

# Decolonising the Mediterranean



# Decolonising the Mediterranean:

*European Colonial Heritages  
in North Africa  
and the Middle East*

Edited by

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# INTRODUCTION

## GABRIELE PROGLIO

For the phenomena that interest me are precisely those that blur these boundaries, cross them, and make the historical artifice appear, also their violence, meaning the relations of force that are concentrated there and actually capitalize themselves there interminably.

—Jacques Derrida

“What is the Mediterranean?” is one of the main questions implicitly raised by this book.<sup>1</sup> Adopting a specific gaze and positionality in stating such obvious truth, one might reply “It’s a sea, what else?” However, if we were to ask the people escaping war and disaster in Africa, their answers would probably vary considerably. In fact, quite a few of the migrants from the Horn of Africa whom I interviewed in my<sup>2</sup> research described the Mediterranean Sea as the door to a dream called Europe for some, but a prelude to tragedy for thousands of others—a vivid, indelible memory linked to a complex set of emotions, ranging from fear to anxiety.

The idea for this book was born out of the need for a new research perspective on the Mediterranean. There is an extensive literature on the topic and Fernand Braudel was one of the first historians to provide an in-depth study,<sup>3</sup> emphasising the cultural unity of the Mediterranean space. While several researchers subsequently revised his paradigm, problematising the connection between the idea of modernity and the production of

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1 I would like to thank Silvia Loffredo (silvia\_loffredo@ymail.com) for her assistance with the linguistic revision of the manuscript.

2 As a Research Associate at the European University Institute in Fiesole, Italy, I am currently collaborating on Professor Luisa Passerini’s ERC project “Bodies Across Borders: Oral and Visual Memory in Europe and Beyond” with a research on migration from the Horn of Africa to Europe. In particular, I have been carrying out interviews with men and women from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia on various topics such as the visual and oral memory of migrations, the idea of Europe and Europeaness, and the memory of different types of colonialisms.

3 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, 12 vol. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949).

geographic space, the Annales historian's monumental work remains important, among other reasons, for conceiving of the Mediterranean as a set of simultaneous, intertwined and overlapping discourses. Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell pursued a new research direction introducing the category of “connectivity” while at the same time asserting the fragmentation of the Sea into a myriad of sub-regions.<sup>4</sup> Their work focused on the plurality of cultures in the Mediterranean basin and the complexity of social contexts in the area. Several scholars re-examined that approach investigating influences, relationships and cross-cultural contamination.<sup>5</sup> From another point of view, David Abulafia's analysis has worked to deconstruct the notion of the Mediterranean's uniqueness and its geographical boundaries.<sup>6</sup> In fact, showing the simultaneous presence of different “Mediterraneans”—each embracing portions of the overlapping discourses and practices of multiple socio-economic and cultural actors in the Mediterranean space—is crucial to asserting its cohesion.<sup>7</sup> When the gaze is shifted from the Mediterranean as a geographically defined research object to the Mediterranean as the area of investigation, other interesting questions arise. For instance, issues of territorial belonging, as based on and legitimised by cartography,<sup>8</sup> can be forsaken and so can

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4 Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2000). See also Horden and Purcell, “The Mediterranean and the New Thassology,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006): 720-740.

5 Scipione Guarracino, *Mediterraneo. Immagini, storie e teorie da Omero a Braudel* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2007); Leila Tarazi Fawaz, C. A. Bayly and Robert Ilbert, eds., *Modernity and Culture, From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Maurice Aymard, Giovanni Berberini and Sebastiano Maffettone, *Il Mediterraneo: ancora mare nostrum?* (Roma: LUISS University Press, 2004); Xavier Gizard, *La Méditerranée inquiète* (Marseille: Éditions de l'Aube, 1993).

6 David Abulafia, *The Great Sea. A Human History of the Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Abulafia, “Mediterraneans,” in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. W.V. Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

7 Cf. Francesco Bruni and Ghryssa Maltezou, eds., *L'Adriatico: incontri e separazioni* (Venice-Athens: Istituto ellenico di studi bizantini, 2011); Pierre Cabanes et al., *Histoire de l'Adriatique* (Paris: Seuil, 2001); Emilio Cocco and Everardo Minardi eds., *Immaginare l'adriatico. Contributi alla riscoperta sociale di uno spazio di frontiera* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2007).

8 See Daniel Neep, “The Middle East, Hallucination, And The Cartographic Imagination,” *Discover Society* 16, no. 3 (January 2015), accessed August 1, 2016, <http://discoversociety.org/2015/01/03/focus-the-middle-east-hallucination-and-the-cartographic-imagination/>; Rosita Di Peri, “Il Medio Oriente oggi. Narrative,



positionality at both individual and communal level; the usual rhetoric of the maritime border—which in several cases coincides with the national boundaries—can be relinquished and the role of the nation-states in defining the region's geopolitical layout can be downplayed. Such shifts in perspective open up the possibility of rethinking the Mediterranean beyond its boundaries.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, when migration flows and routes are observed, fixed representations of boundaries and frontiers fade away into a more fluid and global complex geography. While not denying or minimising the role of borders in the production of space, this research approach allows for the display of a sort of counter-geography. If the production of space is linked with the production of knowledge, then this knowledge-space nexus can be applied to all disciplines. Hence, the same holds true for history: what needs to be established is whether the Mediterranean can be regarded as a semantic area of interest pertaining only to countries and imagined communities in the territories surrounding the Sea. A closer look at transnational and intercontinental migrations reveals, in fact, how events in the region are also affected by agreements among not-only-European or North African nations—such as the EU/Turkey agreement on the management of the Eastern Mediterranean migration flows. At the same time, the increased mobility of people across borders requires a broader understanding of its cultural impact, one that necessarily includes not only the two shores of the basin but also all related geopolitical and cultural areas of belonging (e.g., Europe, Africa, the Balkans, the Maghreb, etc.). Likewise, sub-Saharan migration to Europe has unveiled the existence of a Black Mediterranean, which is neither European nor North African: largely hidden from history and neglected in historiography, it has not yet been adequately mapped. Its waters are home to a mass graveyard, an assemblage of fragments—or ruins, as Walter Benjamin would put it<sup>10</sup>—of the most terrible tragedy of the twenty-first century, which occurred and continues to occur in plain sight of what is left of democracy and its meaning between the two shores

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contro-narrative, rappresentazioni,” *Passato e Presente* 98 (2016):74-89.

