Memories, Myths and Representations of a Contested Land

by Aide Esu

Abstract

Israel and Palestine, over the course of their historical conflict, have created a complex patchwork of memory narratives dealing with different representations of the same landscape. The article examines how the two peoples have elaborated their narratives of national identity by practicing a pre-modern repertoire to shape a modern identity, and by knitting together their collective, multiple visions of the land. Israelis and Palestinians have used space as a temporal-spatial tool to practice the remembering of lost land and to elaborate an imaginative geography. Attention is focused on the relations created by the process of dreaming/imagining space, and on the intricacies, denials, oblivion and ambivalence related to memory construction.

Introduction

Throughout the endless conflict, Israelis and Palestinians have created different memory narrations, sewing a complex patchwork by re-examining and absorbing the past of “a land of many stories.” The high-handed territory narratives of the three monotheistic religions hold strong idealistic and religious connotations inspiring political ambitions and popular memories. This article analyses how Israelis and Palestinians relate their different representations of the same place by focusing on different narratives and multiple visions of territory. In this land, probably more than any other, space and memory are intrinsically bound together. Space is a catalyst for the survival of memory, and, being subject to continuous transformations, exacerbate the sense of belonging and identity. Israel and Palestine, in their two different visions, are mental laboratories in Nora’s sense of memory: “the places of memory (are) those in which memory is elaborated.”

The concept of mythescape introduced by Bell clarifies the understanding of collective memory intricacies for Israelis and Palestinians. The mythescape is a temporal-spatial dimension, a battlefield for the control of memory and

3 Pierre Nora, (sous la direction), Les lieux de mémoire, (Paris: Gallimard,1984), X.
shaping myths. In time, memory is subject to continuous elaboration, during which it is debated, forged, transmitted, reconstructed and questioned, proceeding to a deep reconstructive praxis. In an intractable conflict like the Israeli-Palestinian one, a culture of conflict and a psychological repertoire of conflict have developed. This repertoire includes ethos, emotional orientation and collective memory, which all sustain and reinforce the conflict. My purpose is to focus attention on both narratives adopting Bar-Tal’s view: “Israeli society represents a mirror image of the Arab societies, particularly of the Palestinian society (...) both societies shared beliefs and mutually held social representations.”

The case of the Israeli and Palestinian memories raises many questions; however, I wish to limit the discussion to the relationship between dreamt/imagined space in the Diasporas memories, and the entanglements related to loss and claims of return. In this case, we definitely observe a crucible of meanings and practices of land conflicts, involving efforts to legitimate acts of space appropriation. Meron Benvenisti opens the introduction of his book, Sacred Landscape, by quoting Simon Shama: “landscape is the work of the mind.... its scenario is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers and rocks [...]. Jewish space exists on a different planet, totally separate from the Arab landscape. Only those who have experienced the dichotomous environments of Sarajevo, Beirut or Belfast can truly comprehend the phenomenon of white patches on the mental maps carried around in the heads of Jews and Arabs of Eretz Israel and Palestine, which cover the habitat of the other.” Benvenisti’s quotation focuses on the crucial points and the meanings related to geography and memory in Israel and Palestine. I wish to stress the idea of Israel and Palestine as “different planets”, where the two peoples extend and elevate their identity narratives, and knit collective memory referring to the conflicting intricacies of the same space. Ethnic and nationalism studies (Smith, Anderson, Hobsbawm, Gellner) have suggested that space, land and territory are core narratives nurtured through remembering policies to strengthen identity and belonging. Israelis and Palestinians are certainly no exception to this rule. Space is the master narrative in the background, providing national myths to foster modern identities assuming a pre-modern repertoire; they “tell a history to clarify the present through the light of the past.” Assmann’s assessment reveals the entanglements of past, present and imagined future. The time line does not follow a unified, progressive chronology. A temporal dialogue keeps memory

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alive, but the past is not simply “preserved.” Rather, “tous semble indiquer qu’il ne se conserve pas, mais qu’on le reconstruit en partant du présent.”

In the identity narratives of Israelis and Palestinians, space is the imagined land. Looking at the spatial dialectics, firstly we observe how the results of the 1948 war dramatically changed the relationship to the land. Political Zionism fulfills for “people without land”, the Jews of the Diaspora, the dreamed-of homeland. However, it is a dream achieved with political ambiguity, which entails the negation/removal of the Palestinian people: “...in the mental maps carried by the young Jewish and their parents alike, the Arab communities were white patches – terra incognita.” The uprooting from the homeland is the focal point of Palestinian national identity. This antithetical relationship to the land has had deep implications for the elaboration of their memory and for the elements that have nourished their narratives: ambivalence, rough living conditions, political arena, space, images and objects.

