

The World Humanities Report

Reading in Time

Sherene Seikaly



The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and the Human Science (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

© 2023 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

This work carries a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License. This license permits you to copy, distribute, and display this work as long as you mention and link back to the World Humanities Report, attribute the work appropriately (including both author and title), and do not adapt the content or use it commercially. For details, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>.

This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Seikaly, Sherene. *Reading in Time*. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

More information about the author can be found at the [end of this document](#).

Reading in Time

Sherene Seikaly University of California, Santa Barbara

Reading transcends time. Petitions. Pamphlets. Bank shares. Land deeds. Medical records. Inventories. Court cases. Reading takes time, and we never seem to have enough of it. I have come to think of reading along a temporal spectrum that spans from necessity to luxury. This spectrum captures our everyday struggles, our movement between a civil servant's paper pushing and the deep dives of a life of the mind.

Since 2020, we have been locked in reflections of our virtual selves in the wake of a pandemic that has humbled our pretensions about the normal. We are suspended in time; it envelops us; it is at once mobile and static, rapid and treacherously slow. The pandemic and its temporality have produced new somatic habits, ways of being in our own bodies and with other bodies, without proximity, touch, and smell.

But pandemic time has not been only rupture. It has escalated existing precarities, overlapping with a rolling series of uprisings, initiatives, movements, and catastrophes. It has generalized the experience of catastrophe. We are together in these revelations, across the structures that separate us, experimenting with ideas as the ground shifts under our feet.

Just after the August 2020 explosion that shattered the port of Beirut, I asked my dear friend Nadya Sbaiti how she was navigating the multiple eruptions of life in Beirut. "I don't think I ever understood what instability meant until now," she responded.

I share some notes that reckon with this instability, historically and in the present. Through captions on a photograph, a love letter, a passport, and a death certificate, I reflect on practices of reading as commitments to, adventures in, and vehicles for time. Reading with and through archival material is fraught, enriching, and painful. Reading with and through my ancestors, I explore how the Palestinian struggle transcends time. The archival objects I sit with create a threadbare bridge that brings together past and present, the historical and the contemporary; together they offer a window on pondering the future.

Lydda and Ramla

I start with a photograph (figure 1). It is July 1948. Three girls in matching dresses stand together. Something is happening. One has her back to us. The other closes her eyes. A third is on the verge of tears. Are they sisters? Is that their mother carrying a child on the margins of the image? Did that cloth catch her eye at the market? Did she sew those dresses? Is that their brother looking straight ahead?



Figure 1. Lydda and Ramla, 1948. From exhibition and collective laboratory project led by Ariella Azoulay, Wendy Ewald, Susan Meiselas, Leigh Raiford, and Laura Wexler, *Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography*, The Image Centre, January 24–April 8, 2018, a partnership of Brown University, University of California, Berkeley, Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University), and Yale University.

It is July 1948. Israeli forces expel 60,000 Palestinian men, women, and children from Lydda and Ramla. At a checkpoint on the edge of town, the soldiers strip the Lyddans of their money and jewelry. They put the people of Ramla

on trucks; at the town of Qubab, the Ramlans disembark. They walk eastward. The columns of refugees converge. They leave behind traces of home: a fork here, a chair there. Some perish on the way. They chart a map of dispersal.

It is July 2020. I search the photograph for the time before. The photograph is a salve. It opens into a past cracking under the repetitive strain of erasure. The photograph is a spark. It tugs at an ongoing injury. I fight the image of catastrophe. I don't want it to define the girls. I don't want it to define me.

I sit with the girls more. The photograph shifts. It does more than move the past into the present and mark the passing of time. It does more than remind me of my inevitable death. There is something else there. It is a thread that links 1948 to 2020. It is the permanent temporary, suspension and abeyance, a prolonged and fragmented state of waiting. Dispossession tries to vanquish the past, besiege the present, foreclose the future. Through and despite conquest, a fragile, tangible thread defies time and space.