9 Luigi Mascilli Migliorini and Mirella Mafri, *Mediterraneo e'è Mar Nero* (Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2012); Leila Tarazi Fawaz, C. A. Bayly and Robert Ilbert, eds., *Modernity and Culture, From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Donna Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder, *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Ocean and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011).

10 Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

of the basin, Europe and North Africa. Evoking Paul Gilroy's analysis of the black diasporic identity,<sup>11</sup> his suggestion to look at the *Black Atlantic* as a system of cultural exchanges, and W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness,<sup>12</sup> the very existence of this Black Mediterranean forces us to reflect on the positioning of non-European and black African subjectivities and the plight of millions who, after crossing the Mediterranean to reach European shores, experience a condition of subalternity and find their voices silenced in the national imagined communities. In *Mediterranean Crossings*,<sup>13</sup> Iain Chambers offers a masterful deconstruction of the epistemological processes around which the European lexicon has invented the category and concept of a unique Mediterranean; analysing how European discourse worked to obscure the fluid and hybrid nature of this space, he reveals the porosity of its borders. Adopting a variety of approaches, other authors have evaluated the impact of the Mediterranean on national cultures or, on the contrary, how national cultures worked to define a specific idea of Mediterranean: two different gazes employing specific lenses in order to read the relationship between *micro* and *macro*, *local* and *global* in the same area, without re-considering the “structural question” and, in a way, without questioning how overlapping territories collide with intertwined histories—as suggested by Edward Said.<sup>14</sup> Lacking deconstruction, knowledge patterns that are crucial to the preservation of power structures and their sophisticated *modus operandi*, in Europe as well as in North Africa, may be bound to replicate themselves.

On the contrary, here I would like to mention two important works that have tried to analyse this complexity, albeit using different approaches and methods, without losing sight of the close and essential relationship between single stories and global dynamics. The first is a special issue of *Zapruder* on the topic of mobility in the Mediterranean, edited by Andrea Brazzoduro and Liliana Ellena.<sup>15</sup> Challenging the Hegelian-like perspective of European discourse on the so-called “Arab Spring,” and its

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11 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993).

12 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, 2007); Cf. Sandro Mezzadra, ed., *Sulla linea del colore. Razza e democrazia negli Stati Uniti e nel mondo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010).

13 Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an interrupted Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

14 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

15 Andrea Brazzoduro and Liliana Ellena, eds., “Movimenti nel Mediterraneo. Relazioni, Scambi, Conflitti,” special issue, *Zapruder*, no. 33 (January-April 2014).

implicit argument that Arabs alone were involved in an awakening process that had no ties whatsoever with the past, the authors adopted an unusual and extremely interesting global history approach to their analysis of the Mediterranean. Trying to push the boundaries of Abulafia's perspective, they “detected fault lines in the movements of people across the Mediterranean” and were forced to “split their interpretive lens, narrowing their gaze to focus on specific cities, local networks and biographies while at the same time broadening it to embrace a global dimension.”<sup>16</sup> *Mediterranean Diasporas. Politics and Ideas in the Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, edited by Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou, traces a different but equally fascinating research trajectory.<sup>17</sup> In their analysis of movements of ideas and people across the basin, the Mediterranean emerges as “a malleable space of contact, encounter, entanglement and interaction among its diverse and heterogeneous peoples. Its history is a history of interconnections and of their multiple forms: among them, diasporas and intellectual exchange. Our Mediterranean history is all about contact, as much peaceful as violent; it is a dynamic, interactive, trans-Mediterranean history.”<sup>18</sup>

This book aims to focus on the relationship between colonial rule and postcolonial conditions in several North African/Mediterranean societies. Specifically, an attempt is made to understand how several cultural constructs, which developed during the colonial period, reappeared in public discourse after decolonisation and played a crucial role in setting and controlling migration processes, territorial segregation and various forms of discrimination across Europe and North Africa. *Border as method*, by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson,<sup>19</sup> provided us with an important reference point. As the authors themselves state: “the method for us is as much about acting on the world as it is about knowing it. More accurately, it is about the relation of action to knowledge in a situation where many different knowledge regimes and practices come into conflict. Border as method involves negotiating the boundaries between the different kinds of knowledge that come to bear on the border and, in so doing, aims to throw light on the subjectivities that come into being

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16 Ibid., 4. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

17 Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou, *Mediterranean Diasporas. Politics and Ideas in the Long 19th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

18 Ibid., 2.

19 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

through such conflicts.”<sup>20</sup> For all these reasons, in this book the Mediterranean is at the same time a place of investigation as well as an epistemological device.

A few remarks on the title of this book. *Decolonising the Mediterranean* means, first and foremost, investigating how the legacies of the colonial rule over bodies and land have been used by other entities/powers (nations, associations, private enterprises, political parties, etc.) to impose new forms of hegemony after the fall of Empires and European powers. It means denouncing and dissecting the tools employed in the production of new geometries of power in the global Mediterranean as well as in the farthest, most recondite corners of the Mediterranean World. *Decolonising the Mediterranean* is an epistemological practice of border dismantling and scrutiny of the ways in which powers overlap and intertwine. The multiplication of the border is investigated from an in-between position, namely a specific positionality of subjectivities, in order to connect global and local and address Mediterranean issues with a transnational approach. *Decolonising the Mediterranean* means thinking of the Mediterranean as a space of investigation beyond its geographical boundaries. Finally, it means deconstructing the power relations at play, viewing the Mediterranean as an excess space of signification in order to reconsider the past and present stories and subjectivities erased by Eurocentric, nationalist historical discourse. In this sense, the Mediterranean may then be more than a “method”: a matter of politics, or a space without borders where the future can be reinvented from the bottom up.

