

‘No One Escapes’: thoughts on coloniality, peace and martyrdom after watching Khalid Abdalla’s *Nowhere*

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About a quarter of the way through his solo performance, *Nowhere*,¹ Khalid Abdalla pulls off a neat trick. He uses a change of accent, conjuror-like, to whip the tablecloth of his life story out from beneath the various autobiographical plates, forks and glasses that he has hitherto arranged on it for his audience. Suddenly, the softly spoken, elite southerner we'd been listening to revealed that he was Scottish. Identity and location thus radically disrupted, the ground beneath Abdalla's story vanishes and is reconfigured. As it turns out, though, Abdalla is something more like Scott-ish. More importantly, his ease in sliding in and out of the Egyptian accents of his extended family and his racially ambiguous appearance confirm that he is also Brit(ish) as Afua Hirsch (Hirsch 2018) has it.

This accent trick is not a one-off. The instability it produces remains a keynote of Abdalla's 'anti-biography' (Abdalla 2024), in which new characters and timelines continually reconfigure the narrative. Its co-ordinates whirl repeatedly around Abdalla's figure on the stage, coming to rest each time in a new, but always contingent, position. Partly, this is an effect of the extremely skilful use of technology by director Omar Elerian, designer Ti Green, lighting designer Jackie Shemesh, sound designer Panos Chountoulidis, and video designer Sarah Readman. All of the staging's components function collectively as a dispersed totality, situating Abdalla among the fragments of his life: music, photos, texts, videos that shift back and forth between live and recorded. At times these elements are operated or orchestrated by Abdalla, and at others they seem to activate him as he writhes and floats in Omar Rajeh's evocative choreography, both subject and object of his life.

In all, this was as eloquent a staging as I can remember of the experience of identity in a globalized world. For Stuart Hall, capitalist globalization was the crucial structuring

¹ *Nowhere* was produced by Fuel Theatre and opened at the Battersea Arts Centre in London on 1 October 2024, before transferring to HOME in Manchester. In August 2025, it played at the Traverse as part of the Edinburgh Fringe, and at the time of writing is on tour in the UK and Europe.

dynamic of what he called the present ‘conjuncture’, the fusion of long and short-term economic, political, social and cultural tendencies that constitute any particular historical moment. For the prologue to her collection of Hall’s writings on visual arts and culture, Gilane Tawadros selected Hall’s talk from 1994, ‘Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities’, in which he argued that we had entered a conjunctural moment characterized by ‘the pluralization of cultural difference’ (Hall 2024, 25). Hall argued that this pluralization was a consequence of ‘social antagonisms on a world scale’:

These antagonisms are a product of huge, planned, and unplanned world migrations—the greatest and most constitutive cultural fact of the late modern world, the planned and unplanned, forced and unforced movements of peoples, taking up hundreds of years later after that first forced migration of slavery with which modernity began. ... They are torn apart by poverty, by drought, by civil war, by the international arms trade, and they are moving, moving, moving from their settled homes to somewhere else. (Hall 2024, 25)

History has proved Hall right. 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the wider ‘war on terror’, the second intifada and so-called ‘Arab Spring’, the 2006 ‘July war’ in Lebanon, civil war in Syria, and countless other events have endorsed his account more emphatically than he could probably have imagined, or certainly hoped. As a result, our world is now characterized by a violently unstable matrix of long-standing and emergent social antagonisms.

Both Abdalla’s life-story and its staging exemplify Hall’s argument that culture is a ‘terrain for producing identity’. For Hall, in other words, identity is not to be found within, but appears as a set of positions that either attach themselves to us or make themselves available for us to take up. This is the basis of that much-misused term ‘positionality’, which

I take to mean the dual condition of both being positioned and positioning oneself within social, political, and cultural contexts. When Abdalla first met a British casting director, they reportedly looked at him and said ‘poor you’ (Abdalla 2024, 9), a crass comment certainly, but also the most succinct expression I can recall of the actor’s condition in which the gap between being positioned and positioning oneself is often too narrow to matter.