A Love Letter

A love letter came into my life in 2021 (figure 2):

My dear,

I have been thinking a lot about you this week, and about our love, I was surprised to find how it engaged all my time and thoughts. Darling, I was miserable on Monday, when I could scarcely understand what you talked with me, and I hoped so much to hear from you and talk to you. I am doing nothing here, I only eat and sleep, I feel rather idle, and am not inclined to study. I wonder if the papers will come? My days here are rather empty, and I am rather bored with it. Some of my friends have invited me, but not all yet. Lily Jameel phoned me yesterday, and she might come to me today. How are you spending your time, I wonder? Did you leave Tulkarem already. By the way darling, I was so excited when I talked with you that I forgot the number of the P.O. Box which you gave me. Was it 1508 or 1805? So darling, I am going to send it to your office this time. I am impatiently waiting for Saturday, when I hope to see you sweetheart. I wish you could come with mother, I think she is returning on Saturday. Dear, give my love to Auntie, and the rest of the family. And accept for yourself my best love and hottest, most burning desire. Eternally yours, May.

My Dear,

I have been thinking a lot about you this week, and about our love, I was surprised to find how it engaged all my time and all my thought.

Earlier I was miserable in Monday, when I could scarcely understand what you talked with me, and I hoped so much to hear from you and talk to you.

I am doing nothing here, I only eat and sleep and I feel rather idle, and am not inclined to study. I wonder if the papers will come. My days here are rather empty, and I am rather bored with it. Some of my friends have visited, but not all yet. Lily Tarned phoned me yesterday, and she might come to me to day.

How are you spending your time, I wonder if you leave Tulkarim already. By the way I was so excited when I talked that I forgot the number of the P.O.B.

Figure 2. A love letter. Document in author's possession.

May writes to the love of her life, Ibrahim, who later became her spouse and the father of her five children. But that outcome is not yet tangible in this letter. Here she is a student, a young woman in her twenties, surprised at her

preoccupation with love and how it captures her moments. That Monday she describes (we don't know which Monday, which month, of which year) was full of uncertainty and fear that she marks with the word *miserable*. She had anticipated hearing his voice, knowing his whereabouts, testing his love. But the disembodied voice was muffled and distant, indecipherable. She is left emptier; her days revolve around eating and sleeping. Depleted of the will to study and experimenting with doing nothing to stave off restless anticipation, she awaits distraction from friends who don't call. For his part, Ibrahim is somewhere between Tulkarem and his office in Acre. His whereabouts, like the number of the PO box she can't remember, are just out of reach.

My grandmother was the most soft-spoken woman I have ever met, but in this letter she is bold, unassuming, articulating her desires fearlessly. What papers were they waiting for? What did Ibrahim do in Tulkarem? Did he love her as much as she loved him?

May was born in 1923 in the coastal city of Haifa. She was among the vanguard of young women who earned their teaching diplomas at the Jerusalem Girl's College. She loved poetry and forged an intimate relationship with Arabic and English. She became the best sort of teacher, the kind that is always eager to learn.

In 1948, May and Ibrahim and their two eldest daughters, were uprooted from their home and land. With a few scattered belongings and no clear sense of the future, she and Ibrahim built and nourished a tightly knit family in the Beirut neighborhood of Mar Elias. They forged happiness, despite the loss. Their five sons and daughters recount their youth as a precious time, neither of instability nor of displacement, but of laughter, joy, and togetherness.

May loved Ibrahim so deeply that on a spring evening in 1963, when a heart attack ravaged his forty-nine-year-old body, she held him for hours, weeping, quietly bidding farewell to that burning desire she wrote about here. He visited her in her dreams until her death in 2009.

This letter entered my life a few months ago in a sad ceremony that I now read as a changing of the guards. The family archivist, my maternal aunt Lamia, was stepping back from her role, closing her home to move in with her brother.

I knew Lamia had more that she was holding on to, ever since she accidentally shared a file of family papers with me in 2016. At that time, a séance of sorts took shape and my great-grandfather Naim Cotran (c. 1877–1961) was revealed to me as my guardian and companion. I wrote a book about him without knowing it. Today, he is in innumerable, persistent, and surprising ways challenging me to escape the colonial and national logics to which my vision has been confined.

His journeys in Baltimore, Sudan, Palestine, and Lebanon are the focus work now, his multiple subjectivities of medical doctor, colonial official, slaveholder, landholder, and dispossessed refugee are my puzzle and my gift.

