

Embodied Agency

Creating Room for Maneuver through Dance in Palestine

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■ **ABSTRACT:** In this article I explore the experiences of three dance artists living and working in Palestine through the concept of “embodied agency.” Based on fieldwork in Palestine and a decade of professional engagement as a dancer and choreographer with the Palestinian dancing community, I examine how the body—through the practice of dance—creates movement in the artists’ lives. The article highlights how embodied and expressive spaces of dance expand the artists’ possibilities and room for maneuver. I argue that in the context of protracted occupation, like Palestine, where individuals have little possibility to impact their situation, zooming into the body can be a powerful way to identify spaces where it is possible to have influence on oneself and others.

■ **KEYWORDS:** dance, embodiment, occupation, Palestine, transformation, violent conflict

For us . . . break dancing is, you feel like, you just release something out of you. And you experience for a moment this freedom. This feeling of freedom. Ahh, you feel it, when you dance and when you do a movement that is really very challenging, like not many people can really do this movement. So, you feel that you are in control of your body, you move it the way you want. So, it’s very much for us about freedom. And this is what we need as a Palestinian. This feeling that we miss, really. (Nadir, 26 years old, 29 July 2019)

The contrast between Nadir’s¹ description of the experience of dancing and his experience of everyday life in Palestine is striking. For Nadir, dance creates freedom and the possibility of movement, both literally and symbolically. The ongoing situation of occupation, dispossession, oppression, and injustices in Palestine, on the other hand, can be described as one of stagnation (*Joronen et al. 2021; *Levy 2020). In this article, I share the experiences and reflections of Nadir, Mahid, and Ayyan, who are part of the dancing community in Nablus and its surrounding refugee camps. I argue that the practice of dance, in general, has created a possibility for movement literally and symbolically, offering the artists an alternative means to navigate the paralyzing restrictions they face in their everyday lives. In this way, dance creates an alternative space for the artists to imagine, act, and live their lives differently (*Katz 2017) to what they thought was possible before they started dancing.

Nadir, Mahid, and Ayaan are professional dance artists, and their dance practices draw on hip-hop, break dancing, Dabkeh (Palestinian traditional dance), and contemporary dance. Nadir is part of a dance collective that creates its own work and engages the local community by offering workshops, performances, and dance classes to youth. Mahid’s creative practice includes dance, writing (he is a published author), and music production. He also runs a dance center in down-



town Nablus that offers dance classes to a more privileged class of Palestinian youth. Ayaan is at the beginning of his professional dance career, working independently and performing with diverse groups and productions across the West Bank. Although the dancers featured in this article are all men, I note that the larger professional dancing community in Palestine consists of both men and women, and a gendered analysis will not be the focus of this article.

Nadir, Mahid, and Ayyan all come from Muslim families and describe their background and families as both conservative and religious. Nadir and Mahid have completed university studies but do not work in the fields of their degrees, while Ayyan has made an active choice not to pursue an academic degree and to follow his passion for dance instead. Nadir and Mahid are third-generation refugees; their grandparents were exiled in 1948.² This means they have refugee status and have grown up and still live in Nablus' surrounding refugee camps. Ayaan, on the other hand, is from Nablus.

The Israeli military occupation, which includes “home demolitions, military campaigns, settlement expansion, land appropriation, mobility restrictions, mass incarceration, an apartheid wall—to name just a few” (*Joronen et al. 2021: 277), has created a society that is permeated by a violence that is structural, visceral, and physical. The occupation controls space and movement in the West Bank through bureaucratic restrictions, such as permits to leave the West Bank, and physical restrictions, such as permanently staffed checkpoints (*OCHA 2017). The checkpoints are regular sites of tension, confrontation, and deadly violence (*B'Tselem 2017; *Iriqat 2020). At the same time, Israeli settlements in the West Bank continue to expand, while new ones are built, despite their illegality, intensifying tensions and violent confrontations between settlers and Palestinians (*B'Tselem 2019). The geographical separation created by the occupation is further deepened by a lack of unity among Palestinians themselves. The Palestinian population is fatigued, and their government is fractured and weak with no real means to alter the current situation. In addition, the international community has demonstrated a lack of will to pressure and change the status quo (*Cammack et al. 2017; *Jensehaugen 2020; *Levy 2020). The occupation is felt deeply in the artists' lives, and I will argue, controls not only *where* they move but also *how* they move.

