property relations, both Arsanios and Sinnokrot pay close attention to folk culture, collective memory, myths and other sources which are typically perceived as unscientific and unrealistic. However, as I argue, their respective engagements with localised belief systems and folkloric traditions should instead be understood as partaking in a critical redefinition of realism from an anticolonial perspective. In her 1971 essay ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’, Sylvia Wynter considers the epistemological underpinnings of realism as deeply rooted in the history of colonialism. She observes how, in the context of Jamaica’s plantation economy, all history was perceived by colonised and enslaved subjects as ‘a fiction written, dominated, controlled by forces external to itself’, so that reality, too, appeared unreal.¹⁵ For Wynter, countering the naturalising force of these externally imposed conditions of life requires forms of knowledge other than the normative, analytical data produced by plantation administrations and imperial state bureaucracies. As Warwick Research Collective (WReC) argue in their reading of Wynter’s essay, in such situations colonised and enslaved subjects ‘resort to other (at times informal) institutions of local knowledge production’, which are often precisely ‘those displaced by the arrival of external agencies’ and ‘associated with backcountry or agrarian lifeworlds’.¹⁶ These subaltern institutions tend to be ‘repositories of non-normative or numinous forms of folkloric knowledge, located in alternative cultural archives, often those depending on oral storytelling practices, embodied performance and the use of dialect.’¹⁷ They are also importantly connected to non-alienated ways of life and forms of collective subsistence cultivation. For

¹² Arab farmers’ reluctance to register their lands was motivated as much by practical reasons such as avoiding taxes associated with registered land and dodging army drafts, as by a reluctance to dispense with long-established systems of landholding and the kinship and social relations in which they were embedded.

¹³ Nadan 2020.

¹⁴ As Gershon Shafir has noted, even before the Mandate period, the Tanzimat reforms created the legal and economic preconditions for Jewish colonisation. With the gradual rise of land values, many large landowners were convinced to sell their lands to Jewish settlers and settlement companies. See Shafir 1989, pp. 23, 41.

¹⁵ Wynter 1971, p. 95.

¹⁶ WReC 2015, p. 76.

¹⁷ WReC 2015, pp. 76–77.

Wynter, the ‘plot’ is the site where ancestral skills and indigenous cosmologies can be kept alive in resistance against the coercive fiction of the plantation value system, determined by ‘the demands of external shareholders and the metropolitan market’.¹⁸ It is from the often communally-held plot that one can challenge the promethean fiction, so crucial to the establishment of colonial-capitalist regimes of private property, that humans are separate from nature; an epistemological fiction which, as Lisa Tilley writes, was fundamental to ‘the powerful shift in European ontology that enabled the modern mastery complex’.¹⁹

In a chapter devoted to ‘national culture’ in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon focuses on the role that native intellectuals play in reclaiming national history and culture as a process of liberation and decolonisation. Charting the native intellectual’s passage from a phase of ‘unqualified assimilation’ in colonial culture to one of ‘immersion’ into their own rediscovered national culture, Fanon sees the culmination of this transformation in a third moment he names ‘fighting phase’, when the intellectual embarks on a crusade to enlighten the masses and becomes ‘an awakener of the people’.²⁰ Adapting the notion of ‘fighting phase’ to the host of different forms of literary realism emerging in societies undergoing decolonisation, WReC coined the concept of ‘fighting realism’ to define an investment in reality which does not merely portrays a present state of affairs, but strives to reveal ‘possible futures and emergent social orders’ which are occluded by existing conditions of colonial domination.²¹ Following this articulation, here I explore Arsanios’s and Sinnokrot’s artistic projects and practices as examples of ‘fighting realism’. In combining non-anthropocentric perspectives with the rediscovery of pre-capitalist lifeways and their associated cosmologies, both artists propose alternative representational practices which work to counter the ‘instrumental realism’ of the cartographic imaginary and its restructuring of the broader visual field. Rather than merely mapping present social conditions according to the mystifying parameters imposed by these instrumental forms of realism, Arsanios and Sinnokrot fight *against* and refuse the terms of a visual ideology that has come to dominate our way of seeing and imagining the land. Through practical interventions and the reclamation of indigenous cultural forms, they both reveal and fight *for* alternative futures and possible modes of living beyond colonial-capitalist regimes of private property.

Reverse Shots

‘Let’s imagine a land that wishes to separate from the private property regime.’²² It is with this hypothetical prompt that Marwa Arsanios opens *Part 4: Reverse Shot*, the last chapter to date in her video series *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* (2017–22). The film documents a collaborative attempt to release a parcel of land from the relations of ownership in which it has been embedded for the past one hundred years. The land in question is an abandoned quarry located in northern Lebanon, 400 metres above sea level, its perimeter delimited by olive groves. Following fifty years of excavation, the open pit mine is now depleted and the surrounding soil extremely damaged, compacted and filled with small pebbles and rubble. While legally the area is split between different landowners, they all have agreed to relinquish their property rights, as their plots are mostly unusable in their current hydro-

¹⁸ Wynter 1971, p. 100.

¹⁹ Tilley 2023.

²⁰ Fanon, p. 178–79.

²¹ WReC 2015, pp. 77–78.

²² Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are transcriptions from the voice-over of Marwa Arsanios’s *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot*, 2022.

ecological state. The plan is to turn the land back into a *mashaa*, reversing the historical process by which a resource deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community has been reduced into an extractable commodity. From the beginning, however, the voice-over invites viewers to step beyond conventional epistemic frameworks, asking us to imagine that it is not the owners, but the land itself which demands to be liberated from relations of private property.

