

Rana Barakat\*

## How to Read a Massacre in Palestine

### Indigenous History as a Methodology of Liberation\*\*

## كيف نقرأ المجزرة في فلسطين؟ التاريخ الأصلي بوصفه منهجية للتحرير

**Abstract:** This article is framed as a question about historical methodology that imagines another way of living with the stories of the past. By investigating two massacres in Palestine (Tantura and Kafr Qasem), the article presents an alternate reading of the past, both in terms of Palestinian voices and relationality with historical sources. By arguing from an understanding informed by Indigenous history as a decolonial praxis, this article relies on the voices and work of two women, Radwa Ashour and Samia Halaby, to map anew the stories of the past through the ongoing violence of the present. Their work forms the basis for engagement with the primary question: Can imagining Indigenous history, of which settler colonial violence is just one branch, be more than the victim's desperate plea that settlers recognise a people's humanity?

**Keywords:** Massacres, Palestine, Settler Colonialism, Indigenous History, Violence.

**الملخص:** نُظِر هذه الدراسة بوصفها تساؤلاً عن المنهجية التاريخية التي تتخيل طريقة أخرى للوجود عبر التعايش مع حكايات الماضي. فمن خلال التحقيق في مجزرتي الطنطورة وكفر قاسم في فلسطين، تسعى الدراسة لطرح نوع مختلف من قراءة الماضي في ضوء الأصوات الفلسطينية والعلائقية مع المصادر التاريخية. ومن خلال المحاجة في فهم مستوحى من التاريخ الأصلي بوصفه ممارسة لتفكيك الاستعمار، تستند الدراسة إلى صوتي امرأتين، هما رضوى عاشور وسامية حلبي، وعملهما من أجل ترسيم خريطة جديدة لسرد الماضي من خلال العنف المستمر للحاضر؛ فعملهما يشكّل الأساس لسؤال الأساسي المطروح هنا: هل يمكن تخيل التاريخ الأصلي، الذي يشكّل فيه عنف الاستعمار الاستيطاني جزءاً من أجزاء كثيرة، أن يتخطى مطالبة الضحية اليائسة باعتراف المستوطنين بإنسانية شعب؟

**كلمات مفتاحية:** مجزرة، فلسطين، استيطان، تاريخ أصلي، عنف.

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\*\* This study was originally published in Arabic in: Rana Barakat, "How to Read a Massacre in Palestine? Indigenous History as a Methodology of Liberation," *Omran*, no. 39 (Winter 2022), pp. 149-172. *Omran* is a quarterly peer-reviewed journal of social sciences and humanities.

*We have poetry*

*So we do not die of history.*

Meena Alexander<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In September 2018, “new revelations” of a massacre of Palestinians in 1982 reached global mainstream media. Although the Shatila massacre had occurred more than three and half decades before, and in spite of all of the literature about the events that had been produced since, there was still something “new” in these revelations. What was “new” in 2018 was the archival finds by Seth Anziska drawn from documents he discovered from the Israeli Kahan Commission report.<sup>2</sup> According to Anziska’s reporting, the newly available secret documents from the commission’s report reveal what most people already knew: the tactical relationship between Zionist forces and the Lebanese Phalanges and that the massacre in Beirut was a result of this collusion. What is it about this kind of archival material that makes for such a “historical” discovery? The massacres in Sabra and Shatila, unlike those that came before them, were actually well publicised, well documented (in real time) and widely exposed both as they happened and over time.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it can be argued that given the context of the early 1980s, the massacres in Beirut served as a kind of historical affirmation of all of those that came before them at the hands of the Zionist military machine and were treated as such within all the literature produced. Why then was this treated as a “discovery”?

While this article is not about Sabra and Shatila directly, it is about how we think about the inexplicable violence of the past (and the ongoing present) in Palestine and how we imagine historical methodology as a potential tool to confront the paradox between the inexplicable/unspeakable and storytelling.<sup>4</sup> A great deal of work has been done on reading the archive as a historical source — this article is also not written in that vein. Rather, in this article I pose a different kind of inquiry, away from the state and interrogations about the state apparatus’ ability to frame history and produce (and exclude) knowledge. Rather, this article is an endeavour, posed as a question, to think about the stories of those who fall outside of the power the archive.

What happens when we move away from and exist outside of the power of the archives and the method of history that elevates that archive, even as a place of alternative knowledge? What kind of rendering of the past can we move into when we move away from the act of searching for documentation of violence through the archive of the perpetrators of that violence? Described through the “science of history” and using the annals of documentation, this kind of traditional historical method that prioritises the archives performs the task of settler colonial elimination of Indigenous people. If this is “history”, can history – or the representation of memory and the telling of a people’s history – be more than the documentation of defeat and destruction? Should it be? Can imagining Indigenous history, of which settler colonial violence is one part of many parts, be more than the victim’s desperate plea that settlers recognise a people’s humanity? The main question this article interrogates is whether Palestinian history can be (re)imagined as part of an ontological project to decolonise knowledge. How can Indigenous voices not be overpowered, overwhelmed, and over-written by the Zionist settler colonial narrative and its explicit and implicit frameworks?

<sup>1</sup> Meena Alexander, “What Use Is Poetry?” *World Literature Today* (September 2013), accessed on 9/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/34le3Lv>

<sup>2</sup> Seth Anziska, “Sabra and Shatila: New Revelations,” *New York Review of Books*, 17/9/2018, accessed on 9/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/34awItc>

<sup>3</sup> In particular, see: Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hut, *Ṣabrā wa-Shātilā: Aylūl 1982* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2004); Zakaria al-Shaikh, “Ṣabrā wa-Shātilā ‘ām 1982: Muqāwamat Majzara,” *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Fall 1984), pp. 57-90; Jean Genet, “Four hours in Shatila,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1983), pp. 3-22.

<sup>4</sup> This study distinguishes between the concepts of “narrative” to describe the modern and official narrative related to history and derived from colonial legacy, and the concept of “storytelling” to describe the methodology of authentic historical narrative derived from the accounts of the country’s inhabitants. Accordingly, the expression “storyteller” does not refer to the profession of entertainers (storytellers), but rather refers to the practice of storytelling as an intentional and systematic act of providing authentic testimony of the past, present, and future.

To explore these questions, I examine the massacres of Tantura (1948) and Kafr Qasem (1956) as the scenes for this analysis. These massacres were part of the structural violence of settler colonialism that is both a part of Palestinian “history” and Zionist “history”. In each location, this article covers the major historical literature to understand how settler narratives have become the dominant discourse, and to see how refuting this history opens up the possibility for Indigenous story/history of Palestine. That is, this is part of a larger story of how to read and un-read settler History through an Indigenous lens and methodology. The actual events of both Tantura and Kafr Qasem are well known and widely discussed in historical literature. Israeli “border guards” attacked and killed Palestinians over the course of an evening on 29 October 1956 in a massacre in Kafr Qasem, just as nearly a decade earlier Zionist forces had attacked and killed Palestinians in a massacre over the course of an evening on 22 May 1948 at the coastal village of Tantura. But both labelling the events as massacres and understanding them as Palestinian stories remain, at best, contested.