Youth are disproportionately affected by the current situation in Palestine. They do not enjoy equitable access to opportunities: youth unemployment rates are high, and political representation is low, leaving many young people feeling that their voices do not matter (*Chawla 2017: 17). This feeling of disenfranchisement is reinforced among refugee youth like Mahid and Nadir. Social and religious control within Palestinian communities adds to the constraints experienced by many youth (see also *Karkabi 2013). Altogether, many young Palestinians feel there is no space to move, literally and symbolically, and their outlooks on the future are correspondingly bleak.

In the growing literature on theater and dance in Palestine, we find much exploration of the connections between art and resistance (*Mee 2012; *Varghese 2020), with a focus on how artistic practices create counter-narratives to “contest Zionist discourse and Israeli state practices” (*Varghese 2020: 1) and how dance creates a sense of belonging and “becoming Palestinian to the world” through transnational spaces (*Rodriguez-Quinones 2019). Another branch of the literature examines how dance contributes to reimagining and renegotiating Palestinian identity, creating spaces of freedom to challenge oppression (*Martin 2016; *Ophir 2021). Some scholarship explores how Palestinian artists reimagine and rework our understanding of archives to radically imagine alternative Palestinian futures (*Hochberg 2021; *Saleh 2021, 2020). This article will contribute to the growing literature on dance in Palestine by focusing on how the dancing body—through the practice of dance—creates movement and possibility in the artists' everyday lives.

To explore how dance creates an alternative space in the context of oppression, dispossession, and violence, I will use a critical phenomenological perspective (*Guenther 2013; *Simonsen and Koefoed 2020) to engage with the artists' lived, subjective experiences of their everyday lives. The first part of the analysis highlights how the restrictions and exclusions the dance artists experience are embodied, and play out across scales—on the body, in the home, at the checkpoint, at the level of national authority, or in international engagements. I focus specifically on how space, movement, and the social are restricted, highlighting how these restrictions in turn create exclusions. The second part of the analysis focuses on the embodied and expressive space created through dance, highlighting how the practice of dance becomes a transformative practice for the artists themselves through encountering, experiencing, and negotiating these spaces. I argue that in the context of protracted occupation, where individuals have little control and possibilities to impact their situation, zooming into the body can be a powerful way to identify spaces where it is possible to create change, and thus make a difference for oneself and others.

Critical Phenomenology: Methodology and Theoretical Perspective

We all both *have* and *are* bodies (*Engelsrud 2006). We live our lives *in* and *through* our bodies, and our bodies are embedded in both space and time. When navigating the world, we navigate through our bodies: our bodies, for example, *know* how to measure distance. The calculation of a door opening, to understand if one can pass through it or not, will be just as valid regardless of whether the subject can verbalize the process or not (*Engelsrud 2006: 34). Working from a phenomenological perspective means to understand the body as our access to the world and to understand our bodies as shaping the world while, at the same time, the world shapes our experiences of the body. The notion of the “lived body” refers to the totality of a person’s subjectivity and intersubjectivity—our communication with others and all the reflections a person can make about oneself, others, or situations in the process of being in and navigating the world through one’s body (34). The concept of the “lived body” provides a theoretical perspective of the body as ambiguous—being seen and seeing, affected and affecting (31).

Critical phenomenology can be understood both as a methodology *and* a critical theory that emphasizes lived experience (*Simonsen and Koefoed 2020). In this article, I use critical phenomenology as a lens through which to examine the experience of occupation as systemic and how it is experienced *by* those living under occupation and their embodied experiences of occupation. Most critical theories focus on the structural and systemic factors of oppression and inequality. However, we also need to understand how these structures are experienced by persons within and, in particular, “of those who are finding themselves in and suffering from situations of oppression” (*Simonsen and Koefoed 2020: 9).

By understanding lived experience as intersubjective, this embodied and situated experience is sedimented in layers of history and culture that are interwoven with power. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity are sites of politics that form within “dominant social meanings, cultural schema, and power relations. Critical phenomenologists are thus eager to demonstrate how the horizons available to subjects are necessarily shaped and constrained by dominant social practices and cultural codes” (*Kinkaid 2020: 10). Iris Marion *Young (2005: 7) argues that “the body as lived is always layered with social and historical meaning and is not some primitive matter prior to or underlying economic and political relations or cultural meanings.” Therefore, these “sedimented histories” (*Ahmed 2006: 56) offer what can be understood as bodily horizons (*Simonsen and Koefoed 2020). Our bodily horizons determine how we understand and navigate our own room for maneuver. By focusing on the embodied experience of dancing,

the article will highlight how dance can stretch these bodily horizons and create more room for maneuver for the artists.

