

## RESTORATION OF ERASED LANDSCAPES, COUNTER-MAPPING AND MEMORY ACTIVISM: THE CASE OF ZOCHROT'S NAKBA MAPS

Orna Vaadia  
Ben-Gurion University

### Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which civic organization uses counter-mapping and memory activism to restore the erased landscape and the silenced history, within transitional justice processes, in ongoing conflict situations. Counter-mapping and memory activism are practices that seek to challenge the hegemonic perception of space, the hegemonic modes of commemoration and the collective space memory construction.

Relying on the assumption that each technology enables the production of different forms of knowledge, which in turn, represents and constructs different ideas and different political relations, this paper will examine the Nakba maps: the printed map, the interactive map, and the navigation app- iNakba, produced by Zochrot.

Zochrot (Hebrew word for “remembering”) is an Israeli NGO operating to promote the responsibility to the Palestinian Nakba among the Jewish public in Israel and to realize the Palestinian refugees' right of return.

The 'Nakba' refers to the results of the 1948 war and it stand for 'catastrophe' in Arabic. The Israeli and Palestinian narratives of the 1948 war constructs conflicting narratives.

In light of this, the discussion of Zochrot's Nakba maps will trace the spatial modes of representation provided by the different mapping technologies, the way they define the memory discourse in which the map seeks to operate and the ways of commemoration that they offer to each memory community.

### Introduction

This paper examines the uses of mapping and memory building in order to restore the erased landscape and the silenced history, within transitional justice processes, in ongoing conflict situations.

Counter-mapping and memory activism are practices that challenge the hegemonic: perception of space, modes of commemoration and the collective space memory construction.<sup>1</sup> The dissection of these counter-practices involves examining the technology that enables their materialization, as each technology enables the production of different forms of knowledge, which represents and constructs different ideas and political relations. Accordingly, this paper

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the divers' Practices of memory activism with in the Israeli public that seeks to commemorate the Nakba, see: Gutman 2017.

examines the Nakba maps produced by Zochrot<sup>2</sup>: the printed map, the interactive map, and the navigation app- iNakba.

The 'Nakba' that stand for 'catastrophe' in Arabic is narrate through contested narratives.

In the dominant Zionist narrative, the 1948 war was portrayed as a war of few against many-the Zionists who stand against the Arab countries who fought alongside the Palestinian. In the Palestinian narrative, the war is viewed as a tragedy inflicted on unequipped and unprepared peasants who were subjected to an organized ethnic cleansing by Israel's military forces (Khalidi 1992; Abu-Sitta 2004).<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, the discussion of Zochrot's Nakba maps will trace the spatial modes of representation provided by the different mapping technologies and the way they define the memory discourse in which the map seeks to operate and the ways of commemoration they offer.

### **The Printed Map**

Zochrot's Nakba map is the first map in Hebrew that represent the destroyed Nakba villages, which were erased from the physical and cartographic space.<sup>4</sup> The roots of this cartographic erasure can be traced back to the Zionist revival of the Hebrew language, from an ancient biblical language to a modern language and to its usage in maps of the land of Israel in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This carto-linguistic practice, was used to weave the Zionist narrative of the return to the "Forefathers Land". The cartographic construction of this imagined continuum relied on the toponymic layer of the Arab settlement, which retained resemblance to the ancient Hebrew settlement names and perceived as bearers of the area's spatial memory and as a signifier of the ancient Hebrew past. Therefore, the representations of the Palestinian settlement were based on "representation and erasure" which represented the Palestinian settlements, while naming them by an ancient Hebrew name that stripped their identity and provided them with a visibility which excluded their existence. In this context, the use of the Hebrew language in the Nakba map is a subversive action, that provide visibility by using the same language that was used to 'erase' these villages.

Furthermore, the Hebrew language in the Nakba map defines the target audience of the map to be Hebrew –speakers, and the Israeli memory discourses as the circle in which it seeks to operate, and it declares the maps creators as participants in this discourse.

Placing the Nakba map within the context of the Israeli memory discourse is an act of memory activism, that represent the Nakba in Hebrew in the voice and perspective of the Israeli-Jews, and perceive the Nakba as an integral part of the spatial history.