The volume is divided into six chapters, each written by a different author focusing on a single North African, Maghreb or Mashrek country’s colonial legacy to investigate borders in a transnational perspective and with a global approach. While research directions and topics of investigation are different, they can all be situated on the boundary line described above, and each chapter suggests a specific path for decolonising knowledge. The archipelago is the cartographic metaphor used by Olga Solombrino to describe Palestine and examine people’s mobility in a sea of Israeli discourses and practices of domination. Rosita Di Peri investigates the Maronite community in Lebanon and the sense of relative deprivation arising from processes of disintegration and marginalisation. Adopting the point of view of the Amazigh community, Nancy Porsia delves into the history of Libya from the Italian colonisation to the fall of Gaddafi and problematises the roles of Italian colonisers and Libyan authorities. With a special focus on the Daesh attack at the Bardo National Museum and its consequences in terms of memory of politics and politics of memory, in

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20 Ibid., 15.

the fourth chapter I analyse the combined effect of memory, colonial legacy and new forms of power on the creation of various forms of Tunisian identity. Adopting a “global microhistory” approach, Andrea Brazzoduro focuses on the creation of an artificial divide in order to “invent” decolonisation and differentiate the Frenchness of metropolitan France from that of Algeria, with important consequences on the production of identity. In the last chapter Laura Odasso focuses on Moroccan migrations to Belgium and France and how the production of the Mediterranean border has a direct bearing both on immigrants' memories and on feelings of belonging to a collective and communitarian identity. Finally, identifying some common recurring themes in the *different practices of decolonisation presented in the book*, an afterword by Gaia Giuliani draws on and highlights cultural continuities and discontinuities and offers insightful reflections on the Mediterranean.



## CHAPTER ONE

# WHERE IS PALESTINE? NOTES ON PALESTINE AND THE (POST)COLONIAL

OLGA SOLOMBRINO

### **Palestine disappearing, becoming an archipelago. An introduction**

When I began hill walking in Palestine a quarter of a century ago, I was not aware that I was travelling through a vanishing landscape. (Shehadeh 2008, xi)

With these words, Palestinian lawyer and writer Raja Shehadeh introduces his lyrical and melancholic book *Palestinian Walks. Notes on a Vanishing Landscape*, in which he offers a metaphorical transposition of the land and the landscapes he encounters during his walks. As he recounts his seven *sarhat* (plural of the Arabic *sarha*, nomadic walk)<sup>1</sup> through the valleys, the settlements and two *intifadas*, from the Ramallah hills to the *wadis* of Jerusalem and the ravines of the Dead Sea, he retraces, uncovers and unveils the transformations of Palestine along with his and other Palestinian lives. Over a period of twenty-six years, from 1978—eleven years after the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank—until 2006, soon after the end of the Second Intifada, what he sees when he looks at the landscape is the image of the Palestinian land slowly dissolving under his feet.

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1 In Shehadeh's words: "To go on *sarha* is to roam freely, at will, without restraints. [...] The commonly used noun *sarha* is a colloquial corruption of the classical word. A man going on *sarha* wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. But not any excursion would qualify as *sarha*. Going on a *sarha* implies letting go." In Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (London: Profile, 2008), 2.

In his personal journey through space and time—a dissolving space and a suspended time—his *sarhat* reproduce the sense of communion generated by a reiterated affective encounter with the land, becoming a three-dimensional and sensorial translation of that process of re-invention and falsification of Palestine which involves topography and geological transformations as well as “the relationship between geography, history and the way of life of its inhabitants.”<sup>2</sup> Connecting his personal biography to the biography of those hills, Shehadeh traces the evanescent lines of a Palestinian land that is increasingly less walkable and recognizable. The aggressive intrusion of Israeli settlers, the construction of a separation wall, and the growing *enclavization* and *bantustanization* of Palestinian villages are only part of the immediate evidence of a continuous project of violation and desecration of the land.

As our Palestinian world shrinks, that of the Israelis expands, with more settlements being built, destroying for ever the wadis and cliffs, flattening hills and transforming the precious land which many Palestinians will never know.<sup>3</sup>

In his narrative Shehadeh reflects on what seems to be nowadays an acknowledged state of affairs, that the eroded Palestinian land has morphed into the form, and essence, of an archipelago—a cartographic and metaphoric representation that immediately conveys the strategies and effects of the politics of space (and displacement) at stake in the occupied Palestinian territories. It has been argued that the archipelago configuration appropriately describes the arbitrariness and ephemerality of Palestinian sovereignty and mobility, and the loss of Palestinian land in the last decades. The Palestinian land is now made up of metaphorical islands of Palestinian sovereignty, barely connected and immersed in an ocean of Israeli control.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Ibid., 17.

3 Ibid., 17-18.

4 Many scholars, geographers and architects use the metaphor of the archipelago to describe the current Palestinian situation in the West Bank. Here, I specifically refer to the work of Léopold Lambert, *The Palestinian Archipelago: A Metaphorical Cartography of the Occupied Territories*, The Funambulist Pamphlets, vol. 6 Palestine (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2013) but see also Alessandro Petti, *Arcipelaghi ed enclave. Architettura dell'ordinamento spaziale contemporaneo* (Bruno Mondadori: Milano, 2007), and more in general, on the relevance of space as both field and instrument of war in Palestine: Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007).



