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The Palestinian Perspective: Understanding the Legacy of al-Nakba Through the Palestinian Narrative

By Muhammad Jamal Saadah

The memories carried by the Palestinian people can be understood in two forms. First, there are the memories as a result of direct trauma received through displacement and death throughout the history of the Zionist colonial project. The Palestinian Nakba, as but one example, highlights the extent of such memories through the traumatizing military massacres and forced expulsion of over 750,000 Palestinians at the hands of Zionist militant groups. These direct memories are carried from generation to generation and transform into a looming sense of collective melancholy experienced by the later generations both in historical Palestine as well as those living in diaspora. There is a clear disconnect in historical academia as people try to understand the suffering of the Palestinians through questionable historical frameworks rather than a lens that accurately represents the memories and trauma of the Palestinians as they had and continue to experience. As a result, Palestinians today find their memories of trauma challenged and in some cases outright denied via these historical frameworks and atmospheres produced by the Israeli government. The question is then how could we be able to understand trauma and memory as it relates to the Palestinians? Throughout this thesis we will explore several different forms of translating and transmitting Palestinian memory.

Introduction

Palestinians acknowledge May 15th as the commemoration of the Palestinian Nakba, which refers to a series of genocidal massacres across the land of historical Palestine in 1948. 'Nakba' in the Arabic language literally translates to 'catastrophe', and this word was attributed to the series of events in 1948 that resulted in the deaths of thousands and the expulsion of over 750,000 Palestinians, leading to over 6 million Palestinians currently living in diaspora. The Nakba was categorized by the violent demolition and seizure of hundreds of Palestinian villages via mass killing and forced displacement at the hands of Zionists militant groups, which later became the backbones of the Israeli state. Samera Esmeir opens her essay in *Nakba, Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*: "The year of the Nakba, 1948, was a year of conquest. It was a year in which death and destruction were imposed, though not to a perfection, on what had previously existed."¹ The Palestinian communities, especially those living in diaspora, carry their collective memories of the Nakba from generation to generation; strengthening their overall memory of Palestine in the process. Despite this effort, there are several challenges historians face when addressing the Palestinian Catastrophe, which are centered around the ideas of witnessing and memories.

¹ Esmeir, Samera, and Lila Abu-Lughod. "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura." Essay. In *Nakba, Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, edited by Ahmad H. Sa'adi, 247–69. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007, 247.

Palestinians today find their memories of trauma, as well as their general culture and history, challenged by the historical frameworks and atmospheres produced and used by the Israel state.

The Palestinian story poses several interesting anthropological questions, regarding the idea of a stolen and hidden narrative in relation to trauma: How are the memories of al-Nakba preserved and passed down? What does it mean to have an apparatus working against you? We soon learn that the identity and existence of the Palestinians has been under attack by the crimes against fact as memories of al-Nakba are being denied. Similar to Saidiya Hartman's realization in *Lose Your Mother*, there is the case of the fragmented archive where the record of al-Nakba and the events are incomplete and memories become ultimately lost.² Author Gayl Jones also explores these questions around generational trauma and memory through her novel *Corregidora*, which explores the life of Ursa and her task to carry the memories of her enslaved women ancestors; preserving them and passing them on.³ As we expand upon these themes shared within the black American narrative and history of trauma and apply it within the context of the Palestinian Nakba and diaspora, we are able to explore the act of remembrance when one's memory is held by the enemy, as well as how the colonized can break free from the colonial narrative where their minds above all else has been a target of colonization and oppression by the colonial regime.

The Zionist colonial narrative operates in opposition to the truths and memories of al-Nakba, and therefore acts against the lives of Palestinians. Nevertheless, it is regarded as a 'truth' which creates a framework of 'history' that is based on myth and is used as a weapon against the indigenous Palestinian people. In order to understand the power of 'history' and explore the means to change it, we must look at the origins of the traditional historical account of Israel. This account was pushed by the Zionist communities and government since the day of al-Nakba, and lacked real archival record. This was due to the fact that the documents relating to military operations in 1948, evidence that the events of al-Nakba were calculated and pre-determined, were actually classified by the government following the British model of the "thirty-year rule", and were not released until 1988. For three decades after al-Nakba, official accounts were meant to utilize a romantic and mythical account regarding the founding of Israel. With regards to al-Nakba, there was an historical grey area with no clear story. That is not to say that the Palestinians have not carried their own stories in the form of oral histories/testimonies, however, those stories were not treated as legitimate evidence and were considered romanticizations of their own.

After the archives were eventually released in the 80s, a minority group of historians — called "New Historians" — emerged and challenged the traditional Israeli perspective; making several contradictions to the 'official' account of al-Nakba and the foundations upon which the Israeli state was built. They used the released documents to show that the Palestinians did not leave by their own free will, but were instead ethnically cleansed and expelled from their homes as their villages were burnt to the ground.⁴ This is not to say that 'history' has become a friend to the Palestinian voice; far from it, as a matter of fact. The story of the New Historians does show how the apparatus of history could be changed to work for the Palestinian memory and narrative rather than against it. Despite the efforts of the New Historians and the declassification of the archives, the traditional account remains official in most case studies and continues to foster an environment of debasement, denial, and the suppression of Palestinian memories and identity.

