

“Homecoming Is Out of the Question”

Palestinian Refugee Cartography and Edward Said’s View from Exile

“Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.” The Palestinian refugee activist Salman Abu-Sitta deploys this quotation, which he attributes to the Baal Shem Tov, as one of the epigraphs to his “register of depopulated locales in Palestine,” one of Abu-Sitta’s initial attempts to document the dispossession and forced exile of Palestinians by Zionist militias in 1948, named by Palestinians as the *nakba*.¹ Memory for Abu-Sitta represents a moral demand placed upon refugees: failure to cultivate memory, the epigraph suggests, will prolong refugees’ exile, whereas proper attention to memory will hasten redemption understood as the physical return of refugees to their homes.²

Abu-Sitta displays little interest in the mystical Hasidic framework within which the Baal Shem Tov’s conceptions of exile and redemption operated, one in which exile referred most fundamentally to the estrangement of the people Israel (and by extension, humanity) from God, with redemption correspondingly understood as the mystical cleaving of the soul to God. The epigraphic appeal to the Baal Shem Tov does not point to a mystical dimension to Abu-Sitta’s effort to document the ravages of the *nakba*, but rather reflects how Abu-Sitta self-consciously locates the Palestinian refugee case within the symbolic discourse of Jewish exile and return. This discursive move is reinforced by another epigraph in Abu-Sitta’s registry of over five hundred destroyed Palestinian towns and villages, a citation from Lam. 5:1–2: “Remember, O God, what has befallen us; behold, and see our disgrace! Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens.”³ Abu-Sitta maps Palestinian exile onto Jewish exile and Palestinian refugee memory onto Jewish remembrance of *eretz yisrael*. In the face of Zionist discourses that claim

Palestine as the land on which the exiled Jewish people will find redemption through return (renewed national existence and the reentry into history for secular Zionists, the hastening of the Messiah's return for religious Zionists), Abu-Sitta claims the metaphors of exile, return, and redemption for Palestinians. Abu-Sitta's archival and cartographic efforts thus represent "part of an ongoing project to document the collective memory of the 'unchosen' but determined people."⁴

Unlike maps produced by state actors which often seek to erase the political ideologies encoded within various cartographic features (choices about what names to use, what to mark, what borders to draw, what legendary material to use, etc.), Abu-Sitta's maps and atlases are unabashedly political, forming part of a broader campaign for Palestinian refugee rights of return, compensation, and restitution. Abu-Sitta's cartographic productions, meanwhile, stand alongside a wide variety of other Palestinian refugee mappings of exile and projected return presented in encyclopedias, memory books, and websites. The heart of this chapter consists of a descriptive analysis of these various forms of cartographic production, what some cartographic theorists call "counter-mappings," and a critical evaluation of what functions these counter-mappings of exile and return serve. Do they stand as memorials of a past and places never to be recovered? Do they foster the creation of new diasporic forms of community? Do they help to galvanize political action on behalf of Palestinian refugee rights, including return?

Most pertinent to the question of this study, do the "counter-mappings" produced by Palestinian refugees mirror what Israeli cartographer and critic Meron Benvenisti has called the "flawless Hebrew map," that is, Zionist mappings that clear the Palestinian landscape so that the Jewish national project might unfold on a smooth cartographic plane?⁵ Most Israeli Jews, including Benvenisti, perceive Palestinian refugee cartography as mirroring Zionist mapping in precisely this way, and thus experience Palestinian refugee calls for return as a profound existential threat. Palestinians, meanwhile, are divided regarding the feasibility of refugee return and on the role it should play in a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel. Thus, after critically analyzing the functions played by different Palestinian mappings of exile and return, I contextualize Palestinian refugee cartography within Israeli Jewish fears about return and within intra-Palestinian debates about the practicality and the realism of return, debates in which Abu-Sitta and his maps have played key roles.

In the final section of this chapter, I turn to the reflections of the Palestinian-American critic Edward Said on exile as both a physical condition

and a critical stance to provide a lens through which to interpret Palestinian refugee cartographies. While Said joined Abu-Sitta in decrying and mobilizing against the hardships and dispossessions of exile, Said also, unlike Abu-Sitta, identifies a positive function for exile, insisting that the view from exile offers a decentered place from which to critique injustice and the abuse of power. Said’s ruminations on exile and return, I contend, help to illuminate what different meanings “return” might have, including what return shaped by an exilic perspective might look like. If, as we will see, Said insists that “homecoming is out of the question” for Palestinian refugees, what other possible meanings, if any, might return have?

