

Yifat Gutman, *Memory Activism. Reimagining the Past for the Future of Israel-Palestine*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017), pp. 186.

by Tamar Katriel

Yifat Gutman’s book, which identifies “memory activism” as a distinctive brand of non-state sponsored memory work that challenges mainstream Israeli memory culture, is a major contribution to the study of collective memory in Israel. It introduces marginalized voices into the more familiar landscape of memory projects sponsored by the state and explores their relationship with mainstream memory culture. The book also makes a significant contribution to the study of activism in Israel (and elsewhere) by demarcating the field of memory as a cultural arena in which ideological struggles are enacted and negotiated through locally inflected cultural forms that promote particular counter-memories.

The case that Gutman has chosen to focus on in studying memory activism is indeed the most politically charged example of a collective memory struggle in Israel today – the memory of the events of 1948. Israeli Jews remember these events as the War of Independence with its national and military triumphs; for Palestinians they mark the Nakba, the catastrophe, i.e., the flight and expulsion of some 750,000 Palestinians from the Israeli State, the decimation of Palestinian society, and the creation of what is known as “the refugee problem” that is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to this day. While the Jewish Israeli version of the events of 1948 has become enshrined in state-sponsored commemorations, school curricula and museum displays, the memory of the Nakba has been deliberately evaded in mainstream Israeli-Jewish memory as well as in school curricula designed for Palestinian citizens of Israel. The term “Nakba,” which was unfamiliar to most Israeli Jews until the 2000s, became a part of the lingua franca in Israel following concerted efforts by the Jewish establishment to battle the Palestinian narrative by outlawing its commemoration through legislation that is commonly referred to as “the Nakba law.” This was passed in 2011 after a long process of negotiated revisions extensively covered by the media.

As Gutman’s book amply illustrates, memory activist groups, whose work is largely done “under the radar,” have contributed in significant ways to the

production of oppositional knowledge¹ in an attempt to incorporate the memory of the Nakba into both Palestinian and Jewish-Israeli society. The book follows the logic and practice of three such activist initiatives: the first, *Zochrot* [Remember, feminine plural inflection], addresses Jewish audiences (to advance awareness of the Nakba in Hebrew, as per the organization's slogan); the second, *Autobiography of a City*, addresses both Palestinians and Jews who are involved in Nakba-connected issues, such as in its aftermath in the history of Jaffa; and the third is the youth movement *Baladna* that addresses Palestinian youth.

The study was conducted through a close ethnographic reading of fieldwork materials that focused on these groups' practices and rhetoric. It involved in situ observations, an analysis of public documents, and performances and interviews with activists. The analysis focuses on the ways in which these various groups sought to familiarize their target audiences with the Nakba as a story of unrecognized and unrequited displacement, suffering, and loss. It also contextualizes these groups' activist work by addressing the public debates surrounding the establishment of the Nakba law that called to withdraw public support from any organization commemorating the Nakba, such as schools and cultural institutions. Gutman argues that in the hostile public environment of an ongoing conflict, the commemoration of the Nakba as a counter-memory that produces oppositional knowledge in the hope of leading to recognition and to the assumption of responsibility has not worked as it has in the case of post-conflict model of Truth and Reconciliation committees in other places. The availability of knowledge about the Nakba has not led to recognition; it has given rise to defensive measures of de-legitimization in both social and legal terms despite the activist groups' persuasive efforts, to the delineation and analysis of which the bulk of the book is dedicated. The case of Nakba memory in Israel thus calls for a further interrogation of this widespread model of social reconciliation processes.

The first group Gutman discusses, *Zochrot*, epitomizes two major points the book elaborates: 1) the border-crossing nature of memory activism in the Israeli context – the fact that at one of the highest points of the conflict, the early 2000s (known as “the Second Intifada”), when buses were exploding in Israeli cities and Israel reconquered cities of the West Bank, the organization designed to promote the memory of the Nakba was founded by Israeli Jews; 2) the use these activists made

¹ Patrick G. Coy, Lynne M. Woehrlé, Gregory M. Maney, “A Typology of Oppositional Knowledge: Democracy and the U.S. Peace Movement,” *Sociological Research Online* 13/4 (2008), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/13/4/3.html> (accessed July 23, 2018).

of mnemonic practices adapted from mainstream Israeli culture as persuasive tools – guided tours and the archive of testimonies.

The starting point for Israeli Jews' engagement with the commemoration of the Palestinian Nakba is an act of recognition – recognizing the existence and validity of an alternative narrative; the public promotion of this narrative by Jews is an act of defiance *vis-à-vis* mainstream Israeli society as this border-crossing is generally interpreted as a turning away from the Israeli Jewish national narrative to the point of questioning the legitimacy of the Israeli state. *Zochrot*'s project seeks to unsettle this defensive stance, validating the Palestinian narrative by providing factual accounts of Palestinian life in pre-'48 Palestine and the events of '48 and its aftermath. The alternative these accounts present is not only a matter of giving voice to Palestinian Nakba stories, but also a matter of insisting on their relevance to Israeli Jews and on the points in which the Israeli and Palestinian narratives intertwine and may even collapse into one another.