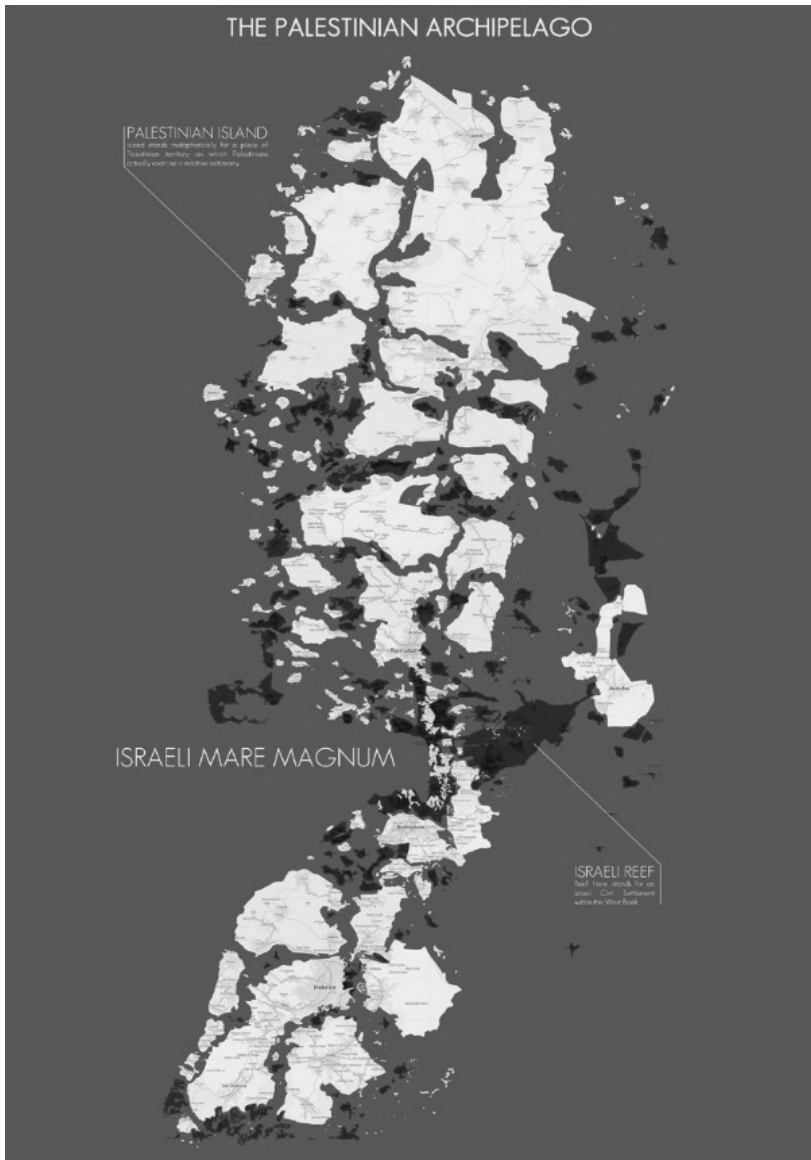


Figure 1.1 West Bank Archipelago. Map drawn by Léopold Lambert. Source: thefunambulist.net. Accessed 07/04/16

The bio-politics of movement and the political economy of life and death are—on the Israeli side—the only reasonable factors in determining the fluidity of waters as an interactive but arbitrary mechanism of internal bordering. The only certain consequence is the uncertain and precarious existence of Palestinians, who can never be confident that they will be allowed to cross from one island to another, from home to work, from work to family hangouts. Although just one of many constraints imposed on Palestinians, the impossibility of moving freely in what should be their land makes explicit the appropriateness of using the archipelago figure to critically describe the spatial layout of the Palestinian territories.

Now that Palestine is drowning in a sea of colonialist expropriation, its fragmented geography and uncertain coordinates suggest unpredictable responses to the multifaceted question “Where is Palestine?” Taking into account the landscape and the territory as well as Palestinian bodies and lives, Shehadeh’s perspective on space suggests a different way of looking at the evolution of the process of dissolution of Palestine. Not only is this relevant in providing evidence of Israeli subjugation of the Palestinian people, but also in recording Israel’s relentless colonialist project.

Drawing from these insights, this essay will trace continuities and discontinuities in the formations of power that have characterised the Palestinian context since the birth of the state of Israel and before. It will mobilise geography in a combined approach with other forms of knowledge, seeking to uncover how the Israeli policy of dominance, control and hegemony is contextualised and performed in the Palestinian territories as part of a persistent colonial strategy involving the land and its resources along with its population, its history and its culture, and how it all combines to endanger the very existence of Palestine on multiple levels.

### **Palestine: a living archive of coloniality**

The configuration of power in present-day Palestine was partially but emblematically evident in media images of the latest Israeli attack on Gaza in the Summer of 2014. News reports showed footage of Gazawi families digging through rubble and dust to find their loved ones during the brief ceasefires, counting and grieving the dead or moving hastily in fear, finding shelter in UNRWA schools, dodging sniper fire. As Sherene Seikaly wrote at the time:

These are but a few of the scenes of Gaza 2014. They are painful in their immediacy. But their familiarity is also a source of injury. They do not belong to this time or this place alone. They are instances in what is now a

century-long confrontation with colonialism. They are part of an archive that is the Palestinian condition.<sup>5</sup>

As Seikaly pointed out, those enduring visual representations perfectly described the continuity of the Palestinian colonial archive and its rationale. This is the same colonial violence that symbolically links the numerous and indiscriminate killings by the military with the collective punishments and the settlers' "price tags," or the 1948 Deir Yassin carnage with the 1953 Qibya attack and the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre—where the Israelis, together with the Lebanese Phalangist militia, wiped out the Palestinians from the two refugee camps in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

Demolished houses, depopulated villages, expropriated land, the creation of buffer zones, Palestinian eviction and displacement, but also racist laws and cultural appropriation: these are the practices that emerge from the rubble and dust of the Palestinian archive. This is the historical recurrence of the Zionist strategy of land appropriation, which led to the explosion of the Palestinian geography and the fragmented configuration of the *bantustanized* and non-contiguous districts poetically described by Shehadeh.

The archive of the Palestinian condition is the demonstration of a past which never passed: it has become a permanent present and points to a miserable, crumbling future. Not only is this archive condensed and represented by historical events, but also by overlapping and intertwined individual and family stories, biographical recollections, and landscape metamorphosis. All together, they shape a collective memory where land and bodies are at the same time victims, witnesses and evidence of the enduring colonialism and its thinly-veiled attempts at removing the Palestinian population from their land while denying their claim for a re-reading of history. Today, the artificial forests, the Hebrewized toponyms, the Separation Wall and the illegal settlements with their red-tiled roofs clustered on mountain tops (so as to be easily identified from afar as Israeli and reinforce the difference between "us" and "them") tell the story of Palestine: the target of a process of transfiguration and falsification, the memory of its land tampered with and confused.

