

Crossing the Green Line Between the West Bank and Israel

By Avram S. Bornstein. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2002. 170 pp.

Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel

By Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2002. 283 pp.

Palestine

By Joe Sacco. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books. 2001. 285 pp.

The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village

By Susan Slyomovics. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1998. 294 pp.

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I write this article as news appears about the murder of Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old peace activist, who was crushed to death by a bulldozer on 16 March 2003 as she tried to prevent the Israeli army from destroying homes in the Gaza Strip. This incident has made me think differently about reviewing these four books. Mentioning Ms. Corrie's death may seem incongruous in the context of a discussion of one comic book and three academic treatments of Palestine-Israel. And it may seem parochial to focus on this so far unusual death of an American woman in Gaza, given the fact that every day some new stream of tragedies pours into what is already a vast sea of Palestinian woes under occupation. But something she wrote in a letter home, subsequently reprinted in the UK Guardian, March 17, 2003, struck me as critically relevant. With eerie, if inaccurate, percipience she wrote:

“... there are eight-year-olds here much more aware of the workings of the global power structure than I was just a few years ago. Nevertheless, no amount of reading, attendance at conferences, documentary viewing and word of mouth could have prepared me for the reality of the situation here. You just can't imagine it unless you see it - and even then you are always well aware that your experience of it is not at all the reality: what with the difficulties the Israeli army would face if they shot an unarmed US citizen... and the fact that I have the option of leaving. Nobody in my family has been shot, driving in their car, by a rocket launcher from a tower at the

end of a major street in my hometown. I have a home. I am allowed to go see the ocean. When I leave for school or work I can be relatively certain that there will not be a heavily armed soldier waiting halfway between Mud Bay and downtown Olympia at a checkpoint with the power to decide whether I can go about my business, and whether I can get home again when I'm done."

Her letters continue with thoughtful, emotional, deeply humanistic accounts of her experiences and observations from Rafiah. These are accounts that actually do go far in allowing a reader to imagine without seeing. And the fact that it is not clear what, if any, difficulties the Israeli army will face as a result of her death, and that Ms. Corrie did not get to go home, only increases the impact of her words.

In addition to the issues of privilege and responsibility that Ms. Corrie raised, she highlighted a problem that plagues many people writing from or about Palestine. How to convey the experience to anyone outside, while knowing you have only gained access to some small fraction of "the situation"? Whether Palestinian living in some part of historic Palestine, or in the diaspora, whether Jewish, Israeli, or something else, you're never going to get it all. This is not unique to Israel-Palestine and its observers, and the subject-positioned partiality of knowledge is a truism across the academic spectrum. But the issue of getting at - and effectively communicating with enough nuance - something about the tangled mess of history, politics, conviction and resistance that bind Palestine-Israel seems somehow more critical, than, say, realizing that a middle-class female teenager is going to understand Madonna's XYZ video differently than a middle-aged guy in the Philippines.

There are surely few authors, academic or otherwise, especially those who deal with Palestine-Israel, that do not carefully consider their writing style and communication techniques. Anyone would be, or probably should be, plagued by the question of what is the best way to make this convoluted, often misunderstood subject comprehensible to someone who has not lived through some aspect of it, as well as to those who have lived through some of it and think, therefore, they know it all. The authors of the books reviewed here have come up with distinct approaches to this problem. We see from Bornstein's straight-forward narratives of bordered Palestinian lives occasionally tinged with humorous asides, and Sacco's hard-hitting realist comics that are often irreverent, just how welcome a little levity can be in the face of such suffocating political weight. These sketches humanize the brutalities portrayed, give the reader some breathing room, and create a bridge for those for whom such outrageousness may seem too alien to grasp. Bornstein's story-based narrative is meant to allow readers "to imagine themselves in the place of those being written about" (p 24). Kanaaneh's

book is equally humanizing. Her self-reflexive account of Palestinian women and men's reproductive choices in the Galilee is filled with patient, thick description. On the other hand, Slyomovics's ethnography of **Ein Houd/Ein Hod**, a book which itself puts narrative strategies at the center of its analysis, ranges far and wide across spatial and theoretical terrain.