Research Process

Throughout the research process, I have tried to approach, do, and engage with the research from an embodied perspective. By this I mean that I have aimed at centering the experiences of the body, and the knowledge that comes from this perspective, as the focal point of the research throughout the fieldwork and data analysis. This article is based on four weeks of fieldwork in Palestine in the summer of 2019 but also draws on my professional and personal engagements with Palestine and the Palestinian dance scene over the past two decades. This includes performing, teaching, and collaborating on short- and long-term projects with Palestinian dancers and dance organizations.

These embodied and lived experiences have left deep and lasting impressions on me and have been a key point of departure when engaging with the research. My position as a professional dance artist with a long personal and professional history in Palestine has situated me uniquely in the research. On the other hand, my position as a white, Norwegian, middle-class woman has also created biases and blind spots.

Engaging with research across geographic divides of power, privilege, and (post)colonial structures is challenging. Conscious that I run the risk of amplifying existing power inequalities, I am aware that I may contribute to an Orientalist gaze on, and understanding of, the particular Palestinian dance context I am trying to describe (*Said 1978; *Spivak 1988). For this reason, I have used a critical reflexive approach (*Taha 2022) throughout the research process by staying in close dialogue with the artists I have engaged with for this study, while also critically examining my own perceptions, prejudices, and assumptions, based on this dialogue.

The fieldwork was multisited and conducted in the West Bank towns of Nablus and Ramallah. For this article, I draw on field notes and recordings from fieldwork that consisted of several long, in-depth conversations with the artists (some recorded and some not), observation and participatory observation, walking interviews, walking together, dancing together, and hanging out. Since all the artists were comfortable English speakers, conversations were in English. After transcribing my field notes and recordings, I coded the text using NVivo.

Drawing on my experiences and knowledge of dance and choreography, I noticed a heightened sensitivity throughout the fieldwork period. My body was in a state of alertness: all my senses were active and ready to make sense of what I was observing, sensing, and perceiving, including the atmosphere and energies in the spaces I visited and the relationships I encountered. Throughout the fieldwork, I kept a field diary to record these observations, perceptions, and experiences.

The walking interviews (*Kusenbach 2003) and other practices of doing and participating were particularly important to engage with and highlight the embodied aspects of doing the research. Walking interviews put the researcher and research participant's bodily experiences in the foreground by being exposed to a multitude of sensory experiences (*Adams and Guy 2007; *Evans and Jones 2011). I organized the walking interviews as unstructured walks and talks in which the artists chose the route and pace of the walk. The walking interviews were conducted in the refugee camps and in the old city of Nablus and were important for engaging with the dance artists' everyday spaces through my own embodied experience.

I must stress the limits of these insights, as they are based on *my* embodied experience, which will, because of my particular positioning, be different compared to how the Palestinian dance

artists experience the same phenomena. Thus, my experiences from these walking interviews are not a general claim on what it feels like to move through different spaces of occupation, but they tell us something about moving in these spaces, and they highlight embodied aspects of moving and navigating space in Palestine (see also *Griffiths 2017). The sensory experiences from the walking interviews provided valuable insights that were important for relating to, understanding, and interpreting the artists' experiences. The walks created a common ground of experience from which I could draw the memory of sensory information to see if it resonated (or not) with the conclusions arrived at after my fieldwork had concluded.

To put embodied knowledge into words is challenging. How can we think or write (or speak) about that which is outside language without reducing it? This is a recurring question within dance research (*DeFrantz 2016; *Sklar 2000). Adrienne *Rich (1976: 284) suggests we start to "think through the body" (see also *Gallop 1988). For some sections of the article, I have been thinking through the body when writing. I have closed my eyes and imagined the movement or experience I am trying to put into words, evoking the sensations, feelings, and movements I am writing about in my body.