Part 4: Reverse Shot can be seen as the culmination of a process of learning from worldwide land rights struggles as captured in the three earlier films of the series.²³ Each episode focuses on the experiences and strategies devised by different ecofeminist groups, women's communes and farmer cooperatives in specific socio-political contexts. *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 1* (2017) and *Part 2* (2019) both stem from the artist's research into and personal connection with members of the Kurdish autonomous women's movement. While the first film follows the armed struggle of female guerrillas in the Qandil Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, the second explores the implementation of their eco-feminist ideas in the women-only commune of Jinwar, in Rojava, northern Syria. Built in 2016 on reappropriated land, Jinwar represents a remarkable example of bottom-up governance made possible in the political vacuum triggered by the 2011 Syrian Revolution. *Part 3: Micro Resistencias* (2020) moves to the south of Tolima and Norte del Cauca, in Colombia, where self-appointed indigenous seed guardians reclaim plots of land from the monocultural farms of transnational corporations by planting them with creole seeds. Drawing from such varied experiences of land reclamation and commonalisation, which resort to both legal and extra-legal means, *Reverse Shot* seeks to adapt and translate their lessons to the specific conditions of the Lebanese context. Taking a more speculative and propositional approach, the film follows the artist and her collaborators as they attempt to rehabilitate the abandoned quarry through an array of interrelated interventions: legal, agroecological, epistemic and imaginative.

In *Reverse Shot*, Arsanios instigates and chronicles a joint experiment in land liberation involving historian Wissam Saade, lawyer Maya Dghaidi and agroecologists Amani Dagher and Wael Yammine (from Soils Permaculture Association Lebanon), and including the participation of geologist Joanna Dammour and the artist's father, Boutros Arsanios, a native of a village nearby the quarry. Each collaborator offers different perspectives for approaching the land outside and beyond private property relations from their specific fields of expertise: living memory, history, law, ecology and geology. This collaborative structure is reflected in the film's multi-layered spoken track, which is comprised of recorded interviews and a scripted commentary read by three actors. Modelled after the reading-group discussions which Arsanios credits as one of the film's sources, this conversational script expounds on various decolonial, feminist, ecological, materialist and post-humanist ideas, providing a theoretical grounding to the project of de-privatising the land. The film's plurivocal narration, which includes moments of disagreement and divergence amongst the three speakers, disrupts the impression of coherence and singular authority often associated with the documentary voice-over. As sound and image are slightly out-of-sync – a distancing strategy repeatedly used throughout all the episodes of *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* – the technical mediation of the filmic apparatus is made transparent.

²³ Arsanios's works and thinking are informed by several gatherings and conventions she has organised over the years. In 2016, in the wake of the Beirut trash crisis, the artist invited Dilar Dirik and Meral Çiçek to present the work of the Kurdish autonomous women's movement at 98weeks, a small research project she co-run in Beirut. In 2019, during the Warsaw biennial, Arsanios co-organised an assembly bringing together women farmers and cooperatives from Syria, Lebanon, Colombia, Mexico, Poland and Germany.

‘We want to turn this land from a private property to a *mashaa*, a common’, one of the three narrators announces near the beginning of the film; ‘so that’, she continues, ‘the users won’t have an ownership status over it, only the right of usership’. This intention can be seen as partaking in a recent reappraisal of the practice of *mashaa* as a ‘sustainable, community-inclusive use of land resources’ rooted in local socio-cultural traditions.²⁴ For Reem Fayyad, what historically distinguishes *mashaa* from other land categories is its ‘social dimension’, the way it promotes a ‘communal sense of belonging, collective understanding of the place and the shared responsibility to sustainably maintain, preserve and manage the landscape and its resources for the sake of the common good’.²⁵ In *Reverse Shot*, as the three narrators elaborate, the aim of the de-privatisation project is precisely to advance the community’s rights of access and usership over the restrictions of ownership. The communalised quarry, we are told, will be transformed into a cooperative, collectively managed and used for agricultural purposes only by people who do not own any land. This opposition of usership and ownership, forcefully articulated in the film’s voiceover, can be read in Marxist terms as a struggle between use value and exchange value. As in Sylvia Wynter’s description of the plot, *mashaa* lands serve as provision grounds for the community’s subsistence, catering for local uses and needs. In contrast, as an extraction site of raw material to be exported and used elsewhere, the now-disbanded quarry was, like the plantation in Wynter’s essay, fully integrated in a colonial-capitalist world-economy structured around exchange value.²⁶

In the film, the three narrators discuss the necessity of changing the land’s legal status, rather than simply leasing it for an indefinite period of time, as a means to ensure shared practices of use and community over individual possession. As Ellen Meiksins Wood demonstrated in her study of the origins of English agrarian capitalism, the legal definition of property is ideologically based on a narrowly construed conception of use, that is its productive use for profit. In other words, ‘property derives from the creation of value, from “improvement” that enhances exchange value.’²⁷ In colonial contexts, this ‘ideology of improvement’ was deployed to expropriate lands that, even if occupied and cultivated, were considered insufficiently productive or profitable by the standards of European agrarian capitalism. The principle of improvement as the basis of property rights was legally codified in order to justify enclosures at home and theft of indigenous lands in the colonies. Following Evgeny Pashukanis’s analysis of the ideological role that law plays in structuring and facilitating relations of exchange, Brenna Bhandar shows how the juridical form of property has served to valorise and commodify the land abstracting it from any preexisting social relations or use. As she cogently puts it:

the commodity logic of abstraction obliterates preexisting relations to the land, and preexisting conceptualizations of the land as something other than a commodity. The legal form renders invisible (and severely constrains) the ways in which people live, act, (re)produce the conditions of their existence, and relate to one another in ways not confined to commodity relations of ownership and exchange.²⁸

Reverse Shot endeavours to excavate and retrieve precisely those ‘preexisting relations’ to and ‘conceptualizations’ of the land that have been obliterated and rendered invisible by the imposition of the private property regime. Drawing on research by historian Wissam Saade,

²⁴ Fayyad 2018, p. 36.

²⁵ Fayyad 2018, p. 37.

²⁶ Wynter 1971, p. 97.

²⁷ Meiksins Wood 2002, p. 158.