The exodus is a central problematic crux in Palestinian identity, since the dispersed people, the land, and the dream to return is the pivotal issue of national identity. As a people in exile, their narrative is entwined with those of the host countries, often identifying with “the other,” and thus rising to spurious incoherent construction. The 1967 defeat marked the failure of Nasser’s Great Arab nation political agenda. The Palestinian disenchantment regarding the Arab nations opened up a new opportunity: the intelligentsia undertook to renew the national discourse and revive cultural identity.

The collective memory construction cannot be separated from cultural memory. Regular and recurrent social practices and ceremonies have nurtured shared experiences, create and maintain collective identity. In human history, no other people, more than the Jews of the Diaspora, have focused their secular existence on the narration of the “self.” They have weaved the notion of “remember where we come from” into everyday life practices.

In the Seder ritual, the mandatory rule “preserve and remember” performs a liturgical memory activating a social imagination through spatial de-localization. The wish, “next year in Jerusalem,” conveys the dream and the will put an end to the Diaspora. It is a here imagined in a time and space elsewhere. The “somewhere,” Zion, takes political form in Herzl’s utopia and like any other nationalist movement, projects the present into a future imaginary, which carries images, stories and legends.

Places were constantly re-evoked and integrated in the rituals maintaining alive the wish for a return.

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11 Benvenisti, Sacred landscape, 56.
12 Nora, Les lieux de mémoire, XIX.
14 The continuation of the Israelites communities in the Diaspora is fixed in the mandatory rule “Shamor ve-zakhor be-dibur ehad”, “preserve and remember”, celebrated in the Saturday song Lékáh dodí. J. Assmann, Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis.
Researchers have demonstrated how cultural memory rituals, in the case of Israel, have forged identity, and how they have supported the endurance of the Jews to survive during the Diaspora. Nation, identity and religion, according to Heller, strengthen cultural memory and States have always used them as a powerful tool. When, like the case of Israel, building and preserving cultural memory becomes a significant commitment for the State, accomplished through the mobilization of intellectuals, the ideological substance changes into mythological form. For the Jews of the Diaspora, even for the most geographically distant and dispersed communities, the confluence of collective memory into religious practices fortifies the ties with the motherland.

The Palestinians do not possess such a clear-cut narrative framework, despite that; their building process of collective memory testifies to a captivating, rich expressiveness. Al-Nakba is *par excellence*, the celebration of Palestinian collective memory, preceded twenty years before by the celebrations of Land Day that are the prelude to the Al-Nakba remembrance lost land. Land Day is crucial for the Palestinians of Israel, that massive social protest thrusting into the limelight of the Israel political arena the infringement of their rights. This later became “a Palestinian-Israeli civil national day of commemoration and a day of identification with Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, to be marked by yearly demonstrations and general strikes.” The protesters overcome the traditional passiveness springing on the Palestinian communities peaceful political action, fertilizing the Palestinian political arena for the celebration of the lost homeland.

The institutional celebrations of Al-Nakba are truly recent...they became popular with the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary and they have had a low impact because of the wide dispersion of the refugees. The limited budget and the resources invested left room primarily for individual memories and oral narrations. All generations were called to contribute to narration by activating a national inter-generational live archive. For the dispersed nation, popular culture is the medium entrusted to unify national identity. Songs and poetry evoke and celebrate the idea of a *lost paradise*; the hopeless condition of the refugee prefigures the promise of a triumphant return. Over time, the poetry of Mahmud Darwish has been crucial for founding and preserving collective memory. His prolific poetry is the main voice reminding international public opinion of the rights of a dispersed nation. In a speechless national voice, Darwish’s lyrics stimulated the awakening narratives of collective imagination, which condemn the uprooting and despoliation of the Palestinian people. Through his symbolic world, he expresses the hope for a life that deserves to be lived in the homeland. Recently, new technologies have been used to foster

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a ‘virtual’ national unity. Al-Nakba web sites with their rich photographic documentation have helped to restore a sense of national physical unity, shaping a new memory body: “the imaginative geography.”

