

# **Artists Under Occupation: Collective Memory & the Performing Arts in Palestine, 1948-2011**

By

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## **Abstract**

This project explores the relationship between art, politics and collective memory as represented in Palestinian performing arts. By looking at the historical trajectory of art movements in Palestine and identifying key moments of change in artistic style and trends, I hope to support the argument that Palestinian art is inherently political and holds political functions in its society. Furthermore, while I initially anticipated discovering artists reproducing motifs of resistance as found in the early works of painters as a means of participating in salvage ethnography, my findings actually show a growing enthusiasm for new works that reappropriate older narratives and breathe new life into older aesthetic representations.

The thesis will also explore issues of identity and pinpoint ways in which the Palestinian diaspora are participating in art production and efforts to resist the occupation through cultural means. In the final part of the thesis, I will present findings from my interviews with several performing artists who are living in the West Bank as well as in the diaspora.

## Acknowledgements

There are many individuals which helped in the creation of this thesis. First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Nadia Al-Bagdadi and second reader Professor Tolga Esmer for offering their assistance throughout the writing and researching process. Due to my involvement in both the arts and activism concerning Palestine, it was particularly meaningful for me to have two readers who were able to both encourage my passion while simultaneously reminding me to take distance and approach the work from a scholarly, less journalistic approach. I hope I have proven to pick up some of those skills along the way.

My interviewees, most of which I have included in the final chapter of this research, have been of great inspiration and truly wonderful people to share time with. Of particular help was spoken word artist, Remi Kanazi, with his helpfulness in putting me in touch with new artists in the field. Additionally, I would like to thank Ruanne Abu-Rahme, Edward Muallem, Bayan Shabib and Farah Saleh for the time that they took out to have conversations with me and show me their art. Similarly, I have a deep appreciation for the student actors at the Jenin Freedom Theatre who, despite the unfortunate circumstances of their theatre being raided by Israeli forces over the summer, still kept the door open for me to interact and observe their rehearsals.

I would like to show my gratitude to my emotional support system here in Budapest as well as my family back home, all of whom have been the best cheerleaders during my difficult sicknesses in the past two years.

Finally, this project has been inspired by the talent and strength born out of the Palestinian struggle. I dedicate this work to my friends and all of the people living under Israeli apartheid and in exile and dream with you for a free and just end to the occupation.

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## Introduction

”انت بتعرف انهم بمنصب شهاد  
بحكو الماضي وتنبوا حاضر أي بلاد  
قد ما حكيت قد ما أحكي, فش كلام يغطي بس  
في كلام يربي وينمي انت بس أروي  
في, شوف انه قوه والقوه بتقوي  
فيك و أن رويته مصيره يسقيك  
مثل للقوه) العدو من أمامكم  
تخيخوا أسياكم والبحر من ورائكم فلا  
فأين أشعاركم وأين مجادلتكم  
فأنتم تسكتون وتخدمون أحلامكم“

“You know, lyrics are like a witness  
They witnessed the past and forecast the future  
As much as I said or say, I can’t describe them  
But there is a way to find the description, and that’s through them  
Quench the thirst of the pages with them  
So in the future, it’ll quench your thirst  
Keep feeding them, as soon as they grow up  
They’ll give you strength  
"Example for the strength?"  
"The enemy is before you, the sea is behind you  
So don’t you dare disappoint our ancestors  
Where are our deep poems?! Where are our strong statements?!  
From generation to generation we kill our dreams"

Hip-Hop Group DAM, Lyrics from “Kalimat” (Words)<sup>1</sup>

One need not look past the political messaging of artwork produced in Palestine to see the ways in which the Israeli confiscation of land in 1948 and continued occupation has permeated the political, social and cultural lives of Palestinians in the world over: those living within the walls of the West Bank, others under siege in the Gaza Strip, the minority of Palestinians who live in the borders of 1948 Palestine, presently known as Israel, and those Palestinians who are exiled refugees living in various parts of the world.

<sup>1</sup> DAM lyrics, “Lyrics translated (Kalimat-Words),” <http://www.damrap.com/lyrics/english/ihda2/Kalimat.html> (Accessed May 17, 2012).

Histories of conflict areas, trauma ridden societies and politically unstable regions have often addressed collective memories (e.g. Post Soviet and Holocaust studies) in forming their cultural identities. The case of Palestine is no different. Younger generations have grown up with the narratives of their country's painful past and as such are encouraged to hold onto these stories in part of keeping remembrance and salvaging their history from erasure. The case of Palestine, however, is not that of a post conflict society; its youth are evermore experiencing many of the life threatening circumstances of their family's past as they continue to live under conditions of occupation, exile and refugee status.

The ways that people experience trauma as rooted in a specific event, although not in their direct experience, will be central to this research and particularly how it connects to art production. Experiences are mediated through various forms of representation (e.g. newspapers, radios and television) and exhibit the nature of collective memory and the special and temporal distance between an event and its experience.<sup>2</sup> Specific to the context of Palestine, the artist has played a pivotal role in creating such representations that tie members of society to a crucial moment in their nation's history—*Al-Nakba*. Briefly, the pivotal event with which the bulk of this thesis relates to, *Al-Nakba*, refers to the dispossession of Palestinians from their homes and villages and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

This research's novelty is found in the way that it addresses the Palestinian community and its artists who did not experience *Al-Nakba*, or even Palestine at all (diasporic Palestinians), yet continue to display strong symbols of displacement in their art, similar to the earlier artists from 1948-1967. Working with a variety of performance artists in the disciplines of poetry, drama and dance, I conducted interviews with the aim to learn more about the

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<sup>2</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Cultural trauma* (Yale University, 2001), 74.

conceptual inspirations of their work and the ways in which their pieces relate to and represent, through common motifs, the narratives shared with them about the past and specifically Al Nakba; I also sought to learn more about the way that their pieces relate to each other as Palestinians and the varied lived experiences of Palestinians in and outside of Palestine. Common themes that came out of nearly every interview were those of trauma, memories of Al Nakba, critiques of the occupation and the everyday life challenges of being Palestinian and Palestinian artists under occupation.

It is my hope that exploring the history, evolution and implications of resistance art in the Palestinian context will prove useful in making connections in broader studies of art as an interventionist action in other revolutionary struggles (e.g. Palestinian liberation art and Mexican mural art). The first task in understanding the state of liberation art in Palestine would, which I will undertake in Chapter One, is to identify significant trends during key moments in the Palestinian resistance movement from 1948 to present. In doing so, it would be helpful to investigate the periods of change that artists, specifically painters and multimedia artists, experienced in their styles and themes as they lived through Al Nakba and the Intifida(s). Following both the linear progression and reflexive re-appropriation of symbols and themes in the historical trajectory of Palestinian art will assist in identifying the formation of a fourth phase in the movement in the contemporary context which will also be explored in this chapter.

In Chapter Two, I will explore the notions of post memory and autobiographical memory as potential models in which to study the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma that exists in Palestinian youth and adults. By observing memory as mediated by art we can further explore the function of art production for social mobilization as highlighted in Chapter One.



Furthermore, the role and relationship between the Palestinian diaspora and those living in the Occupied Territories will be discussed.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I will present the findings of my interviews which were conducted with current artists residing in the West Bank and in the Diaspora, where I reflect on their works and visions. Through the use of visual material, biographies, and interviews, I will highlight the aforementioned themes of trauma, Al Nakba, occupation and everyday life as it is expressed in these contemporary projects which I present.

A note about what this research does not cover is warranted in the preface. As Palestinian art incorporates my genres, key figures and diversity depending on the region of production, it would be overambitious to attempt a comprehensive text on Palestinian art. Instead, I have chosen to highlight motifs conceived from the earlier stages of liberation art with emphasis on style and icons. Later I look at the use of popular motifs as applied in the performing arts, where I spend the majority of my fieldwork investigating. As mentioned above, the newness of the performing artists and projects that I highlight bring novelty to this field of research.

### **Background**

The history of Palestine and conditions of occupation warrant a dissertation of its own and thus will not be comprehensively discussed in this background section. Instead, the pivotal moment which serves as the backdrop for transgenerational trauma in Palestinian society and thus central to my thesis should be understood. While 1948 is considered to be the year of independence for most Israelis, it is remembered as Al Nakba, or *the catastrophe*, for Palestinians. After the Arab- Israeli war of 1948, the British Mandate of Palestine had been divided into three parts and nearly eighty- percent of the native Palestinian population had left their homes, by fleeing or being expelled. Around 150,000 Palestinians remained in the new

state, while approximately twenty-five percent were displaced from their homes and villages and became internally displaced persons. The Arabs that remained fell drastically to one-sixth of the population and assumed their status as national, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities.<sup>3</sup> Most Arabs in Israel were granted Israeli citizenship and able to vote for the Israeli Knesset but they were still subject to martial law, the requirement of travel permits, administrative detentions and expulsions. It wasn't until 1966 that many of these discriminatory laws were dismantled by the government and efforts were made to secure the equal treatment of the Arab minority.<sup>4</sup>

The Six Day War is often seen as the point of a major shift within the Arab Israeli population. After Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and Jerusalem, Arab citizens started to be in touch with Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Through this interaction and what is considered to be the rise of Palestinian nationalism, there was an increase in political activism among the Palestinian community. A good example of this solidarity seen amongst Palestinians was during the First Intifada (1987-1993) when Arab citizens helped those in the occupied territories with aid and the participating in strikes in support of the Palestinians. As Jacob Landau discusses in his book *The Arab Minority in Israel*, “While the Jewish majority perceives Israel as a Jewish state, the Arab minority relates to the large Arab masses beyond the borders, whose governments continue to consider themselves at war with the Jewish state.”<sup>5</sup> Prior to 1967, Palestinian politics was part of pan-Arab politics and played a central role in the consciousness of all Arabs. So Palestinians can be said to have affiliated more with pan-Arab parties and regimes during the period between 1948 and 1967.

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<sup>3</sup> Landau, Jacob M. (1993). *The Arab minority in Israel, 1967-1991: political aspects*. Clarendon Publishing. p.6. ISBN 0198277121. Google Book Search. Retrieved on April 09, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Landau, Jacob M. (1993). *The Arab minority in Israel, 1967-1991: political aspects*. Clarendon Publishing. p.6. ISBN 0198277121. Google Book Search. Retrieved on April 09, 2011.

As Landau explains, the Six Day War aggravated this situation and became a time during which Arab citizens had to decide whether to support their people or their state. In the years following 1967, the leadership of the Palestinian movement started to emphasize Palestinians' priorities in the conflict with Israel, which then resulted in a new ideology that looked more like Palestinian nationalism than Arabism. As a result, the widely embraced notion of pan-Arabism lost its appeal to more localized Palestinian nationalism.

The experiences of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza also differ as the system under which they live have been likened to that of South African Apartheid.<sup>6</sup> As artist Sama Alshaibi discusses in her article “Memory Work in Palestine”, Israel has constructed over 200 settlements (for approximately 400,000 settlers) in the West Bank 1967 borders. Having created illegal areas-closed military zones, Palestinians have to commute through checkpoints armed with Israeli military in prison like stalls sometimes for hours at a time, simply to get to work or farming land. On the same token, systems of highways that lead to settlements are designed for settlers alone and create barriers between different areas. As a result, roads for Palestinians are restricted and are oftentimes re-routed, increasing travel time by double.

Movement in and out of the Occupied Territories is also dealt with by discriminatory standards as permits for entrance and travel restrict freedom of movement, usually restricting individuals from jobs, schooling and/or visiting family members. Limitations on the import and export of goods, water rations and zoning policies are some of the other injustices that Palestinians face on a daily basis. As Alshaibi describes it, Palestine looks like a piece of

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<sup>6</sup> BBC News, “Tutu Condemns Israeli ‘apartheid’,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/1957644.stm> (accessed May 17 2012)

Swiss-cheese. “Concrete walls segregate Palestinian cities and villages; Palestinians are pushed into ghettoized holes while Israelis eat their cheese, the fertile land between the holes.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Theoretical Framework**

The backbone of this research, as explained in the introduction, relies on the current state of knowledge on collective memory in the case of trauma, specifically as it relates to cultural production and social movements. Thus it will remain imperative throughout this thesis to reference the works of key theorists in the field of memory studies alongside those working with the issue of social mediation of images and contentious politics as it is seen through collective action and social movements. In highlighting these theories, we can begin to form a dialogic relationship between studies of memory, art and politics. Furthermore, these concepts provide grounds for analysis when discussing the contents of the interviews conducted with Palestinian artists, as presented in the subsequent research chapter of this thesis. Following a discussion of my theoretical framework, this chapter will address the use of oral history as my main methodological approach. A discussion of Alessandro Portelli’s work will enter finely here, as I propose testimony as an alternative to hegemonic history writing—the central machine that opposes history from below.