These are all anthropological texts in the sense that they collect their data and draw their conclusions from the details of the quotidian - from information gathered by "asking obtuse questions of subtle people," as Geertz has characterized the ethnographic project. A conclusion to be drawn from looking at these four, somewhat diverse texts together is just how important it is when approaching the sprawling, fraught subject of "Palestine-Israel," especially when trying to teach something about the subject, to approach it from all angles, be they informational, stylistic, intellectual or emotional. Only such a kaleidoscopic view can do justice to the shifting, even jolting, and fractured nature of this subject.

All four books raise complicated questions about the nature and interaction of national identities, and the state institutions and material practices which enforce and challenge those categories. It is not, in fact, the analytic category of "identity" which is at the heart of these works, nor that, which makes them interesting. It is, rather, the daily activities and stories detailed in these books that make so apparent how restive such identities can be. Notions of self and other, and interactions between compatriot and enemy, are not always so tightly bound, either conceptually or practically, by the geopolitical markers, checkpoints and security walls that stand for national borders in Israel-Palestine. Most refreshing about these authors' approaches are their efforts to prevent the nation-state boundaries which they are analyzing from occluding their own conceptual approaches. For none of them do the Green Line or the borders of historic Palestine limit the scope of their investigations. The authors are attuned to the mutually constitutive nature of colonizer/colonized, but they do not neglect the historic specificity and distinctive internal dynamics of Palestinian society too long subsumed within Israeli history.

Avram Bornstein's "Crossing the Green Line" offers an accessible introduction to one of the pillars of Israeli occupation: the protean borders of Israel and the military checkpoints that guard and enforce them. Using personal accounts of how Palestinians negotiate the dividing line that separates the occupied territories from Israel, Bornstein demonstrates how "[t]he maintenance of a porous border facilitated the subordinate economic integration of Palestinians into Israeli society while excluding them from the political community" (p. 127).

Drawing a distinction between what he calls "acute violence" and "structural violence", Bornstein offers a rich collection of vignettes, which illustrate how the structural violence systematically inflicted through physical, psychological and economic means is withstood and succumbed to.

Coming at an apt moment, when the “acute violence” of the current intifada draws most attention, this volume addresses “labor and production processes in the borderland [which are] an important part of the national conflict often missed in descriptions of the Israel-Palestinian struggle” (p. ix). Indeed, the stories of humiliation and frustration in this volume illuminate the destruction wrought by the slow, niggling violence of the occupation’s economic stranglehold.

Bornstein’s first narrative, the story of Abu Samud, a father and construction worker, illustrates the effect of Palestine’s crisis-ridden history on one man’s peripatetic life and work. The author describes the progression of Abu Samud’s life, from his early days as a refugee in Jenin, to searching for work in Kuwait and Cairo. While entrepreneurial attempts in the West Bank were frustrated by the 1967 war and occupation, mixed opportunities across the Green Line were opened. Another war, moves to Jordan and Saudia Arabia, and the strike-filled days of the first intifada preceded his employment with an “Arab-Israeli” contractor. Abu Samud’s account includes details of tense interactions with this boss. It would have been interesting to know more about the tenor of relations between West Bank workers and Palestinian employers inside Israel, and Bornstein’s analysis of the structural, economic, and cultural aspects that must have shaped these work relations. Moreover, Bornstein’s use of the term “Arab-Israeli” to refer to Palestinian citizens of Israel is jarring, and would surely be considered offensive by some, especially many to whom the term is meant to apply. A loaded label like that should at least be acknowledged as such, if not explained and justified.

