



# Sinai: Tourism, Colonialism, and Sea

**RANIA LEE KHALIL**

**VIDEO ARTICLE**



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## ABSTRACT

This video article examines the author's embodied research in the Sinai region of the Egyptian Red Sea. It asks how embodied research can interrupt touristic and capitalistic frameworks of experiencing land and seascapes to better understand our collective responsibility to the indigenous humans and wildlife whose habitats are claimed by tourism. It considers the ways in which embodied research is uniquely suited to support postcolonial ecological inquiry.

Arguing against environmental discourse which separates land and animal conservation from the indigenous humans who have lived among them for centuries, this video article considers the multiple losses suffered by the Bedouin peoples of the Sinai- from the annexation of Bedouin lands by nation states including Egypt and Israel, to neoliberal development schemes which displace them and their ancestral nomadic routes. This video article considers devastation to the environment from the countries, colonization and institutions directly affecting their food sources, homes and livelihoods.

The author joins a legacy of artists of color examining the touristic within their own countries. Blending critical race theory and environmental criticism by scholars of color, the author rethinks the normalizing of extractive underwater practices and reflects on the ways in which tourism, scuba diving and commercial fishing extend colonial structures of invasion.

Conducted between 2013 and 2016, this research took place just before new massive touristic development began in the area. This video article looks across political, historical and environmental landscapes to reflect on life and loss within Sinai's interspecies communities.

Problematizing embodied practices and methodologies which invisibilize the lived experiences of BIPOC peoples, the author proposes a more politically integrated somatics through which to re-sense human bodies as extensions of our earth. This article reflects on possibilities for using embodied research for more sustainable futures.

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**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:**

**Rania Lee Khalil**

University of Arts Helsinki, FI

[rania.khalil@uniarts.fi](mailto:rania.khalil@uniarts.fi)

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## VIDEO ARTICLE

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image from "Sinai: a story i tell my daughter", 2019



plastic particles floating in the water, Red Sea, Egypt, 2013



## VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

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[00:15]

[Quote appears over moving image of an ocean landscape with mountains behind it]

“The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and (ongoing) settler colonialism have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence.”

“If the Anthropocene claims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities...”

“The Anthropocene ... is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom.”

Kathryn Yusoff

*A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

[01:04]

[image of an ocean landscape, though the window of a straw hut]

Sinai:

*Tourism, Colonialism, and Sea*

a video article

by Rania Lee Khalil

[01:18]

[image of a human shadow holding a snorkel over shallow water]

In 2013, I went to Egypt’s South Sinai to conduct an embodied artistic research into the pollution of rare marine life from tourism.

[image of artist’s face with mask]

Using an inexpensive underwater camera and snorkel, I swam and filmed, focusing on my bodily sensations and sense of the water. At the time I was shifting from a live performance practice to one that centered moving image for live audiences.

I was interested in links between the kinesthetic relationship of my work as a performer, to work behind the camera; and the ways in which my background in movement influenced my making of moving images.

[01:59]

From a coupling of this embodied research and postcolonial thought, emerged a short video poem called, *Sinai, a story i tell my daughter*.

*Sinai, a story I tell my daughter* (2019)

I gave birth to my first child, three years into the start of this research. The words of this poem are inspired from a bedtime story I would tell her about a bear and a unicorn who live in a parallel dimension.

[02:26]

from the film: *Sinai, a story I tell my daughter* (2019)

On this earth, an earth exactly like our own, yet which exists its invisible skin, just one millimeter away from this one, all of the cruel things that some men did to the earth, did not happen, they did not even ever exist as thoughts to be acted upon.

There is a story, this story of an earth so much like our own that it has our same creatures. Magnificent fish that rainbow the oceans, huge whales that blow spray from their heads and sing sonar to babies, and nurse their young floating in sea.

### الثالث العالم بينة علم

The Third World Ecology Trilogy

*Sinai* is the third in a series of works called the Third World Ecology Trilogy, which reflect on the shared devastation of colonialism across plant, animal, mineral and human life. This artistic research blends postcolonial and critical ecological thought with moving image for live audiences. This video article expands on all of the video footage and research that went unseen and unsaid in the making of *Sinai*.

My research centers around this question:

[03:46]

How can embodied research interrupt touristic and capitalistic frameworks of experiencing land and seascapes to better understand our collective responsibility to the indigenous humans and wildlife whose habitats are claimed by tourism?