The spatial demarcation of the Nakba map encompasses the sovereign territory of the State of Israel and it differentiated from the spatial demarcation of the Palestinian Nakba map within the

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<sup>2</sup> Zochrot (Hebrew word for “remembering” in female plural form) is an NGO operating from 2002 to promote the responsibility to the Palestinian Nakba among the Jewish public in Israel and to realize the Palestinian refugees' right of return. For further reading see: Zochrot, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the Nakba as a symbol of the loss and destruction of the Palestinian life and as a cornerstone in shaping their identity and struggle see: Masalha, 2012; Sa'di & Abu- Lughod, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the various practices for deleting the Nakba villages see: Kadman 2008.

British Mandate in Palestine.<sup>5</sup> This spatial framing ties the Nakba to the sovereign space of the state of Israel, thus concerning the Jewish-Israeli audience.

Additionally, it unifies Palestinian, Syrian and Jewish settlements. This demographic unification who is indifferent to the demographic aspect of the settlements, expropriated the Nakba as a defining narrative in the Palestinian identity and is enabled only when dealing with the Nakba from an Israeli viewpoint, seeking to face the injustices committed during the conflict (Bronstein Aparicio 2018,106).

The highlights of these Nakba settlements on the map, on top the actual settlements layer, ties the past to the present and claim: that the spatial present cannot be examined without relation to the Nakba's past. And so, like the maps' time layers interwoven with each other, the memory of the Nakba is bound as an imminent part of the Israeli memory.

As an educational map the printed map presenting onto one sheet the entire space which encompasses the entire social-spatial phenomenon in a single gaze. Furthermore, the printing technology provides a closed narrative that retains the exclusivity of knowledge formation to the knowledge creators and allows to seal and preserve that narrative, before it distributed to the Israeli discourse.

### **The Interactive Nakba map**

The digital technologies provide the interactive map with multitude of cartographic representation options and allows presenting a trilingual map (Hebrew, Arabic, English) which expands the potential viewership beyond limitations of geo-physical space.

The multi-scalar representation, enables to zoom in or out. Zooming out presents the distribution of the Nakba on the map, which frames it in the geo-political contexts that construct it's spatial-national narrative. Zooming in presents the personal testimonies of the village's inhabitants' memories that unravels the national narrative into local micro-narratives, banded together with the movement from zoom in to zoom out. Framing these testimonies within the Palestinian collective memory, expands the Nakba map's circle of memory into the Palestinian memory discourse.

In a state of ongoing conflict, where encounters between people from opposite sides of the conflict are limited, these refugees and Jewish soldiers' testimonies, provides an opportunity for recognition and reconciliation through revealing information about the other which, validates the witness as a bearer of that memory.

The oral testimony preserves the modes of conveying and preserving communal knowledge in traditional societies and legitimized "space related knowledge" based on human experience tied to a defined location. In situations of historiographic erasure, this knowledge has a significant role invoicing and documenting the erased memory.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For comparison, see Abu Sita, 2004 And the Nakba maps available in English on the Web at: 'Palestine Remembers' and 'Visualizing Palestine' deployed in the Nakba settlements within the boundaries of the British Mandate of 1948-1922

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the memory in relation to the construction of the Nakba's collective memory see for example: Ben-Ze'ev 2011; Masalha 1988, 88-120; Sa'di & Abu-Laghdod 2007

The multiplicity of modes, forms and sources of knowledge that are link to the map allows for deviations from the cartographic discourse, which in turn, enable the creation of knowledge that is closer to the complexity of social life. This heterogeny has epistemological importance, for the discussion of spatial-social issues cannot rely on a single form of knowledge that dictates a system of categories which stems from a singular disciplinary logic (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2012). Therefore, the synthesis of diverse knowledge provides this interactive map with a more holistic understanding of the Nakba.

The spatial-time representation in this map distinguish between the temporal layers. While the main map, presents the Nakba temporal layer, by the links to Google Map & Google Street, provides the locations of the Nakba villages on the present space and illustrates the scale of the erasure. Additionally, in places where Israeli settlements were raised over the ruined villages, 'Google Street' enables tracing the settlement's stages of development. And so, enables the Palestinian to see what now lies over his house, and it enables the Israeli-Jewish to see what used to lie underneath his house. This technology is affected by the current levels of development and so, spaces which are not currently inhabited constitute 'blank spaces' on the Google Street map and are denied visibility.

And thus, the interactive map's multiplicity expands the memory circles. In the Israeli-Jewish memory discourse, the map seeks to challenge this discourse through the soldier's testimonies which challenge the hegemonic Israel-Jewish narrative, while taking responsibility for the events of the Nakba. The use of the Arabic language, address the Palestinian memory discourse as well. For the voices of the Palestinian, the map offers a stage and a space for documentation and archiving of the social-spatial memories and the construction of national identity and memory.