Memory and Zionism: Building the National Identity

In the past decade, memory studies have flourished following a rediscovering of Maurice Halbwach’s writings and Pierre Nora’s work on Les lieux de mémoire (1984). As Olick and Robbins have pointed out, the rising interest comes from a multiculturalism that considers mainstreaming historiography as a source of cultural domination. The intellectual environment opened up a space for a counter-memory to challenge the dominant discourse, impacting Israeli academics, particularly on the topic of the Zionist narrative memory. According to Michel Feige, studies on memory are articulated in three cycles corresponding to the most significant moments of Israel’s history. The first corresponds to the period of state building. The collective memory is shaped by drawing from the Diaspora experience in which Jews have strengthened the spirit of national greatness until the return to the land of their fathers. It is, therefore, an exceptionally long path that Michel Feige defines as being soaked with sacrifice and heroism. Within this framework, the Zionist narrative reaches its zenith in the period from the British Mandate to the early years of State formation. The hegemonic narrative, created, maintained and reproduced, was accepted as objective, an absolute truth. Any pioneer, sabra, facing the hardships of everyday life with dedication and spirit of sacrifice to build the nation, embodies the national collective memory. The sabra represents the ideal-type of a new man. He transformed the space with dedication and courage. He “makes the desert bloom,” strengthening the ownership of the land, He “Zionised” the land, a perfect example of farming to be followed by the Palestinian fellah. Spirit of sacrifice and a sense of absolute truth were the pillars for the new State. The sabra established political leaderships, and his loyalty, constantly, feeds the base of the Zionist narrative. In his research on the myth of Masada, Nachman Ben-Yehuda deconstructs

19 Halbwachs, Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire.
21 Ibid., 126.
22 Israeli Studies published in summer 2003 an issue dedicated to collective memory.
23 Michel Feige, “Introduction: Rethinking Israeli Memory and Identity”, Israel Studies 7/6 (Summer 2002): V-XIV, VI.
25 To withstand the siege of the Romans guided by General Flavius, Eleazar ben Jair, the Masada commander decide on a collective suicide, as an extreme act, to defend the fortress. The myth of Masada has been impressed in the Israeli consciousness as a symbol of resistance.
the narrative, showing how the story of the defeat has been transformed into the legend of national patriotism through different media products: rewriting textbooks, creating children’s literature and developing media materials and tourist propaganda. The myth of Masada deploys a narrative transformation in which death and defeat are reconfigured according to Israeli nationalist ideology.

Social sciences contributed to the State building through total acquiescence and so the institutionalization of sociology and State consolidation has several convergences. Social sciences have played a key role in the construction of social reality and the Zionist consensus. Despite the fact that they are disciplines mastering methodologies and paradigms useful in highlighting the complexity of nation building entirely done by migrants, the sociologists were not immune, according to Kimmerling’s severe criticism, to subjectivity and distortion of reality. The master narration of statist Zionism, the moral, symbolic and material unicum, is perfectly coherent with the Parsonian social system paradigm, which depict society as an integral entity. For the so-called “Jerusalem School of Sociology”, strongly influenced by Eisenstadt, the main concern of social research was “the integration (or indeed assimilation) of “new immigrants” into Israeli society. It was assumed that the immigrants should shed their traditional identity and that once they did so, they would be absorbed as equals in Israeli society.” This way of looking at the social reality was instrumental in building the myth of the Zionist State and the internal dominant hegemonies.

The second cycle takes place in the transition period of post-Zionism with the decline of the pioneer generation and the growing new waves of ‘aliyah out of the pioneers’ world. Nevertheless, the main narrative was strengthened by inventing new places of remembrance, like the kibbutz museums charged with portraying the epic Zionism conquests, and enhancing the narrative with media materials and historical texts. The year 1977, following the first electoral defeat of the Labour party since 1948, marked a turnaround. Michael Feige defines it as a break with the hegemony of the Zionist narrative. A new generation of social scientists, better known as the revisionist, historians and sociologists opened a review and a critical debate about the “accepted truth” of the founding myths. They took a step back from the one-sided accounts and integrated the pioneers’ oral memoirs with the documented archival materials. The flourishing inquiries broke with past narration and opened a new heuristic to understand the social and cultural construction of Israeli identity. They

Each year the recruits climb onto the fortress top to take the oath: “Masada shall never fall again.”


