

Retelling Stories:
Sarah Farahat's *Palestine
Then and Now* and
Towards the Setting Sun

— Amelia Rina

“Do we have any better way to organize such wildly disparate experiences as a half-remembered crocodile, a dead great-aunt, the smell of coffee, a scream from Iran, a bumpy landing, and a hotel room in Cincinnati, than a narrative?—an immensely flexible technology, or life strategy, which if used with skill and resourcefulness presents each of us with the most fascinating of all serials, *The Story of My Life*.”
—Ursula K. Le Guin¹

In 1878, nine women stood in a river near Lawrence, Kansas. In 1961, Sarah Farahat's grandfather took photographs of life in Ramallah, Palestine. Nearly fifty years later, Farahat retraced her grandfather's steps and photographed the same locations. In November of this year, I visited Farahat's studio in Portland, OR, to hear her stories.

I've been thinking about storytelling a lot recently. Who gets to tell stories, who gets to hear the stories, which ones do we remember, who are the main characters, and why? Ursula K. Le Guin has been a sort of guiding light for me in this line of questioning—a journey to uncover narratives other than what she describes as “the *Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero*.” Like Le Guin, I think we deserve something more nuanced, meandering, sticky, and true.² If yet another man—either underdog or demigod—goes on a journey, overcomes a challenge, conquers a foe, gets the girl, and enters the annals of heroic history, what can we learn? What's the difference between Theseus, Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones, or Harry Potter? Not a lot. Instead of these neat and tidy stories (which, admittedly, can contain a lot of exciting events), I want to know about the peripheral characters, the ones mentioned in passing or not even mentioned at all.

In Sarah Farahat's two projects, *Palestine Then and Now* (2009) and *Towards the Setting Sun* (2016–ongoing), she gives us a view into four vastly different worlds. Her stories transport us through nearly 150 years, over 7,000 miles, and don't necessarily have protagonists. Instead, the stories tell us about the specifics of place and time, and how certain people moved through those worlds—some freely, others not.

Despite being made almost a decade apart, and without any intentional connections by Farahat, *Palestine Then and Now* and *Towards the Setting Sun* illustrate the artist's decades-long interest in place, identity, and the many political factors that complicate each person's life story. We'll start at the beginning. Farahat's grandparents moved to Ramallah in 1961, where her grandfather worked as a theologian and archeologist studying the recently-discovered Dead Sea Scrolls, and her grandmother worked as an English teacher. Farahat traveled to Palestine in 2009 and attempted to find the locations her grandfather photographed decades prior: Al-Manara Square, which is still a nexus in Ramallah; the exercise yard at the Friends Boys School; and the living room in her grandparent's old house, for example. During a second trip to Palestine, Farahat was abruptly and inexplicably deported by the Israeli Defense Forces, barring her from reentering the region and making it impossible to complete the project.

Palestine Then and Now consists of diptychs—Farahat's grandfather's and her own—that tell a story of presence and absence. Each of her grandfather's images are full of people, whether it's a crowded square, a grid of boys with arms outstretched on a blacktop, or smiling family in a holiday living room. In Farahat's images, these spaces are sparsely populated, if not totally deserted. The schoolyard and Al-Manara Square have a few people moving through them, but nothing compared to the photographs taken in 1961. Farahat's grandparents were living in a Palestine-controlled city, before the so-called Six-Day War in 1967, resulting in over 300,000 Palestinians fleeing or being expelled from their homes. 1967 marked a major expansion of Israel, occupying the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and most of the Syrian Golan Heights—tripling the territory under Israel's control. Today, with only fifteen³ percent of the country's original historic land controlled by Palestinians, the emptiness in the photographs reflects a region plagued by forced exile.⁴ When trying to document an absent person or thing, you have to treat it like gravity. We can't see gravity in the same way we see opaque objects that light bounces off of, but we can document its effects. Farahat's photographs document the gravitational pull of a decades-long, violent, and devastating occupation.

The multimedia installation *Towards the Setting Sun* employs a similar tactic of identifying absences and presence to tell the story of colonialist expansion and occupation, this time in the US. First presented as her MFA thesis at California College of the Arts, *Towards the Setting Sun* combines photography, collaborative sculpture, sound, and text. At the center, there are two photographs. One, taken in 1878, shows nine women shin-deep in slow-moving water, heavy skirts hiked up to keep them dry. Two of the women stand on the river's rocky edge, and one of them points a rifle out of the frame. The other image, taken in 2016, captures Farahat standing in the Yuba River in eastern Sacramento Valley, California, heavy skirt hiked up to keep it dry, eyes directed straight into the camera's lens.

Farahat told me that when she first came across the nineteenth-century photograph, she was immediately captivated by its strangeness. Who were these white women in some Kansas river, charged with agency



Sarah Farahat, *Self-Portrait*,
Yuba River, Yuba Goldfields,
California, Nisenan Land, 2015.
Archival pigment print, 44×66 in.
(Photo: Kristine Eudey)

and independence, during a time when women had far less than today? What is that one woman doing—the one walking across the frame, her face blurred by her movement, with a long, thin stick in her hand, prodding the water? That stick threw Farahat down a rabbit hole of water divination and other explanations for the woman's actions, rendered inexplicable by their petrification. Speaking across more than a century, that woman asked Farahat: Where do we go now?

She answered with a short fantasy installed as a wall text in *Towards the Setting Sun*:

I followed her, wading carefully. The water was cold but not unpleasant. Her eyes were closed, as if in a trance. Holding a long willow stick, she swayed this way and that, pulled by a force that seemed not quite her own.