THE PROLIFERATION OF PALESTINIAN MEMORY PRODUCTION

The past fifteen years have witnessed an explosion of memory production by Palestinian refugees in the form of “memory books” highlighting specific villages destroyed during the *nakba* of 1948; oral histories; memoirs; fictional narrations; and Internet websites focused on particular towns or villages or dedicated to an encyclopedic summation of the *nakba*’s destruction.⁶ Some of this memory production has been actively supported, promoted, and organized by nongovernmental organizations and transnational political networks, such as the Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights and the Al-Awda Right to Return Coalition, committed to mobilizing activism in defense of Palestinian refugee rights of return, compensation, and restitution.⁷ Other forms of Palestinian refugee memory production have been more individualized and localized, such as the writing of memoirs or the launching of websites dedicated to particular Palestinian villages.

Both types of Palestinian refugee memory production emerged or intensified in the mid-1990s. To be sure, memory books and other forms of cultural production dedicated to remembering the *nakba* existed in the 1980s and even earlier.⁸ Yet, as Israeli anthropologist Efrat Ben-Ze’ev observes, “Palestinian commemoration has been prospering in the last decade,” particularly in the genres of written testimonies, Internet sites, and film.⁹ Ben-Ze’ev rightly resists positing any simple correlation between the proliferation of Palestinian refugee memory production and the emergence of new technologies such as the Internet, arguing that “even in their absence, archives and village ethnographies and memorial books could have been produced all along, yet they have blossomed only over the last decade.” Ben-Ze’ev is less convincing, however, when she seeks to explain why Palestinian refugee memory production has exploded, attributing the phenomenon to a

generational shift, with the second and third generations of Palestinian refugees driven to “recapture the past so that when voices fade away, there will be a permanently available record. To this end, new methods are developed and substitutes for a homeland are enveloped in books and viewed on television and computer screens.”¹⁰

While the aging and passing away of the generation that directly experienced the dispossession of 1948 does undoubtedly serve as a catalyst for the proliferation of Palestinian refugee memory production, Ben-Ze’ev fails to take into consideration the Palestinian political context within which this proliferation has occurred. Specifically, Ben-Ze’ev does not adequately recognize the impact of the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in parts of the Occupied Territories on Palestinian refugee and internally displaced communities. In contrast, Randa Farah has correctly explained that Palestinian refugees in the wake of the Oslo Accords came to recognize that the political framework created by the agreements displaced the Palestinian refugee right of return in favor of the “right to self-determination” understood as “the establishment of a sovereign state”: in this framework, “the right of return, compensation and restitution would be restricted to citizenship rights and perhaps relocation within the Palestinian statelet on the West Bank and Gaza only.”¹¹ Palestinian Christian novelist and poet (and Israeli citizen) Anton Shammas bleakly evaluated the Oslo accords as having turned Palestine of 1948 into “a territory without a map,” a “mapless country that exists only in the oral traditions and the written texts of poetry and fiction. A key to a house in Yafa, then, is bound to become a collector’s item that opens no door, a threatless tool of the imagination.”¹²

In the face of this grim assessment, however, Palestinian refugee memory production, including map-making, has proliferated, continuing up until the present, as Palestinian refugees—and internally displaced Palestinians within Israel—began to mobilize in defense of their rights of return, compensation, and restitution, convinced that the PLO, once viewed as the defender of those rights, was no longer a trusted advocate.¹³ Palestinian refugees sense, Laleh Khalili maintains, that only “dogged insistence” on their rights will “prevent their options from becoming entirely circumscribed by much more powerful actors.”¹⁴ Confronted by a Zionist cartographic and planning regime that works to efface traces of the Palestinian landscape, Palestinian refugees undertake their own cartographic endeavors, aware that they face the stark choice of “map or be mapped!”¹⁵