²⁸ Bhandar 2018, pp. 98–99.

the film's dialogic voiceover propels us back in time to a period during the Ottoman Empire when 'in absolute terms, everything was *mashaa*', since according to Islamic theology all agricultural land ultimately belonged to God.²⁹ With the introduction of the Ottoman Land Code in 1858 and its subsequent systematisation in the Land Registration and Cadastre established by the French in 1926, *mashaa* gradually became a marginal land tenure practice, an obsolete holdover incompatible with a new 'economic and legal system based on an ideology of the possessive individual'.³⁰ While presently surviving *mashaa* lands in Lebanon are mainly abandoned and uncultivated, serving as easy prey to plans of real estate development, personal memories of previous collective arrangements endure. In *Reverse Shot*, Boutros Arsanios, the artist's father, remembers the social uses, kinship ties and customs bound up with land use before it became fully commodified and privatised. As he recalls, sitting on a chair in the middle of an olive grove: 'when one would be using the land ... that was the most important sign of ownership.' First interspersed with images of a family of Syrian refugees harvesting olives, Boutros's testimony is then set against tracking shots showing a land registry office, shelves stacked high with piles of documents and bulky folders. In this sequence, the real and tangible use of the land is contrasted with the productive fiction of land titles which have ultimately determined 'the ways in which people live, act, (re)produce the conditions of their existence, and relate to one another'.

Turning to history and living memory, Arsanios unearths alternative modes of relating to the land other than commodity relations of ownership and exchange. Later in the film, lawyer Maya Dghaidi relates her attempts to actualise and implement such alternatives in the present via legal means. Albeit common in popular usage, the term *mashaa* has never been adopted as a property category or form of ownership in the Lebanese official land registries and, as such, it has little juridical value. Dghaidi suggests using instead the land category of *waqf*, one of the five classifications inscribed in the Ottoman Land Code to designate land reserved for religious or pious purposes and controlled by the Supreme Muslim Council. Although originally limited to religious uses, as a type of commons, the institution of the *waqf* offers a legal loophole to permanently freeze an estate for the benefit of a social cause. Exploiting this aperture in the law, Dghaidi is working to develop the secular notion of a social *waqf*. Unlike a *mashaa*, which is truly beyond ownership, in a *waqf* land is still owned, but property is halted and usership can be handed over for collective and sustainable cultivation. By withdrawing the land from the circuits of market exchange and the cycles of hereditary appropriation, the social *waqf* disrupts the very rationale of private property and acts as a potential anticipation to a renewed *mashaa*.³¹

Alongside this legal route, *Reverse Shot* documents a parallel endeavour to repair the land's damaged natural ecosystem. Throughout the film, we follow Wael Yammine and Amani Dagher from the Soils Permaculture Association Lebanon as they test the grounds, take samples of soil and study its composition under the microscope. At the end, they propose a

²⁹ Wissam Saade quoted in Arsanios 2023, p. 148. This understanding is based on the *Istikhlaf* theory (commonly translated as 'inheritance of power') according to which the Earth was entrusted to Man by God, to which it ultimately belongs.

³⁰ Bhandar 2018, p. 29. The French introduced a Land Title Registration system based on the infamous Torrens system which, first introduced in the colony of South Australia in 1858, gave rise to an increasingly abstract concept of ownership.

³¹ The systems of property inheritance and their exclusionary application along gendered and racial lines are summoned in the film through the story of Mariam, who was denied her family inheritance because of her gender. The voice-over pointedly concludes that: 'the only plausible history is a history of disinheritance'. For an analysis of how 'propertised' forms of oppression are shaped by relations of gender and race, see von Redecker, 2020.

rehabilitation plan aimed at restoring the depleted fertility of the soil through an increase of organic matter. Such an intervention will ultimately enhance chances of usership for farming, contributing to the overall project of creating a *mashaa* or social *waqf*. Yamine and Dagher's work can be seen as an attempt to repair the 'metabolic rift' provoked by the removal of physical matter in the quarry to feed the demands of capitalist exchange. John Bellamy Foster has revived Marx's notion of the 'metabolic rift' to theorise the rupture in the metabolic interaction between humanity and nature ensuing from capitalist agricultural production and the growing division between town and country.³² Whether in intensive farming, monocultural agriculture or mining, extractive modes of production inevitably lead to soil erosion or exhaustion causing a break in the ecological cycles necessary for its natural regeneration. In contrast, the plots or the commonly held *mashaa*, in catering for the use and needs of the local community, ensure biodiversity and the return of nutrients into the soil in a life-sustaining cycle. As Lisa Tilley argues in her reading of the socio-ecological implications of Wynter's dichotomy plot/plantation, the return to the plot, or in our case *mashaa*, offers a way 'to consciously think through metabolic repair along with social repair, as well as to actively organise against the ecological rupture provoked by the exchange structure of the plantation' or the quarry.³³ Towards the end of *Reverse Shot* the concept of metabolic rift is conjured up explicitly in the dialogical voiceover and described as that which challenges and ultimately resists private property. As we are told, 'there is an ecological rift that calls into question the very notion of property.' Through the figure of the rift, whether geological or metabolic, Arsanios points our attention to what Jason W. Moore characterises as the 'signs of revolt of extra-human nature' which constitute 'formidable barriers to the old models of accumulation' and appropriation.³⁴

If the processes of legal transformation and socio-ecological repair that Arsanios sets in motion and records have practical implications that will hopefully exceed the work itself, *Reverse Shot* is also important as an intervention in practices of visual representation. The film can be seen as an attempt to undo entrenched ways of seeing that have made possible the abstraction of nature into land, and land into property. Throughout, Arsanios endeavours to disturb and disrupt the instrumental reproduction of land within a realist visual imagery structured around private property relations. As I discussed at the start of this essay, spatial-visual techniques have had a crucial role in facilitating land expropriation and in defining private property regimes. What Moore calls 'ocularcentric means of mental production' have historically served to enforce and naturalise claims of ownership over land and nature.³⁵ Halfway through *Reverse Shot*, one of the narrators evokes this problematic complicity by asking: 'If property is the representation of the land, how would we film it without owning it?' Or as Arsanios wonders elsewhere: 'how can we film land without reproducing an imaginary of property and ownership?'³⁶

Reverse Shot seeks to address this dilemma experimentally by juxtaposing different and often antithetical visual registers, which span from CGI animation to conventional landscape framing, from worm-eye camera work to microscopy. In the film's opening scene, for instance, we first encounter the abandoned quarry as a 3D animation, the camera rapidly diving in the virtual foliage of a small grove before slowly approaching a pink-hued rocky formation. The film then cuts to a real-life drone shot panning in and then out of the stone pit.

³² See Foster 1999.

³³ Tilley 2023.

³⁴ Moore 2015, p. 121.

³⁵ Moore 2023, p. 7.