Ahmad Sa’di, political science professor at Ben-Gurion University, and Lila Abu-Lughod, anthropologist and gender researcher at Columbia University, discuss challenges to memory work in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*. They explore how the dispossession of an entire population and shift in identity from native residents to exiles with neither economic nor political power over their lives has shaped their individual and collective

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<sup>7</sup> Sama Alshaibi, “Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora (Personal Essay and Art).” *A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2006), pp.33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137421> (accessed April 20,2012).

identities. Not only does the *Al-Nakba* remain in the memory of these people, but as the authors suggest, *Al-Nakba* remains as the background to their ongoing condition and has thus shaped the Palestinian experience. The authors write, "The special character of Palestinian memory lies in the key experiences of their radical and abrupt displacement from life in the continuing violence and lack of resolution they must endure, and the political nature of the deliberate erasure of their story, which gives birth to the stubborn dissidence of their memory work."<sup>8</sup>

It is scholarship that explores memory work in Palestine such as *Nakba*, which encourages the focus of my current research; it builds upon the foundational texts on **collective memory**, such as those written by Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, while extending these theories to address the dynamics of memory work surrounding Al Nakba and its trajectory from a microhistorical approach.

In applying the Halbwachs' perspective to the case of Palestine, a clarification on the way in which this notion of collective memory will be approached becomes critical. Rather than to look at individual memories as the building blocks of a larger collective memory, Halbwachs argues that memories cannot exist exclusively on their own and are formed by regular engagement with others; thus, memories are necessarily shared memories. His emphasis on individual remembering is often overlooked in the larger body of scholarship which cites collective memory as the explanatory phenomenon in working with case studies of collective consciousness. While there is much basis in doing so, and while shared memories will become central to the discussion of Palestinian Al Nakba remembrance, it is important to acknowledge Halbwachs' particular thoughts on the individual as he states in *The Collective Memory*:

"while the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember. While these remembrances

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmed H Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the claims of memory*, (Columbia University Press, 2007), 1-178. Ibid, 4-5.

are mutually supportive of each other and common to all, individual members still vary in the intensity with which they experience them. I would readily acknowledge that each memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory, that this viewpoint changes as my position changes, that this position itself changes as my relationships to other milieus change. Therefore, it is not surprising that everyone does not draw on the same part of this common interest.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, by acknowledging the individual’s ability to engage critically and constructively with ideas and beliefs that are part of their social group, this research will, through the use of oral history, explore aspects of recollection that allow the individual to be an agent in their representations of the past.

It was Jan Assman that later utilized Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory and expanded on it by saying that communicative memory binds three or four generations of a social collectivity that are present at one time by the use of norms and values that construct social ‘conscience.’<sup>10</sup> Thus, Assman argued that theories of collective and social memory are composed of a framework which is social and cultural rather than biological.<sup>11</sup> Central to Assman’s theory is the difference between communicative and cultural memory. Cultural memory, as he explains, is the result of various media of memory storage that societies use: “cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance).”<sup>12</sup> It is here, within this discussion of cultural formation and institutional communication that art production and the social mediation of images play a role in constructing cultural memory and where examples of performance art in the case of Palestine will intersect with Assman’s emphasis on the *fixed point*.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The collective memory* (Harper & Row, 1980). P142.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*. *New German Critique*, No. 65. *Cultural History/ Cultural Studies* (1995), pp 125-133.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, trans. (CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 7.

Looking at Al Nakba as the fixed point to which this research reflects on, the notion of **collective trauma** becomes pertinent in addressing intergenerational narratives of the past. The far reaching affect of violence on memory is addressed by Nicolas Argenti and Katherina Schramm in their writings on intergenerational transmission of trauma, which is based on the seminal works of Halbwachs and the concept of collective memory. As an extension of this theory, Ron Eyerman explains that

"cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. In this sense, the trauma not need necessarily be felt by everyone in a community or experienced directly by any or all. While it may be necessary to establish some event as the significant 'cause', it's traumatic meaning must be established and accepted, a process which requires time, as well as mediation and representation."<sup>13</sup>

Eyerman's notion of trauma as mediated and represented for social causes becomes ever more relevant in the case study of this thesis. By examining the presence of post trauma or transgenerational trauma in art production, the ways in which experiences are transmitted between people and over time can help us to understand the very social fabric of a society which struggles with identity and social cohesion a daily basis and simultaneously bring light to the role of memory in popular histories of trauma verses those authoritatively written.

In understanding transgenerational transmission, Argenti and Schramm explain that it is as if, with memories of trauma and violence, "*ghosts are not laid to rest with those who create them or in whom they are created.*"<sup>14</sup> Thus, children may incorporate these ghosts of their parents. Particularly relevant to the topic of my study would be the extension of inheriting these ghosts as bodily practices. In the case of mass traumatic events, Argenti and Schramm argue

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<sup>13</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p2.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm, *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission* (Berghahn Books, 2010), p 13.

that bodily memories can eventually become established in the community as social practices, making sediment micropractices of individuals into macroprocesses visible in societies (e.g. gait, posture, movement) and the social dynamics in everyday practices. These reflections on embodied memory as well as bodily practices such as rites (e.g. dance) help us to recognize that the social transformations to which memory is prone is not restricted to memory in the field of oral accounts but is also present in the field of non-verbal memory. The intersection of trauma and bodily practices will become visible in an analysis of the artwork selected for this research in conjunction with the oral testimonies given by the art producers themselves, oftentimes reflecting on the fixed point of trauma, being Al Nakba.

A clarification on the use of trauma theory as it applies to this research project is needed to emphasize the agency given to the narrator. Just as Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin refer to the notion of “regimes of memory”<sup>15</sup>, it remains critical to approach social memory as agentive. In engaging with generations that have been handed down knowledge about the past—transmissions of representations and experiences, emotions and values—from older generations, this inheritance should be seen as one in which individuals are able to actively negotiate them. Thus, as it will become evident in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, narrators engaging in art indeed reflect on pivotal moments in the traumatic history of their elders, but participate in these narrations as dynamic and moving in light of similar life experiences that they draw upon.

As mentioned above, **social mediation of images** becomes central to any discussion on cultural memory construction. It was art historian Aby Warburg that tied the notion of cultural memory to its representation in the arts. As he argued, human products, most compellingly aesthetic creations, told and retold the functioning of personal and social memory. In 1923, he

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p 14.



asked, “how did verbal and pictorial expressions originate? What are the feelings or points of view, conscious or unconscious, under which they are stored in the archives of memory? Are there laws to govern their formation or reemergence?”<sup>16</sup> He then ascribed a ‘mnemonic energy’ to the objectivation of culture and referenced works of high art as well as posters, postage stamps and customs to explain the formation of culture and further how collective experience crystallizes and becomes accessible across millennia.<sup>17</sup> This discussion on the social mediation of art becomes an important part of engaging with the art production process discussed in this thesis. The conceptual frameworks of theatre, music and poetry production alongside the repetition of motifs in popular art speak loudly about collective experiences in Palestinian society as well as cultural memory construction through the arts that engage the diaspora in the process of art making as well as allowing them to act as agents by using their art for the more general social movement for liberation in Palestine.

Just as Maurice Halbwachs makes the argument that memory serves has functionality in facilitating change in society, the dialogic relationship between art and politics will be present in the final chapter of this thesis. In order to look at the artist and their art as forms of civil action and engaging in **contentious politics**, we should look to the function of memory in this jump to action. In doing so, it will be useful to look at the ways in which memory is utilized in these contentious politics. Both Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow have much to contribute to this larger question of social movements and the origins of civil action.

*Contentious politics* itself is defined as incorporating interactions in which certain political actors make claims bearing on other political actors’ interests, producing coordinated

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<sup>16</sup> Kurt W. Forster, “Aby Warburg’s History of Art: Collective Memory and the Social Mediation of Images” in *Daedalus*, Vol. 105, In Praise of Books (1976), p 171.

<sup>17</sup> Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, trans. (CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p 7.

action in pursuit of shared interests.<sup>18</sup> *Contention* is the process of making claims appertaining to another actor's interests. And *collective action* refers to the organization of coordinated efforts to pursue shared interests or programs. The actor most typically making claims within this notion of contentious politics is that of a social movement. These collective claims are usually expressed through contentious performances such as marches, rallies, demonstrations, petitions, etc. As Tilly and Tarrow explain "a social movement campaign is a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on targeted authorities and is characterized by repeated displays of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment."<sup>19</sup>

The performative aspect of social movements, which is of particular interest to this project, has shown to be dynamic and has the ability to be acted out in a multiplicity of ways. With contemporary representations of performative social movements ranging from flash mob performances in public places to protest theatre and spoken word poetry, the Palestinian social movement is a prime example of a collective claim asserted through various contentious performances. In Chapter One, I will refer back to this notion of contentious politics in an attempt to analyze in greater detail the pivotal moments in Palestinian history that have correlated with certain artistic productions used in mobilizing groups towards social change, as present both in Palestine and in the diaspora, and the trajectory of these artistic and political movements in the current state of Palestinian art production.

To recapitulate, the purpose of referencing theories within the fields of collective memory and transgenerational trauma, social mediation of images and contentious politics is to find an intersection of thought whereby memory, art and politics can be addressed in a context

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Tilly, *Social Movements (1768-2004,)* (Paradigm Publishers, 2004) p114.

where arguably all art can be examined through a political lens, as well as found to be reconstructions of the past and its representations through narration.

### **Methodology and Limitations**

I will address the use of oral history as my main methodological approach. A discussion of Alessandro Portelli's work will enter finely here, as I propose testimony as an alternative to hegemonic history writing—the central machine that opposes history from below. While the case of Palestinians under Israeli occupation is exemplary of where mainstream narratives dominate popular discourse. Thus, oral history seeks to fill in the gaps where social groups, often illiterate, are unrepresented or misrepresented through distorted history.<sup>20</sup> It allows us to gain further insight about people who have not recorded their past in writing or were part of communities who were not represented in official records and those who had to destroy their writings to avoid arrest under repressive regimes.

While empirical scholars often dismiss oral histories and microhistories, in fear that an increase in orality would lead to written records being “swept out”<sup>21</sup>, the benefits of everyday life history is manifold and we can see the ways in which written and oral sources can work together rather than exclusively. While written texts can tell us to a large extent the happenings and minuscule details during certain moments in history, they cannot, by their very nature, reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of actors that participated in these events. Oral history fills this void. While recollections of details might be distorted in oral histories, personal narratives share with us the meaning of events beyond the fact that it happened. It tells us not

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<sup>20</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different”, in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 46.

only what people did, but also what they wanted to do, what they thought they were doing, and what they now think they did.

Unlike transcripts, oral interviews include much more than just words delivered in monotone. Interviewees share their emotional responses through a multiplicity of body behaviors, and the velocity, intonation, and pitch of their speech. While written sources turn their subject's oral narrative into a visual source, it loses the depth and richness of the interview. These physical characteristics of the interview cannot be reproduced in writings. Furthermore, when one is to read a transcript, this also involves a certain level of interpretation. And since the choice of punctuation and grammar is left to the discretion of the transcriber, much is often lost in translation, if you will. So while the content of daily life and material culture are utilized by many forms of recordkeeping such as journals and diaries, oral history offers a unique and distinguishing element in its form.<sup>22</sup>

Having explored the vast uses and value of oral history, the challenges in the subfield are not few. Issues of interpretation, methodology and ethical interviewing are incessantly debated amongst historians. Similar to the narrative theory in literature, oral history must also come to terms with some of its challenges in terms of the meaning of the narrator.<sup>23</sup> An informant may, for example, reduce an important event to a few words or conversely, embellish on a small but meaningful detail of a larger event. How then, do we interpret oral history and interviewees? And what are the challenges posed by interviewers themselves? These are issues that were explored in our course and Portelli himself expands on the challenges that present itself when doing oral history.

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<sup>22</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different", in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 47.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 48.