The story continues with Abu Samud’s trying time of unemployment, resolution of which became all the more difficult with Israel’s closures of the territories following Palestinian attacks in Israel and increasing levels of border enforcement since 1995. Woven throughout the vignette is information about the countless rules and regulations imposed by the Israeli occupation authority’s bureaucracy. These laws, which require West Bankers seeking work in Israel to shuttle from office to office gathering documents and stamps, make each laborer a kind of pinball which Bornstein points out requires a patron in Israel to launch (p. 59). Employers’ exploitation of workers, documented or not, often leaves them without health insurance, always underpaid, sometimes abused and, ultimately, disposable. Abu Samud’s story, and that of the others portrayed in this book, details the many ways in which the borders and their selective enforcement constitute tools of economic oppression, as well as a means of assuring the dependence of Palestinians on Israel.

While Bornstein’s strategy seems to have been one of allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions, these revealing accounts would have been enhanced by an analysis of, for example, the relationship of the state’s

settler-colonial ambitions and practices in the territories, to the ways in which Palestinian workers are exploited.

Subsequent chapters offer further case studies, including those of a few women. While Bornstein's ethnographic access to women laborers was limited by his respect for the rules of social propriety, he does manage to offer glimpses into the tedium and tribulations of sweatshop labor in sewing workshops. The women's stories also provide insight into the social mores and gender relations which structure Palestinian women's access to different kinds of jobs. Accounts of Palestinians working abroad, entrepreneurs in the West Bank, and attitudes of West Bankers towards Palestinians from "the inside" and vice versa, describe how people go about making day to day life decisions and formulate their strategies for getting by a variety of road blocks, not only economic and military, but also social and political. This book would be a good addition to an introductory course on the conflict.

Susan Slyomovics's *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* deals with border crossings of another variety and attends to the material artifacts and nationalist discourses of the different people who inhabit both the physical spaces carved out by the Green Line, as well as the imaginary spaces of remembered pasts. This is a "story of Arab Ein Houd and Jewish Ein Hod, one village with two identities in the Carmel Mountains south of the city of Haifa [that] recounts Palestinian Arab memory covered over by Jewish memory" (p. xii). What is more, it recounts Palestinian Arab land and possessions covered over and appropriated by a Jewish artist colony.

Marcel Janco, a Romanian Jewish refugee and a founder of the Dada art movement, established the colony in 1953. In search of a geographic muse like Guagin's islands, Janco instead found Palestine, which he described as being a place where "one works savagely to exist" (p. 32) - not quite the Tahiti he had hoped for. Dada's "call for a return to a generalized, indigenous, primitive art ... [and] appreciation of the vernacular ... functioned as theoretical underpinnings for the move to create consciously a national art, one that was to be uniquely Jewish and Israeli," thus inviting the "appropriation of Palestinian Arab art and architecture" (p. 35) by these Jewish colonists. Noting Dada's, and Janco's attraction to naïve and popular art, art by children and the insane, the subsequent fetishization of non-Western regions in modern art, and Janco's romanticization of Arab culture (p. 36-37), Slyomovics describes these artists' "return to the land to seek out nature" as being "part of a monumental task in state building" (p. 43). She also mentions Janco's desire to import Yemeni Jewish silversmiths. Yemenis and other Arab Jews are considered to be not only living proof of an "unbroken line of tradition bearers" (p. 45). They have also been imported for the state's other, more mundane strategic and economic concerns (cf. Shafir, 1996; Shohat, 1997).

Slyomovics likens these and other fascinating details about Janco's and other artists' attitudes to the "found objects" of Palestinian architecture to Columbus' wonder at the New World (pp. 46-50). Prompted by this discussion, the reader might wish for further exploration of the relationship between this artist colony and the larger settler-colonial project of which it was a part. How have the "facts on the ground" and on the canvas produced by Ein Hod's artists contradicted, appropriated, enhanced, or rejected other material practices of settlement that have been fundamental to the justification and creation of Israel, (cf. Abu El-Haj, 2001; Ben-Ari & Bilu, 1997; Katriel, 1997)?