The word *nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym has explained, was coined in 1688 as a pseudo-Greek term by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer to denote “the sad

mood originating from the desire to return to one’s native land.”¹⁶ While, as Rochelle Davis grants, “it is easy to attribute Palestinians’ feelings to a nostalgic longing for the long-absent past and their lost lands,” one must also account for the role played by Palestinian refugees’ current living conditions as stateless refugees, denied basic rights in numerous contexts. Many Palestinian refugees understandably assert the right of return and map visions for such return in the face of political and legal regimes that deprive them of the basic protections afforded to citizens.¹⁷ Accordingly, Davis rightly concludes, “geographic nostalgia for the village places and the peasant lifestyle is rooted both in local memories and experiences and in Palestinians’ current status as landless and dispossessed refugees.”¹⁸

Palestinian refugee memory production over the past fifteen years or so, including memory production created on and disseminated via digital media such as the Internet, should thus be viewed in large measure as an attempt to mobilize Palestinian refugees (and sometimes sympathetic allies) in defense of rights of compensation, restitution, and especially return, rights that are viewed as under severe threat. Forgetfulness of one’s origins, failure to transmit memories from one generation to another and record these memories for posterity: the fear that these will prolong exile helps to drive Palestinian refugee memory production. In the face of the Zionist rejection of Palestinian refugee return, international indifference, and an ineffectual and compromising Palestinian leadership for whom the refugee question is a source of irritation, Palestinian refugees pin their hopes on memory, in the expectation that memory, as Abu-Sitta’s appropriation of the Baal Shem Tov would have it, might prove to be the “secret to redemption.”

MAPPING MEMORY: ENCYCLOPEDIAS, VILLAGE BOOKS, WEBSITES, AND ATLASES

Palestinian refugee memory production has proliferated in a wide variety of media. In this section, I will examine some of the media by which Palestinian refugees have sought to map and transmit memories of home, to locate themselves in exile, and to chart possible futures of return. My purpose is not to provide an exhaustive overview of the types of Palestinian refugee memory production and the media by which such memory production takes shape and is disseminated. I will not, for example, pay close attention to films, memoirs, or fictional accounts produced by Palestinian refugees, and will give only glancing consideration to memory books in chapters 3 and 4. Instead, my focus here will be on the ends served by various forms of Palestinian refugee memory mapping.¹⁹

MEMORY AS ENCYCLOPEDIA DOCUMENTATION

One function played by Palestinian refugee memory is documentary, a drive to record in encyclopedic breadth all that was lost during the *nakba*: not only the villages, towns, and landscapes (with their distinctive environmental markers such as hills, springs, flora, and fauna), but also the customs and folklore tied to village life. Comprehensive publications in the 1970s and 1980s such as the multi-author *Palestinian Encyclopedia*, published in Damascus, or Mustafa Dabbagh's magisterial eleven-volume *Our Land, Palestine*, sought to document and thus to memorialize the land and a lost way of life.²⁰ These volumes, however, also advanced a territorial claim that went beyond the memorial or the documentary: Dabbagh's encyclopedia, after all, bore the title *Our Land [Biladuna]*.

This claim of possession falls away, however, with the one-volume—but still encyclopedic in scope—publication by the Institute for Palestine Studies of *All That Remains*, a descriptive listing of each of the Palestinian towns and villages destroyed between 1948 and 1949.²¹ The editors of *All That Remains* drew on cartographic surveys and registers compiled by the British Mandate government, such as the *Palestine Index Gazetteer, Survey of Palestine, 1941–1945*, and the British Land Survey Map of 1944, alongside oral histories and archival research carried out by Palestinian nongovernmental organizations like the Birzeit Research and Documentation Center and the Galilee Center for Social Research, in order to compile what they claimed to be a comprehensive and authoritative listing of 413 Palestinian towns and villages destroyed during the 1948 war.²² Each village or town then received its own listing (alphabetically within each region), including basic demographic facts (population, religious breakdown, etc.) and a brief historical overview, along with information about how the village was destroyed, where the villagers ended up, and what remains from the village endure on the landscape.

All That Remains presents itself not as a blueprint for prospective action but instead as a weighty (literally) tribute, “a gesture of homage” to the “collective memories” and “sense of ancestral affiliation” of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from the 413 destroyed towns and villages, an “acknowledgment” of their suffering and a “tribute to their credentials as three-dimensional beings.”²³ Such acknowledgment and tribute, the editors stress, do *not* represent “a call for the reversal of the tide of history, nor for the delegitimization of Zionism.”²⁴ Rather, the encyclopedia stands as “a call” for “a break into the chain of causation which has, since the beginning of the Zionist colonization of Palestine, created the dimensions of the tragedy of the Palestinian people

as we know it today.” This “chain of causation” can be broken, the editors suggest, if triumphant Zionism as an “exultant builder” would acknowledge, “if only on prudential grounds,” the “debris left in its wake.”²⁵ The editors of *All That Remains*, led by historian Walid Khalidi, thus anticipated the arguments advanced later in the 1990s by other Palestinian academics and politicians like Rashid Khalidi and Sari Nusseibeh, that insisting on Palestinian refugee return is impractical and that the best that can be hoped for is thus an Israeli recognition of at least partial responsibility for Palestinian refugee dispossession. These arguments will be examined in greater detail below.