In order to question the usefulness of the traditional discipline of History, this article engages with the late Radwa Ashour’s novel *Al-Tanturiya (The Woman from Tantoura)* and Samia Halaby’s exhibit/book *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*. Historians can learn a great deal from the imaginative realm of artistic creation, which tells the story of Indigenous defiance in the face of settler oppression in a way the confines of the history discipline often seem incapable of. Although these massacres are but two examples of Israeli settler colonial violence over the past seventy years, by reading the historical literature of these particular massacres and the debates that surrounded them, the dominance of settler narratives and the subsequent settler framing become clear. In the case of Palestine, the war is not only not over, but it also is an ongoing mission to eliminate the Indigenous people, targeting not only the land and the people, but also the story. This article works to understand how Ashour’s and Halaby’s attempts to imagine Palestinian stories through literary and artistic renditions were a trenchant rejection of the settler frameworks and power that dominate historical literature. Their respective works both tell an Indigenous story that is obviously wrought with settler colonial violence, but not exclusively defined by it.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, the work of fiction and art provide a historical account that cannot be conveyed or captured in what the history discipline legitimates.

## History as Reconstruction: How to Discover and Cover a “Massacre”

The village of Tantura is located south of the city of Haifa on the Mediterranean coast. Israeli military forces of the newly declared state invaded and occupied Tantura in late May 1948. Between the nightfall of 22 May and the following dawn, these forces emptied the village of all its Palestinian inhabitants with force and intent, executing more than 200 people. More than seventy years later, these details are widely known. But how are these details framed in dominant historical narratives? The narrative of this expulsion and massacre is to this day a highly “contested” political and historical debate.<sup>6</sup> This section explores how this village — as one among many — embodies history’s failure in its treatment of Palestinians.

Nearly a generation after the establishment of the state of Israel, a controversy erupted in in 2000-2001 in Israeli media about the massacre at Tantura. While once again struck within the prism of the settler state

<sup>5</sup> The question of “Indigenous and Indigeneity” in Palestine is one that requires a great deal of attention and is complicated. I have written about this elsewhere, but for the purposes of this piece I use the term “Indigenous” as a mythological intervention in how we engage the past and present in the Palestinian context. This is a politics of positionality and how knowledge production is engaged and distinctly not identity politics within the prison of coloniality and European modernity. I attempt to cover this wide-ranging debate in my forthcoming book: Rana Barakat, *Lifta and Resisting the Museumification of Palestine: Indigenous History of the Nakba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [forthcoming]).

<sup>6</sup> For literature on the war between 1947-1949, see: Walid Khalidi (ed.), *All the Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Palestine Studies, 1992); Nur Masalah, *The Expulsion of Palestinians: The Concept of “Transfer” in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Palestine Studies, 1992). The following section will go through much of the literature on this Tantura debate, but it should be noted here that even Benny Morris, a staunch advocate of what he described as a necessity for the use of violence in expelling Palestinians in 1948, recorded some details of the Alexandroni Brigade’s (the unit of the Zionist army, the Haganah) work to empty the village on the night of 22-23 of May. See: Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 119-121.

and setter narratives, this episode is instructive in how material and methodology intersect in making history. That is, the details of this supposed controversy show just how ineffective history is in the Palestinian context. As Samera Esmeir explained in her reflection on the “legal case” of Tantura, “One of the difficulties in discussing the violence against Palestinians during the 1948 war is that “Palestine”, the site of the violence, both persists and has ceased to exist”.<sup>7</sup> Since 1948 is a marker of the “end” of something, “that moment when Palestine was ruined”, and the beginning of something, the new state of Israel, it follows that, “the documents recording the birth of the state attempt to conceal the death of Palestine”.<sup>8</sup> Esmeir’s keen reflections, more than fifty years after the massacre in Tantura, grew out, in part, of the reactions caused by an MA thesis by an Israeli graduate student of Haifa University working on the history of five Palestinian villages, including Tantura. The storm of controversy that ensued was simple: a student wrote a thesis, based on research (from various Israeli archives) and oral testimonies, both from Palestinian survivors from Tantura and from members of the Alexandaroni Brigade, the military unit that seized the village in May 1948. The findings of the thesis hit the Israeli press in 2000, and because the issue seemed to challenge the Zionist national imaginary, push back came in the form of the Alexandaroni Brigade veterans’ association filing suit against the student for libel. Put quite plainly, Tantura broke into Israeli public and academic discourse, not as its own story but rather as a libel case within Israeli courts. Of course, the narrative of Tantura is far more complicated, but it was reduced to a war of words over who produced more convincing “evidence” of the events that took place in 1948. Nevertheless, this controversy revealed a great deal, not only concerning the obvious elements of Israeli society’s hard and fast inability to cope with the contradictions in their mythological origin story, but also, and perhaps more importantly, it revealed how warped a story can be if put into the hands of the oppressor’s courts and forced into the straightjacket of “legal evidence”.

Historians can easily find the limits regarding what passes as critique, as Ilan Pappé did in several of his reflections on this episode. First, and perhaps most obviously, is the importance of attending to oral history as an alternative method to archival research. According to Pappé:

*oral history is not a substitute for written evidence, but it is particularly important in validating and filling in the gaps in the documentary evidence, which gives us the “bare bones”. Thus, what is in the official Israeli record [...] a brief reference to the act of occupying a village – or “cleansing” it, to use the actual term of the Jewish texts – becomes in Palestinian history a detailed account of assault, expulsion, and in some cases massacre. Indeed, in the case of Tantura, the massacre might not have come to light at all had it not been for the oral testimony on the Palestinian side – later corroborated by Jewish testimony – because the piecemeal evidence currently available in the Israeli archives is too fragmented [...] to more than hint at what happened. In this case, then, it is the documents that fill out the oral history, rather than the reverse.<sup>9</sup>*

Though oral history has now become a more widely used methodological tool in the historian’s arsenal, it is still handled with scepticism, with a main focus on how memory is both constructed and changes over time. But what often goes unsaid is whose memory is privileged. Pappé, who stood in the controversy over the student’s thesis as one of his strongest allies on their university campus, underlines the importance that the student’s interviews with Palestinians were “corroborated by Jewish testimony”. As he explained, “Katz [the student in question] was able to overcome the suspicion and, indeed, delegitimization that is usually applied

<sup>7</sup> Samera Esmeir, “1948: Law, History, Memory,” *Social Text*, vol. 75, no. 21 (Summer 2003), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Ilan Pappé, “The Tantura Case in Israel: The Katz Research and Trial,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Spring 2001), p. 20.

in Israel to Palestinian oral history (and, indeed, to Palestinian history in general) only because he succeeded in obtaining testimonies about the massacre not only from Palestinian witnesses but also from Jewish soldiers who had participated in the events”.<sup>10</sup> Evidence, in this sense, is as Esmeir described it, the crux of how legal practices relate to historical positivism. This leads her to ask, “How legitimate are the memories of the Palestinian survivors within the fields of law and history?”<sup>11</sup> Even if a historian adopts memory as a method, the need for corroboration of memory with archival evidence leads, once again, to the complete silencing of Palestinians.