Following the original inhabitants of Ein Houd, the Abu al-Hayja clan, after the 1950 Absentee Property Law formally evicted them from the village they fled during the war, Slyomovics traces the family's broad dispersal: from an unrecognized, new village near their former homes, to a tourist village in the Galilee, the Abu al-Hayja guesthouse in Jordan, to Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank (where, incidentally, at least two Abu al-Hayjas were killed during the April invasion of 2002). As a comparison with Bornstein's text indicates, the history of this family's dispersal is representative of many Palestinians. The scattered family established and settled in Ein Houd al-Jadidah two kilometers away from their original home, from where they fought the Absentee Law ruling that evicted the family and threatened the new Ein Houd. They challenged their exile on many fronts. In addition to the Abu Al-Hayja's creation of the "Organization of Forty" in order to obtain governmental recognition of tens of unrecognized villages denied municipal services, the leader of Ein Houd al-Jadidah, Abu Hilmi, walked daily around Ein Hod as "part of a deliberate strategy to maintain the Abu al-Hayja presence...a challenge and provocation" (p. 116). The reference was reminiscent of Israeli "*tiyulim*", hikes taken as a means of demarcating ownership of territory and connection to the land (Ben-David, 1997).

A true bricoleur in the Levi-Straussian sense, Slyomovics cobbles her text together with a variety of analytic and theoretical tools, from the depth psychology of Freud and Jung, to art history and poetry, as well as nationalism and gender theory. Not unlike Dadaism?, the philosophy at the core of Jewish Ein Hod, her prose and approach are a protean amalgam. But whereas Dada "provided Zionism with a cultural and intellectual alibi...an aesthetic veneer to disguise the implacable disenfranchisement of all that was and is Arab" (p. 35), Slyomovics attempts to peel away these layers as she follows Palestinians' efforts to reveal the material reality of their history.

Social scientific analyses of memory - collective, traumatic, or national - often get lost in the foggy amorphousness of their subject, a failing Slyomovics tries to avoid by tending to the material practices and intentions of real people in actually existing places, how they recover their pasts and constitute their futures. Unfortunately, her prose sometimes slips into an obfuscating jargon, such as that which appears in the first chapter, in which

"memory" becomes unhinged from the agents that produce and wield it. The book begins with a discussion of the memorial books of both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, produced to document losses and testify to the unwillingness to let them slip from collective consciousness. While the author goes a long way in answering the question of how "historical place and space develop into public memory and nationalist identity construction" (p. 18), significant lacunae mark the text. For example, in describing a photograph of an old man from Ein Houd pointing to the site of his former home, Slyomovics writes: "The villager's passion for his home conflates past and present time, rendering historical trauma persistent, ongoing, and contemporaneous. The stone is a tangible survival, a relic from the mundane world of vernacular architecture" (p. 11). In the midst of this psychoanalytic approach, the reader is left wondering about the potential political motivations behind - and effects of the memorial book and its visual reminders. How do the producers and audience of these "memory artifacts" themselves envision the connections between the books, photographs and political practice? I suspect they are motivated by more than "documentary and realist purposes" (p. 17). Positioning these memorial books in a dialogue between "history, including folk and popular history, and imaginative literature" (p. 28), Slyomovics' analysis muffles some of the discordant voices of the ongoing political conflict.

A potentially instructive moment appears in the brief discussion of the Abu al-Hayja clan in Jenin refugee camp. More than 200 members of the family reside in the Camp, declaring their "allegiance not to the Abu al-Hayjas, but to the larger family defined as the Palestinian people," (p. 132). They are committed to the nation, not the clan, highlighting the fact that identity categories, as well as nations and national commitments, cannot be taken as givens. Slyomovics' work underscores the need for further investigation to determine the conditions in which different, sometimes competing, categories of identity are crystallized, motivating various political activities. The nation is a category of practice that structures perception, informs thought and experience, and organizes discourse and political action (Brubaker, 1996), projects that are responsive to specific economic, political, and structural conditions. It is the scholar's task to understand how this confluence of structure, event, history making and agency create national politics.