Esmeir expands on this idea of denial with the case of Theodore Katz, a graduate student from the University of Haifa who wrote an MA thesis in 1998, utilizing various Israeli archives while also taking into consideration a Palestinian narrative. Katz's thesis was concerned with the 'Arab exodus' — as al-Nakba has been referred to by Zionist historians — and the displacement of several Palestinian villages. Initially, Katz's thesis was praised by some academics as a well-balanced account of the history of the 'Arab exodus'. Unfortunately, Katz was faced with a libel lawsuit from the Alexandroni Brigade Veterans' Association⁵ due to his labling of the events as 'massacres', or rather, "exceptional acts of killing", having taken place in the village of Tantura. These labels were mainly drawn from Palestinian survivors' testimonies. Since this ran against the traditional Israeli account, and the veterans deny any massacre having taken place, Katz's thesis was under public debate and Katz himself faced a major legal challenge. In the end, although Katz settled the libel case, his degree was revoked

2 Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

3 Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975.

4 Pappé, Ilan. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2006.

5 The Alexandroni Brigade was an IDF military brigade which was involved in the 1948 war and was also responsible for the massacre of Tantura village.

and his thesis was taken off the university's library shelves. This legal battle was essentially a means of legally challenging the Palestinian narrative of the massacre of Tantura. Rather than a case against libel, this was a court case about the historical validity of the events of al-Nakba and the memories of trauma carried by the Palestinian survivors. Esmeir notes that the key strategy for the plaintiffs was disqualifying the testimonies of Tantura's survivors, making the world forget about the atrocities that took place.⁶

The testimonies by Katz's interviewees were debunked by the 'official' accounts. These official accounts are not only drawn from the testimonies of the veterans, but also from the fact that there is a lack of primary sources describing that a massacre actually took place in Tantura. Esmeir explains that this is due to the fact that the Tantura massacre was denied and covered-up almost immediately via the literal destruction and censorship of those very primary sources.⁷ Considering both the memories of the traumatized slaves which Hartman and Jones explore as well as the memories of the expelled Palestinians, we can see a theme where the memories of the oppressed are, quite literally, stolen, denied, and subsequently erased by the oppressors.

As we see with the case of Katz' thesis, the court recognizes the Zionist narrative as the default, unless there is established an entirely accurate and detailed picture of the contrary Palestinian narrative that is also accounted for by the Israeli archives. Since there is a lack of written primary sources from the Israeli archives, this picture had to be drawn from spoken testimonies of Tantura's survivors. Essentially, oral history is the only real way that the memories of Tantura can be preserved. We see similar instances, as we later explore, in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* as Ursa's family pass down and preserve their memories through oral histories, albeit having a somewhat different effect on the mind and bodies of those remembering. Jones expresses an importance of preserving personal histories through telling stories across generations: "My great-grandmama told my grandmother the part she lived through that my grandmother didn't live through and my grandmother told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget".⁸ Likewise, Palestinian memories are also passed down, in a generationally, within this context of retold stories and oral histories.

This posed a very troublesome legal problem, as oral history could easily be labeled as hearsay and therefore become inadmissible as evidence. Katz's interviews and the court testimonies by his interviewees revealed some contradictions and lack of order in the accounts of Tantura's survivors. On the surface, this Palestinian narrative could be compared to the issues Hartman faces while attempting to narrate the Middle Passage, in the sense that both the Palestinian narrative and African slave narrative appear incomplete via fragmented archives. In the case of Katz's thesis, we see a direct legal challenge against the memories of trauma for Tantura's survivors. Yet, it is important to note that the survivors have not lost their own personal memories.

The 'Tantura Case', is a perfect example of the inability of an Israeli courtroom to listen to and understand the memories of Palestinian survivors: "To understand survivors' memories of the massacre, of this very specific incident of death, one has to understand the partial death of human relationships that Palestinian society was subjected to following the 1948 war and the establishment of the State of Israel".⁹ Esmeir explains that the memories of the Palestinian survivors of Tantura village must be understood as ongoing memories. That is, these memories exist between the past and the future rather than on a linear temporal scale: "The past is relived in the present and does not come to an end in the present". Although 1948 is the year of the Nakba, the trauma is ongoing as the survivors continue to survive.¹⁰

Esmeir's understanding of the Palestinian memory falls in line with some of the ideas which author Gayl

6 Esmeir, Samera, and Lila Abu-Lughod. "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura." Essay. In *Nakba, Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, edited by Ahmad H. Sa'adi, 247-69. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007, 249-253.

7 Esmeir, Samera, and Lila Abu-Lughod. "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura." Essay. In *Nakba, Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, edited by Ahmad H. Sa'adi, 247-69. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007, 262.

8 Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975, 9.

9 Esmeir, Samera, and Lila Abu-Lughod. "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura." Essay. In *Nakba, Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, edited by Ahmad H. Sa'adi, 247-69. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007; 256 - 369.

10 Esmeir, Samera, and Lila Abu-Lughod. "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura." Essay. In *Nakba, Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, edited by Ahmad H. Sa'adi, 247-69. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007; 256 - 369.

