

Transcript

00:00:01 Speaker 1

Thank you.

00:00:01 Speaker 1

Thank you so much, Omar, and thank you for hosting me again.

00:00:04 Speaker 1

It's such an honor to be back after I, you know, just a few months of being here, so it's wonderful to be back.

00:00:12 Speaker 1

I'm going to read just the opening few pages, the prologue of the book, just to give you a sense of what this book is doing.

00:00:24 Speaker 1

The yellow box is worn, its corners collapsing.

00:00:28 Speaker 1

The green and blue paint stripes streaked across its sides have lost their brightness.

00:00:33 Speaker 1

The cardboard of its body has sagged, crushed under the weight of travel.

00:00:38 Speaker 1

Amman, London, Sydney, Beirut, Ramallah.

00:00:42 Speaker 1

Forced to hold more and more content over the years, its bottom threatens to give way.

00:00:47 Speaker 1

Its handles almost drip as I move the box to my desk here in London.

00:00:52 Speaker 1

Lifting the lid releases childhood smells, sugary sweetness and perfumed paper.

00:00:57 Speaker 1

The inside of the cover has a scribbled note from high school friends who had gifted me the box, wishing me a meaningful graduation, not knowing that it would come to contain an archive I would visit only occasionally, but otherwise keep safely entombed.

00:01:13 Speaker 1

Shortly after Ramsey's news reached me, the messenger oblivious to how her words landed, I retrieved the box.

00:01:20 Speaker 1

Dust had settled on its lid.

00:01:22 Speaker 1

I peer in.

00:01:24 Speaker 1

On top are Tata's diaries, my maternal grandmother,

00:01:27 Speaker 1

which I have only recently inherited.

00:01:29 Speaker 1

I set those aside, not yet ready to turn their pages.

00:01:33 Speaker 1

I sift through the rest of the content.

00:01:35 Speaker 1

There are scores of letters, cards received from friends and family, old journals and pads, notes written on torn pieces of paper by classmates who pass them along during class, and paraphernalia, including a pack of decades-old chewing gum, toilet rolls printed with bright red hearts and lips, stickers, Christmas ornaments,

00:01:55 Speaker 1

And for some reason that is no longer known to me, but which is frightfully prescient, surgical masks.

00:02:02 Speaker 1

I pull up Ramsey's side of our correspondence.

00:02:05 Speaker 1

This stack, disentangled from the box and organized beside my laptop, includes a picture in an unaddressed white envelope.

00:02:12 Speaker 1

Two barely recognizable teenagers are perched on a ledge.

00:02:16 Speaker 1

Their backpacks and sweaters are in a heap next to them.

00:02:19 Speaker 1

The two boys are on the final landing of the three sets of stairs

00:02:24 Speaker 1

leading from the classrooms to the main playground.

00:02:26 Speaker 1

The one on the right, I know, was posing not for the picture, but for two other students coming down the stairs.

00:02:33 Speaker 1

The blue railings sneaking alongside the stairs are, I recall vividly, behind the photographer, whose identity I have forgotten.

00:02:41 Speaker 1

The basketball courts and football pitches are filled with screaming children on the other side of the landing.

00:02:47 Speaker 1

Looking at the boy on the left, I remember how dry his skin felt in that morning sun.

00:02:52 Speaker 1

how the medication he had been taking for his acne made him dehydrated and itchy.

00:02:57 Speaker 1

Even though these kids' most guarded thoughts are still a part of me, there is a vast distance between us, a whole life lived.

00:03:06 Speaker 1

I kept Ramsey's notes from the very beginning, not just his, everyone's, before I realized that I was keeping everyone's to avoid acknowledging that I wanted to keep only his.

00:03:17 Speaker 1

Everything he had given me, even before our correspondence had evolved into what it would become.

00:03:23 Speaker 1

Proper letters, pages long, stapled and enveloped.

00:03:27 Speaker 1

Those were all in the yellow box, alongside a smaller box that contains 2 cigarettes and a bullet.

00:03:33 Speaker 1

The blue ink on the cigarettes is still legible.

00:03:36 Speaker 1

One reads, 20 January 2000, time 3.45, rules.

00:03:42 Speaker 1

One, smoking is a pleasure.

00:03:44 Speaker 1

Two, there is no way out of this country except through loving someone.

00:03:47 Speaker 1

Enjoy.

00:03:49 Speaker 1

The second, **** Davidov and Marlborough.

00:03:51 Speaker 1

This cigarette is from my last packet.

00:03:54 Speaker 1

It was not.

00:03:56 Speaker 1

On my 17th birthday, a month later, there was another cigarette stuffed into the card I received.

00:04:01 Speaker 1

I slip the card out of the envelope and open it.

00:04:04 Speaker 1

The cigarette is almost flattened in the crease, but the writing on it remains clear and crisp.

00:04:09 Speaker 1

Happy birthday, TB.

00:04:10 Speaker 1

It's really nice to have you by my side.

00:04:12 Speaker 1

I love you, but not a lot.

00:04:14 Speaker 1

are.

00:04:16 Speaker 1

The bullet, if I remember correctly, is from a camping trip he had gone on with his father to North Jordan.

00:04:23 Speaker 1

I had refused to join, much to his frustration.

00:04:26 Speaker 1

You want me to spend a whole day just with him?

00:04:28 Speaker 1

It will be lecture after lecture.

00:04:30 Speaker 1

His complaints resonate in my mind.

00:04:33 Speaker 1

I sift through his other gifts, chocolates, candy, photographs, cards, and skillfully drawn vulgar pornographic sketches.

00:04:41 Speaker 1

Three dicked aliens and multi-boobed creatures in twisted sexual positions.

00:04:46 Speaker 1

In front of me is a trail, his side of the letters we wrote to each other as we fell in love.

00:04:51 Speaker 1

We wrote on anything we could find.

00:04:53 Speaker 1

Yellow legal notepads or blank A4 sheets, pages torn out of notebooks or the backs of cigarette packets, whatever scraps were lying around our homes.

00:05:03 Speaker 1

We left them on each other's beds or in our backpacks whenever we couldn't meet for whatever reason.

00:05:08 Speaker 1

and our conversations had to find other ways to meander.

00:05:12 Speaker 1

I am reminded that his letters were neat, the lines never sloped, even on online paper.

00:05:18 Speaker 1

His handwriting was tight and cursive, lines of English interspersed with a strange hybrid of Arabic, colloquial words written with the full diacritics of formal Arabic.

