

Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora (Personal Essay and Art)

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Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora

SAMA ALSHAIBI

The first time I visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, it was the fall of 2004. Six months pregnant at the time, I had decided to travel on the Israeli airline El Al. I figured if I weren't to be allowed to enter Israel, I'd rather be held up in New York and not after a long flight. I had been told I would face difficulties trying to enter Israel because my American passport reveals that I was born in Iraq.

Sure enough, I was detained with El Al Airline security for nearly five hours while my American friends passed through without incident. I was questioned over and over about my motivations for entering Israel. Was I visiting relatives or friends in the West Bank or Gaza? What about my relationship with Saddam Hussein? My political affiliations? My history? My parents' history? Was I a Muslim, and did I know any terrorists? What was I doing, where was I going, where had I been? Each question was asked as an innocent accusation: "Going to work with Arab groups in the West Bank, yes?" They scanned my body seven times, lifted my shirt to "make sure" I was pregnant, searched my bag three times, and confiscated my lotion and shampoo. I politely answered each question, but offered very little. I told them nothing of my hope to find my mother's childhood home in Jaffa, Palestine, now a part of Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel. "I'm just an artist," I said. Just an artist looking to take pictures of a home stolen from my mother's family in 1948.

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948, known to Palestinians as "Al Nakba" ("The Catastrophe" or "The Disaster"), was built on a systematic destruction and depopulation of more than four hundred villages, massacres, looting, and the displacement from the region of 800,000 of the 900,000 Palestinians who lived there.¹ Currently, there are more than four million registered Palestinians and descendants living in the diaspora, as a consequence of typical birthrates, subsequent wars, two intifadas, and a brutal occupation.² Millions more are displaced from their own families' land and continue to live in internal exile throughout Occupied Palestine and Israel, prompting Palestine's poet laureate, Mahmoud Darwish, to ask, "Where do the birds fly after the last sky?"

My work is based on narratives of my mother's family's forced migration from Palestine to Iraq and then on to America, and culminates with my own return to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, a trip that has only become possible since I became an American citizen a few years back. The work forms a discourse that complicates accepted and official history. The memories of my mother and grandmother act as personal testimony or verbal memorials to events that have shaped history, geography, and modern-day politics. As witnesses to history, our stories of diaspora are reflected in my artwork, a kind of memorial that has never been allowed to exist on the sites from which Palestinians were expelled.

To understand my story of exile, or the stories of the millions of Palestinians living internally or externally displaced from historical Palestine, one must navigate through complicated, conflicting, and contentious histories that reflect the narratives of two peoples who have been able to resolve neither their past nor their present differences. At one point or another, populations both of contemporary Israel and Occupied Palestine have been victims of global forces or at each others' hands. Both are guilty of creating a revisionist history at one point or another. However, contemporary Israel is a dominant first-world power, and her narrative ultimately triumphs hand-over-fist in the public perception and understanding of that history and modern-day realities. Its propaganda asserts that it is Israelis who have suffered greater casualties and that they are held captive by the surrounding hostile Palestinian and Arab countries; preemptive terror tactics are simply national military "defensive" measures; the Palestinian exile was created by Arab leaders encouraging Palestinian civilians to flee, and, consequently, "abandoned" homes were inhabited by immigrating Jews.

My art provides the "flip side of the coin" narrative; a reclaiming of a history, as well as a voice to current struggles "silenced" by Israel's domination tactics and subsequent demonizing of the Palestinian identity. The international world accepts this double standard; Israel is simply defending or reacting; Palestinians are inciters of violence. Yet clearly all evidence points otherwise. In the most recent Intifada (dating back to September 29, 2000), 1,084 Israelis were killed, compared to the 3,837 Palestinians; 7,633 Israelis injured, compared to 29,369 Palestinians; no Israelis became political prisoners, compared to 9,184 Palestinians; zero Israeli homes were demolished by Palestinians, compared to the 4,170 Palestinian homes demolished by Israel.³

According to countless human rights watch groups, including Israel's Committee against House Demolitions (ICAHAD), Israel claims to be operating a "civil administration" over the Occupied Territories (since 1967) and simply defending itself, but it is indeed carrying out a "matrix of control" policy of varied and diverse tactics. Among them are controls that violate international

law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention (according to ICAHD, it was also signed by Israel). ICAHD includes

