

Spaces of Memory and Reclaiming of Palestinian History

John Halaka, Hani Zurob
and Mary Tuma

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The victors write history. They make it nearly impossible for alternative historical narratives to enter the public arena, transform public opinion and, most significantly, restore the countless lives erased by the pen of power. Today's huge, undemocratic mass media normalizes the colonial versions of history, alleging the inferiority or barbarity of their colonized subjects. Silenced and dehumanized, occupied peoples from different periods and places have much in common. The commonality of their experiences forms the premise of the touring exhibition, *"The Map is Not the Territory: Parallel Paths-Palestinians, Native Americans, Irish."*¹ The means used to subjugate them have been the same: forced displacement, destruction of the economy and culture, theft of resources and perennial imprisonment, torture and murder.

Despite the violence and injustice inherent in the colonization of the Americas, Palestine and Ireland, anger is not the chief characteristic of the art exhibited in *"The Map is Not the Territory."*² The artists resist rather than confront, and do so largely through the articulation of cultural, topographical and personal memory. While this certainly reflects a curatorial decision, recourse to memory as a strategy for minoritized artists to gain visibility and voice is a tendency seen worldwide. Since the demonstration by Michel Foucault,

Edward Said and others of the ideological nature of history, a shift has taken place from the privileging of history to the gathering of memory as a tool to maintain culture and redress history's caveats.³ Consequently, although I focus on the role memory plays in the specific works of three Palestinian artists participating in the *"The Map is Not the Territory"* – John Halaka, Hani Zurob and Mary Tuma – readers and viewers will find correspondences with the work of artists from other communities.

The idea that memory can play a critical role in reclaiming lost histories intends to highlight the diverse ways history can be represented, probe the intersections of individual and collective memory in contemporary Palestinian art and, of course, analyze its capacity to alter mainstream Western perceptions of Palestine and Palestinians.⁴ Because the modern history of Palestine is largely one of displacement, the term Palestinian is here understood in its widest sense. Only one of the artists discussed – Zurob – was born and raised in Palestine and is of Palestinian descent on both his mother's and father's side. None currently live in Palestine and all three naturally have other factors informing their respective self-identities. As such, their work is poly- or transcultural and should be positioned not only within the context of Palestinian art but also that of Euro-American and global contemporary art more broadly.

The Case of Palestine: Culture as Crime

Some historically marginalized or colonized communities, for example African-Americans, have gained a bit of ground in mainstream culture by challenging the victors' version of history although the acknowledgment of the history of slavery has engendered political correctness rather than abolished structural racism. Palestinians, however, are still most often

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“ We live in a world of suffering in which evil is rampant, a world whose events do not confirm our Being, a world that has to be resisted. It is in this situation that the aesthetic moment offers hope. ”

—John Berger
The Sense of Sight



Hands of Time, John Halaka

ignored or misrepresented in North American mainstream media and political discourse. Palestine remains under occupation, while the Israeli nationalist narrative dominates the Western view of history and current events. Journalists or scholars who dare venture beyond “official speak” often pay a hefty price. And this same system of imposed silence or punishment also extends to the realm of culture. Jessica Winegar, in an article arguing that post-9/11 exhibits of Middle Eastern art in the United States generally reproduce the neo-Orientalism they attempt to counter, also discusses how “recent art events related to Palestine strikingly reveal the ... political underpinnings of the category of art.”⁵ For example, the curator of the 2003 *Made in Palestine* exhibit held at the Station Museum in Texas had great difficulty securing other venues for the show.⁶ That he was systematically told by museum directors that “they would lose their museum funding if they were to hold a show that was pro-Palestinian”⁷ and by gallery directors that “showing Palestinian art would likely mean an end to their gallery”⁸ effectively points to the art world’s indebtedness to the politics of its funders.⁹ Commentary on the show was also sometimes predictably hyperbolic with at least two officials claiming *Made in Palestine* was anti-American and anti-Israeli propaganda and a glorification of terrorism and murder.¹⁰

Not only is contemporary Palestinian art targeted, but, also – perhaps even more so – Palestine’s historical and traditional art. Farah Munayyer, an important American collector of antique Palestinian and Syrian costumes, states for example, that “Israel keeps the finest collection of Palestin-

ian costumes in the world under lock and key in a museum basement,” underlining the desired invisibility of such collections.¹¹ Any affirmation of Palestinian cultural lineage and heritage counters the Israeli fable of “a land without a people for a people without a land.”¹²