00:05:29 Speaker 1

At the bottom of the pile is the first note I got from him.

00:05:32 Speaker 1

It is little more than a hasty scroll that I can barely decipher on the torn corner of what looks like a textbook,

00:05:38 Speaker 1

Geography may be our history, laminated paper that has ground with time.

00:05:44 Speaker 1

Sometimes I would leave his place, walk back to mine, only to find a letter stuffed into my backpack.

00:05:50 Speaker 1

Those were the most precious.

00:05:52 Speaker 1

Letters that held thoughts that bordered on confessions, ones that grew beyond the confines of anyone exchanged, and instead contained words that could not be spoken.

00:06:02 Speaker 1

Texts that he was depositing in my safekeeping.

00:06:06 Speaker 1

Words that were directed at me, but were not necessarily for me, that made me a container for his musings, a human journal, made me also his witness.

00:06:16 Speaker 1

Some letters were full of recrimination, calling me out or raging at my behavior from behind the safe distance of a delivered screed.

00:06:24 Speaker 1

He was nocturnal, I wasn't, and when he couldn't call me late at night, he would write, Imagine a chat we might have had if I were awake.

00:06:32 Speaker 1

Embody my response.

00:06:34 Speaker 1

find himself against my words and then leave me that record.

00:06:38 Speaker 1

I treasured his written trust then, and today I am grateful for it.

00:06:43 Speaker 1

In front of me is a transcript of his earlier self, one he has most likely forgotten or discarded, an archived monologue waiting to be excavated.

00:06:53 Speaker 1

My voice is absent, not yet reclaimed, not yet molded into the voice of the man I am today, with my side of that correspondence missing.

00:07:01 Speaker 1

And with very little recollection of what I might have written him more than two decades ago, his letters helped me retrace my past, make sense of my present, starting in Amman.

00:07:19 Speaker 2

Thank you so much, Todd, for this beautiful opening for us today, and also taking us to the construction of this world that you lived in, Amman, with the introduction to also your love story with Jameson.

00:07:31 Speaker 2

How many years ago was this?

00:07:33 Speaker 1

So this is

00:07:34 Speaker 1

This is I met Ramsey in 1990 and we were in a in friendship in a relationship until 2000.

00:07:45 Speaker 1

So we haven't spoken since since 2000.

00:07:48 Speaker 2

So almost talking about like 30 years ago and how long in the making was it to to make this possible the book?

00:07:55 Speaker 1

So I honestly I feel like I've been writing this book for a very long time.

00:07:59 Speaker 1

I a lot of it is snippets of things that I've written maybe even

00:08:04 Speaker 1

immediately in the aftermath of the relationship and my leading Aman.

00:08:09 Speaker 1

So in some ways, I've been writing this for more than two decades, but I really turned to this book in earnest after Hamas Fontaine was published.

00:08:16 Speaker 1

So I started writing it properly in 2018, and I finished it and submitted it in September 2023.

00:08:24 Speaker 2

So almost five years, and then a few years later to see the light.

00:08:27 Speaker 2

What was

00:08:29 Speaker 2

urging you, I'm sure like everyone who wants to write something, there's something calling us from inside to write it, you know.

00:08:35 Speaker 2

Sometimes it would be like a research inquiry, what you've done before, and sometimes more like a personal commitment that something is calling us.

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So I wonder what was it that was pushing you towards, like I have to make this possible, and this is the time for it.

00:08:52 Speaker 1

Yeah, I never thought that I would write MMOR.

00:08:57 Speaker 1

I actually still can't believe that I wrote the memoir.

00:09:02 Speaker 1

It was never my intention to write the story of my life or the story of my family's lives.

00:09:08 Speaker 1

You know, Palestine, Lebanon, that was not the driver for me.

00:09:12 Speaker 1

It's what ended up being in the book.

00:09:13 Speaker 1

But the driver for me was really a decision that I knew from when I was quite young, when I was 17 or 18, that I would write about my relationship with Franci.

00:09:25 Speaker 1

because as it was happening, and you referenced silence in your opening, as it was happening, I had no words to talk about my relationship to him.

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I had no words to explain to him what it meant that I loved him.

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I didn't understand this myself.

00:09:41 Speaker 1

I had no words to understand what I was feeling.

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And so I always knew that this was something that I would come back to, not necessarily in the form of a book, but I always knew that once I had

00:09:53 Speaker 1

words and understanding, I would come back and try to capture this feeling and try to convey what this feeling was.

00:10:00 Speaker 1

And so, as I became a writer, I realized that this was actually what I wanted to go back to.

00:10:06 Speaker 1

And so when I started writing this book, it was really a book about my relationship with Ramsi.

00:10:11 Speaker 1

It was a book about friendship and about two boys falling in love in Amman.

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And that was it.

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I didn't think I would write anything beyond that.

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And then as I was writing and as the book started taking form,

00:10:24 Speaker 1

It became the book that it was, almost inadvertently, even thinking about, these two boys are Palestinian.

00:10:31 Speaker 1

Why are they in Amman?

00:10:33 Speaker 1

When I'm talking about their family homes and talking about how they grew up, you know, their grandparents, their parents, all of these things, it's very difficult to separate politics from it.

00:10:42 Speaker 1

And so suddenly it becomes a book about dispossession in Palestine and

00:10:47 Speaker 1

Lebanon and the civil war there.

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So it becomes a book about that, but really at the core of it, this is a queer love story.

00:10:54 Speaker 1

This is what the driver of this book was from.

00:10:56 Speaker 1

Wonderful.

00:10:59 Speaker 2

I wanted to ask you, like you mentioned, that it became almost like a book about Palestine, but also a book about queer love story.

00:11:08 Speaker 2

And I wanted to ask you about the timing of the writing within this moment of rupture, you know, this time of destruction and

00:11:16 Speaker 2

killing and genocide.

00:11:19 Speaker 2

And sometimes when there's a revolution somewhere or there's like a war or uprising and somebody wants to write a story about, I don't know, a community that it's usually underrepresented, people are often faced by this question, like, is it a good time for this?

00:11:35 Speaker 2

And one would wonder, like, when is the good time for it, you know?

00:11:38 Speaker 2

So I was just wondering, how did you deal with these, like, different, almost, like, struggles, like, you know,

00:11:46 Speaker 2

Let it be like sometimes people would be doing like poetry or doing a painting or writing a song or like writing, making a piece of photography during a time of war and the horrors of war.