- Massive expropriation of Palestinian land;
- Construction of more than 200 settlements and the transfer of 400,000 Israelis across the 1967 boundaries: about 200,000 in the West Bank, 200,000 in East Jerusalem and 6000 in Gaza (the latter occupying a fourth of the land, including most of the coastline);
- Carving the Occupied Territories into areas—closed military areas, security zones, and “open green spaces” of restricted housing over more than half of Palestinian East Jerusalem—which confine the Palestinians to some 190 islands all surrounded by Israeli settlements, roads and checkpoints;
- A massive system of highways and by-pass roads designed to link settlements, to create barriers between Palestinian areas and to incorporate the West Bank into Israel proper;
- Imposing severe controls on Palestinian movement;
- Construction of seven industrial parks that give new life to isolated settlements, exploit cheap Palestinian labor while denying it access to Israel, rob Palestinian cities of their economic vitality, control key locations and ensure Israel’s ability to continue dumping its industrial wastes onto the West Bank. . . .;
- A permanent “closure” of the West Bank and Gaza;
- A discriminatory and often arbitrary system of work, entrance and travel permits system restricting freedom of movement both within the country and abroad;
- Exile and deportation; the revoking of residency rights; induced emigration through impoverishment; land expropriation, house demolitions. . . .;
- Zoning policies, which, under the guise of planning and the law, serve to freeze the natural development of Palestinian towns and villages. Part of this system involves the restrictive use building permits, enforced by house demolitions, arrests, fines and daily harassment, all designed to confine the population to small enclaves. . . .;⁴

The list continues at length. What is critical to understand in light of the most recent Intifada is that much of the above controls were actually taking place during the Oslo negotiations (1993–2000). There was never a legitimate practice of peace or respect for the 1967 borders during the peace process. Today,

Occupied Palestine looks like a “piece of a Swiss cheese.”⁵ Concrete walls segregate Palestinian cities and villages; Palestinians are pushed into ghettoized holes while Israelis eat their cheese, the fertile land between the holes.

Palestinians’ lives in Israel and Occupied Palestine are and have always been determined by the physical and psychological oppression of occupation: harassment, humiliation, and trauma are daily norms, yet the people are called on by the international world to be accountable for those who have succumbed to the desperation of violence. It is worth noting that the leading cause of death in the Israeli army is suicide, not suicide-bombers. Four hundred fifty-nine self-inflicted deaths have been reported since 1992, underscoring the heavy toll Israelis pay under present conditions.⁶



Figure 1. Olives from Gaza

Early Zionists' hopes were founded on similar ideology, the dream for Israel, at whatever cost (Figure 1). The following narrative chronicles the most even-handed approach one can take when discussing her own family's exile, but it is important to be mindful that Al Nakba was not even or fair or just. On April 9, 1948, Zionist militia attacked a small village outside of Jerusalem named Deir Yassin, which was known for its peace policies. Although the village was not included in the area the United Nations recommended as the future Jewish state, the leaders of the Jewish paramilitary Haganah (the foundation of the modern Israeli army) had approved and reinforced the attacks because of its strategic location on high ground in the corridor between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the perfect location for an airfield.⁷ Led by Menachem Begin of the Irgun Zvai Leumi and the Lochamei Herut Yisrael militias (also known as the Irgun and the Stern Gang respectively, both groups are members of the two Revisionist "right-wing" Zionist paramilitaries), the massacre resulted in the murders of 100 to 120 residents, half of whom were women and children.⁸ Fifty-three orphaned children were left along the wall on the old city and were taken in by Miss Hind Husseini, whose home was later to become the Dar El-Tifl El-Arabi orphanage.⁹ Credible evidence indicates that other atrocities followed, such as looting, sexual crimes, torture, and parading of victims before lining them up on a wall and executing them at point-blank range.¹⁰

Begin (later to become the sixth prime minister of Israel) bragged that the terror the massacre prompted "was worth half a dozen battalions to the forces of Israel,"¹¹ and that

Arabs throughout the country . . . were seized with limitless panic and started to flee for their lives. This mass flight soon developed into a mad-dened, uncontrollable stampede. Of the about 800,000 Arabs who lived on the present territory of the State of Israel, only some 165,000 are still there. The political and economic significance of this development can hardly be overestimated.¹²

Indeed, although small in death toll numbers, the massacre of Deir Yassin had a significant psychological effect on the residents of Palestine, who began to flee from the incoming Zionist forces. My grandmother recounts her own personal tale of flight, which was extensively based on the stories coming from Deir Yassin.

In 1948, my grandmother, Imtithal, had three daughters, aged four and two (my mother, Maha), plus a newborn. Imtithal's family was from Jaffa (now Yafo), a small port city adjacent to Tel Aviv that wasn't included in the UN mandate. Her husband, my grandfather Mahmoud Yaqub, was from Budrus, a small village outside of Ramallah. Imtithal's father, Hamdala Munayyre, was

a landlord in Jaffa and owned a tailoring business in the old city. All of her family lived in the adjoining homes her father owned in the al-Manshyyah neighborhood overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. My grandfather worked for a pharmaceutical company but was also active in the Palestinian resistance. Fluent in six languages, he would broadcast on the local radio in Hebrew. He was hired to deliver propaganda that the Arab resistance was indeed coming. When my grandmother could not catch his broadcast over a period of several weeks, they investigated the equipment. It turned out that the trick had been played on them; the equipment was a “receiver” sold to them by a Zionist sympathizer, rendering useless several weeks of strategic plans.