This truism is, of course, doubly true for racially minoritised performers, and so it would prove for Abdalla. In 2005 he was cast as a terrorist in the British spy drama *Spooks*, and the following year he played 9/11 hijacker Ziad Jarrah in Paul Greengrass’ film *United 93*, followed by a very different figure of Orientalist fantasy, Amir, the haunted protagonist of *The Kite Runner* (2007). The career that these roles established for Abdalla seems, however, to have bought him some freedom to occupy a radically different position. In 2011, he was back in the Egypt his father had left, protesting against Hosni Mubarak’s regime in Tahrir Square. After Mubarak’s fall, Abdalla became a founder member of the Mosireen (‘we insist’) collective of filmmakers and activists, demanding and facilitating citizen-led media. Since the failed Egyptian revolution, Abdalla has continued this divided professional existence, both pursuing activist causes and occupying the racialized periphery of western screens, most recently as Dodi Fayed in *The Crown*.

Abdalla recalls at one point that his father had resisted leaving Egypt (where he and his father were activists fighting the regime), saying that he didn’t want to ‘run away’. Abdalla’s grandfather offered ironic reassurance to his son: ‘Don’t worry. No-one escapes’ (Abdalla 2024, 14). The sequence of geopolitical and autobiographical revelations that constitute *Nowhere* could be read as an emphatic affirmation of that observation. It departs, however, from the jigsaw tendency of similar performances, such as Complicité’s *Mnemonic* (1999), *A Disappearing Number* (2007) and *The Encounter* (2015), that treat geo-history as

raw material for the coalescing of a sentimental, unifying perspective. Here, by contrast, moments of clarity and connection feel both momentous and momentary, substantial and illusory. Some such moments produced gasps from the audience I was in, but they also resist producing coherent meaning. Carefully selected, they also litter Elerian's staging, both treasured keepsakes and just so much detritus.

Nonetheless, it's obvious where these historical and geo-political fragments will converge. Signalled at the start, Abdalla's confrontation with Israel's genocidal war in Gaza is finally engaged in Abdalla's closing monologue, framed by his reflection on the Nazi genocide: 'the shadow of the Holocaust is still alive, its afterlife still capturing victims in a way that defies linear causality', he says. Some victims of the Holocaust said the same. Philip Bialowitz, survivor of the Sobibor extermination camp, wrote that:

I am witnessing the tools of the modern age, trains, assembly lines, and gas engines to efficiently murder thousands of people on any given day. And yet, how new is this really? The primitive whips used by the Germans are no different from those used by brutal slave masters for thousands of years. (Bialowitz and Bialowitz 2010, 83)

Understandably perhaps, Abdalla doesn't pursue this kind of long-historical analysis of colonial continuities in the final minutes of a solo performance about his own life. But he does invoke another historical tendency, that of 'intergenerational grief' in the wake of a Nazi genocide that is 'still capturing victims': both 'the children of those ethnically cleansed in the wake of the Holocaust' and 'the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors' (Abdalla 2024, 39–40).

The neatness of this paradox and its acquiescence to Holocaust exceptionalism make these lines doubly out of place in a performance otherwise marked by ambivalence. Severed

from the European colonial modernity that birthed both Zionist settler colonialism and Nazi fascism, ‘the Holocaust’ stands, here, in the west’s preferred position for it: the ahistorical purity of a unique and monumental evil whose malign shadow is somehow imagined to be laying waste to Gaza and its people. Crucially, that shadow obscures the Merkava tanks, American F-35s, German ammunition and RAF Shadow R1s that are doing the actual work of annihilation. In addition to this obfuscation of genocidal reality, Abdalla’s framing of Israel as the land of ‘Holocaust survivors’ is a historical smokescreen that obscures the coloniality of the Zionist entity’s origins. ‘There is ... no basis for claiming the state was founded as the result of the Holocaust;’ writes Israeli historian Tom Segev, ‘the British played a much larger role’ (Segev 2019). Furthermore, positioning the process of establishing the state of Israel ‘in the wake of’ Nazi genocide obscures the willingness of some war-time Zionists to work with both Italian fascists and Nazis to achieve their aims (Greenstein 2022). It’s deeply disappointing, therefore, that Abdalla’s narrative closes by allowing Zionists to escape a reckoning with the historical forces of globalizing modernity that so thoroughly shaped their project, while also obfuscating the genocide currently being committed by them, or at least in their name.

