

BIOGRAPHIES

Khadija Baker is a Montreal-based, multi-disciplinary artist of Kurdish-Syrian descent. Baker completed an MFA in Open Media at Concordia University. Her work has been shown in Montreal, Toronto, New York, London, Berlin, Marseille, Beirut, Damascus, and at the Biennale of Sydney in 2012.

Livia Daza-Paris is a transdisciplinary artist who has worked with dance, performance, video, text and documentary evidence, and has shown in Scotland, Santa Fe, Caracas, Toronto, and New York. She is a certified teacher of Skinner Releasing Technique; and holds an MFA from Transart Institute.

Michael Greyeyes (Plains Cree) is a writer, actor, director, and educator. Directing credits include: *A Soldier's Tale* (Signal), *Pimootewin* (Soundstreams), *Almighty Voice and his Wife* (Native Earth Performing Arts), and *Seven Seconds* (imagineNATIVE). He founded Signal Theatre to push the boundaries of contemporary Indigenous performance.

John Halaka's artwork and documentary projects address the forced displacement of the indigenous Palestinians, their persistent struggle to return to their native land, and the role of personal narratives as a tool for the survival of their history in the face of an ongoing cultural genocide. He is Visual Arts Professor at University of San Diego.

Siamak Haseli is a Toronto-based multimedia artist and animator. He holds a BFA from York University and an MFA from University of Windsor. His artwork explores the integration of trauma and violence in war zones; focuses on the recent U.S led war in Iraq in 2003.

Gita Hashemi's transmedia practice draws on visual, media, performance, site specific and live art strategies. Recurrent themes include decolonial acts and resistance, from 18th century East-West encounters and 1953 coup in Iran to the 1979 Revolution and Indigenous land rights in Palestine and Turtle Island.

Rachel Gorman is Associate Professor in Critical Disability Studies at York University, and an artist working in dance theatre and curating. She focuses on transnational social movements, cultural studies, ideology, and critical political economy. She is a longtime organizer in feminist, anti-racist, and anti-occupation movements.

front: Livia Daza-Paris, still photo from *Antigone, Diary of Rituals* project, 2012, girl in image is Eliana Gonzalez



January 27 - March 18, 2017

Grieving Empire

Khadija Baker
Livia Daza-Paris
Michael Greyeyes
John Halaka
Siamak Haseli
Gita Hashemi

Curated by Rachel Gorman



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Grieving Empire features six artists whose works reveal the violence of the settler colonial state, its imperialist adventures, and its proxy wars. The artists anchor their work in their bodies, on the land, and in unfolding transit and return. The works in this show reject aesthetics of postcolonial catharsis in which we are asked to pity, and then purge our knowledge of, imperialism's victims. Rather, these works animate aesthetics of revolutionary grieving that demand we "apprehend the policies creating unlivable, ungrivable conditions."¹ The artists engage in the work of grieving and historicizing contemporary violence through dance, animation, testimony, and repetition, drawing our attention to the body caught by borders, institutions, and war.



John Halaka, *Umm Aziz—Amneh Hassan Bannat. Born 1930, Sheikh Daoud, Palestine. Lives in Borj El Barajneh refugee camp. Beirut, Lebanon, digital print on fabric, 2015, detail*

Khadija Baker's *I'm Still Alive* (2014) is an animation for a child injured in a chemical attack on a Damascus suburb in 2013. It was created from snippets of the artist's hair, cut during a performance that traces the destruction of the bombing campaigns, and recalls the child's words "Don't leave me, I am still alive." As the figure of the child emerges from the hair snippets through stop-motion, we sense the artist's hands caressing and shaping the form of the child in a lament. Other children appear and vanish, as does an apple tree, which both represents life in the midst of war crime, and references to survivor accounts of chemical attacks in northern Iraq between 1986 and 1989, as they reported rising green smoke and the smell of rotten apples when the chemical bombs first hit. Thus grieving empire requires that we grasp the ongoing history of imperialist war in the region. The artist's use of traces of her own body to represent the bodies of the children creates a profound sense of connection between the witness and the children suffering the atrocities of imperialist proxy war.