My grandmother recalls hearing the horror stories from Deir Yassin and begging her husband for the family’s escape. Mahmoud refused to leave, believing the Arab countries were forming a resistance and would arrive any day. Despite local Arab leaders’ urging them to stay, the residents of Jaffa fled in the tens of thousands after hearing the stories of Deir Yassin; the streets were left empty and the once lively compound of Imtithal’s family and friends disappeared. My grandmother’s last weeks in Jaffa were terrifying as the Zionist forces moved in closer, shelling the city with mortars for nearly three months to root out the resistance that remained. Even now, nearly sixty years later, she breaks down when she recalls huddling in the corner of her house, shielding her young daughters from the flying debris and shattered glass. Because of my grandfather’s position with the radio station, he received early warning that the Irgun militia was closing in. Deir Yassin fresh in his mind, he escaped with his wife and daughters to Nablus. So sure were they that they would soon be returning, that the occupation was only temporary, they actually covered the furniture with sheets and locked the doors.

The Arab troops never came, and Zionist forces continued to depopulate and destroy hundreds of villages to create the Israeli state. In his book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*, Zionist Israeli historian Benny Morris chronicles the deliberate destruction, intended to ensure refugees would not return.

During May [1948] ideas about how to consolidate and give permanence to the Palestinian exile began to crystallize, and the destruction of villages was immediately perceived as a primary means of achieving this aim. . . . [Even earlier,] On 10 April, Haganah units took Abu Shusha. . . . The village was destroyed that night. . . . Khulda was leveled by Jewish bulldozers on 20 April. . . . Abu Zureiq was completely demolished. . . . Al Mansi and An Nagnaghya, to the southeast, were also leveled. . . . By mid-1949, the majority of [the 350 depopulated Arab villages] were either completely or partly in ruins and uninhabitable.¹³

My grandparents spent many months in Nablus, where tens of thousands of refugees lived on the streets. Work was impossible to find. Refugees poured in from hundreds of villages, each with their own tales of brutality and loss. Deir Yassin, as it turned out, was one of countless massacres in the quest to empty historic Palestine.

Families in Nablus took in as many of the homeless as their houses could hold. Because of the generosity of a Nablus family, my grandparents were lucky enough to have a room to share with their girls. But in the substandard living conditions, my grandparents' youngest daughter died from dysentery. Their money was running out, and they feared they would soon have to move to the camps set up by the Red Cross. Thousands of Palestinians began to walk to Jordan. My grandfather used the last of his money to rent a car to move to Baghdad, where he'd visited years before. They buried their daughter and left for Iraq. They believed they would be able to move back in a year or two, but after fifty-seven years, that dream has never materialized for my grandmother. My grandfather died in Iraq in 1983.

Baghdad, the adopted home my grandfather chose, was supposed to be a sanctuary from the violent uprooting he endured in Palestine. For many years, his family prospered in the growing metropolis. My grandmother recalls feeling accepted and that all of her neighbors in Al Mansour treated her with warmth and generosity. My grandfather would never know that after his death his wife, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren would suffer a fate similar to his exile from Palestine. Iraq's three wars under the leadership of Saddam Hussein have resulted in a world unwilling or afraid to embrace Iraqi citizens in exile, causing my family to live in a continual state of physical and psychological displacement—a fear of being ejected from our homes at any time.

My mother married my father (an Iraqi) in 1968. After giving birth to me in Basra, Iraq, in 1973, my parents moved to Iowa for my father to earn his PhD. It was supposed to be temporary, a four-year excursion to bargain for a better life when they returned to Iraq. But they never bargained on Saddam Hussein coming to power in 1979, the very day we arrived home in Iraq. They never imagined that our lives would sink into ruins within months . . . the land torn savagely by the erupting Iraq-Iran War, bombs and death greeting children in their own schoolyards. My father and mother were pressured daily at their jobs to join the Ba'ath party. My father refused, and my mother grew fearful that one day he would be taken away. Each night, they stayed up late whispering in their bedroom, plotting how to get out and where they would go next. The conditions grew worse with each passing day; we stood in bread lines for hours, ate corn beef hash and drank powdered milk every day; without

hot water available, lice spread rampant in the schools and my mother had to shave all of our hair off and pour kerosene on our heads to kill them off (and it burned!). Blackouts, night raids and sleeping in the basement bathroom were our nightly ritual; we made regular visits to the hospitals to deliver dolls and other gifts to the children of family friends who were hit by bullets or had shards of missiles wedged in their bodies. And the worst of it was that we were suspicious of everyone and everyone was suspicious of us. No one could trust anyone else, because no one knew who was working with or against the Ba'ath regime. Informants were everywhere, and forced collaboration was the norm. My parents shared little of their plan with us, afraid that one day we would tell a friend and find ourselves locked up in prison, facing our death. One morning, they woke us out of our sleep and we left.