00:11:56 Speaker 2

So I just wondered like how did you manage to situate your work within what's happening in our time?

00:12:02 Speaker 1

I really struggled with this and I think I continue to struggle with it.

00:12:06 Speaker 1

I don't know that I have a good answer.

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The most honest answer is that I'm deeply unsettled.

00:12:12 Speaker 1

by the prospect of publishing a book and specifically publishing a personal book at the moment of genocide.

00:12:22 Speaker 1

I finished writing this book in September 2023, and obviously October 7th happened weeks after that.

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And I could have never imagined this book coming out at the moment of genocide.

00:12:34 Speaker 1

It's in some ways, even in my mind, this is pre-genocide.

00:12:37 Speaker 1

This book is a pre-genocide book.

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And our worlds have changed in the genocide.

00:12:42 Speaker 1

I don't know that I'd be able, I don't know that I would have been able to write this book post-genocide.

00:12:46 Speaker 1

I think we're still living in a moment where we don't quite, at least as Palestinians, but not only as people who are aware of what just happened, we're still living, or what is

continuing to happen, we're still living in a moment of deep rupture and dislocation and grief and the absence of words that can convey

00:13:09 Speaker 1

the madness that we've all been witnessing the past 2 1/2 years.

00:13:14 Speaker 1

And so I, to be in a position where this book is coming out, where I'm talking about it, where this reality where, you know, I'm in Oxford here talking, and then there's still a reality of genocide happening.

00:13:27 Speaker 1

Those 2 temporalities, the fact that they're in parallel and coexist is

00:13:33 Speaker 1

It's very unsettling.

00:13:35 Speaker 1

And I've said this before, and I keep saying it, that I think it's obscene that life keeps going normally when we're witnessing mass death.

00:13:44 Speaker 1

Not that when, you know, mass death is happening and we don't know about it.

00:13:47 Speaker 1

When we're witnessing mass death and we're still able to live lives as if nothing is happening, there's something that has destroyed us as humans, I think.

00:13:56 Speaker 1

And so, I mean, the only way that I've been able to rationalize this reality that I'm in

00:14:03 Speaker 1

is to say that this is also a book about the Nakba.

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It's my own story of Nakba, and it is, and we know that the genocide is the continuation of the Nakba.

00:14:12 Speaker 1

And in that way, this is 1 strand of a much broader story.

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But even that doesn't really, doesn't really sort of reduce the level of guilt and horror and grief that I'm feeling.

00:14:27 Speaker 1

And I think that we're all feeling in different ways.

00:14:30 Speaker 2

Thank you for sharing.

00:14:31 Speaker 2

And I think in many times when we hear about like any war, let's be like Sudan or Libya or Iraq or Syria or Palestine or Ukraine, these wars become almost like a faceless and abstract wars, almost without a face, without a story of a person, without, you know, a voice or narrative.

00:14:48 Speaker 2

And therefore, people are turned into numbers almost, you know, and people become numb towards this flood of images of destruction and horror.

00:14:57 Speaker 2

And I feel like therefore books like this help us to also slow down and like enter into one's, like one family, one person's life, you know, and see how 1948 or how the violence of the, you know, what's happened in Nakba has shaped people across generations through movements.

00:15:15 Speaker 1

Yeah, I mean, I, on some level, I agree with that.

00:15:19 Speaker 1

On another level, I completely reject that because I, I think that this,

00:15:27 Speaker 1

need almost to humanize has also been, first of all, it's starting from the position that we've been so dehumanized, we need to rehumanize ourselves with our narratives and our private tales and our stories and our personal loss and grief, which I reject.

00:15:46 Speaker 1

No one should struggle to prove their humanity.

00:15:49 Speaker 1

So this idea that we need to rehumanize by personal tales, I think it actually further dehumanizes.

00:15:58 Speaker 1

But I also think that it's very difficult when, this question, and I'm not saying this is what you're saying, but even in mainstream media, this language of, you want the human story, you want to put that name to a face.

00:16:10 Speaker 1

I think in some ways, actually, I understand how that helps readers connect, but also it's an impossible, the calamity here is that this is mass death, this is mass dislocation.

00:16:23 Speaker 1

It's not the story of one person or one family.

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it's actually incomprehensible.

00:16:28 Speaker 1

We can't, even if you hear the story of 1 NACDA survivor or now one genocide survivor, one can't quite compute the scale of what's happening.

00:16:36 Speaker 1

You know, the hundreds of thousands killed and the level of destruction and violence.

00:16:41 Speaker 1

And so it's a very difficult reality to sit in.

00:16:44 Speaker 1

I do think that it becomes faceless and sort of difficult to hold on to, but there's something in me that resists this idea that, oh, you must humanize this.

00:16:54 Speaker 1

I don't think we need to humanize.

00:16:55 Speaker 1

I think it's clear what's happening.

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And even if we don't know anyone or don't know any specific stories, what's happening is unjust, and that should be enough.

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And so it's a difficult thing to put myself in.

00:17:06 Speaker 1

I don't know if that makes sense.

00:17:07 Speaker 2

It does make sense, yeah.

00:17:09 Speaker 2

Thank you for sharing, Tarek.

00:17:11 Speaker 2

I wanted to ask you, in the book and writing the memoir, you return to describing your home in Amman, the Stone home.

00:17:21 Speaker 2

So somehow there's, this is the first page.

00:17:23 Speaker 2

It's almost like taking us in our hand, like with you into your home.

00:17:28 Speaker 2

And also you described to us like the box of memories and the diaries that you recently inherited from your grandmother.

00:17:33 Speaker 2

So I just wanted to ask, when you were opening your own past, how did you see talk that you left 20 and 30 years ago?

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What did you discover in these, you know, the box and the letters and you know?

00:17:45 Speaker 1

A mess of a child, yeah.

00:17:48 Speaker 2

Tell us more.

00:17:49 Speaker 1

No, I mean, so the way that the book is constructed, I can't really quite get rid of the scholar in me.

00:17:56 Speaker 1

So I have all of the letters that Ramzi sent me over the course of about a decade.

00:18:02 Speaker 1

So I have all of his letters, but obviously my letters are absent.

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So it's almost an archive where I could go in and try to reconstruct our relationship and our friendship with my presence absent.

