

Editorial

Towards Palestinian Cultural Studies

Helga Tawil-Souri

New York University
Email: helga@nyu.edu

When considering modern-day Palestinian experiences, one is struck, on the one hand, by permanent repression, dispossession, and denial of Palestinian reality, and on the other hand, by changing forms and processes of self-determination. No matter the forces attempting to erase them, Palestinians have not disappeared. No matter that more of their (external) representation is constructed by others, and often objectionably, Palestinians take part in their own self-signification through individual and collective expressions.

Comprehension of culture must be historically rooted and consider the relationship between consciousness and material reality. The scholars included in the following pages do precisely that, by reflecting on the dominant themes around which Palestinians understand and articulate their present, past, and future, and how those are manifested in everyday lived experiences. Indeed, the over-arching concern of this issue is the consideration of what comprises the Palestinian cultural universe amid continuous historical and political stability and instability.

Arguably, the past decade and a half has witnessed exponential growth in media and cultural production made by Palestinians; that made about or for them continues to grow too. Such growth may be attributed to new technologies and the age of globalization in which outsiders have more access to Palestinian products, and in which Palestinians, no matter the difficulties of being encased in Bantustans and refugee camps, or disoriented in wide expanses of Diaspora and exile, have more access to the outside and to each other – at least in mediated forms. In fact, one could argue that Palestinians' biggest export is media, until recently entirely controlled by others (one need only consider the extent to which Palestinian presence in the news is relatively

high yet overwhelmingly created by non-Palestinians) – of course I mean ‘export’ very loosely, as I am neither implying any demarcated territory from which such media flows, nor referring to any economic gains.

The themes that emerge from contemporary mediated self-expression, and highlighted throughout this issue, should be of no surprise to readers: resistance, empowerment, assertion, defiance and hopefulness, against a background of desperation, erasure, loss, violence, and crises. Indeed, the cornerstone ideological justification, political strategy and everyday experience at the heart of the Palestinian struggle, *sumud* (steadfastness / perseverance), seems as resilient as ever, even though, as is clear in the articles selected here, resistive forms have gone through fundamental changes over the past six decades, responding to the shifting political landscape in which Palestinians find themselves playing a role. Today, Palestinians are faced with changing experiences of space and de-territorialization; are caught up in fratricidal violence; face ruthless military aggression as witnessed by the recent war in Gaza; are experiencing an increase in religiosity and Islamism; and face harsher measures of control and subordination. In response, they are discerning new forms of expression and opposition. Such self-signification is manifested through ‘older’ forms of communication such as poetry, theater and political cartoons, but also through ‘new media’ such as hip hop, videogames, and the Internet. Palestinians may continue to face political impossibilities, but cannot be considered as not producing a culture of their own. Sure, it may be de-centered, transitory, oppositional, unstable and discordant, but that is its strength, and one which is increasingly being embraced by Palestinians, and hopefully, by outsiders. I hope that the articles brought together in this issue provide us, Palestinians and outsiders, a glimpse of that rich and contradictory Palestinian cultural universe.

Nadia Yaqub demonstrates how Palestinian political cartoons are windows into cultural shifts across time, especially as they pertain to individual agency and political/social responsibility across gender. She begins with an analysis of prominent cartoonist Naji Al-Ali’s lesser known characters from the 1960s through the 1980s and demonstrates how Palestinian families have been affected by dispossession, violence and exploitation. Al-Ali’s cartoons depict the emasculation of Palestinian men and boys, stemming from their unstable political landscape, and portray the mother figure as an inviolable symbol for the land and Palestinian womanhood – in other words, the mother is the quintessential icon of *sumud*. Yaqub then examines six contemporary cartoonists and spotlights how they negotiate changes in Palestinian society and gender representations since Naji Al-Ali: for example, characters are more prominently Muslim or have middle class concerns; cartoons provide

commentary on Hamas-Fatah internecine fighting; and portray political participation in a more positive light. Finally, Yaqub demonstrates how Palestinian motherhood is depicted as in crisis, reflecting the crisis of the idea of a whole Palestine itself.

Any analysis of contemporary Palestinian culture would be incomplete without reference to the growing importance of Hamas in the cultural landscape; and also, as Atef Alshaer argues in the following article, incomplete without reference to one of the most expansive and popular means of Palestinian creative expression: poetry. Alshaer introduces us to the poetry of two assassinated Hamas leaders who shared similar life experiences and thus wrote of similar concerns: incarcerated in Israeli prisons, painfully separated from their families, both found strength in Islam and continued steadfastness in the Palestinian struggle. Alshaer depicts the uniqueness of each poet, but also juxtaposes their similarities to argue that one can speak of ‘Hamas poetry’ as a collective. Drawing on Arabic and Islamic poetic traditions, interweaving the personal and political, and committed, at the last instance, to Palestinian liberation under the rubric of an Islamic *ummah*, Hamas poetry challenges and complicates the already rich Palestinian poetic landscape, which has hitherto been predominantly secular.