The Pith Helmet

The year is 1916. Naim is donning a pith helmet, confident in his civilizational and racial superiority (figure 3). Two Black Sudanese men stand at attention a discreet distance away. One wears a turban, the other a fez. Naim is confident in his role as a junior partner and medical official in the Anglo-Egyptian rule of Sudan. He inhabits the vanguard of a colonial temporality in which Western civilization advances through conquest.



Figure 3. Naim Cotran in Sudan, 1916. Photograph in author's possession.

In Sudan, Naim occupied the position of the “superior” doctor, albeit a second-tier one, healing the “backward” natives. When he returned to Palestine to establish his private practice in the early 1920s, he faced new formulas. In

Palestine, Naim found that the British officials he had formerly emulated were “ruling but not governing.” Unlike their Lebanese, Syrian, Transjordanian, and Iraqi counterparts, Palestinians under the Mandate were denied access to representative institutions and developmental infrastructures. As a Palestinian native, Naim soon realized that he was present on the land but absent in the law.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917, which became a juridical pillar of British rule, afforded Palestinian Muslims and Christians civil and religious but not political rights. The declaration and the Mandate defined Muslims and Christians by what they were not. They became “non-Jews.” This definition necessitated territorial, national, and ethnic partitioning between Palestine’s small Jewish communities, about 5 percent of the inhabitants of Palestine in 1917, and their Christian and Muslim brethren. Palestinian Muslims and Christians became rootless “natives” unworthy of self-determination. The British Mandate hinged on using the language of the “native” while denying natives a political name and a territory. Naim stood as a sort of specter, a present absentee.

When the war between Arabs and Jews began in 1948, Naim’s children and grandchildren fled to Egypt and Lebanon. Naim and his wife, Aniseh (1896–1978), struggled to remain in the midst of the Nakba (catastrophe). Naim maintained his faith in bureaucracy. He was confident. He knew the rules. He understood the importance of evidence. For four years, he gathered certificates, deeds, and maps for the lands he owned in the village of Nahr al-Nabi’a, about eight miles from Acre. These lands, he insisted time and again, were “my private property.” He petitioned. He appealed. A formidable wall of bureaucracy excluded him at each turn. Between June and November 1949, Naim and Aniseh found their orchards burned. Two years later, impoverished and defeated, they joined their family in exile.



Figure 4. Naim and Aniseh Cotran in Palestine, 1949. Photograph in the author's possession.

In this photograph, Naim and Aniseh stand on the grounds of their burned orchards in 1949 (figure 4). There, sense of time has shifted: it is no longer linear, or confidently marching; it is now suspended between crisis and stasis.

Family Papers

My grandmother May would occasionally ask me: “Do you think we will get any restitution? There is word that we might.” Lamia loyally guarded this elusive promise of restitution, recovering former riches, former ways of being before 1948. She held tightly to the land deeds and shares. Even when she handed them to me, she did so with hesitation. “Do you think we can get any of these lands, these company shares, back? Are they any good?”

She has asked me this before. I never know what to say. I am stuck in this gap between what the papers mean to her and what they mean to me. I lock eyes with her; I want to say, “I will guard them.” But I fear that my guarding is not enough, is not legible, will not hold meaning for her. So I remain silent.

Lamia has guarded more than the hope of restitution. Ever since I can remember, she has embodied an elusive and fragmented dream of familial collectivity.

She collected and protected photographs, birth and death certificates, and letters. She maintained this archive beginning in her twenties, perhaps around the same age May was when she wrote her love letter to Ibrahim.

That house in the Mar Elias neighborhood in Beirut had witnessed the forging of family intimacy even in exile. It was a place of gathering for refugees and elders, of children and adolescents. It was the house where May wept over Ibrahim's body.

In my own twenties, I made a long and elusive quest for return to that house, the one where I was the first and much-celebrated grandchild. The one where I played with a blue electric car on the white tiles of the long corridor. The house that was shelled in an escalating civil war, the one where my mother carried me over her shoulder, covered my face, and ran for our lives to escape the smoke.

Dispossession tries to vanquish the past,
besiege the present, foreclose the future.
Through and despite conquest, a fragile,
tangible thread defies time and space.