28 Feige, “Introduction: Rethinking Israeli Memory and Identity”, VII.
introduced a new ontology, the Weberian opposition between the enchanted world (myth) and the disenchanted world (critical history).\textsuperscript{29}

The third cycle marks a break with the main narrative and the revisionist discourse. The impacts of the Intifada tremendously affected the routines of everyday life. Fear and insecurity sped up the processing of memory, activating an endless re-framing process. Collective memory explored new domains, like the symbolic transliterations of Palestinian experience (Jeningrad) into negative connotations of the Holocaust memory. New places of memory proliferated through the construction of family memorials within bombed areas or through commemorations on the web. New social actors and practices reject State celebration hegemony and move the celebrations into the private sphere. Increasingly, memory took shape in private, shifting from collective to individual memory. The commemoration of private pain prevailed over the heroic public event, generating “memory fragmentation,” a concept adopted by Vinitzky-Seroussi relating to the commemoration practices of Rabin’s assassination. In this case, time and space are separated, and different narratives were created and performed by several actors.\textsuperscript{30} The media, especially television, became the main mnemonic place for the broadcasting of historical reports, assassination investigations, public debate and people’s reaction to assassination.\textsuperscript{31} Tel Aviv and Jerusalem were an outstanding example of distinct mnemonic communities as the two main expressions of Israeli consciousness, the secular and the religious. This spatial distinction is reflected in the practices of commemoration (Tel Aviv) and counter-commemoration (Jerusalem) that were united by television as a new field of memory.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Remembering and Practicing the Rhetoric of Return}

Commemorations and memorials for fallen soldiers are one of the most common practices, from democratic systems to totalitarian regimes. No matter who are the fallen, or where the events have occurred, nations, especially new nations, need this kind of unifying tradition to be created. By tradition, we refer to Hobsbawm’s and Range’s definition, “a set of practice, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition.”\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{29} Avishai Margalit, \textit{The Ethics of Memory}, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 122.

The Kfar Etzion fallen defenders memories\(^{34}\) represent an “invented tradition” in which a locality memory rises to a national myth. In mentioning the Kfar Etzion myth at this stage of our discussion we do not intend introduce a comparative scale between Israeli and Palestinian memory narrations; rather, the purpose in citing this case focuses on space-territory meanings and implications deployed in the outcomes of the 1967 war. The Kfar Etzion myth, in relation to the entanglements of loss and claims of return, reveals meaningful explanations of the “implicate relations”, and the socio-spatial intricacies of conflict intractability. We might say that this myth represents a hinge between the state-building Zionist narrative and the Neo-Zionism. The rhetoric of loss and the right to return to the land of fathers is not simply a locality remembrance or a war-heroes memory. The discourse and the following political actions have transformed the myth into a driving force for the national strategy of “creating facts on the ground.”\(^{35}\) The return to Kfar Etzion transcends the resettlement in the symbolic locality. The settlement project foresees expansion into the whole West Bank, through ground action and symbolic achievements to improve the sacred belonging to the Holy land, like renaming the West Bank as Samaria and Judea. Thus, the orphans of Kfar Etzion pioneered the settlement process, challenging “themes, both cultural and religious, that have broad resonance within Israel.”\(^{36}\)

The kibbutzim orphans played a relevant role in the public sphere of the newborn State, being at the core of social practices relating to dispossession, expulsion, loss and the right to be back in the sacred land. Remembering is a way to fulfil and legitimise the resettlement in the Holy land. What is relevant in terms of our scrutiny of space as a temporal-spatial tool to elaborate national narrative is the pivotal role played by the orphans in the rise of new meanings related to space. The Kfar Etzion orphans and, later, the Gush Emunim, seized the opportunity to appropriate and renew the original pioneering ethos by acting out an aggressive display of settlement planning and fulfilling the messianic dream. What is relevant in terms of political and religious contamination discourse is that the settlement policies are mainstream Zionism, in the sense underpin by Kimmerling, “when the frontier was reopened to Jewish settlement, the settlers inherited the role of the pioneer, and Gush Emunim was the entire Zionism: nationalist, destructive, and

\(^{34}\) On 12th and 13th May 1948 the kibbutzim of the 4 religious kibbutz (Kfar Etzion built in 1943, Maasout Yitzchak built in 1945, Ein Tzurim built in 1946 and Revadim built in 1947) fought against the Arab Legion. 163 adults and 50 children lived in the 4 kibbutz located half way between the holy cities of Hebron and Jerusalem. Shortly before the battle the women and children were evacuated to Jerusalem.

\(^{35}\) Ram, Israeli Nationalism. Social and the Politics of Knowledge, 36.

ethnocentric, completely ignoring the rights of another community settled in the same land.”