Chapter 3: Route 181 and the Impact of Film on Palestinian Memory

When he filmed Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Israel-Palestine (2004) together with Eyal Sivan, an Israeli director, he was reminded of a lesson from Jean-Luc Godard, that they were there to receive and not impose. Together, with love for their country and people, and for a history that is shared not divided, they set out for two months in the summer of 2002 to film. They agreed to have the same approach to everyone they'd interview, Palestinians and Israelis regardless of religion, along the green line – Route 181, named by the UN's peacekeeping treaty that split the land in two.

- Rebecca Jane Arthur⁴⁵

Route 181, Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel succeeds where most forms of visual media fail when it comes to providing a lens to properly comprehend the Palestinian struggle in terms of their memory and trauma in an academic and scholarly manner. That is not to say that the film itself was received in a positive light. While it is regarded as a groundbreaking piece of work to academics and scholars who value the Palestinian narrative, it is met with disdain from the broader audience of historians and film critics. This is for the most part due to the impact that *Route 181* has on the mode of discussing Israel-Palestine. As we've explored, there are many different challenges that the memories of al-Nakba face in legal and official grounds. The traditional Zionist narrative is one that romanticizes the founding of the State of Israel and forgoes the tragedies - and memories of the tragedies - suffered by the Palestine people which served as Israel's foundation. Considering the film's role in exploring the Palestinian narrative, *Route 181* is unapologetic in the way it captivates the tragedies and suffering the Palestinians face on a daily basis.

Controversy and the Zionist narrative

The Zionist narrative isn't only within written academia, but film as well. Writer Jack G. Shaheen explains the Israeli/Zionist narrative of film as one that presents the Israelis as the victims of a violent onslaught by the Palestinians who are the victimizers.⁴⁶ This superficial narrative within films and documentaries, such as *West Bank Story*, offers nothing to the overall narrative of the conflict besides distorted half-truths and clear bias in favor of the military state of Israel. Rather than obtaining an insider's perspective with interlocutors, these films focus on presenting the Israeli narrative that subordinates the Palestinians as less-than and dispossesses them from their homes. *West Bank Story* in particular arranges shots in certain juxtaposed scenes that present the IDF as just in their cause for land-seizure from the Palestinians; essentially making the audience root for those actually taking the land as opposed to those who are having their land taken.⁴⁷ The Zionist narrative is fundamentally broken if we want to use it to gain not only an accurate portrayal, but and accurate *account* of what is truly going on in Palestine. This narrative fuels a convoluted system where Palestinians are dehumanized and stereotyped, leading to a desperate need in the realm of visual media for a film that manages to go against this troublesome narrative.

Any question of this narrative is met with strict criticism, as explored through the story of Theodore Kaz, and is ultimately 'debunked' via the Zionist frameworks in which academia in Israel operates from. In fact, Eyal Siva eventually 'fled' Israel as a result of socio-political stress due to his label as an 'anti-Zionist academic' which was ultimately the fate of many progressive scholars in Israel starting from the 1980s. With that said, the State of Israel places a great deal of emphasis on the manner in which it preserves the legitimacy of the Jewish State, through creating a society with one central view and belief in regards to the history and formation of their own country. This is the tradition Zionist and Israeli narrative, as prefaced in the introduction, that works through the frameworks of politics and academic history yet is ironically anti-history and instead based upon myths; as outlined by the New Historians such as Illan Pappé. Therefore, a film such as *Route 181* is in direct violation of that very narrative and as such has been the recipient of unjust and undeserved scrutiny.

As such, *Route 181* is a rare film. Rare not only in the sense that there are few films like it, but also in the sense of rarity in supply. That is to say that coming into possession of this film is a challenge in and

⁴⁵ Arthur, Rebecca Jane. "Nearby" Sabzian, 2018.

⁴⁶ Shaheen, Jack G. *The TV Arab*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984; 98

⁴⁷ Shaheen, Jack G. *The TV Arab*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984; 95

of itself; scouring the internet for a valid form of the film in the correct region-lock and is relatively inexpensive. It is because of this rarity and criticism that the film itself has never truly been a center of academic or anthropological analysis; despite its major achievements as an ethnographic film/documentary.

In 2002, filmmakers Michel Khelifi and Eyal Sivan spent two months traveling together through Israel-Palestine along the border of the 1947 partition plan from the UN General Assembly Resolution 181. Throughout the film, they interviewed both Israeli Jews as well as ethnic Palestinians, and uncovered very powerful and moving accounts and testimonies regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict, especially in regards to the 1948 war and al-Nakba. Despite its critical acclaim in some areas, many individuals and organizations who share the traditional Zionist narrative felt threatened by the film which led to some screenings, such as the ones in the Cinema Du Rel festival, to be cancelled by foreign cultural ministries⁴⁸. The film struck a great deal of controversy amongst such foreign ministries who aim to appease the established Zionist narrative, with criticisms ranging from it being an “insult to peace” to borderline “anti-semitic” or “judeophobic”, despite the fact that the co-director was himself a Jewish Israeli.⁴⁹⁵⁰ Worldwide, *Route 181* has been the subject of both harsh criticism and borderline censorship; which only aids in the broader censorship of the film in academia.