³⁶ Arsanios 2023, p. 147.

This panoramic view of the landscape, with its associations of a commanding and possessive gaze, is then abruptly interrupted as the drone falls to the ground and a blurry dark patch of grass fills the screen. Later in the film, a similar sequence occurs. A buzzing drone is surveying the olive grove when it suddenly drops down into the lawn, dry grass blades pressing against its lenses. In these two emblematic sequences, Arsanios at once references and undercuts cinematic conventions of framing the land as landscape, such as the establishing shot, the panoramic view or the tracking shot. These formal techniques can be seen as contemporary extensions of the ‘landscape idea’ which, according to Denis Cosgrove, emerged in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century as the privileged representational form of the new landowning class.³⁷ As he elaborates, ‘landscape achieved visually and ideologically what survey, mapmaking and ordnance charting achieved practically: the control and domination over space as an absolute, objective entity, its transformation into the property of individual or state.’³⁸ In landscape imagery nature is habitually presented as an aesthetic object spread out before the control of a proprietorial gaze. The observer’s mastery and command over space is guaranteed by his external, generally elevated position, his artefactual placement outside and above the landscape. Donna Haraway has famously characterised this perspective as ‘the view from nowhere’ or ‘the god trick’ and has articulated its wide-ranging epistemic and ethico-political implications – the ways in which, under the guise of objectivity and neutrality, this mode of seeing hides and universalises a specific position of power, while rendering invalid and subjective all other positions.³⁹ In *Reverse Shot*, Arsanios challenges precisely this ‘conquering gaze from nowhere’ and ‘the violence implicit in [its] practices of visualization’.⁴⁰ Through the shock of the drone suddenly plummeting down to earth, the normative promethean vision of the landscape is forcefully interrupted, so that other ways of seeing might emerge in its place.

Arsanios’s choice of filming with a drone is significant given how, across the Middle East, this technology is mainly associated with war and military surveillance. Drones are also increasingly used for mapping purposes given their capacity to capture large number of high-resolution photographs of a survey area from different angles in the quickest, most practical and safest way. Data collected by drone through photogrammetry or LIDAR scanning are combined to create point cloud models of that site, that is a set of data points plotted in 3D space.⁴¹ Arsanios thwarts this instrumental use of drones as tracking, targeting and mapping technology by staging the device’s spectacular failure, its theatrical fall. Such scenes serve to counter the illusion of immaterial and disembodied seeing engendered by aerial photography. The material and embodied nature of vision is instead underscored not just in the haptic contact of the camera lens with blades of grass, but also in a scene where a pair of hands are seen controlling and manoeuvring the drone from the ground through a small monitor. These denaturalising strategies draw attention to both the technological and earthly conditions of the aerial view, and its ideological and discursive effects within the history of colonial modernity

³⁷ Cosgrove 1985.

³⁸ Cosgrove 1985, p. 46. In relation to Arsanios’s use of CGI animation, it is notable that nowadays computer-generated images have become the common means for architects and developers to visualise and market future development projects in postcolonial contexts. See Degen, Melhuish and Rose 2016.

³⁹ Haraway 1988, p. 589.

⁴⁰ Haraway 1988, p. 581, 585.

⁴¹ Drone-based point clouds are increasingly used in several applications – from construction sites to archaeology and cultural heritage projects, from surveying to forensics. For the use of drone-based photogrammetric point clouds as investigative technology and counter-dominant practice, see Forensic Architecture’s project ‘Ground truth’ (2010–ongoing) in the Naqab/Negev desert discussed in Boshi (2024).

– that is the way in which the aerial view has become ‘the characteristic technology and emblem of an acquisitive imperious and transcendent modern subjectivity.’⁴²

Reverse Shot does not simply critique and deconstruct the ideological underpinnings of the cartographic and landscape imaginary but seeks to advance different ways of perceiving and imagining the land. The repeated, multiscale cuts from drone-eye views to earth-bound shots can be seen as a materialisation of the editing technique of shot/reverse shot that gives the film its title. Against conventional images of the land composed through anthropocentric and proprietorial modes and technologies of vision, Arsanios juxtaposes a diverse array of ‘reverse shots’ framed – that is imag(in)ed – from the perspective of the land itself. One sequence, for instance, is filmed through an unmanned camera mounted on a tripod in the middle of a sparse grove. Rapidly gyrating on the stand of its own accord, the camera captures a succession of extreme close-ups of the thicket grounds, carpeted with yellow leaves and greenish sprouts of weeds and ivy. The lens zooms in and lingers on plant roots, camouflaging insects, mushrooms and tree bark spotted with moss and lichens. Shortly after, the grove is seen from below, treetops gently swinging in the breeze, covering and at times revealing the sunlit sky. In another section, samples of soil are scanned through the lenses of a microscope, revealing the otherwise invisible living matter, bacteria and microbiome that inhabit the land. As Arsanios writes ‘the image of a land needs to be taken out of its landscape-form and turned into a quasi-scientific image: one that looks microscopically into the living matter that negates property.’⁴³ These counter-images, as she continues, are crucial in the process of deconstructing the colonial doctrine of *terra nullius*, the idea of empty land that provided the main justification for imposing systems of ownership and colonial-capitalist development.

Arsanios’s form of ‘fighting realism’ lies in the articulations of the reverse shot, which resist the (dis)possessive gaze of instrumental realism in order to insist instead ‘on the invisible that haunts the landscape – from the bacterial to the human remains to what was written out of it for the purpose of colonial expansion.’⁴⁴ By looking up from the land or magnifying the biological and microbial life residing in it, these ‘reverse shots’ offer an alternative way of seeing which displaces the centrality and supposed exteriority of the human/machine gaze. Instead, this way of seeing and being emphasises human entanglement and enmeshment in the ‘webs of life’ that make up our planet; it supports affirmative cross-species care structures which nurture plant, animal and human life alike. As Arsanios puts it, ‘the reverse shot imposes another labour of seeing, flips time, and reverses history in order to see its ghosts.’⁴⁵ In this sense, the cinematic principle of ‘reverse shot’ indicates both a reversal of perspective as framed from the standpoint of the land, and an invitation to rewind time so as to find in the precolonial past an imaginative counterweight to the capitalist present. As Priyamvada Gopal elaborates in her reading of Aimé Césaire, ‘[s]ocieties before colonialism are, by definition, societies before *capitalism* and in that capacity, contain resources for alternatives: the ante carries within it the potential of the *anti*.’⁴⁶ Through imaginative and material practices, *Reverse Shot* resists and refuses colonial-capitalist relations of private property, while bringing other possible modes of relating to the land (back) into being.