Though it might seem farfetched to look at a libel case about an MA thesis to understand disciplinary understandings of “evidence” and “facts”, it is quite revealing in how historical evidence is put into question in establishing “facts”. Though the word “massacre” was not used in the thesis, the plaintiff’s lawyer’s strategy against the student thesis was to, in part, “establish that there was no admissible or reliable evidence proving the occurrence of the massacre [...] [in doing so] the admissibility and reliability of the evidence provided by the survivors were questioned”.<sup>12</sup> The courtroom setting in this case, represented what the discipline of history has done over time: filter sources to find what is deemed to be “reliable evidence” needed to prove facts. In this setting, oppressed people’s memories will always be subject to doubt and oral history will remain secondary to archival sources.

Though the point of this article is to discuss how a “massacre” can come into appearance on its own terms within Palestinian history, it is obvious that even indirect suggestions of the word “massacre” (like the word “Nakba”) are subject to censorship.<sup>13</sup> Even ardent Zionist historians, like Benny Morris, weighed in on the issue of the court case:

*the Katz-Tantura affair teaches us that one cannot base a reconstruction of events on the testimony of witnesses decades afterward. Faulty memory, political interests, flaws in transmission or translation — all impair credibility. In a case like Tantura, played out against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Palestinian demands for a “return”, Arabs will “recall” Israeli monstrosity and Israelis their own blamelessness.<sup>14</sup>*

This clear obfuscation of memory serves the function of silencing and denial. Moreover, the notion of “reconstruction” appeared throughout the literature concerning the student’s MA thesis and the subsequent interrogations concerning history. It is not without coincidence that an ardent defender of Zionist ideology like Benny Morris would cling to this kind of equation of credibility. Ilan Pappé, a historian who occupies a different end of the Israeli political spectrum from Morris, asked a similar question regarding history and Tantura, albeit with his own political trajectory in mind: “when the *Present* is enveloped by an on-going conflict, writing on the *Past* by way of history writing is an exceedingly difficult task, not always appreciated or anticipated by those who have written in theoretical and philosophical terms on the question of the reconstruction of history”.<sup>15</sup> This is not about how to write, but about who is writing and why. The questions that both Morris and Pappé present, as different as they may be, are essentially Israeli positions and part of a debate about Zionist History and how it has affected Palestinians. Even as Pappé offers a path forward in showing how a historian might go about *reconstructing* the events that happened in Tantura between 22 and 23 May 1948, he suggests this as a model for other cases, arguing that writing the history of massacres is long overdue in Palestine. This description of “overdue” also ignores a number of Palestinian historians

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Esmeir, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> see: “‘Nakba Law’ – Amendment No. 40 to the Budgets Foundations Law,” *Adalah* (2011), accessed on 9/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3mUuSTX>

<sup>14</sup> Benny Morris, “The Tantura ‘Massacre’ Affair,” *The Jerusalem Report*, 9/2/2004, accessed on 9/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/33jIzEM>

<sup>15</sup> Ilan Pappé, “Historical Truth, Modern Historiography, and Ethical Obligations: The Challenge of the Tantura Case,” *Holy Land Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2004), p. 172.

who have meticulously reconstructed massacres, including Nur Masalah and Saleh Abdul Jawad.<sup>16</sup> Here, Pappe reveals another level of silencing, including his own complicity in it. In fact, the Arabic language academic journal, *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya* published a special issue devoted to the massacre at Tantura in the summer of 2000, contemporary to this entire debate.<sup>17</sup> This issue also included testimony from survivors gathered from various refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon. Tellingly, Elias Shofani, in his article in the special issue, mentioned and confronted Israeli historiography, from the official to the “new official” of the self-described “new historians”. Not only is there on-going work among historians on the massacres, but these same historians, as in Shofani’s case, devote space in their work to respond to these narratives, further highlighting another issue: When and how can a Palestinian historical narrative not be a response to Israeli historiography? Put another way, how can an Indigenous narrative not be framed by the settler narrative as a counter-narrative?

Out of this quasi-instructional manual for historians, Pappe influenced and partook in a subsequent project for oral history with the Israeli NGO Zochrot (Memories). With Eyal Sivan as the scientific curator, and Pappe as the assistant curator, Zochrot’s project, “Towards a Common Archive”, is a remarkable exhibit of Israeli history that both confronts the violence of the Zionist forces in the Nakba War (1947-1949) and challenges Israeli society’s denial, ignorance, and ambivalence on the subject.<sup>18</sup> The testimonies of former soldiers are also archived and made partially public on the Zochrot website and You Tube. This project, as reflective of the overall work of Zochrot, is a clear challenge from within that is aimed at re-conceptualising the Nakba for an Israeli audience.<sup>19</sup> The testimonies in this archive are vast and range in clarity between the “why” and the “how” of the violence, and do truly try to map the violence of the war against Palestinians. Nevertheless, the notion of a “common” archive in this story (taken from the title and description of the project), obfuscates a major issue: with this kind of emphasis, where Indigenous stories have to be “tested” and/or “combined” in such a way, how can we understand Indigenous narratives that are not based on/in and not reliant on/responding to the settler narrative?

## Radwa Ashour – al-Tanturiya and Storytelling as an Indigenous Historical Tool

Leaving behind all the fodder of proof and evidence and the horrible fate an Indigenous people face in the storm of history, Radwa Ashour puts forward another way of being and imagining through exquisite narration. Perhaps in the context of Palestine, asserting that Ashour provides a vision of liberation might read as exaggerated, but she certainly offers a useful and timely alternative to close the door on the silencing and suspicions that accompany the rules of history.<sup>20</sup> In *al-Tanturiya*, Ashour tells the story of Ruqayya

<sup>16</sup> The list of Palestinian scholars in this vein is long. For a sample of them, see the work working throughout the last half of the twentieth century see: Nur Masalah, Saleh Abdul Jawad, Rosemay Sayigh, Bayan Nawahid al Hut, and Walid al Khalidi.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, vol. 11, no. 43 (Summer 2000).