Route 181 & its filmic modes

To better appreciate the impact that *Route 181* had on the Palestinian narrative, we must contextualize the film-making motifs that Sivan and Khleifi seem to implement as drawn from notabile ethnographic filmmakers. To start, there is the notion of ‘event sequence film’ that was introduced in the late 60s and early 70s by filmmakers John Marshall and Timothy Asch in particular. Essentially, they were concerned with the ‘truthfulness’ of ethnographic film, as they noted several problems that prevented a filmmaker from crafting an accurate portrayal, or filmic ‘reportage’, of a group of people.⁵¹ Ultimately, they are concerned with how a film conveys what is happening. This leads us to a series of questions and problems: What do we include? When do we start or stop? What is the position of the filmmaker? The latter is in regard to the filmmaker’s position as either an “insider” or “outsider”, which affects what is filmed as well as the overall narrative of the film. ‘Event sequence film’ refers to the methodological response to these concerns, which aimed to structure the film with events before the camera. In other words, this method allowed Marshall and Asch to shift the filmic narrative to follow an event that is happening in real time rather than the filmmaker’s own perspective or dictation. In a sense, ‘event sequence films’ are directed by the events themselves as the disputes themselves take the audience on a journey of their origin, discourse, and eventual climax.

The basis of *Route 181* definitely shares a similar motif to the work of Marshall and Asch as it pertains to ‘event sequence film’, albeit somewhat indirectly. Sivan and Khleifi had a very simple premise: a two-month unadulterated journey in Palestine-Israel. Regarding the mass criticism the filmmakers face, against the underlying ‘agenda’ or biased ‘perspective’, those stem from a depressing misunderstanding of what and whom the film represents. That is not to say that there is no ‘goal’ of the film, only that the filmmakers themselves are not infringing on the subject matter and rather share the drive of Marshall and Asch to show the story as it is told in front of the camera as a sequence of events. In particular, film critic Harlan Jacobson refers to *Route 181* as a case of a ‘decontextualization of history’ where there is no mention of the historical nature of Palestine-Israel as it pertains to the geopolitical contexts of European and US involvement/influence.⁵² This is a common criticism towards the film: that it lacks context. The only way to aid in context, in the way that these critics seem to value, would be for a direct involvement by the filmmakers themselves, thus jeopardizing their relationship to the camera and to whom they film. Furthermore, the ‘history’ that such critics so desperately want can only conform to the historical narrative that debases the Palestinians of their memory and voice. As we’ve explored, the Palestinian narrative is a rare instance where ‘historical context’ and its framework is incapable of representing it and is often used against it. A ‘decontextualization of history’ is not some fault of the filmmakers, but rather a means to avoid forming a skewed narrative that takes away from the story that the interlocutors show and tell. This is what

48 Laurier, Joanne. “San Francisco International Film Festival 2004-Part 1.” World Socialist Web Site, 20 Apr. 2004.

49 Jacobson, Harlan. “Road to Perdition: Route 181.” Film Comment, Jan-Feb. 2005.

50 Pinto, Goel. “The Storm Over ‘Route 181’.” Haaretz, 18 Mar. 2004.

51 Asch, Timothy, John Marshall, and Peter Spier. 1973. “Ethnographic Film: Structure and Function.” In Annual Review of Anthropology (2): 179-187; 180.

52 Jacobson, Harlan. “Road to Perdition: Route 181.” Film Comment, Jan-Feb. 2005.

makes *Route 181* and its depiction of Palestine-Israel stand out from most visual media and what allows the film to establish a platform for Palestinians to speak without any overarching constraints.

Route 181 also addresses the narrative culture of Israel-Palestine through broadening the ethnographic representation through a variety of perspectives. Faye Ginsburg coined the term ‘parallax effect’ as a means of introducing the perspective of filmed indigenous peoples (i.e the film’s subject) into the mix of the ethnographic and filmic perspective.⁵³ In other words, the ‘parallax effect’ describes culture as a three dimensional phenomenon. Within the context of ethnographic film and filmmakers, the ‘parallax effect’ has significant implications to the way a film is made. First, different filming techniques can be implemented to establish a clear insider’s perspective; this could be via camera styles or the relationship and dialogue between the filmmaker and interlocutors. The most significant take away from the ‘parallax effect’ is that it makes collaboration between the filmmaker and ethnographic subject a total necessity in conducting such a project. Apart from being the filmmakers, Sivan and Khleifi play an important role as insiders. Eyal Sivan and Michel Khelifi, having been born and raised in the society of Israel-Palestine, are a part of the narrative culture which they aim to film and represent. Their roles as insiders does not contradict their roles as filmmakers in any way, but rather builds upon it and establishes a clearer ethnographic lens where the audience can better understand the narrative from the interlocutors perspective.

