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Book Review: The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village by Susan Slyomovics

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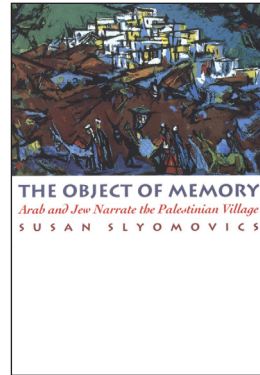
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The object of memory: Arab and Jew narrate the Palestinian Village. Susan Slyomovics: University of Pennsylvania Press (1998). ISBN: 0812215257, 320 pp.

Reviewed by MELINDA BERNARDO.



Several international agencies have provided statistics about the number of Palestinian homes razed in the Occupied Territories. According to data published by B'Tselem - The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, between 1999 and 2007, 1129 Palestinian homes were destroyed because they were built without permits¹. This number refers only to homes in the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem. Further, this number excludes punitive house demolitions as well as demolitions for alleged military purposes. Just mentioning the demolition of homes in the territories will likely put many readers on edge. Most people have visceral reactions and entrenched political opinions about the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine.

While these debates are important, they are not my concern here. Instead, in the context of Israel/Palestine, I reflect critically on the ways that ethnographic and archival work may assist, on their own terms, those worked with and written about. A less recent ethnography, Susan Slyomovics' (1998) *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village*, offers an entry point for considering the politics and power relations not only between two disparate sides, but also as a feature of academic research. Slyomovics' study focuses on the dual Palestinian and Jewish identities of a single village, alternately referred to as *Ein Houd* in Arabic ('Spring of Trough') or *Ein Hod* in Hebrew ('Spring of Glory'). It is based on fieldwork in Palestine, Israel and Jordan that was conducted intermittently between 1991 and 1996. Within the text three different incarnations of the village emerge: the pre-1948 Palestinian village of Ein Houd, the post-1958 Jewish village of Ein Hod, and Ein Houd al-Jadidah ('New Ein Houd'), which was established after the expulsion of Ein Houd residents by the newly formed State of Israel. New Ein Houd, considered an illegal settlement by the Israeli state, is within sight of Jewish Ein Houd, though as the text develops we learn that, on the surface, physical proximity is one of their few similarities. New Ein Houd is comprised of Israeli-style apartment blocks and lacks running water, paved roads or street signs that mark its existence; Jewish Ein Hod has the original Palestinian stone houses,

running water and paved streets. It is a popular tourist attraction for both foreign travelers and Israelis.

By focusing on Palestinian vernacular architecture, oral histories and archives, Slyomovics illustrates how the interconnections of present and past influence memory in both Jewish and Palestinian contexts, though she focuses mainly on the latter. The author relies on tangible objects – houses, maps, photographs, and most interestingly, Palestinian ‘memorial books’ – to illustrate the connection between memory and place, and further, to illustrate the process of creating collective memory. Her discussion of memory and place is grounded in Maurice Halbwachs’ idea of ‘collective memory’ and the related notion of ‘social frameworks’² These concepts are based on his belief that individual memory is conditioned by the memory of the group.

Slyomovics explains the importance of memorial books for Palestinians from Ein Houd as they strive to recall, represent and recreate their pre-1948 village. She explains that memorial books are “a genre of popular or folk literature” that has developed in communities impacted by war or persecution. As their name indicates, memorial books serve to commemorate a destroyed village or town. Slyomovics compares Palestinian memorial books to those created by other groups that have experienced dispossession and traumatic loss, for example, Jews, Armenians and Bosnians. She seems to understand these books as a way of constructing nations or communities through the connection of memory with physical place. Additionally, she points to the political character of memorial books by observing that they help transform private memories into public history. Through her narrative details emerge the process of Palestinian memorial book construction and the construction of collective memory. The most striking of these details is how academics, Palestinian and non-Palestinian alike, rely on personal narratives and oral history to create these texts. Slyomovics identifies three sets of Palestinian memorial books -- two sets, titled *The Destroyed Palestinian Village Series*, produced by the Bir Zeit University’s Center for Research and Documentation of Palestinian Society (CRDPS), a third set, *A Homeland That Refuses To Be Forgotten*, that was researched independently.