I wondered if she could do it, if she could find the way. It felt so hazy, as if what I knew to be true one day would almost surely be upset the next. I stumbled, jamming my toe on a rock. The water was deeper now and gravity seemed to loosen its grip.

As the water reached my belly, she became more transparent. What I thought was a stick started to look a lot like a thin scratch on a negative. Shivering, I reached out to her shoulder for support but found only filmy grasses that slipped gently out of my hand.

The story connects the nineteenth century photograph to its sister on the opposing wall: a black and white image of Farahat standing alone in the Yuba River.

Conditions



James Boucher Shane, *Group of women in creek with woman pointing rifle*, approximately 1870–1923. Silver gelatin print. Courtesy Shane-Thompson Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas

Sarah Farahat, Installation view showing *Diviner*, 2016. Graphite on wall; and James Boucher Shane, *Group of women in creek with woman pointing rifle*, approximately 1870–1923. Silver gelatin print. Courtesy Shane-Thompson Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas. Sarah Farahat use: *Kansas River, Lawrence, Kansas, Kansas Land*, 1878.



Sarah Farahat, *Al-Manara Square, Ramallah*, 2009.
Archival pigment print,
10½x7in.



Sarah Farahat, *Friends Boys School, Ramallah*, 2009.
Archival pigment print,
10½x7in.

Conditions



David Wieand, *Al-Manara Square, Ramallah*, 1962.
Archival pigment print,
10½x7in.



David Wieand, *Friends Boys School, Ramallah*, 1962.
Archival pigment print,
10½x7in.



Sarah Farahat, *Swift House*,
Ramallah, 2009. Archival
pigment print, 10½×7in.

Attuned to deeper narrative currents and broader sociocultural significance, Farahat navigated her photographic fascination toward an investigation of western colonial expansion. In

the 1800s, Kansas was a hub for settlers moving West. The .44 caliber rifle one of the women is holding had just been invented, along with barbed wire. By the end of the century, the Gold Rush had already hit California so hard that thousands of acres of land had been destroyed by mining operations. Farahat chose the location for her self-portrait because of its environmental significance; in 1893, the river had to be dredged to mitigate environmental disaster caused by overmining. Of course, the environment wasn't the only one to suffer from US colonialism. Farahat collaboratively expands *Towards the Setting Sun* by including contributions from Charlene Sul and Tomahawk GreyEyes as a way to challenge the siloed nature of solo exhibitions and the lack of collaboration in graduate programs.⁵ GreyEyes, an artist from the Navajo Nation, and Farahat were in the same cohort at CCA. Farahat included a Diné medicine wheel offering to the spring equinox made by GreyEyes as a gesture toward land sharing and inter-tribal solidarity. Charlene Eigen-Vasquez, a local Ohlone tribal elder, talks about the importance of place and healing in an excerpt from an interview conducted by the Earth Medicine Alliance in 2011. The two additions allowed the project to look beyond itself and consider both the broader and hyperlocal implications of the ideas addressed in *Towards the Setting Sun*.⁶

“Why is place so important?” asks Sul in the audio recording. “Place is so important because if you believe that everything is living, then



you have respect for your surroundings just like you would any person.” You can’t think of a place, a stream, a forest, or prairie as a being with the right to thrive, and then credulously destroy it. Just like you can’t hurt your loved ones without at least a bit of internal turmoil. So why is it so easy to disregard (I don’t want to use the word dehumanize here, because forests and rivers shouldn’t need to be humanized to be respected) place? If Farahat’s stories have a moral, it’s that we should pay close attention to the places we’re in, where we’ve been, and where we’re going. We should pay attention to which characters—human and nonhuman animals as well as earthly entities—are missing or overstaying their welcome. Farahat describes *Towards the Setting Sun* as an ongoing project, but not in the sense that the original photographs and texts will be exhibited again. Instead, Farahat continues to pursue the project’s themes and inquires through her activist and artistic work via organizations like the Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative and her project Land Back Land Forward Partnership, a website working to connect landowners with Indigenous communities to facilitate land access or transferring of property rights.^{7,8} Through *Palestine Then and Now*, *Towards the Setting Sun*, and all her work, Farahat shows us how to build relationship with a place. In each action, she asks herself and others: where do we go from here? “Building a relationship is the foundation of understanding an area,” says Sul, “and the deeper the understanding of and the relationship with a particular area is, within a person, the easier it is to try to figure out what to do next.”



- 1 Ursula K. Le Guin, "Some Thoughts on Narrative," in *Dancing at the End of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989)
- 2 Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *Dancing at the End of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989)
- 3 "Israel's borders explained in maps," BBC, September 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54116567>
- 4 Mohammed Haddad, "Mapping Israeli Occupation," Al-Jazeera, May 18, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/18/mapping-israeli-occupation-gaza-palestine>
- 5 <https://www.tomahawkgreyeyes.com/>
- 6 Earth Medicine Alliance, "Importance of Place; Working with Spirits of Place; Advice for the Younger Generations," August 23, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9lreuQ1IVo>
- 7 <https://www.justseeds.org>
- 8 <https://www.landbacklandforward.com>

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Sarah Farahat, *Day of Rage*,
بظرف لال موي، 2020. Digital down-
loadable graphic, 8½×11 in.,
[justseeds.org](https://www.justseeds.org)

Conditions



Sarah Farahat, *Land Day*
رضارالا موي 2021. Digital down-
loadable graphic, 16×16 in.,
<https://justseeds.org/>

Sarah Farahat, *Everybody's
Got a Right to Live*, 2020.
Screen print two colors on
Speckleton White French
paper unsigned open edition,
12½×18 in.