After our escape from Iraq, we spent the next several years moving from country to country, trying to settle down in an Arab world that wouldn't renew the visas of Iraqi nationals. In each country where we lived, some aspect of our mixed Iraqi-Palestinian, Shi'ite-Sunni or American identity was problematic. Every year I started a new school weary of describing who I was and where I was from. In 1985, when I was a teenager, we came back to the U.S., but without my father. After my grandfather died in 1983, never having returned to his home in Jaffa that he spoke so much of, my mother decided it was time to live somewhere stable; she wanted to give her children a chance at normalcy by living in the U.S., a place she thought would always be safe. After witnessing her own father wait in vain for his return to Palestine, she would not shoulder her husband's dream for a return to his beloved Iraq. She had lost too much already. She spent her whole life waiting for backwards to move forward. She decided to try to forget remembering and look forward to the now and her future with her kids in the land of opportunity.

"Whose story is it?" asks theorist Nancy K. Miller, referring to memoir writers who "blur the lines between autobiography and biography, self and other, especially when a child tells the parents' story."¹⁴ Sitting at a table in Bethlehem with Palestinians during my first trip to Occupied Palestine in 2004, I felt as if I were a memoir writer, attempting to explain what I was doing there by weaving a complicated tale of my family's exile. I chronicled my mother's and grandparents' journey from Palestine to Iraq, the journey my parents and I made from Iraq to America and back, the years spent moving from country to country until finally settling in America. After waiting nearly fifteen years to receive the precious American passport, a passport that allows the body freedom of movement in the world, I "returned" to Palestine. My story, they told me, was not just the story of my family, but of Palestinians everywhere.

My body represented the symbolic hope for the "right of return." "Right of

return” is a phrase used by Palestinians and sympathizers to explain the demands for the return of all refugees and their descendants, both internally and externally displaced by the 1948 and 1967 wars, to their homes within Israel. It stems from paragraph 11 of the December 11, 1948, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194:

Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours [*sic*] should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.¹⁵

Perhaps it is better to say that the refugees *can* return if they so choose. It is unlikely that my family would move back to Israel or Occupied Palestine. The acceptance of the “return” of refugees means far more to most of us than the prospect of actually uprooting our contemporary lives to move back into our abandoned homes or land property in Israel. In 1983, the United States Congressional Research Service, in a briefing for Congress, stated the following, “By accepting the right of return, Israel may be accepting blame for forcing the refugees out of their homes in the first place, and the Palestinians may be more interested in such a confession of guilt than in the actual return to abandoned properties.”¹⁶ I cannot speak for other Palestinian families; perhaps many would move back or, at the very least, be able to visit without intimidation and humiliation.

Such longing for return is not exclusive to the Palestinian experience and is evident in the exile narratives from around the world. In her article *Growing Up Cuban in Miami: History, Storytelling and the Politics of Exile*, Cuban writer Myra Mendible reflects on her family’s coming to terms that their “brief sojourn” to the U.S. was indeed not temporary. Unable to return to Cuba, her family fled just two months after Fidel Castro and his Revolutionary Army occupied Havana. Mendible’s parents safeguarded their children’s legacy (property titles and memories) in a “small metal box,” in hopes that they would one day be able to be reclaimed.

Year after year, my mother safeguarded our property titles in a small metal box, convinced that someday we would reclaim the life left behind. My father’s loss was less tangible; his memory served as his metal box, and it stored a wealth of stories rich in detail and drama. Years of exile never faded my father’s memories of home. . . . He yearned for her, idealized and idolized her; held her in his memories. She was *his* Havana. . . . Growing up elsewhere—away from the “home” I knew only through pictures, legal

documents, and stories—I came to understand that my mother’s obsession with property titles and my father’s preoccupation with storytelling shared a purpose. My parents’ “metal boxes” were meant to safeguard my inheritance, the legacy they hoped I would claim . . . *mami*’s promised the financial security that eluded them as immigrants; *papi*’s offered a history I would not otherwise learn.¹⁷

For one exiled and unable to have a living connection with a homeland, any representations of identity connected to that homeland are also representations of death; a homeland from which one is long “unhoused” means that one’s memory of it remains mummified. A generation removed, the “metal box” I inherited was more of a coffin than a container for memory. My travels back to Palestine were, literally, attempts to breathe life back into an identity from which I was exiled, an effort to revive a homeland that lay in state. My return was also part of the struggle to reconcile some of the dissonances in the elements that constitutes my identity: I used my newly granted American citizenship to obtain a passport, the magical document that allowed my physical body access to our forbidden Palestine.