CONVENING A DIASPORIC PUBLIC SPHERE: PALESTINIAN REFUGEE MEMORY ON THE WEB

If *All That Remains* was the product of mostly elite actors based in academic institutions, then memory books and websites dedicated to specific Palestinian villages are mostly compiled by “non-elite actors—neither the politically powerful nor the globalized professionals,” persons who within their own particular contexts might form “an educated local elite” but who “remain enmeshed in and an inextricable part of their small communities.”²⁶

Describing itself as the virtual domicile for an uprooted people (“The Home of Ethnically Cleansed and Occupied Palestinians”), the Palestine Remembered website (with full content in both Arabic and English, along with more limited content in Hebrew) plays multiple roles. Not only does the site present itself as a comprehensive database for information about Palestinian towns and villages destroyed in 1948, but it also creates transnational forms of community among dispersed refugees and resources and spurs political action in defense of Palestinian refugee rights.

The site’s self-proclaimed political agenda as outlined in Palestine Remembered’s mission statement is to debunk the “Zionist myth” that Palestine was an empty land, to raise awareness among Palestinian refugees of their rights under international law, to frame the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in terms of Palestinian dispossession and expulsion, and to humanize Palestinian refugees for others, especially for Israeli Jews.²⁷ The site offers basic primers on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Right of Return (“The Conflict 101” and “ROR 101”), designed to equip Palestinian refugee activism with an ideological framework and a historical narrative.²⁸ To foster this political activism, Palestine Remembered considers part of its mission to be creating “an easy medium where refugees can communicate, organize, and share their experiences amongst themselves.” Refugees can sign up as site members and then register on the “411-Directory Service” of a particular village, noting name

(or more often screen name), clan (*hamula*) affiliation, and current country of residence. Message boards, meanwhile, offer refugees the opportunity to sign the village's virtual guestbook and record marriage, obituary, and graduation announcements. Through these services, "ex-villagers and their descendants can establish social ties across borders that cannot be crossed," maintaining and recreating the village and tribal bonds ruptured by dispossession and exile and nurturing new transnational publics.²⁹

In its goal of providing "a comprehensive source of information about the villages and cities that were ethnically cleansed, looted, and destroyed by the Israeli army," Palestine Remembered also functions less as an objective, encyclopedic reference and more as an interactive medium by which refugees share memories with one another, a medium that tries to "amplify" the "voices in cyberspace" and to "preserve the memories and experiences" of Palestinian refugees.³⁰ While in its compilation of ordered facts in encyclopedic form about specific villages Palestine Remembered resembles (and borrows from) the structure and content of published reference sources such as *All That Remains*, Palestine Remembered also calls on Palestinian refugees to become active participants in the shaping of the historical record through various interactive media.³¹ While other websites seek to provide either concentrated information about one particular village or, as in the case of AlNakba.org, founded by the Arab Studies Society and the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah, a comprehensive overview of Palestinian dispossession from 1948, Palestine Remembered stands out from the rest thanks to the degree of interactivity built into the site.³² Refugees contribute to the site's content by uploading photos and audio and video files containing oral history narratives about Palestinian life before, during, and after the *nakba*. Most intriguingly for the purposes of this investigation, refugees can also register on the site to plot the erased Palestinian landscape back onto the map using Google Earth technology, a form of interactive cartographic construction.³³

Through these interactive functions, Palestine Remembered becomes a virtual form of what Pierre Nora has called a *lieu de mémoire*, a site of memory, the fundamental purpose of which is "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial."³⁴ With most of Palestine Remembered's refugee contributors based in the diaspora and thus unable to visit destroyed village sites in present-day Israel, the website substitutes for the ruins, cactus plants, and fruit trees of the actual location, serving as a virtual *lieu de mémoire*. Separated from their villages of origin by physical and legal barriers, Palestinian refugees share Nora's recognition that memory does not erupt spontaneously, that memory must be

cultivated and produced through the creation of archives and the celebration of anniversaries. In short, they concur with Nora that “without commemorative vigilance, history would sweep” away the remembered locations.³⁵