With the filmic modes of *Route 181* in mind, it becomes clear that the film itself seems to follow the footsteps of filmmaker Robert Gardner with respect to the idea of ‘sensory ethnography’ as it pertains to this kind of documentary. The idea of ‘sensory ethnography’ as a methodology refers to a multimodal, or multi-sense, approach to ethnographic film. Many filmmakers consider the world to be understood through many different channels and not simply through image and word. In other words, filmmakers use multi-sensical data as a means to create a holistic account of an experience, event, group of people, etc. It is here where we can consider the works of Sarah Pink and David MacDougall, implementing multisensory experiential data to immerse the viewer into the film itself. On the other side of the spectrum, we see Robert Gardner who is more concerned with the aesthetics of a film and how that relates to the sensual film experience, the immersion of psyche and sound. Consider the Gardener’s film *Forest of Bliss*.⁵⁴ Previous documentaries have constructed their own realities through narration or other filmic modes, however, Gardner employs aesthetics in a way to let the film speak for itself without the aid of cuts or narration.

Now we can consider the legacy left by Robert Gardner, as it applies to ethnographic film and filmmakers. In summary, there is a priority of the aesthetic-sensual that allows Gardner to tell a story without saying anything, which ultimately sets him apart from practicing anthropologists. *Route 181* displays a similar priority as shown by the long single-takes of driving through the countryside as well as a tendency to keep the interactions between themselves and the interlocutors relatively raw. Sivan and Khelifi, similar to Gardner, have a desire to immerse the audience within their film in a way that presents an unabridged story and discussion.

Route 181 is a mixture of various anthropological/ethnographic filmic motifs, as it combines the legacies of past filmmakers who valued an unabridged insider’s perspective to the ethnographic subject. It is not what the film says that makes *Route 181* stand out as a means of exploring the Palestinian narrative, but rather how it deconstructs the troublesome framework which historians and politicians force Palestinian memories to conform to. In this sense, *Route 181* is not only a groundbreaking film by its own merits, but most importantly it manages to provide a lens that we - those who want to represent and understand the Palestinians - can actually use accurately.

Deconstruction of the Zionist narrative

Despite the tribal allegiances imposed on us, which we reject, and armed with our common experience, we decided to return to our country. By doing so, we wanted to unveil the geographic and mental reality in which the men and women of Palestine-Israel are living today.... Our aim was to break with the usual approach in which people, places or events are filmed only because they coincide with the filmmaker’s ideological disposition, where nothing is really illuminated other than already familiar political discourses

53 Ginsburg, Faye. “Rethinking the “Voice Of God” in Indigenous Australia: Secrecy, Exposure, and the Efficacy of Media,” in Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moore, eds. *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere*, 188-206. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2006.

54 Gardner, Robert. *Forest of Bliss*. 1986.

or clichés on what is called the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.... We wished to construct a film which resists the idea that the only thing Israelis and Palestinians can do together is fight wars until they are both driven to oblivion.

- Sivan and Khleifi, *Route 181*

Route 181 shows a the harsh reality of Israeli society, and deconstructs nearly every statement and myth that the Zionist narrative attempts to produce. This alternative narrative shows that the foundations of Israel are deeply rooted in white supremacy and ethnocentrism, rather than its contemporary romanticized origins. The themes regarding Israel's foundations, as a racist state operating through means of settler-colonialism, is a general theme throughout each part of the film. Sivan and Khleifi show this in a very subtle way through their interviews. In particular, an employee of the Jewish National Fund⁵⁵ was interviewed by Sivan and Khleifi at a JNF museum:

JNF Employee: There was an Arab village here before 1948 called Kfar Huldeh. It hasn't existed since the War of Independence. You want to know where this land came from? Ur was the land of Arab villages. After the conquest, they fled or were chased out. The State took over the land. The land was legally bought and paid for in hard cash. Abraham himself bought the Cave of Machpelah. But let's leave it at that. How far back in history can you go?⁵⁶

"How far back in history can you go?" A very interesting remark considering —as our filmmakers brought up — that he went back 3000 years during that same statement. The Zionist narrative doesn't only contradict the truths behind Palestine suffering and memory, but it also contradicts itself. On one hand, the Zionist account has no problem justifying the violent colonial actions which Israel committed and continues to commit through the romanticization of the 'ancient promise'; that is how God literally promised Palestine to the Jewish people thousands of years ago. Yet, at the same time this very account fails to consider the events of al-Nakba as it was too long ago to matter today. Many of the other Israeli interlocutors share the same sentiment: "You have to think of the future, not the past". The framework of history which the majority of the world uses to understand Israel and Palestine is fundamentally broken. Not just in terms of failing to recognize the Palestinian perspective, but falling into logical holes and breaking the rules that it establishes. The irony in this interaction with the JNF employee was that he made this very statement while a poster was behind him titled "The Dream takes Root".

Regarding the specific histories of al-Nakba, the filmmakers soon discover that many Zionist Israelis, such as curator of the Nir Am Reservoir's museum, the 'Palestinians' are all but a forgotten group of people who have fled and 'disappeared' from the land. The curator recounts the history of Israel, drawing from his experience as an officer of Haganah, and paints himself as a pioneer. The conversation between the curator and director got heated as the topic of settlements on the Gaza strip was brought up. The curator denied any presence of Israeli settlements in Gaza; however, he later corrected himself after being pressed, claiming there are "some but they are negligible".⁵⁷ The filmmaker brought up the massacres of al-Nakba, to which the curator denied and called 'nonsense' only to angrily respond:

CURATOR: The Arab neighbors need to understand that in the war against Israel they will not taste victory. Okay? They will not win. It will only lead to Arab extermination, much worse than any previous ones. Then there'll be peace.⁵⁸

The Palestinians are ignored, yet at the same time are referred to by the same people as Israelis bear witness to the internal problem of 'the Arabs' — as the Palestinians are called. The Palestinians are not only of a

55 The Jewish National Fund was founded in 1901 to buy and develop land in historical Palestine for Jewish settlements leading up to Israel's establishment in 1948.