Palestinian culture and history are, from the perspective of Israeli nationalism, at the very least a threat, revealing the enmeshment of colonialism and (ethnic) nationalism both premised on the exclusion of difference. Yet the refusal to acknowledge Palestinian history and the attempts to erase it have actually endowed cultural and topographical signs with a political agency that they would not have had otherwise. The ongoing practices of cultural destruction, land expropriation and media censorship explains why memory – both collective and individual – remains central to contemporary Palestinian art and activism. While not infallible, memory is a space that can defy in varying degrees, the colonizers and their historical biases. As Lila Abu-Lughod and Ahmad H. Saidi state, “Memory is one of the few weapons available to those against whom history has turned.”¹³

John Halaka: Documenting the Forgotten Survivors

John Halaka, Palestinian through his mother, was born in Egypt, but raised in the United States where he lives and teaches. Until recently, he worked essentially in painting and drawing, creating series of canvases that use simplified figures, objects, fragments and motifs as visual metaphors

to articulate the many tensions at the heart of human experience between, for example, desire and denial, life and death, human strength and frailty, power and oppression, reality and illusion. For Halaka, identity is shaped by inseparable personal, cultural, historical and political factors. Some of his series specifically address the Palestinian issue, and through it, the universal issues of injustice, oppression, displacement and the violence of our blindness to them.

In the last few years, Halaka has felt compelled to document rather than merely evoke what he calls the “ethnic cleansing of Palestine.” For example, in his series, *Landscapes of Desire* (2009-2013), he draws the ruins of Palestinian houses and villages destroyed in 1948, inserting and building forms textually by stamping words that read “remember,” “resist,” “return,” “rebuild” and “forgive.” Text here serves a double function. It provides these forgotten spaces and places with a voice. Once mute, they now speak: we can no longer pretend we don’t see and know. The words also simultaneously emphasize and change the meditative, discursive filter underwriting these sites and images of Palestine. Constituting a bridge between art and viewer, they point to the possibility of seeing Palestine and Palestinians in terms other than those of the American mass media.

The documentary impulse in which reality takes precedence over metaphor culminates in Halaka’s most recent series. *Portraits of Desire and Denial* (2012-ongoing) is an interdisciplinary social and artistic project focusing on Palestinian refugee families. It involves drawings, photography, videos and documentary film.¹⁴ Color photographs are assembled into horizontal or vertical diptychs and triptychs featuring the men and women Halaka has interviewed along with images of objects, photographs, documents or land that act as synecdoches for the subjects’ yearning for home. While the photographs are portraits of real people, they are not purely photojournalistic. Unlike in standard portraiture, each piece is here produced by combining and contrasting images to visually enact what is normally intangible: the personal narratives of the subjects as well as their relationship to Palestine.

The two photographs from *Portraits of Desire and Denial* exhibited in “*The Map is Not the Territory*” illustrate the artist’s manner of rendering portraits from the inside, so to speak.

The central photograph of the horizontal triptych, *Hands of Time*, shows a late middle-aged man, Boulous Khoury, sitting on the ground. His back is straight and propped against the wall of what appears to be a traditional house made of hewn stone. Khoury is holding a framed black-and-white photograph about the same width as his torso, a landscape showing a path winding up a small, tree-rich mountain. Several elements converge to communicate the importance of the picture that seems to possess an almost talismanic quality for the subject. One: there is the mirroring situation of viewing a photograph both outdoors and within another photograph. Two: the man is not looking at the viewer, but gazing into space. Instead, it is the old photograph that looks back at the camera. Finally, the space delineated by the photograph, devoid of either a horizon line or any physical depth, is claustrophobic: the ground-and-wall backdrop provides no vista apart from the one seen in the keepsake image in Boulous Khoury’s hands. Black and white, it speaks of the past, suggesting that the only opening, the only way out or forward lies in memory.

The image-in-an-image theme is repeated in the photographs on either side of the triptych’s center. On the viewer’s right, is a close-up of an elderly person’s hands holding an aging passport showing, one guesses, Boulous Khoury as a young man. Viewers who know the history of Palestine immediately infer that this is a British Mandate Palestinian passport or, in other terms, an official document that attests to the existence of a nation.¹⁵ The passport and hands take up most of the image, the hints of the chair, carpets, table and water bottle seen behind it revealing that we are in someone’s home.

The image on the left is also a close-up of hands. These appear younger. Open palms hold three black-and-white identity photographs, one more yellowed and faded from age than the others. Here too, framing and the position of the hands convey that the two men and one woman portrayed play, or played, a central role in Khoury’s life. The juxtaposition of images, objects and framing strategies, as well as of past and present, draws viewers into the work, inviting them to piece the image(s) together and, by extension, the subject’s life. The passport and old photographs – or, in other

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Flying Lesson #03, Hani Zurob



Flying Lesson #04, Hani Zurob

works, items such as bones or antique house keys – are mnemonic devices that succeed in conferring upon memory, usually impalpable, a visual and tactile dimension.