Thus, the deconstruction of Israel's dominant and hegemonic narrative becomes increasingly urgent. Before blowing the dust off records, announcements, papers and interviews, however, the layers of the territory

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5 Sherene Seikaly, "Palestine as Archive," *Jadaliyya* (Aug 1, 2014), accessed September 15, 2014, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18760/palestine-as-archive>.

and of the bodies that have been inhabiting it through endless, acute recurrences need to be slowly unfolded.

The point zero of this archive should probably be dated long before 1948, the year of the Palestinian Nakba and of the birth of the State of Israel,<sup>6</sup> for its traces lie in the history of European colonialism. While the *Nakba* is still an unquestionable historical event that has shaped the past and the present of Palestine, representing “the ineluctable climax of the preceding Zionist colonisation and the great watershed in the history of the Palestinian people, marking the beginning of their Exodus and Diaspora,”<sup>7</sup> the role of the European colonial administration in setting the scene for the events that followed should not be neglected.<sup>8</sup> It was the European role in bringing about the demise and division of the Ottoman Empire, together with the suppression of the Arab awakening during and between the two World Wars, that would subsequently mark the political cartography of the region. Within this historical constellation, the European Zionist dream of uniting the diaspora in a Jewish state was formed. The famous Balfour Declaration of 1917, with which the British government claimed to “view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,”<sup>9</sup> was only one in a series of events that preceded the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the British Mandate for Palestine, subsequently framing the Zionist project within the geometry of power of the larger colonialist context of imperialist Europe. In the wake of colonial Europe's long-established tradition of conquest in

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6 On the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1948, with a unilateral Declaration of Independence, Israel officially declared its birth, simultaneously entering the post-colonial phase after the British Mandate, an ideological move seen “as an attempt to re-contextualise the new Zionist territorial entity as one established against, not via, colonialism” willingly placing itself among all those states that, after World War II, were conquering their independence after colonial rule (Massad 2006, 19). Israel, which had already commenced its ethnic cleansing activities uprooting nearly 250,000 Palestinians (see Pappé, 2006), was attempting to capitalise on anti-colonial sentiments against the British Mandate, while at the same time the future saga of dispossession, and of being exiled by the exiled, was becoming clear to Palestinians.

7 Walid Khalidi, *All that remains: the Palestinian villages occupied and depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).

8 See also Di Peri in this volume for the case of Lebanon.

9 Excerpt from The Balfour Declaration, November 2, 1917, accessed April 19, 2106, full text at:

[http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20balfour%20de  
claration.aspx](http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20balfour%20declaration.aspx).

the New World, the modern Zionist discourse also fabricated the image of Palestine as an empty space where the community would settle and recompose itself while at the same time serving as “an outpost of civilization against barbarism.”<sup>10</sup> It was an ideological and cultural commitment, on the frontiers of the West, that fitted perfectly with the civilising mission pursued by colonial Europe. Palestine was described as an arid desert, ready to flower once the Western narrative of moral and technological progress was applied. Drawing from this discourse are the Israeli propaganda of “Making the Desert Bloom” and the description of the indigenous population as a “coward, hypocritical and false [race],” a “semi-savage people”<sup>11</sup> destined to be replaced.

Focusing on such historical connections with European colonialism helps us better understand how this ideology has paved the way for and supported the advancement and justification of Zionism as a colonial movement, from the earliest Jewish settlements in Palestine up to the present time. In Derek Gregory’s words:

The performance of this imaginative geography, with its colonial couplets of darkness and light, waste and civilization, proved to be a model for subsequent conquest and settlement.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the State of Israel was established and imposed its presence on the pre-existing Palestinian population through that particular form of colonialism called *settler colonialism*. While colonial rule is usually aimed at the exploitation of native labour, resources and markets, in this case that objective overlapped with the elimination of the pre-existing community, its replacement by exogenous populations, and a claim for sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> In undertaking this process, Israel’s strategy used mythology and rhetorical tools wrapped up in historical justification, such as the famous Zionist slogan “a land without people for a people without land.” This cornerstone of Israel’s revisionist policy was publicly recalled several years after 1948 by Golda Meier, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, in her famous statement:

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10 Theodor Herzl and Sylvie d’Avigdor, *A Jewish state: an attempt at a modern solution of the Jewish question* (London: D. Nutt, 1896).

11 Benny Morris, *Righteous victims: a history of the Zionist-Arab conflict, 1881-1999* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 43.

12 Derek Gregory, *The colonial present: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 82.

13 On the analysis of Israeli colonialism as *settler colonialism*, see, among others, the collective issue of *Settler Colonial Studies*: Omar J. Salamanca et al., “Past Is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012).

There was no such thing as a Palestinian people. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people considering itself a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.<sup>14</sup>

Golda Meier's words were unequivocal, and the acceptance of such a narrative of refusal and denial by the West demonstrates how Zionism "was (and remains) not just about the colonisation of Palestinian land, but also about colonising minds—Jewish, Arab, European, American."<sup>15</sup> Many historical accounts unquestionably acknowledge that the territory was already inhabited by both Arabs and Jews before the Palestinian Arab population began to be forcibly expelled and dispersed.<sup>16</sup> Israeli practices and propaganda testify to the persistent use, albeit in a different manner, of the colonial logic of *Terra Nullius*, employed to justify the removal and dispersal of indigenous peoples from their land and pave the way for occupation, exploitation and appropriation. The *Terra Nullius* doctrine, conceiving of the land as formally unoccupied upon arrival of the coloniser, conceptually connects all the different colonial ventures of the West and is further signified by the practice of coining new topographic names—expressing the idea that the semantics of the soil can start all over and open new frontiers. It should also be seen as a socio-political apparatus disseminating a logic of ethnic segmentation and developing a form of governmentality based on exclusion systems, which eventually take on the nature of necropolitics or thanatopolitics.<sup>17</sup>

The unconscious and collective operation of Zionist desire, as perceived through the abstract machines of *Terra Nullius*, continues to capture a

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14 Golda Meier's statement was widely reported in the press, e.g., *The Sunday Times* (June 15, 1969) and *The Washington Post* (June 16, 1969). Her controversial claim was a clear reference to what the Zionist leader Israel Zangwill, an Anglo-Jewish writer and spokesperson for the Zionist movement, had stated in 1920, acknowledging the existence of Palestinians but not as a people. From then on, he referred to the Zionist venture as "a people without a land returning to a land without a people," and eventually affirmed: "there is no Arab people living in intimate fusion with the country, utilising its resources and stamping it with a characteristic impress: there is at best an Arab encampment." (Svirsky 2010, 225).