In terms of challenges regarding informants and the information they share, it is foremost important to explore the notions of objectivity and subjectivity. Oral histories, by nature, are subjective, variable and partial.<sup>24</sup> That is not to say that subjectivity is not valuable. As Alessandro Portelli explains in *What Makes Oral History Different*, “the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, there are no false oral histories and while there is emphasis on meaning in these histories, that doesn’t imply that there is no factual validity. In fact, interviews often reveal facts that were not formerly known and expose the daily life of people through nonhegemonic narratives. So while many scholars may ask about the credibility of oral sources, it is critical to remember that oral sources are credible, but in a different way. The memory of interviewees shed light on the way people recall events and how their recollections change as their personal lives change. They might tailor the story they share in the context of their present state of mind and oftentimes interviewers hear different narratives over a longitudinal study. These interviews share information about the way people create meanings at different points in their lives as well as how they think reflexively. This of course presents a challenge for historians because information on personal truth is at conflict with empirical truth. Furthermore, the interviewee’s truth may not be singular, rather collective. As Portelli explains, “the effect of community or shared materials (proverbs, songs, etc) may measure the degree in which a collective viewpoint exists within an individual’s narrative.”<sup>26</sup> Oral sources coming from the marginalized communities, then, might be

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<sup>24</sup> Marsha Siefert. *Oral History, Memory and Everyday Life. Modern Historiography*. Central European University, Budapest, Hungary. 12 Nov 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different”, in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 51.

considered as folk narratives because of the conflicts between the factual and what is questionably historical, poetical or legendary.<sup>27</sup> What then, is the task of the interviewer in reconciling the challenges between offering a platform for concealed voices and the inevitable subjectivity and inaccuracies of oral history?

With the primary intention to reveal lesser heard stories, or stories never heard before, the use of oral history becomes vital as it paints a more detailed picture of a pivotal moment, in the case of my research, Al Nakba. The challenges to oral history, as mentioned above, not only require historians to redefine their understandings of credibility and truth, but should also prompt historians to find new and innovative ways of making use of people's narratives and enriching the history that they share. Oral history challenges the role of the interviewer in the way that he or she interacts with their interviewee and the methods by which they allow for a free and open space for the informant to feel comfortable to share what they want.

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on several performing artists and their works and using oral history as my main methodology. My interviewees include audio-visual performers, actors/actresses, spoken word (poetry narrated or spoken as the person would in conversation) poets and musicians. As the primary purpose of the research is investigating memory distant from past events as they are represented currently, the sample of artists I have interviewed are those who did not live during the first years of *Al-Nakba* (1948) and were born after the Six Day War in 1967. I have used oral history as an approach to analyzing the influence of collective memory in the works of performing artists in Palestine as well as the Palestinian diasporic community. Keeping in mind the importance of

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<sup>26</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different", in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 49.

space and place as it relates to memory construction, I conducted interviews in a variety of places where Palestinians currently live. With a focus on artists living in the West Bank, I utilized the snowball method to learn about newer artists in the field. The same approach was used when speaking to artists in the diaspora, initially meeting with New York based spoken word artist Remi Kanazi as my first contact. In general, I have chosen a rather small sample size and used the West Bank as a place of focus in order to deal with artists more than the art itself, while both speak about each other. Finally, interviews with artists from both sexes and different social classes (living in and outside of refugee camps) have been vital in understanding the role of gender and class in issues of representation. Some guiding/opening questions for that I used for the interviews included questions about the artists work and inspiration, initial inspiration to create, the role of family members in this process, and their role in social activism. I have also explored the themes of works that they have produced and factors that have played a role in their ability to freely produce. Finally, every interviewee was asked about the role of Al Nakba and the stories around this event in their art. Because of the semi-structured approach of the interviews, questions were formed as a response to the interviewee's narration and thus led to different topics, as will be explored in Chapter Three.

Using these questions as a premise to build a better understanding of the artists and their role in the discourse of memory in Palestine, I sought to develop a structure in three stages: firstly addressing the individual and their personal memories (including those that they have developed through family and national narratives), secondly exploring the ways in which their art, as a product of these memories, enters the larger discourse of memory in Palestine, and finally looking at memory and politics, specifically the ways in which memory serves as a powerful tool in political action and as a critique of the political.

While the interviews resulted in fruitful material, a note on the limitations of my fieldwork and challenges that have affected the final product deserve mention here. While I had chosen to interview primarily artists residing in the West Bank due to reasons of mobility and the impossibility of travelling to Gaza, the summer proved to be a time of hardship for one of my prospective interviewees in the West Bank, student actor Rami Hwayel. I discuss the particularities of his arrest and detainment in the proceeding chapters and consider his absence, and the subsequent stress felt by the rest of the Jenin Freedom Theatre group, a deterrent for my research and generally a terrible experience for all of those involved. As an alternative to our interview, I spent time with the troupe as they rehearsed and gathered information from their previous shows. I mention this limitation primarily to emphasize the familiar struggle of research within Palestine where each day proves unpredictable and instable.

Another unfortunate challenge that I was met with after the completion of my interviews was the collection of the interview tapes. Due to strict border controls and harassment at Ben Gurion Airport, I avoided bringing through research materials from Palestine. It had been my experience in every trip prior that I was detained for a minimum of three hours and a maximum of five due to my activities as a volunteer and activist in the West Bank. As a result, I had to air-mail written materials to Budapest and request that a friend arrange for my interviews to be digitized. In the conversion process, the quality of the interviews decreased greatly, proving to be quite a challenge while transcribing the interviews.

Unrelated to Israeli bullying, I should make note of my choice to interview exclusively English speaking artists. This choice, in part due to my lack of proficiency in Arabic and the challenges of translation, also led me to artists who are working with Palestinians in the diaspora and international artists like myself. This collaboration and interest in international



joint efforts played a role in the interviews and proved to be less of a limitation and more of a narrowing down of my research group. While it did limit me from learning about the exclusively Arabic-speaking arts, the scope of this thesis was limited enough to narrow down my interview group.

As a final note, my entryway into the art scene in the West Bank had taken place several years prior to this research project when I began teaching Bharatanatyam (Indian classical dance) at a small circus school in Nablus city in 2008. Having connected with a handful of performing artists in the years following, I was considered an in-group member and had already gained the trust and confidence of the art community. For example Farah Saleh of Sareyyet Ramallah Dance Troupe was a student of mine in 2009 and I have assisted in coordinating poetry tours for Remi Kanazi since 2008. I have found these relationships beneficial for my research in creating an environment where the artists were at ease in speaking to a seasoned expatriate in Palestine with whom they did not need to delve into a meta-history of the occupation.

## CHAPTER I. THE ART OF HISTORY: ART AND POLITICS IN PALESTINE

“The Palestinian art movement was strong and self-aware when it first saw the light. It had organically linked itself with the masses and it bore the burden of the struggle against Israeli occupation. It is an art of resistance, with all that the word ‘resist’ implies.”  
-Ismail Shammout<sup>28</sup>

There remains a dearth of knowledge about Palestinian art in the field of global art history and only recently have Palestinian artworks and their authors gained international recognition to new degrees. With the first English language text to explore art production in Palestine, *Towards a Revolutionary Arab Art*<sup>29</sup>, only to be written in 1970 by Kamal Boullata, it can be said that Boullata was the pioneering artist and writer to bring to surface a world of art that had gone widely unrecognized. While still relatively sparse, this publication has inspired scholars of art to pay more attention to emerging artists in Palestine as well as within the Palestinian diaspora. Accordingly, this chapter will explore the stages in which the Palestinian arts have developed. Among the scholarship that does exist on the topic, the political nature of art production becomes clear in the use of motifs coinciding with pivotal events in Palestinian political and social life. By referencing works such as writings by Samia Halaby<sup>30</sup> and Nicholas Rowe<sup>31</sup>, I will explore the pre-Nakba, Zionist, Pan-Arab and Palestinian salvage movements as they were manifested in the visual and performing arts in Palestine. As will be subsequently shown, Palestinian art cannot be separated from the political environment in which its artists

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<sup>28</sup> Made In Palestine, “Palestinian Artists Working Under Seige”

[http://www.stationmuseum.com/Made\\_in\\_Palestine-](http://www.stationmuseum.com/Made_in_Palestine-Palestinian_Artists_working_under_Siege/mikdadnashashibi.html)

[Palestinian\\_Artists\\_working\\_under\\_Siege/mikdadnashashibi.html](http://www.stationmuseum.com/Made_in_Palestine-Palestinian_Artists_working_under_Siege/mikdadnashashibi.html) (accessed May 21,2012).

<sup>29</sup> Kamal Boullata, *Towards a Revolutionary Arab Art*, in Naseer Aruri, ed. *Palestinian Resistance to Israeli Occupation* (Wilmette, IL,2970)

<sup>30</sup> Samia Halaby. *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Drawing of the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. H.T.T.B Publications, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Rowe. *Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine*. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010.

and society are living and thus art has become political and ultimately embedded in the political.

### **I.1 Pre-Nakba, Zionist, Pan-Arab & Palestinian Salvage Movements in the Visual & Performing Arts**

In looking for central themes visible in Palestinian art, Al Nakba remains the pivotal and single most defining site of trauma and collective memory for Palestinian society and consequently makes appearances in the vast majority of Palestinian art. As I explore topics of post trauma and identity as experienced by artists in chapter two, it will become evident that the lasting effects of Al Nakba on Palestinians are made present in the artwork that they produce. Looking at specific moments of change in Palestinian political history as well as current conditions of oppression and injustice in the territories will help us recognize and contextualize changes in artistic expressions of Palestinian experience through time. Both dancer Nicholas Rowe and painter Samia Halaby articulate parallels between these critical moments in Palestinian history with changes in their respective fields of art. Below I discuss Rowe's and Halaby's contribution to the study of the political in the artistic as their works set the backdrop for the trends and artistic trajectory of many of the arts today. Their respective fields show major shifts in style and concept and by looking to their analysis of dance and painting, we can observe parallels between forms and suggest similar models appear in various other art forms such as theatre and music, which are not discussed at this point in the paper.

Dancer and author Nicholas Rowe, in *Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine*, explores the ways in which dance has changed and evolved in Palestine, beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. He looks both at the role and function that the art form of dance

has served, especially as a measure of social change and as a space for dialogue on social issues. While there is little discussion of pre-Nakba art in Rowe's book, he does include descriptions of the latter three processes of salvage in which he argues that an artistic revival took place three times in the 20th century and was associated with Zionism, pan-Arabism and Palestinian nationalism, respectively. It is particularly interesting to see how each of these processes had a distinct set of ideological and aesthetic viewpoints that characterize them. He calls them the 'zionist salvage, the pan-Arabist salvage' and the 'Palestinian nationalist salvage'.

As Rowe asserts, the Zionist salvage movement was basically a reappropriation of the dances of the indigenous Palestinian population, which they called *dabkeh* (Arabic folk dance). As he explains, the ultimate goal in learning and performing *dabkeh* in Israel was in part a desire to create a collective Israeli identity. As a result, they would be able to find their cultural links with their Jewish past, which were their claims to this dance form. In order to personalize *dabkeh*, steps were re-choreographed and made into stage presentations of folk dance by Zionist dancers. This helped to establish, as Israeli choreographer Shalom Herman said, "one of the best known ambassadors of the spirit of the new State of Israel and its people."<sup>32</sup>

Under Jordanian rule in 1947-67, a pan-Arabist salvage movement was seen in the West Bank rather than rather than Palestinian nationalism. In effect, folkdance productions featuring *dabkeh* were very common in neighboring countries and especially in Lebanon. After the 1967 war, the Palestinian nationalist salvage movement became more tangible as it surfaced as a result of the Six-Day War. Instigated by the Israeli occupation, academics in the West Bank began to do research on the folkloric arts and culture to question and challenge the Zionist narrative of claiming legacy on the dances of the Palestinian people. Additionally, recognizing

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Rowe. *Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine*. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010, p 9.

and providing unifying symbols of Palestinian national identity helped to provide an authentic and distinctly 'Palestinian' *dabkeh*, which challenged both Zionist reappropriation and pan-Arabist assimilation which was noticeable prior to the Six-Day War.

Rowe terms what has come after the Palestinian salvage movement as the "post-salvage paradigm," lasting from 1980-2008. For the purpose of my own project, the post-salvage paradigm can be applied to current works as recent as 2011. Between these years, the First Intifada, the Oslo peace process, and the Second Intifada took place. While Palestinian folklore continued to play a central role in the Palestinian dance revival, the 1990s saw a huge shift in styles due to cultural exchanges between Palestinian and foreign artists, oftentimes Palestinians living in the diasporic population. Dancers were, according to Rowe, "forced to negotiate with both the ongoing local salvagist ideals of unchanging traditions and foreign definitions of modernism and postmodernism." As he finally argues in *Raising Dust*, dancers are now in the process of negotiating with the ongoing salvagist ideals of these folkloric dances and foreign definitions of modernism and postmodernism. This dialectic relationship between notions of salvage art movements, as a form of salvage ethnography, become ever present in the works highlighted in this research project and explored in chapter three. Samia Halaby, in a similar effort to mark moments of change in the arts, though specific to painting, highlights political-artistic shifts in her contribution to the study of Palestine art.

When it comes to the visual arts, Nakba survivor Samia Halaby remains an important voice in the Palestinian diaspora. In *Liberation Art of Palestine*<sup>33</sup>, painter-scholar Halaby marks the start of the artistic liberation movement in 1953 and traces back stages of artistic development with a focus on painting. Similar to Rowe, she argues that Palestinian art is

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<sup>33</sup> Samia Halaby. *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Drawing of the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. H.T.T.B Publications, 2003.

distinguished as a form of cultural resistance and has parallel tendencies with key moments in Palestinian resistance.