The breadth of this book's scope was a daring effort to encompass some of the complex interaction between Palestinian and Israeli history and culture. In so doing, the author partially realizes her intended goal: to investigate "what is it that motivates nationalist identity construction and how is it allied to and compromised by complex compulsions to recreate, to represent, and to preserve a record of destroyed communities" (p. xiv). The rich material presented in "The Object of Memory" suggests that the central question might not be what motivates nationalist projects, but rather, how the

specific conditions of Palestinian defeat and dispersal have prompted specific kinds of responses.

Rhoda Kanaaneh takes up this question of how Israeli state practices and national discourse have generated complex Palestinian responses. Her ethnography of nationalist strategies among Palestinian citizens of Israel living in the Galilee illuminates the relationship between literal procreation, the creation and sustenance of nation-states, and the struggles of particular categories of people to negotiate identities “of self and community through reproductive discourses and practices” (p. 107). She addresses the extent to which the dominant narratives with an emphasis on what is modern (and, therefore, what is primitive, traditional) - have set the terms of the debate. How have Israel’s desires to promote Jewish population growth and limit that of the Palestinians determined the range of Palestinians’ reproductive choices, counter-strategies, and the idioms through which they justify them? Have Palestinians been able to foil the state’s efforts to limit their presence and propagation? Kanaaneh points out that while “Palestinian nationalist culture shares with Israeli nationalism roots in Western Enlightenment models and Marxist developmental stages theory,” it also reacts against it (p. 125), mobilizing “tradition,” the clan, and pronatalism to promote an alternative national agenda. These “anti-modernization” tendencies are “partly an expression of modernism’s failure to fulfill its promises and to assimilate everyone into its fold” and partly a reaction against Israel’s exclusionary policies, which have found an alibi in the Orientalist discourse of civilizing missions.

The book is a compelling account of how “[r]eproduction has been politicized and maternity nationalized” (p. 22) illuminating how “the nation” and “the state” shape the most mundane activities of the people who inhabit them, reach into the intimate spaces of bodies and families, and guide economic choices. The evidence marshaled throughout the book also demonstrates the centrality of reproduction to the construction of identities, the marking of difference, and the reinforcement of national hierarchy.

Kanaaneh successfully sustains “the nation” and “the state,” the colonizer and colonized, as well as representation, structure and practice, within her analytic purview, keeping the dynamic among these levels alive throughout much of her book. However, some important distinctions are missing from the analysis. This project, which investigates the relationship between Palestinians’ incorporation into the global capitalist economy, their consumerism, their status as third-class citizens of Israel, and modes of national [re]production, would have been enhanced by more attention to class and social history. Statements such as: “Style, and keeping up with it, has become a major marker of modernity and class. Such items are now significant players in the emerging powerful discourse of family planning, tools in the construction of social identity and status” (p. 95) beg questions about “when” and “why.” While Kanaaneh recognizes that “[a]cquiring the

status of the modern is not a one-time event, nor is it stable" (p. 96) and that acquiring "modernity" is also not an aspiration shared by all Palestinians, we are given no sense of how these issues are being worked out among different classes of Palestinians over time. And it is not always clear what economic choices exist for her interlocutors. Without clearly distinguishing between "modernity" as a folk category and modernity as an analytic category, there can be no evaluation of how ideals of modernity and reproduction are defined by groups with different political commitments to Israel and/or Palestine within shifting political circumstances, and why.

By bringing into conversation gender and body theory, discussions of modern nationalism and "governmentality," and Palestine/Israel, "Birthing the Nation" is a novel contribution to many fields. It would be an excellent addition to any graduate and upper-level undergraduate class on any of these topics.