My body “returned,” along with my camera; I was a surrogate for my grandmother whose age and frailty hinders her from being able to ever return. Upon my return, however, I witnessed the segregated and ghettoized lives of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. I became determined to tell America the truth about what was happening in Occupied Palestine. My body, pictured in my American passport, had the ability to travel and move freely in this world and could come back to the U.S. and speak for those whom I met in Occupied Palestine, confined to a single city and cut off from the world by massive walls. I brought my family’s story to Occupied Palestine and stood as a symbol for the right of return, and I brought the stories of Palestinians under occupation back to the U.S. as a voice for those who haven’t the ability to be heard. My work is based on the stories of my family and the Palestinians I met, and as such, of Palestinians everywhere.

The question of why Palestinians have been unable to narrate their history of Al Nakba to the world is best understood in the lack of memorials on those very sites of sacred ground. Conversely, my experience living in the U.S. has been characterized by the surge of memorial work being done on sacred ground, from large-scale memorials (such as the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City) to makeshift shrines at accident sites. Theorist Marita Sturken argues that critics of postmodernism largely see such work as extremely antihistorical, noting that “postmodern culture is preoccupied with the question of memory, and national culture has produced an increasing number of

memorials to war and to figures of the past.”¹⁸ The lack of memorials on those sites is a manifestation of our inability to combat the “official history,” a history that doesn’t acknowledge the people of Palestine prior to the creation of Israel. The sacred ground site of what was once Deir Yassin and the massacre that triggered massive exile is within sight of the most famous Holocaust museum, Yad Vase. This tragic juxtaposition asks many painful questions. Is memory enough to teach humans moral and lasting lessons? Can one population’s painful memories and victimization trump another?

Steven Salita wrote in his article, “Reconstructing Consciousness: Memorializing Deir Yassin,” about the impact of not being able to memorialize the death and exile created by Al Nakba on the very sites where they occurred (modern-day Israel). Salita illustrates the continual denial that an indigenous people existed, or perhaps even more detrimental, that the majority of Israelis believed back then, and even now, that their lives are worth more than non-Jewish populations. Salita writes:

It is no accident that conflict exists in places without memorials because memorials are more than physical structures; they position the past in the present in the service of a better future. Unfortunately, though, these are rare cases. No structure commemorates Romani and homosexual victims of Hitler. No structure commemorates the Turkish genocide of Armenians. . . . [N]o physical marker in Israel beyond occasional stone rubble and cactus patches denotes the existence of a once proud and populous Palestinian nation.¹⁹

The inability to narrate the factual destruction of historic Palestine is visibly obvious in the absence of memorials to those events on the very sites where they occurred. It reflects that modern Israeli policy of “erasure” is still ongoing. My art works to denounce the effacement of those events and functions as temporary memorials to Al Nakba and its present realities, through devices such as oral recollections, visual substitutions, reconstructed artifacts, and conceptual imagery.

By using my own body as a vehicle to embody and illustrate visual narratives of the Palestinian past and present (while hinting at the future), I become the retrospective witness. With video camera in hand, I took myself to Occupied Palestine and Israel in search of the homes of my grandmother and mother, opening the door of the past into the present. My body crossed imaginary boundaries of time and national borders. Private memories told in my grandmother’s kitchen or in my mother’s sewing room became public in my artwork.

In her book, *The Image as Memorial*, Sturken states, “The photograph plays

an important function in the relationship of personal memory, cultural memory, and history precisely because of the ways in which images can move from one realm to the next.”²⁰ In the context of my work, the photographs and video move from personal memory (based on personal memories shared between my mother, grandmother and myself) into cultural memory (both the video and photographs house and juxtapose the collection of memories, forming a collective memory), which culminates in a different mediation of history, one that resists the “official” and mediated history of historic Palestine and Israel.

The story of my grandmother and mother’s loss of country, symbolically tied to the house they left and my unsuccessful attempt to locate it in the present, repeats the cycle of dispossession. It articulates the current and unresolved conflict of the Palestinian diaspora. Without the country, the house, or the official history that reflects what really happened, where are the spaces that are left to hold our memories?