Let’s me summarize some key questions. The extraordinary chronology of the Kfar Etzion battle and the State declaration made it a perfect myth of origin for the new nation; an ideal narrative setting for the memory of the 1948 war to preserve and celebrate heroism and martyrdom. The orphans of the fallen combatants channelled the epic veterans memory, their infancy was committed to celebrating the lost land, forming a tight link between the celebration of loss and the desire for future redemption. Between 1948 and 1967, they were the pioneers of a memory policy, playing a public role in commemorative events in order to build up a common secular past of the Zionist State and a secular myth of return. Also, a memory community was created where the orphans of Kfar Etzion were in charge of keeping the memories alive through various media, retelling the constitutive narration of the fallen fathers and reaffirming the belonging to historical identity. They embody the symbolic meaning of sabra sacrifices (the Etzion Bloc lacked water and had poor soil) and their claims and wishes to be re-established in the area. The Six Day War outcomes make the dream a tangible reality. The orphans driving force come from twenty years of crafted symbolism; Kfar Etzion resettlement come three months after the end of the war. They pressured the Government to put an end to the orphans’ exile. “The Labour movement adopted the Etzion Bloc and transformed it into one of those “security settlements” that, unlike “political settlements”, were embraced by the consensus and profited from the generous public funding that derived from its status.”

The orphans’ wish to restore the former glory came to reality; the settlement was rebuilt on the old kibbutz ruins. Being back at the four kibbutzim locations meant for the orphans of Kfar Etzion, reunifying the Zionist narrative time-space; the guardians of the Zionist memory were back home, in the land of their fathers, and the original secular myth of return promptly turned to redemption discourse. The myth of return slipped into religious contamination and opened up to the meta-narrative of the messianic return to Zion. A new epic began. They opened a new period of Neo-Zionism, grounded in religious

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38 On May 14th 1948, during the State of Israel declaration, Ben Gurion commemorated the fallen fighters: “the people of Jerusalem owe a debt of thanks ….first of all to those who fell at Kfar Etzion. Their sacrifice saved Jerusalem more than the entire war effort”. In David Ohana, “Kfar Etzion: The Community of Memory and the Myth of Return”, Israel Studies 7/2 (2002): 145-174, 148.
fundamentalism, to sanctify the land of Israel and raise “sharpening divisions between the religious and secular segments of Israeli society.” Hanan Porat, the orphans’ leader who had easily succeeded in the resettlement strategy, facilitated the Rabbi Levenger action in Hebron to open the doors to religious settlement based on the biblical claim of Eretz Yisrael.

Transforming the Loss into a Living Locality

People with no land have not honour
(Palestinian proverb)

The 1948 war is for Palestinians the Al-Nakba, or the catastrophe that brought about exile and the loss of the homeland. It is the beginning of their long journey into the imagined or dreamt land, the focal point of their national identity and collective memory. The Al-Nakba is a historical marker that defines the before and the after of the tragedy, “a remembrance of the exodus also fluctuates between the difficulty of representing the event oneself, and the exemplarity of one’s experience.” For Palestinian historiography, it represents: “(the) loss of the homeland, the disintegration of a society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of a nasty process of cultural destruction.”

Al-Nakba is a memory framework, the master narration that frames the interrupted nation-building process, ruling class dissolution and the disintegration of urban life. According to Palestinian historians, the missing process of crafting modern national identity was caused by the 1948 war. Of this original nationalism, so radically quashed, there survived a coexistence of different loyalties that variously have contributed to form contemporary

43 The Shaping of Israeli Identity, Myth, Memory and Trauma, eds. Robert Wistrich and David Ohana, (London: Frank Cass, 1995), XI.
44 Israeli settlers number 311,431 located in the West Bank and 190,425 in East Jerusalem (B’Tselem, 2011). Manookin and Eiran estimate that the settlers are made up of three groups: a quarter are religious nationalists whereas half of the total move to the settlement to improve the quality of life, motivated by generous government subsidies; the third group is made of ultra-orthodox Jews.
45 The extent of the Palestinian exodus following the defeat in 1948 is still an object of discussion among historians. It is estimated that the Palestinians under British Protectorate numbered about 1,300,000 inhabitants. According to Arab sources, the population evacuated had been roughly between 700,000 and a million. For Israelis, it had totalled 520,000 persons. The British put the figure at between 600,000 and 760,000 (Kimmerling and Midgal, Palestinians: the making of a people, 2002, 185).
Palestinian identity.\textsuperscript{48} The uprooting from the homeland became the memory narration developing a collective imagination. In Palestinian Diaspora, national identity is a melting pot of complex social stratifications: refugees with international status as political refugees; minorities still living in Israel known as Arab-Israelis and citizens of Israel but, de facto, socially and politically alienated; the Palestinians who stayed in the West Bank under Jordanian law who were referred to as “the Jordanians”, and those who stayed in the Gaza Strip under Egyptian law. For all of these “new identities” the lost land carries a rhetorical and unifying function, framing public and private discourses and shaping the refugees’ new identity.