<sup>18</sup> “Eyal Sivan,” accessed on 9/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3znNbG5>

<sup>19</sup> A useful case to read, among many beyond the Katz affair, is the theatre production of *The Admission* by Motti Lerner, which in passing notes the land of Tantura as a site of Zionist violence in 1948, the play received critical attention and pushback, in particular, in the United States. See: Brett Abelman, “Ari Roth on *The Admission* at Theater J – Even in Good wars, Bad things Happen,” *Dc Theatre Scene*, 20/3/2014, accessed on 9/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3mWwxbt>. This kind of work follows the line that discussing Palestinians in general and the violence of Zionist history need not negate the “righteousness” of the cause or the Israeli state. Doubling down on this kind of righteousness of Zionism even within a light discussion of violence of the state is a trope in Zionist literature, a pronounced version of this kind of Zionism can be seen in Ari Shavit’s work as well. See: Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Ashour’s literary oeuvre includes several novels that deal with historical narratives including *Sirāj* and *Specters* (where she writes about the massacre in Deir Yassin of April 1948) and follow her own career from the time of her early engagement with African American literature, politics and her artistic intervention. See: Radwa Ashour, *Fī al-Naqd al-Adabī: Ṣayyādū al-Thākira* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafī al-Arabi, 2001); Ira Dworkin, “Radwa Ashour, African American Criticism, and the Production of Modern Arabic Literature,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 2018), pp. 1-19.

while Ruqayya tells the story of Palestine.<sup>21</sup> Published in 2010, more than six decades after the massacre in Tantura, Ashour writes the novel through the voice of a young girl, Ruqayya, who lived in the seaside village of Tantura. The reader sees the landscape through Ruqayya and follows her as she grows up from childhood in her homeland through the adult stages of her life in exile as a refugee primarily in Lebanon. The narrative of life, violence, and survival are localised through this young girl's experiences. The power of settler colonial modernity that imposes itself on historical documentation is completely non-existent in Ashour's historical story. As such, through Ruqayya, Ashour liberates the historian as a storyteller. In writing about her experience as a novelist, Ashour explicitly explored the role of a storyteller and history: "I do not historicize for ideological reasons but because I have no other means to conceptualize my existence and reconstruct it into meaningful categories".<sup>22</sup> Though this quote precedes her publication of the novel on Tantura, Ashour, nevertheless, spoke of how she perceived her role as a kind of storyteller:

*because the free play of the imagination and the exercise of power to create, to draw characters, to construct space and temporality, to effect shifts, transitions, and changing time speeds, to manipulate words and sentences, is a reappropriation of a threatened geography, and a threatening history [...] writing is a retrieval of a human will negated.*<sup>23</sup>

It is clear that Ashour saw herself in a way as a kind of historian, but one who might be called an anti-historian who undertakes the hard labour of fighting historical negation. In her own words she described her cultural resistance as attempting "to give history visibility and coherence, to conjure up unaccounted for, marginalized and silenced areas of the past and the present".<sup>24</sup> Ashour described her own relationship to memory in another essay about history writing through fiction, where she revealed that her fiction is not a suspension of reality as much as it is an intimate description of life in the past through the present.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, her work on Tantura is exemplary of this stance. To be sure, Ashour is not alone in these kinds of contemplations, as fiction and poetry have long been the medium for storytelling in the Palestinian and Arab context, but how Ashour does this through Ruqayya is worth exploring.

## Out of Settler Time: Ruqayya's Beginnings

The story of Ruqayya did not begin with the devastation of 1948 as the novel is not linear, but rather framed by how Ruqayya remembers.<sup>26</sup> The back and forth in time is key to understanding how Ashour's storytelling works — breaking free from the linearity of history can, in part, be seen as challenging the settler distribution and destruction of time. That is, this approach challenges the notion of "settler time". This technique is not new to literature, including Palestinian literature, where novelists ranging from Ghassan Kanafani to Elias Khoury have played with time in interesting ways. Ashour invents Ruqayya as a storyteller, and as such, the reader as the listener need not think about the technique of the novel as much as the reader is enthralled with the storyteller and her tales. Instead of time, Ashour brings her reader into the story in space — opening with Ruqayya playing on the beach, the reader enters Tantura through the sea and Ruqayya's imagination. The romance of the water and her vivid imagination represents, in some

<sup>21</sup> Radwa Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Storyteller: My Experience as a Novelist," *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> Ashour, *Fī al-Naqd al-Adabī*, pp. 57-70.

<sup>26</sup> The novel was written in colloquial Palestinian Arabic (not modern standard Arabic). This is an important distinction that Ashour made as the words of Ruqayya were/are how conversations and memories occur over time, in the past and present, in Palestine and among Palestinians.

ways, the romance of what the settler army stole from Palestinians in stealing Palestine. By the time the reader reaches the military occupation of Tantura, the geography of Ruqayya's landscape and life is clear. Her relationship to the land was based on her ordinary life, until the ordinary became extraordinary.

The power of Ashour's literary style is fully on display in Ruqayya's storytelling of that day in May when her family was violently driven from their home by Zionist military forces. The day began when her mother woke her up and gave her a list of tasks to perform in the house. The young Ruqayya did not understand but performed the tasks her mother gave her:

*wake up Wisal and Abed. Put fodder for the livestock that will last two or three weeks, and a lot of water. Scatter seed for the chickens, a lot. And the horse, don't forget the horse. Lift the oil cans off the ground so the moisture doesn't get to them, and put a cushion between the wall and each can. Dress in three layers...*<sup>27</sup>

While she sensed the danger outside the borders of their home, Ashour presented Ruqayya as she had been, a young girl who, along with her mother and their recent refugee guests from Qisarya, fled their home in a cloud of confusion and fear. Embedded within the details in this short description is the unspeakability of "becoming" a refugee. In time, Ruqayya would embody this unspeakability. She had never before this moment even seen the door to her family's home locked, and as her mother closed the iron door, she locked it with a key that she had also never seen. Though that was the first appearance of that key in the novel and in her life, it would remain a material symbol throughout Ruqayya's life.