In her introduction, Samia Halaby attributes the blossoming of the arts in Palestine to “times when hope for liberation was high” and dates the beginning of these three movements to the 1930’s when Palestinians revolted against British colonialism. After Al Nakba, there was a second revolt against Zionism and as a result a second wave in the visual arts. It was during the opening of Ismail Shammout’s “Where to?” in a 1953 exhibit in Gaza that he gained widespread popularity in Palestine for characterizing the pain which was experienced on a personal and social level of his audience. By depicting the massacre of Al Lydd in his art, he had echoed the experience of many and provided a narrative that otherwise had not been given a platform. In the 1980’s the liberation art movement encountered its third stage when the first Intifada broke out. The artistic tendencies and symbols that were utilized parallel with the shifting political climates in Palestine.

Artistic tendencies in the Palestinian liberation art movement, Halaby asserts, have been inspired by other revolutionary struggles and thus reflect styles characteristic of Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism and the Mexican mural movement.<sup>34</sup> Instead of framing pictures as though through a window, characteristic in Renaissance painting, Cubist artists insisted that we see the world as we move through it, and thus created work from many points of view and with disjunction. Similarly, Palestinian artists found this abstract structure more suitable than the framework of continuous space and realism, which has been regarded as academic. In liberation art, Palestinian artists are known to make parts of their final piece separately before it is brought together. As Halaby explains, this is due to the symbolic nature of the style and that

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<sup>34</sup> Samia Halaby. *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Drawing of the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. H.T.T.B Publications, 2003. p11

as pieces are to narrate a larger story, parts are assembled as the story comes together. While Arabic traditional art is known for mosaics and inlaid design, Palestinian liberation artists have been able to gain inspiration from the layering method and escape the Renaissance picture plane, prioritizing modern needs of liberation symbols.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of symbols, there are a range of motifs that have been conceived during the early years of resistance and have since been echoed in later and current works, some of which are highlighted in the third chapter of this thesis. Emerging from 1948 were symbols of exile, namely that of *al-miftah*, or the key. As many families locked their homes before leaving as a result of Israeli aggression, they held onto their keys with the expectation of return. While this wait still continues, so does the importance of the key. Additionally, early paintings exhibited images of celebration, suggesting the hopefulness of revolution. As artists from diaspora joined in creating pieces that showed dancing fighters and banners of revolution, artists used their messaging to uplift the community by showing a forthcoming change which would bring joy. Creating transnational support for the liberation of Palestine through the embrace of revolution was central to art at the beginning of the liberation movement. There were also traces of idyllic imagery and nostalgic memories in the works that came out of this early period, such as beautiful scenes of pastoral life and powerful horses in battle. Similarly, images of martyrs as a form of honouring those who died in battle became both popular in artwork as well as common in households and graveyards. The abundance of martyr posters and artwork indicated the working-class nature of the movement in which very little of political leadership was

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 11.

represented. Halaby stresses this as a significant point in her book and asserts that liberation art placed emphasis on socially organized action rather than figureheads in political seats<sup>36</sup>.

In supporting the notion that artistic styles and symbols changed according to political moments, the First Intifada introduced new trends in the conceptual art it produced. Instead of symbols of weaponry and armed resistance, symbols of stones and graffiti were more common. As Halaby explains, the politically messages were expressed through graffiti art, finding places on walls which were aptly named the city's "radical newspapers."<sup>37</sup> While the Israeli forces ordered the area be buffed, the youth again went back to the walls during night hours and re-plastered the walls with their messages as a form of resistance. This practice has endured and remains one of the popular mechanisms of resistance to the apartheid wall to this day.<sup>38</sup> Other prominent symbols during this period were tents, which were given to the refugees by the United Nations, the dove in connection to women and children as an appeal for peace, and the sun which was to symbolize the light which would lift the darkness of Israeli injustice.

When in the 1990's, the Intifada was waning, themes in artwork shifted to those of patience and suffering.<sup>39</sup> As Halaby points out, patience can be observed by the presence of a visual representation that suggests *sumoud*, or endurance, in the form of the cactus plant. As she writes, "the cactus plant sprouts anew even after severe abuse. Palestinians dream of having such qualities as they steadfastly confront Israeli terrorism."<sup>40</sup> Alongside the cactus plant, other popular icons particular to the art created by prisoners have become the barbed wire, iron bars, eyes with tears and the lit candle.

<sup>36</sup> Samia Halaby. *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Drawing of the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. H.T.T.B Publications, 2003. pp 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Julie Peteet, "The Writings on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada." *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (May, 1996) pp.139-159. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656446> (accessed May 20,2012)

<sup>39</sup> Samia Halaby. *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Drawing of the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. H.T.T.B Publications, 2003. P 9

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 9



While prominent figures in the liberation art movement are many, I will limit my discussion of the early works to trends and symbols which have permeated the generations to follow and hold great value in the current artistic projects of Palestinians in the occupied territories as well as those who live in exile. As it will become clear in the following section, current projects which have continued to be committed to political messaging encounter many challenges to representation, in effect stifling the representation of Palestinian narratives as told by artists themselves. Expanding on this struggle, I will explore issues of censorship and agency that have been at the forefront of this battle for visibility and projects which have suffered as a result.

## **I.2 Contemporary Projects and Contentious Politics**

While I have provided a brief background in both dance and painting as explored by Rowe and Halaby, the projects that are at the center of this particular project are those which are considered to be part of the performing arts and include theatre, dance, music and spoken word, or poetry which is recited. The weight of these arts in everyday life Palestine as well as the role that it plays in connecting Palestinians in the diaspora with those living in the occupied territories and in 1948 Palestine will be important to point out before exploring the difficulties that they face in the political climate in which they function. As contemporary projects necessarily include a vast amount of members from society and are accessible at not just elite levels, an assumption commonly made of the fine arts, the function of art and specifically engaged art such as that of the theatre become part of the fabric of civil society and a platform by which they express themselves and inform others of their plight.

The importance of these art forms to be part of society is highlighted by the role of the storyteller, or *Al-Hakawati*. This name was adopted by a theatre group formed in 1994 and whose emphasis is on the role of the story teller in the state of affairs. The founding group was aware that the storyteller, through his or her story, is able to take command of a situation he is powerless to change. Similarly, playwright George Ibrahim insists that, “suffering in the theatre is a reflection of the suffering in the land. While the life of theatre is a reflection of the reality of our life, at the same time it strengthens mobilization, enlightenment and revolt against this reality.”<sup>41</sup>

The Arabic words *muqdwama* (resistance) and *sumud* (perseverance) well characterize the approach taken amongst Palestinian playwrights in their works. As Susan Slyomovics stresses in her article “To Put One’s Fingers in the Bleeding Wound: Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship” theatre production in the occupied territories provides us a good example of the deployment of both *muqdwama* and *sumud*.<sup>42</sup> Recalling that in 1966 that Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani encouraged the recognition of literature composed under occupation as a form of resistance, the political fabric of cultural production has served important both as a form of record keeping and documentation of conditions under occupation. Just as literature sought to reflect everyday life, so did the theatre and thus the mechanisms used to reach its audience went alongside the conditions of moment at hand. For example, during the First Intifada, street theatre became increasingly popular and reflected the conditions of its society, fragmented and works-in-progress.

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<sup>41</sup> Susan Slyomovics. “To Put One’s Fingers in the Bleeding Wound”: Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship, The MIT Press, Vol. 35, No.2 (Summer, 1991), p 8.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Slyomovics. “To Put One’s Fingers in the Bleeding Wound”: Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship, The MIT Press, Vol. 35, No.2 (Summer, 1991), p 18.

Palestinian music too has reflected the daily experiences of its people, with features that Chuen-Fung Wong points out in his study on music-making in Palestine.<sup>43</sup> In his interviews with musicians of Palestine such as Sabreen, Nasser Al-Tae and Samer Totah, tries to identify the ways that music mediates the experiences of people living under occupation and the musical styles which echo these experiences. As he points out, new styles of music are perceived as a new way of struggle: imbalanced phrases, unsteady rhythms and inconstant beats are features of music that represents the experience of occupation.<sup>44</sup> Quoting an excerpt from his interview with Ramallah based musician Samer Toteh, Wong writes, "I try to create an ambiance of intertextuality, a layering of memory and self as it was shaped by the experiences of life."<sup>45</sup> Thus, music alongside theatre and dance have been unable to divorce themselves from their environment and become part and parcel of the environment itself.

It has become clear from the engagement of art in everyday life that the political context in which Palestinians are living in has been the basis of the majority of art production in Palestine. Professor Hala Khamis Nasser of Yale University similarly asserts that the political situation is "the driving force and the medium that insistently has provided the backdrop for the stage, the landscape, the content, the chisel, and the brush. These mediums are where collective memory, trauma, exile, refugees and the struggle for recognition and independence are dominant cultural themes."<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it is this very political situation that has limited these art forms from visibility and restricted artistic agency in the process. It was while focusing her research on

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<sup>43</sup> Chuen-Fung Wong. "Conflicts, Occupation, and Music-Making in Palestine" *Macalester International* Jan. 2009. pp 267-284. <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1222&context=macintl> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 272.

<sup>45</sup> Chuen-Fung Wong. "Conflicts, Occupation, and Music-Making in Palestine" *Macalester International* Jan. 2009. pp 272. <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1222&context=macintl> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Nassar. "The State of the Arts in the Middle East." *The Palestinian Cultural Scene: Narrating the Nakba*, 38. 2009.

Palestinian cultural production in 2009 that Nassar pointed out many of the restraints that kept artistic activities from thriving such as restrictions on movement due to the wall and the isolation of communities such as those in the refugee camps.<sup>47</sup> Below I explore the three main restraints that I have identified as obstacles to agency and visibility: physical intervention from the Israeli army, limitations on mobility and direct and indirect forms of censorship of content.

In "Permission to Paint: Palestinian Art and the Colonial Encounter Power" Joseph Massad begins to break the ice on some of the most troubling issues that face Palestinian artists today and their struggle for visibility. An example of an earlier challenge in the arts sector was the closure of the Gallery 79 in 1979 by Israeli military. Works of resident artists were confiscated and shut down just hours after painter Sulayman Mansur's first solo show.<sup>48</sup> Samia Halaby also discusses this event in her book, stressing that this harassment has been characteristic of the experience of artists under occupation. Another example would be the attack on the Sakikini Cultural Center in 2002. Created in the mid 1990's by the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Culture, the space had served as a hub for the local arts. When it was invaded and sacked by the Israeli army, it became evident that the occupation did not exclude Palestinian cultural life as a target. In a more recent event, on July 27<sup>th</sup> 2012, the Jenin Freedom Theatre, located in the Jenin Refugee camp of northern West Bank, was attacked and raided in the middle of the night as Israeli forces arrested Adnan Naghnaghiye, the manager of the theatre, and Bilal Saadi, a board member of the theatre, and placed them in the arbitrary system of administrative detention without the release of any information.<sup>49</sup> Days later, Rami Hwayel, student actor of the theatre, was stopped at a check point, blindfolded, handcuffed and placed

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Massad, "Permission to Paint: Palestinian Art and the Colonial Encounter Power," *Art Journal* Vol. 66, no 3 (2007), <http://www.virtualgallery.birzeit.edu/media/artical?item=313501> (accessed March 12, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> "Jenin's Freedom Theater raided by the Israeli army." 972. <http://972mag.com/jenins-freedom-theater-raided-by-the-israeli-army-2/19566/> (accessed May 23, 2012).

into administrative detention where he stayed for one month. Rami's story is discussed at length in chapter three, as these incidents took place during my fieldwork in the West Bank.

Physical intervention from the Israeli forces is not the only obstacle that artists are facing on a daily basis. Mobility is also restricted and thus creates limitation on collaboration between artists residing in different parts of the West Bank, Gaza, 1948 Palestine and in the diaspora. A good example of this difficulty is presented in the 2008 documentary film, *Slingshot Hip Hop*, featuring one of Palestine's most popular hip hop groups, DAM, and the hurdles they have to overcome to thrive in their art.<sup>50</sup> The group from Lyd in present-day Israel experience a different set of experiences as Palestinians inside Israel. As DAM member Tamar Nafar explained, "It's like a refugee camp inside Israel." With the lack of services and high unemployment rates, the group uses their music to address the status of Palestinians as second-class citizens and living within a system of discrimination. When aspiring hip hop artist Mohammad Al-Farra in Gaza heard some of DAM's tracks online, he said it would be his dream to meet them although they live in Israel, which Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank cannot enter. Similarly the members of DAM cannot not enter Gaza, making their meeting impossible. They continue to communicate over the phone and Skype throughout the movie and in the final scene show Mohammad and his group, Palestinian Rapperz, performing their debut in Gaza. As DAM members gathered around a computer to watch their friends perform, they notice the strength and confidence as they stand in front of an audience that could potentially reject their unconventional choice of music. Ultimately, they attribute the confidence with which they perform to their everyday struggle against tanks and guns and are surprised with the support that they receive from their audience.

