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I'm Just Here for the Dabke

Ben Sadece Dabke için Buradayım

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines dabke, the Palestinian folk dance, as a site of cultural resistance and political intervention. Blending personal narrative, media, and historical analysis, it traces dabke's evolution from rural Levantine roots to its appropriation by Israeli state institutions and its ongoing reclamation by Palestinians in the diaspora and under occupation. Through performances, workshops, and activism, the essay explores how dabke mediates joy, grief, and solidarity, challenging both colonial narratives and respectability politics in the arts. Situating dance within broader struggles for liberation, it argues that embodied practice can enact political claims where words fail, sustaining community, memory, and resilience. To "shut up and dance" becomes a deliberate act of survival, creativity, and defiance. Ultimately, dabke illustrates the transformative potential of cultural practice as both a repository of history and a vehicle for radical imagining and collective freedom.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Dabke, Palestine, Cultural Resistance

ÖZ

Bu makale, Filistin halk dansı olan dabkeyi, kültürel direnişin ve politik müdahalenin bir alanı olarak inceler. Makale, kişisel anlatı, medya ve tarihsel incelemeyi harmanlayarak dabkenin kırsal Levant köklerinden, İsrail devlet kurumları tarafından sahiplenilmesine ve diasporadaki ve işgal altındaki Filistinliler tarafından yeniden sahiplenilişine kadar uzanan evrimini takip eder. Performanslar, atölyeler ve aktivizm aracılığıyla, dabkenin sevince, kedere ve dayanışmaya nasıl aracılık ettiğini hem sömürgeci anlatılara hem de sanatlardaki saygınlık siyasetine nasıl meydan okuduğunu keşfeder. Dansı özgürlük mücadelesinin daha geniş bağlamına yerleştiren makale, bedensel pratiğin kelimelerin yetersiz kaldığı yerde politik iddiaları hayata geçirebileceğini, topluluğu, hafızayı ve direnci sürdürebileceğini öne sürer. "Sus ve dans et" ifadesi, hayatta kalmanın, yaratıcılığın ve meydan okumanın kasıtlı bir hareketi hâline gelir. Sonuç olarak dabke, kültürel pratiğin hem tarihin bir deposu hem de radikal tahayyülün ve kolektif özgürlüğün bir aracı olarak dönüştürücü potansiyelini örneklendirir.

Keywords: Dabke, Filistin, Kültürel Direniş

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I'm *Just Here* for the Dabke[1]

February 1, 2024

It has been 118 days since the apartheid wall was shaken and boundaries blurred, a momentary line of flight before the genocide erupted. Since then, 117 days have passed. That's more than 5 months. Over 35 weeks and about 5,880 hours. 30,000 people have been murdered since (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024). Others have starved to death. Numbers don't lie, but countries do. Arabs may have invented math, but the West perfected racial calculus. It subtracts at differing rates, formulaically anticipating capital over candor. The numbers are certainly higher, but they'll never tell us by how much. I'm not here to talk about math, though.

I'm *just here* for the dance.

February 2, 2024

I'm summoned "backstage" (or a kitchen to be more precise), to rehearse with my troupe, Al-Juthoor, or "roots" in Arabic (Al-Juthoor Palestinian Dabke, n.d.). We're performing at Eastside Arts Alliance in Oakland, a space that was founded in 2007 to center the work of radical people of color (Eastside Arts Alliance, 2024). We were invited to perform dabke at the closing ceremony of a larger exhibit honoring the legacy and work of the Zapatistas (@Granom & @eastsidecultural, 2024). It's a split bill event and a sold-out show. Having already finished a full day of activism, I enter the designated area. It's a room brimming with familiar faces, individuals from diverse backgrounds whose struggles resonate deeply with my own. Many of them I've encountered at our events before. They invited me to theirs after all. I guess I should have anticipated as much.