## Describing the Indescribable: Settler Violence and Indigenous Narration

Forced removal, danger, and violent death had suddenly become her reality, but how little of it made sense, how much she could not understand, and how utterly illogical it all seemed to her is precisely the key to explaining the inexplicability of the massacre. That is, through Ruqayya, Ashour tells a story of unspeakable violence, but her stories are not defined nor framed nor confined by violence. The landscape of violence was clear enough in the dark of the night, Ruqayya felt it from the sounds of explosions and bullets coming from the east, south, and north. Just as they had taken refuge in another house, three armed men attacked the home. As the armed men forced the family to move to another area, Ruqayya saw the bodies of the "blind Hassan Abed al-Al and his wife Azza al-Hajj al-Hindi lying near their house surrounded by a pool of blood".<sup>28</sup> They were driven out to the beach, separated, men on one side and women, children, and some elderly men on the other. In this moment, Ruqayya described the scene:

*it was the first time I saw female soldiers: women wearing a military uniform and bearing arms. They spoke to us in Arabic and began to search us, one after the other, taking any money or jewelry they found on us [...] she noticed the rings in my ears as she was searching me. She yanked them out and blood flowed from my ears.*<sup>29</sup>

In this midst of these assaults, Ruqayya stood at the edge of the group, closest to the men. As she searched for any sign of her father and brothers, she witnessed murder: men were picked out of the group,

<sup>27</sup> Radwa Ashour, *The Woman from Tantoura: A Novel of Palestine*, Kay Heikkinen (trans.) (Cairo: American of University Press, 2014), p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

taken in smaller groups, and disappeared. The soldiers then forced the women towards the cemetery of the town, where she was witness to further devastation of violence:

*as they were leading us toward the cemetery, I noticed that the village has a strange odor, mixed with the scent of white lilies that grew on the islands and along their beaches at that time of the year. I couldn't distinguish the odor even though it remained in my nose after we left the village. Afterward it would sometimes appear suddenly, days or weeks later, without my knowing where it had come from or why the village had had that odor on that particular day.<sup>30</sup>*

Ashour's narrative allows room for describing what is indescribable, her style making the connections that traditional historical documentation cannot. As a storyteller, Ashour is free to use the power of the sensory and creates a scene that the reader can experience viscerally. Ruqayya's journey began before the night broke into early morning, but her life was forever changed by it:

*at the cemetery two trucks were waiting. Threatening us with their weapons, they told us to get in [...] They crammed us into the trucks, and they began to move. Suddenly I shouted and pulled my mother's arm, pointing with my hand to a pile of corpses. She looked to where I was pointing and shouted: Jamil, my cousin, Jamil. But I pulled her arm again and with my left hand and pointed with the right to where my father and brothers were: their corpses were next to Jamil's, piled one next to the other at the distance of a few meters from us.<sup>31</sup>*

In the truck that forced her and her mother into a life without their home, young Ruqayya's last sight in Tantura was that of her father and brothers, murdered along with piles of others around them. Her mother never accepted that her husband and sons were killed; she would spend the rest of her life telling herself and others that they had escaped to Egypt and she simply did not know how to find them. Ruqayya, on the other hand, after seeing what she saw, stopped speaking. Her voice was left behind in the town of Tantura. As if confronting the forced silences in history, Ruqayya's physical being absorbed the violence as the temporarily loss of her voice. Ashour's novel follows Ruqayya and her mother through their refugee journey, east through Palestine, to Jordan, to Syria and finally, to the southern city of Sidon in Lebanon. In Sidon, Ruqayya found her paternal uncle, the man who tried to get his brother to leave on a boat with him before the settler soldiers invaded. Only then did she regain her voice, to inform him of the fate of her father and brothers.

## **The Story of Tantura is the Voice of the Woman from Tantura (Al-Tanturiya)**

Ashour's imaginary voice of Ruqayya captured Palestinian reality in a way the evidence produced by the perpetrator's archive never could. The massacre was real. And Ruqayya felt it, smelled it, breathed it, and lived to relive it. Because the method of massacre was/is, as described earlier, part of an ongoing structure of settler colonial violence, Ruqayya lived to see more massacres. After meeting up with her uncle and his family, Ruqayya re-established her relationship with her beloved young cousin. When the settler soldiers invaded Lebanon, she explained, "what he did not live through with her on the sea of Tantura forty years before he now lives through on the sea of Sidon... it is as if history repeats itself, although the scene is larger".<sup>32</sup> She lived through it yet again, in Beirut, in 1982, at the refugee camp of Shatila. As if the linear passage of time was irrelevant, she re/lived the 1982 massacres in Sidon and again in 2000

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

when she travelled with others to the newly liberated southern border, when her younger son told her the story of her eldest son's lost love, and of how she was murdered along with 125 others in a school that was bombed by the Israelis in 1982. Ashour's remarkable description of the strength of Ruqayya reveals that in this form (the novel) and through this medium (Ruqayya's storytelling), one can be the victim of indescribable violence, but not be confined to the role of the victim. Ruqayya remains a powerful and complicated character *through* the violence.

Time and space, again, are complicated by how time freezes and continues to move in the life of a refugee whose relationship with space is defined by displacement. Throughout the novel, as Ruqayya's life moves from one site to another, from one context to another, the frozen aspect of time and dislocation remain. As she described it while with her children on a trip in Lebanon: "I was with the boys on the train and yet I wasn't, because ever since that day when they loaded us into the truck and I saw my father and brothers on the pile, I have remained there, unmoving, even if it didn't seem like it".<sup>33</sup> The movement of time, including time that seems not to move, follows Ruqayya from her generation to the next. The novel ends with another beginning, as Ruqayya travels to the southern border of Lebanon, the northern border of her Palestine. When she sees her granddaughter on the other side of the border, she gifts the baby child the key that her mother carried the day they were forced to leave Tantura. Ashour's description of that border scene is the ongoing journey of every Ruqayya and the geography of displacement:

*in the flash of an eye it was as if the barbed wire had disappeared from view, covered by the bodies of the residents on both sides. They were greeting each other, shyly at first, and then speaking easily. People were meeting each other:*

*"We are from Haifa..."*

*"We came from Ain al-Helwa, originally we're from Saffurya. From al-Zeeb. From Amqa. From Safsaf. From al-Tira. From..."*

*"We're from Um al-Fahm..."*

*"We're from the Mieh Mieh Camp..."*

*"We're from Shafr Amr..."*

*"We came from the Rashidiya Camp..."*

*"We're from Acre..."*

*"We came from the Burj al-Shamali Camp..."*

*"We're from Arraba..."*

*"We came from the al-Bassa Camp..."*

*"We're from Nazareth..."*

*"We came from Sidon..."*

*"We're from al-Bi'na..."*

*"We came from Tyre..."*

*"We're from Jaffa..."*

*"We came from Jezzin..."*

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

*“We’re from Sekhnin...”*

*“We came from Ghaziya...”*

*“We’re from Lid...”*

*“We’re from Deir al-Qasi...”*

*“We came from al-Bazuriya...”*

*“We’re from al-Jdayda. We’re from al-Rama. We’re from...”*

*“And the lady is...?”*

*“From Tantoura.”*

Listing Palestinian towns, cities, and villages, along with places of refuge throughout Lebanon is the juxtaposition of being refugee from a nation that itself was made into a refugee.

The geography of this journey and the ongoing violence that she was witness to, that she experienced and that she survived, is the story of Tantura and its people. In her present, Ruqayya takes us on a journey through the past, from her earliest childhood memories, through the life of her refugee family in Lebanon, as she married and became a mother and then grandmother. She ends the novel with a beginning, as described earlier, when, after the Israeli army retreated from southern Lebanon in May 2000, she along with hundreds of other Palestinians travelled to the border to see beyond the barbed wire. The story does not have an ending, and the massacre of Tantura, like the all the memories of home, follow the reader as they follow Ruqayya from home to war and massacres and from one generation to the next — a Palestinian story.