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<sup>50</sup> *Slingshot Hip Hop*. DVD. Directed by Jackie Salloum. 2008; Israel & Palestine; 2008.

The last mechanism by which artists have been robbed of their creative agency is that of censorship. Direct censorship has been explicitly noticeable as part of the Israeli response, as explored above. When in 1984 the colors of the Palestinian flag were banned in Israel as well as the print of the traditional Palestinian *kuffiyeh* (a black and white cotton headdress), donning either would label an individual as supportive of Palestinian identity and result in imprisonment.<sup>51</sup> Ironically and the cause of large debate, the *kuffiyeh* is now worn in Israel but in the Israeli colors of blue and white.

Indirect sources of censorship can be identified within the walls of the occupied territories as well as coming from international donors that consider their assistance as in support for building stronger communities. As Bayan Shabib of the Ishtar Theatre in Ramallah emphasized during my interview with her, this has been one of the major criticisms on behalf of Palestinian artists receiving funds from international agencies to carry through their projects. Without this funding, many up and coming groups do not have the means to rent spaces, build stage sets and train their actors. With this funding, their projects are passed through a proposal and monitoring system which prioritizes the agenda of the donor party over the vision of the artist. As I explore Shabib's experience with the "donor problem" in Chapter Three, it deserves mention in this section particularly because the very source of support for visibility has also served as a deterrent for free expression. In her description of first setting up the Sakakini Cultural Center, Adila Laida Hanieh mentions the trouble with requesting funding from international donors: "As for the international donors, they were primarily concerned with the hard political objectives set in their home bases. Thus, the aid machine reified aid recipients according to donors' political priorities, often informed by neo-Orientalist concepts, in a

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Slyomovics. "To Put One's Fingers in the Bleeding Wound": Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship, The MIT Press, Vol. 35, No.2 (Summer 1991), pp 25.

process we could neither stop nor change but had to join to survive.”<sup>52</sup> This in turn creates a general sense of disbelief when cultural initiatives from donor countries extend their support to local initiatives. Thus, one might argue that donor agendas bare significant weight on the messaging that artists choose to use in their work and ultimately censor out certain messages.

As rejection to these forms of silencing are ever present within the artist community in Palestine, Joseph Massad expresses the current frame of mind that projects are approached with when he says that “Palestinians continue to refuse to surrender their aesthetic sensibilities and their ongoing efforts to document the history of their culture to the ugliness of their colonial encounter with Zionism. They and their art continue undeterred by their persistent tragedy, whether Israel grants them permission to or not.” Looking at some of the current efforts that are taking place as part of an artistic and cultural resistance will help us to identify where the art movement is at this juncture, when patience has run out. Furthermore, it will link back to the discussion of social movements and how performance art serves as a tool for mobilization.

The key form of resistance that has come about as a response to the popularity of performing arts in Palestine is that of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). The central principle of the boycott is to contribute to the efforts made to end the occupation by applying the following five rules: “(1) Refrain from participation in any form of academic and cultural cooperation, collaboration or joint projects with Israeli institutions; (2) Advocate a comprehensive boycott of Israeli institutions at the national and international levels, including suspension of all forms of funding and subsidies to these institutions; (3) Promote divestment and disinvestment from Israel by international

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<sup>52</sup> Adila Laïdi-Hanieh, ‘Arts, Identity, and Survival: Building Cultural Practices under Occupation’ *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 35, no. 4, p. 28-43 (2002).

academic institutions; (4) Work toward the condemnation of Israeli policies by pressing for resolutions to be adopted by academic, professional and cultural associations and organizations; (5) Support Palestinian academic and cultural institutions directly without requiring them to partner with Israeli counterparts as an explicit or implicit condition for such support.”<sup>53</sup>

The hope that boycott applies pressure against Israel and in turn will force it to comply with international law is the driving force behind PACBI’s work and has gained a large following including many international artists who have chosen to hear the call for boycott and cancel performances in Israel and significant figureheads in the international community, two of which are Desmond Tutu and Judith Butler. In Palestine, many artists choose out of principle not to play, dance and act beside Israeli artists. As Samer Totah in his interview with Chuen-Fung Wong expressed, “it is dishonest to gesture towards reconciliation in art before political reconciliation is achieved.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "PACBI Call for Boycott." Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. <http://pacbi.org/einside.php?id=55> (accessed June 1, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Wong, Chuen-Fung (2009) "*Conflicts, Occupation, and Music-Making in Palestine*," *Macalester International: Vol. 23*, Article 19. p 8.



## CHAPTER II. MEMORY AND IDENTITY

The role and function of memory in the process of creating salvage ethnography through artwork is both noticeable and necessary in the case of Palestinian artwork. This chapter looks at this function of memory and questions surrounding it, namely of how one remembers having not experienced a pivotal event in national history. For the purposes of this research, questions surrounding memories of Al Nakba are brought to the forefront and second generations within the territories, 1948 Palestine and the diaspora are discussed in terms of identity and claims to narration. While the Palestinian diaspora is still a relatively understudied subject, I will offer more questions than findings and seek to explore these further in my interviews, discussed in the following chapter.

In *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, Rochelle Davis begins tracing memory work as it exists within the diaspora and specifically at the prevalence of recreating the lost homeland, which refers to memorial books that were created for destroyed villages. These books included family details such as the location of the villages, maps, the family trees, traditions of the family and even sometimes included the details of family weddings such as wedding songs—essentially life during pre-Nakba Palestine. In this way, we see use of the concept of *lieux de memoire* in the Palestinian context and in how their local spaces have created sights of memory. In another essay, Omar Al-Qattan shares the story of a trip he took to Jaffa with his father, looking for their lost home. Here we see how Al-Qattan, despite not having lived through the initial displacement himself, sought to identify with the memories that his family shared from Al-Nakba. At one point in the essay he places the past in the present when he says, "It is impossible for any Palestinian to honestly pretend that the trauma of 1948, or of the subsequent disposessions and forced exiles which afflicted us and continue to do so,

are no longer central to our lives. Nothing makes much sense without those memories and that history.”<sup>55</sup>

Similar to Omar’s experience while visiting Jaffa, Lila Abu-Lughod insists that this experience is one which is echoed by many second-generation Palestinian refugees and shares her story visiting her grandfather’s house in Jaffa which was taken from him in 1948. Abu-Lughod recalls seeing the arches and structure of her grandfather’s house as it appeared in photographs and describes the overlapping similarities of the stories she had heard and the house itself—the asparagus fern and the veranda. The importance of her confrontation with the house, tying it back to the stories of the house and the land surrounding it are brought to surface when she holds a dialogue with the new owner of the house. As she recalls, “then someone spoke to me in Hebrew and I was brought out of that dream.” Abu-Lughod’s conversation with the man currently living in the house consisted of him testing her on her family’s history and subsequently educating her on his history of the land and the success of the Zionist dream. What the reader gets from this anecdote, in my opinion, is the true value of *Nakba*. Not only does this book make apparent the role of *les lieux de memoir* and the experience of the refugee’s return to sites of their family’s past, but it also brings to the front the encounters of these refugees with the very real and continued Palestinian experience of occupation and Zionism, the dominant narrative and the constant struggle for a voice and an alternative truth. The phenomenon of memory transmission from one generation to another has been explored in more current studies on collective memory and, as discussed below, post memory and autobiographical memory. In the following section I will look at both models as possible fits for studying memory work in Palestine.

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<sup>55</sup> Omar Al Qattan, “The Secret Visitations of Memory,” in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the claims of memory*, ed. Ahmed H Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod, (Columbia University Press, 2007), 204.

## II.1 The Question of Post Memory

In “The Generation of Postmemory”, Marianne Hirsch introduces the notion of postmemory as the “relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”<sup>56</sup> Her study focuses on the remembrance of the Holocaust and was inspired by works that she came across by second generation writers and artists documenting events around the Holocaust. As she explains the use of post in postmemory, it is contextualized in what she calls an era of “posts” (e.g. post-secular, post-human, post-colonialism) and suggests that “posts” look backward instead of forward in order to define the present in relations to the past. Furthermore, Hirsch sees postmemory as a “transgenerational transmission of knowledge and experience.”<sup>57</sup>

Whether to apply Hirsch’s concept of post memory to this project has been a question at the forefront of this research. While parallels of Holocaust memory are to be found in the traumatic stories of Al Nakba memories alike, there are differences which make this model a difficult one to apply to the case of Palestine. While anti-Semitism has not been overcome, it can be argued that the trauma itself, that being the Holocaust, is a story to be told, not one currently being experienced. In the case of Palestine, the trauma is a continued story. That is to say, Palestinians still feel the effects of Al Nakba on a daily basis and come face to face with injustice with no end in sight. Thus, we are left to question the applicability of post memory as model for Palestine and their ways of remembering.

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<sup>56</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today*, 29:1, p 103 (2008).103

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 106.

An alternate yet similar model that may be more fitting has been offered by anthropologist Maurice Bloch. At his suggestion, through psychological study we are able to learn that the individual's memory of what he or she has experienced during her lifetime is not all that different from her knowledge of more distant historical events, which he or she did not live through. He calls this form of remembering autobiographical memory. The distinction between autobiographical and semantic history plays a central role to Bloch's argument and provides some insights to a possibly more appropriate description of memory in Palestine.

As he explains, autobiographical memory, or memories of events that have happened to an individual, can be differentiated from public and social practices of recalling. As Bloch points out, memory is a psychological process and this can be seen in the act of commemoration. Here, "in some cases moments when the participants in commemoration begin to experience the past in the way that is psychologically similar to their own experience, their inscribed memory"<sup>58</sup> memories that they did not know they held are brought to the surface in certain emotional contexts. This is an instance of recollection.

Semantic or Historical memories are facts that people learn from what they have been told or shown by others about the past that they did not experience themselves. It is concerned with memory retention and relates to "how efficient and accurate mechanisms of transmission"<sup>59</sup> are using tools such as oral history. Bloch argues that the difference between autobiographical & semantic historical memory is much less as is the difference between history & memory

As mentioned above, Bloch conducted much valuable fieldwork at the Zafimaniry in Madagascar which is village that was burnt down in 1947 by French troops in retaliation

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<sup>58</sup> Bloch, M. 1998. Autobiographical Memory and the Historical Memory of the More Distant Past. In *How we think they think: anthropological approaches to cognition, memory, and literacy*. Boulder, Colorado; Oxford, Westview Press; p 123.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 116.

against the supposed support given by the locals to the anti-colonial rebellion at the time. For over two years, villagers in the area hid in the forests in fear of being found and captured. During his research at the Zafimaniry, he conducted research and interviews with locals about their experience during the time of hiding. On one occasion he found himself stuck in a field with a survivor of the rebellion who had previously given him a version of the rebellion recalled a different account when being in the field because he could see a valley where important events from the rebellion took place. Thus, we see how this aforementioned emotional triggers bring about certain recollection that otherwise would not be at the forefront of an individual's memory.

Maurice Bloch mentions Frederick Bartlett's work, *Remembering*, in which he argues that the mechanisms of retention of narratives is much like that for autobiographical episodes. It is not the actual narrative which is stored, but a representation of what happened or "what it was like." It serves as a model to imagine what is happening "as though one was witnessing it."<sup>60</sup> As a result, individuals must infer parts of the narrative in order to understand them and produce for themselves a vivid memory of events, again similar to the way people do when recalling autobiographical memories. So even if certain information is lacking, individuals can fill in the gaps and search for events. Ultimately stories become re-represented and retold as if it happened or was witnessed by the person themselves. This in turn diminishes the difference between "historical and autobiographical memory for narratives of events of great importance for those concerned."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bloch, M. 1998. Autobiographical Memory and the Historical Memory of the More Distant Past. In *How we think they think: anthropological approaches to cognition, memory, and literacy*. Boulder, Colorado; Oxford, Westview Press; p 123.

<sup>61</sup> Bloch, M. 1998. Autobiographical Memory and the Historical Memory of the More Distant Past. In *How we think they think: anthropological approaches to cognition, memory, and literacy*. Boulder, Colorado; Oxford, Westview Press; p 124.