### ***iNakba* App**

The *iNakba* app based on GPS technologies allows navigating to the erased Nakba villages, and mobilizing the information about the village. During the displaced visits in the village, occurred intergenerational inheritance of past memory from the 'Nakba generation' to their families, in which the stay *in situ* - by the material remnants, has an important role in the construction and instillation of this memory.

For those who do not belong to the Nakba generation, moving the information about the ruined village to the village site, extends the experience of their visiting which allows the examination of the knowledge on the background of the village's remains, visible and hidden. This examination emphasizes the scope of erasure, but at the same time it allows imagining the fabric of life that existed here before, and to restore it even imaginatively. In this encounter the visitor embodies the remembering entity and his 'presence' in the place, constitutes a commemorative act.

This navigating occurs in space and between layers of time - moving through contemporary space following ghost scenery. However, bridging space and time is not simple since many of the destroyed villages are in uninhabited areas today and do not have regulated access routes. Therefore, the apps will not always guide to the exact location of the destroyed locality.

These fissures in the virtual bridging, between the physical space and the erasure space, indicate these technologies' limitations in bridging between time and space, and between the physical and the erasure space.

Unlike the interactive map, the app realizes the interactive ability to include users in knowledge production. In doing so the users who upload knowledge to the app becomes memory production agents and the users who share knowledge from the app, becomes distribution agents of Nakba map memory, on the social media.

The information donated by users includes photographs taken while visiting the Nakba sites, commemorate the Nakba in its erasure and paradoxically, give it visibility.

For the Israelis, this documentation is an act of recognition of the contemporary space as erased space, bearing the memory and responsibility of the destruction of the Nakba villages.<sup>7</sup> For the Palestinian, it embraces a symbolic return that enables the past commemoration and impartation to the next generation, as well as the representation and commemoration of the contemporary ruined village. In this documentation the Palestinians acts as documentary agents of the erasure stages of the village, but also of the restoration of the past. For those who are prevented from visit the village, it allows maintaining contact with the place and contributing past memories.

Among Israeli, the app contributes to a consciousness process that begins with the discovery and awareness of the erase geography and silenced history. The visit to the Nakba sites and mobile the information, provided another gaze that exposure the unfamiliar layers beneath Jewish settlements and creates a politicization of space. And thus, constructs a community that acknowledge the Nakba as an imminent part of theirs space.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, I discussed how the various technologies by which Zochrot's Nakba maps were created, conditions the Nakba's mode of representation, its commemoration, and the circle of memory discourse that the map attends. This examination illuminates the essential difference between the printed map and the digital maps, resulting from the scope of representable information. While the printed map is limited in scope, the digital maps are characterized by multiplicity. As a result, the printed map appeals to a unilingual audience, presenting a closed body of knowledge that allows to encompass the cartographic information at a glance. In contrast, the digital maps represent the unified national narrative and the 'micro-narratives' of the displaced villagers. The heterogeneity in the mode of represented knowledge, make it possible to represent the Nakba in its complexity and from different perspective, which relies on expert's knowledge alongside knowledge derived from evidence and memories. This containment of 'bottom' up' knowledge produce a stage in the virtual space, for the displaced villagers to make their voices heard, and allows the Israeli-Jewish audience to be exposed to these testimonies. The app deviates from the virtual space to the physical space and allows navigating to the erased villages and identifying their past as part of the Israeli-Jewish space.

In this way, Zochrot works through counter-mapping and memory activism as a memory agent in the Israeli-Jewish and the Palestinian Nakba memory discourse. In discussing Zochrot's Nakba

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<sup>7</sup> For a dissection of the Israeli uses of the iNakba as a politic app see: Tirosh 2018; Golan & Tirosh 2018

commemoration, Lentin (2010; 209) raises the question of whether Zochrot appropriates the Palestinian voice and thus establishes their status as a victim? This question raises widespread discussion of ethical issues related to memory politics that cannot be sustained in this framework. However, I would like to conclude the paper with a broader question: By using Palestinian testimonials about the Nakba, does Zochrot appropriate the Palestinian voice for its memorial work, or can we regard it as an active partnership of the Palestinians with Zochrot's memorial work, to promote recognition and reconciliation processes within Israeli-Palestinian discourse?

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