

A Passage from a Diary of Echoes

Alexandra Sophia Handal

We both fell into motionlessness. Only the sound of moving cars could be heard. Here we were in the immense underground car park of the upscale shopping promenade of Alrov Mamilla Avenue. While Victoria Kawas had heard about this Israeli open-air mall in West Jerusalem, it was her first time here.¹ Her voice crackled: “And now I feel as though I am going to fall” – the timbre of an English intonation still inhabiting her speech from the time of the Britishers, as she called them. Grief-stricken by the sight of what she was witnessing, Victoria explained to me: “My father spent all his years working so that he could construct a seven-story building in Jerusalem.” Her physiological response to absence was summoned in the assemblage of words that followed, when she murmured, after a pause the duration of a gasp: “I feel my leg shivering.” Even the balmy afternoon air did not spare her from feeling chills ripple through her bones. Victoria took a deep sigh and uttered: “Good-nessss.” The “s” soared into an uphill melody, pronouncing her current state: “I feel broken.” We had come to identify the unmarked grave of *a dream*, yet it was nowhere to be seen, so she began to draw the outline of a structure that once stood there with a gesture of her hand. Nothing remained, not even the remains.

The way her father had told her the story, she passed it on to me. Hanna Issa Shehadeh Kawas was no more than thirteen years of age when he left to work as a merchant in La Ceiba, Honduras.² “Why there?” I asked. “And who did he go with?” Victoria had no answers, nor did she desire to speculate. She only knew what her father had relayed to her about his reasons to make such an epic journey alone to the New World. This was towards the end of the Ottoman rule of Palestine. “He was a merchant,” she expressed, *tout court*, with her matter-of-fact stare. While his parents and

siblings remained in Bethlehem, Hanna went in search of economic opportunities in Honduras, where he had distant relatives. In La Ceiba he married a fellow Bethlehemite named Sofia Salem. Their union would eventually form a family of seven children, with Victoria being the eldest. When she was about seven, not older than eight, her father decided to return home to Palestine with his entire family. He desired to raise his children there, “in the Arabic language,” Victoria specified. Hanna had constructed the only house made of white stone in La Ceiba. Now that he had accumulated enough wealth, he was ready to leave behind *la casa blanca*, as it was referred to by the locals, to set sail with his family back to the Old World, to which he had remained closely connected, despite the distance, and the years. Cordillera was the name of the vessel, Victoria repeated, her “r” rolling impeccably into a full circle.

Before reaching the street level of the Alrov Mamilla Mall, Victoria proceeded to tell me that there was a wholesale paper factory owned by Phillip Dardarian in the basement of her father’s building. She did not notice my surprise when the owner’s full name appeared on the surface of her moving lips. Less than a week earlier, Victoria had drawn a mental map for me with a question mark after the words: “Phillip Paper?” Now that we were in situ, she had retrieved the missing name suddenly and unexpectedly. Dardarian’s factory, she had informed me earlier, covered the surface of the entire underground area, with one section dedicated to papermaking and another to carton manufacturing. Resting her hands gently on top of each other, Victoria stood still. “Is this the convent you once told me to go to?” I asked. Her head swayed gently to the pace of traveling eyes, which were climbing the staircase of a splendid ecclesiastical structure that had been incorporated into the architecture of the pedestrian mall. We discovered on site that Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul had been rebuilt in its original form, yet its surrounding environment had changed so drastically that it left her with a disoriented expression in her gaze.

I was looking at Victoria from the back. Her silver hair shimmered alongside the black attire she was wearing. Departing from the Central American port city of La Ceiba, the Kawas family bid farewell to the years they had spent on the northern coast of Honduras. Their final destination was Bayt Lahm (Bethlehem), but first they needed to be at sea for weeks before reaching the Mediterranean port city of Jaffa. They were not the only Palestinian passengers on the ship. There were those from the Honduran capital city of Tegucigalpa and from neighboring El Salvador who were traveling to visit relatives. Onboard were also nine “orphaned” Palestinian children, as Victoria described them, since they had lost their mother. The widower father wanted them to be in the care of his sister in Bethlehem. Victoria’s parents, Hanna and Sofia, agreed to chaperone them from Honduras to Palestine. Despite the nearly eight decades that had passed, I could hear the ecstatic voices of children running onboard the craft through Victoria’s witty smile. She mentioned that herself and Mercedes, who was the oldest of the “nine children,” would look after the little ones who often quarreled. On one particular occasion, Mercedes received a blow to the eye and a physician on the boat provided a recipe to heal the injury, charging a mere five piasters. He instructed Sofia to boil the contents of the little sachet he provided in order to clean Mercedes’s wound. When Sofia curiously drew her nose close to the packet, she discovered to her amusement that it smelt of chamomile.