⁴² Dorrian 2007, p. 1. On aerial photography as the ‘triumph of applied realism’, see Sekula 1975.

⁴³ Arsanios 2023, p. 147.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Arsanios 2023b.

⁴⁶ Gopal 2021, p. 898. Emphasis in the original. See also Césaire 2000, p. 44.

Acoustic Ecologies

Founded in 2016 by artist Nida Sinnokrot with architect Sahar Qawasmi, Sakiya is a research platform that combines art, science and agriculture to envision and enact models of sustainable land stewardship and alternative pedagogy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Functioning at once as an interdisciplinary residency programme, progressive academy and permaculture farm, Sakiya traverses demographic divides by bringing together farmers, artisans and villagers alongside artists, architects, writers and students.⁴⁷ This horizontal system of knowledge production and sharing is based on an experimental integration and cross-fertilisation of local agrarian traditions with contemporary ecological thinking, as well as artistic and cultural practices. Central to Sakiya's vision, the notion of the commons is emblematic of such crossovers, pointing simultaneously to the communal agrarian arrangements of *mashaa*, their present recuperation as an environmentally sustainable practice, and the commoning of knowledge through resource sharing and open access. Similarly, Sakiya's capacious concept of 'rewilding pedagogy' – the guiding frame of a symposium Sinnokrot organised in 2019 – holistically brings together the ecological reparation of soils from the ravages of industrial agriculture and monocropping with a reclamation of indigenous knowledge from colonial epistemicide, corporate theft and the imposition of a monoculturalism.⁴⁸

After a period of itinerant activity, in 2017 Sakiya found a physical home in the estate of the Zalatimo family on a rewilded hillside in the village of Ein Qiniya, about seven kilometres west of Ramallah.⁴⁹ Once fully cultivated, the area has been mostly abandoned since the 1967 occupation, and consequently rewilded by its political circumstances. Following the parcellation of the West Bank laid down in the Oslo Interim Agreements of 1995 (commonly known as Oslo II), the site fell under the classification of Area C, meaning under full Israeli security and civil control.⁵⁰ While, on paper, the Zalatimo estate is acknowledged as the property of Palestinian owners and part of the municipality of Ramallah, Israel retains control of security and land-management. The declaration of roughly one square mile of the Wadi al-Dilib, or Dilib valley, lining Ein Qiniya as an official nature reserve has further restricted Palestinian use and access of private land within the area. While practically cutting off the estate from its rightful owners, these political and legal constraints have also protected the

⁴⁷ For a project developed in collaboration with a group of women from the village of Ein Qiniya, see Aruri et al. (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ See 'Rewilding Pedagogy: A Symposium on Land, Knowledge and the Commons', August 2019.

⁴⁹ The first phase of Sakiya was launched during Qalandiya International III, in partnership with the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre with a project titled 'Under the Tree'. As part of this initiative, Sakiya established a community Garden Laboratory with local agroecologist Saad Dagher to facilitate sustainable agricultural practices and botanical research; a Compost Centre made from modified cement mixers and serviced by local restaurants and residents; a Library Project set up as a regional, open source networked library featuring a custom built, portable Book Scanner courtesy of Marcell Mars, in collaboration with Beth Stryker and Cairo's Cluster Group's PILOT library initiative; and an inter-city Moving Garden project by the Danish artist Anika Barkan. The interdisciplinary conference 'Under the Tree: Taxonomy, Empire and Reclaiming the Commons', revolved around the colonial legacies of botanical classification featuring the participation of local and international academics, artists and farmers.

⁵⁰ Area C covers 60% of the West Bank and includes most of the arable lands. As B'Tselem reports, 'Israel retains control of security and land-management in Area C and views the area as there to serve its own needs, such as military training, economic interests and settlement development. Ignoring Palestinian needs, Israel practically bans Palestinian construction and development. At the same time, it encourages the development of Israeli settlements through a parallel mechanism, and the Civil Administration turns a blind eye to settlers' building violations.' (B'Tselem 2019). According to estimates from January 2023, over 500,000 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) in 144 settlements and approximately 100 outposts (United Nations 2023).

site from the unchecked urban development of the nearby city of Ramallah. Deserted for years and fallen into disrepair, in 2018 the estate was entrusted by members of the Zalatimo family to Sinnokrot and Qawasmi. After renovation work on the grounds, two historical buildings and the stone terraces, Sakiya's headquarters, farm and residency spaces officially opened the following year.

The predicament of the Zalatimo estate reveals the contradictory status of private property in the Palestinians' struggles against colonial dispossession.⁵¹ On the one hand, private property could be assumed to provide a certain level of protection against mass confiscation of land by Israel and the expansion of illegal settlements. In fact, Palestinians often resort to Ottoman-era land titles as evidence of ownership in attempts to defend their properties from expropriation.⁵² On the other hand, however, the refusal of Israeli courts to recognise pre-existing ownership, as Brenna Bhandar asserts, reflects a 'blatantly ideological treatment of property law' based on racialised national identities.⁵³ Israel's 'racial regimes of ownership' are articulated through recombinant forms of appropriation and (dis)possession that enshrine the property rights of one racialised group (the settlers) to the detriment of another (the indigenous population).⁵⁴ Further, property law is actively used as a tool of colonisation and land annexation through a range of juridical techniques of dispossession such as: seizure of territory for military and security purposes; manipulation of the Ottoman doctrine of *mewat* (uncultivated lands) which are declared Israeli state lands; abuse of the Absentee Property Law while conveniently denying Palestinians the right of return; and declarations of protected heritage sites and nature reserves.⁵⁵ In 2023, the illegal expansion of Israeli settlements across the West Bank has seen an unprecedented surge, with the establishment of at least 26 new outposts, 18 of which are agricultural farms.⁵⁶ Since 7 October, following the launch of Israel's genocidal military campaign on the Gaza Strip and the worsening of conditions in the West Bank, Sakiya has been evacuated, and its already precarious survival is now even more endangered.