15 Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba: decolonising history, narrating the subaltern, reclaiming memory* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 5.

16 Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba*; Khalidi, *All that remains*; Joseph Andoni Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians* (London: Routledge, 2006).

17 Anchille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40; Ronit Lentin, *Thinking Palestine* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

given historical tract of civilized terra as the object for human and cultural nullification – for the purpose of making it into another kind of civilized terra.<sup>18</sup>

Svirsky specifically links the *Terra Nullius* doctrine to the question of the *disappearance of the Other*, interpreted as “the continuing social production of collective displacement-and-replacement within a particular form of settler-colonialism—Zionism,”<sup>19</sup> and argues that it has evolved into a productive social machine. Following his reflections, it would seem that Israeli colonialism and nullification practices most probably differ from the logic of conquest and territorial redefinition shared by other colonialisms, for they are reinvigorated by a nationalist fantasy—expressed in the research and production of displacement, relocation and thus disappearance of the Other, the disappearance of Palestinians.

The consequences of this nationalist fantasy are quite evident both at the material and at the discursive level. *Politicide*, the gradual but systematic attempt to annihilate the Palestinian population, or, in Kimmerling’s words, “the dissolution of the Palestinian people’s existence as a legitimate social, political and economic entity,”<sup>20</sup> is closely related to the events of 1948 but it also goes further. If 1948 represents an irrefutable keystone in the history of Palestine, marking the beginning of the uprooting of the Palestinians, the dismemberment, and the de-Arabisation of historical Palestine, its results cannot be simply regarded as an historical product, but rather as an ongoing process: “the Nakba in 1948 is not simply a precondition for the creation of Israel or the outcome of early Zionist ambitions; the Nakba is not a singular event but is manifested today in the continuing subjection of Palestinians by Israelis.”<sup>21</sup> The ways in which the Palestinian uprooting and *politicide* were conducted involved not only governmental and social apparatuses, but also—quite intensely—the Palestinian cultural context, place names, geography. Immediately after 1948, 800,000 Palestinians were expelled and 531 villages were destroyed; the Israeli military administration and the Jewish National Fund (JNF) carried out the tasks of denying and preventing the return of Palestinians. They were complicit in launching the process of expropriation and appropriation of the Palestinian historical and cultural past.

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18 Marcelo Svirsky, “The Production of Terra Nullius and the Zionist-Palestinian Conflict,” in *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, ed. Simone Bignall and Paul Patton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 220.

19 *Ibid.*, 221.

20 Baruch Kimmerling, *Politicide: Ariel Sharon’s wars against the Palestinians* (London: Verso, 2003), 3-4.

21 Salamanca et al., “Past is present: settler colonialism in Palestine,” 2.

Reinforced by military operations that declared many evacuated villages to be closed military zones, the persecutions, the dispersion, the dispossession and the land theft continued throughout the following decades, effectively preventing Palestinians from returning to their homes. Not only did the *politicide* lead to the de-legitimisation and marginalisation of Palestinians, but their expulsion was also transmuted into a systematic and sweeping operation, as Ilan Pappé argues in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006). From then on, the name of Palestine was erased from the maps, and the JNF was given the task of perpetuating the aforementioned Zionist myth that saw Palestine as an empty and barren land before the arrival of Zionism. Among the many tactics deployed was the transformation of the natural environment: conifers were imported from Europe and planted to create national parks and forests—meant to replace the Palestinian vegetation, rich in olive, almond and fig trees, and at the same time erase all memory of the Palestinian Nakba and life in the pre-Nakba world. The parks, built on the ruins of Palestinian villages whose inhabitants had been forced into exile or to live in refugee camps, replaced the Palestinian sites of memory and trauma with the Israeli places of entertainment and fun. At the same time, the afforestation process carried out by the JNF was aimed at transforming the Palestinian landscape into a European-Jewish one and at *green-washing* the memory of the territory—while simultaneously destroying Palestinian villages and replacing them with new Jewish ones. Both processes served the purpose of inventing a new Jewish identity.

Hence, alongside *politicide*, Israel developed a process of *memoricide*, as Nur Masalha calls it, the systematic eradication of the expelled Palestinians and their personal holocaust from the Israeli national memory: removing their history and their cultural heritage, erasing their villages and towns from official memory, ordering military censorship and denying Palestinians the right to commemorate the victims of Zionist massacres. Palestinian documentation centres were appropriated by the Israeli government, if not destroyed, to expunge all evidence of a former demographic reality from history,<sup>22</sup> a policy which was necessary not only

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22 As reported by Nur Masalha, the systematic destruction of Palestinian infrastructure in 1948 and the appropriation of the records, documentation and cultural heritage of the Palestinians continued after the Nakba. The research institutions and archival documentation centres continued to be regularly raided and their documents confiscated by Israeli forces, as widely documented in the cases of the Palestinian Research Centre in Beirut in 1982 and the Arab Studies Society archive in East Jerusalem in 2001. Also, during the Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian cities in 2002, many Palestinian institutions across the West Bank, such



to strengthen the claims of the Jewish state, but also to support the idea of that “unbroken link between the days of Joshua and the Israeli state.”<sup>23</sup> In one of history's ironies, the Martyrs Forest (Ya'ar HaKdoshim), built in West Jerusalem by the JNF in 1951 to commemorate six millions Jews murdered during the Holocaust, was built on the ruins of the depopulated Palestinian villages of Bayt Mahsir and Suba, now buried beneath new villages, commemorative plaques, picnic areas, bike paths and archaeological sites.<sup>24</sup> In a similar way, construction of the Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem has been progressing since 2004, despite the chosen site being on the Mamilla Cemetery grounds. Renowned for being a historic Muslim burial place, the cemetery houses several Sufi shrines; some of Prophet Muhammad's companions were buried there, as well as other prominent intellectuals and Jerusalemite personalities.