No Space to Move

We are sitting on the roof of Mahid's family home in the refugee camp where he grew up and still lives, drinking tea as we hear a series of gunshots. He shrugs his shoulders, laughs; "You see what I told you? This is camp life." I ask him if we should be worried; the day before a young boy was shot dead by Palestinian police in the same camp, just a few streets away. He assures me it is nothing to worry about, they are just testing their guns, making a little bit of noise. Shootings occur almost daily here, due to widespread drug dealing and raids by both the Israeli army and Palestinian police, he tells me. They usually storm the camp at night, entering people's homes. He shows me the escape roots via the rooftops, which are semi-attached. They are used by those who are wanted and sought after, independent of who is responsible for the crackdown. Mahid shakes his head. "Imagine being a child here." (Field notes, 5 August 2019)

I have met Mahid before, both in Ramallah and in his dance studio in Nablus. We have danced and jammed together, but today he wants to show me the camp where he grew up. Working with dance professionally in Palestine is precarious in all its aspects. In an already vulnerable and demanding situation, where violence, humiliations, and crackdowns are commonplace and the future is uncertain, Mahid and other dancers have chosen an insecure profession at the margins of society, often going against social and cultural norms of their own communities. They live under constant pressure, navigating an exceedingly difficult situation, facing limitations and restrictions in the small space of the home and local community, the national space of occupation, and the global space of international travel.

The rooftop of Mahid's family home, approximately three-by-two meters, is also one of Mahid's rehearsal spaces, where he sometimes comes up to dance. The family keep a few chickens here. It is also a place to withdraw, if only to envision some privacy for a few minutes in the overcrowded camp (in reality, we are really quite visible to many of the neighboring buildings). We make our way down the dark stairs to the ground floor. The building feels a little bit like a maze, with extensions having been built as the family has grown. The rooms are dark. There are only windows on one side, and these windows face out into an alleyway, not much broader than my shoulders. Mahid tells me they are around 16 people living in the family apartment. We make our way out into the alleyway, feeling the buildings on each

side, as they loom two to three stories above us. Passing by a small indent in the alley, Mahid exclaims, “Ahh, this is where I shot my first dance film!” As we continue down the alleyway, barely fitting one person in breadth, I find myself surprised at how limited the space is. It is not my first visit to a Palestinian refugee camp, but I’m still somehow, every time, taken aback by just how enclosed everything is, as we make our way down the narrow alley. The almost claustrophobic feeling, with hardly any space to move, feels symbolic of the Palestinian situation, where space is disappearing. (Field notes, 5 August 2019)

Walking and talking to Mahid throughout the day, encountering and navigating the spaces of his everyday life, feeling and sensing the spaces through my own body, I am struck by the paralyzing sense of limitation in his life—the actual physical restrictions, the lack of room for maneuver, the lack of possibilities, all encompassed by the dread of a permeating violence. The way physical space is restricted and controlled suffuses every aspect of Mahid’s life, from the private space of his home to how the refugee camp is built and organized, separating Palestinian refugees from the rest of the local Palestinian community. The architecture of the wall and checkpoints throughout the West Bank create a clear physical demarcation and scar in the landscape. These physical restrictions create a spatiality that excludes, physically separating those who are included and those who are not, ultimately resulting in a spatiality that is violent and determining where a Palestinian can and cannot move, but also affecting how one moves from one space to another and within a space. As Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman (2011: 5) note, “mobile, embodied practices are central to how we experience the world . . . Our mobilities create spaces and stories—spatial stories.” Thus, the spatiality of the camp and the occupation affects movement and how the body moves, influencing people’s embodied experiences of everyday life and how they live their lives.



Figure 1. The refugee camp in Nablus, 2019. Photo courtesy of the author.

Suffocation

As we continue past the indent where Mahid shot his first dance film, he enthusiastically tells me about an idea he has for a new film. He wants a hundred people, or more, all lined up as close as possible, in the alleyway, breathing in each other's necks, with the camera focusing on close ups of people's faces, the next person right behind, no privacy, no space to move. "This is how we live," he says. "On top of each other." (Field notes, 5 August 2019)

Ghazi-Walid *Falah writes that the English word "occupation" does not really capture the lived experience of daily life in Palestine. He suggests that the Arabic word *ihtilal*, which translates to "suffocation" is more apt: "The word 'suffocation' is more precise. It underlines the desperate need for oxygen which the Palestinians are experiencing. Their political and human asphyxiation . . . A geopolitics in a sense inflicted on the body, the mind. A mechanics of mutilation of flesh and spirit, close up" (2004: 597). The sensation of suffocation reverberates as we walk down the alleyway and in the description of Mahid's projected dance film. The experience of encroachment inhabits the body—being limited and enclosed means the body is not able to stretch, reach, grow, expand. Passing another person in the alleyway means you must turn your body away, narrowing the shoulders, making yourself smaller than you are. These restrictions are felt on the body, enforcing a sensation of unfreedom, of not being able to expand and move in the way one wants.