Sakiya's endangered status is reflected in its very geographical location, flanked in the east by the illegal settlements of Dolev and Talmon and exposed to frequent settlers' raids, and encroached upon in the west by the sprawling urban expansion of Ramallah. This besieged position is also symptomatic of Sakiya's attempt to articulate a viable alternative to both Israeli settler colonialism and the neoliberal turn taken by the Palestinian Authority following the Oslo Accords. In many ways, as Gabi Kirk writes, the 'Oslo Accords served not as a rupture between settler colonialism and neoliberalism, but a continuation of settler

⁵¹ See Doumani and Kohlbry 2023.

⁵² As Rawan Sharaf explains, Palestinians have reclaimed the *tapu* land deed, transliterated as *tabu* in Palestine, 'and made it a kind of symbol, just like the house keys used by Palestinian refugees to claim and assert their right of return after the Nakba. TABO presently happens to be the name of a Palestinian property-investment platform that, under the motto "protecting Palestinian land by taking the long and complex procedures of land registration, land parcellation, and issuing title deeds," allows Palestinians to purchase land across the territory. The website of TABO even invites its users to navigate an online shopping list to select and reserve parcels of land for sale in the Ramallah district.' Sharaf (forthcoming).

⁵³ Bhandar 2018, p. 111.

⁵⁴ As Sai Englart has pointed out, '[p]rocesses of identification, including racialisation, operate within categories structured by the state. By mobilising these categories, the state is able to exercise control, distribute rights, and facilitate exploitation, expropriation and exclusion.' See Englart 2018, p. 153.

⁵⁵ It goes without saying of course that, despite this legal infrastructure, land annexation in the West Bank is illegal under international law. In relation to private property in Israel, it's also important to note that only 7% of the land is privately owned. The remaining 93% is owned by the State and typically leased to privates on a long-term lease for a period of 99 years.

⁵⁶ Peace Now 2024.

colonialism by other means.’⁵⁷ Since the 1990s, what Toufic Haddad terms the model of ‘neoliberal conflict resolution’ has increasingly shifted the project of Palestinian sovereignty towards targets of economic development based on real-estate speculation, enclosure of remaining public lands and boosts to private enterprise, as well as dependency on international donors, NGOisation and consumer-indebtedness.⁵⁸ At odds with this entrenchment of neoliberal privatisation in the West Bank, Sakiya seeks to reinvigorate and re-establish modes of commoning which are antithetical to the construct of private property and rooted in the agrarian cooperative practice of *mashaa*. The recovery of nearly forgotten rural traditions can be seen as offering a remedy against the twofold alienation from the land caused by both Israeli occupation and the Palestinian drive to urbanisation. It provides a way to stem the process that has gradually turned Palestinian peasants (historically the overwhelming majority of Palestinian society) into unskilled construction workers and wage labourers increasingly detached from their historical ties to the land.⁵⁹

Sakiya’s attempt to hold on to dwindling memories, discredited forms of know-how and passed-down wisdom can also be seen as a way to offset the colonisers’ systematic denigration of indigenous culture, which has often been internalised by the colonised themselves. Both early Zionist settlers and the British mandatory government dismissed as inferior and undeveloped the modes of semi-cultivation and land stewardship associated with *mashaa*. According to the racially inflected concept of ownership implemented by the British colonial administration, the traditional methods of subsistence agriculture (and even agriculture bound to the internal market), which the Palestinian peasantry had practiced for centuries, were seen as incompatible with modern European forms of cultivation and thus not a valid basis for recognising the Palestinians’ property rights.⁶⁰ Conversely, the supposed backwardness of Palestinian agriculture and the need for its modernisation were frequently used as justification for the encroachment of early Zionist settlers upon Palestinian lands. Sinnokrot often recounts the story of Abu Ibrahim, a Palestinian peasant who, between 1911 and 1912, wrote the column ‘Peasant Letters’ in the *Filastin* newspaper. An impassionate advocate of private property, he argued that the only way to modernise Palestinian agriculture and make it competitive on the global market was to abandon the *mashaa* system and invest in modern infrastructure and technology. Yet, it was later found out that Abu Ibrahim was in fact a pseudonym for Menashe Meirovitch, a Jewish agronomist who immigrated from the Russian Empire to Palestine in 1883 to help establish one of the first Zionist colonies (or *moshava*), Rishon LeZion.⁶¹

More recently, Israel has used nature preservation measures as a tool of political and territorial enclosure, and to further alienate Palestinians from their land. At least since the creation in 1977 under Ariel Sharon’s tenure as minister of agriculture, of the Green Patrol, a paramilitary unit of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, environmental concerns have been cynically deployed as a pretext to displace indigenous populations (particularly Bedouins in the Naqab/Negev desert) and legitimise Israel’s claims to land. The creation of nature reserves, for instance, is used as a means of extending the occupation, with the Israeli

⁵⁷ Kirk 2023.

⁵⁸ Haddad 2016, pp. 23–31.

⁵⁹ See Sayigh 2007; Said 1986, pp. 88–93.

⁶⁰ Bhandar 2018, p. 118. As she writes elsewhere (pp. 112–13), articulating the racist underpinnings of the ideology of improvement, ‘land that required improvement was [seen as] the result of its stewardship by people who required improvement; the colonial authority had the technology, vision, and, most importantly, the cultural habits and intellectual capacity to modernize spaces that had yet to become modern.’

