

# Music, Borders, and the Sensorial Politics of Displacement in Jumana Manna's "A Magical Substance Flows into Me"

Film review by Hanan Toukan

Since then, the story of the sardines has been linked to Israel for me: whenever I mention Israel, or it's mentioned in front of me, I remember the smell of those sardines. So I just want you to check if that story is correct, that I did not make it up . . .<sup>1</sup>

In *A Magical Substance Flows into Me*, Jumana Manna builds on the genre of postcolonial trauma and collective memories of violence in Middle Eastern filmmaking by showing how the subconscious pain and suffering that is born in contexts of obliterated geo-histories may lie in the realm of the musical, familial, and sensorial that bind communities together. In her latest experimental documentary film, Manna – a Palestinian citizen of Israel who grew up in East Jerusalem – ethnographically explores the different musical traditions of various communities residing in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories by drawing on her research into the German-Jewish ethnomusicologist Robert Lachmann (1892–1939). Lachmann's *Oriental Music* series was broadcast by the Palestine Broadcasting Service established during the British Mandate period.

Lachmann's broadcasts are the starting point for Manna's search into the multilayered meanings of intertwined histories of displacement in the Middle East and the life that follows trauma. These broadcasts featured field recordings of musical performances by what Lachmann understood as the "Oriental" segments of Palestine's population: that is the indigenous Palestinians and the Eastern Jews. In part conversing with Lachmann's search for an authentic, untainted, and

local Oriental musical experience, and in big part rebuking it, Manna revisits the same communities that he studied – including Kurdish, Moroccan, and Yemenite Jews, in addition to the Samaritans of Nablus, members of urban and rural Palestinian communities, Bedouins, and Coptic Christians. Along the way, Manna reads to her viewers parts of Lachmann’s lectures. Sometimes she shares the music he broadcast during his time at the radio, which she recorded onto her mobile phone, while at other times she asks her protagonists to replay his music or make new music altogether.

Manna’s unique journey into her homeland’s music takes her into the homes, kitchens, places of worship, and workplaces of members of the communities she first encountered in Lachmann’s broadcasts and diaries. In these spaces, Manna delicately unravels the multiples threads that make up how we understand the colonial encounters and postcolonial experiences of nationalism, exile, trauma, and longing through lenses of authenticity, Orientalism, and exoticism in our contemporary era. Acting as ethnomusicologist, Manna proposes the body and its senses as a formal methodology for the task she sets out for herself: to uncover the cultural, social, material and cognitive dimensions of musical behavior. Delivering an intense and contemplative interrogation of the interstices between myth, fact, and historiography in the making of music and identity in cases of entangled geo-histories, Manna posits the sensorial experience as an innately political one.

The backdrop and starting point of Manna’s journey is the house in which she grew up in the Shu‘fat neighborhood of East Jerusalem. Manna sets the tone of the film in its lively and powerful opening scene, which intersplices footage of the director waiting for a bus in West Jerusalem with scenes from the Arab neighborhood that sits atop the hills of Jerusalem, accompanied by an Israeli rendition by Haim Moshe of the famous upbeat Arabic song *Linda Linda*, originally composed by Samir al-Tawil. *Linda Linda* is a popular Arab song traditionally sung at weddings, summer camps, and other festive occasions in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine in the 1970s and 1980s, with an upbeat tune and playful lyrics about a beautiful woman named Linda whom everyone wanted to court. Manna’s decision to use an Israeli version hints at the notion of hybridity that Lachmann abhorred – he found mixing of styles produced music as “shallow as ditchwater” – as well as the more biting realization, at least for Arab viewers of the film, that the innocent and natural process of hybridization may be masking Israeli appropriation of Arabic music.

Manna uses interspersed voiceover of readings from Lachmann’s written reflections on music and identity, to rethink the history of the Mizrahim of Israel and of the Palestinians, interrogating the very foundation upon which the Zionist narrative is constructed: that Arab and Jew are distinct, opposing, and in essence inimical categories. Manna thus contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature and visual and literary production that shows how the dispossession of the Palestinians was intimately linked to the process that also uprooted and dislocated Arab Jews.<sup>2</sup> Musically and visually, Manna and her interlocutors add layers of unsettled new meaning to this painful period in the tangled traumatic histories of different groups of people in her homeland. Here the notions of division, dispossession, and displacement and the pain they typically engender find solace in hybrid musical forms that cut across boundaries.

Even though Manna concedes that each group has suffered from a form of forced expulsion, she reminds her audience of the reality that for one group, the Palestinians, the violence of dispossession continues to be lived as an ongoing trauma of displacement, thwarted movements, dashed dreams, and violent ruptures. In this, her father plays a central role, recounting personal stories of musical encounters with the Jewish Israeli “other” and narrating momentous historical events in the making of the Jewish state, undertaken at the expense of all those implicated, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. In one instance in the film, Manna’s father elaborates on an exchange of letters between Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism, and Yusuf Diya’ al-Khalidi, a Palestinian politician and mayor of Jerusalem in 1899. The former reassures the latter that Jewish settlement in Palestine will be a lucrative business for the Arab population and so nothing to fear.