How then does Bloch's expansive study apply to the case of Al Nakba memory? As we recall, the continuation of loss and ongoing occupation of Palestine, Al-Nakba remains the pivotal moment in the lives of those were displaced as well the generation to come after them, holding onto the inherited stories from their grandparents and parents. The first form of salvage ethnography was that of commemoration.

Initially, the memory of the catastrophe of 1948 was both personal and communal in character and families or members of different villages would use the day to gather at the site of the villages that they were displaced from. In 1958, commemorations of the tenth anniversary were carried through in the form of vigils and were held by Arab schools in historic Palestine, or Israel. Of course, there were several attempts from Israeli authorities to stop the gatherings from taking place. In 1976, the commemoration of Al-Nakba became more prominent after the events of Land Day, during which marches were organized to the villages of the Negev and the Galilee. Then, in 2002, an Israeli NGO dedicated to raising public awareness on Al-Nakba called *Zochrot* (Hebrew for 'remembering'), was established. When on March 15, 2011, known as Nakba Day, Palestinians marched towards their respective borders and ceasefire lines with Israel and several were shot at and injured or killed for throwing stones, the international community began to open its eyes to the severe punishment incurred by the Palestinians for seeking to return to the places where Al-Nakba was experienced by their elders.<sup>62</sup>

More presently, when Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are not permitted to the places of their past, villages occupied and/or destroyed, they are left to use material culture that is reproduced or representations of the past such as art, literature and cinema to recall their past

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<sup>62</sup> Sa'di, Ahmad H. and Lila Abu-Lughod. *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*. Columbia University Press, 2007; p 15.

and the narratives of the past which have been told and retold over the years. This is where the research presented in Chapter Three enters and assumes an important role in commemoration and salvage ethnography.

## II.2 Palestinian Identity: The Palestinian Diaspora

To reemphasize the particularity of the Palestinian diaspora, Julianne Hammer *in Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland*, asserts that this population cannot simply be seen as one of migrancy and globalization. Because Palestinians are denied the right of return and oftentimes denied to visit the occupied territories as well, what they know of the homeland is from their parents and grandparents and other virtual means. The latter being a relatively new way of experiencing space is a topic that I will not see through in depth but a point to consider in beginning to understand the lived and unlived experiences of Palestinians. As Hammer explores the experience of Palestinians who have the opportunity to return home, she suggests that “returnees temporarily lost their social identities and had to negotiate their position in the newly founded Palestinian society.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, in the process of doing so, they must also see the reality of Palestine and to compare them to their preconceived notions and images held prior to their return and cope with these differences. Ultimately, Hammer considers the Palestinian diaspora as holding a transnational identity and a “floating idea of home and nationality” which is both a blessing and a burden.<sup>64</sup>

Artist Sama Alshaibi writes about her own experience as a second-generation Palestinian and her return to Palestine in her article “Memory Work in Palestine.” Her piece, published in 2006, was a reflection on her recent return to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories just after she became an

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<sup>63</sup> Abbas Shibliak, ‘Book Reviews: *Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland*,’ *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 24:2, p. 112 (2005).

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*

American citizen. Reflecting on her family's history, in which her family was forced out from Palestine and settled in Iraq and later America, she recalls stories told by her mother and grandmother and insists that for most of her life, this is how she knew Palestine. She then offers her commitment to these stories through her art by saying that, "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."<sup>65</sup>

Echoing this chapter's emphasis on transgenerational memory, Alshaibi shares details of her knowledge of Palestine through the words of her family and how this compared to her visit much later in her life. She shares, as a perfect example, the story of many diaspora Palestinians:

"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."<sup>66</sup>

While experiences from the Palestinian diaspora are diverse and should not be reduced to the few examples offered in this research, it is important to highlight the different nature of this diaspora population as compared to other migratory populations. Similarly, the interaction between individuals in the Palestinian diaspora and those living in the Occupied Territories and 1948 Palestine (interaction with artists in Gaza is further limited due to the ongoing blockade) is phenomenal. As it will be explored further in Chapter Three, the extent to which the populations are interacting and collaborating with projects, despite barriers and restraints, is worthy of mention. Not only are artistic projects spearheaded by diasporic Palestinians, but knowledge is shared and political activism is encouraged by the support of Palestinians who are residing internationally and granted more rights and access to mobility and resources. As I will try to emphasize in the following chapter is that despite the differences in lived experiences, the Palestinian diaspora has and continues to play a vital role in the artistic production in Palestine as well as a major force in the human rights and justice cause within and outside Palestine.

<sup>65</sup> Alshaibi. Sama. *Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora*. Frontiers: Volume 27, No.2, 2006. p31.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 41.



## CHAPTER III. MEMORY AS REFLECTED IN PERFORMANCE ART

*“Allow me to speak my mother tongue before they colonize her memory as well (...) All my grandfather ever wanted to do was wake up at dawn and watch my grandmother kneel and pray in a village hidden between Jaffa and Haifa. My mother was born under an olive tree on a soil that they say is no longer mine but I will cross their barriers, their checkpoints, their damn apartheid walls and return to my homeland.”*  
*-Palestinian Poet, Rafeef Ziadah<sup>67</sup>*

### III.1 Introduction: Artists as Narrators

Edward Said, in August 2001, wrote in the Cairo newspaper, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, “The appallingly unbroken history of Israel’s 34-year-old military occupation (the second longest in modern history) of illegally conquered Palestinian land has been obliterated from public memory nearly everywhere, as has the destruction of Palestinian society in 1948 and the expulsion of 68 percent of its native people, of whom 4.5 million remain refugees today.”<sup>68</sup> With the Israeli occupation of Palestine reaching its 45<sup>th</sup> year mark, there has become urgency in the effort of Palestinians to engage in the act of “salvage ethnography”<sup>69</sup>, whereby these narrators feel a responsibility to provide the story which has been silenced through the hegemonic process of history-writing. On the grounds of an increasing number of Palestinian refugees, it may be argued that the political future of the Palestinian people depend on the reclaiming of their unrepresented past and the inclusion of these micro-narratives within the current meta-discourse on Israel and Palestine. It is here where the Palestinian artist has

<sup>67</sup> Ziadeh, Rafeef (2011, November) *Shades of Anger* [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2vFJE93LTI>

<sup>68</sup> Said, Edward. “Occupation is the atrocity.” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, August 16, 2001. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/547/op2.htm>.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 56.

participated in the process of salvage ethnography, both as storyteller and activist, serving as a vessel of memories and an agent for popular resistance. As it will be shown through the research presented in this chapter, Palestinian artists have participated in responding to subjects relevant to modern Palestine—displacement and nostalgia, exile and resistance—as well in recovering parts of Palestinian history as past down by their family stories. Just in the way that art curator James Harithas emphasized while organizing the 2003 art exhibition *Made in Palestine*<sup>70</sup> when he said “Under conditions of occupation, everything is political,”<sup>71</sup> Palestinian artists have, whether wholeheartedly or by social demands for political art, remained committed to both nostalgic and liberation art.

Before reviewing the current state of the Palestinian performing arts, a note on constraints to representation is warranted. However much the artist may try to assume the role of a narrator for silenced communities, Palestinian art and the representation of daily life in Palestine is not only politically charged and contested, it is also limited because of the very subject matter with which many artists engage with in their pieces. The limitations of production and representation of life under occupation, including continuous monitoring by military forces and restrictions on movement, resources, money and images which are withheld from art production have come to determine what artists can show and in turn what the viewer is able to see. Thus, while records of daily life struggle to exist under such circumstances, there is a need for these narrations to be given a platform before they witness erasure. In this effort, projects such as this thesis aim to collect records of highly charged testimonies, as expressed in the arts, of the occupation’s grave impacts on the Palestinian people. As it will become clear in the subsequent parts of this chapter and chapters following, artists have worked with several mediums to create their

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<sup>70</sup> Jessica, Wright R. "Contemporary Palestinian Art: Moving in From the Margins." The Jerusalem Fund for Education. [http://www.arteeast.org/artenews/artenews-articles2006/jessica-wright/jrwright\\_paper.pdf](http://www.arteeast.org/artenews/artenews-articles2006/jessica-wright/jrwright_paper.pdf).

projects of salvage ethnography: the stories of elders, memories of their own childhoods and the utilization of documentary-based materials to combine audio and visual works from archival sources. Below I will reflect on the concept of post trauma as a possible basis for the creation of these works and subsequently highlight the most common motifs shared with me during interviewees with several Palestinian artists in the West Bank and in the diaspora. As it becomes apparent, these young artists are not only providing a most crucial testimony of their everyday lives in occupied Palestine, but they also use their work as a form of resistance; they are able to reclaim a narrative with which they can then provide their own conceptual representations of alternative pasts, presents and futures.

### III.1.1 Post trauma & Art

In her chapter “Mapping the Past, Re-creating the Homeland: Memories of Village Places in pre-1948 Palestine”<sup>72</sup>, Rochelle Davis explores the memorial books which were written by Palestinians from historic Palestine, the West Bank, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon and which consist of information collected about their villages of origin, which were destroyed in 1948. She considers these books as both commemorations to remember the lands from which they were exiled as well as a sort of salvage ethnography. Davis explains that their descriptions would often include,

“the history of the village and its name; crops grown, livestock raised; religious holiday celebrations; lists of the trades practiced, the vehicles owned, and the shops in the village; explanations of customs and traditions including songs sung at circumcisions and wedding, details of how houses were built and tomato paste was made; and huge family genealogies.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Sa'di, Ahmad H. and Lila Abu-Lughod. *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*. Columbia University Press, 2007; pp 53-77.

These descriptions, so far as we recognize them as channels for creating salvage ethnography, can be seen as a way to revisit places in the past before the traumatic events of Al Nakba.

This phenomenon of revival is seen in the usage of lineage to preserve non-written maps of memory such as songs and narrations through oral traditions. In this way, the past becomes linked to the present by means of the continuity of such practices, both material and oral. Observing the ways in which Palestinians have identified the village and lands of historic 1948 Palestine as heaven before exile, one might refer to Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de memoire*, or realms or sites of memory. According to Nora, "The moment of *lieux de memoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history. This period sees, on the one hand, the decisive deepening of historical study and, on the other hand, a heritage consolidated."<sup>74</sup> When approaching this research and keeping in mind the various efforts across disciplines for a Palestinian salvage ethnography, how does the artist participate in this process?

Hardly any discussion on Palestinian art and its connection to trauma and nostalgia can begin without mention of the most acclaimed poet of Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), known as the poet of exile, being a refugee himself. Born in Palestine in 1941 and exiled during Al Nakba, Darwish is known to be the poet of nostalgia and of exile. Writing from Lebanon, France and Egypt, spending time in the West Bank later in his life and his last years in the United States, his poetry resonates a longing for a homeland lost. He writes of loss, "I won't ever return to my name in the wilderness, never, never, never" and of estranged love:

"What will we do with love? you said  
while we were packing our suitcases  
do we take it with us, or hang it in the closet?"

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<sup>74</sup> Nora, Pierre. 1989 Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations* 26. p 13

I said: let it go wherever it wants  
it is already outgrown our collar and spread”<sup>75</sup>

As seen here, Darwish’s works are not necessarily explicitly in nature about the Israeli occupation, nor are they clearly political. His works speak to the personal effects of exile on one’s identity and the separation between the individual and their home. Mahmoud Darwish’s words have remained timeless in Palestine and ever present in artistic production amongst Palestinians. The motifs seen time and time again in Darwish’s work, such as the imagery of shadows and dual identity, the olive tree and the *miftah* (key symbolizing the loss of houses and land in 1948 Palestine) still reoccur in the works of younger generations and Palestinians artists who have not experienced life in Palestine as such.

*El-Funoun Popular Dance Troupe, Ramallah*

El Funoun Popular Dance Troupe was established in Ramallah in 1979 and has become the leading dance group in Palestine, with its stage productions recognized in almost every household. Utilizing *dabke* (Palestinian folklore dance) choreography, the abundance of their work is in an effort to tell the stories of Palestine through folk dance and explore issues past and present. One such piece, entitled *Images Remembered*, was choreographed and showcased in 2009. It was created to reflect on the important eras of Palestinian recent history. The performance goes into the Palestinian memory and portrays symbolic and important recurrent images and motifs from the Ottoman and British colonial times. As the show’s program explains, “the chosen dances illustrate the resurfacing images reminding us of the weariness of a past and present that does not foresee a different future.”<sup>76</sup>

As I watched the production at the El-Funoun studio space, the images created through movement displayed how the society has chosen to survive and resist the suffering that they

<sup>75</sup> Darwish, Maḥmūd, and Fadi Joudah. *The Butterfly’s Burden, Poems*. Copper Canyon Pr, 2007. p235.