This border crossing, which Jewish activists have embraced in collaboration with Palestinians, is not easy for Jewish audiences who have grown up with the official version of the state's founding, in which the Palestinian displacement is consistently ignored. Given the long-standing tradition of touring the Land of Israel as a Zionist practice, or “conquering the land with one's feet,” as the Hebrew turn of phrase goes,² the use of tours to sites of destroyed Palestinian villages as a mnemonic practice makes good sense. By appropriating the tour as a cultural form, Jewish Israelis get a glimpse of the vanished reality of Palestinian villages through direct contact with the remnants, much as they do in visiting archeological sites. They also get a chance to experience their own and the Palestinians' shared attachment to the land while being intimately exposed to the nostalgic stories and deep feelings of embodied presence exuded by the (typically elderly) Palestinian witnesses' accounts that accompany the tour groups in sites the Palestinians once called home. This type of experiential learning, which is so much part of Zionist education, is harnessed in service of an empathetic reading of Palestinian memory. It encapsulates both a refusal to negate the other's memory and an opening for the recognition that the Palestinian and Jewish Israeli past are indeed intertwined in ways that recognize the victim-victimizer binary and the responsibility it entails for the dark side of history, as well as in ways that unravel

² Tamar Katriel, “Touring the Land: Trips and Hiking as Secular Pilgrimages in Israeli Culture,” *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 1-2/17 (1995): 6-13.

it in stories of a shared past that speaks to the possibility of a place-centered shared memory.³

The testimonial component of this activism is central to establishing the validity of the Palestinian narrative by providing a great deal of factual information included in the tour guiding, in photography exhibitions, in documentary films, in curricular materials developed for the teaching of the Nakba to school-age students, in detailed mappings of destroyed villages, as well as in richly documented booklets about individual villages that are given out to tour participants on site. As Gutman stresses, all these make up a dynamic evidentiary edifice that is made available to the public through tours, public events, and lectures and online. It draws on the testimonial culture that flourishes in Israel, mainly (but not only) as associated with the memory of the Holocaust. This move of cultural appropriation is a creative one, adapting the well-entrenched strategies of touring and witnessing and giving them new forms – e.g., the embedded texture of on-site witnessing, or putting up signs with the former Arabic names of destroyed villages or city streets along the tour route and thereby re-inscribing the landscape with its forgotten past, a momentary symbolic gesture that usually culminates in the removal of these signs by opponents within minutes or hours.

The second mnemonic initiative, *Autobiography of the City*, was founded in 2000 by a group of Jewish Israeli and Palestinian artists to address the memories of residents of the so-called “mixed” Jewish-Arab city of Jaffa of life before and during the war in 1948, following which the city space and the composition of the population dramatically changed. Gutman describes this project as “a memory-activism group that uses visual, creative, and technological knowledge for the production of high-quality video-recorded testimonies and a smartly accessible online archive” (p. 45). The virtual archive of testimonies thus constructed is informed by survivor testimonial practices that characterize contemporary, globalized cultures of memory and by traditional Palestinian storytelling practices. Though made available to non-Palestinian audiences as well, and forming the basis of a unique digital archive that tells stories unavailable elsewhere, the hybrid, “glocalized” idiom of narration serves primarily the goal of building a local Palestinian community of memory in Jaffa. In sensitively analyzing the processes through which this counter-archive is constructed, Gutman brings out its dual

³ Marcelo Svirsky and Ronnen Ben-Arie, *From Shared Life to Co-Resistance in Historic Palestine*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

commitment: to the hegemonic practice of testimony and to its radical manipulation that draws on the authority of the witness.

The third group whose memory work Gutman addresses attends to practices and debates within Palestinian society regarding the question of who will shape the memory of the Nakba and of Palestinian identity. Gutman addresses this internal mnemonic struggle by focusing on the story of *Baladna* [Our Homeland, in Arabic], an all-Palestinian youth association, and the ways in which it adapts Zionist commemorative practices. Founded in 1999 and officially registered two years later, this group's goal is to empower Palestinian youth and prepare them for leadership positions in their communities. Learning about their own history, which is not taught in Palestinian formal education programs in Israel, is considered to be the best way of enhancing Palestinians' communal identity. The story of the Nakba is clearly central to this history and to Palestinian collective identity. It is recounted during tours to the sites of destroyed villages, where the young visitors listen to their elders' testimonies of life before and during the war of 1948. In this case, the appropriation of the hegemonic cultural forms of touring and giving testimony is not a matter of embodied border crossing as it is in the case of *Zochrot*, as discussed earlier, but a matter of claiming voice and identity as a form of cultural empowerment in a wider context that is hostile to the story of the Palestinian Nakba. The narrative's suppression in public discourse and absence from formal schooling make the expressive and mnemonic possibilities created within informal, locally sponsored educational settings all the more important.

Gutman's nuanced ethnographic account of each of these case studies is rich with insights about the dynamics of activists' mnemonic interventions, taking into consideration not only the identities of the producers of activist messages but also of their intended and actual receivers. The author moves elegantly from detailed discussions of observed pedagogical interactions to macro-level considerations of the larger socio-cultural context in which they are embedded, including the legal and social struggles involved. She raises significant questions about the role of knowledge in processes of national reconciliation, using the case of Nakba memory in Israeli society as a way to open up discussion about the symbolic forms through which memory is shaped and their persuasive potential; the tension-filled relations between culture and politics; and the politics of legitimacy in working both within and beyond one's cultural borderlines. Memory activism, its practices, platforms and tenuous accomplishments, emerge from the pages of this innovative book as a crucial field of transformative social and political action, broadening our view of Israeli collective memory well beyond its usual scope.

Tamar Katriel

While Gutman is well aware of the limitations of the struggle she documents and analyzes, her focus on memory activism nevertheless engages a politics of hope, which is made explicit in a slogan currently circulated by another activist project of the many that dot the Israeli landscape (*Omdim B'yahad* [Standing Together]): “where there’s struggle there’s hope.”

Tamar Katriel, University of Haifa

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