According to Picaudou, Palestinian reactions to Israeli counter-memory took a different path, following the emerging oral history paradigm. The pioneering work of Thompson in oral history shows different ways to tell the history. Oral history represents for Palestinian historians a way to bypass the absence of an archive, a challenge “for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry (...) it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.”\textsuperscript{49} Since the end of 1970, Thompson’s work influenced the first research on the Palestinian Diaspora refugees. A decade later oral history contributed to launch a challenging project – the re-making of inventories in towns and villages destroyed in 1948. Rochelle Davis collected, in ten years of field work, 120 village memorial books, a mnemonic archive of social history that records the “evidence that these villages existed and were more than just a place once on the map.”\textsuperscript{50}

In the Palestinian Diaspora individual memories and oral history are crucially involved in the remembering process. Every patriarch and matriarch kept the keys to their lost home and bear witness to the exodus story from Palestine. A mnemonic socialization is set up and the humula story is fed by the memory of concrete things\textsuperscript{51} (the key) to strengthen the sense of belonging. The Al-Nakba generation tells the exodus to the youngest, they celebrate the lost land in order to strengthen the firm determination to return: “we teach them that Palestine exists, and we have to go back there. Even if this will happen in thousand years, we will carry on and on, generation after generation.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{48} Nassar Issam, “Reflections on Writing the History of Palestinian Identity”, 28.
\textsuperscript{50} Rochelle Davis, \textit{Palestinian Village Histories, Geography of the displaced}, (Stanford: Standford University Press, 2010), XVII.
\textsuperscript{51} Assmann, \textit{Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen}, XVI.
\textsuperscript{52} Testimony by an old Palestinian man in the documentary \textit{Identity} (2003), by E.Awad, A.Pizzalunga, A.Zimbelli, recorded in the refugee camps of Sabra, Chatila, Beddowi, Jerash, Beq’a, Tiro.
The loss and the exile are threats weaving the Palestinians’ collective identity narration. The individual oral stories are assembled in a chorus of scattered voices; from the refugee camps dispersed in the Middle East to the Diaspora around the world, they tell the collective trauma of the lost homeland. Indeed, we may remark that the Israelis’ collective memory is structured within the coherent frame of Zionism, while the Palestinian memory is a joint effort of a regressive reconstruction of fragmented voices. The trauma of the loss is “the vacuum” that carries with it different meanings. It is a collective memory constructed along a painful and contradictory path. For the generation who experienced the 1948 war, the relationship between memory and oblivion became the laboratory for making the collective subject; “the people of Palestine”. Remembering the loss creates a community of experience that inspires the dream and the ambition of return. The nostalgia for the lost homeland is the lifeblood to cope with harsh everyday life in the refugee camps. Autobiographical and historical memories are built upon different layers in an endless dialogue of denials, repression, exaltation and oblivion; a relentless action that moves forward and backward in which biographical memory feeds the history of a people.

It took fifty years from the events of Al-Nakba to bring together all the individual stories and frame them in a common public awareness. Single experience, publicly remembered, is transformed into historical memory “extend[ing] the scope of these memories by incorporating information about the world that goes beyond one’s own experience.”

In the first official celebration, private memories became collective public memory. A stream of voices coursed into the pages of the daily newspaper al-Ayyam: “as if an entire generation had started to remember crucial events of its life and wanted to testify them openly in public.” It is a patchwork of autobiographical remembrance and historical accounts in which the burden of traumatic recollections and the inter-subjective experience produced a dissonant chorus composed of myriad voices: a collective outpouring that narrated the story of a nation.

Photography clearly plays a primary role in the villages’ memories. Photos compensate the loss, a memory delay in time and space. Memory needs images to provide focus for the evidence of existence, to demonstrate a past society symbolically represented by the home key. Over time, the key embodies their state of mind, which unveils a complexity of meanings: sense of loss, the existence of an organized social life in the village, the dream of return, and the desire for a normal life.