When Lamia left that exilic site of gathering to join the rest of the family in California in the 1990s, she meticulously transported that space of familial togetherness with all its hopes and broken promises. When she had saved enough, she replaced the flooring with white tile. Stepping into her Covina home was its own return, a glimpse into multiple layers of memory, grief, and commemoration, of the first site of diaspora in Lebanon and the original site of loss, Palestine. In 2021, I witnessed and took part in dismantling the house in Covina. I inherited these papers, which I am now slowly working through, untying knots of pain to see what I might find.

As I make my way, the practice and the responsibility of reading takes on new levels of urgency, intimacy, and discomfort. It is a rich inheritance, full of gifts, struggles, and silences. For now, I trust you with this tattered paper that made its way from Jerusalem to Acre in the 1940s, crossed militarized borders to Lebanon after the Nakba, crossed the Atlantic in the 1990s, and now is here with us. Was this letter preserved and cherished? Or did it survive just by chance? Do I betray May by reading it to myself and reading it to you?

For now, I trust you with these questions and with what feels to me like a magical occurrence of learning about my grandmother, a woman whose generosity and love were a pillar of my formation, a woman who still has so much to teach me.

A Passport

As Lamia dismantled her house, she gathered all the papers into piles, some for me, some to take with her to my uncle's house. "Here is a pile of passports," my uncle said, "those are for us, we will keep these." I paused, trying to contain the waves of emotion washing over me. "How about I scan them and return the originals to you?" I suggested. "Oh yes of course," he said. Lamia caught my eye: just keep them, we have no use for them.

After a long day of tears and farewells to the last space of the memory of gathering, I mobilized my grief to travel through my inheritance. I never met my grandfather; Ibrahim died before I was born. His image loomed over my childhood in Beirut, a patriarch whose charisma and humor were a formidable and remembered presence. I never had too many feelings about him, except for perhaps a tinge of sorrow that he left the family so early, at about the age I am now.

With this passport, I plunged into Ibrahim's movements across borders (figure 5). He took on new and different dimensions. Let's move through the passport and read it together.

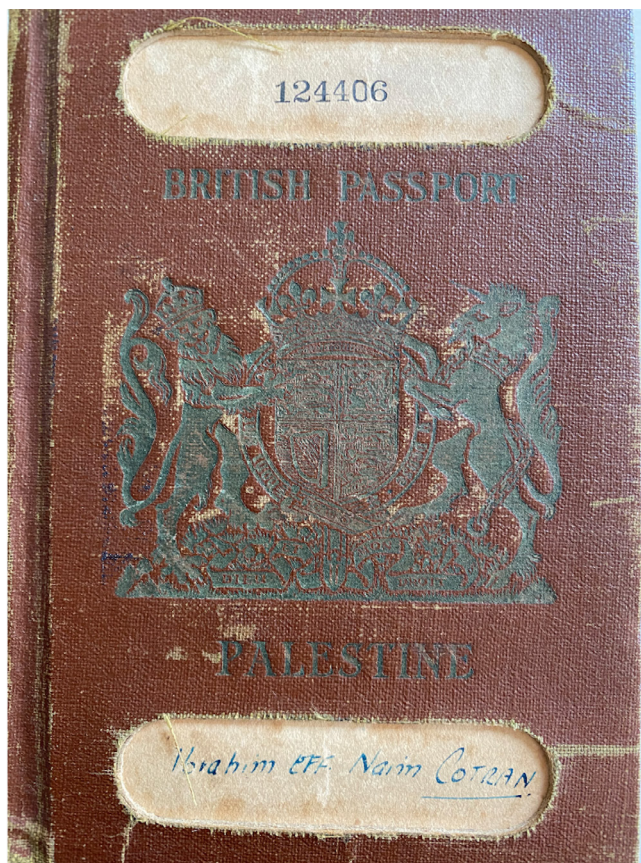


Figure 5. Ibrahim Cotran's passport. Document in author's possession.

Page 1:

British Passport—Palestine

Ibrahim Effendi Naim Cotran

Fee paid: 750 mils

Nationality: Palestinian under Article One of the Palestinian Citizenship Order,
1925

Profession: Government Office

Page 2:

Place of Birth: Acre

Date of Birth: 1914

Height: 182 cm

Color of eyes: brown

Color of hair: black

Countries of validity: All

Page 3:

Photograph of bearer

Where was May's passport? It doesn't seem to have survived.