It pleased her that she had found another medicinal use for this herb. Thus it became the heirloom of natural remedies in her family, tying generations to that homecoming voyage to Palestine.

Along the Alrov shopping promenade, we discovered handwritten numbers on the stones of certain façades of buildings. The reason they were marked in this way was so they could be rebuilt with their old appearance, giving the design of this contemporary Israeli commercial space, an allure of the past. However, the *past* of unfinished balconies, incomplete archways and partially reconstructed columns emanate from the rubbles of a destroyed pre-Nakba Mamilla, the one Victoria and I had come to recollect. “It’s awful,” she says, continuing her thought, ‘and they are still constructing. It’s awful, really. And look what they are doing here!’ Her voice became indiscernible as it faded into the clamor of drills, hammers and heavy weight building machinery. We moved away. “When exactly was your father’s edifice constructed?” Victoria could not provide a specific date, as she never knew it to begin with. Hence, together we began measuring time differently. We ascertained that her father must have begun to give shape to his dream endeavor in Jerusalem while she was still attending the National High School of Bethlehem; for by the end of the 1930s or the early 1940s, when she had become a student in Jerusalem, it was already a commercial landmark in Mamilla.

“You had Spinneys on your left,” she recalled. This grocery store occupied the largest surface of the four businesses that were situated on the street level of the Hanna Kawas building. To the right of Spinneys was the Handal Shoe Store and next to it, al-Amal, a store that boasted an array of textiles from which Victoria would ravel in choices with the help of her mother and maternal aunt (*mart khalah*), Nvart Karparian. Her mother, who was coming from Bethlehem, would take the bus to Upper Baq‘a, where Nvart lived, and together the two women went to fetch her at the Schmidt’s Girls School in Jerusalem, behind Cinema Orion. While the pupils who originated from nearby Bethlehem were rarely boarders, Victoria had chosen to avoid the daily bus commute by residing in the dormitories, like those who had come from Safad, Haifa, Nazareth, Acre, and Jaffa. Unable to remember the name of the fourth store, Victoria began rhyming family names that resembled it. “Not Sansour, Mansour . . . something like that,” and she continued repeating similar sounding names, until she arrived at the one she was looking for: Samour.

Of the four stores on the street level, Samour’s was the smallest. It sold “perfumes, things for ladies,” Victoria recalled, but she stopped at that description, adding: “I don’t know what else, I never went there.” The rest of the building, Victoria believes, was used either as commercial storage space or offices. On the second story was her family dentist, Dr. Etayim’s practice. I kept my remaining questions for our car ride back to Bethlehem. Yet there was a moment of reflection while we waited for the lift. Her contemplative presence stood in stark contrast with the glitzy, careless atmosphere. A building, I thought, is not *simply* a building. Hanna Kawas had created *a place* in Jerusalem’s commercial center; but as Victoria noted, there were still unrealized desires. As we left Alrov Mamilla Mall, she pointed to the spot where *a dream* was unwillingly buried.

Over the years, destruction has taken on different facets, from ethnic cleansing to occupation to appropriation to alteration to demolition. The systematic assault on

Palestinian social and cultural memory by the Zionist state has produced another kind of ruin to be deciphered.³ If imagination were a boundless territory, I would want to explore its capacity to touch reality. I carefully folded this idea in my pocket, making sure it would not tear. Going along an uneven road, I encountered numerous people – twenty-eight, to be precise – some by chance and others through mutual acquaintances. They had been exiled. We were all connected through loss. Each brought a new insight of what this meant. I made an agreement with every one rooted in respect. Unlike the accepted notion of a war ruin, the ruins I am examining are about an extended past that drags into the present. I pulled out the notes I held in my pocket to scribble a question: How can freedom and justice be activated in ways that are uniquely possible through art? I pass my hands on the crease that was formed at the lower edges and folded the thought gently back into my pocket.

The core of my investigation is: m-e-m-o-r-y. Through the medium of memory, I desired to recover what remains of our eradicated world. Nothing was deemed too banal to document, even what remains unknown. This too is part of the story. I heard about the barber, the shoe repairman, the seamstress, the dentist, the photographer, the watermelon vendor and the milkman. While memorials are not commonly built for ordinary folks, the everyday spaces that they have created are nevertheless the focus of my investigation. They illuminate our understanding of the social and cultural fabric of a place, even more so, when it has been torn apart. I observed that, through the act of remembering, the *spirit* of these expropriated places could be kept alive. Creativity has a vital function to play amidst destruction. As a listener from another generation, I wanted to accurately retell the stories that were being transmitted to me by those with first-hand accounts. By *accurate*, I am not simply referring to the scientific use of the term; I had already set in motion the groundwork for this understanding of it. Rather, there was a more expansive meaning of the word that I wanted to explore through art.