## The (On-going) Nakba: The Massacre in Kafr Qasem, a Massacre against Citizens?

As described earlier, the Nakba both as a reality and as a concept in Palestine did not end with the conclusion of the military war and its massacres, like that in Tantura, in 1949. On Monday, 29 October 1956, between the hours of 5 and 7 pm, Israeli “border police”, upon direct orders from the army military command of the Central District, shot and killed 49 Palestinian Arabs from the village of Kafr Qasem: men, women and children. Based mainly on the published verdict of the military court, Emile Habibi’s specific account of the massacre recounted that “border patrols guards” shot and killed nineteen men, six women, ten teenage boys (age 14-17), six girls (age 12-15) and seven young boys (age 8-13). One of the murdered women was pregnant and her unborn baby was also killed.<sup>34</sup> A few hours earlier in the day, the military command had issued a curfew to begin at 5:00 pm. The people coming home from the work in the fields and on the land to Kafr Qasem that evening did not know about the curfew or the military orders. According to Adel Manna, “the details of what happened in Kafr Qasem that day are well known and documented; there is no dispute over them...in contrast to other massacres (from Deir Yassin in April 1948, to Sabra and Shatila in September 1982, to Jenin in April 2002, and others)”.<sup>35</sup> Though the military war supposedly ended in 1949 with the armistice treaties between the state of Israel and neighbouring Arab states, the violence of the Nakba and the massacres that define a core part of that violence did not end. With various nefarious pretexts, the military government has continued — until this very day — to attack, invade, and, if not emptied, tried to

<sup>34</sup> Emile Habibi, *Kafr Qāsim: al-Majzara-al Siyāsa* (Haifa: Arabesque, 1976). See: Shira Robinson, “Local Struggle, National Struggle: Palestinian Responses to the Kafr Qasim Massacre and Its Aftermath, 1956–1966,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3, Special Issue: Commemorating the 1973 War (August 2003), pp. 393–416.

<sup>35</sup> Adel Manna, “Majzarat Kafr Qāsim,” in: *al-Filasṭīniyūn fī Isrā’īl: Qirā’āt fī al-Tārīkh wa-l-Siyāsa wa-l-Mujtama’*, Nadim N. Rouhana & Areej Sabbagh-Khoury (eds.) (Haifa: Mada al-Carmel; Arab Center for Applied Research, 2011), p. 76.

empty Palestinian villages and towns. Before Kafr Qasem, for example, came the notorious special military unit 101, under the command of Ariel Sharon, whose main goal was to attack border villages and towns in the West Bank. On 15 October 1953, Sharon and his troops attacked the village of Qibya, killing 69-70 people, most of them women and children.<sup>36</sup> The same year, 1956, another Israeli military unit attacked Khan Yunis in southern Gaza, resulting in another massacre.<sup>37</sup> Massacres, as Manna and others have described, were and remain a fundamental aspect of Israeli military policy and tactics.

It is important to frame these massacres as part of the structural violence of Zionist settler colonialism, but it is interesting as well to look into the specifics of Kafr Qasem. Just as the Katz controversy highlights aspects of how reconstruction functions (or does not function) in the telling of the narrative of Tantura, Kafr Qasem also has a kind of Israeli reckoning in the aftermath, albeit a more immediate one. As Shira Robinson points out, the exceptionalism of Kafr Qasem was Israeli exceptionalism. The state worked to render the events of Kafr Qasem an anomaly and, through this narrative of exceptionalism, worked to take the massacre outside of Palestinian history. That is, in the months and years after the massacre, the aftermath was, in part, fed by the internal political dynamics of the Israeli state, those who were murdered as well and those who survived in Kafr Qasem were part of this state, and the aftermath was very much about how, in the telling words of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, these "citizen strangers" fit into (or did not fit into) Israel.<sup>38</sup> Because of these internal political developments, the aftermath of the massacre was clearly the state's attempt to produce the historical narrative, reinforced through the tools of commemoration. That is, after a solid attempt at a complete media blackout of the event and total isolation of the village, enough internal agitation outside of Kafr Qasem forced official Israeli action in the form of a committee of inquiry and a military trial. This was a moment to see how contested memory played out in the narrowly defined public space of a settler state that was hostile to Palestinians whose status in the state was unclear and unwanted.

The weeks and months that followed the massacre were a time of clear mobilisation for Palestinian Arab communities throughout the settler state of Israel. According to Shira Robinson, "for residents of urban centers and scores of other villages the Galilee and Little Triangle, this period witnessed the transformation of a relatively unknown border village into the motive force of unprecedented grass-roots protest against military rule".<sup>39</sup> The mobilisation led to direct battles between the state's security forces and Palestinians in Israel who were acting as political groups, parties and communities throughout the various stages of the aftermath, from the beginning of the military trial into the first annual commemoration of the massacre. A battle over memory was at play — deciding how the massacre of Kafr Qasem would be memorialised and politicised (or de-politicised in the state's intentions). The state went as far as to impose a truce (*sulha*) on the residents of Kafr Qasem to put a final end to the "affair" and "cleanse" the state and its various apparatuses of any blame for the massacre. This forced truce was another kind of violent attack on Kafr Qasem; as Robinson describes it: "the *sulha* remains an indelible stain on Israel's historical record, an assault on the dignity of the victims and the Arab community as a whole".<sup>40</sup> Taking the massacre out of the context of the Nakba and the ongoing structural violence of settler colonialism, however, was the goal of the government manoeuvres in the aftermath of the massacre. This tension is seen in commemorative

<sup>36</sup> Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 91.

<sup>37</sup> Joe Sacco's oral archeology of the Khan Yunis massacre through the genre of the graphic novel *Footnotes on Gaza* is another exemplar of de-colonising Palestinian history. A graphic novel, here, is another way to tell an inexplicable story, that is, again, a story that holds unspeakable violence but is not defined by it. See: Joe Sacco. *Footnotes in Gaza: A Graphic Novel* (New York: Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Robinson, "Local Struggle, National Struggle," p. 399; Shira Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel's Liberal Settler State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Robinson, "Local Struggle, National Struggle," pp. 399-400.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

activities in and about Kafr Qasem over the succeeding decades.<sup>41</sup> If it were a contest over historical memory, it is clear what the Israeli state intended. Given the power of the state to control the narrative — both in terms of commemoration and of the historical record controlled by the state’s closed archives — history failed Kafr Qasem.