This knowing in and of the body is further shaped by the constant threat of violence that is present in Palestinian lives. As described in the opening passage, a young boy was shot dead by Palestinian police the day before our meeting. He was shot by accident. The northern towns of Nablus and Jenin are considered hot spots for Fatah activists in opposition to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and militant groups; thus, both Palestinian authorities and the Israeli army view the camps as security threats. As a result of the PA's security cooperation with the Israeli army, this means that refugee camps "on a weekly basis endure incursions by *two* military powers" (*Lorentzen Sogge 2019). The constant threat of raids, where the private space of one's home is intruded and violated, often under the cover of night, creates fear that also inhabits the body. The limited space and lack of privacy in the camp, along with the constant threat of violence to one's own body and home, all reinforce an embodied sensation of a lack of opportunities, which, in turn, affects how one navigates the world and what one views as possible.

The restrictions Mahid experiences through the control of movement and confinement of space is fortified by constraints imposed by social, cultural, and religious norms in Palestinian society. Mahid and the other dancers describe a society that is conservative, where social space is restricted through a very narrow script. For Mahid, Nadir, and Ayyan, this means following a projected path of university studies, building (or securing) one's own house, and marrying. Young men, as any men and women, in the Palestinian context are subjected to gender norms and ideologies. There are certain expectations for young men as to other roles and identities that they must fit into within their societal context. Thus, through dance they often contest those norms and expectations. To be yourself and make other life choices means being different and standing out. To dance, and the practice of dancing, is making other life choices, challenging norms and conventions of society, because the practice breaks with norms and expectations of how one should live one's life. Thus, the dancers' precarious situation is further amplified by operating at the margins of their own society, going against cultural and religious norms and conventions.

By highlighting how systemic injustices are constructed from without but also experienced from within, we can start to understand how the limitations for movement in Mahid and the

other dancers' lives are experienced from the first-person perspective, while being aware of and sensitive to the particular political and social context in which these first-person experiences are felt. In her work on embodied agency, this is what Diana *Coole (2005: 138) refers to as a critical reflexiveness entailing a back and forth between a first- and third-person account. This back and forth between first- and third-person accounts, allows for "a critical interrogation of everyday experiences . . . plus an objective account of broader structures of oppression, where the second emerges from but contextualizes the first" (134).

Embodied and Expressive Space: Creating Movement in a Standstill

I would say in the beginning I didn't know why I was dancing, I got more interested with time . . . So, in the beginning, I just liked it and I wanted to do head spins and like fly [laughs], that's what I wanted in the beginning. And when I started, it made me feel good, that's why I was interested. (Nadir, July 2019)

The embodied space of dance can be understood as the bodily, sensory, and emotional experiences of moving and dancing. From observing others dancing, talking to other dancers, and dancing myself, I would describe the embodied space of dance as what it feels like to move in a certain way, the tingling sensation in the body, the rush of blood to the head, the increased heart rate. The sensation of falling, flying, turning, leaping, and how the skin feels against the surface you are moving on, or the gush of wind created by a movement. How the body reads the space, the feeling of your own body moving in space and time, the suspension of space and time, and the feeling of time standing still. Losing yourself in the moment and the emotions triggered when moving.

Nadir describes the embodied experience of dancing as physical, sensory, and emotional. Further he highlights how these tactile and corporeal encounters with dance have affected him. Through pushing physical boundaries and discovering what the body is capable of, dancing triggered emotions of joy and well-being, and made him feel good. Dance became a space where he could thrive and have fun. According to Derek *McCormack (2008: 1823), bodies not only move physically; they also move "affectively, kinesthetically, imaginatively, collectively, aesthetically, socially, culturally and politically." Dance, therefore, allows us to think about the spaces in which bodies move in an affective sense—as an affective, embodied space.

Dance has had a transformative impact in Nadir's life. From starting as a pastime, something he did for fun, it became a way of living, that opened up new possibilities in his life. "So, I would say dancing gave me this chance, and I always speak about dancing not as dance, but as this . . . way of living." Nadir describes dance not only as physical, aesthetic, or creative movement but as a set of processes, experiences, encounters, and engagements that has deep meaning in his life, something that has opened up new possibilities. This experience highlights the body's potential for change and transformation, and the possibility to "create critical spaces of expression and resistance" through creative practices such as dance or music (*Hill 2022: 45; see also *Kurfürst 2021).