⁶¹ Sinnokrot 2021, pp. 271–72. See also: Dolbee and Hazkani 2015.

government allowing only settler groups to build within their boundaries, while restricting access to Palestinians.⁶² Further, specific protection measures have been introduced to target and criminalise age-old practices, such as foraging for wild edibles which are typical of Palestinian agro-culinary traditions. As artist Jumana Manna remarks in reference to the ban on collecting *za'atar*, *miramiyyeh* and *'akkoub*, 'ancient Palestinian land practices are framed as an inherent threat to nature, and thus the right of Palestinians to access that nature is revoked.'⁶³

In the face of this systematic denigration, criminalisation and erasure of indigenous rural knowledge, Sakiya seeks to recover *mashaa* as a complex and integrated system of land practices which include cultivation, grazing, foraging and agrarian architectures.⁶⁴ For instance, the renovation of the stone terraces on the hillside of the Zalatimo estate has led to a rediscovery of the ecological properties of the *senasel*, or dry-stack stone walls, vernacular architectural features common across the Mediterranean and often used to demarcate cultivated lands. These stone walls are not lifeless barriers of separation, but thriving ecosystems that in their crevices support diverse plant and animal life. Functioning as heat sinks, they regulate temperature and create microhabitats that contribute to biodiversity, even in dry rugged soils. Their porous and hospitable surfaces are antithetical to the colonial-capitalist enclosures of private property, with their imposition of rigid boundaries between the cultivated and the wild, the colonised and the colonisers.⁶⁵ Grafting new agrarian techniques onto old heritage structures, Sakiya's stone terraces have been used to plant crops in permaculture 'guilds' – mutually beneficial communities of plants which support each other's growth by resisting diseases or pests. Both new permaculture methods and old local techniques of semi-cultivation support coexistence between domesticated crops and their wild relatives, giving new impulse to practices of seasonal herb-picking, which at Sakiya are encouraged through group walks and communal food preparation. This effort to restore local pride in fast eroding artisanal and agrarian skills can potentially have far-reaching social implications, inspiring younger generations to relearn old crafts as an alternative to searching for employment in urban areas.

However, as Sinnokrot makes clear, *mashaa* is not just a system of land tenure and stewardship of natural resources. It stands for an entire, now largely vanished, way of life, with its traditions of cooperative labour, forms of celebration, ritualistic customs and complex cosmologies reaching back to pre-Islamic beliefs. As he explains, in losing *mashaa*

we lose other things as well: the stories and songs we would sing when we're thrashing wheat and farming, and all these moves and rhythms that are part of our histories, such as *debke*, where all the dance moves come from farming, or *zajal* (a form of improvised call-and-response singing with its roots in agricultural tradition).⁶⁶

Part of Sakiya's purpose is then that of rediscovering and creatively nurturing this rich culture through local folklore, storytelling and myths. For Sinnokrot, mythologies are similar to infrastructures in that they govern and manage our relationship to nature and the built

⁶² Tesdell (forthcoming).

⁶³ Incidentally, it was then minister of agriculture Ariel Sharon who, in 1977, declared *za'atar* a protected species, placing a *de facto* total ban on the old-age tradition of foraging the plant. Manna 2020. See also Eghbariah 2020. Manna further explores this issue in her experimental documentary *Foragers* (2022).

⁶⁴ In relation to the eliminatory tendencies of settler colonialism, see Wolfe 2006. See also the concept of 'memoricide' in Pappe 2006.

⁶⁵ Gray (forthcoming).

⁶⁶ Sinnokrot and Zhexi Zhang 2019, p. 40.

environment, ‘assuage our anxieties and offer forms of embodiment, collective labour and celebration’.⁶⁷ The first open call for Sakiya’s residency programme, entitled ‘Infrastructure as Art – aboveground, ground, belowground’ (2020), for instance, evoked the mythical spirits (*jinn*s) which are believed to inhabit the site and characterised their presence as an invisible infrastructure. As the open call states:

From the Maqam (holy shrine) of Abul-einien, and the water spring of Um El-einien, the holy Oak ballout on top of Abul-adham al-Ajami’s grave, to the holy boulder of Sabah El-kheir, spirits have historically inhabited Sakiya’s hillside and are often associated with ritual, and collective imagination. These spirits, concealed from our senses, guard and govern the infrastructure of our site.⁶⁸

The open call elicited proposals for sustainable and ‘ephemeral infrastructures’ which can be built on Sakiya’s site in spite of Israel’s ban on new Palestinian constructions in Area C. The emphasis on the three dimensions of ‘aboveground, ground and belowground’ is inspired by ethnographer Tawfic Canaan’s 1914 study of Palestinian demonology, which loosely organised the spirit world in three categories – earth spirits, subterranean spirits and hellish spirits.⁶⁹ This allusion to pre-Islamic otherworldly beings serves to literally *ground* the construction of new sustainable infrastructures and technologies in local mythologies. Rather than seeing sustainability solely as an issue of design, a problem that can be solved through a mere techno-fix, Sinnokrot believes that sustainable practices require ‘sustainable mythologies that can germinate our imaginations as we move into the future.’⁷⁰

In a similar spirit to Arsanios’s project, Sakiya’s holistic approach seeks to reimagine the land outside a system of representation dominated by capitalist relations of private property and colonial forms of dispossession. Land in the West Bank is routinely scanned from the air in Israeli photometrical land surveys and IDF-coordinated surveillance-based security operations.⁷¹ Eyal Weizman has famously described Israel’s complex system of domination as a ‘politics of verticality’ in which Palestinian territory is not only fragmented in a patchwork of sealed islands, but also severed vertically into different, discontinuous layers, ‘making the ground below and the air above separate and distinct from, rather than continuous with and organic to, the surface of the earth.’⁷² If, at least notionally, Palestinians have jurisdiction on the land surface of increasingly shrinking and fragmentary areas, Israel holds full control of the militarized space above and the vast water aquifer in the subterranean. As in Sylvia Wynter’s characterisation of the unreal conditions of life imposed in the plantation value-system, the remaking of the natural environment through the visible and hidden infrastructures of Israeli occupation produces promethean fictions of domination which Palestinians can imaginatively challenge by turning to precolonial reservoirs of folkloric and numinous knowledge. For instance, the secular revival of the elemental animism documented by Canaan – with its above, below and on the ground spirits – offers ways to recompose the colonial segregation of complex ecologies into the holistic unity of the pre-Islamic spirit world.

⁶⁷ Sinnokrot 2021, p. 279.

⁶⁸ Sakiya 2020.

⁶⁹ See Canaan 1922; Abboud 2018.

⁷⁰ Sinnokrot 2021, p. 279.

⁷¹ Since 1967, Israel undertakes thorough aerial survey every two years. Photometrical aerial land surveys have replaced conventional land surveys. See Weizman 2007, p. 118.

⁷² Weizman 2007, p. 12.