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So it's almost trying to guess

00:18:18 Speaker 1

at what it was that I would have said or done that would elicit a certain response from him.

00:18:23 Speaker 1

And so it really was a very mechanical process of reconstruction, of sort of trying to come back into my childhood and using that relationship as an anchor, or as a backbone rather, reconstruct those years.

00:18:38 Speaker 1

And so there's a lot of it that is archival, quote unquote, in that sense.

00:18:43 Speaker 1

And the fact that much of our relationship happened through correspondence meant that I had quite a significant body of sort of work to go through.

00:18:54 Speaker 1

But then there were also all of the anecdotes.

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every family has anecdotes, stories of the past, stories of grandparents and parents.

00:19:03 Speaker 1

And so it was going back to a lot of these stories and trying to piece them together and trying to understand

00:19:12 Speaker 1

especially for people, Palestinians, obviously in this case, specifically Palestinians, oral history is a big part of our history, especially when our history is contested, our archives are stolen and looted.

00:19:24 Speaker 1

Oral history is a big part of who we are, how we talk about these things.

00:19:27 Speaker 1

So obviously when I was a child, I had understood, I had listened to and heard all of these stories.

00:19:33 Speaker 1

I'm not sure that I had understood them.

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So coming back to them now after really understanding the politics of Palestine more,

00:19:41 Speaker 1

and placing these stories in their context, going back to my mom specifically, my grandparents and my father have now passed away, but going back to reconstruct these stories was actually very, was a beautiful process of sort of reconstructing my family home.

00:19:58 Speaker 1

And I see in the book that I struggle a lot with memory.

00:20:06 Speaker 1

I don't, I'm under no illusion that one can recreate, you know, I can't recreate what happened last week, let alone 3 decades ago.

00:20:15 Speaker 1

And so I'm, in doing that, I'm sort of already acknowledging that memory is unreliable.

00:20:21 Speaker 1

And what I try to do is to resurrect the feeling, the emotional, the spirits, the emotional resonance of certain experiences, rather than the fact of how they happened or when.

00:20:35 Speaker 1

And I think that's the spirit of what guides the book, sort of putting me back in that home and in that friendship.

00:20:42 Speaker 2

Wonderful.

00:20:42 Speaker 2

And I wanted to ask you, because you mentioned in the book, you know, growing up as a boy who was attracted to boys, all the sense of rupture and bullying and trauma and struggle, you know, to fit within the society that, you know, these stories wouldn't be told or narrated.

00:21:04 Speaker 2

And I feel not everyone would have the, not every one of us would be able to have the ability to go deep into their own past and to touch on the places that are hurting and places that are quite traumatic.

00:21:16 Speaker 2

And, they maybe sometimes, we would just try to bury them and move.

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Sometimes we would like and back them, dig a little bit before we plant, as they say.

00:21:25 Speaker 2

So I just wonder, like, how did you deal with returning to these moments when

00:21:30 Speaker 2

You describe in the book that I felt very invisible.

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I felt I was made small.

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I was the self I am should be erased.

00:21:39 Speaker 2

In the book, it says like this.

00:21:41 Speaker 2

I just wonder, how did you deal in first of all, finding that self there, but then like writing it and putting it in the book?

00:21:49 Speaker 1

Yeah, I don't know.

00:21:52 Speaker 1

You know, right?

00:21:53 Speaker 1

So obviously there were experiences that were quite painful in the book.

00:21:58 Speaker 1

But there were also experiences that were beautiful and loving.

00:22:02 Speaker 1

So it's not, it's not a book just about despair.

00:22:06 Speaker 1

And there's a lot of love and a lot of joy.

00:22:09 Speaker 1

There was in my own childhood and there is in the book.

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But I think going through some of the more painful memories, I think this is part of the reason why I think I couldn't write the book immediately after.

00:22:24 Speaker 1

those experiences happened, I feel like I need a distance and space to be able to come back to a place where I can touch these things after some healing has happened.

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So I think in turning back to the book, I feel like I'd already processed a lot of and understood and dealt with a lot of the, a lot of the emotional wreckage of those years.

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Not to say that this book didn't also

00:22:54 Speaker 1

offered catharsis in some ways, it reopened wounds in other ways.

00:22:58 Speaker 1

But I think that I had already become somewhat sovereign in myself before I turned to this book.

00:23:06 Speaker 1

And I don't know that I would have been able to, you know, not to take it back to Palestine and the genocide, but it is an example now.

00:23:14 Speaker 1

I find myself unable to write about the genocide now, emotionally.

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I can, analytically and intellectually, cerebrally.

00:23:23 Speaker 1

But I can't hold this grief.

00:23:24 Speaker 1

I can't write through it from the heart.

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This book is a heart.

00:23:28 Speaker 1

It's written not necessarily as an intellectual book.

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And so I think sometimes when you're too close to something that is raw and painful, I don't know that, at least I don't know that prose is the best kind of writing.

00:23:41 Speaker 1

Poetry might be.

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Different forms of art definitely are.

00:23:44 Speaker 1

But for me, I would have struggled to write about these things that I write about in the book closer to the time when.

00:23:53 Speaker 2

I like that you mentioned the word beauty because even when one's own life is shared by, let's say, forced displacement or trauma or war, but life happens at the same time and there is love and there's beauty and there's kindness and generosity of the people around us.

00:24:12 Speaker 2

There's this topic of, I find it quite one of the themes in the book about disappearance or

00:24:20 Speaker 2

talking back again about trauma, about sense of invisibility, where sometimes you would be saying like my ugliness or feeling I'm fading away.

00:24:31 Speaker 2

And I would read like a quote from you, say, I had known how to shrink myself into invisibility, but I had grown reliant

00:24:40 Speaker 2

on him to act as armor, so in somehow by finding one's own self in the love you found.

00:24:46 Speaker 2

And then in a different piece out of the book, you said once, much of my life has taught me how to make parts of myself invisible, to sing, to soothe those I love, how to hold myself unseen.

00:25:03 Speaker 2

I know how to pass, to survive,

00:25:07 Speaker 2

undicted just as Palestine.

00:25:09 Speaker 2

So I just want to ask you about, feeling, small and invisible and then feeling like visible and loved.

00:25:16 Speaker 2

How did you deal with this love story as a way to, you know, to find your own self in the sense of invisibility?

00:25:24 Speaker 1

Yeah.