Joe Sacco's *Palestine* is a very different book than those discussed above. A black-and-white comic drawn in a realist style, it makes no claims to high theory, or even analysis. And it has no pretensions of offering closure or a final lens through which to view Palestine/Israel. Rather, this hand-drawn documentary of one westerner's traispe through the occupied territories opens more doors – into Palestinians' homes, story-tellings, grievances, histories — and offers the attentive reader more questions than it answers.

The artist's humor is often self-mocking, and any foreigner who has bumbled through the West Bank and Gaza, where the surreal and unexpected become routine, will recognize something of her/himself in Sacco's main autobiographic character. A particularly amusing scene recounts Sacco's first experience of sound bombs. The main character, shaking and screaming, the jittery line drawing nearly coming off the page with fear and agitation, mistakes the "Blam!" for an "attack on Israeli positions in Ramallah!" It is an interpretation, which his calm, cool, bored Palestinian interlocutor dismisses over the edge of his newspaper, followed by Sacco readily facing up to his ignorance.

What is most remarkable, though, is the author's ability to recognize his own semi-vulture-like desire to "go where the action is," — not unique to him among foreigners in Palestine - without either excusing this attitude or totally disparaging it. This taste of excitement — the running chaos induced by soldiers' imposing curfews with sound-bomb — leaves him wanting more: "A comic needs some bangbang and I'm praying Ramallah will deliver." His adventure-seeking enthusiasm quickly becomes tempered by the scene of a march, a chanting, tire-burning demonstration, which, Sacco realizes "could get serious." He is pictured sweating and worried, excusing himself with the remembered promise to his mother that he'd be careful, admitting that, anyway, he's shaking like a leaf, trying to bolster his courage, repeating "It's good for the comic ... It's good for the comic ..." Competition from other members of the media momentarily propels him into the thick of things once

again, until he sees the gathering of the ammunition — “stones are ammo ... bottles, too ... not the sort of arsenal you can look up in ‘Jane’s’... but they add underdog color to the heroics in Ramallah”— and he’s back imitating a leaf “discreetly positioned in a storefront.” He’s sated, he’s had his fun. And the reader is left feeling like they’ve been along for the ride, from a safe distance. But it is a distance you realize most there can never find.

And this is another remarkable thing about *Palestine*. Sacco manages to maintain the delicate balance between reflective commentary on himself, his own reactions and experiences, and those of his hosts. He manages to cover many spheres of Palestinian life under occupation — imprisonment, torture, settler-vandalized houses, mourning over dead children, schools closed, soldiers chasing, teeming refugee camps, and the list goes on. History and some of the political complexities are woven in almost seamlessly, but they give any reader unfamiliar with the context enough information to understand what is going on in the pictures and dialogue. And the stories and information are always couched in the small details of the human interactions from which they emerge, from the endless cups of tea and (sometimes overbearing) hospitality offered with tales of suffering and persecution, to the 89-shekel brutalities tour, the driver-interpreter urging his clients on to visit just one more family with a tale of destruction and woe, leaving Sacco and his sometimes side-kick, a Japanese photographer, saturated and heavy just from hearing about it all. But the stories continue. For nearly 300, hash marked, heavily inked pages, the stories and dense, evocative pictures continue.

Without melodrama or hyperbole — difficult when writing about a place that seems to demand it just to keep up — Sacco ends with a typical story of a Palestinian boy, stopped by occupation soldiers, made to stand in the rain, humiliated, answering questions. And Sacco asks his own: “What can happen to someone who thinks he has all the power, what of this ... what becomes of someone when he believes himself to have none?” (p. 283). And the reader is left “with one more of the occupation’s mean ironies to gloat over ...” (p. 280).

Of all the scholarly treatments, eyewitness accounts, essays, films, letters home, interviews, and diatribes churned out about Palestine that I have seen, Sacco’s *Palestine* comes the closest to letting an outsider in, allowing someone to imagine it without seeing it.

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