<sup>76</sup> El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe. *Program*. 2011.

have endured. Thus images of hope and resilience are put side by side with injustice and struggle as the dancers on stage interact with each other in opposing roles as well as moments of unity. We see images remembered and traces of melancholic nostalgia from each of the eras presented—Scene I: Curfew is Imposed (Ottoman Era), Scene II: Curfew is Imposed (British Mandate), Scene III: Curfew is Imposed (Israeli Occupation) and Scene IV: Determination. Each of the dances symbolizes the importance of keeping alive the memory of the Palestinian history.

*Tashweesh Audio-Visual Group, Ramallah*

In a more contemporary fashion, audio-visual group, Tashweesh (meaning ‘interference’) seeks to produce audio-video clips that engage the audience in a more abstract form. It was at the Palestine Festival of Literature in July of 2010 that I first saw Tashweesh perform live. With their set up of simply two laptops connected to a sound system and projector, the group used sound, music, image and text to bring together the different practices and interests of the artists: Ruanne Abou-Rahme, Boikutt, and Basel Abbas. They use the diversity of their artistic backgrounds to mesh sound and video field recordings, archive material, vocals, breaks and soundscapes to produce what producer/composer Abbas calls, “a point of questioning and reinterpreting in a very experimental way.”<sup>77</sup> Ruanne Abou-Rahme, who works mostly with the video components, shares with me that their projects also

“express the baffling contradictions and disruptions of the Palestinian experience, past and present, and the relationship between the actual, imagined and remembered. In my own practice, I use a lot of archival materials because I am more engaged in issues of memory and archives, and drawing connections with the past and how it’s being lived in the present. Through my use of archives, even with material from another time and places and times, be it 1920’s Russia or 1967 Palestine, I felt like there was something from that which could resonate with us here. Events from all over the world can say something about Palestine.”<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Sophie, Dewitt. "Artist of the Month: Tashweesh." *This Week in Palestine*, April 2010 <http://www.thisweekinpalestine.com/details.php?catid=11&id=3090&edid=181>.

<sup>78</sup> Abou-Rahme, Ruanne (member of Tashweesh Audio-Visual Group, Ramallah), interview by Rozina Gilani, July 12, 2011.

Another issue that came up during my discussion on nostalgia and remembrance with Ruanne reflected her desire to provide, what she called, a “re-narration” of the past through new medium. This was a similar theme that came up with contemporary artists in the West Bank. According to Abou-Rahme, there needs to be a new language on old materials. She went on to explain how images of a lost homeland and of resistance had started to lose “potency after Second Intifada and became mundane as a result.”

She showed me through samples of her work how with innovative photo compilation paired with digitized audio tracks well-known narratives of the past were produced. In one video,<sup>79</sup> I see the initial scenes (videos overlapped and repeated) of families at the beach in Haifa and Jaffa and swinging on swing sets in their bathing suits, kids playing amongst olive trees and families and friends enjoying themselves at restaurants without a care. These images after just a few seconds shift to more familiar scenes of empty streets, belongings abandoned on the road and bare houses with Hebrew broadcasting on the radio. Soon enough I see the prisoners, the peace agreements, house demolitions, jail cells, the resistance fighters and the interrogation room. In the last scene, there is a man who puts up his finger to hush the resistance. This short introduction clip as a preview of Tashweesh’s expansive work goes to show the reproduction of popular images, which every Palestinian or scholar on Palestine will recognize, through a very innovative medium.

*Sarreyet Ramallah, Ramallah*

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<sup>79</sup> Tashweesh (2010, May 8) Intro [Video file]. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbuB\\_OOVeYs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbuB_OOVeYs)

Contemporary Dancer/Choreographer Farah Saleh also suggested the need for nostalgic pieces through new medium. Although, her praise for contemporary art went hand in hand with her critique on traditional art production in the Palestinian art scene. During our interview,<sup>80</sup> Saleh encouraged the use of new interventions on what she considered overused themes, complaining that, “The olive trees, the dabke movements—this is what the younger generation remembers of Palestine and what we call Palestinian culture. But why do we get stuck there? I understand if they do it inside Israel because they want to say ‘No we have Palestinian culture!’ but here [in the West Bank], we can remember in new and creative ways because no one is denying that we are Palestinian.”<sup>81</sup> After asserting her disapproval of ‘getting stuck’ in the past, Saleh argues that *Sarreyet Ramallah*, her dance troupe, does a good job of breaking the norms and providing a performance that is both aesthetically innovative and yet still in keeping with themes that are important to all Palestinians—occupation, identity, resistance and, of course, nostalgia. During the later part of our interview, Saleh emphasizes that while representations of Palestine before 1948 are necessary in keeping with the preservation of a story that is continuously being faced with erasure, art should also interact with the issues that society today and in the future.

### III.1.2 Al Nakba

a village of stone cutters  
 a village of teachers and shopkeepers  
  
 an ordinary village  
 with a peaceful reputation  
  
 until the massacre  
  
 carried out without discriminating

<sup>80</sup> Saleh, Farah (choreographer, Sarreyet Ramallah dance group, Ramallah), interview, July 7, 2011.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 2011.



among men and women  
children and old people

in the aftermath  
light remembers

light searches out the hidden places  
fills every crevice

light peers through windows  
slides across neatly swept doorsteps  
finds the hiding places of the children

light slips into every place  
where the villagers were killed  
the houses, the streets, the doorways  
light traces the bloodstains

light glints off the trucks  
that carried the men through the streets  
like sheep before butchering

light pours into the wells  
where they threw the bodies

light seeks out the places where sound  
was silenced

From *Fifty Years On* by Lisa Suhair Majaj<sup>82</sup>

While there is a continuation of loss and persisting occupation in Palestine, Al-Nakba remains the pivotal moment in the lives of those were displaced as well the generation to come after them, as they hold onto the inherited stories from their grandparents, parents and community members. The commemoration of Al Nakba, or what has come to be called Nakba Day is part and parcel of the Palestinian practice of remembrance and continues in our discussion of salvage ethnography.

Initially, the memory of the catastrophe of 1948 was communal in character and families or members of different villages would use the day to gather at the site of the villages that they were displaced from. In 1958, commemorations of the tenth anniversary were carried through

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<sup>82</sup> Excerpt from Ahmed H Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the claims of memory*, (Columbia University Press, 2007), p xv. Included at the start of subsections to introduce the theme discussed following.

in the form of vigils and were held by Arab schools in historic Palestine, or Israel. Of course, there were several attempts from Israeli authorities to stop the gatherings from taking place. In 1976, the commemoration of Al-Nakba became more prominent after the events of Land Day, during which marches were organized to the villages of the Negev and the Galilee. Then, in 2002, an Israeli NGO dedicated to raising public awareness on Al-Nakba called *Zochrot* (Hebrew for ‘remembering’), was established. When on Nakba Day in 2011 [March 15<sup>th</sup>], Palestinians marched towards their respective borders and ceasefire lines with Israel, several were shot at and killed for throwing stones. The international community began to open its eyes to the severe punishment incurred by the Palestinians for seeking to return to the places where Al-Nakba was experienced by their elders.<sup>83</sup>

While Nakba Day continues to be a day of commemoration, Palestinians have found ways to recall the events of Al Nakba without the necessity of visiting the places of their past; they have used material culture to reproduce or representation images of the past. The arts have been a central tool in preserving the stories about Al Nakba as they have been told and retold over the years.

#### *Ashtar Theatre, Ramallah*

My recent trip to Palestine<sup>84</sup> provided me an opportunity to view the productions of artists that have worked specifically within this discussion of 1948 and Al Nakba. The Ashtar Theatre, based in Ramallah, Palestine, was first establish in Jerusalem in 1991 as the first Palestinian Theatre and training program for actors. When it moved to Ramallah in 1995, the theatre began to experiment with styles similar to the Theatre of the Oppressed through the

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<sup>83</sup> Sa'di, Ahmad H. and Lila Abu-Lughod. *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*. Columbia University Press, 2007; p 15.

<sup>84</sup> June-Sept 2011

forum theatre technique<sup>85</sup>. The theatre's director, Edward Muallem invests a large part of his efforts in creating a space whereby the Palestinian narrative of Al Nakba is preserved, while still focusing on current issues facing the Palestinian community, both in the West Bank and in Gaza. *48 Minutes for Palestine*, a drama without words and told only through physical action, is one of Ashtar's recent production which tells the story of a woman and man living together against their will. As Muallem shows me the production on a DVD he has saved in his office, I watch as the woman in the story lives alone and spends much of her time taking care of her garden. One day a man walks into her house with a suitcase and claims it is his home. The story goes on to show how they struggle for sharing the space and power, dealing with issues of temperature and water which is running out. Similar to the state of Palestinians and Israelis in 1948, they began a forced marriage that neither of them wanted but in a place that neither were willing to leave or let go of.

Looking back at the patterns of Nakba commemoration through the arts, one cannot miss in the discussion the images of Handala. Cartoonist Naji Al-Ali created the character of Handala, the refugee child, to depict the complex plight of the Palestinians. Handala is shown as a child who is not beautiful, with hair that resembles thorns; he is barefooted and rough like the refugee camp children and we do not see his face. His hands are clasped behind his back to show resistance. Naji Al-Ali created Handala to remain true to himself until the day he is able to return home. He is ten years old (the age that Naji Al-Ali left his home) and will remain ten until he returns to his homeland. And till present times, it is Naji Al-Ali's depiction of struggle for justice and self-determination through Handala that has remained one of the most visible

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<sup>85</sup> Theatre of the oppressed. A technique pioneered by Brazilian radical Augusto Boal. A play or scene, usually indicating some kind of oppression, is shown twice. During the replay, any member of the audience ('spect-actor') is allowed to shout 'Stop!', step forward and take the place of one of the oppressed characters, showing how they could change the situation to enable a different outcome.

and representative images of Palestinian resistance to date. Cartoon images of Handala are seen in most public spaces in Palestine—as graffiti on the apartheid wall, on murals in the West Bank and Gaza, worn as a charm around the necks of male and female Palestinians, and indeed in performance.

Two instances in which Handala came up during my fieldwork in Palestine were through stage performance and video. In the first instance, El-Funoun Dance Troupe, mentioned above, dedicated a performance entitled *A Letter To...* to Naji Al-Ali in 2007. In it, they perform a contemporary adaptation of his caricature through dance as a reflection of the past. While the audience sees the dancers carefully interpret what Handala might do in movement, the backdrop on the stage is of Handala walking through a forest, still barefoot and with no destination. In the second instance, during my interview with Ruanne Abou-Rahme, she mentioned that she had incorporated the image of Handala in one of her video montages without deliberately meaning to do so. She recalls, “It’s interesting how the work takes up a nature of its own. There’s this figure that you don’t see his face and he is looking away from the audience. And there was this woman in the audience who stood up and said, ‘You know, the figure really reminded me of Handala. Where you thinking of Handala when you made it?’ And what was really strange is that a day before, Basel and I went to an exhibition for Naji Al-Ali and I remember seeing a figure of Handala and thinking, ‘My God, there is a real connection between that and what we did!’ You know, it’s not like we sat there and said, let’s make a modern day Handala. But on some level, it was there.” As Abou-Rahme continued to think out loud, she concluded that perhaps when themes and images are so present in everyday life, they just re-emerge in the work that you do as artists. On the same note, she pointed out that in fact the Nakba and the images related to it, such as Handala, are ever more present

because it is not in the distant past at all. It remains the story of every Palestinian. In an interview with the Palestine-Israel Journal about the relevance of Al Nakba in the visual arts, Palestinian painter Suleiman Mansur emphasized the fact that the Palestinian artist “wanted our work to have an impact so we painted works that people could understand and relate to, from Nakba to occupation.”<sup>86</sup>

### III.1.3 Occupation

“without water, we stumbled into the hills  
a small child lay beside the road  
sucking the breast of its dead mother

outside Lydda  
soldiers ordered everyone  
to throw all valuables onto a blanket

one young man refused

almost casually,  
the soldier pulled up his rifle  
shot the man  
he fell, bleeding and dying  
his bride screamed and cried

he fell to the earth  
they fell in despair to the earth

the earth held them  
the earth soaked up their cries

their cries sank into the soil  
filtered into underground streams

fifty springs on  
their voices still rise from the earth”

From *Fifty Years On* by Lisa Suhair Majaj<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> "The Nakba and Palestinian Painting: Interview with Suleiman Mansur." *The Palestinian-Israel Journal* 5, no. 2 (1998) <http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=218>.

<sup>87</sup> Excerpt from Ahmed H Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the claims of memory*, (Columbia University Press, 2007), p xv. Included at the start of subsections to introduce the theme discussed following.