Backstage, there is a flurry of people mingling. Performers are exchanging stories and getting to know one another. I don't feel like socializing, though. After all, I'm *just here for the dance*, which should be easy enough. Though I'm situated in academia these days and perform dabke on the side, I once earned a living as a concert dancer, where the motto "just shut up and dance" was life. Every day for nearly 20 years, I was told to leave everything at the door upon entering the studio. Habits are like lullabies, though. Even when they're problematic, they can be soothing. I

[1] This paper was originally written in Spring 2024 and has not been published elsewhere. As of this writing, estimates suggest that more than 680,000 Palestinians have been killed since October 7, 2023, and the number continues to rise daily (Hil & Polya, 2025, *Independent Australia*, https://independentaustralia.net/life/life-display/gaza-death-toll-far-worse-than-reported-in-western-media,20034).

know that when words fail to answer the dreaded question, "How are you," my body will react to the *darburka* instinctively.[2]

In the meantime, I busy myself with meaningless tasks to avoid pleasantries until the curator walks in. She offers her thanks before telling us about her connection to the Zapatistas. She hands each of us a small bag with lavender inside. Attached is a Zapatista political pin and a tiny, silver spoon held together by a satin ribbon. I look at it knowingly. I smile and nod. A newer face in the crowd inquires about the spoon's meaning, so she directs her to a note tucked inside. It reads: *"September 6, 2021, Six Palestinians escaped from the Zionist entity's Gilboa prison, using a spoon. In a joint struggle, may we never stop digging tunnels for freedom."* While the curious woman may not have known why the spoon was there when she asked, I'm certain she'll remember it now (Al Jazeera, 2021).

The show starts. It features a diverse group of performers, all of whom are tied together by their shared commitment to resistance. It's time for us to perform, but the stage is too small, so the audience moves to the corners of the room. After we dance, a woman who I would place in her late 80s shuffles onto the stage. She takes the mic and, in a thick Mexican accent, yells, "*Yalla*, let's dabke." My friends and I look at each other, perplexed.[3] There's no room, and we never gave them music, but *5alas*, the revolution will be danced, we might as well give the people what they want.[4]

February 5, 2024

I step into dabke rehearsal, reeling after a wonderful performance two days prior. We tell the founder and coach of Al-Juthoor about the performance and how invigorating it was before grounding ourselves in the stark reality that, as utopic as the event was, the genocide rages on. Our people still aren't free. Once we settle in, he makes an announcement explaining that one of our newer recruits has decided not to continue with Al-Juthoor. She called the morning after our performance, having attended it herself. She explained that the event's content and tone made her uncomfortable, particularly the incessant calls to resistance. She did not believe armed resistance was a viable method for achieving peace and asserted that such rhetoric had no place in culture and dance. He listened to her, explained our positionality, and ultimately, the two decided we were not

[2] Darburka (also known as a darbeki and tabla) is a goblet drum that is played in most dabke, especially freestyle.
[3] "Yalla" is a common colloquial term in Arabic that translates to "hurry up," or "let's go!"
[4] "5alas" is written in colloquial Arabic using English transcription. It translates to "stop" or "enough."

a good fit for one another.

Introduction: Dancing Between Respectability and Revolution

I walk through these aforementioned asides because they shed light on a common logic that permeates dance. On one hand, we hold the belief that our art is inherently political, yet simultaneously, we find ourselves sanitizing it to fit into the confines of respectability politics. We champion the idea that the arts are a powerful tool of resistance, yet our resolve wavers when faced with that resistance materializing. In a world where the arts are wielded as weapons by those who oppress us, we find ourselves wary to do the same, and it's about time we interrogate that logic.

It is with this in mind that I insist that we ask the question, "What does it mean to shut up and dance," or rather, what would it mean if we recognized that to shut up and dance *could* mean more than what we allow ourselves to believe? Employing these questions as my propellers, these reflections as my starting point, and dabke's history, scholarship, and current iterations as my guide, this paper will assess the revolutionary potential and obfuscation that lies within dabke. To this end, I will begin by briefly discussing the history of dabke, followed by an assessment of how power operates within dance to serve or debilitate revolutionary goals, offering potential for radical change that challenges the institutions we hold so dear.[5]

Part 1: May We Never Stop Digging

The Stage of Control: A Brief History of Dabke

Early Roots

Dabke is a folk and social dance rooted in local Shami communities, which folklorists often trace back as far as the Canaanites. It emerged from everyday practices of stomping—legend has it that villagers would pound mud roofs to compact them during seasonal changes. Over time, it became a slow unified stomping dance performed by peasants.[6] Rooted among peasants and the lower classes, dance was sometimes performed as a form of resistance against ruling authorities in the 1800s—a link that some theorists connect to class attitudes of the era. It was not until the early twentieth century, amid shifting geopolitical dynamics and the aftermath of World War I, that

[5] "Aspects of this history build upon my previous work, including 'Breaking Bridgebuilding: A Case Study of Zvi Gottheiner's Dabke' (in review) and 'Stomping Between Steps: Dabke, Foucault, and the Politics of Love.'