Thus, a geography of dispossession is articulated on expropriated lands and overlapping memories. This is how the settler colonial structure that provides a firm basis for Israeli practices reveals itself in a wide range of manifestations. In a plethora of Israeli tactics, the territory is always involved not only as a frame, but as the real battlefield. In his book *Hollow Land. Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, Eyal Weizman described how natural and artificial environments in Palestine are not just allegories of power relations, because space itself is a form of power and a tool of domination: not only the place where the war takes place, but the real instrument of war. Bearing this in mind, it is clear that all the processes of expropriation, destruction and consequent reconstruction of buildings, history and memory are the expression of a politics of Jewish modern state building, and space, because of its elastic and in-depth expansion, is the very tool by which this concrete invention is created. Sociologist Sari Hanafi connected the control of space with the Zionist euphemistic concept of population “transfer,” arguing that:

The Israeli colonial project is ‘spacio-cidal’ (as opposed to genocidal) in that it targets land for the purpose of rendering inevitable the ‘voluntary’ transfer of the Palestinian population, primarily by targeting the space

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as public libraries and public archives, were damaged and records and files were destroyed. A notable example is the vandalism of the Khalili Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah, a famous foundation dedicated to the preservation of Palestinians’ cultural heritage, whose public archives were gutted and property records destroyed. (Masalha 2012, 137-8)

23 Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba*, 16.

24 Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian village histories: geographies of the displaced* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 2.

upon which the Palestinian people live.<sup>25</sup>

He coined the term *spaciocide* to define that “potentiality of a structure of juridical-political delocalisation and dislocation aimed at transferring the Palestinian population whether internally or outside the fluid state-borders.”<sup>26</sup> *Spacio-cidal* strategies ceaselessly produce the vanishing landscape and shrinking Palestine described by Shehadeh in his *sarhat*, a process in which “the weapons of mass destruction are not so much tanks as they are bulldozers, which have destroyed streets, houses, cars, and grove after grove of olive trees.”<sup>27</sup>

*Politicide*, *memoricide* and *spaciocide*, with their array of possibilities, are some of the colonial *dispositifs* adopted by Israel and illustrate a stratified policy that works through the interaction of several layers. The obliteration of space and lives, transposed in ethnic cleansing and the expulsion of Palestinians, is supported by the configuration of a growing apartheid state that uses impenetrable ethnic and geographical barriers to prevent Palestinians' access to resources, recognition and power. The dismantling of Palestinian society, aimed at denying “the Palestinian people any independent political existence in Palestine,”<sup>28</sup> has coincided with the creation of a new state whose original population was deprived of their rights. Palestinians are racialised, cast as dangerous “others” and dehumanised, “written out of the settler state’s creation myth,”<sup>29</sup> and stripped of their rights. In the alienation, eviction, dispossession and dehumanisation of Palestinians lies the unique logic of this archive: it is a living archive of coloniality.

## **Where are the Palestinians? Bringing the postcolonial back in**

When unfolding the Palestinian archive, the colonial character of the powers currently configuring Palestine can hardly be questioned. However, emphasising the persistence of colonial power in Palestine and retracing

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25 Sari Hanafi, “Spacio-cide: colonial politics, invisibility and rezoning in Palestinian territory,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2009): 107.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 110.

28 Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba*, 4.

29 Jonas Fossli Gjersø, “Israel – the last of the settler colonies,” *Open Democracy* (September 10, 2014), accessed April 19, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/jonas-fossli-gjers%C3%B8/israel-last-of-settler-colonies>.

its relation with the matrix of European colonialism is not only appropriate to this historical-ideological weave, but also helps us understand how to disassemble it theoretically and intellectually.

The question raised at the beginning of this chapter, “Where is Palestine?,” can be rephrased as “Where are the Palestinians?” and the only possible answer would be that Palestine and the Palestinians are buried under the debris of an archive of coloniality, beneath a weave of culture and imperialism that suffocates them, but they are still there. Edward W. Said wrote:

There is no getting away from the fact that, as an idea, a memory, and as an often buried or invisible reality, Palestine and its people have simply not disappeared. No matter the sustained and unbroken hostility of the Israeli establishment to anything that Palestine represents, the sheer fact of our existence has foiled, where it has not defeated, the Israeli effort to be rid of us completely.<sup>30</sup>

Although oppressed, Palestinians still live in their land, struggling for their self-determination, and it is exactly their continued and resilient exercise of existence and refusal to disappear that attracts our attention. The consequences of dispossession and multifaceted inequality are so evident that reopening the discussion on the Palestinian question as a colonial problem could also be a first step towards fostering its decolonisation from the Zionist ideological propaganda that has oppressed, mystified and silenced the Palestinian perspective over the years.

“Where is Palestine?” was also the eloquent expression used by Patrick Williams and Anna Ball in their critical introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, entitled *Palestine and the Postcolonial: Culture, Creativity, Theory*.<sup>31</sup> Their response was a tempting “nowhere”—probably, as they themselves noted, the outcome of a simply hyper-realist vision of the global situation, which makes it difficult to disavow such understanding. In the current historical moment, the discursive production around Palestine keeps it from being more absorbed by incomplete or crude criticism and, beyond the peaks in media attention, the Palestinian issue remains enmeshed in political and theoretical discussions. The discursive short-circuit of Palestine is of course corroborated by the geography of occupation and the lack of international

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30 Edward Said, *The end of the peace process: Oslo and after* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), 250.