Ela Greenberg’s article on a hip hop group from a refugee camp on the outskirts of East Jerusalem, brings together the themes of emasculation and resistance. G-Town creates nationalistic lyrics as a mechanism to address the band members’ opposition to Israeli occupation without jeopardizing their safety by committing violent acts of resistance. By displaying a tough, masculine, ‘ghetto’ image of themselves – borrowed from African American rappers – G-Town members reclaim their masculinity amidst a political context that has all but erased the possibility of being a strong, dominant, young Palestinian male. The popularity gained through rapping furthermore allows G-Town members to become local youth leaders in the refugee camp. Here we have an example of a ‘new’ and foreign media form reappropriated to express frustration at the Israeli occupation, providing group members – and to a lesser extent, their fans – a newfound sense of empowerment.

Participatory and youth media, according to Julie Norman, can provide spaces for youth empowerment by developing individual agency through processes of self-expression and identity exploration. She outlines various kinds of participatory media projects in the West Bank, such as theater, photography, film, and video, and argues that such media are useful in amplifying the voices of young people and combating mainstream media stereotypes in which Palestinians, and specifically Palestinian youth, are portrayed either as helpless victims or perpetrators of violence. Moreover, Norman suggests that such

media projects allow youths to participate and engage in their communities in new ways, providing space for regional dialog, and can positively impact international activism. She does caution however that participatory media are not removed from the power dynamics inherent in traditional modes of representation.

Vit Sisler describes the array of videogames that take (virtual) place in the Middle East and Palestine and/or foreground the Arab-Israeli conflict, and shows how games' constructions of reality serve parallel and contradictory political interpretations of real-world events. However, Sisler argues that the rule system that enables a player's interaction with a game also intrinsically limits it – for example, whether a gamer is supposed to move, shoot at, or hide from an enemy, or supposed to gather resources to build or save something – thereby rendering games' content and ideological and marketing underpinnings less important than their architecture. In other words, whether one is playing a game created by Hezbollah in which the target is Israel, or playing an American-made game where the target is Palestinians, the player is limited in both by only being allowed to interact with the enemy as enemy that he must shoot and kill. Sisler also shows how gamers resist representations and rules by tweaking games' codes, inserting different characters, allowing different outcomes, and ultimately challenging the mainstream video gaming industry by reappropriating its products. Although Sisler's article is a critique of game genres, its significance moves beyond the virtual realm, as the argument can be made about other forms of mediated interaction.

Finally, filmmaker Sobhi Al-Zobaidi combines touching personal accounts as a Palestinian refugee continuously losing his sense of place with a theoretical discussion of memory and space. Al-Zobaidi offers important insight on the continuing loss of Palestine, on the enforced forgetting of Palestine, and on ways that may ultimately allow Palestinians to re-imagine their past, present and future homeland. By inviting us to conceptualize the Internet as a rhizome, Al-Zobaidi suggests that certain uses of the web allow Palestinians “for the first time, to practice the otherwise prohibited: public collective remembrance.” He focuses on one website which allows users to post old and new images of Palestine, to enter into discussions about those images and lost places, to rename those villages and cities which were destroyed or fled from during and since the *Nakba*, and to use the site in ways that evade the laws and logic of spatiotemporality. It becomes clear that in overlapping the de-centeredness of the Internet and the scattering of Palestinians over discontinuous geographies, Al-Zobaidi bespeaks a new spatial poetics of the long-standing struggle for the Palestinian dream.

The mediated expressions focused on here reveal new forms of Palestinian self-signification; more importantly, they demonstrate continued resilience and vitality as experienced in everyday life. If we are to anticipate what Palestinian cultural studies might contribute, it would be that it recognizes and theorizes on a people's ability to survive, and create, even in the most intolerable political conditions. The Palestinian cultural universe is both about fixedness and change – about being tenacious and remaining flexible. It is a difficult contradiction to reconcile, but that is precisely the dialectic strength of *sumud*: resisting Israeli (and other) practices that aim to silence and erase Palestinians while sustaining an individual and collective sense of humanity and creating vibrant cultural interpretations.