As Liza Takari, in *Living Palestine: Family, Survival, Resistance, and Mobility under Occupation* reminds us, the majority of works in the 1980's and onwards—due to the mass uprisings to the occupation—centered around the political agency of Palestinians and the ways in which they had begun to organize and resist the occupation.<sup>88</sup> It is with this same emphasis on resistance, resilience and self-determination that a large body of artwork today also centers its subject matter on the reality and consequences of the occupation. While certainly reflecting on the life before and events subsequent to the initial displacement of Palestinians, the vast body of artwork present among contemporary artists necessarily deal with highly politically charged content.

*Remi Kanazi, Poet/Spoken Word Artist, New York, USA*

As one of the most well-known and prolific poets and spoken word artist in the Palestinian diaspora, Remi Kanazi writes, "Artistic resistance has been an enormous part of Palestinian action over the last six decades, but it has gone relatively unnoticed in the West. My voice is clearly political, but it's presented through a cultural medium. It's a way for me to present my views on Palestine and struggle, while staying connected to the younger generation."<sup>89</sup> During my interview with Kanazi, he expanded on his decision in using art as a medium, "I see myself as an activist who uses art as a medium to get the message across and i'm really comfortable in that role. The reason that I don't write exclusively op-eds for Palestine is because i thought that this was a more effective role that I could play (...) the way that a spoken word poem can connect with a 19 year-old and connect with a 59 year-old. As part of the movement, we want people to sit on panels and writing for mainstream outlets, presenting a true and positive ethical voice on Palestine, but we also want people taking up

<sup>88</sup> Tarāki, Līzā. *Living Palestine, Family Survival, Resistance, And Mobility Under Occupation*. Syracuse Univ Pr, 2006. xi.

<sup>89</sup> Institute for Middle East Understanding (IMEU). "Remi Kanazi: Poet and Teacher." <http://imeu.net/news/article0019923.shtml>.

those artistic roles and flourishing in those fields while presenting an ethical voice on Palestine. I think that activism has to be at the core of art.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed Remi’s work epitomizes this notion of politicized art that he speaks about. Upon reading and listening to several of Remi’s poetry written over the past several years of his career, it becomes clear that the topics with which he deals with are continuously inspired by the political atmosphere in Palestine. In 2008 after Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, Remi wrote:

“(…) So his daughter studies mathematics  
Seven explosions times eight bodies  
Equals four Congressional resolutions  
Seven Apache helicopters times eight Palestinian villages  
Equals silence and a second Nakba  
Our birthrate minus their birthrate  
Equals one sea and 400 villages re-erected  
One state plus two peoples...and she can't stop crying  
Never knew revolution or the proper equation  
Tears at the paper with her fingertips  
Searching for answers  
But only has teachers  
Looks up to the sky and see stars of David demolishing  
squalor with hellfire missile.”<sup>91</sup>

Kanazi joins a roster of several other spoken word artists such as Suheir Hammad, Rafeef Ziadah and Omar Offendum. Each with their own style and reciting in both English and Arabic, these poets have become the link between the diaspora and Palestinian artists living under physical occupation.

### *The Jenin Freedom Theatre, Jenin*

The Freedom Theatre is located in Jenin Refugee Camp in the northern part of the West Bank. Over the past 40 years of military occupation, Jenin has lived through nearly daily

<sup>90</sup> Kanazi, Remi (freelance poet, New York), interview, Dec 27, 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Kanazi, Remi. *Poetic Injustice: Writings on Resistance and Palestine*. New York: RoR Publishing, 2011, p 1.

incursions and assassinations by the IDF (Israeli Defence Force). With the nearly half of the population of Jenin being under the age of fifteen<sup>92</sup>, the effects of numerous checkpoints, roadblocks, curfews and apartheid wall have been tremendously devastating alongside the frequent violence and aggression from the IDF. The theatre's (late) founder, Juliano Mer-Khamis, noticed that almost every child in the camp had witnessed actual or threatened death and as such had displayed symptoms of emotional problems such as nightmares, withdrawal, aggressive behaviour and other psychosomatic symptoms. When speaking with one of the theatre's senior level actors, Rabea Tarkin, he told me, "Juliano saw the theatre as a clinic for the sick. I was a fighter for seven years, with a gun. Then I became a fighter on the stage."<sup>93</sup> Juliano, after inspired with all the work that his mother, Arna Mer-Khamis, had done with the students with the theatre, utilizing theatre as a therapy, began to write productions that highlighted the fears and humiliations that were very much part of the lived experiences of those in Jenin Camp under occupation. When Juliano was assassinated by an unknown individual in April of 2011 just outside the theatre, his recruited actors went into another stage of shock. Having been a family for years, all members of the theatre mourned for the loss of their driving force and began fearing the realities of the occupation from which the walls of the theatre had kept them safe(r) for years. Just before the group was to go on tour earlier this fall, I was in Jenin watching them rehearse for 'Sho Kaman?' Nonverbal and comprised of loosely connected scenes, the play addresses the psychological impact of the occupation: doubts and pain and above all, an unforeseeable future.

Not surprisingly so, these feelings of unforeseeable futures were brought to surface when just two weeks the theatre group was set to leave for a tour in the United States, on

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<sup>92</sup> United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA). "Jenin Refugee Camp." <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=118>.

<sup>93</sup> Tarkan, Rabea (actor, The Freedom Theatre, Jenin), interview, July 24, 2011.



August 7, 2011 twenty-year-old actor, Rami Hwayel was arrested at a checkpoint for questioning. His phone had been tapped and his scheduled journey to visit his family in Nablus was intercepted by IDF soldiers who were given orders to question Rami regarding the death of his father-figure, director Juliano Mer-Khamis. After being detained for several weeks, Rami was released on September 6, 2011 and charged with entering Israel illegally with his friends several years ago.<sup>94</sup> Still, Rami and the other students of the theatre continued their efforts upon his release to go on tour, which they successfully managed in early October of 2011.

### III.1.4 Everyday Life

I was forced to leave my village  
but the village refused to abandon me  
my blood is there  
my soul is flying in the sky over the old streets

fifty years on

soul still seeks a sky

the walls were torn down long ago  
homes demolished  
rebuilding forbidden

but the stones remain

someone dug them from the soil  
with bare hands  
carried them across the fields

someone set the stones  
in place on the terraced slope

someone planted trees,  
dug wells

someone still waits in the fields all night  
humming the old songs quietly

someone watches stars chip darkness  
into dawn

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<sup>94</sup> "October 2011 Newsletter." *The Freedom Theatre*, October 2011. <http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/press/Newsletter-2011.pdf>.

someone remembers  
how stone holds dew through the summer night

how stone  
waits for the thirsty birds

From *Fifty Years On* by Lisa Suhair Majaj<sup>95</sup>

As the story of the Freedom Theatre exhibits, the occupation is very much part of the everyday life experience of Palestinian society, yet it is not the entirety of the Palestinian experience. Looking back at James Harithas' quote<sup>96</sup>, I make the argument that despite living dynamic and culturally rich lives, every Palestinian experience is unavoidably permeated with the effects of the occupation, and so its art reflects occupation even in its portrayal of everyday issues. How and in what form these issues are depicted in are changing dynamically, as the work of Bayan Shabib exhibits.

After speaking with director Edward Muallem, I had the opportunity to sit down with one of the theatre's writers and actress, Bayan Shabib. When discussing her past and present work, she opened up to me about her transformation as a writer and conceptual artist: "I used to write more about Nakba and the oral histories that were shared with me from my Grandmother. It was important! But then you can easily get stuck there and the victim identity becomes the hero and where do you with that? Where does the Palestinian cause go? Then I was challenged to present parts of the past that we don't get to hear about. I worked with a director that asked me to say more about my grandmother. She told me, 'Was she only a woman in a refugee camp? Wasn't she also the woman that lost the love of her life? I want to see a love scene—a Palestinian kiss!' Now in retrospect, I think that the art we produce today must reflect the universality of the Palestinian cause. Where do we connect with the world? It's not only about

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<sup>95</sup> Ahmed H Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the claims of memory*, (Columbia University Press, 2007), p xv.

<sup>96</sup> "Under conditions of occupation, everything is political."

the pain and agony, the martyrs and the mothers crying. This is old and a common image and we've become stereotyped."<sup>97</sup> In an effort to address the everyday life experiences within an evolving and progressing society, Bayan encouraged the work of more innovative styles such as spoken world, hip hop, contemporary dance and modern theatre to be given the platform when presenting Palestine internationally. She emphasized that "having new genres and styles doesn't erase our identity, but it helps us connect with the world." Her words echoed some of the statements made by *Sarreyet Ramallah's* Farah Saleh and I was interested to see what she thought stood in the way of this inclusion of modern arts. In responding to my curiosity, Shabib heavily criticized both the art community that was clinging onto the traditional styles in fear of community dissent as well as the pressure put on artists by international donors to represent the *real* Palestine. She gave an example from her experience directing *Romeo & Juliet* and her frustration when the donor party, with an undermining attitude, wanted her to put a separation wall in her production and make Romeo Israeli and Juliet Palestinian! She asked, "Why can't we as artists perform the classics without being made out to be the poor Palestinians?"

After speaking at length about the new directions she wishes to see the performing arts go in, she gave the example of '18+', a play directed by her students at the theatre—all of whom are under the age of 18. Watching 18+ in its closing night at the theatre, I saw the very real issues of 2011 come up in these short skits—social issues that address the politics of today, teenage romance, woman's issues, religious issues, the politics of international funding and conditional funding and trauma and memory. What became evident in viewing this production as well as the many other pieces referenced in this chapter is the way in which the use of motifs have take various means of representation but ultimately go full circle in creating a form of

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<sup>97</sup> Shabib, Bayan (writer/director, Ashtar Theatre, Ramallah), interview, August 3, 2011.

salvage ethnography in which artists and community members alike can negotiate the ways in which they remember their past and themselves become narrators in this process.

Recognizing the importance of newness and innovation amongst the majority of my interviewees and the current trend of artists to reappropriate the stories that have become classical in the popular narrative of Palestine, we may look to earlier artists to decide whether this is such a new concept after all. In 1988, Radi Shehadeh of Al-Hakawati's acting group, emphasized that,

“being grateful grandchildren of his [the storyteller], we have not only adopted his beautiful name but have attempted to breathe new life into him...[T]he reliance on tradition and folklore can trap one in imitation and repetition. Rather it was necessary to find the essential in folklore...molding it into a new form appropriate to our modern age.”<sup>98</sup>

In light of Radi's belief and the trajectory of innovation amongst artists in Palestine and in the Palestinian diaspora, it can be argued that while tradition and the process of salvage ethnography is central to securing a narrative of injustice and continued suffering, contemporary artists and their projects have been committed to new styles of displaying old messages in new forms.

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<sup>98</sup> Slyomovics, Susan. *Object of Memory: Arab and Jew narrate the Palestinian Village*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the research process that enabled me to investigate the role of memory and politics in the contemporary performing arts in Palestine, I believe it to have been an enriching experience that emphasized the character of political art with which I anticipated to interact with. However, my findings were not necessarily as expected.

When formulating my hypothesis, I expected to find that despite the spacial and temporal distance from these pivotal events, and in this case Al Nakba, artists will reproduce many of the literary symbols found in the earlier works of poets such as Mahmoud Darwish as well as visual markers, such as stage productions which depict timeless symbols of resistance (e.g. Handala and the olive tree) and thus participate in creating a salvage ethnography and preserve individual and collective ideas of Palestinian identity. While this has become an obvious trademark of the arts today, the interviews that I conducted produced a new vigor that was not anticipated.

The concerns about “getting stuck” in traditional narratives and the need to reappropriate those age-old styles were similarly echoed by the majority of my interviewees. While the necessity to participate as record keeper as part of the salvage ethnography process was at the forefront of each of the artist’s work, so was the necessity to breath new life into art forms that had relied on similar stories. Furthermore, my expectations on the artist-activist role were reaffirmed by the enthusiasm with which each of the performers spoke when asking them about how their work intertwines with the human rights cause within Palestine.

In conclusion, this study of art, politics and memory has hopefully offered new thoughts on the role of the arts, and specifically that of the performing arts as an agent in social mobilization and record-keeping of everyday life. Of course, due to the scope of this research project, many topics were left unexplored or briefly discussed. It would be useful for future projects to explore in more depth the interactions between Palestinians in the diaspora with those living under physical occupation. While my research supports their current collaborations, there may be room for exploration of differences that may present challenges to representation or difference in ideology. Furthermore, research similar to mine conducting within Arabic-only speaking populations may produce new ideas about the direction in which art is moving and possible reflections on the contemporary arts that would be less discouraging. Finally, this project is only a minor effort to make clear the state of the arts in Palestine today. As my research did not expand to Gaza or parts of 1948 Palestine, this work cannot speak for the experiences of individuals or groups which were not represented. It is my hope that the theoretical background and approach of this research, along with the few revelations made, may make way for a more expansive research in more parts of Palestine and the diaspora.

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