The memory productions presented on Palestine Remembered are not univocal in character. Rather, they reflect what Laleh Khalili has termed “the polysemic nature of commemorative practices.”³⁶ On the one hand, the website as a *lieu de mémoire* inscribes Palestinian refugee memories into a broader Palestinian nationalist narrative of dispossession and return (while reasserting the centrality of the refugee cause to Palestinian nationalism). On the other hand, the focus on particular villages and local identities reflects to some degree the post-nationalism of the post-Oslo era, the reassertion of more localized identities, and the fragmentation of the broader Palestinian nationalist identity—especially in the wake of the Palestinian statist project being thwarted by the territorial fragmentation of the Occupied Territories by dividing walls and fences, Israeli-only bypass roads, and expanded settlements. This dual meaning of commemorative practices on Palestine Remembered emerges from what Khalili identifies as “the tension between top-down nationalist narratives (which nevertheless resonate with the refugees themselves) and more locally grounded subaltern narratives.”³⁷

As a memory site composed of multiple media (e.g., photographs, audio files, video testimonies, and online cartography), Palestine Remembered stands as an example of what Arjun Appadurai terms a *mediascape*, an “image-centered, narrative-based” account of strips of reality, “out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives.”³⁸ Appadurai identifies the communities created by such mediascapes as “diasporic public spheres.”³⁹ Following Appadurai, one can thus interpret the transnational communities created by Palestine Remembered gathering dispersed refugees living in diverse locations around shared memory practices centered on specific villages as “diasporic public spheres.” Websites like Palestine Remembered, Rochelle Davis explains, allow “Palestinians to bridge the diasporic geography of their lives in order to connect the past to the present, photographs to stories, and family histories to Palestinian histories,” in turn creating a diasporic public sphere.⁴⁰

Appadurai arguably overreaches, however, in his assessment of such diasporic public spheres as “the crucibles of a postnational order.”⁴¹ Appadurai’s claim that “the nation-state, as a complex modern political form, is on its last legs” prevents him from recognizing the resilience of the nation-state as a political form.⁴² True, the proliferation of Palestinian memory production on websites such as Palestine Remembered reflects profound disillusionment among Palestinian refugees that the PLO-led nationalism that culminated in

the Oslo “statelet” could protect Palestinian refugee interests. To that extent, mediascapes like Palestine Remembered do indeed contain “the seeds of more dispersed and diverse forms of transnational allegiance and affiliation.”⁴³

Yet that is surely not the complete story. A more nuanced interpretation of the Palestine Remembered mediascape would recognize that it not only represents a diasporic public sphere, but it also seeks to reinscribe Palestinian refugee rights of return, compensation, and restitution into the narrative of Palestinian nationalism. The diasporic public spheres convened on Palestine Remembered may indeed reflect “nonnational identities and aspirations,” but not to the exclusion of Palestinian national identities. Localized village and regional identities are asserted alongside self-identification with the larger Palestinian nation.⁴⁴

“SACRED, LEGAL, POSSIBLE”: SALMAN ABU-SITTA’S CARTOGRAPHY
OF RETURN

Among the individuals and organizations dedicated to documenting the dispossession and forced exile of Palestinians in 1948, arguably none has been as active and productive as the civil engineer and longtime member of the Palestine National Council Salman Abu-Sitta, a refugee from Bir as-Sabi’ (now the Israeli city of Beersheva). The founder of the Palestine Land Society in London, Abu-Sitta, like many other Palestinian refugee activists, became active in the defense of Palestinian refugee rights in the mid-1990s, at a time when Palestinian refugees perceived their rights as under threat.