56 Khleifi, Michel & Sivan, Eyal. *Route 181 Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. 2003.

57 Haganah was a Zionist paramilitary group that operated in historical Palestine, playing a key role in the massacres of al-Nakba. After 1948, Haganah was integrated into the IDF.

58 Khleifi, Michel & Sivan, Eyal. *Route 181 Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. 2003.

lower status, but are seen and treated by Israel as sub-human and forced into a paradoxical status of existence and nonexistence within the overall Zionist society of Israel. As the film's directors pass through military checkpoints, they interview the IDF soldiers who make statements such as "we're human, unlike the Arabs." For members of the Israeli military to say such a thing shows the value that Israel has towards the life of Palestinian — virtually none. Of course, the Palestinian interlocutors don't treat the conflict as a battle between 'Arabs' and 'Jews' but instead a struggle of resistance against the occupier by the occupied: "Regarding segregation, the problem isn't that the Jews can't live with Arabs — they lived together before. It's the problem between the occupier and the occupied".⁵⁹ With this in mind, the film's significance comes from providing this alternate take on the Palestine-Israeli conflict; one that isn't rooted in ancient feuds nor a battle between faiths. The Zionist narrative would have us believe that Arabs and Jews could never get along and that the conflict is rooted in the anti-semitic drive from the Palestinians against the Israelis. *Route 181* shows us that the Palestinians view the conflict as a struggle for human rights under the harsh rule of military occupation.

The Zionist narrative is especially strong in convincing those committing acts of violence are doing it for a just cause and that the victims are simply *victimizers*. In the second part of the film, we see an IDF commander sharing his tastes in literature with the directors:

IDF COMMANDER: I'd gladly read "The Trial" again. Have you read it? It corresponds well to the present situation in the world and in Israel. Our world is Kafkaesque. And "Before the Law"? Have you read it? It's about a man who confronts a guard of a door that exists only for him. Kafka's a giant, one of the greatest. He waits at the door. He waits until he's about to die and the guard says that the door is for him alone and that he must break the law to enter. But there is no law. Descartes... Greek philosopher. 19th century philosophy. Not very consistent. 20th century philosophy, Levinas, Buber. You know Buber? What else? I'm religious, I read a lot on these subjects. Maimonides, all those who speak of that. That's all.

FILMMAKER: You know "The Banality of Evil"?

IDF COMMANDER: Who's it by? Is it a book or a concept?

FILMMAKER: Hannah Arendt.

IDF COMMANDER: Never heard of her.

The filmmaker mentioned Hannah Arendt and her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* which describes the monstrous small deeds performed by regular people which add up to an even greater evil. The IDF Commander remains oblivious to the connection as he and his fellow soldiers confine people into their homes via curfew and restrict access to roads by ambulances and firetrucks. Surrounded by guns, tanks, and other forms of heavy artillery, the Israeli military refuses to acknowledge their actions as inherently violent in nature nor that they feed into the evil against the Palestinian people. The irony is startling, but with Arendt's work in mind we can consider that the oppression against Palestinians has not only been normalized, but has become a characteristic of every seemingly 'normal' Jewish Israeli: "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal".⁶⁰

Of course, such actions have been committed by Zionists nearly a century prior as we consider the events of al-Nakba. Many of the members of the Zionist's military forces, such as Haganah, were not soldiers to begin with, but were mostly 'normal'. One of these individuals, seventy year old Aaron Greenberg who was apart of Israel's 'Operation Matateh', was interviewed by Sivan and Khleifi, and their testimony was shocking to say the least; not in material, but in how it was presented:

59 Khleifi, Michel & Sivan, Eyal. *Route 181 Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. 2003.

60 Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1964; 129.

AARON GREENBERG: We swept them out. We needed them out of the region to create a Jewish territorial continuity. We formed a chain. We were armed, of course. When they saw us coming they fled. We were the Iftah Regiment, a battalion of 1500 men. It's not complicated. We gave chase, we advanced. Pushing them to Jordan. Once in Jordan, they couldn't come back. It didn't take us long to create an Arab-free region.

Greenberg recounts on his crimes not with pride nor with disdain, but rather in a completely nonchalant manner. As we were children playing in the background, we are told this brutal story of forced displacement of Palestinians during al-Nakba. Of course, this was justified by Greenberg, as he believes that the Palestinians — be it the men, women, or children — would retaliate if given the opportunity. Operation Matateh was one of the many military operations that took place in 1948 which had the aim of displacing the Palestinian population. Like al-Nakba, the name 'Matateh' has a special meaning of its own.