31 “Where is Palestine?” was also a provocative clear reference made by Williams and Ball to a 1984 book by Shanee Marks, with the same title, dedicated to the Arabs of Israel.

recognition, but also by certain intellectual approaches that have paralysed the analysis of the conflict in singular or inadequate readings, failing to consider the Palestinian question for what it is: as Edward W. Said suggested, it is ultimately a conflict between the Palestinian conscience and the liberal Westernised ideology of Zionism<sup>32</sup>.

Said's work *The Question of Palestine* (1980) revealed the socio-historical formation of Palestine, putting the emphasis on the need to narrate Palestine—and for Palestinians to narrate themselves—as a colonised nation and insisting on the necessity for a critical re-evaluation of the relations and ideologies that produced colonialism and that might, and indeed must, emerge and be developed even from within a purely colonial situation, such as that in which Palestine is framed.

Said's critical considerations should be resumed and assumed as the basis for a postcolonial re-reading of Palestine that overcomes the temporal ambiguities of a post-colonial definition (its paradoxical historical and spatial synchronicity.<sup>33</sup> material and discursive terms have made it possible for two opposite configurations of power to insist simultaneously on the same space—the post-colonial for Israel and the colonial for Palestine). This registers the classic postcolonial failure in addressing and giving due weight to Palestine, precariously poised between being a colony and what comes next.

Palestine is at the centre of a colonial discourse and also at the centre of a postcolonial possibility where the postcolonial is not a further stage of development, nor a position along a timeline, but rather “a discursive site of both spatial and temporal contestation, not a straightforwardly historical condition.”<sup>34</sup> What is more:

an anticipatory discourse, looking forward to a better and as yet unrealized world [...]: an understanding that facilitates the analysis of multiple forms of inequality, oppression and struggle.<sup>35</sup>

It is with this complex understanding that we need to build a real critical discourse on Israel, an understanding in which Palestinians—despite being engaged in a sort of objectification and suffocation, a

32 Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

33 Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question*, 14.

34 Patrick Williams and Anna Ball, “Where is Palestine?,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50, no. 2 (2010): 131.

35 Patrick Williams, “‘Outlines of a Better world’: Rerouting Postcolonialism,” in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 2010), 93.

weakening or exoticising of their political potential—retake control of their actions and narratives and re-gain their voice and subjectivity, expressing their geographical marginality and their experience of such power formations, and responding to and re-writing their encounter with Zionism and its dehumanisation of the Arabs.

Postcolonial approaches, with their attention to subaltern practices, could then actively urge us to avoid both the risk of erasing the active agency of the Palestinian subject and the trap of the polarisation between “passive victim of Israeli dispossession or aggressive insurgent,”<sup>36</sup> and to abstain from treating them as that “interruption, an intermittent presence” identified by Said.<sup>37</sup> Opposed to this process of thingification of Palestinians, the urgent act of decolonising means exactly to continue stressing the conditions and the history of dispossession as the basis of a critical reflection. It also means to de-objectify, which entails a commitment (both in and outside the academic research perimeter) to liberate forms and expressions of resistance that lead, theoretically and practically, to that Foucauldian “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.”<sup>38</sup>

Palestinians' subjectivity exists and resists in many creative ways: countering Israeli occupation and facing displacement; mobilising their own society and the international community; actively promoting campaigns for the end of segregation—whether it be the abolition of settler-only buses (*Palestinian Freedom Riders Campaign*)<sup>39</sup> or the reopening of a street closed as a result of the segregation policies, like *Shuhada Street* in Hebron;<sup>40</sup> or going back to the land and seeking to rebuild, metaphorically or not, their villages, as has happened with *Bab El Shams*.<sup>41</sup>

The events since October 2015, with the emergence of a new, young—albeit fragmented, loosely organised and not backed up by the Palestinian institutions—movement of resistance,<sup>42</sup> have again brought to light the

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36 Lentın, *Thinking Palestine*, 2.

37 Edward Said and Jean Mohr, *After the last sky: Palestinian lives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 26.

38 Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 81.

39 Palestinian Freedom Riders Campaign Website, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://palfreedomrides.blogspot.it/>.

40 Open Shuhada Street Campaign Website, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://www.youthagainstsettlements.org/home/open-shuhada-street-campaign>.

41 Allison Deger and Annie Robbins, “Palestinians Establish New Village—Bab al-Shams, ‘Gate of the Sun’—in occupied E1,” *MondoWeiss*, January 11, 2013, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://mondoweiss.net/2013/01/palestinians-establish-occupied>.

42 Ramzy Baroud, “Of course, it is an Intifada. This is what you must know,”

existence of a potential for counter-efforts of those Palestinians who refuse to be colonised, subjugated and subdued. The Palestinians who fill the streets like the ones before them at the time of the Intifadas—along with those stubbornly leading the weekly demonstrations that every Friday metaphorically connect different islands in the same archipelago, the digital activists, and anyone who is in any way committed to countering the everydayness and the future of the occupation—are evidence of Palestine’s incomparable resilience and ongoing struggle for decolonisation.

From the archive of Palestinian coloniality, a new potent archive comes to light and unfolds to support the decolonisation process, which requires a shift in perspective and specific attention to new historical critiques and cultural stories emerging from, and sustained by, the same expressions of resistance to power and to processes of exclusion. Palestinians proclaim their resistance through intense cultural production and activism, building and nourishing multiple archives of memories, geographies, feelings and aspirations, proposing their own narratives, their own his/her-stories. Their prospects are tied as much to the possibility of building a different form of knowledge or epistemology as they are to their transformative potential. Along with these narratives, we must rethink and re-write a new “discursive road map,” as Ilan Pappé called it, where the old terminologies and political strategies are replaced with new discourses, new practices, new narratives, and new paths towards decolonisation.

Here, insisting on the active agency of Palestinian subjects and being mindful of the emerging counter-voices and counter-narratives, along with the deconstruction and de-ideologisation of the Zionist historical interpretation, is to inevitably confront the decolonisation of Palestine and the anticipation of a future yet to come.

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