How can embodied research interrupt touristic and capitalistic frameworks of experiencing land and seascapes to better understand our collective responsibility to the indigenous humans and wildlife whose habitats are claimed by tourism?

In this video article I attend to this question through an examination of several related themes:

#### 1. Relations between embodied and postcolonial research

The first are the unique ways in which embodied research supports postcolonial ecological frameworks.

#### 2. what our bodies can tell us about pollution

The second is through a look at what our bodies can tell us about pollution.

#### 3. embodied examinations of tourism and scuba diving

The third are embodied examinations of both tourism and scuba diving.

[04:33]

part one

Relations between embodied and postcolonial research

[image of two arms swimming through water]

I take my cues on ideas of embodied research from an essay by Dr. Ben Spatz entitled “Embodied Research: a Methodology.” Here, Spatz outlines this research in which, quote “the experience and material fact of having a body—is the central object of fascination and study.” There is a co-relation I explore in my all of my research, with the embodied experience of race and racism, and that of embodied research.

[05:14]

[Image of person in shadow on sand]

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon writes: “O my body, make of me always a man who questions.”

In this research I’ve asked questions from my own body: questions about the gendered, class and racialized ways my body is encountered — and through my body, questions about what it encounters: of people and water and beings. About notions of home and other people’s homes.

In this video article, I look at the uneven economies, social and environmental destruction of tourism through the work of Caribbean writers Jamaica Kincaid and Sylvia Wynter.

[05:55]

[Image of feet with microplastics with overlay of Post Card]

I meditate on the embodied experience of being a brown tourist in my own country, inspired by the writing of artists including June Jordan and James Baldwin.

I conducted my research as a dual citizen of Egypt and the US, during the years between 2006 and 2016, pre and post revolution, that I lived in Cairo. I am the daughter of Egyptian immigrants, who had returned to live in Egypt after many years abroad.

[06:25]

[image of person’s shadow on beach]

In the making of this research, I drew on my somatic training in authentic movement, embodied anatomy and butoh dance, to follow my inner impulses in the water. I’ve felt curious about the ways that somatic practice can remain critical and expansive, when so much of it is criticized by women of color, including myself, for reproducing class and racial hierarchy, for universalizing feeling, for invisibilizing the lived experiences of people of color.

image from *Sinai, a story I tell my daughter* (2019)

In this research I fuse somatic training with an awareness of postcolonial theory and the environmental harms of colonialism. Activating these interrelated spheres of awareness, the possibility of “purely” enjoying swimming in the sea or lying in the sand becomes impossible, because this embodied theory acknowledges histories embedded in the sand, and what it means for us as colonized people to swim in colonized water. It is this specifically black and brown phenomenology, this centrality of race within thought and experience, that Franz Fanon refers to when he writes: “Jean Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.”

[07:45]

[image of open road through desert landscape]

part two

What I knew Previously

In my conversations with her, artistic researcher Annette Arlander has spoken about the importance of declaring what one knows at the start of a research.

I knew about settler colonialism and neoliberalism in the Sinai, through the Occupation of Palestine by Israel and international tourism in Egypt.

[image of map of the 'Sinai Peninsula']

present map of Sinai, Wikipedia (2020)

I knew about maps in which Palestine, a country bordering Sinai, does not exist, and I knew about a western history of landscape and nature which removes indigenous people, in order to create pure views for the enjoyment of the settler-colonizers.

What I knew before my formal research began were the everyday losses of the formerly colonized, our losses of land and wars and relatives, of dictatorships installed all over the global south for the benefit of Western democracies.

[08:47]

[photograph of Nubia]

Nubia, by Rania Lee Khalil (2016)

Like Nubia on its southern border, land in Sinai has come to officially “belong to” Egypt through annexation and a brutal quelling of the distinct cultures of indigenous people.

And in the twentieth century, following Egypt’s failed efforts to protect Palestine from occupation, Sinai was declared a demilitarized zone, to deter the threat of war between Israel and Egypt. This threat of war ironically protected the area from industrial and touristic development that would have otherwise taken place.

I knew how European style hotels along the waterfront damage fragile marine ecosystems, with their chemical run off from artificial lawns. And how their waste and sewage disposal systems are constructed with little to no environmental oversight. And the ways in which tourists damage fragile coral reefs with their chemical sunscreens and non-biodegradable trash, which finds its way to the water.