Page 4:

Date of issue: 23 August 1939

Passport expires: 23 August 1944

Place of issue: Jerusalem

Page 5:

"This passport is hereby renewed and valid until 23 August 1949."

"Bearer has previously traveled on passport No. 26786 dated 13.8.29 issued at Jerusalem, which has been canceled or withdrawn."

As these momentous dates swirled in my mind—1939, the end of the Arab revolt in Palestine, and of course 1948, and then 1949—I moved through the pages embellished with the words "British Passport." My grandfather's flurried and rushed itinerary unfolded.

On December 30, 1942, the Palestine Police Force stamped Ibrahim's single journey to Egypt. He returned to Palestine, perhaps on the train, with a stamp in the Suez city of Kantara on January 11, 1942. The next year, he returned to Egypt for a week. From January 1943 until September 1947, Ibrahim seems to

have remained in Acre. By the autumn of 1947, his movements become frantic, the visits to consulates in Haifa multiply, and he moves quickly from one border to the next.

On September 18, 1947, Ibrahim acquired a visa to Lebanon for a little over a month. The visa is adorned with the word *istiyaf*, or summer vacation. I laugh to myself at the dissonance. A month later Ibrahim returned to Palestine through the northern border of Ras el Naqura. December 1947 marked the first phase of the Nakba as attack and counterattack escalated between the Yishuv and Palestinian forces. Seeing the writing on the wall, Ibrahim made another brief trip to Lebanon in January 1948. He returned to Palestine in February, as the Haganah escalated shelling Arab neighborhoods and villages and authorized the expulsion of the villagers of Arab Suqair and Qisarya just south of Haifa.

Ibrahim tried his luck again, crossing the border to Lebanon in February 1948 and again in March. By that time, the Haganah's military advances and the increasing power of the Irgun and the Lehi militias had instilled panic and fear. Palestinians with means fled in the hopes of return. Ibrahim did his utmost to join them. Perhaps he couldn't secure a home for his family or the paperwork to get himself, his wife, and his two eldest daughters settled, even if temporarily. Ibrahim shifted tactics and tried his luck in Jordan, again in March 1948, returning to Palestine once more.

In March 1948, the Haganah launched Plan Dalet, a shift to large-scale, highly organized, and sustained operations. The war of conquest was in full gear. On April 9, 1948, Irgun and Lehi forces pillaged the village of Dayr Yasin, shooting the fleeing civilians. Dayr Yasin intensified fear throughout Palestine. By the last weeks of April, the Haganah overpowered Arab forces in Haifa; the city fell in two days. After the invasion of the Arab armies in May 1948, expulsion of villages had become regular practice.

It must have been a long summer for Ibrahim, May, and their daughters, Samia and Lamia. By the end of June 1948, 250,000 Palestinians had fled or been expelled under the force of fire. In July, the expulsion of Lyddans and Ramlans initiated another escalation. As summer gave way to autumn, the Haganah conquered the Negev, the Jerusalem Corridor, and the Upper Galilee.

Ibrahim crossed to Jordan again in September 1948, only to return empty-handed to his family. His movements became increasingly desperate, he tried Lebanon, Jordan, and finally Syria, entering at Daraa in October 1948. There the record of his movements ends, along with his passport's validity. The last visa, the last stamp is from the Republic of Syria on December 4, 1948.

I breathed in the beautiful smell of old paper, studiously noted his comings

and goings, brought out the magnifying glass, asked my spouse if he could make out an illegible stamp. I tried not to be sentimental. I tried not to stop too long at the date December 31, 1948, when the visa to Syria expired. I imagined him rushing across borders, his repeated visits to the passport office in Jerusalem and the consular offices in Haifa. I noted the growing urgency of his movements between February and May 1948. Then it dawned on me that this passport, long expired, long tucked away, “of no use” as my aunt put it, was a fragile bridge. Ibrahim touched this document, and now I am touching it.