[6] "Shami" refers to the Levantine region (*Bilad al-Sham*), encompassing modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine.

dabke began to transcend these class boundaries (Rowe, 2011).

1900-1948

To understand the forces behind these shifts, it is important to consider several key events, beginning with the emergence of the modern Zionist movement in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Spurred by widespread antisemitism and guided by Theodor Herzl's vision of a Jewish state, Zionism sought to establish a homeland in Palestine, culminating in the formation of settlements in the 1880s (Herzl, 1896; Reports of the Hovevei Zion Societies, 1882–1890). During this period, references to dance among the new settlers were scarce and seldom extended beyond the desire to form a genre. The few mentions of it that did exist alluded to French Ballroom, accompanied by criticism that performing a European-derived dance, given the intense racism Jews had endured in Europe, was inappropriate in their new locale (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 43–44; Mire, in review-a).

Following World War I, Jewish migration to the region increased significantly, driven both by escalating antisemitism in Europe and by the shifting political landscape of the region. During that time, Arab leaders, negotiating with the British, had agreed to support a revolt against the Ottoman Empire in exchange for the promises of independence. Yet these assurances were complicated by the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided former Ottoman territories into mandates, and by the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which endorsed the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine—decisions made with minimal consultation from the local population ("Agreement Between France and Great Britain," 1916; Balfour, 1917).

These events, in turn, shaped the development of Zionist ideology in the decades that followed. Of particular relevance here is the emergence of Revisionist Zionism in the 1920s, which offered a more expansionist alternative to Practical Zionism. While Practical Zionism focused on gradual settlement and building a sustainable Jewish community in Palestine, Revisionist or Expansionist Zionism advocated for immediate statehood and territorial maximalism (Bergamin, 2021). Confronted with the challenges of establishing legitimacy in the region, Zionist cultural efforts began promoting narratives that portrayed Jews as the primary and sole historical inhabitants of the land, reflecting broader ideological divides: Practical Zionism sometimes engaged with native culture, while Expansionist Zionism more readily appropriated local traditions. These narratives were reinforced through strategic maneuvers, including the absorption

of Jewish Arabs from nearby countries, which intersected with cultural strategies such as the adoption and performance of local dances like dabke. While dabke originated in the Shami region, its incorporation into state-sponsored programs helped construct a narrative of belonging that blurred distinctions between diverse local and immigrant populations, effectively treating all Arabs as interchangeable (Rowe, 2011, p. 368; Kaschl, 2003, pp. 40–48).

Meanwhile, with national aspirations in mind, Zionists gained favor among British and later American politicians, who viewed a Jewish presence in Palestine as a strategic foothold. Accordingly and under the Mandate, Britain facilitated land acquisition for Zionist settlers while sidelining the rights of the Palestinian majority, privileging European Jews and reinforcing hierarchies that marginalized Palestinian communities. Settlement expansion, enforced through British policing and backed by the League of Nations, provoked Palestinian resistance, which was met with harsh suppression (Anderson, 2019; Bustos, 2025).

However, Jewish immigration was far from automatic or unrestricted under British rule. During World War II, it was limited by Britain's 1939 White Paper, even as European Jews faced persecution, and only in the aftermath of the war did Zionist leaders promote the large-scale migration of Holocaust survivors. In the lead-up to 1948, Zionist militias intensified attacks on Palestinian communities, contributing to the conditions that resulted in mass expulsions and massacres (Karsh, 2010). Alongside these political and military strategies, cultural efforts—including the appropriation and performance of local dances such as dabke—helped construct narratives of Jewish belonging, reframing indigenous practices in ways that blurred distinctions between Palestinian and settler populations (Kaschl, 2003, p. 40).

1948-1964

Building on these political, military, and cultural strategies, the stage was set for the dramatic transformation of the region in 1948. Amid a fragmenting mandate system across the Levant, the British, exhausted and unable to control the developing situation, withdrew from Palestine. At the same time, the end of World War II marked the emergence of the United States as a dominant global power and the future principal ally of Israel, shaping the broader geopolitical context. Meanwhile, neighboring nations—relatively new and politically precarious—had limited military capacity, constraining their ability to intervene effectively on behalf of the Palestinian population. In this context, Zionist militias seized control, resulting in what is known today as the Nakba (or

"catastrophe") in Arabic. During this period, an estimated 750,000 Palestinians were displaced, primarily into nearby countries; thousands were killed, eleven urban neighborhoods were destroyed, and over 500 villages were decimated (Pappé, 2006).