## An Indigenous Story - Samia Halaby and Kafr Qasem

In her work on Kafr Qasem, the artist Samia Halaby, undertakes a form of storytelling that challenges history’s erasure in a move similar to Ashour. Through Ruqayya, Ashour centres Palestinian narratives and ontologies, while Halaby is faced with a technical challenge in the visual representation of the massacre and how to depict the moment/act of violence without centring the perpetrators. In her book, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*, Halaby presented over a decade of her artwork on and in Kafr Qasem. The book is divided into three main sections under the titles “Researching the Massacre and the Aftermath”, “Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre”, and “Documentation Appendices”. The book, therefore, is a material documentation of her journey as both an artist and a researcher. As such, this presents an opportunity to see how history has failed Palestine and how storytelling opens a methodological path to understanding the past and the present towards a future in/for Palestine. In the book’s dedication, Halaby writes: “this book is the story of the workers facing great odds but determined to survive and persist...the victims of the Kafr Qasem massacre are one with all those who died fighting to defend Palestine, or died insisting that they have a right to live in their own homes on their own land, or died trying to return to it”.<sup>42</sup> The positionality of the researcher and artist is set clearly first and foremost in this exceptional work of art. In fact, over her career, Halaby has committed to this positionality; on the liberation art of Palestine, Halaby writes:

*palestinian artists of the second half of the 20th century [...] sometimes speak of being the first to do this or that, or that theirs was the first Palestinian one-artist exhibition, etc. The trauma of the Nakba caused an absence in knowledge. Closer study reveals that, despite this perceived chasm in the continuity of Palestinian painting and sculpture, there were precious connections between the two halves of the twentieth century in Palestine art history that were so traumatically divided.*<sup>43</sup>

Focusing on continuity and connections between the breaks, is a history of a people. The story of Palestine, for Halaby, begins long before and continues long after 1948 — the story is connected, not broken, by 1948. In writing about fellow artist Abed Abdi, Halaby points out that whether working in symbolism, realistic drawings, or abstraction, the artist and their work is about Palestine - one artist’s work that embodies both continuities and variations. Halaby has herself been an active artist through the eras or phases divided by traditional history, and her commentary on Abdi can easily be applied to her own work.

In her most recent work about Kafr Qasem, Halaby suggests her own articulated engagement of an Indigenous politics. In part one of the book, she described her research methodology, including gathering data in all forms available to her from oral interviews, archives, and secondary sources. She was performing historical documentation, but drawing on a line of questions that are neither about proving (as if doubt prevailed) or providing evidence. In fact, she spoke to the difficulty of working on a massacre, describing it as “like a hammer blow that shatters a hard mass to smithereens [...] the town receiving the blow is

<sup>41</sup> Sabri Jiryis, *The Arabs in Israel*, Inea Bushnaq (trans.) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976); Tamir Sorek, *Palestinian Commemoration in Israel: Calendars, Monuments and Martyrs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Samia Halaby, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre* (New York: Schilt Publishing, 2016), p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Samia Halaby, “Abed Abdi and the Liberation Art of Palestine,” *Jadaliyya*, 31/3/2013, accessed on 12/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3FmPISh>

shattered, broken to pieces”<sup>44</sup> Representing this description is what leads Halaby to combine narration with drawings, because, as she claims, this combination, “provides a more powerful understanding of events than either can do alone”.<sup>45</sup> Halaby addresses a massacre, names it such without trepidation, and works within her medium to narrate it. As was the case in Ashour’s reading of the massacre in Tantura, this kind of storytelling is a distinct departure from traditional history on several layers. In a positivist school of historical analysis, the work of documentation by a researcher is treated as science: find evidence and present it. That is, documenting is treated as a science outside of politics or political positionality. Halaby — in her process and resulting work — completely refuses the hegemonic politics of history’s feigned objectivity.

After conducting a series of interviews with survivors from Kafr Qasem and spending time in the village, Halaby archived the voices of people and their stories. She then used this archive as the basis for her exhibition. She produced a series of paintings and drawings depicting scenes of the village on the day of the massacre. Accompanying the art with narration revealed the phases of both the evolution of her work and the many phases of the massacre. She based the series on Emile Habibi’s narration of the massacre that he divided into nine waves of killing.<sup>46</sup> The waves of her drawings and their change reflected Habibi’s narration and also her own experiences over a decade into her research and work on Kafr Qasem. This kind of parallel evolution provides insight into the changing nature of storytelling. “The Martyrdom of Talal”(2012), an acrylic on polyester painting, draws from years of work on various iterations of the scene in black and white drawings. Halaby tells a story in the painting, but also tells the story of the painting. Based on interviews with the Easa family (Eight year old Talal Easa and his ninety year old grandfather were killed and Rasmiyya Shaker Easa, Nour Shaker Easa, and Shaker Abdallah Easa, mother, sister, and father to Talal, whose stories she relied on to help produce the images, were wounded) led her to depict Talal’s death as a crucifixion. Halaby went through various renditions of the image between 1999 and 2012 and relied on the commentary and reactions of people in Kafr Qasem (and elsewhere) over time that led her to this depiction of Talal as the centre of the composition. This insight into the production of art is also an insight into the nature of story-telling. Herein, we can see how Halaby used oral history in an inter-subjective iterative process that gives us a sense of a methodology that works as a kind of translation process: from words into visual stories. That is, the artist telling the story behind her work serves as a kind of documentation of how fluid and interactive storytelling can be. It also reveals, as is seen in the painting (2012), that the story centred on Talal in the moment of his death, as Halaby worked to frame the story through Talal and his family rather than through the lens of the weapons that killed them. Even in the midst of unspeakable violence, or perhaps especially in the midst of this violence, Halaby works to the tell the story of the Talal.

In “Killing in the Northern Fields”, Halaby reveals more about the process of her art production, where she came to “the decision to minimize the Israeli soldiers because this is not their story”.<sup>47</sup> In her narration to this piece Halaby explains more about the process and her reliance on feedback from people in Kafr Qasem, particularly her exchanges with Abu Naser, on whom she relied throughout her work both in research and production.<sup>48</sup> Her presentation of the series of sketches that represent her own journey towards working to “comprehend the knowledge and memories of those who were in the village at the time” actually

<sup>44</sup> Halaby, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Habibi; Mahmoud Darwish, “Dhāhib Ilā al-Jumla al-‘Arabiyya fī al-Khāmis ‘Ashar min Ayyār,” *Shu‘un Falastiniya*, no. 22 (June 1973), pp. 11-17.

<sup>47</sup> Halaby, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*, p. 83.