A Death Certificate

My great grandmother, Aniseh Cotran, Ibrahim’s mother, the wife of Naim, outlived her son. I was there when she died, in that house in Mar Elias, the entire extended family—the siblings, their spouses, their children—gathered around her as she passed. I was only seven years old, but I remember Aniseh as herself formidable. Someone to be scared of, to behave around. I am searching now for her, since her husband Naim has taken so much of my attention. Her beauty was legendary, her attention to proper comportment and hygiene stringent. She was only fourteen when her family married her to a man much older than her.

It is not a painful memory, this last gathering. It has become so faded for me that I have wondered if it actually happened, and I forget to ask my parents, in between the details and exigencies of the every day.

As I carefully worked through my inheritance of these family papers, I found a

document that enlivened and challenged faded memories: Aniseh’s death certificate (figure 6). It captures this moment of gathering and memorializes it: August 16, 1978, at 7 p.m., Aniseh departed this world. Born in 1896 in Haifa, she died in exile in Beirut. But there is something new to learn, always. In the space marked for village or space of origin, the death certificate specifies: Palestinian identity card. From this one bureaucratic rectangle, I learned something new about Aniseh. Unlike her sister, who acquired Jordanian citizenship, and her son, Ibrahim, and his children, who mobilized sectarian imperatives to acquire Lebanese citizenship, Aniseh spent her last years of exile on the Palestinian identity card, or *le se passe*, that continues to confine Palestinian refugee life and mobility in Lebanon.

Perhaps reading is a sustained listening. And perhaps it is only through this careful practice . . . that we can begin to think about writing, too, as an act of listening.

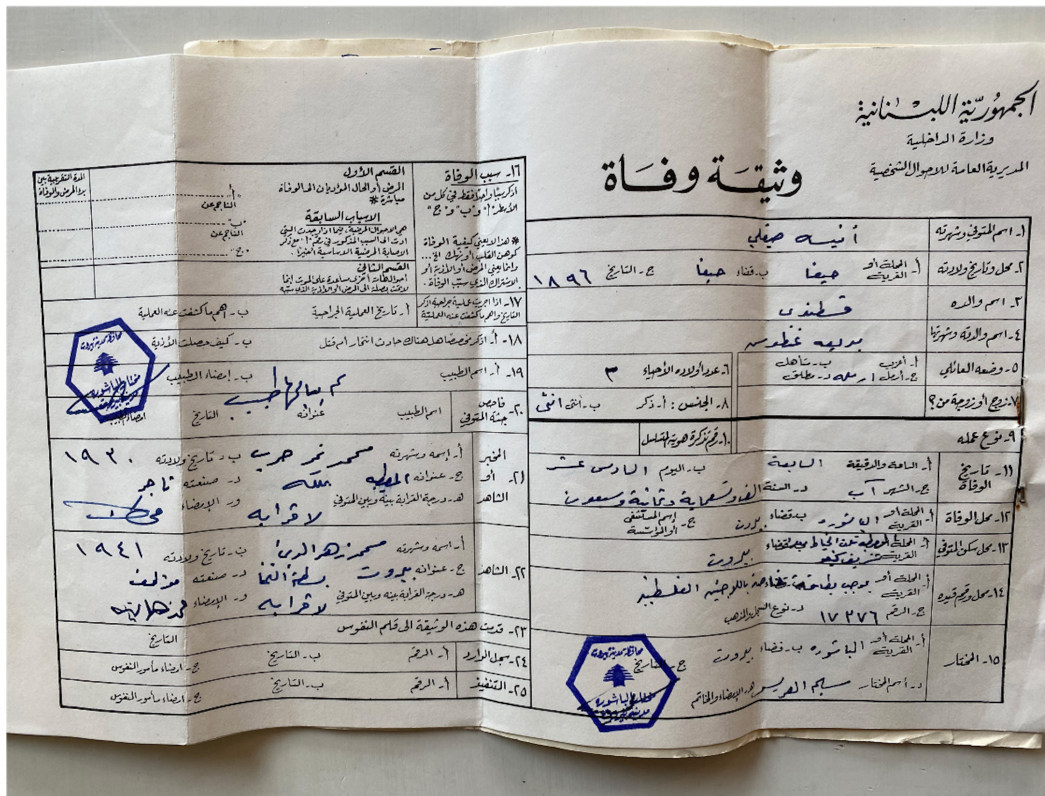


Figure 6. Aniseh Cotran’s death certificate. Document in author’s possession.