Accelerated by their newfound international recognition and territorial consolidation, Israel redirected resources toward crafting a new national identity, intentionally stripped of European signifiers and oriented around localized cultural narratives. Informed by their experiences of persecution in Europe, Zionist leaders emphasized the creation of the "New Jew": athletic, self-sufficient, militarily adept, and attuned to the land. To embody this ideal, they sought a national dance, turning to dancer Gurit Kadman, celebrated as the "Mother of Israeli Dance." Though she accepted the task, Kadman struggled to institute a truly national folk dance, noting that such dances develop organically over time, with no known choreographer or fixed moment of origin. European dance educators had long observed that folk dances evolve naturally through improvisation, reflecting the changing practices and values of their communities. For Kadman, the attempt to codify and orchestrate an Israeli folk dance—synthesizing diverse influences into a national repertoire—was fundamentally at odds with the traditional form (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 67–70).

At the encouragement of cultural leaders, Kadman and her collaborators turned to existing source materials, particularly those of the region's remaining Arab inhabitants. Studying the dances, they took a special interest in the dabke, which they found complementary to the strength, masculinity, and communal kibbutz values of the "New Jew." Veering away from dabke's improvisatory tradition, Kadman and her peers codified steps, set choreography, and credited individual choreographers, performing it as "Israeli" in its burgeoning folk festivals. Insisting her version was different from the Arab rendition, Kadman asserted that Israeli dabke would be co-ed.[7] Her final adjustment to the dance was changing the spelling from "dabke" to "debke," a fairly inconsequential move (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 67–70; Mire, in review-a).

Meanwhile and in response to the Armistice, the denied Right of Return, and the establishment of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), Israel vigorously promoted their debka in concert settings, imbuing it with indigenous claims, military attire, biblical motifs, and Israeli war reenactments showcasing victories over Arabs, thereby demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between the state, art, and colonialism. This

[7] From this point forward, I will refer to the Israeli version as "debka" and the Arab version as "dabke."

strategic staging not only rewrote the dance's meaning but also obscured Palestinian histories and claims, turning a shared cultural practice into a tool of nationalist narrative predicated on Palestinian dispossession (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 57–59; Phillips, 2020, pp. 99–101; Mire, in review-a).

Despite Israeli state efforts, however, debka/dabke failed to gain the same traction that it did within its indigenous population. Interestingly enough, after the forced displacement of Palestinians in 1948, dabke's importance multiplied among Palestinians in the diaspora, serving as a method to preserve cultural heritage, especially among the youth population born outside the land (Mills, 2017). Recognizing the potential threat posed by a unified Palestinian identity, expressed through factors like cultural cohesion, Israel and surrounding powers responded strategically to the symbolic significance of the dance. For instance, following Jordan's annexation of the West Bank in 1948, dabke was frequently used by the Jordanian regime in celebratory events, yet in a manner that diluted its Palestinian essence. Emphasizing its "apolitical" nature, the Jordanian regime marketed it as a generic Shami dance, disregarding how it was also a growing form of resistance among Palestinians, many of whom resided in Jordan (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 75–79; Mire, in review-a).

As expected, iterations of dabke/debka performances were not confined to Jordanian politics but extended to the broader contexts in which they were staged. Distinct from Jordan's nationalist strategies, dabke was also mobilized by the Pan-Arab movement. Following World War II and amid the gradual decline of British and French mandates in the Middle East, Pan-Arabism emerged as a cultural and political ideology promoting unity and cooperation among Arab states and peoples. Advocating for a closer union of Arab nations, Pan-Arabism highlighted folk dances like dabke as symbols of shared identity, values, and aspirations across the Arab world. These performances emphasized collective, active participation and camaraderie, reinforcing notions of unity and solidarity among Arab communities. This emphasis was further institutionalized through folklore conferences, which, ironically yet understandably, incorporated European theatrical conventions—such as proscenium staging and choreographed formations—to attract attention and gain validation from Western audiences (Rowe, 2011, pp. 374–379).[8]

[8] Pan-Arabism promoted dabke even in regions where it was not traditionally performed, using the dance as a unifying cultural symbol.