By placing her father in the role of historical narrator, Manna seems to indirectly express her own anxieties and disillusionment as a third-generation second-class Palestinian citizen of Israel and, subsequently, her personal need to recount to her audience the history of Zionism in Palestine, which sought to exclude her generation as it had previous ones. The link between memory, perception, and history in her father’s intermittent commentaries locates personal and collective memories in juxtaposition to, but also part and parcel of, the formation of national historical consciousness and thereby the very meaning of history itself. Neither is possible without the other, she seems to remind us. Each holds the other accountable, always intermingling and perpetually in flux. In her musical journey, Manna attempts to construct another memory, not proposing revisionist historical content as such, but rather using Lachmann’s Orientalist love of “authentic” Eastern music to explore new ways of memorializing established, albeit fragmented, histories. Using her father’s narrations, Manna then relates these new forms of memorialization to histories that have obscured Palestinians’ pain and its representation.

Viewed within this framework, the focus on two generations of men in most of the communities and musical performances Manna captures with her lens sits in juxtaposition to her portrayals of her mother and other women. The *mise-en-scène* for these portrayals is often the kitchen or elsewhere in the home. The slowness and silence with which the camera frames these encounters serves to explore more closely female subjectivities in response to trauma. In the case of her mother, whom Manna voyeuristically depicts from a distance, it is clear that a corporeal rather than an intellectual relationship to the Israeli state is at play. This is demonstrated most aptly in her mother’s slow, silent exercising in front of an Israeli National Television exercise program that advises its viewers to treat their bodies well. This distanced, though not necessarily strained, relationship between mother and daughter is often filmed as if with a hidden camera. The film captures what seems to be a banal conversation where Manna’s mother quietly reminds her husband to throw out the compost, a nod to the ways in which the body, contra Lachmann’s rigid lens of authenticity, is perpetually circulating and adapting to new forms along the way. What appears is an ultimately singular experience of coping with an oppressive colonial system where power is countered at a very personal level, through one’s physical, corporeal flexibility.



The director's mother exercises. Still image from *A Magical Substance Flows into Me*, courtesy of Jumana Manna.

In one of the major highlights of the film, Manna visits a colorful Mizrahi female singer, Neta Elkayam, in her home to hear her perform and watch her cook in her kitchen. We are reminded that the dominant Zionist Ashkenazi narrative's cultivation of victimhood amongst Mizrahi Jews in order to solidify a fabricated modern Zionist Israeli identity has never been as successful as its Zionist propagandists would have liked.<sup>3</sup> In a powerful diatribe against this narrative, the Moroccan-Israeli singer shows that identities in public space were performed very differently from those in private spaces for the very purpose of survival. Punctuated with a thrilling musical performance, the singer forcefully and with much hand gesturing drives home the point that her grandmother, whom she speaks of with great admiration, coped with the foreignness of Israeli society by minimizing her encounter with it, drawing her own borders and creating a "little Morocco" – one brimming with the sounds, smells, and tastes of her original homeland – in her house. These Proustian "madeleine moments" in the film, where Manna's interlocutors conjure more than one of our senses at the same time, most often take place in the kitchen. Further, the focus in these scenes is often a strong female character, whether boisterous or silent, as a trigger to an involuntary memory conjures up images of a cultural present incapable of being explicitly articulated.

The first stop on Manna's musical journey is the only scene in the film that takes place in a kitchen and involves no female characters, other than Manna herself. In this scene, Manna meets the Kurdish Jewish Israeli father of a music scholar at the Hebrew University. The father – an Israeli policeman who sings Kurdish songs – politely wonders about Manna's Arab background and whether her parents approve of her being a filmmaker.



Neta Elkayam sings in her kitchen. Still image from *A Magical Substance Flows into Me*, courtesy of Jumana Manna.

This interaction is an apt example of some of the social and cultural representations of the Arab other that Israelis supposedly “co-existing” with Palestinians within the boundaries of the Israeli state often construct. Manna looks bemused, even if she answers his question genuinely. The father then goes on to speak proudly of the pickled turnips he has pressed himself, while the camera zooms in on a windowsill lined with all sorts of jarred pickles and olives, a typical sight in most Levantine kitchens, old or new. He asks Manna if she knows the meaning of *mkhallal* (the Arab word for pickles, which he seems to presume is Hebrew) and what the word for them in Arabic is. Taking a bite and expressing her delight at the taste of the turnips, Manna affirms in her Arabic-accented Hebrew that the word used in Arabic is also *mkhallal*, without explaining that the word is in fact Arabic (the Hebrew word that Ashkenazi Jews in Israel use is *hamutzim*). Manna’s protagonist in this scene has served with the Israeli army in the occupied Palestinian territories; yet the touch, smell, and taste that emanates from his kitchen are an indication, like so many others in the film, that the involuntary memories that lie in our senses can evoke recollections of a lost past without conscious effort, even if the violent present elides them.