Memory is twofold in *Portraits of Desire and Denial*. The series is as much about documenting the life stories of elderly Palestinians, who still remember the 1948 *Nakba*, and of their descendants as it is about weaving the information into the fabric of the viewers' consciousness.

The second image featured in "*The Map is Not the Territory*," *Forgotten Survivors* (2013) is also produced through juxtaposition, but this time, the technique of multiple exposure allows for three images combined into one. The upper portion of an elderly woman's face fills the whole image. The top third of the photograph shows Rif'a AbedAllah El Kurd's wrinkled brow and bespectacled eyes whose gaze, although directed into space, is clearly turned inward. A map of Palestine overlays the left side of her face creating a vertical dividing line in the photograph. Superimposed over the lower part of the women's face, particularly her mouth, a scene of a refugee camp seems to silence her. The imaged

voicelessness further intensifies the pain of exile and trauma marking her face and gaze: memory is here clearly a wound. The photograph, whose narrative content is stated less ambiguously than that of *Hands of Time*, is simple, direct and powerful.¹⁶ Halaka, by realigning subject and homeland, offers hope to Rif'a AbedAllah El Kurd and defines memory itself as a territory to be reckoned with as it lies beyond the reach of colonial appropriation. In this version of *Forgotten Survivors*, Halaka has fixed a screen overtop the image. As a distancing mechanism, it stresses how the images and lives of Palestinian refugees are not part of our Euro-American cultural imagery or what Kaja Silverman so aptly calls our "cultural screen."¹⁷ The screen equally denotes imprisonment, adding a material and tactile dimension to "the conditions that trapped the refugees in a life of neglect and denial."¹⁸

Hani Zurob: Space and the Foreclosure of Memory

Zurob grew up in the Rafah refugee camp. His experience of the Occupation and of Palestinian art produced within Pal-

estine, because direct, therefore differs from that of Halaka and Tuma, both of whom grew up and studied in the United States. Zurob is a painter whose work can stand without blush or shadow next to the best contemporary art, proving wrong those pundits and critics who enjoy periodically announcing the death of painting. His personal trajectory is unusual in that the proclivity he felt for painting as a young boy first manifested itself in adult life in the posters and urban graffiti he created during the 1987 Intifada. Later, he made his way from Gaza to the West Bank and completed an art degree in 1999 at the University of Nablus. In his professional career, Zurob has never adopted the nationalist and political symbolism that characterizes a central current of Palestinian modern art. Instead, he privileges a personal rather than collective space and language in his work, where self-portraiture is central.

Zurob's life changed when, in 2004, he received a grant for a residency in Paris, where he has lived ever since. His work, too, has undergone marked changes. Earlier series – bearing titles such as *Siege* (2004–6), *Exit* (2006), *Barrage* (2007) or *Standby* (2008), evoking exile and occupation – are characterized by oscillation between abstraction and figuration and by an expressionistic style in which the physical performance of painting and the materiality of paint work together to convey meaning and even, in part, the narrative content. The feelings accompanying exile – Zurob holds an identity card from Gaza and cannot travel back to Palestine – pain, deferral, incompleteness, loneliness and hopeless waiting, are conveyed through an almost violent brushstroke, contorted bodies and faces and the use of materials such as tar.

Flying Lesson #03, #04 and #07, exhibited in “*The Map is Not the Territory*,” are prints from a painted series of the same name. The images were born of a simple question the artist's son Qoudsi innocently asked his father, not understanding the travel restrictions that have prevented Zurob from going “home” with his son and wife: “Daddy, why don't you come with us to Jerusalem?” Qoudsi is the sole figure in all the paintings, often lost in reverie, playing with toys of transportation. But as Zurob describes, the paintings are layered and the images of Qoudsi are also in a sense self-portraits

Through the use of oil and acrylic paint, and other media, I try to create a world composed of three worlds: exile where the artist

lives (the father), and who appears in the paintings as the sole living human being by the depiction of the son who is portrayed in a relatively small scale in contrast to his surroundings. The second world concerns Qoudsi himself, as he visually appears and shows his feelings through his interactions with his toys. The third world is one of space, where we come from, depicted through walls, and multilayered backgrounds, as symbolic traces of the complex life that prevents Qoudsi and me from meeting. Yet, it is in my construction of a virtual world where a space for such a meeting occurs.¹⁹