1964-1993

Influenced by these preceding movements and historical moments, dabke's significance surged in the 1960s with the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) (Rowe, 2011, pp. 374–379). Committed to representing Palestinian interests and promoting self-determination, the PLO formalized nationalist strategies, including the development of an arts sector, during what is now known as the Palestinian Folk Movement (Hamid, 1975, pp. 90–109). Dedicated to preserving folk forms and uniting Palestinians across social and religious divides, this period witnessed a resurgence of "traditional" culture through forms like the dabke and tareetz (Rowe, 2011, p. 375). With financial support and in political alignment with the PLO, dabke was used as a tool for unification and mobilization among Palestinians within and outside of Palestine.

Despite the PLO's dedication to folk culture, however, its early years showed hesitance in fully embracing substantial innovations within the dabke. Instead, it leaned toward appropriated, material symbols of the past, such as Palestinian peasantry, resulting in women taking up more supportive roles within the dance (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 98–101). It also implemented minor adjustments that gravitated toward European aesthetics (Rowe, 2011, p. 372). These strategic choices served dual purposes. On the one hand, it reminded Palestinians in the diaspora of their shared roots through a sense of nostalgia. On the other hand, it aligned with respectability politics, effectively garnering international sympathy amid Israel's escalating aggression.

In response to this, Israel's political scene and the Cold War politics of the period, Israel sought to neutralize dabke's growing prominence by presenting the dance as both Israeli and a universal language capable of transcending politics (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 62–93). By emphasizing their identity as the Middle East's sole "democracy" and "modern" society, Israeli cultural institutions were able to claim innovation in the dance, while Palestinian communities largely maintained traditional forms. Efforts by the PLO and other Palestinian institutions to preserve dabke as a marker of national identity, though culturally significant, sometimes reinforced external stereotypes of Arab cultural stagnation, highlighting the complex interplay between nationalism, cultural preservation, and the politics of representation (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 72–81).

It's worth noting that Israel's selective claim of dabke was influenced not only by nationalistic goals but also by concerns over its international image. The Nakba of 1948 set in motion a series of events that shaped global perceptions of Israel, including the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1982

invasion of Lebanon, ongoing settlement expansion, and the appropriation of Palestinian cultural artifacts. While Israel largely avoided sustained international accountability, these actions left marks on its public image, motivating the state to promote cultural achievements, like their framing of dabke, as symbols of modernity and innovation rather than total erasure—positioning them in contrast to the ongoing efforts of Palestinian communities to maintain and assert their own cultural heritage (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 206–281).

Israel's use of dabke was shaped in part by global Cold War dynamics, which positioned the state to leverage cultural diplomacy on the international stage. During this period, Western dancers were often mobilized as cultural "activists," and Israeli performers were sometimes positioned within this framework as world citizens tasked with spreading their interpretation of culture, embodying ideals of modernity, freedom, and influence. Dance became a symbolic marker of the new world order, contrasted with Soviet ballet, which was often associated with aristocratic tradition (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 206–281; Phillips, 2020, p. 6). Against this backdrop, Israel promoted dabke internationally as a universal cultural language, reinforcing its modernist image while diverting attention from ongoing political conflicts with Palestinians (Mire, in review-a).

Meanwhile, as the First Intifada unfolded, dabke underwent significant changes, shifting from primarily folk and turath themes toward expressions of resistance. Grassroots mobilization challenged the authority of the PLO and the efficacy of traditional leadership, and the lawih (leader) of the dabke line increasingly came from younger men in the community. Women, who played prominent roles in the resistance, also became more visible in these performances, reflecting a reduction in gender disparity and highlighting the radical political energies of the period (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 230–260).

1990s-2022

After the First Intifada subsided in 1993, dabke's prominence within Israel shifted toward '48 Palestinians. While hardships in the West Bank and Gaza continued, '48 Palestinians increasingly called for greater access to Israel's cultural sector, a demand Israel strategically accommodated. As part of its cultural diplomacy, Israel launched campaigns celebrating the country as a place where "the layers of time and mixtures of people" come together in dance. Negotiating with '48 Palestinians and Druze, the state hired Arab performers to participate in dabke, presenting these performances as evidence of inclusivity, while simultaneously framing

Gazawis and other marginalized groups as resistant to participation. Through this approach, Israel could assert a narrative of progress and coexistence, while controlling the contexts in which the dance was performed and determining who could represent it publicly (Kaschl, 2003, pp. 230–260; Mire, in review-a).