I knew that Egypt is in the process of building a land bridge, drilling through the fragile floor of the Red Sea, to allow Saudi Arabian tourists to drive their cars into Egypt. Over the years of my embodied research, Egypt-Saudi collaboration expanded into the construction of a new mega city upon fragile shores, and a series of four underwater tunnels from Cairo to the Sinai. This has all taken place under a dangerous rhetoric of development and even “new life” in the Sinai, though they are in truth projects of extinction, in what we will soon regard as the formerly marine-rich Sinai.

[10:00]

[image of camels on the beach]

Where Bedouin people are the nomadic and ancestral inhabitants of the Sinai, these destructive developments are as injurious to them as they are to the nonhuman marine life they have cohabitated with for centuries.

What I learned more about were Bedouin nomadic routes, which do not adhere to the borders of nation states, and how these routes are severed when private luxury resorts are built in between them. When open lands and waters throughout the world are claimed as private property, they result in indigenous dispossession, starvation and mass incarceration. Bedouins fall victim to coordinated roundups,

village and habitat demolition. Bedouin humans share this troubled circumstance with endangered sea turtles, for example, whose eggs are laid along the sandy edges of the shore and crushed when their shoreline breeding grounds are unseen by tourist and non-indigenous development.

[image of a faint sea turtle swimming in the distance]

[11:38]

In this video article, I wish to zero in on this particular tradeoff: a luxurious holiday for some and generational trauma for others.

[image of woman with cane, walking through water]

Narratives of loss within interspecies communities — the animal, fish, plant and human communities who until recently solely populated its shorelines and mountains — are muted within Sinai's travel brochures, yet it is here that this video article wishes to now turn.

[12:08]

part three

what our bodies can tell us about pollution]

[moving images of plastic bags in the ocean]

Despite methodological differences, my embodied research came to reveal things that my textual research later enforced.

[12:24]

plastic particles floating in the water, Red Sea, Egypt, 2013

Swimming through water, I came to understand on a kinesthetic level, the end point of trash thrown into the water, its small plastic particles surrounding me. As a swimming and walking body, I saw oil and gas leaked from diving boats, ship anchors thrown into delicate marine life. As I swam, I could only imagine how marine life were experiencing the sound of motors, jet skis, large boats, and overhead planes moving through their space.

In these embodied states, I saw nets cast, from the smallest to the widest, learning more about the ways in which touristic sea side restaurants infer a false sense of the local, serving fish that is often caught far away, commercially farmed or hunted. I learned more about large scale fishing and “bycatch” — bycatch being the accidental yet avoidable capture of dolphins, baby whales, sharks and other species, who end up in commercial nets thrown for edible fish. Even when captured alive, throwing back these endangered sea creatures has not been shown effective in saving their lives, or the lives of their young.

[13:38]

scuba diving

images from essay film *Sinai, a story I tell my daughter*, 2019

Through embodied and textual research, diving websites themselves mostly, I learned the ways in which swimming and diving fins send out harmful ripple currents which erode and kill coral. Divers introduce bacterial infections into the water which kill entire coral reefs.

What I came to understand is that, like colonialism, diving industries have normalized the rights of certain humans to travel to far away places and invade their environments. When these expeditions do not go as planned, the invader is framed as a victim, while the sea creatures, like sharks, are framed as violent and put to death. Benedicte Boisseron touches upon these points in her book *Afro Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question*, which examines the parallel framing of black people and dogs as criminals.

In this research I've joined a legacy of artists and writers researching the touristic within their own countries. Artists including June Jordan, James Baldwin, and Gwendolyn Brooks have all reflected on experiences of being black and brown tourists within spaces normatively reserved for white people. In one leg of my research, I stayed at the seaside resort of a friend's uncle, dining alone among groups of Europeans, at tables covered in white linens. I spoke with gardeners who had respiratory conditions from using pesticide sprays to maintain the hotel plant life. I spoke with a young *mâitre d'*, whose wife and family lived six hours away by train. This research all took place as Egypt's anti-dictatorial revolution was coming to a defeated end.

## tourist photography

While conducting my research through snorkeling, I watched guests learning to scuba dive. One day a new group of divers crowded around a coral reef to take photos. One man held on to the coral to steady himself, then lost his balance and tore a limb from the reef. Coral is a living animal in the family of the sea anemone and jellyfish. On another day, I watched a crew of divers, including the children of guests, surround a small white octopus, the sea filling with black ink.