Livia Daza-Paris' split-screen video *Antigone, Diary of Rituals No. 4: At the End, the Beginning* (2013) engages dance, memorial, and ritual in a journey back to the land from where the artist's father departed before he was disappeared in 1960s Venezuela by state agents trained at the US School of the Americas. In the face of the "complicated grief" of the unresolved disappearance of her father during the armed insurgency in Venezuela, the artist "suggests that a new language form is required, one that dances with the imagination and poetic narratives come to fill in the gaps of what has been erased by political repression."ⁱⁱ The video documents a ritual performed by the artist and a girl from the valley in which the artist buries herself in the place of her father. This powerful enactment of intergenerational grieving excavates the historical and emotional significance of the assassination to ask, "Does hidden traumatic memory in the personal body parallel memory at the social scale?"ⁱⁱⁱ This work resonates deeply with themes of land, return, and transgenerational trauma,^{iv} and offers aesthetic strategies for rendering whole personal and social relations—the body dancing with bare feet planted in dirt, the body encased in and reborn from the earth.

Michael Greyeyes' 30-minute site-specific dance on video *Triptych*^v (2007) moves through the past and present terror of Canadian residential schools. Through a series of hauntings and memories, and through the gradual transformation of relations in the present, *Triptych* reveals the violence of the Canadian state through the residential school system and ongoing colonial policy, while making legible the resilience and resurgence of Indigenous communities. The move from trauma to grieving unfolds on the land with scenes shot in Toronto under a bridge, in an alley, and in a park.

At 24:00 minutes, *Triptych* is the most sustained exploration of nightmare, history, testimony, and the relationship between the moving body and land, compared to other video works in this exhibition, which range from 0:50 to 10:50 minutes. When I first came across *Triptych*,

I was immediately gripped by its narrative arc of nightmare and resolution—an arc similar to one in my own dance video work *The Ghost*^{vi} (2006). My work followed a unit of Kurdish peshmerga and their grieving after a comrade's imprisonment and execution, but for me creating and performing the piece was a physical enactment of my coming to terms with my father's political disappearance in fascist Portugal before my birth. In this way dance can be both narrative and process.



Siamak Haseli, *Bedtime Stories*, multimedia installation, 2015, still from video projection

John Halaka's video *Interview with Umm Aziz* (2015) brings us the testimony of a Palestinian woman recounting the devastating disappearance of her four sons in 1982 during the time of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Amneh Hassan Bannat (Umm Aziz) was born in 1930 in Sheikh Daoud, Palestine, and since her exile she lives in Borj El Barajneh refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon. In the opening lines of her narrative, Umm Aziz recounts her body in relation to land and exile. "I left Palestine and came here

walking. If they told me I could go back to Palestine, I would tell them that I would happily return to Palestine walking...But only after they would tell me what happened to my children." Umm Aziz's suspended grief at the disappearance and likely massacre of her four children reminds us that in the context of genocide, transgenerational trauma reverberates both forward and backward across generations, as parents grieve the loss of their children. Settler colonial ideology locates harm in the past, while it is the present and presence of state violence that makes the past ungrivable.

Siamak Haseli's video projection from his *Bedtime Stories* (2015) multimedia installation evokes a child's nightmare during the Iraq war. As we look down on the white sheet of a bed, as a cast-bronze cowboy hat falls in slow motion, and a paper airplane lands. With powerful imagery of the US imperialist war for oil, and of ongoing aerial and drone warfare, the work silently conjures bombs falling on terrified children.

Gita Hashemi's series of painted postcards *Declarations I: On the Move* (2016) inscribe visceral grief and documentary witnessing of past and present exile. Sent from the artist's journey along the Balkan refugee trail, the cards document fragments of connection, solidarity, and activism, as well as memories of her own exile as a refugee of the 1980s Iranian regime. The cards as material objects evoke embodiment and precarity, and reveal the trace of the artist's moving body among bodies on the move in a process of repetition and return. The calligraphy on the front of the cards traces a firm but fragile line across the vast hostile space of contemporary Europe.

—Rachel Gorman, Curator



Gita Hashemi, *Line of the Road, Izmir, Artcard No. 8, 2016, from the series Declarations I: On the Move*

¹ Jodi Byrd (2011) *Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press) p. 38

ⁱⁱ Livia Daza-Paris, artist statement

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Dr. Roberta K. Timothy, personal communication

^v Michael Greyeyes (choreographer), Byron McKim (video director) (2007) *Triptych* (Toronto: Bravo!)

^{vi} Gorman, Rachel (choreographer), Shahrzad Arshadi (videographer) (2006) *The Ghost: A Memory from the Mountains of Kurdistan* (Montréal: Kayon Productions)