In doing so, the government was able to promote multicultural narratives that often obscured its role in imposed violence (Kaschl, 2003, p. 180). While seemingly benign on the surface, these maneuvers—coming in the wake of Israel's consolidation of power through the Oslo Accords—had particularly harmful effects on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinian dances of protest could be reframed as celebratory performances, featuring both Palestinians and Israelis as symbols of a budding friendship, or as evidence that Israel had "created" its own version of the dance. In this way, state-sponsored narratives depicted Israelis and Palestinians as relatively equal participants in shared cultural practices, masking ongoing asymmetries of power and control over the land and reducing the plight of those Palestinians, especially those without Israeli citizenship (Bindler, 2019; Kaschl, 2003, p. 199; Mire, in review-a).

Given these contextual influences and technological developments, this period saw several changes in dabke/debka. New technology, particularly expanding internet access in the late 1990s and 2000s, facilitated the dance's dissemination in the diaspora and helped connect Gaza and the West Bank, regions previously isolated due to blockades. At the same time, academic interest in dabke grew, reflecting broader scholarly engagement with Palestinian cultural heritage. The critical climate fostered by the "New Historians" in Israeli academia—who questioned official narratives of 1948 and subsequent events—also contributed to greater attention being paid to indigenous dances like dabke, even if these historians did not explicitly focus on the dance itself (Kaschl, 2003, p. 11; Shlaim, 2016, pp. 888–908).

This is significant because, while Israeli dance scholarship remains far from radical, the critical climate fostered by the "New Historians Era" and in other moments of Israeli history contributes to a perception of progressivity—an impact from which the field still struggles today.[9] Although dabke is widely practiced and increasingly studied, few scholars examine Israeli-Palestinian dance through the lens of power. Even among those who research Israel-Palestine,

[9] Though the New Historians contributed to the appearance of progress, they were certainly not the only factor. Many progressive and socialist movements have proliferated in Israel, standing in stark contrast to its apartheid structures.

Palestine often remains peripheral, mentioned only with a disclaimer about the conflict's complexity.[10] In contrast, Palestinians frequently interpret dabke as a site of resistance, emphasizing resilience and cultural continuity rather than defining their work solely through victimhood or imperial frameworks (Mire, in review-a).

While acknowledging the material impacts of these academic slippages, it's important to emphasize that it does not diminish the power of the dance in any manner. Academia is not the real world and is certainly not an indication of the people's collective power. In fact, despite the academy's shortcomings, dabke has seen a huge surge in recent years through social media and the rebirth of a Third World Liberation Movement (Hamdonah & Joseph, 2024; Shawa & Bintfalastin, 2021; Shawa & Bintfalastin, 2021). The dance went viral in 2018 when young Ghazawiis performed it amid Israeli snipers at the Great March of Return and again in 2023 at the trial of Palestinians versus Biden (Trends Desk, 2018; @al.juthoor, 2024; Mire, in review-b). Some may say the dance is inappropriate in a moment of grief, but to that, I would push back. Palestinians have to live every moment to the fullest. Palestinians are policed, and we refuse that policing. Our Movement and movement are inseparable. When people tell us to shut up and dance, it doesn't mean to shut up. It's an invitation to *never stop digging*…

Part 2: Tunnels for Freedom

April 22, 2024

It has been 198 days since the apartheid wall was shaken and boundaries blurred. That's 8 months. 4,752 hours. 42,510 people have been murdered since (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024-b). College campuses have started their encampments to demand that universities divest from Israel. We were one of the first. I'm in charge of programming, and suggest we bring in dabke. Some people are skeptical. They say that now is not the time to dance, but they know they won't win this fight and ultimately back down.

April 28, 2024

I invite Al-Juthoor to the encampment for a brief workshop. The dancers shift their schedules, setting tasks aside to be there. This, too, is organizing—not the only kind, but a kind all the same.

[10] Elisa Rose Davis, *Going Gaga: Contradictions and Articulations of the Contemporary in the Work of Ohad Naharin* (PhD diss., Temple University, 2021), x. This source offers a sample of the mentioned approach.

We gather a few dancers and agree on an afternoon session but before they arrive, I am greeted by a horde of preschoolers chanting "Free Palestine" in broken, toddler English. Their tiny megaphones, still oversized against their small frames, amplify their voices as they parade through the encampment with the conviction of freedom fighters and the wobbling gait of a drunkard's stupor. I ask if they'd like to learn dabke. They answer with an eager yes. I tell them its story, we learn a few steps, and joy spills over them—by extension, over me too.