AARON GREENBERG: Matateh means a broom, to clean the earth, because we swept out the Arabs, especially the nomads. We had to chase them. The aim was to get rid of them for Jewish settlements and kibbutz. The land went to kibbutz and moshavs.⁶¹

The romanticized myths surrounding the birth of the Israeli state are deconstructed as a result of the several interviews within the film *Route 181*, as we see that the true history of Israel is not centered around an 'ancient promise' but rather a drive to ethnically cleanse the land of historical Palestine. The Palestinians are not only treated as if they do not belong, but also as if they have no right to exist and live in Palestine.

Route 181 does not only succeed bringing reality into the Zionist narrative, but also in placing a Palestinian narrative in its place. The film gives a voice for the Palestinian people to speak and a platform for them to remember and express their memories, achieving a Palestinian perspective that has been absent. Several of the interlocutors are themselves ethnic Palestinians and share stories about themselves, their families, and their own histories. Of course, this isn't a platform exclusively for resistance but for melancholy as well. As the filmmakers pass through construction sites of settlement walls, they note that there are Palestinian workers among the labor force. This is a devastating realization to the filmmakers as they see an oppressed people working for the oppressive state (i.e the colonial regime) as they build the settlements where the colonizers live and the walls that further segregate the two peoples: "We live in this State. We're Israeli nationals. Why shouldn't we do this work for a living?"⁶² This scene is as confusing as it is depressing, as the Palestinians living under Israeli sovereignty have a sense of shame regarding their own ethnicity and background. There are many psychological side-effects to colonization which we see in Palestine, where the Palestinians become ashamed of who they are; desperate to belong to Israel as they are citizens of the state, yet despite their efforts to hide their own 'arabness' they will never achieve such status. There is a sense of confusion that one gets while watching *Route 181*, as the relationships and dialogues are not simple by any means, yet they all share a commonality — being symptoms of an oppressive colonial regime that lacks an outlet to properly examine and understand it. Despite the confusion one may feel, there is no real contradiction in play, as opposed to the frameworks in which the Zionist narrative operates. Ultimately, *Route 181* achieves the impossible as it explains the histories of Israel and Palestine and the memories of the Palestinians through a proper lens where every voice is heard and every dialogue is considered.

Each demolished home is a memory lost forever!

- Elderly Israeli Citizen⁶³

As we've explored, there is a clear effort to erase the memories of al-Nakba —and thereby the memories

61 Khleifi, Michel & Sivan, Eyal. *Route 181 Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. 2003.

62 Khleifi, Michel & Sivan, Eyal. *Route 181 Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. 2003.

63 Khleifi, Michel & Sivan, Eyal. *Route 181 Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. 2003.

of the Palestinians — similar to the act of ‘forgetting’ which Sayida Hartman experiences throughout her own research. The film shows us that this is a conscious act that is not only acknowledged by the Jewish-Israeli population, but actually praised by them. While older Zionists reminisce on the horrid military actions of the Israeli military during the wars of 1948 and 1967, they make such statements with pride and gloat about their own atrocities against the Palestinian people. The demolished homes of villages that were in some instances literally razed to the ground is one of the strongest tactics that the Israeli government used - and continues to use - against Palestinian memory. The houses and villages are not only rooted in material structure, but contain an obvious symbolic element of one’s own home and familial memory. It was where they were born, where their parents were born, where their grandparents were born, and so on. The goal of destroying the home is to sever this connection between the Palestinian and the land of Palestine through erasing this very sense of memory and legacy.

Of course, the destruction of homes is also a form of collective punishment against a specific Palestinian community: “The demolition of homes is a form of collective punishment — the rape of an entire people. Every Israeli soldier is a boss unto himself.”⁶⁴ In the event of imprisonment of one of their own members, a village is usually subjected to military harassment and in extreme cases events such as the ones described in the film. Collective punishment would ultimately lead to a collective trauma on the ‘psyche’ of the Palestinian people, affecting them psychologically through the manifestations of specific symptoms.

64 Khleifi, Michel & Sivan, Eyal. *Route 181 Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. 2003.

Conclusion

The Palestinian people experience trauma in many different forms, however, the commonality between the physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma which they endure is the fact that they are all sources of settler-colonialism. The identity of the Palestinians has been under attack ever since the British Mandate, however, the Zionist Congress introduced a concentrated effort to remove any trace of the Palestinian people from Palestine. This was done in two ways: ignorance of the indigenous population of Palestine and the attempt to eradicate that same population. When the 'Arabs' remained in their native land, the Zionist effort was focused towards removing them via al-Nakba. The ultimate goal was, of course, to establish a settler-colonial state where a Zionist population would remove and replace the Palestinians.

The onslaught known as al-Nakba resulted in the forced expulsion of over 750,000 Palestinians from their land and the demolition of near 500 Palestinian villages. The fate of these villages were used to attempt to achieve the goal of removing the Palestinians and establishing Zionist immigrants as the true natives of historical Palestine, fulfilling the 'ancient promise'. What followed was a Zionist narrative that shared the settler-colonial sentiment of Palestine being exclusively for the Jewish people while denying both the existence of the Palestinian people as well as the memories their home and al-Nakba. As we learn with the story of Theodore Katz, the denial of al-Nakba is an official legal position of the State of Israel rather than a mere social stigma. It takes place on the legislative level and creates a system of 'history' that acts in opposition to the voices, memories, and lives of the Palestinians. What this creates is a fragmented archive, not caused by lack of information, but a lack of an outlet to project the memories and records which the Palestinian people hold in the hearts and in their hands.