I experience these stories from my research as in line with a long history of nonconsensual photography: touristic photos of ethnic others, which center the pleasure of he or she who is taking the photo.

[16:43]

## part four

Tourism in the Eyes of Those it Impacts

[woman walking through frame of tourist window]

text by Jamaica Kincaid, writing of her island homeland, Antigua in *A Small Place*

“That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain... Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression, and every deed, good and bad, is an attempt to forget this. Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives — most natives in the world — cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go. So, when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.”

[17:58]

The uneven economies, social fracture and environmental destruction of tourism are lamented by Caribbean writers Sylvia Wynter, Jamaica Kincaid, Renee Gosson and Derek Walcott. Wynter and Walcott critique tourist economies intended to replace local fishing and agriculture as a means of local sustenance. Sylvia Wynter discusses the agricultural plot of black peasants as a revolutionary tool of independence.

The peasant's plot, with its multitude of vegetables, flowers and fruit trees, resists imperial monoculture and tourist industries. Like colonialism, tourism privatizes vast tracks of public and peasant land, making it unlivable for its indigenous inhabitants.

Across countries and time periods, writers have condemned the environmental consumption of tourism. Like much Western environmental thought, tourism isolates “nature” from its indigenous peoples, or commodifies them in turn, invisibilizing their struggle to reclaim their land and lives.



Through my research I've sought to attend to this question:

How can embodied research interrupt touristic and capitalistic frameworks of experiencing land and seascapes to better understand a collective responsibility to the indigenous humans and wildlife whose habitats are claimed by tourism?

How can embodied research interrupt touristic and capitalistic frameworks of experiencing land and seascapes to better understand a collective responsibility to the indigenous humans and wildlife whose habitats are claimed by tourism?

Through this research, I've come to understand the unique power of our sensing bodies to comprehend the tragedy of our disconnection with the sea. It is through our bodies, already intimately connected with the planet and those regions from which our ancestors were born, that we can truly feel the sea, and all that has gone wrong in human relations within it. Using our bodies in research, we can create alternatives to the dominant textual frameworks which have abstracted the overbuilding, overhunting, polluting and extinction taking place for centuries within the seas which we rely on for our collective survival.

[20:24]

[image montage: baby with sea water]

As a mother, using my embodied artistic research as a tool to imagine an earth in which the tragedies committed upon it are unthinkable, is a step in imagining a different kind of ecological care. Not just a care of conservation or preservation, but one of a radical rethinking of colonial ideas of development and progress. This also involves a rethinking of ideas of embodiment: what we do with bodies and to bodies; our own, and others.

images from the film: *Sinai, a story i tell my daughter*, 2019

My poem about a parallel dimension in which environmental harms "did not happen or even exist as thoughts to be acted upon" becomes an important mode of boundary making with the past. My words about the "terrible things that some men did to the earth and each other" must be understood within the context of racialization, of land occupation, and the harmful interspecies legacies of violence and disconnection that they produce.

Placing greater emphasis on our bodies as intelligent tools of research, we can then offer solutions which include the indigenous peoples least consulted and most affected by tourism and neoliberal development. The solutions I have come to see as most valuable though this research is a return to indigenous practices and leadership, and divestment from tourist networks which feed dominant power structures.

As news media within and beyond Egypt celebrate the expansion of tourist and development industries, my embodied research has attempted to chronicle myriad losses of life within it, removed from the tourist's photo and developer's portfolio. Expanding upon histories produced by situated researchers color, we can offset the narratives of global corporations with local movements toward third world solidarity, as in those of the writers outlined here.

[22:19]

Our bodies are means to connect with water, sea plants and creatures we must collectively work harder to honor and protect. I argue that to (re)know ourselves as researchers on embodied levels can guide us into new futures.

Sinai:  
*Tourism, Colonialism, and Sea*

a video article  
by Rania Lee Khalil

images, direction and editing  
by Rania Lee Khalil

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The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Rania Lee Khalil is an Egyptian American performance and video artist based in New York City.

Keywords: Tourism; Colonialism; Ecology; Red Sea; Bedouin; Indigenous; Marine Life; Sinai; Underwater; Video; Performance; Somatic; Egypt; Scuba Diving; Non-human; Photography; Pollution

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATION

**Rania Lee Khalil**

University of Arts Helsinki, FI;  
The New School, USA

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