Many of them remain for the workshop that afternoon. Our coach begins by speaking of resistance, his words grounding the space before we join hands in a circle. The rhythm of *Ya Zarif al-Toul* rises between us (Kabaha, 2005). On the surface, it is a wedding song, a melody of joy and celebration. Yet woven into its history are threads of sorrow, of longing, and dispossession. With no single author and no fixed set of lyrics, the song has traveled through generations, reshaped again and again to meet the urgencies of shifting political times. Still, its tune remains constant—an anchor through change—carrying forward the insistence that love itself is resistance, and that even in joy are echoes of what has been lost (Hamouda, 2013, pp. 4–6).

The lyrics paint a poignant scene of a man serenading their beloved as they prepares to leave Palestine in pursuit of a "better" life. Passionately reminiscing about the familiar smells and soil of their homeland, he insists that if they leave, their memories of him and the land will fade away. He claims they will never find a true sense of belonging outside of Palestine because foreign lands will not know them (Noworah, n.d.). A subtle shift redirects the focus from the person to a broader audience, illuminating that this is more than a personal love interest; rather, it is a metaphor for Palestinians both within and beyond the land (Moussa, 2022; Mire, in review-b).

The workshop brings together an eclectic crew. The youngest among us have yet to master walking; the oldest are supported by canes. A dog weaves through the line. The woman who gifted us the pins and tiny spoon is present, along with several other Zapatista educators. Many organizers I have come to know well since October 7th are there too. As we move together, a swirl of emotions takes hold—joy, grief, tears. The session ends, and we continue with the dance or the protest…whatever you want to call it.

May 2-3, 2024

A few days later, we celebrate minor victories. Partial divestment is secured through the Associated Students of the University of California and the Graduate Assembly. The challenge

now is putting it into action. The union calls an emergency strike vote. In a speech sharing the news, I include a quote that has stayed with me since October 7th. From *The Battle of Algiers*, Ben M'Hidi says: "It's hard to start a revolution. Even harder to continue it. And hardest of all to win it. But, it's only afterward, when we have won, that the true difficulties begin" (Bouattia, 2007). I use this quote to temper the audience, and then we come together in dabke. As I'm leading the line, I am struck by another dancer. I have never seen him before, and admittedly, he dances the steps better than I. With a sheepish grin, he reminds me that "traditionally men are the lawihs," implying I should follow his lead. I give him a look, and he backs down. Later, we get to talking. It turns out we can place each other's villages based on how we dance certain steps.

The next day, we extend an invitation to a former member of the Black Panther Party. We had first met him a few months earlier, when two friends crossed paths in a coffee shop after he approached their table upon noticing their keffiyehs.[11] Their conversation ranged from the Black Panthers to Palestine and collective liberation, and it quickly became clear that we should invite him to share his wisdom with us. He chose to speak about the intersections between our movements, illuminating the history of the Free Speech Movement here at Cal. Throughout the talk, he returned again and again to the importance of movement and culture in our struggles. Together, we explored dance—dabke, ghost dance, and the crip walk. It was joyful and sorrowful and everything in between.

Despite my exhaustion, I left the camp that evening to attend my friend's book launch for their latest anthology on queer Palestinian utopias. The room buzzed with quiet anticipation, the air thick with warmth and laughter. Throughout the panel, the interviewer kept returning to the question, "What does a free Palestine look like?" My friend's answer cut through the chatter, radiant and clear: "Palestinians are different. We have to take joy where we can get it because we are always under immediate threat. A free Palestine is a lot like this. Right here in this room." In that moment, the words lingered, echoing through the laughter, the applause, and the collective breath of those gathered—a reminder that even in the smallest spaces of joy, freedom takes root (@yaffasutopia, 2024).

Her words make me think about dabke–its appropriation, its weaponization, and its national obfuscation. I think of dabke in grief and love and resistance. I think about how dance *can be*

[11] A keffiyeh is a scarf that has come to be known as a symbol of Palestinian resistance.

resistance, but how that doesn't mean that *all* dance is resistance. I imagine a free Palestine and how it will be danced. I think of dance's potency and how the institutions we hold close are afraid of it. I think about how dance holds the nuances that words can't. I decided to think less and dance more. I decide to shut up and dance and in so doing, dig and stomp and kick, one step closer to freedom.

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