According to Cindi *Katz (2004), it is in the mundane practices of everyday life that the possibilities for change and rupture exist. Thus, *Katz offers an interesting perspective for thinking about how and what agency located in the body, and understood from an embodied perspective, can look like. Further, she highlights how taking a micro perspective—a perspective from the body, from below, or from the margins—can "open . . . many spaces of betweenness from which to imagine, act, and live things differently" (2017: 597). For Nadir, Mahid, and Ayaan, the practice of dance has created a possibility for movement, both literally and symbolically, offering an alternative way to navigate the almost paralyzing sense of restrictions they encounter in their lives.

Control comprises another important aspect of the embodied experience of dance. In the opening quote of this article, Nadir describes how the dancers experience both a feeling of freedom and control through mastering difficult movements. Nadir links this experience of freedom that dancing generates directly to the Palestinian situation, where freedom of movement, amongst many freedoms, is particularly lacking. Through dance, the body can “create[] spaces of freedom to challenge oppression” (*Ophir 2021: 25), which in turn can create a feeling of empowerment.

This feeling of being in control of and experiencing freedom within one’s own body stands in stark contrast to the everyday forms of bodily humiliation often encountered by Palestinians through the occupation, where one has little or no control over one’s own body. The occupation restricts and controls where one can move, but the occupying power also affects how one moves. To be intimidated, violated, and humiliated, takes hold in the body.

Nadir: This is something we [in our dance collective] speak about a lot, that we feel the occupation in our body, so much. So . . . when we go to Europe I can say, that is a Palestinian. He doesn’t speak to me. I just I feel it.

Me: You can see it from how he moves?

Nadir: I *feel* it from how he moves . . . It’s so much related to the politics of occupation, to being restricted, to not being allowed to move and to being suppressed and humiliated. This I see in the Palestinian bodies . . . I feel the Palestinian body is always trying to show off so much, because of this [humiliation], trying to hide all the pain. (29 July 2019)

Nadir describes how the occupation is felt bodily, how the politics of space, enacted through mechanisms of occupation, is experienced corporeally. The movement restrictions, humiliations, and oppression take hold in the body, in turn, affecting *how* the body moves. Nadir says he can sense and feel bodies that have experienced occupation. This kinesthetic awareness also points to the fact that we can know something from our body, and how it relates to space, not only through vision but from how our body senses and relates to other bodies in space (*Sklar 2000). Further, the corporeal experience of occupation is painful, the pain manifesting itself in the body, which also affects how the body moves. Dancing gives a diametrically different embodied experience to how the body is subjected to control, fear, and humiliation in the artists’ everyday lives, offering a space where the dancers can reclaim and re-empower their own bodies.

Through challenging oneself by learning new skills and movements, and defying gravity, the dance artists stretch their physicality *and* imagination. Mastering movements they once thought impossible to do results in a sense of achievement, creating a feeling of empowerment and control. By overcoming a physical limitation, the mind is also stretched—by experiencing that something that once seemed impossible—is in fact possible. These emotional, physical, and sensory experiences can be understood as embodied experiences of change, of something changing within the artists themselves. These small ripples of movement within oneself trigger a shift in feelings and perceptions, allowing for an experience of *something* making a difference, in a world where nothing seems to make a difference. Through sensitizing the body, stretching oneself physically and emotionally, change is happening in and through the body. This embodied experience of something changing, making a difference, can in turn create hope.

In [our collective], we work with these programs; creating performances, the “open spaces” program, as well as dance competitions. Where we create change is in the program we have called “Spaces for Expression.” And this, actually mainly started with Abed . . . It’s a personal story for him, because he said, dancing changed my feelings. Abed comes from a very con-

servative family. They sent him to the mosque to learn the Koran, where you need to study, and they are very, very conservative, like more than our [families]. And, he said once he was introduced to dance, he felt that life has hope. And this is what he wants to give to the children in the camps, because this is our story. We are living in these conditions where it's very restricted as a place, the camps are very close to each other, where you cannot really move, freely. And with dancing especially, it's very connected to movement. We felt like we can move, easily, and then because dance gave us this opportunity to travel around, it's also gave us this freedom of movement in dance and because of dance, we were able to tour the world, like travel and see, and then he felt, there is hope in this. (Nadir, 29 July 2019)