It's more disappointing still that Abdalla closes by constructing a similar escape route for himself, heralded by a dove:

And I play Dodi in *The Crown*.

This man who was left essentially unmourned and unknown for 26 years, whose body I had stepped into.

And so in the midst of a genocide that is not being recognised for what it is, while nowhere is safe, and we're in this vortex, I have to walk on a red carpet. A world stage.

In every way I can seeing [*sic*] how everybody's grief has sanctity.

Which is when the dove came to me.

...

I'm on a plane on my way back to London from filming, and I understand that I have to write 'End the Occupation' and 'Return the Hostages' on my hands, which gave me the dove (Abdalla 2024, 40–41)

[Abdalla is referring here to hooking his thumbs together so that his palms, and their message, face the viewer, resembling wings.]

At the first mention of the dove, Abdalla added the caveat that he 'used to hate' the symbol because 'the cliché image of peace ... feels like a way of saying, I want everything to stay as it is, just removing the violence without actually confronting what causes it' (Abdalla 2024, 38). And yet this is the image that Abdalla settled on when faced by 'a world stage', and that he chose for the end of *Nowhere*.

This image of Abdalla's hands forming a dove eloquently reveals what is at stake in using peace as a framework to engage Zionist genocide. First, the image enforces a flattened comparison of settler-colonialism and anti-colonial resistance. On the one hand – literally – is 'end the occupation', and on the other, 'free the hostages'. But there is nothing even-handed about this comparison. Not only do the two entail incomparable scales of suffering, they are also incommensurable realities. They cannot be judged by the same standards, much less

traded against each other, as the framing of peaceful resolution requires. The biblical source of this image of peace further exposes its tacit political commitments. We should recall that Noah did not only send a dove, but a dove and a raven. The dove is therefore not only itself, it is also *not a raven*. That difference is not merely superficially racialized, it's deeply encultured in western racial order. Luke's gospel asks that we 'Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them' (12:24). Ravens, then, are not settlers, nor are they domesticated. They do not depend for their livelihood on the control of territory. By contrast, the dove returns to Noah's ship of refugees with an olive branch. Olive trees can live for a thousand years or more and fruit in extremely harsh conditions. They therefore commonly symbolize both ancestral connection to the land and economic security. Today, they unavoidably recall the long history of settler violence and the brutal erosion of Palestinian livelihoods. Only last month, the Israeli Occupation Forces destroyed 3000 olive trees in al-Mughayyir near Ramallah (Al Jazeera 2025). Such instances of settler violence are, of course, predicated upon divisions of the world whose template was provided by medieval mappa mundi (Hotson 2021) whose model was provided, in turn, by the settlement of Noah's sons: Shem in Asia, Ham in Africa, Japheth in Europe. When colonial historians read these maps, they saw race. So when Abdalla's closing words invoke doves 'sent out again', 'searching for somewhere to land', we might observe that his choice of image tacitly and unintentionally reasserts a settler-colonial paradigm, and is deeply imbricated in the project of sustaining and naturalizing the racial ordering of the world.

This is not, however, to argue that *Nowhere* functions simply as a Trojan horse for coloniality. Nonetheless, its ending does derogate significantly from the strikingly beautiful, subtle and resistant account of positionality within globalization that precedes it to a framework that is notably aligned with the project of naturalizing the imperial world system that globalization has produced. As a result, I left the auditorium both unwilling to convey the

message of ‘peace’ and seeking for a framework better equipped to articulate our constitution as subjects in a genocidal world.