Against the colonial cartography of Israeli surveillance which scans the land from above and cuts it both horizontally and vertically, Sinnokrot puts forward what he calls an ‘acoustic ecology’ of stories, folklore and mythology.⁷³ Articulated in a growing number of environmental sculptures and ephemeral infrastructures, this ‘acoustic ecology’ counters the occupiers’ ocularcentric and instrumental representations of the land, with sonic and embodied forms of countermapping.⁷⁴ Sinnokrot draws inspiration from practices of ‘mapping’ in the *mashaa* system, where the extent of a land to be tended as a commons was defined aurally by the distance one’s voice carried over hills, valleys and flatlands. Opposed to the demarcation of territories through visual-spatial procedures, this embodied way of relating to the land through the ear/voice produces what the artist calls ‘terra-stories’ – or stories of the land.⁷⁵ An example of this acoustic ecology can be found in *Storytelling Stones* (2022–ongoing), sonic environmental installations built with the heritage craft of dry-stack stone. *Storytelling Stones* structurally mimic the *mintar*, mortarless stone domes typical of the Palestinian landscape, which were once used for seasonal crop storage and informal habitation but are now largely fallen into disrepair. Hyper-contextual sculptures built with material existing on site, their dry-stack stone walls are porous surfaces providing shelter to and sustaining a wealth of biodiversity. With environmental sensors lodged between their cracks and crevices, *Storytelling Stones* function as ‘echo chambers’ which record, re-play and amplify their eco-acoustic environments. Moving away from anthropocentric perspectives, these sonic constructions give voice instead to the rich non-human life inhabiting them. Moreover, as an architectural form found in many parts of the world, as Ros Gray points out, drystone walls provide ‘a point of connection to a wider network of agricultural sites and regenerative projects globally.’⁷⁶

The project *Sonic Faza3a* (2022) is another example of an ephemeral acoustic installation designed to both sidestep the restrictions imposed by the occupation and restore a mythic relation to the land. In area C, Palestinian farmers are prevented by law from building fences, and Israeli soldiers are also known to target and get rid of their scarecrows, which in Arabic are called *fazaa* (a term evoking both fear and astonishment). This makes it hard for farmers to protect their crops from wild animals, particularly wild boar. Composed of sensors, cables and amplifiers, *Sonic Faza3a* are functional devices that farmers can use to play certain sounds that deter and repel wild boar or birds while crops mature, and then switch to different sounds that attract boar back when it’s time to till the soil. As fluid and permeable envelopes, these sonic scarecrows protect without enclosing, thus countering the rigidity of colonial borders with an ethics of seasonal adaptability and multi-species co-habitation. In Sinnokrot’s words, these resounding bodies ‘witness rather than survey, whispering a glossary of protection and hospitality’.⁷⁷ Inspired by pre-Islamic material animism, *Sonic Faza3a* ‘resonate with mythical creatures to re-situate the nonhuman within an acoustic ecology’.⁷⁸ Besides fulfilling practical purposes such as keeping wild animals away and acoustically monitoring the health of the soil, these sonic devices also play a cultural and artistic function

⁷³ Sinnokrot 2023, p. 90.

⁷⁴ For a different project of countermapping in Israel/Palestine which uses drone technology against colonial erasure, see the discussion of Miki Kratsman and Shabtai Pinchevsky’s Anti-Mapping project in Fisher 2019. In 2020, Sinnokrot started using LIDAR scanning technology to produce point cloud models of Sakiya’s site – a digital repository as an insurance against its potential erasure.

⁷⁵ Sinnokrot 2023, p. 90. Borders were alternatively fluidly defined by natural landmarks, such as fig, olive (Alkhalili 2017, p.110) or carob trees (Quiquívix 2013).

⁷⁶ Gray (forthcoming). In fact, Sinnokrot has been conducting research into Native American typologies of dry-stack stone constructions, as well as Uhaul Huma Pōhaku traditions.

⁷⁷ Sinnokrot 2023, p. 96.

⁷⁸ Sinnokrot in Gray (forthcoming).

as storytelling machines and installations in exhibition spaces. In the context of ‘In the Eddy of the Stream’, an exhibition bringing together the artist-duo Cooking Sections and Sakiya at the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh in 2022, an iteration of *Sonic Faza3a* was presented as an installation of clay vessels playing compositions recorded by former Sakiya artist-in-residence Bint Mbareh.⁷⁹ Based on traditional lore and interviews with two generations of local women, Mbareh’s sound-piece weaves the sounds of rain, water and other natural elements into a speculative narrative.

Akin to Arsanios’s reverse shots, Sinnokrot’s acoustic ecological infrastructures offer alternative ways of relating to the land which displace anthropocentric and imperial scopic regimes. In opposition to the dominant visual imaginary of private property, the medium of sound is favoured for its ephemerality and capacity to transcend human-made borders and to recompose politically divided territories. Like the quasi-scientific micro-images of *Reverse Shot*, Sinnokrot’s environmental sculptures magnify sonically the invisible living matter that inhabits the land and negates property. They also become vehicles for producing and disseminating alternative forms of knowledge which nurture a ‘revolutionary reimagining of planetary justice’.⁸⁰ Rooted in storytelling, local folklore and embodied performances, these revived indigenous epistemologies challenge the promethean fantasy of capitalist-colonial modernity and its naturalisation in instrumental-realist representations of the land. In doing so, Sinnokrot’s works ‘germinate our imaginations’ to cultivate different forms of realism – what I call here ‘fighting realisms’ – against old and new myths of technological progress and capitalist development, including in their recent guises in forms of neoliberal greenwashing.⁸¹ Through an integration of agroecological and cultural-pedagogical interventions, the project of Sakiya becomes the testing ground for imagining and bringing (back) into being alternative futures. In the current circumstances, as emancipatory possibilities in Palestine and elsewhere are foreclosed or suppressed by the violence of the present, it is more important than ever to keep alive Sakiya’s experiment in cultivating alternative modes of living and thinking.

⁷⁹ ‘In The Eddy of The Stream’, Cooking Sections & Sakiya, Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh, 1 July – 18 September 2022.

⁸⁰ Moore 2023, p. 8.

⁸¹ Sinnokrot 2021, p. 279.

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