Stretching Social Space

Drawing on a relational understanding of space (*Massey 2005), social space in Palestine can be described as restricted, leaving little room for individual expression. To dance and dance as a way of life is to make other life choices. It is difficult to make a decent living from dancing in Palestine, meaning Mahid, Nadir and Ayyan are not able to secure or build a house. Not having a house forecloses the possibility of marriage for them, at least for the time being, and therefore breaks one of the important trajectories for living an “ordinary Palestinian life.” By choosing to pursue dance as a career, they make a radical break with societal expectations. Further, dance creates the possibility to explore self-expression, for oneself and in front of others. Because dance is performative and performed in a physical space, a social space is also created. As Ayaan observes,

What dance did for me, it made me open to the world. (Ayaan, 20 years old, 6 August 2019)

The expressive quality of dance is closely interconnected with the embodied experience of dancing. This feeling or sensation of connecting with something in yourself, and then bringing this expression of you into the world. The dancing body can connect and integrate what we are carrying inside us, allowing it to be expressed through movement. Dancing also communicates outside formal, written, and spoken language; to express oneself through movement is sensory, connecting to feelings, touch, and breath, as well as what we hear and see. Practicing dance is simultaneously to tune into oneself and outward toward one's surroundings.

The expressive space allows the dance artists to explore self-expression within a safe, private space, giving room for individuality and exploring who they are. However, this personal exploration of individuality shifts from being private to public when it is witnessed by others and becomes an intersubjective act where the dance artists express themselves toward a community of other dance artists, when practicing, jamming, and battling; toward a broader public while practicing outside in the streets; or toward a public audience in more formal performance settings. The space where private expression becomes public is a space of friction and negotiation.

[First] I was practicing [alone] in my house. I saw some movements on TV that I wanted to try . . . Later I made some friends who were also practicing [dance] alone in their houses. We made a group and started practicing in the street . . . And we made a lot of trouble, or not us, but other people [in the neighborhood]. Because of the culture in our society, people were asking, what are you doing in the street? Sometimes they laughed, sometimes they made problems for us . . . Some said things like, what are they doing, this is bullshit, do something useful with yourself. Or, look at these crazy people. Sometimes they came to touch us; it was a lot of things. (Ayaan, 6 August 2019)

When practicing dance in the street, the expressive space of dance shifts from a private to a public space, witnessed by other like-minded dancers as well as by casual passersby, neighbors, and

others. Through dancing, and hence expressing themselves, Ayaan and his friends stand out. By being themselves, they are pushing the boundaries for what is considered socially acceptable for how a Palestinian man should live one's life. This contrast generates friction that can be unpleasant and unnerving, as Ayaan describes, but it also marks a way of pushing social boundaries and sharing with others some of the shifts and transformations the artists have experienced in their own lives.

The performance setting is one of the arenas where dance's expressive qualities become explicitly public. The purpose of performing is sharing dance as an artistic expression with an audience. To perform for others is a space where the artists can negotiate dance as an expressive space and share their experiences of dance as a transformative practice with others.

When we have a street show or something like this, we try to show something which will be a little bit provocative and can make the audience question, come and speak to us. Because, although dance is movement, we also believe in words . . . In our shows, when we have a duet between a man and a woman and there is touching, because relationships between men and women are a topic for us in our society, someone [in the audience] often comes and asks us, "Why is she dressing like this?" or "Why did he touch her?" or "What do you mean and what do you want [by showing this]?" Often, we are told, "Ahh, you're just bringing this Western culture to us, and they want to destroy our society with this Western mentality," but actually we are very Eastern, especially our group! [Laughs] . . . And, I really feel that there is a need from the Palestinian audience, they want to see art and they need it, and they like to discuss and question what they see. Also, if you provoke them, they will be angry. They take it very personal, and this I like. I like when things are personal . . . So, yeah some of them, they do not accept [what we do] at all. They reject it, and I remember in Jenin, last time [the audience] asked us, one girl she was wearing a shirt that wasn't very covering, and they asked us to dress her in something else . . . but we didn't. Sometimes we ask how much we can push. We will ask the people from the theater, what do you think, and if they tell us it's not a very big issue, we'll keep it, like the shirt. But really, we are not very provocative. (Nadir, 29 July 2019)

Through performing and meeting the public, Nadir and his colleagues claim a space for themselves, displaying their individuality and their view of the world. By doing life differently, making other life choices, and sharing this way of living through performances, they are sharing some of the shifts and transformations they have experienced in their own life with others. By displaying this individuality, they push against social, cultural, and normative restrictions (*Martin 2016; *Ophir 2021). This is a balancing act in which they are conscious of not pushing too much. To avoid alienating themselves from society, they are attentive to the larger collective. By expressing themselves and finding room for the individual, they are stretching the social space, initially by creating their own space within the restrictions of society but also by displaying an alternative way of living to others that they encounter when practicing on the streets or more directly through performing for others. Through performing, they are negotiating more freedom in the social space for themselves, showing that it is possible to be both Palestinian *and* imagine and live life differently from what is expected.