Zurob describes the painted planes of color, most evident in *Flying Lesson #03*, as functioning simultaneously as walls of separation and desired spaces of encounter. Throughout the series, Qoudsi is depicted realistically, but placed in a painterly no-man's-land. Here the child sits in a toy car heading into the painting. Only his face is turned back to look at his father and the viewer. The rest of the canvas is composed of long, woven, predominately red and orange brushstrokes. The painting is divided horizontally in two by a hard, solid grey line running across the canvas at the height of Qoudsi's shoulders, as if the simplified wall motif in other paintings has shrunk to recall the dividing line on a street or highway. The line provides a certain spatiality to the painting, placing Qoudsi closer to his father, and draws attention to the child's look of both trust and apprehension of leaving. The spaces of pure painting are unsettling, desolate, without context, yet they equally offer hope. The brushwork allows the wall-like expanses to dissipate and transform into sites of potentiality holding the seeds of a different life in which father and son can meet at will. Indeed, this red-and-orange interstitial space communicates how ultimately the intangible father-son relationship transcends the physical restrictions of colonial regulations and practices. Using very different means than Halaka's *Portraits of Desire and Denial*, Zurob's *Flying Lessons* also endow both personal narrative and, more significantly, the interpersonal – the space of the encounter – with the capacity of resistance. In the virtual, albeit embodied, world of paint, Zurob and Qoudsi are never apart.

Mary Tuma: Palestine and the Material Memory of Things

Mary Tuma, whose father is Palestinian and mother Irish-American, is an installation artist based in North Carolina.

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Her *Lingering Presence* displayed in "*The Map is Not the Territory*," is a small, two-dimensional work, created of handmade paper, sewing patterns, thread and printed maps that reflects her training in textile and fashion design.

Straddling the vocabularies and processes of contemporary craft and conceptual art, Tuma's work probes the materiality of memory and its relationship to the body. Her material is in fact often the stuff of – personal – life, combined with realpolitik. Tuma's art is largely autobiographical. Like Halaka and Zurob, she avoids the pitfalls of self-absorption, but does so differently, by employing, consciously or not, two main strategies.²⁰ First, her concept of materiality encompasses her own body, suggesting that she considers "the material world ... as woven into people's bodies, identities, and actions."²¹ This underlying oneness of self (selves), objects and the world moves the work beyond the solipsistic. Second, the aesthetics of impermanence characterizing her work empties it of any hubris. Her installations often appear as part of a continuum rather than as finished, independent art objects, connected only through the inner logic of Tuma's nomadic perspective and the physical act of making. The word "votive" most aptly describes the process, aim, aesthetic and physical instability of her work. While ex-votos certainly form part of visual culture, and some are beautiful artefacts in their own right, their importance comes from the acts of request, gratitude and commemoration that they are thought to symbolize. Tuma's art shares much with ex-votos, premised as it is on the idea of the existence of an ethereal, even spiritual aspect of things, of a relationship between humans and larger cosmic forces and of a strong connection between objects and memory.

In works such as *Wind Collection* (2000) – composed of eleven transparent bottles transformed into containers of the air of Gaza, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Hebron and seven other cities of historic Palestine – memory is cast as a significant archive and a soft weapon of political resistance in which tangible and intangible are intertwined. Tuma's best known work, *Homes for the Disembodied* (2000)²² – five 9-foot-long dresses made of 50 yards of continuous black silk on hangers suspended from the ceiling – is also underwritten by a vision of cohabitation or inseparability of matter and spirit (or affect), and the idea of the space

within objects as a receptacle for the unseen. Both works are implicitly performative.

Lingering Presence, which Tuma made especially for "*The Map is Not the Territory*," is set on white ground, a collage composed of a grid of fifty-one small squares. Torn bits of road map rest within all but five. These map fragments, placed right side up, upside down or sideways, are transformed into small abstract canvases, pleasing no longer for their accurate directions but for their shapes and colors. Tuma has machine- and hand-stitched various types of lines and designs on a number of them in bright, pinkish red thread, creating a loose network that softens the grid composition, even as it subtly heightens the visual unity of the piece. While some names of highways or places remain legible, including those of several American states, the work is not about a particular destination, but about the act of mapping, its instability, transformations and arbitrariness, thereby echoing the tripartite concept of "*The Map is Not the Territory*." "That these maps are of the U.S. isn't really important," she says. "It could be anywhere."²³

Mirroring much craft-oriented contemporary art, Tuma works through ideas and political concerns by thinking with her hands: cutting, placing, pasting and sewing. As in other works, *it is the performed intent that links Lingering Presence* to Palestine. For Tuma, the dismantled map serves as a metaphor for the memory of Palestine, historical Palestine, as a physical presence that cannot be destroyed or ever wholly forgotten. This holistic worldview is rooted in all Tuma's work. Her optimism and the vision of memory from which it stems are best expressed in her own words