Dubravka Ugrešić, referencing the former Yugoslavia conflict, says “refugees are divided in two categories: those with photos and

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53 Halbwachs, Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire.
56 Sa’di, “Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakba as a Component of Palestinian Identity,” 186.
those with none."\textsuperscript{57} For all refugees around the world, photos provide a direct link to the past, an anchor to hang on to, a tangible remembrance to reflect the image of the self in time and space. Even when oblivion is imposed on memory, photography testifies that the past cannot be overwhelmed by deception or mystification. Still, it is also a past that re-evokes pain and suffering, fixes cruel images that cannot and do not wish to be remembered. Photographs do not only focus attention on pain, but for the Palestinians, it is photography that records their past in the lost homeland as a collecting of evidence of the existence of places cancelled by the “Judaisation of the land.”\textsuperscript{58}

Photography is what certifies a past and helps to put together the fragments of a national identity scattered in the refugee camps of Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. Photographs bring not only testimony to the existence of villages and places, but record a past society in these places and testify to the destruction of social life. They provide evidence of how there was little social differentiation before Al-Nakba and how public life was dominated by the collective destiny of the Palestinians. Photographs create an emotional and cognitive space, weave pathos and knowledge, engender compassion, evoke pain and strengthen identity and belonging of the “one nation” in exile.

More recently the Nakba myth shows some interesting practises in the use of new media as a performing tool to process memory. The project Palestine Remembered matures in this context, transforming private remembrance into a public memory by making an exhaustive inventory of towns and villages destroyed in 1948. The \textit{All that remains}, the first historical attempt by a Palestinian scholar to document the destroyed Palestinian villages, has inspired the project.\textsuperscript{59} The web site Palestine Remembered, a virtual home built for friendly use, creates an environment that exhibits memory by using oral history, images, photographs, films and documentaries, with different degrees of reading complexity. This attempt to recreate a virtual nation through the use of new media represents a cyber-application of what Nassar, referring to Al-Nakba, has defined as the acceleration of the Palestinian character: “something much more complex than an old community and much more symbolic than a society (...) the Al-Nakba is not the end of an era but the beginning of a radical rhetoric turn.”\textsuperscript{60}

The Palestine Remembered project has collected the Al-Nakba survivors’ memoirs, from 2003 to 2010, recording 530 interviews (2,531 hours of recording) from 291 different villages. The web site is designed as an interactive tool not only to stage the stories but also to allow virtual village tours with geographical-reference maps enriched by in-depth statistics (historical and contemporary), documents and photographs. It encourages visitors to be active by collecting information concerning the villages not yet registered and to update the website. The forgotten Palestine has come alive

\textsuperscript{57} Ugrešič Dubravka, \textit{Il museo della resa incondizionata}, (Milano: Bompiani, 2002), 21.
\textsuperscript{58} Benvenisti, \textit{Sacred landscape}, 200.
\textsuperscript{59} Walid Khalidi, \textit{All that remains},(Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).
\textsuperscript{60} Nassar Issam, “Reflections on Writing the History of Palestinian Identity,” 165.
again, attesting to the existence of ruined villages, enabling the dispersed community to be virtually reunified and to overcome the Israeli ban on visiting the ruins. The web site shows a private memory in a public frame, in which the “neutrality” of the documents sometimes follows a blurred narrative frame. New technologies enable the young and the old alike to make virtual journeys into the lost land.\textsuperscript{61} Electronic memorial sites of Al-Nakba with their rich photographic documentation restore a picture of physical unity. For a dispersed nation, the virtual reality of place may be a surrogate of identity.

**The Imaginative Geography: Cancelling, Renaming and Remembering the “topòs”**

“...I discovered that the earth was fragile, and the sea light; I discovered that language and metaphor are not enough to provide a place for the place. The geographical part of History is stronger than the historical part of geography. Unable to find my place on earth, I tried to find it in History. And History cannot be reduce to a compensation for a lost geography”. (Mahmoud Darwish)\textsuperscript{62}

The imaginative geography engendered by electronic mnemonics reasserts the “implicate relations” between society and space and between Israelis and Palestinians. The socio-spatial intricacies of the Israeli and Palestine memories are the cornerstone of the intractability of this conflict, and, to use the words of Portugali, are the active player in the conflict. “...[S]patial dialectics were the process thought which Europe Jews were driven into an identity crisis when their (spatial) Ghetto wall disintegrated and thus became conscious of their nationalistic-political identity. And it is this process through which several decades later the Arabs in this country were forced into an identity crisis and became conscious of their Palestinian identity, once the Zionism have defined the boundaries of their future Jews State. It is also the process through which Israelis and Palestinians became engaged in implicate relations.”\textsuperscript{63}

Space is in continuous transformation, devastated by the forces of war or by the action of conflicting groups. Changing space is associated with the transformation of topography, not only to mark the acquisition of land but also to cancel memory and any possible record as a potential source of legitimacy. The practices of cartographic design are at the core of the institutional non-belligerent strategy of land acquisition. Possession of land is seen not only in terms of physical conquest but involves a more complex set of actions that legitimise ownership. The new-born Israeli State had invested huge resources in cartography and correlated sciences. Benvenisti, quoting Harley and Woodward, authors of the History of Cartography, stresses that:

\textsuperscript{61} On the webpage [www.alnakba.org](http://www.alnakba.org) 425 destroyed villages are registered. There is a description of what exists today and what used to be there, with photographic documentation.