Sturken writes, “The photograph may be perceived as a container for memory, it is not inhabited by memory so much as it produces it; it is a mechanism through which the past can be constructed and situated with the present.”²¹ My work is a vessel for aspects of the diaspora’s collected memories and narratives of loss, but they also produce a dialogue located in the present. Walking down the same cobbled streets in Jaffa as my grandmother and mother once had, hearing the cries of the seagulls and smelling the scent of the sea that must have met them each morning, I could contextualize their narratives of land and loss with my own senses in the present. I could grab cognitive imagery and video imagery. I gathered the “place” from the past and turned the loss into a narrative that mapped the visual and cognitive connections. By bringing these connections to the walls and screen of an exhibition, the memory, whose orientation is private, personal, and historic, transforms into one that is public, collective, and present in its orientation.

I have no personal memory of the events leading to annexation of the land that created Israel. Before my first trip to Israel and Occupied Palestine in 2004, I had never seen nor had I experienced the conditions of life under occupation. These events, however, have determined my life, my location, and my relationship to my history. My mother and her family’s painful memories of loss always haunted us but rarely were spoken about. It wasn’t that it was too distant, but rather not distant enough.

I began to understand that this is the identity of loss and exile, and the attempt to hide from it and bury it was the paradox of Palestinian refugee identity. So many wars and disappointments, so many futile attempts at a nation, too many times the hopes for a better future shattered. By not pushing their children to identify with being Palestinian refugees, those who experienced Al

Nakba felt they were protecting us from the very heartache they lived. But their loss was never exhumed, never set free. It was always with us, woven into the very fabric of how they thought and the lessons they passed down. I learned to hope for nothing in America, to expect the worst, to live in a perpetual state of modified anxiety. . . . I grew up terrified that, one day, America would ask me to leave. I still feel that way.

I grew up in a home dominated by traumatic narratives of losing Palestine, and all along I was mourning for a place unknown to me. This dynamic relationship to a past I had never experienced is described as a “postmemory,” a term coined by scholar Marianne Hirsh, who writes:

Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. . . . The term “postmemory” is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary, or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness. . . . The work of postmemory defines the familial inheritance and transmission of cultural trauma. The children of victims, survivors, witnesses, or perpetrators have different experiences of postmemory, even though they share the familial ties that facilitate intergenerational identification.²²

Hirsh’s idea is key to my life and to my art practice, which is, after all, an extension of who I am. I came to understand that I was connected to Palestine, to its history, and that my very character, the way I think and behave, stemmed from the violent severing my mother’s family endured. Hence, my work comes from an investigation of my relationship with my mother’s past, exploring *why* I “remember,” as well as exploring the history itself. In essence, my art constitutes a “metamemory.”

As an artist of scholarship, I feel I have the ability to articulate perspectives that are often complicated and uncomfortable. Remembering is a moral responsibility of all Palestinians, but responding to the postmemory in such a way to influence public perception that is both effective and honest is a creative challenge best addressed by imaginative means. Reflecting on the power of memory (in that it plays a significant role in our sense of identity), and the power of art (that it can, among other things, poetically argue with one’s emotions and intellect), I created the following two projects to challenge perception of the Palestinian persona and to memorialize the inception of the Diaspora.

THE DISINHERITED: A COUNTER-MEMORIAL TO EXILE
(MONEY WEDDING HEADDRESS)

The dowry money headdress is an artifact now lost to our culture (Figure 2). Fashioned after my mother's faint memory of her grandmother's, our collaborative effort constructs a memorial to our family's continual migrations. Substituting the no longer minted Palestinian currency with coins embossed with our visas, passport stamps, and pictures suggests an intellectual dowry rather than a monetary or economic one. My inheritance is confined to the memories of my elders, teetering on the brink of obliteration.

A bride's family presents the wedding headdress to the bride as her personal "dowry" on her wedding day. Prior to 1948, every village in Palestine had their own unique style of the headdress (Figure 3). Women wore it all day, every day except during sleep. Their bodies would become so accustomed to its weight that upon its removal they would experience headaches.



Figure 2. Headdress of the Disinherited



Figure 3. Headdress (authentic headdress image).
Courtesy Joseph Handel

After 1948, Palestinian currency ceased to be minted (Figure 4). There are only a few intact headdresses left in the world; most were used for their monetary value, one coin at a time. The headdress was often taken apart if the Palestinian woman was widowed and needed financial resources. More often, after her own death, the coins were dispersed to her daughters.