00:25:25 Speaker 1

I mean, I think that this is something that a lot of marginalized communities, not only, but specifically queer folk,

00:25:34 Speaker 1

struggle with, this sense of visibility versus invisibility.

00:25:39 Speaker 1

if one is able to pass, what does it mean for one to visibilize part of their private life?

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And what does it mean to invisibilize that?

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So when is it hiding out of fear?

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When is it hiding out of privacy or propriety?

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So there's always a tension, I think, between visibility and invisibility.

00:25:58 Speaker 1

I think in my case in Amman,

00:26:01 Speaker 1

I felt invisible in the sense that there was no sense of queerness in the world around me.

00:26:06 Speaker 1

It just was absent.

00:26:08 Speaker 1

Not just in terms of the material reality, but also in terms of language.

00:26:12 Speaker 1

The only words that were available to talk about some semblance of what it was I was experiencing were pejorative words.

00:26:20 Speaker 1

They were insulting words.

00:26:22 Speaker 1

And so I couldn't find myself in the world around me.

00:26:25 Speaker 1

I also couldn't find myself linguistically.

00:26:28 Speaker 1

And so there was a sense of disappearance that was a very big part of, actually, I think who I am today as a person.

00:26:34 Speaker 1

It sort of taught me how to exist outside.

00:26:37 Speaker 1

And this is also a queer experience, you know, how to exist in margins, how to exist in between, in transit, not necessarily fully present or fully whole.

00:26:48 Speaker 1

And obviously when one falls in love, you get the complete opposite of that.

00:26:51 Speaker 1

You're completely visible and you're seen.

00:26:54 Speaker 1

with all of these sort of, with all of these sort of tensions.

00:26:59 Speaker 1

And so I, love thinking about that.

00:27:01 Speaker 1

I still think about it.

00:27:02 Speaker 1

what does it mean?

00:27:04 Speaker 1

what does it mean to write a queer memoir and to sort of make visible a queer life in a place where it's in some ways invisible?

00:27:14 Speaker 1

Would the queer community in Jordan want more visibility?

00:27:18 Speaker 1

Is it safe for more visibility?

00:27:20 Speaker 1

What does that mean?

00:27:22 Speaker 1

And all of these are obviously conversations that queer activists are always having, but I'm always thinking about, yes, about this tension between visibility and invisibility.

00:27:30 Speaker 2

I tried to search for the book in Arabic.

00:27:33 Speaker 1

It's coming out in there.

00:27:34 Speaker 2

And all I found was Hamas, so that's the same.

00:27:37 Speaker 2

So I'd like, and not frequently tija, or in every direction.

00:27:41 Speaker 1

It's coming out in Arabic.

00:27:42 Speaker 2

But even like reviews or something, it's nice to see in Arabic.

00:27:46 Speaker 2

And as you said, like somebody who is in Jordan or in Lebanon or in a different country, it would be important to see this book in Arabic.

00:27:55 Speaker 2

Before I move to the second patch of questions, I would ask you a question for this section and then I would ask you to read a little bit.

00:28:03 Speaker 2

But I want to ask you by pausing now and then I move to the rest of my questions on how did it feel to have this published?

00:28:11 Speaker 2

I'm sure there's a sense of, I don't know, maybe there's a sense of, you know, doubt or fear or like what would it happen?

00:28:19 Speaker 2

Would it close doors?

00:28:21 Speaker 2

Is it going to open doors?

00:28:22 Speaker 2

Am I having more enemies?

00:28:24 Speaker 2

Am I having more friends?

00:28:26 Speaker 2

How did you feel so far?

00:28:27 Speaker 2

So I saw like it's been launched in the US and in the UK and you have been, there are few reviews, great reviews and great conversations happening.

00:28:36 Speaker 2

So how are you feeling in the tool, what you're hearing from the people you're meeting in these events and how do you feel?

00:28:41 Speaker 1

Yeah, I mean, I don't know how I'm feeling.

00:28:45 Speaker 1

I think I'm a bit numb to it in some ways.

00:28:48 Speaker 1

I think that I said before, this is either the bravest or the stupidest thing I've ever done.

00:28:53 Speaker 1

And I think the jury's still out, honestly.

00:28:56 Speaker 1

I haven't tried to go back home since the book's published.

00:28:59 Speaker 1

I'm a bit nervous about what that looks like.

00:29:03 Speaker 1

But, you know, for the most part, it's been really affirming.

00:29:07 Speaker 1

I've had incredible responses.

00:29:09 Speaker 1

I know that the book is finding its readers.

00:29:11 Speaker 1

I've had, you know, beautiful people reaching out to me to talk to me about the book and how it resonated with their

00:29:18 Speaker 1

lives, specifically people from Amman, which I'm really appreciating.

00:29:22 Speaker 1

And I don't know, I kind of feel like, yes, of course it can have a backlash and it can close some doors, but I don't really think that that's how I thought about this.

00:29:32 Speaker 1

And I still don't think about it.

00:29:33 Speaker 1

I mean, of course it can close some doors and it will open others.

00:29:36 Speaker 1

And it doesn't, I mean, I don't think about it in sort of this utilitarian way.

00:29:41 Speaker 1

I think it's just an expression of

00:29:44 Speaker 1

a creative need that I have to put out there and will move with whatever it produces.

00:29:49 Speaker 1

I also think that, I have this very strong sense that I need to separate myself from the book in the sense that the book is out in the world, it will do its own thing.

00:29:58 Speaker 1

It's not mine anymore.

00:30:00 Speaker 1

So I feel like I've let go of it in some ways.

00:30:05 Speaker 2

Yeah.

00:30:06 Speaker 2

It's a beautiful way that people are reaching out and feeling like connecting with it.

00:30:11 Speaker 2

So can we have another round of freedom?

00:30:14 Speaker 1

So if I can find where it is, the section that I want to read is about the first time I go back to Palestine to try to find my grandmother's house.

00:30:34 Speaker 1

My husband and I are having breakfast with a retired Palestinian urban planner who had built his career in Haifa's municipality.

00:30:42 Speaker 1

and developed a reputation for mapping the city's streets.

00:30:46 Speaker 1

Clandestinely, of course, he was, after all, a Palestinian in the heart of Israel's bureaucracy.

00:30:52 Speaker 1

Here is a man able to juxtapose Haifa's contemporary landscape with the blueprints of the city in 1948 on the edge of calamity as it remains frozen in time in the minds of all the Nakba survivors who were expelled.