One such framework, in fact, constantly ghosts Abdalla’s performance, but remains fundamentally unavailable to his narration, even as analogy or metaphor. The initiating event for *Nowhere*’s narrative is the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, in 2011. As a protest against the confiscation of his goods by the police and the refusal of the governor’s office to grant him entry to complain, Bouazizi poured fuel over himself and, shouting ‘How do you expect me to live?’, set himself on fire (Abdalla 2024, 3). Abdalla marks the event by setting light to a touchpaper that is immediately consumed by flames and vanishes, an image in which now and here instantly become nowhere. Abdalla then introduces his friend Aalam, whom he ‘met during the heights of the [Egyptian] revolution’ (Abdalla 2024, 6), and who has recently died of pancreatic cancer. We are told that ‘in the year between diagnosis and death [Aalam] really faced the question of how to live when you can’t take now or here for granted’ (Abdalla 2024, 6). The imminence of nowhere thus exposes the realities of now and here. *Nowhere* is thus doubly ghosted by martyrdom.

The performance’s crisis, the ‘Fork in the Road, when maybe things could have gone differently’ (Abdalla 2024, 15) is, fittingly, a moment of near-martyrdom. In October 2011, running battles erupted in Cairo following the massacre of 29 people in front of the Egyptian Radio and Television Centre when the army ran them over with tanks. Recalling the incident, Aalam tells Abdalla ‘we should have died there, Khalid. We should have tried harder. All of us’ (Abdalla 2024, 18). When the now-martyred Ismail Haniyeh, then head of the political wing of Hamas, was told that his sons and grandchildren had been killed by the Zionist entity, he responded ‘May God have mercy on them’ (Ray 2024). Later, he added that ‘the blood of my sons is a sacrifice on the path to liberating’ Palestine (Palestine Chronicle 2024). Zionists

called his reaction ‘casual, nonchalant, uncaring, psychotic’ (Nioh Berg [@NiohBerg] 2024). I see quite the opposite in it: both the core Palestinian virtue of *sumud* (steadfastness) and Aalam’s message to Abdalla that ‘we should have died there’. In the face of genocidal violence, in other words, perhaps only martyrdom can constitute the ultimate fulfilment of our constitution as political subjects.

As well as a reckoning with Abdalla’s life, *Nowhere* is a dance with his shadow. The narrator attempting to establish his subjectivity against an onslaught of objectification repeatedly encounters figures of his opposite: men who know that the only basis for their adequate constitution as subjects is the radical embrace of objectification. We must not, of course, idealize them, and set the bar of full political participation at the level of public suicide. Nonetheless, the martyrdom of Aaron Bushnell, for example, carried an astonishing political force, thanks to his transgressive embrace of the emphatically non-western condition of those who can only constitute themselves as political subjects by choosing to become objects and throwing themselves like so much sand into the gears of domination. In the case of Palestine, this process has already consumed whole generations, as it did Ghassan Kanafani, who fictionalised his own commitment to Palestine in the narrative voice of his ‘Letter from Gaza’, which announces: ‘I’ll stay here [‘among the ugly debris of defeat’] and I won’t ever leave’ (Kanafani 2014).

The point of this line of thought is not to observe that martyrdom remains beyond Abdalla’s personal reach. There must, after all, have been performances of *Nowhere* in which he was the only person present who had chosen, at some point, to throw their body into the gears of imperial domination. The point is that martyrdom remains beyond the conceptual grasp of the vast majority in the west. Meanwhile, the work of actually resisting Zionist genocide to which many of us claim commitment is delegated to resistance fighters and

civilian martyrs in Palestine, whose self-understanding as martyrs remains excluded from our culture as a terrain for producing identities.

The struggle for Palestinian liberation, in short, is not reducible to peace and depends fundamentally upon martyrdom. It both requires and holds the secrets to a new cultural terrain. *Nowhere*'s signal achievement is to offer a sketch of part of that terrain. Its signal failure is to discard that sketch when it matters most.

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