Through extensive study of maps produced by the Ottoman, British Mandate, and Israeli authorities, Abu-Sitta has, beginning in the mid-1990s, compiled registries of destroyed Palestinian villages and then has produced maps and atlases resituating these erased locales on the cartographic plane. Abu-Sitta’s project of documenting the “collective memory” of Palestinian refugees takes multiple forms. In addition to registries compiling lists of destroyed villages by districts and subdistricts, along with available information about those villages, Abu-Sitta has produced multiple cartographic representations of the Palestinian past, the *nakba*, and prospects for return. In his magisterial *Atlas of Palestine, 1948* and the more recent *Atlas of Palestine, 1917–1966*, Abu-Sitta seeks to offer a comprehensive overview of Palestine’s landscape prior to the catastrophe, combining survey maps produced by the British Mandate authorities with aerial photographs also taken by the Mandate government.⁴⁵ The “Palestine 1948” wall map, published in 2008 to mark sixty years of Palestinian exile, and the maps in *From Refugees to Citizens at Home*, meanwhile, fulfill two functions: the archival one of restoring the erased Palestinian landscape to the map, and the

polemical one of presenting a pictorial argument (in cartographic form) for why Palestinian refugee return is “no Utopian project” but is instead an eminently practical matter.

The maps Abu-Sitta constructs purport to demonstrate that the vast majority of Palestinian refugees originate from towns or villages whose ruins are now located either on agricultural or state land such as the parks and nature reserves created after the Israeli state expropriated the properties of refugees and internally displaced persons under the terms of the Israeli Absentee Property Law of 1950. In an ironic reversal of how the Oslo Accords divide up the Occupied West Bank into Areas A, B, and C (identifying whether the PA or the Israeli military government has responsibility for security and civilian affairs), Abu-Sitta, in all of his cartographic publications, divides up the Israeli map into Areas A, B, and C in order to identify areas of relatively high- or low-population density. From these maps, Abu-Sitta claims to show that 80 percent of Palestinian refugees come from low-population density areas, with former village lands now having become a combination of state lands (forests, national parks, etc.) or agricultural land for *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*. Palestinian refugee return, Abu-Sitta therefore contends, would not result in Israeli Jewish displacement, and would thus be relatively feasible and practical: large arrows pointing from refugee camps back into locations in Israel dramatically picture the proposed return.

The Return Journey, for its part, has less of an archival or overtly polemical agenda, focused more on the practical tasks of a guidebook. Over the grid boxes of a Hebrew-language road atlas, Abu-Sitta restores destroyed Palestinian locales to the map, naming these sites in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. Abu-Sitta envisions *The Return Journey* serving as a practical guidebook to “assist those Palestinians able to do so to visit the site of the towns or villages of their original homes,” to “enable visitors to learn more about the history of the country,” and to “encourage Jewish Israelis to explore the Palestinian experience of 1948.”⁴⁶ Denis Wood has argued that “[t]he very point of the map [is] to present us not with the world we can *see*, but to point *toward* a world we might *know*.”⁴⁷ As Rochelle Davis explains, “by listing names of places,” Palestinian map-makers and map-users “show their knowledge of that place” and thus “imprint their presence on the land through this authority and knowledge.”⁴⁸ Making and using maps of a particular village or of the land of Palestine as a whole implies an intimate knowledge of—and thus connection to—the land.

Abu-Sitta’s maps have been in turn used by numerous other Palestinian refugee organizations, from committees dedicated to the memory of particular villages like ‘Iqrit of Saffuriya, to websites such as the encyclopedic Palestine

Remembered, to activist networks like the Al-Awda coalition focused on mobilizing in defense of Palestinian refugee rights. Taken together as a whole, Abu-Sitta's cartographic productions not only function to reassert Palestinian presence in the face of a regime that has effaced and continues to obscure that presence, but also to point toward an imagined future of refugee return, presenting such return as practical and possible rather than as utopian illusion. His maps, Abu-Sitta underscores, constitute "a proposed plan for the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes. It is not Utopia."⁴⁹

The right of return presented and defended cartographically by Abu-Sitta is, in his phrase, "sacred, legal, possible."⁵⁰ This sacralized account of Palestinian refugee return is not based on a theological account of the land itself as holy. Unlike Islamist organizations such as Hamas or the Islamic Movement in Israel, Abu-Sitta does not subscribe to a theological description of all of Palestine as *waqf*, property set aside for religious purposes. Nor is Abu-Sitta's description of the right of return as sacred primarily dependent on the presence of self-identified holy places on the landscape, such as mosques, churches, and *maqams* linked to traditional saints. True, Abu-Sitta does refer to Palestine as the "Holy Land," a designation supported by the fact that "its soil is studded with holy sites of all kinds, mosques, churches, synagogues, sheikhs, maqams, shrines and other sites for which only ruins remain."⁵¹ In *The Return Journey* guide, Abu-Sitta identifies nearly 5,000 such religious sites, building on a previous 1976 field survey carried out by Shukri Arraf and on documentation of nearly one thousand Muslim and Christian religious shrines compiled by the Al-Aqsa Association, an organization associated with the Islamic Movement in Israel.⁵²