Futurity

I think a lot about the practice of historians and our relationship to heroes—excavating them, remembering them, dismantling them. For a long time, I believed that our political imperative was to kill our heroes, the big men of history who get the lion’s share of attention. Now facing the responsibility and gift of guarding these papers, of reading them, I wrestle with the pillars of my family’s story. It is a navigation of heroes and antiheroes, a journey that holds the idea of a family together just as it is dispersing. But perhaps heroes and families always come broken, even before rupture and catastrophe.

Perhaps reading is a sustained listening. And perhaps it is only through this careful practice, a practice that need not be solitary and lonely, a practice that is most beautiful when it is collaborative, perhaps we can begin to think about writing, too, as an act of listening. Reading is time travel, and although it may seem that journey one takes is to the past, prior futurities can also work to unleash our imaginations.

With that futurity in mind, I leave you with an image that I have yet to

read, my great-grandfather's shares in the Panama Canal, another document that came into my life in 2021 (figure 7). I wanted to stay with my intimates and familiars before I made the journey to these other worlds, but they await careful, skeptical, respectful reading.

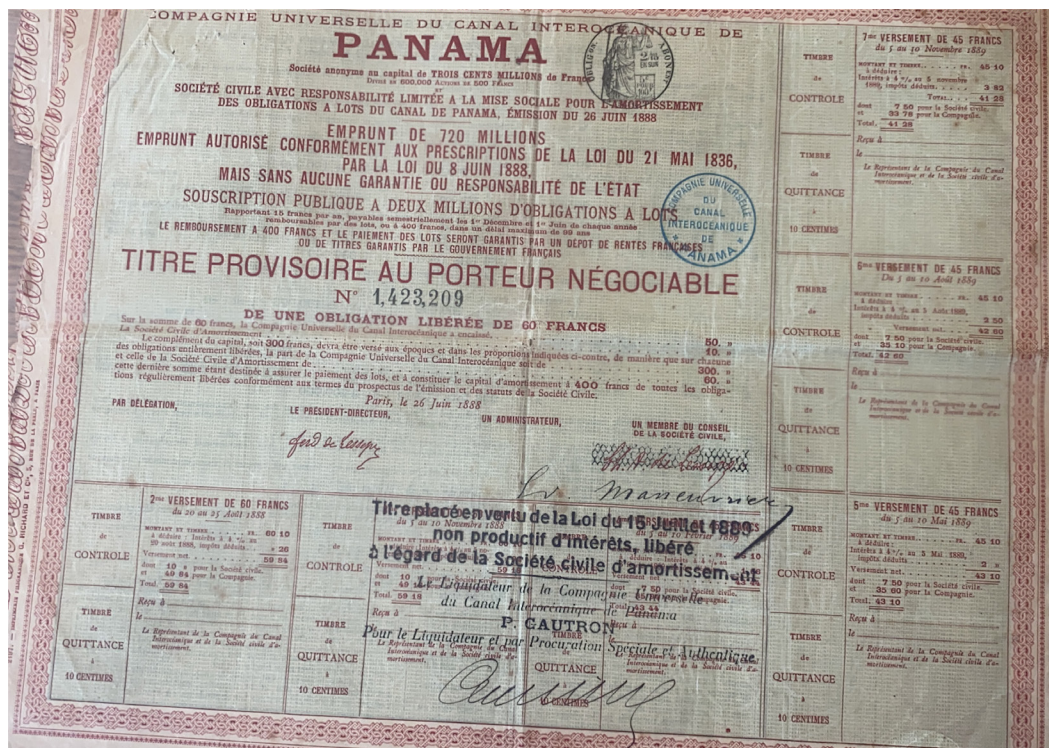


Figure 7. Naim Cotran's shares in the Panama Canal. Document in author's possession.

Sherene Seikaly is an associate professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is coeditor of *Journal of Palestine Studies* and cofounder and coeditor of *Jadaliyya* e-zine. Seikaly's *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (2016) explores how Palestinian capitalists and British colonial officials used economy to shape territory, nationalism, the home, and the body. Her forthcoming book, *From Baltimore to Beirut: On the Question of Palestine* tells a global history of capital, slavery, and dispossession.