Figure 4. Coin

My reason for recreating the headdress reflects my mother's past. She frequently spoke about her grandmother's headdress and her desire to acquire it. She returned to her father's village in Budrus, Palestine, during her teenage years, around 1962. My mother told her grandmother that she wanted to inherit the headdress upon her death. Her grandmother promised her it would be hers and informed the family of her wishes. My great-grandmother passed away in 1982, and my mother was horrified to learn that her family sold the headdress after her death to help offset the terrible financial situation most families living in the villages endured. To inquire any further would have caused more shame and embarrassment to the family; my mother still dreams that one day she will find the headdress in a dusty shop in the streets of Palestine. Her disappointment at not being able to "inherit" her heritage, as the headdress is one symbolic example of, has haunted me my entire life.

The traditional headdress was embroidered. Before 1948, Palestinian women wrote the history of Palestinian culture with their needles.

The continuity from ancient times is very clear, with some of the embroidery patterns dating back to the Canaanite period. The embroidery is also found in the Palestinian dress. Each Palestinian dress is cut in the same A-line style, similar to what was called in antiquity the "Syrian

tunic.” And unlike European dress, where styles changed constantly even within a single era, the Palestinian cut has remained constant for at least a thousand years.²³

Variety is expressed in the choice of fabric, colors, belts, embroidery design, and the style of headscarf and headdress. Each Palestinian village developed a unique combination of these elements that became a badge of its identity. The costumes also demonstrate that geographical area rather than religion was the distinguishing factor. In Bethlehem, for instance, the traditional style of dress for Christian and Muslim women is indistinguishable.²⁴

One of the largest collections of the remaining dresses and headdresses belongs to Farah and Hanan Munayyer. The collection travels to museums and libraries worldwide, but, tellingly, it has no permanent home. The Munayyers, Palestinians living in the U.S., are interested in informing the world about the lost culture of Palestine and establishing a positive Palestinian presence by educating future generations about the past. Hanan believes that the history of Palestine is stitched both literally and symbolically into the garments. Their overall prebiblical designs and the methods of construction show an “amazing continuity over the millennia,” proof of the continuity of Palestinians and their ancestors on the land.²⁵

Because of the war of 1948, which resulted in the inception of the Palestinian diaspora, the embroiderers’ tradition was dealt a damaging blow. As hundreds of thousands of people sought safety in Lebanon, Jordan, and what became the West Bank and Gaza Strip, hundreds of Palestinian coastal villages ceased to exist, and many others were destroyed and repopulated by immigrating Jews.²⁶ The refugees escaped with only the possessions they could carry. “In many cases, all that was left of a village—the only way you knew there had been a village—was the dresses on women’s backs,” says Farah Munayyer.²⁷ Many Palestinians sold their dresses in exchange for desperately needed cash.

The war of 1967 amplified the process in which Palestinians lost more land: “With each war, with each new wave of refugees from new places, you would see new kinds of dresses being sold,” says Hanan. “The refugees would sell them secretly, because [such a sale] was considered a shame.”²⁸

I want to speak about the inheritance of an intellectual dowry, the stories of our heritage and culture, without the experience of the events that fundamentally define it. I also am conceptually alluding to the inheritance of exile and displacement. When you belong to a people without a home, or a home that you are not allowed to reside in, your home is an idea.

By making coins out of visa stamps and passport pictures, I’m transforming the coins’ intended purpose of value and wealth to give it new life. The value

is now invested in the continual journey around the world in search of a temporary home until we are allowed to return. In terms of a memorial, which is often permanent or fixed to a single location, a headdress can be worn and moved around by the body. The Palestinians have not given up the idea of a homeland and the right of return to what are now Israel and the Occupied Territories. A permanent, fixed memorial would imply that we would permanently be exiled from our home. Even though I believe our plight is more than temporary, I still feel that this memorial should have the ability to move, be worn as both art and costume, and to be displaced from location to location. It could have different bodies to speak about the ever-changing political landscape on the question of Palestine. It shouldn't be static and fixed, because nothing about our personhood, our plight, or our hope is.

BIRTHRIGHT (PHOTOGRAPHS)

The media's largest triumph is the reduction of the Palestinian persona into a single crude terrorist "body." This propaganda is perhaps most palpable in mediated attitudes about mothers whose sons kill in the cause for nationhood. The perception exists that Palestinian mothers are suicide-bomber-producing machines, while mothers of Israeli and American soldiers are revered as noble, civic-minded, and models of patriotism. This complex of perceptions prompted me to contemplate my own pregnancy this past year because I am a half Iraqi-half Palestinian mother of two American boys.

Freedom fighter, terrorist, soldier, insurgent, peacekeeper—this conundrum of perception taking place in my womb was a microcosm of the agenda of righteousness played out in modern day politics. My son's gender allows for the leasing of his body to kill and die for governments and in the interest of political ideology. All my maternal instincts are powerless to protect his life when compared to the future he will be forced to inherit because of his national identity.