Object of Memory provides the opportunity to reflect on the implications of academic research. My impression is that there is a political project as well as an underlying humanist project (or perhaps just an expectation or hope) that underlies the writing of this text, though I do not mean that her work was intentionally contrived to secure a certain result. My impression is that she wants her Palestinian informants to gain political recognition and rights from the Israeli state. Related to this, she seems to want to show that there are similarities between those who have suffered under government persecution and physical dispossession, the link here

being Jews under the Nazis and Palestinians under the Israeli government.

Perhaps Slyomovics' tacit project may also help explain both the way she approaches archival work and the palpable tension between written and oral history that is present in the text. There seems to be an effort to make the Palestinian archive more material. Slyomovics notes:

The history of Jewish Ein Hod is easy to study: It has produced or published an archiveful [sic] of museum catalogues and exhibitions, fiction and newspaper articles, a sixteen millimeter film made in 1960, personal and professional photography, and videotapes recording memorable occasions. [xvi]

In this sense she is discussing the notion of the archive as a collection of materials. Her observation that the archive is easily knowable relates to its taxonomic classification and to the way the reader is meant to approach the material. The author reads the Jewish Ein Hod archive as it has been set and arranged. Slyomovics' approach certainly stands in contrast to Stoler's (2002)³ counsel against taking the archive at face value; she is not reading between its lines to see how the Jewish Ein Hod archive is produced as a classificatory system. For both her Palestinian and Jewish informants, the production of this text adds to their material archive, though the addition to the Palestinian archive seems to have bigger political implications. She is supplementing the existing archives (for example, Kanaana's *Destroyed Villages* series) with new materials that are meant to be read in a particular way. If one of her objectives is to aid her informants in make claims on the Israeli government, then this production of an ordered, material item is perhaps helpful. Simultaneously, the multiple processes though which the material archive is produced, and in this case, the obvious intervention of academics is laid bare.

Slyomovics demonstrates the complex connections between present and past, which complicate the way we see both history and anthropology. Rather than history as backward-looking and anthropology as the present, the author illustrates how looking backwards (say, in the form of oral history) is discussed and makes 'objects of memory,' things that help form both collective and individual memory. Interestingly, I found that while definitely not a constant sentiment, her informants were somewhat hopeful about the future. They seemed hopeful that their written history could help them garner recognition for New Ein Houd from the Israeli courts, and in turn, help them gain resources. It may seem that the backward gaze upon which memory relies on indicates that Palestinians want only to return to their pre-1948 homes. Perhaps Slyomovics Palestinian informants may also be seen as a looking toward to the future, one where their new village is recognized

and they obtain the services which they have been denied.

Yet as the terms that govern the destruction of homes in the Occupied Territories have shifted over the years since this text was written, that hope for the future has become more difficult to find. As 25 year old Nablus resident, Issa Khalil, notes, “I wasted 14 years of my life. We all did...Here, there’s unemployment and no peace; it retreats, we go backward.”⁴ Slyomovics’ book, in light of the ongoing conflict in Israel-Palestine, illustrates how ethnographic and archival work does have the power to assist, as it may have with her interlocutors. Issa Khalil’s statement though, indicates that these approaches may, like other approaches, also fail to reach everyone or to produce desired outcomes. What is important and applicable about Slyomovics work today, is how it reveals the process through which perceptions are formed. Working towards mutual understanding of these perceptions can, maybe, provide hope in this climate of despair.

¹ B’Telem Website. Statistics on demolition of houses built without permits in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem), accessed 1/2/2008.

www.btselem.org/english/Planning_and_Building/Statistics.asp

² Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

³ Stoler, Ann L. “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance” in *Refiguring the Archive*: 83 – 102, 2002.

⁴ “Years of Strife and Lost Hope Scar Young Palestinians” *New York Times*, 1/12/2007.

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