<sup>48</sup> Halaby explained early in the book that Abu Naser (Ahmad Hamdan Amer) is “the”historian of Kafr Qasem whose unpublished work and research as well as her continued conversations with him were the main material that she relied on throughout her journey. This idea of local history is not uncommon in Palestine and further reveal the tension between official History and local historical material as another manifestation of the settler/ Native binary as local is in this sense OF Kafr Qasem and OF Palestine.

presents the journey of a story-teller historian.<sup>49</sup> That is, the process of learning towards creating a kind of representation, or, in Halaby's words, "translating the words of witnesses into pictures".<sup>50</sup> In a piece titled "First Wave of Killing on the Western Road", Halaby further reveals her ambition towards depicting the ordinary in an extraordinary context:

*without knowledge of details [...] this would merely look like four Palestinian men of the 1950s leading their bicycles [...] it is crucial that the viewer knows them as individuals, notes the quirks of their body language, and further knows that they are about to be shot in cold blood by soldiers [...] This drawing of four men represents a fleeting moment of life just before violence, when in their full dignity victims confront viewers for as long as the drawing survives.*<sup>51</sup>

In all of her drawings throughout the nine waves of killing, Halaby places emphasis on the people of Kafr Qasem. Similar to Ashour, Halaby centres the subjectivities and ordinary lives of the individuals of Kafr Qasem and represents their fully human un-extraordinary lives and ontological world that are about to be extinguished. Reminiscent of how Ashour's begins with Ruqayya's everyday material and sensorial world. For example, according to Halaby, she

*drew the victims of the Second Wave of killing walking home, facing the viewer. The soldiers and imminent danger are unseen. This places the viewer in the position of the soldiers waiting for their victims to arrive, knowing they will kill many, if not all of them. It asks the viewer: Would you be able to kill these people in cold blood as they approach you?*

Halaby worked to represent the dignity of an oppressed people, not in the murder, but rather in how she worked to depict the lives of the people. Moreover, she never drew or painted any military actors (soldiers, border guards, or police), only the guns and shadows of soldiers, never in the centre of the frame.<sup>52</sup> Instead of centring soldiers killing in the act of violence, Halaby portrays the full (and unquestionable and unquestioned) humanity of those who were killed. While this might be read as a kind of statement on the universality of humanity, I would argue, rather, that it is the visual representation of Indigenous defiance. It is not people's death or even victimhood that captures her focus, but, so clearly stated in words and in vision, her insistence on her people's existence and survival. As such, this is about Palestinian peoplehood.

By providing a running commentary to the evolution of her work, from the initial drawing phase to the final productions, she asks the hard question of how an Indigenous artist depicts a massacre — without falling into the reductive frame of the position of victim and centring the narrative as a story of the perpetrators. This is a difficult and ongoing dilemma, but I suggest that the drawings are a part of Indigenous history because of the questions she asks and the way she addresses them. Echoing the voice of Ruqayya that Ashour chose to tell the story of Tantura, Halaby explicitly explains her anxiety about where to put the Zionist military in the literal frame of her work. As Raja Shehadeh describes in his foreword to the book, "throughout all this work and these efforts, she [Halaby] was able to achieve a high degree of empathy with the victims of this massacre, that made it possible for her to produce a visual whole of the scattered parts of human emotions and suffering, of loss, anger and pain, and present in words and drawings a re-creation of that dark time".<sup>53</sup> Empathy, rather than pity, frames Halaby's work. How can we present the history of horror and do so in way that historicises the past within a politically motivated methodology in the present? How

<sup>49</sup> Halaby, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*, p. 84.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> For example, see: bottom left "Death of a Shepard Boy Fathi, 2012; top right "The Shepard Uthman Easa, 2012; bottom and left right of "The Martyrdom of Saleh Amer, 2012; bottom center of "The Martyrdom of Rayyan," 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Halaby, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*, p. 11.

can one describe a past and a people's relationship with the land, and not confine this past to the work of history? These are my questions regarding the historiography of the Palestinian Nakba, and these are the questions that Halaby confronts in this remarkable work.

In her preface to the book, Halaby describes herself and her work:

*for my painting, I seek to know art history internationally and be at the leading edge of painterly discovery. For my politics, I would make politically explicit posters, banners, leaflets, as well as documentary drawing reflecting my own political persuasion and not that of others. The project describing the Kafr Qasem massacre falls within the second category. It is a documentary project that I seek to complete in the most scientific manner possible. I created this series of drawings not to be avant-garde but rather because I am a Palestinian and am able to visually document a small piece of my national history.<sup>54</sup>*

Halaby's own description exposes the tensions and inherent contradictions involved in being an artist in/on Palestine. It is full of the paradoxical relationship with the past in a present — both imprisoned within settler colonial violence and how that violence forces a relationship with what she described here as “scientific manner”. Though Halaby uses “scientific” when speaking of her epistemology, when investigating the many layers involved in this work, her epistemological intervention through visual representation seems to achieve something well beyond science. She also explains that the figure drawings of the projects are, in her words, “not based on live models but are constructed from memory”. Memory here is of dispossession, destruction, murder, and genocide. The massacre in Kafr Qasem in October 1956 is part of the longer history of this oppression. People were murdered with deliberate force — settlers murder and destroy. It is what settler colonial violence is and has been in Palestine. The task at hand for Halaby was to try to narrate this story and, I argue, she did so within the tools — conceptual and practical — of story-telling within an Indigenous methodology, which involves documenting the past with a clear political trajectory about understanding the past that is also the present.

## Conclusion

To return to story of Sabra and Shatila, though recent findings taken from Israeli archives about the invasion in 1982 of Beirut reveal the direct and calculated motives of Ariel Sharon's military plan in carrying out the massacres, what is actually “revealed” in this archival “discovery”? The documentation is not actually revelational, all it actually tells us is how the perpetrators of violence performed their violence. Likewise, new so-called revelations regarding the killings in Kafr Qasem from a book recently published in Hebrew including confessions from Yiska Kadami (the general put on trial for the murders) are only new to the discipline of history.<sup>55</sup> While these archives are interesting, and while, as Rona Sela has meticulously documented, Israeli archives contain a massive amount of material that details the massacres, including the massacres of the Nakba War like those in Tantura and Deir Yassin, among others, what is it these archives actually document and what kind of histories do they produce?<sup>56</sup>

While this is a question about settler violence, it is also only a history of settlers, where Palestinians are at best nameless victims. The more pertinent question in Indigenous history is what Ashour and Halaby struggled with: how can an Indigenous story about the past memorialise the violence of that past and present

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>55</sup> Zen Read, “General's Final Confession Links 1956 Massacre to Israel's Secret Plan to Expel Arabs,” *Haaretz*, 13/10/2018, accessed on 9/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3zoiv7J>

<sup>56</sup> Archives in this context is another and related as well as central issue, in the context of this article is both in gratitude for the groundbreaking work on archives (SEE) and an invitation to take that critique into a different direction.

and not be held hostage to it? Through their work we can see how Indigenous histories tell the stories of settler violence but centre the stories around Indigenous defiance and existence rather than victimhood and erasure. While this article may seem to simply be a rejection of history, it is also an exploration, building on the work of Ashour and Halaby, of how an alternative method can demonstrate that defiance is generative and opens up a space to tell the stories of the past in relation to the present and the future in Palestine.

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