00:31:07 Speaker 1

Flocks of Palestinians come to him, hoping that he can magically

00:31:11 Speaker 1

take them back in time and make sense of the vaguest directions that have been passed down from their dying elders.

00:31:18 Speaker 1

I have come to him with the same such vagueness.

00:31:23 Speaker 1

That I implored when I first told her, on a call from London, that I was traveling to Palestine.

00:31:29 Speaker 1

Why do you want to go there?

00:31:30 Speaker 1

she asked.

00:31:32 Speaker 1

I talked her through her fears and into her hopes, untouched for decades, that it is our right to return.

00:31:39 Speaker 1

that this injustice that had plagued her will not remain a silent, unwanted companion.

00:31:44 Speaker 1

I reminded her that Mama too had made this journey and that every generation in our family will claim this right until it is secured.

00:31:52 Speaker 1

Just like with her recipes, gentle prodding undid her hesitation.

00:31:57 Speaker 1

Go to the Italian hospital, she told me.

00:31:59 Speaker 1

Keep it on your right-hand side.

00:32:01 Speaker 1

Turn right just before you get to the actual hospital.

00:32:05 Speaker 1

From there, it's the first left and second right.

00:32:08 Speaker 1

Our house is the one on the corner closest to the C, a two-story villa.

00:32:14 Speaker 1

I had no street name or house number.

00:32:16 Speaker 1

She could recall neither.

00:32:18 Speaker 1

Is there any point walking in the back streets behind the hospital?

00:32:22 Speaker 1

There is, our urban planner tells us, handing us books about Hifa's topography.

00:32:28 Speaker 1

That area has not been leveled and little has changed.

00:32:31 Speaker 1

The plot sizes and street names have all been altered, obviously.

00:32:36 Speaker 1

but the general skeleton of the area has been preserved.

00:32:39 Speaker 1

Just follow her directions, he says, and see where you find yourself.

00:32:43 Speaker 1

We thank him and set off.

00:32:45 Speaker 1

The midday sun beats down on us as we walk along the busy main road, away from Haifa Strip and towards the Italian hospital.

00:32:53 Speaker 1

It's hot and I'm anxious.

00:32:55 Speaker 1

We have spoken about this before, my husband and I.

00:32:59 Speaker 1

There might be a chance that the house will never be found.

00:33:02 Speaker 1

But that is in some ways a more straightforward outcome than finding it.

00:33:06 Speaker 1

Because what then?

00:33:08 Speaker 1

Will I knock on its front door?

00:33:10 Speaker 1

Will I ask to see it?

00:33:12 Speaker 1

What if the house is inhabited by an Israeli family?

00:33:16 Speaker 1

Or worse, an American Jewish family just summering there, holding Tata's home hostage to their vacations?

00:33:22 Speaker 1

Will they be aggressive if I introduce myself as the original occupant's grandson?

00:33:27 Speaker 1

What will they make of us bursting into the middle of their day,

00:33:31 Speaker 1

asserting belonging, living proof of crimes they have inherited and abetted.

00:33:37 Speaker 1

No clear answers have been reached by the time we come up to a building that our phones tell us is the Italian hospital.

00:33:43 Speaker 1

Neither of us says anything as we take the ride just before the hospital and walk down to the street behind it.

00:33:50 Speaker 1

First left.

00:33:52 Speaker 1

The area is quiet, with none of the highway traffic spilling over.

00:33:56 Speaker 1

The streets are wide and olive trees are planted on the sidewalks.

00:34:00 Speaker 1

We could be in Amman or Beirut.

00:34:02 Speaker 1

The houses are mostly villas or small residential buildings, two or three stories, all limestone, strangely familiar except for the Hebrew letterings on the front doors and the mezuzahs hanging in the entrances.

00:34:15 Speaker 1

Second rite.

00:34:17 Speaker 1

We walk down in the direction of the sea.

00:34:19 Speaker 1

We get to that first crossing, and the house on the other side of the street closest to the sea is a two-story villa.

00:34:26 Speaker 1

The front gates are shut, black metal,

00:34:29 Speaker 1

and there is an unwieldy jasmine bush spilling over its walls and lining its entrance.

00:34:34 Speaker 1

It's a narrow pathway to the front door, a brown wooden frame that appears shut.

00:34:40 Speaker 1

The ground floor windows are also shuttered.

00:34:42 Speaker 1

I instinctively turn and look diagonally across the street, a grand villa, the one that had acquired a forlorn look in the weeks before Tata's flight, where her best friend had lived, from where her family had fled, furtively in the middle of the night to Tata's dismay.

00:35:00 Speaker 1

I look back at Tata's house, smaller than her friends, now haloed with new importance.

00:35:05 Speaker 1

My husband grabs my hand, wordlessly.

00:35:09 Speaker 1

He knows, I know.

00:35:11 Speaker 1

We've heard her descriptions.

00:35:13 Speaker 1

Neither of us needs to say anything.

00:35:16 Speaker 1

I cross the street and stand by the gate, taking in the scent in the air, looking up at what I imagine was her bedroom, where she was sitting when her father rushed back in, panicked on that fateful night.

00:35:29 Speaker 1

She must have stood exactly where I am standing now and turned around for that final glance, suitcase in hand.

00:35:36 Speaker 1

Was this the same jasmine bush?

00:35:38 Speaker 1

Can it be?

00:35:39 Speaker 1

My mind fixates on this, the bush, its roots, its sides.

00:35:44 Speaker 1

Do jasmine trees live this long?

00:35:46 Speaker 1

How old would it be now, 7 decades later?

00:35:49 Speaker 1

My eyes turn back to the house.

00:35:51 Speaker 1

It looks uninhabited.

00:35:53 Speaker 1

Or maybe they've just left for the day, whoever they are.

00:35:56 Speaker 1

What has this house seen in the decades between her and me standing in this spot?

00:36:01 Speaker 1

What had she seen other than a lifetime of light?

00:36:05 Speaker 1

My chest tightens and I take a step back.

00:36:08 Speaker 1

I cannot bring myself to ring the doorbell.

00:36:10 Speaker 1

There's only so much loss one can bear.

00:36:14 Speaker 1

I do not want to know, do not want to be faced with a family that believes it has a right to be there, or worse, a kind family that acknowledges this past and then offers us a drink in my home.