Over the course of nearly a decade, I compiled an encyclopaedia of vernacular places in West Jerusalem from the combined memories of exiled Palestinians. Victoria Kawas's recollection of her father's building in Mamilla is part of this index. The daily life of the town of Bethlehem was once seamlessly intertwined with the adjacent city of Jerusalem. What was most startling from my conversations with Victoria was how historians of al-Nakba, opting for a Jerusalem-centric reading, had overlooked the social, cultural, economic and demographic ramifications that the dispossession of Bethlehemites has had on Bethlehem.⁴ There were other Palestinians I met, like Issa Soudah, who had become a refugee from western al-Musrara – the part of the neighborhood that was emptied of its Palestinian Arab population in 1948. He had such vivid recollections of his neighbourhood prior to 1948 that he mentioned the names of fifteen commercial and social spaces in our initial meetings. The stories that he conveyed to me orally acquired a visual dimension, eventually finding expression on paper. I wanted to animate the immaterial places that I was hearing about. What began as a component of a large-scale cartographic work called *Mental Map (Issa)*,⁵ became the seed for another project. I have since assembled an inventory of forty-nine commercial and communal spaces in West Jerusalem. With this material, I initiated an ongoing series of prints, under the title *Invisible Ruins & Other*

Short Stories of Erasure. Through memory, I examined a dispersed people's relationship with their built environment, starting from *scratch*. I employ the visual language of advertisements in order to tell short stories of places, as they have been remembered across time. Each print is a document that retraces what has been erased or concealed. Together they are an attempt to resurrect the world beneath *invisible ruins*.

Alexandra Sophia Handal is an artist, filmmaker and essayist. She obtained a practice/theory PhD from the University of the Arts London, UK (2011). Handal had a recent solo exhibition, titled Memory Flows like the Tide at Dusk, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark (September-December 2016).