\textsuperscript{63} Juval Portugali, *The implicate relations. Society and Space in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, (Dortrecht, Netherlands: Kluver Academic Publisher, 1993), XIII.
“mapmaking was one of the most specialized weapons by which power could be gained, administered, given legitimacy and codified.”

In June 1948, a group of nine academics, cartographers, archaeologists and geographers in the Israel Exploration Society (IES) founded the Committee for the Designation of Place Names in the region of Negev. After ten years’ work, they completed the Jewish map of Israel, generating military, political and symbolic claims to the Jewish people’s legacy. The creation of a map, according to Benvenisti, was extremely significant, no less important than the building streets or the creation of new settlements. The making of the Jewish map engenders a process of Judaisation of the land.

“The mixing of authentic ancient names with synthetic, pseudo-biblical names was done, of course, to provide a basis for our rightful historical claims.” The adoption of place names with theological semantic references is inscribed in the praxis of Zionists’ historical narration. It reconstructs a lineage of continuity and identification with antiquity. For the Jews of the Diaspora, the (biblical) landscape was “the work of mind,” constructed first in their minds and thereafter, following the return to Israel, transferred, adopted and modified according to their own needs and preferences.

Generations of Israelis and Palestinians in Israel have grown up without knowing that the new topography was the outcome of a reconstruction process.

Nationalistic narratives often refer to the “motherland” as a metaphor for the genealogical legacy to the homeland. Very often, women are viewed as the natural trustees for collective memory. Palestinian collective memory policies stress women’s role in creating memory bonds. The names of the destroyed villages are preserved by naming newly-born females with the village name. The names of the places enter into family genealogy, recreating indivisible connections between generations so that the lost land represents an ideal renaissance of the motherland. “Place possesses history and narrative. When place is gone, it is recovered in two ways: naming the daughter and telling a story.” Hence, little girls are at the same time narrative and embodiment of collective history, regenerating the force of the buanula, or village solidarity. “The name of the original village replaced the name of the buanula, and the relationship among persons who belonged to the same original village was

64 Benvenisti, Sacred landscape, 13.
65 The declared aim of IES that acted under the aegis of the Royal Geographical Society, was “to develop and to advance the study of the Land, its history, and pre-history, accentuating the settlement aspect and the socio-historical connection between the people of Israel and Eretz Israel” (Ibid.,12).
66 The classification made by Nurit Kliot marks 770 settlements in the area within the borders before June 1967 of which 350 have biblical names. Ibid., 34.
67 Ibid., 20.
68 Ibid., 7.
similar to that of humula solidarity. Humula did not disappear or weaken, but instead some of its functions were transferred to the wider kinship structure based on locality.\footnote{Ibid., 114.}

**Terra Incognita, the Implicate Relations**

The intricacies of Israeli and Palestinian relations create, albeit with many distinctions in terms of power, use of force and geopolitical conflict enlargement, a process of remembrance useful to keep their identity alive as peoples. Memory narrations of Israelis and Palestinians are targeted on events built in the national constituency; they are expressed through cultural media in their most classical forms: poetry, literature, photography, documentaries and public discourse. The idea of otherness, the Palestinian or the Israeli, are always explicitly absent, but pervasively present in a kind of mute narration, projected, perceived and imagined, as a white patch, that permeates every story. The “other” is, in this context, the exact antithesis of a national self, strictly defined. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, otherness raises not only problems of identity, but also of “history and legitimacy.”\footnote{Eds. Pappé and Hilal, *Across the wall: narratives of Israeli-Palestinian history*, 14.}

Both, Israelis and Palestinians, following different paths and historical times, were/are engaged in keeping the land alive. If the “next year in Jerusalem” is a liturgical memory revoked every year around the Jews Seder table all around the world, the Palestinian oral remembering rises as a secular symbolism. Thus, oral memory is a community of memory that processes images, voices, and data to conceptualize a new frame of memory. For a nation with mobile borders, the virtual destroyed Palestine became an “espace de représentation, c’est à dire l’espace vécu à travers les images et les symboles (…) C’est l’espace dominé, donc subi, qui tente de modifier et d’approprier l’imagination.”\footnote{Henri Levebvre, *La production de l’espace*, (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1981), 49.}

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