In the quote above, Nadir also addresses how expressive space can trigger critical thinking and reflection. Through performing something that can be perceived as provocative, the dancers want the audience to ask questions, and to engage with and discuss what they see. By exploring self-expression, the space becomes important for asking questions, reflecting, and engaging critically with one's own society. For the last couple of years, Mahid has been part of an initiative offering dance and theater classes to youth in Nablus. This has resulted in his arrest, on several occasions, by the Palestinian police:

Me: Why are they scared of you running a dance center [here]?

Mahid: You will change the mentality. You will change. It's a revolution. The police aren't scared about someone having a gun. They are scared about someone having a mind. An open mind. (Mahid, 26 years old, 28 July 2019)

Mahid emphasizes how change is linked to mindset and having an open mind. The dance center creates a space for young people to meet and practice dance and theater. The center challenges the restricted social space in Palestine. At the center, both girls and boys are offered classes together, which many do not find acceptable in Nablus. Through dance, an embodied and expressive space is created, where the students can explore and discover who they are, in and through their bodies. By expressing themselves and daring to stand out and “be themselves,” a culture of questioning and critical thinking is encouraged, which, in turn, can foster “open minds.”

To be oneself, and unique, in a suppressive and restricted context, requires courage and does not come without risk. To push, disrupt, and stretch boundaries is a delicate balancing act, and if you push too much, you can be seen as a threat to the collective. For Ayyan it has caused unpleasant encounters. For Mahid it has resulted in several arrests, public condemnation by his local imam, and a violent attack on his home by Hamas. By daring to express themselves, the artists are stretching boundaries and creating a little more room for individual expression in a society where difference can be seen as a threat. Hence, the expressive space of dance is a private space, to “become yourself,” but also a public space of negotiation, tension, risk, and rupture.

Conclusion: Creating Embodied Possibilities

The situation in Palestine is dire, creating a feeling of suffocation that quells hope. As the article shows, this impasse is felt deeply in the artists' lives. By focusing on the dancing body and highlighting the embodied and expressive aspects of it, we learn how the artists create physical, social, and political movement in their own lives, despite very constrained and oppressive circumstances. We also learn how these movements influence, challenge, and inspire other people they meet through performing and practicing dance.

For Mahid, Nadir, and Ayyan, the embodied space of dance creates an experience of moving freely within their own bodies, in contrast to the restrictions and limitations they experience every day. When the artists master difficult movements and move in their own way, they are in control of their body and movements. This feeling of moving freely and being in control creates a feeling of empowerment. Further, the embodied space of dance is a space of fun and enjoyment, a free space as such, in a daily existence that is otherwise permeated by restrictions and violence. Through dancing, the artists engage a different way of expressing themselves through their bodies. Connecting with oneself, tuning into the body and senses, is a way to discover who you are and channel yourself through, showing yourself to the world. Dance, in this way, creates a space that allows for difference, where the dancers are stretching their bodies and minds and the viewers' bodies and minds by pushing both physical and imagined boundaries. By *doing* differently, living differently, not following the usual trajectory—in short, *being* different—and meeting a public with this difference, either when rehearsing on the street or directly in performance situations, a space for questioning and reflection is created.

Taking the perspective of the “lived body” as conceptualized in critical phenomenology, the article highlights how understanding lived, subjective, first-person experiences can give us insight and a deeper understanding of individuals' agency, or their “agentic capacities” (*Coole

2005: 124), also highlighting how different positions and histories affect our embodied agency differently. This shows how zooming into the body—or taking the perspective of body—in the context of protracted occupation, dispossession, and violence, where individuals have very limited options and possibilities to impact their own situation, can be a powerful way to identify spaces where it is possible to create change, and thus make a difference to oneself and others. The article shows how dance—through the dancing body—has created possibilities for Nadir, Mahid, and Ayyan to negotiate and navigate their own horizon and room for maneuver, expanding their possibilities for movement and control in very difficult circumstances.

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■ NOTES

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. More than 750,000 thousand Palestinians were forced to flee their homes as a result of the Nakba, meaning “catastrophe” in Arabic, in 1948, when the state of Israel was created (*Pappé 2006).

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