00:36:25 Speaker 1

I want to imagine it empty, loyal, waiting for our return.

00:36:29 Speaker 1

I want it to exist outside of time, as if everything stopped that April.

00:36:34 Speaker 1

Their presence or absence is irrelevant, I tell myself.

00:36:38 Speaker 1

This is about her, about Tata, about me stepping through that fracture that ran along this entrance, physically reconnecting our histories.

00:36:47 Speaker 1

I have finally bent time, held her history in my presence.

00:36:52 Speaker 1

I walk to the other side of the street and take a picture.

00:36:54 Speaker 1

I send it to Mama.

00:36:56 Speaker 1

I think I found it, I write in the caption.

00:36:58 Speaker 1

She responds immediately.

00:37:00 Speaker 1

This looks like everything she's described.

00:37:02 Speaker 1

Where did you find it?

00:37:03 Speaker 1

How come I couldn't?

00:37:04 Speaker 1

She writes back.

00:37:06 Speaker 1

And then a few seconds later, I'm glad she doesn't have the eyesight to see it now.

00:37:10 Speaker 2

It's a very powerful and heartbreaking story of return and, you know, the inability to return to many people who remain in exile.

00:37:31 Speaker 2

I remember in September meeting a woman in Hamas in Syria, who was born in 1937, and she told me, Do you see all of this Syria and all the villages?

00:37:41 Speaker 2

They don't worth a village in Palestine.

00:37:45 Speaker 2

And for me, I understood, because no matter how many cities one would see in their life, you know, you can go to the most beautiful cities in life, but you still, one would still yearn for that place of, you know,

00:37:59 Speaker 2

childhood and place where they came from.

00:38:02 Speaker 2

So thank you for sharing that.

00:38:04 Speaker 2

And for those who want to also read a shorter piece on the Tata, the grandmother of Tarek, there's a very beautiful article called Dreams of Palestine Where I Can Hold Myself Whole.

00:38:18 Speaker 2

And it's really like a grief, you know, on a paper

00:38:23 Speaker 2

where you write in the piece that behind her sealed eyelids, Tata imagines her own journey of returning, of reclaiming a stolen past, knowing she will never be.

00:38:34 Speaker 2

How is it to construct this, you know, story in the book?

00:38:39 Speaker 2

Because she is almost everywhere.

00:38:42 Speaker 2

She is like, you know, in the pages where she's present, and even in the pages where she isn't, where you even describe

00:38:49 Speaker 2

seeing all her friends coming, to have coffee and talk about what's happening in their lives.

00:38:53 Speaker 2

So how did you remember her?

00:38:56 Speaker 2

How did you put her stories in the book?

00:38:59 Speaker 1

Yeah, I, so my grandmother, my maternal grandmother was a very big character in my life.

00:39:07 Speaker 1

By the time my family landed in Jordan, both my parents were struggling.

00:39:14 Speaker 1

And so I really was raised by my maternal grandmother.

00:39:17 Speaker 1

And she was an incredible figure.

00:39:19 Speaker 1

She was a devout Christian woman, and she rarely spoke about Palestine in ways that we talk about Palestine.

00:39:32 Speaker 1

She talked about her life.

00:39:33 Speaker 1

She talked about school.

00:39:35 Speaker 1

She talked about growing up.

00:39:36 Speaker 1

She talked about, you know, God and religion and all of these things.

00:39:40 Speaker 1

And she talked about fleeing Palestine and ending up in Beirut.

00:39:44 Speaker 1

But she never talked about Palestine necessarily in political terms.

00:39:49 Speaker 1

And she always spoke about her expulsion and about the Nakba through a sort of a divine understanding.

00:39:56 Speaker 1

You know, this is, she would always say, God works in mysterious ways.

00:40:00 Speaker 1

And this was her thing, that it was, she could never understand why she was expelled from Palestine, but surely God had a plan.

00:40:08 Speaker 1

And the only way for her to respond to that is through prayer and

00:40:13 Speaker 1

and asking for forgiveness, that she would pray that the Zionists would want to understand what they've done, and that they would stop hating, they would stop killing.

00:40:23 Speaker 1

That was her whole, this was how she came to Palestine, this was how she sort of talked about it.

00:40:28 Speaker 1

And obviously there was a lot of silence as well, you know, all of the pain, all of the suffering.

00:40:32 Speaker 1

I didn't see any of that, but I obviously felt it, and I grew up, and I always say this, that I inherited Palestine from her, even

00:40:42 Speaker 1

not necessarily verbally.

00:40:43 Speaker 1

And so for me, she was everywhere in these stages.

00:40:46 Speaker 1

She was everywhere in my life as well.

00:40:49 Speaker 1

And so going back to that childhood, now that I am who I am, someone who's much more aware about Palestine, who's, you know, identifies as someone who's very political working for Palestine, sort of I go back and I see her in a different light.

00:41:04 Speaker 1

I see the fear, I see the grief, I see her inability to sort of really articulate the term.

00:41:11 Speaker 1

And so

00:41:12 Speaker 1

And when I, before I moved to Ramallah, she was still alive.

00:41:17 Speaker 1

And I told her that I was going back.

00:41:19 Speaker 1

And she was terrified.

00:41:21 Speaker 1

Because for her, Palestine was where she escaped death.

00:41:25 Speaker 1

And she was terrified.

00:41:26 Speaker 1

You know, what would they do to you?

00:41:28 Speaker 1

You're too vocal.

00:41:29 Speaker 1

You keep talking.

00:41:30 Speaker 1

You never shut your mouth.

00:41:32 Speaker 1

You're going to get hurt.

00:41:33 Speaker 1

It came from a place of terror.

00:41:35 Speaker 1

And I really, the time I spent there, then finding her house, finding her school,

00:41:41 Speaker 1

I would go back to her and talk to her about these things and worry, worry that I'm reigniting past traumas, worry that she might not be wanting or able to hear, but then she would start asking.

00:41:53 Speaker 1

And so we started developing this really beautiful conversation that I recorded that really has given me a lot in terms of understanding her Palestine.

00:42:03 Speaker 1

And then after she passed away, I inherited her diaries.

00:42:08 Speaker 1

And so going back to Palestine with her diaries was also incredible because you could see the life that she had.

00:42:13 Speaker 2

Do you know what age was she when she was right?

00:42:17 Speaker 1

She was 17.

00:42:17 Speaker 1

She left Palestine when she was 17.