The occupier can never really forget us since we will always be present... We are indelibly present, a part of the breeze, the horizon, the stones. We are a part of the fabric of the place, sewn in layers, patched and rewoven... our cells are part of the fruit and the sky. We will always be home, even as we long for home.²⁴

Memory forms a necessary part of our everyday lives and is a cornerstone of our personal narratives, the stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves. It holds a critical place in modern and contemporary Palestinian art whether produced by artists living in the West Bank, Gaza or Israel or those living in the diaspora. The examination of the role

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Lingering Presence, Mary Tuma

Even if we are driven all the way to the moon, our spirits will continue to fill the lands that were once our homes. The occupier can never really forget us since we will always be present. The land remembers us. The land is our witness and our record-keeper. We are indelibly present, a part of the breeze, the horizon, the stones. We are a part of the fabric of the place, sewn in layers, patched and rewoven ... our cells are part of the fruit and sky. We will always be home, even as we long for home.

—Mary Tuma



Rend, Susanne Slavick

Israeli “Pillar of Defense” military offensive in Gaza on November 12, 2012 that killed 72 people including four children in the Al Dalu home on Nasser Street; animal motif derived from a Tree of Life mosaic (8th c. Umayyad period) that depicts the mythical tree with two deer grazing peacefully on one side and a third deer attacked by a lion on the other, in the *diwan* of the bath complex at Khirbet El-Mafjar/Hisham’s Palace in Jericho, West Bank (wrecked car in Gaza).

—Susanne Slavick

of memory in the work of artists exhibiting in “*The Map is Not the Territory*” is here limited to three Palestinian artists solely for reasons of length. Ideally, this essay would have equally considered the relationship between memory and art in the work of the other exhibiting Palestinian artists – Elena Farsakh, Manal Deeb, Najat el-Taji el-Khairy, Najib Joe Hakim, Rajie Cook, Rawan Arar, Vivien Sansour and 6+: a women’s collective – as well as the non-Palestinian artists who address the question of Palestine, like Michael Keating, Andrew Ellis Johnson, Sherry Wiggins and Suzanne Slavick.²⁵

Palestinian lineage constitutes the core of Halaka’s, Zurob’s and Tuma’s identities and, in each case, the Nakba and its ensuing consequences directly inform their work whether it is visually evident or not.

Halaka’s *Portraits of Desire and Denial* bridges personal and collective memory. It is an archival project concerned with recording and documenting – witnessing – critical elements in the oral and visual testimonies of Palestinian elders who still remember the catastrophe of 1948. Zurob’s case is more



Repercussion, Susanne Slavick

Israeli “Pillar of Defense” military offensive in Gaza on November 12, 2012 that killed 72 people including Mznanar Abdallah, 20, and Amina Mznar, 80, an elderly woman in a wheelchair who was in the kitchen at the time of the bombing. Her wheelchair was found in the rubble (beaded curtains).

—Susanne Slavick

complex. As the sole artist here to have experienced Israeli aggression firsthand, his images consider how that aggression impacts and hinders his private life today. Nevertheless, his paintings confirm that Israeli tanks and bombs have not fully succeeded in effecting cultural genocide and amnesia. In Tuma’s work, Palestine takes on a performative and poetic form. Her memory of it cannot be undone or hindered by war, theft, embargos, destruction, lies and the building of separation walls. Like Zurob and Halaka, Tuma addresses collective memory subjectively.

The most significant question is whether art and photography can deconstruct and recast mainstream North American Western perceptions of Palestine and Palestinians. Culture, as Immanuel Wallerstein and so many others have argued, is a profoundly ideological terrain explaining why power holders seek its control.²⁶ Alternative cultural and historical

narratives challenging the status quo thus meet opposition, ridicule or censure. But power holders can never wield absolute power. The Palestinian perspective is increasingly finding its way into the cultural arena, providing opportunity for more people to become aware of the historical facts.²⁷ Although art and art exhibits may seem impotent in light of the many horrors of the Occupation, in fact, art can act as an agent for change. It offers, as John Berger suggests, hope, a vital element of human psychological and emotional health. It is hope that keeps Halaka, Zurob and Tuma making and exhibiting art despite the worsening conditions of life in the Palestinian Territories. They persist, resolute, in imaging Palestine – their Palestine – in order to resist a world, as Berger reminds us,²⁸ “whose events do not confirm our Being” and eventually help change the tide of history, or, at the very least, rebalance the archive. ■