My images act as a visual objection to the denial of our national identity and humanity. By utilizing the loose graffiti writing style over the pregnant belly, the work alludes to all the architectural surfaces within the West Bank. The walls of churches, mosques, homes, markets, and the security "fence" are covered in graffiti (poetry, propaganda, scripture, art, etc.); it constitutes a dialogue of protest in written form (Figure 5). The writing on the surface of my skin connects me to the surfaces of our land (Figure 6). Excerpts of poems from noted Palestinian poets, such as Mahmood Darwish and Fadwa Tuqan, expressively capture our collective voice of determination and longing (Figure 7).



Figure 5. Bethlehem Wall #1



Figure 6. Return



Figure 7. In My Country's Embrace

These writings act as discussions, declarations, and documentation of life under occupation. Both graffiti (as art) and vandalism (as a criminal act), the writings embody the complexity in defining the perception of resistance. The Intifada (the Uprising), with its negative connotations, is indeed an act of resistance. By being both the victim and the victimizer (Figure 8), I am able to cross, once again, the delicate line of perspective. Whose story is it?



Figure 8. Target Practice

The images were shot with Type 55 film whose ragged borders are indicative of Polaroid films, adding the illusion of archival imagery. The warm sepia tones and the paper, whose surface resembles Palladium's, conjure a visual language of memory, nostalgia, and loss. The images, rich with allegory and metaphor, are charged with titles offering insight into their intentions.

Each image has layers of meanings and interpretations, and are not simply limited to those I intended when creating them. For example, "Worthless Possession" (Figure 9) depicts my figure cloaked in a vintage village dress from Ramallah, covered in Islamic headscarf, with my eye peeping out of a key handle. "Worthless Possession" refers to the keys to the homes of Palestine held by the refugees fleeing the incoming Zionist forces in 1948 and the locked doors they left behind. My grandmother points out the irony that she has the key, but the Israelis have her house. Edward Said also describes a similar tale in his book, *After the Last Sky*, of a distant relative from Haifa exiled to Beirut. On his deathbed, he instructs his children to "hold on to the keys and the deed."²⁹ Many refugees kept these keys for years, along with the deeds to their homes, but bitterly threw them out after the 1967 Six-Day War.



Figure 9. Worthless Possession

The key also represents the unlocking of memory, our remaining possession of a past and a land we cannot reclaim. Its worth erodes with the passing of time and the eventual deaths of those who have experienced them. Their intangible and fleeting quality, continually changing and reinventing itself in the present, inevitably is held hostage within the agendas of those (such as myself) who articulate them. They can never remain pure, authentic, and complete. As such, they often feel like the cheapest form of possession.

In contrast, the photograph itself, personal or otherwise, embodies far more than its materiality in that it either triggers memory (whose characteristics are vulnerable and ephemeral in nature) or produces it.³⁰ My images hope to capitalize on the medium's inherent qualities, inasmuch as I can shape a memory dissimilar to that of sanctioned history regarding the wars of 1948 and 1967 and of occupation and exile. Because images, according to Sturken, "have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a culture," I also can produce new memories, interpretations and experiences of the Palestinian persona for the audience who comes in contact with my work.³¹ As an artist and a member of the diaspora, this is my ultimate goal.

The inspiration for my work came from my mother, who recreated her mother's wedding dress when she remarried a few years back. The original vanished during forced migrations, one of the countless examples of our heritage lost to exile. My mother's recreation of the wedding dress was a key to our past, linking our present to a time before we were refugees, exiles, and terrorists. The wedding dress, much like the work exhibited here, defies attempts to obliterate our history and who we are collectively.

I hope my "memorials" remind, educate, and inspire the Palestinian population who come in contact with it. I want to amplify our collective voice in a direction away from the desperation of violence. I hope to dispel myths of how and why Palestine was destroyed. And last, the memorial itself is a tribute to the history and future of Palestine and Palestinians worldwide. My memorial was also inspired by Emily Jacir's *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Which Were Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948*. Her memorial, a Red Cross refugee tent with the names of 418 villages embroidered by an army of volunteers, also narrates the truth of Palestinian history. It's in the very title.

My work exercises my right to not only commemorate the diasporic condition of the Palestinians but to oppose its very existence. I believe in the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in Israel and the Palestinian territories. I believe we can have a peaceful Palestinian and Israeli state. But part

of that solution will have to come from Palestinians in the diaspora, who must no longer stand afraid of being accused of anti-Semitism when defending our right to return, to have a homeland, a national identity, and our culture restored. In the words of Edward Said, "I soon discovered that I would have to be on my guard against authority and that I needed to develop some mechanism or drive not to be discouraged by what I took to be efforts to silence or deflect me from being who I was, rather than becoming who they wanted me to be."³²

There is a land called Palestine and I am one of her daughters. . . .

NOTES

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