Lachmann’s radio show, on which *A Magical Substance* is based, aired before the partition of Palestine and the creation of the artificial boundaries between the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Green Line Israel. In the spirit of Lachmann’s love of the music of the Arabs and Jews of historical Palestine, Manna and her camera roam the land without ever directly informing her audience where they are. Moving at ease between the Galilee, the West Bank, Jerusalem, or the Naqab desert, the notion of borders is erased, albeit

temporarily. Yet Manna insists on upturning Lachmann's seeming conviction that the boundaries that defined the Oriental communities and music he so admired were best left in place in order to protect their authentic almost innocent qualities. In one of the film's most cogent sequences, Manna's camera moves from a Bedouin setting in the Naqab, where we hear sung poetry and the rababa played by an elderly tribal man, to the excruciatingly slow banality of an Israeli Economics and Real Estate Appraisal Office in Jerusalem. In the latter, the camera pauses on documents of tables and graphs with titles like "Table of Land Expropriation According to Plan 4558," triggering thoughts of the violence implicit in seemingly blood-free bureaucratic settings responsible for the theft and division of land recalled in Manna's father's story. The stillness of the camera and the rigid body language of the Kurdish Israeli office workers at work and also performing is juxtaposed with a voiceover relaying Lachmann's description, in one of his broadcasts, of the liturgical song of Kurdish Jews in terms of bodies being possessed and intoxicated by the music that they make.

In *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East*, Kamran Rastegar argues that trauma, often approached in psychoanalytical terms that frame it as an individual experience, is in fact a social phenomenon imbricated in sociological structures. In many ways *A Magical Substance* provides a compelling example of how culture, society, memory, and reactions to violence are in fact linked. But the film also goes a step further. While aesthetics in modern art and their scholarly approaches have tended to privilege sight and hearing as the primary senses of artistic production, touch, smell, and taste might offer equally pleasant (or unpleasant) stimuli, even if they have never achieve the status of art objects in the same way. It is this conundrum that Manna's film engages and to which it offers a novel intervention. For while her experimental documentary is clearly about the memory that lies in the sound of music, it is equally about touch, smell, and taste as corporeal forces in remembering violence and ultimately surviving it. Manna is not the first filmmaker working in or on Palestine to attempt this approach. Omar Amiralay's reflective experimental documentary *A Plate of Sardines, or the First Time I Heard of Israel*, for instance, which involves a conversation between Amiralay and fellow Syrian filmmaker Muhammad Malas takes smell and taste as central to the haunting ways in which memory, place, and politics converge. But Manna is one of the few Palestinian artists of the post-Oslo generation to begin the difficult foray into the impact of trauma on her personal and communal identity beyond the blurring of fact and fiction. The film's quest to consider the role of the "lower" senses of touch, taste, and smell in addition to sound in the affective encounters between memory and lived reality is a welcome contribution to the larger project of collecting and archiving the visual history of Palestine in which so many artists, writers, and scholars are invested. Manna's film essentially pushes us to think about what new insights can be offered by studying the inextricably linked history of colonization and Orientalism between Europe and the Middle East through the site of our senses.

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## Endnotes

- 1 *A Plate of Sardines (or the First Time I Heard of Israel)*, directed by Omar Amiralay (Syria/France, 1997).
- 2 Some of the scholarly literature includes: Najat Abdulhaq, *Jewish and Greek Communities in Egypt: Entrepreneurship and Business before Nasser* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016); Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998 and 2010); Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), with a foreword by Joel Beinin. In the realm of literature, see, for instance: Ibrahim Jubayn, *Yawmiyat Yahudi min Dimashq* [Diary of a Jew from Damascus] (Damascus: Khatawat lil-nashr wa al-tawzi‘, 2007); ‘Ali Badr, *Haris al-tibgh* [The Tobacco Keeper] (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya lil-dirasat wa al-nashr, 2008), translated into English by Amira Noweira (Doha: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, 2012); Kamal Ruhayyim, *Qulub munhaka: al-muslim al-yahudi* [Exhausted Hearts: The Jewish Muslim] (Cairo: Wakalat Sphinx, 2008), translated into English by Sarah Enani as *Diary of a Jewish Muslim: An Egyptian Novel* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012); and ‘Ali al-Muqri, *al-Yahudi al-hali* [The Handsome Jew] (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2009). Films include, amongst others: *Jews of Egypt*, dir. Amir Ramses (Egypt, 2013); *Salata Baladi*, dir. Nadia Kamel (Egypt, 2008); and *Tinghir-Jerusalem: Echoes from the Mellah*, dir. Kamal Hachkar (France, Israel, Morocco, 2012).
- 3 In *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, for example, Beinin explores the ultimately unsuccessful attempt of 75,000 Egyptian Jews to maintain their multiple identities and to resist the attempts of Zionist (and Egyptian) nationalism to eliminate their nuanced existences.