Abu-Sitta's documentary and cartographic productions differ, however, from this seemingly similar effort by the Islamist Al-Aqsa Association to document all of Palestine's holy places in that Abu-Sitta's focus is not on the shrines as *waqf* or as proof of Islam's claim on the land but as expressions of the Palestinian national spirit. Abu-Sitta is struck by the endurance of religious shrines even as the dominant religion in the land shifted: "Over centuries, Palestinians revered these sites regardless of their religion or even when they converted from one religion to another. This is a proof that Palestinians remained the same people, especially in the hilly areas, whatever their tongue or their faith was."⁵³ True, like the Islamist Al-Aqsa Association, Abu-Sitta disapprovingly notes the repurposing of sacred buildings: "Some mosques," he writes, "are turned into other functions: a bar, a restaurant, a museum or a stable."⁵⁴ Such Israeli appropriation of Palestinian mosques, however, is simply representative for Abu-Sitta of the broader Zionist expropriation of Palestinian space. Abu-Sitta is just as affronted by the erasure of hundreds

of towns and villages from the map as he is by the repurposing of these mosques. This is because for Abu-Sitta the discourse of sacredness operates within a nationalist framework, with the term “sacred” describing primarily the unbreakable connection of the Palestinian people (both Christian and Muslim) to the land. Given this sacred bond of land and people, the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes is accordingly “sacred to all Palestinians. It has remained their fundamental objective since 1948. Their determination on the return issue has endured despite warfare, suffering, and enormous social and political hardships. In this, the refugee from Iqrit, who is an Israeli citizen, the refugee from Lydda, who is a Jordanian citizen, the refugee from Haifa, who is stateless in Syria or Lebanon, and the refugee from Jaffa, who is a U.S. citizen, have the same determination.”⁵⁵ The right of return is sacred for Abu-Sitta because it is “an indestructible core of the Palestinian psyche.”⁵⁶ Remembering, tending, and nurturing the sacred bond between people and land is thus critical, according to Abu-Sitta, to maintain refugee commitment to return. Remembering, in short, is “the key to redemption.”

THE MAP AS MEMORY DEVICE AND BASIS FOR PROJECTIVE ACTION

How should the maps and cartographic constructions produced by Abu-Sitta and reproduced on websites like Palestine Remembered be interpreted? What political messages do they convey? What political futures do they embody and foster? One way to think about Palestinian refugee cartography is as an example of what Edward Said has called “counter-maps” and of what numerous cartographers have termed “counter-mapping,” the effort of an indigenous people to challenge colonialist mappings of space.⁵⁷ Without the resources of the state, indigenous groups must mobilize resources to plot their own accounts of space. So, for example, whereas colonialist cartography in twentieth-century Palestine proceeded with the support and under the auspices of first the British Mandate authorities (committed under the Balfour Declaration to ensuring the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine) and then the State of Israel, Palestinian counter-cartography had to make do without state support.⁵⁸

Cartographic theorist Denis Cosgrove explains that a map is “at once a memory device and a foundation for projective action.”⁵⁹ Products of human endeavor, maps reflect “a creative process of inserting our humanity into the world and seizing the world for ourselves.” All maps permit the “illusion” that space can be “represented completely.”⁶⁰ The possibilities afforded by contemporary mapping technologies like Google Earth only intensify this “illusion of total synopsis and truthful vision.”⁶¹ It is not surprising that Palestinian refugees and their descendants, uprooted from their homes and

prevented from return, turn to the seeming stability the map offers and grasp at the promise of controlling space that cartographic construction holds forth.