Route 181 Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel is a case where the Palestinian narrative can be properly told and understood, as opposed to the Zionist colonial narrative which could never be used as an accurate lens. As a result of the film's efforts in presenting the Palestinian narrative, Route 181 has been subjected to both harsh criticism and heavy censorship, where screenings have been canceled and distribution of the film made limited. In terms of filmic strategies and modes, it seems that Sivan and Khleifi are interested in obtaining the insider's perspective of Palestine's indigenous Palestinians, which they achieve by also being a part of the group of people they choose to film. As such, they draw from filmmakers such as John Marshall and Timothy Asch with their notion of 'event sequence film' as well as Faye Ginburg with their notion of 'parallax effect'. Ultimately, I would say that their biggest influence is Robert Gardner and his legacy of 'sensory ethnography' which is their use of film methodology in a multimodal and multi-sense approach. Sivan and Khleifi show just how problematic the Zionist narrative becomes as they reveal the society which it ultimately produces. A silenced people, who believe that their voices may never be heard by the world and an oblivious crowd who's violence against the Palestinians has been normalized to the point where they don't even consider it.

As we approach the notion of collective trauma suffered by the Palestinians under the settler-colonial and psychoanalytical lens of Franz Fanon, we notice that Fanon can be seen and understood across Palestine, despite the differences between the French occupation of Algeria and the Zionist occupation of Palestine. Settler-colonialism establishes the occupational conditions where the Palestinians become colonized in terms of not only the body, but the mind as well. Every Palestinian - be it in the Palestinian Territories, Israel, or in diaspora - is a colonial subject and is impacted by the psychological traumatic effects of settler-colonialism. This is seen in terms of Fanon's notion of racialization and the destructive 'gaze' against the colonized/oppressed. We also see this within psychological institutions of Palestine where the indigenous mode of operating has become weary and broken down to be replaced by the modes of the colonizers. As a result, we see the internalization of backwardness as well as the manifestation of psychological and physiological symptoms that indirectly reconnects to al-Nakba. My interview with Lara Sheehi showed that we must resist the notion of a 'Palestinian psyche' lest we fall into the ethnocentric colonial system where we indirectly deny the Palestinians of self-determination when it comes to their own minds.

There is the ultimate question of how the Palestinians can manage to overcome the occupation and decolonize their minds and bodies. Lara Sheehi best explains that it is in fact the efforts by the Palestinian communities to express themselves as they see fit as well as through the notion of *sumud*. For example, Maana Center poses the best solution to decolonizing the mind through establishing a psychological training center that

utilizes only Arabic and exclusively serves the Palestinian community. Although it is the only center in Israel that is ran for Palestiniand and by Palestinians, the center manages to overcome the issue of having the indigenous process of the colonized be destroyed and replaced by that of the Zionist colonizers. Psychoanalysis absolutely does have a place in Palestine, as it has for years prior to 1948. In order for it to be successful in decolonizing the mind and body, however, it must utilize the Palestinian's narrative. The narrative that has been continuously denied and replaced by the Zionist narrative. The narrative that *Route 181* explores it, yet is condemned for. Despite the obvious struggle to project the Palestinian perspective and the ongoing consequences of al-Nakba, the Palestinian community throughout the entire world remain strong and Samudeen.

Sumud is an integral part of the Palestinian identity, that helps them maintain their identity as ethnic Palestinians who belong to historical Palestine. *Sumud* is seen in the ongoing Nakba that started in 1948, as their remembrance of al-Nakba remains strong in the face of the challenges posed by the Zionist narrative for the past 70 years. *Sumud* is seen through the art and visual media, such as ethnographic documentary/film, which establishes an outlet for Palestinians to express themselves and for people to hear the unheard voices. *Sumud* is the psychological act of remembrance and struggle against an occupational colonial state that seeks to dominate and subject the minds of the colonized. To be *samudeen* is to remember your own history and trauma, despite the pain and suffering it may cause. While Ursa, in *Corregidora*, has the responsibility of holding the memories of her ancestors, it is almost a burden given the reproduction of violence on the body, mind, and soul. This is why Ursa becomes 'free' - in the tragic sense - as she discovers that she can no longer have her own children and therefore cannot pass down those memories of generational trauma. While *sumud*, as a form of Palestinian remembrance, is an alternative Ursa's 'freedom' it is by no means a burden. Ironically, it has a strong element of freedom and empowerment, despite the fact that it reproduces the same violence and suffering as in Ursa's case. This complexity of *sumud* can be best characterized by it being resistance through remembrance.

In *sumud* is the refusal to fall victim to the efforts of the Israeli state to forget the Palestinian history and the history of al-Nakba. *Sumud* is extensive and seen in every aspect of Palestinian life throughout the world, coming in different forms. Only on the terms of the Palestinian people can the Palestinians be understood. Through *sumud* the Palestinians acknowledge their common struggle under settler-colonialism through a collective psychological commons that reinforces the drive to refuse conformity to the narrative which is placed upon them by outsiders who not only do not understand the Palestinians, but seek to destroy them.

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