00:42:20 Speaker 1

Yeah.

00:42:21 Speaker 1

And so the diaries were very clinical.

00:42:23 Speaker 1

Like they weren't, they wouldn't, you know, my diaries are, you know, flowery and how I'm feeling and what I'm, and her diaries were very clinical, you know, so-and-so died.

00:42:34 Speaker 1

This person graduated.

00:42:36 Speaker 1

We went to Gaza.

00:42:37 Speaker 1

And so it's very, in some ways, it's sobering, but it's also beautiful because it gives you a whole texture of, living on the side before calamity, you're not imagining it.

00:42:47 Speaker 1

And so you're just living in the basics of life and you sort of see the disruption.

00:42:55 Speaker 1

Yeah, so it allowed me to reconnect, I think, with a part of her that I hadn't seen before.

00:43:00 Speaker 2

Thank you so much for sharing.

00:43:03 Speaker 2

to move a little bit like into a bigger question and maybe for two more, two more questions from my side, maybe two or three questions, and then in 5 minutes we can open it up for everyone.

00:43:14 Speaker 2

I just want to ask you about how this book like sits within the wider struggle of being gay or lesbian or transgender or part of the queer communities in the region and beyond, especially in reference to the article that you wrote in response to Sarah Hijazi's

00:43:33 Speaker 2

suicide in Canada.

00:43:36 Speaker 2

When, before she got, before she ended her life in Canada in 2017, she was arrested and tortured in Egypt for raising a rainbow flag.

00:43:45 Speaker 2

And she ended her life, I think she was 30, and you wrote an article titled, Our Lives Are Not Conditional, on Sarah Hijazi and Estrangement.

00:43:57 Speaker 2

So I just, you know, this is a very powerful article, you know, and somehow you show how

00:44:03 Speaker 2

People would put masks to hide behind these masks and pretend they are straight or pretend they want to get married.

00:44:08 Speaker 2

And some of them, they get married eventually, you know, and live miserable ever after.

00:44:14 Speaker 2

And some people you describe in the piece that have the courage to be who they want to be.

00:44:21 Speaker 2

But then, of course, that courage is not often coming with comfort, as in the case of Sara Hejazi.

00:44:27 Speaker 2

So I just want to ask you,

00:44:29 Speaker 2

How does this book sit within the bigger question of, you know, to be on the margins, as you, if we can say, but in the region, but also within the very few writings on like queer memoirs in the Arab world?

00:44:46 Speaker 1

Yeah.

00:44:47 Speaker 1

I mean, I think, you know, the point that I was making before about visibility and hypervisibility in Sadiq Haghazi's case, it's very, it's a perfect and tragic, obviously,

00:44:58 Speaker 1

example of that, because in some ways, her throwing out the rainbow flag in a Mashur Leyla concert put a target on her back, and she became hyper-visible.

00:45:12 Speaker 1

And this is a struggle that I think queer people in the region have to navigate.

00:45:18 Speaker 1

It's going back to the work of scholars like Josef Masad, who talks about what it means

00:45:26 Speaker 1

to come out and to sort of embody one's sexuality in the sort of the Western sense of the world, of the word.

00:45:33 Speaker 1

And I think that discourse, that you can't visibilize your queerness, you have to respect local traditional cultures, in some ways have placed queer folks in the region in a very difficult and very precarious position.

00:45:50 Speaker 1

First of all, it erases the fact that there is indigenous queerness and sort of forms of sexual and gender identities that are fluid, that are separate from, you know, the LGBTQ plus nomenclature.

00:46:03 Speaker 1

But it also suggests that if someone is to come out and identify as gay or queer or if Sarah Hagazi is going to unfold the rainbow flag, then she's not local.

00:46:13 Speaker 1

She's foreign.

00:46:14 Speaker 1

She's a foreign agent.

00:46:16 Speaker 1

She's a foreign implant.

00:46:17 Speaker 1

And so that discourse is very politically destructive because it decontextualizes queer folks.

00:46:25 Speaker 1

It places them outside of the region and in some ways reinforces the homophobia that they're not from here.

00:46:31 Speaker 1

And I think Palestinians specifically have an acute challenge with this because of settler colonialism and pink washing, because of this idea that because of all of the Israeli tactics of working

00:46:45 Speaker 1

with collaborator networks around issues of sex and gender and sexuality, where immediately you're seen as anti-Palestinian, you're seen as Zionist.

00:46:56 Speaker 1

So it's a very difficult terrain.

00:46:58 Speaker 1

It's really hard for queer people to figure out how to place themselves in all of these competing narratives and systems of power.

00:47:08 Speaker 1

But I think that there's also an incredibly active scene in Palestine and in the region of

00:47:14 Speaker 1

activists and organizations that are reclaiming the language of queerness.

00:47:18 Speaker 1

So in Palestine specifically, I'm thinking of organizations like Al Qais, which are actively trying to come out with a language of queerness that's also reflecting Palestinian

politics, sort of anti, anti, sort of a decolonial framing of queerness that pushes back against

00:47:40 Speaker 1

pink washing, and that places queer people in their local environments and their local ecosystems.

00:47:46 Speaker 1

Even if they're coming out as gay, that doesn't mean they're co-opted by foreign interests and by empire.

00:47:52 Speaker 1

They have local politics.

00:47:54 Speaker 1

And so I think these are things that the queer movement is working through very thoughtfully, and I think the movement is moving in very heartening ways.

00:48:07 Speaker 1

But as you say, I think there's a dearth of queer voices from the region.

00:48:12 Speaker 1

There's obviously a few in different sectors, increasingly more in writing as well.

00:48:22 Speaker 1

And I think that's a wonderful development.

00:48:24 Speaker 1

Amazing.

00:48:26 Speaker 2

My final question, then we can turn the conversation to the audience.

00:48:31 Speaker 2

Briefly, maybe, what did the writing do to you?

00:48:37 Speaker 2

Like how, after putting it on a paper and it's out, if briefly, you can just tell us.

00:48:42 Speaker 1

What did it do to me?

00:48:48 Speaker 1

I don't know.

00:48:48 Speaker 1

I think it gave me some degree of completeness that this is done, that this story is one that's done and written and narrated, and I can move on in different ways, creatively, I mean.

00:49:03 Speaker 1

Yeah, it was a very, it was a very calming and comforting experience, I think.

00:49:09 Speaker 2

Thank you so much.