A striking feature of the maps produced by Abu-Sitta is how they call attention to their constructed character and to the propositions they embody. Critical cartographers have demonstrated that maps are always social constructions, that they are not direct mirrors of the landscape, and that they always encode, by the manner in which they present map data and by what they choose to present and render absent, the interests of the map-makers.⁶² Typically, however, maps *naturalize* themselves, presenting themselves as objective representations of territory and masking the interests they embody.⁶³ As Denis Wood and John Fels explain, “Maps objectify by winnowing out our personal agency, replacing it with that of a reference object so constructed by so many people over so long a time that it might as well have been constructed by no one at all.”⁶⁴ The maps in *Atlas of Palestine, 1948* or in *The Return Journey*, by contrast, are cartographic palimpsests, highlighting overlapping layers of national presence. As intentionally produced palimpsests, these maps call attention to the agency behind their construction.

All maps consist of propositions: not just the basic proposition of “this is there,” but also higher-order propositions, such as “this is there and *therefore it is also*.”⁶⁵ Abu-Sitta’s maps, maps in memory books, and maps on websites like Palestine Remembered call attention to these propositions, claiming *this village was there, and therefore the Zionist erasure of the village from the landscape and the map must be countered*. However, because many of these maps (e.g., Abu-Sitta’s maps in *The Return Journey*) are palimpsests, they potentially communicate more than these basic propositions. Abu-Sitta’s palimpsest maps, with destroyed Palestinian villages reinscribed over the Hebrew map, can be interpreted, to be sure, as “counter-maps” in the simple, straightforward manner articulated by Wood in his *Rethinking the Power of Maps*, maps that assert Palestinian presence and control over and against Israeli Jewish presence. I would contend, however, that Abu-Sitta’s cartographic productions, by reproducing and not erasing the Hebrew map, point to the possibility of a deeper form of counter-mapping, a counter-mapping animated by the implied propositions that Palestinian return need not mean the erasure of the Hebrew map.

As Issam Aburaiya and Efrat Ben-Ze’ev suggest, alternative cartographies, ones that make room for and embrace heterogeneous spaces, are both possible and an urgent necessity.⁶⁶ Any particular space, Henri Lefebvre has suggested, opens itself up to an infinite number of cartographic interpretations. “How many maps, in the descriptive or geographical sense, might be needed to deal exhaustively with a given space, to code and decode all its meaning

and contents?” Lefebvre asks. “It is doubtful,” he continues, “whether a finite number can ever be given in answer to this sort of question.”⁶⁷

A critical issue at stake here is whether or not the cartographic imagination is wedded to state power. J. B. Harley is undoubtedly correct that “[m]aps are preeminently a language of power, not of protest,” and that cartography typically operates as a “teleological discourse, reifying power, reinforcing the status quo, and freezing social interaction within charted lines.”⁶⁸ The maps created by the new Israeli state, what Benvenisti calls the “flawless Hebrew map,” are representative of such statist cartography. Nationalist cartographies, Matthew Sparke explains, tend to impose the template of the imagined nation-state “proleptically on a heterogeneous past.”⁶⁹ The existence of nation-states is intimately intertwined with cartographic production. As Denis Wood and John Fels observe, “outside the world of maps, states carry on a precarious existence; little of nature, they are much of maps, for to map a state is to assert its territorial expression, to leave it off to deny its existence.”⁷⁰ Its past erased from the map, the Palestinian nation has an inherently tenuous existence. Cartographic productions like those of Abu-Sitta can be viewed as attempts, in the absence of an effective state apparatus, to unify and stabilize an increasingly fragmented Palestinian nation, even as they additionally mobilize refugee activism for return.

But does Palestinian cartographic resistance end up mirroring the mapping regime it opposes? Joe Bryan expresses concern that indigenous counter-mapping efforts might unwittingly adopt colonial understandings of space.⁷¹ Denis Wood, meanwhile, is deeply skeptical that Abu-Sitta’s counter-mapping represents anything other than a mimetic replication of Zionism’s commitment to the nation-state: just as Zionists drew up counter-maps to the cartographic productions of the British Mandate, so, argues Wood, does Abu-Sitta advance “counter-counter-maps,” with both projects wedded to statist politics.⁷² While Bryan and Wood rightly point to a real danger of counter-mapping efforts, I contend over the ensuing chapters that counter-mappings are possible that disrupt the exclusivist logic of the nation-state and that some refugee counter-maps, including Abu-Sitta’s, can be interpreted in precisely this fashion. Rachel Havrelock argues that the act of mapping within the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict tends to foster the illusion of separate and homogenous national territories. While I agree with Havrelock in this assessment, I also join her in her stated hope that other cartographic forms are possible.⁷³