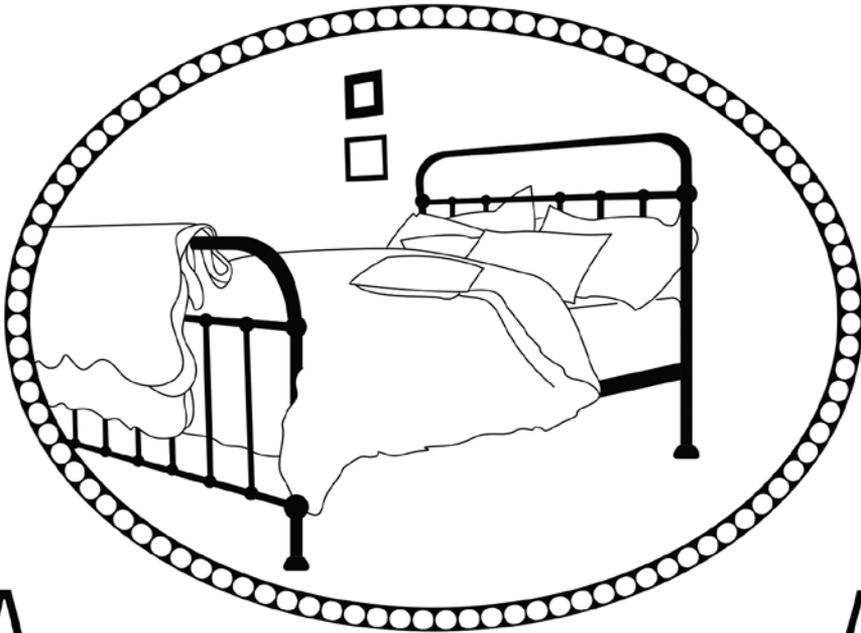
Endnotes

- 1 Since 2007, I have been undertaking oral history fieldwork with Palestinian refugees and exiles from West Jerusalem. This essay is based on the research I conducted with Victoria Kawas. The conversations took place at her home in Bethlehem, over coffee and dessert. So deep in thought, we would not notice that our early afternoon meetings carried into the late evening. On 6 April 2008, Victoria and I went together to the Alrov Mamilla Mall, when the shopping promenade was in the last phase of construction. I am most grateful to her for sharing so generously her story with me. Victoria Kawas, conversation with the author, Bethlehem, 2 April 2008, 2 May 2008, and 24 February 2009. I wish to extend my thanks to her family for always making sure that I arrived home safely.
- 2 For a study specifically on the Palestinian diaspora experience in Central America, with a focus on Honduras and El Salvador, see: Manzar Foroohar, "Palestinians in Central America: From Temporary Emigrants to a Permanent Diaspora," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 3, (Spring 2011): pp. 6–22. For another important investigation on the subject, see: Cecilia Baeza, "Palestinians in Latin America: Between Assimilation and Long-Distance Nationalism," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2013–2014): 59–72. The emphasis of Baeza's research is on Chile and Honduras, the two countries with the greatest population of people of Palestinian descent in Latin America.
- 3 Alexandra Sophia Handal, *Uncovering the hidden Palestinian city of Jerusalem: Disrupting power through art intervention* (PhD diss., University of the Arts London, 2010).
- 4 When I began researching the experience of Palestinians who became refugees in 1948 from West Jerusalem, I noticed the absence of lived histories concerning Bethlehemites who had become dispossessed as a result of the Nakba and exiled from the city ever since. In the course of my fieldwork, I met other Bethlehemites with similar experiences. The late Issa Giacaman told me about two residential properties that his father Saleh Giacaman built in al-Musrara for his two sons. See my interactive web documentary art, *Dream Homes Property Consultants (DHPC)*: dreamhomespropertyconsultants.com/properties/marvelous-arab-style-house-with-a-distinct-allure-a-must-have (accessed 27 January 2017).
- 5 This artwork would not have been possible without the wholehearted participation of Issa Soudah in my oral history research. On 15 April 2008, Soudah kindly took me on a walk through the divided neighborhood of al-Musrara, where he lived prior to 1948. He gave me a detailed account of life there as he remembered it. On other occasions, Issa further acquainted me with pre-Nakba life by showing me his photo album and sharing memories of his family, friends, and places captured in the pictures. My conversations with Issa took place at his home in the Old City of Jerusalem. Issa Soudah, conversation with the author, Old City, Jerusalem, 21 April 2008, 22 April 2008, and 6 March 2009.



Mental Map (Issa), 2nd Edition, 277 x 127 cm, print, 2016, Detail. © Alexandra Sophia Handal.

فندق المازي
HOTEL ALMAZI



AL-MUSRARA
مغلق منذ عام 1948
المصرارة

Mental Map (Issa), 2nd Edition, 277 x 127 cm, print, 2016, Detail. © Alexandra Sophia Handal.

نزال لصناعة الأحذية Nazzal Shoemaker

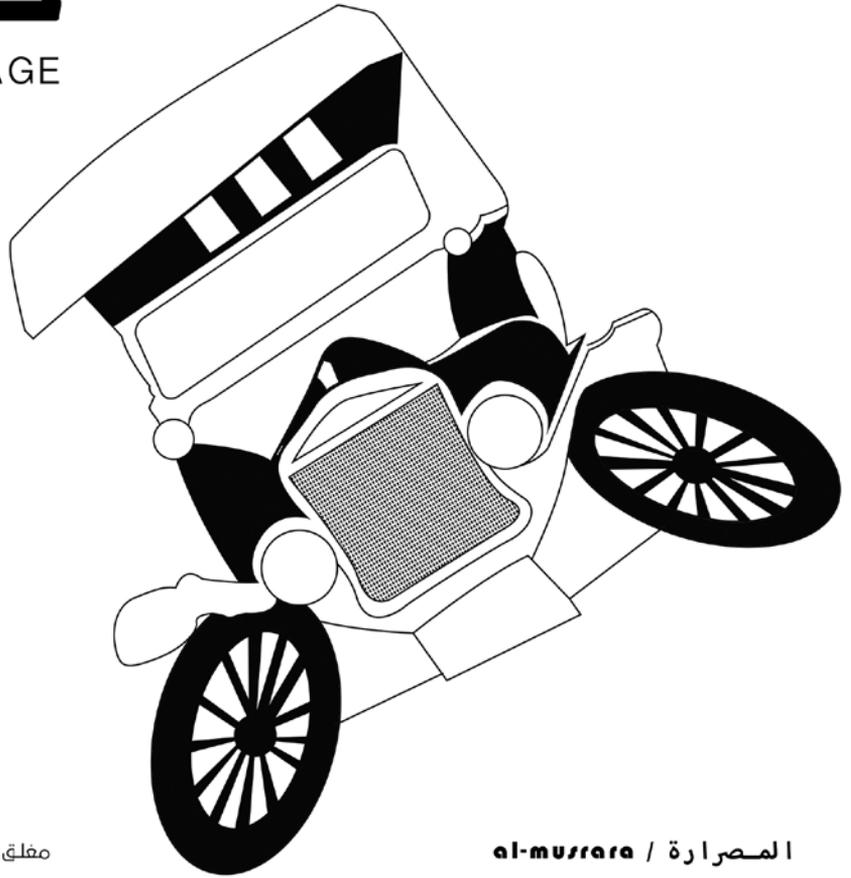
المصراة / al-musrara



مغلق منذ عام 1948 closed since

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كراج بامية
BAMIEH GARAGE



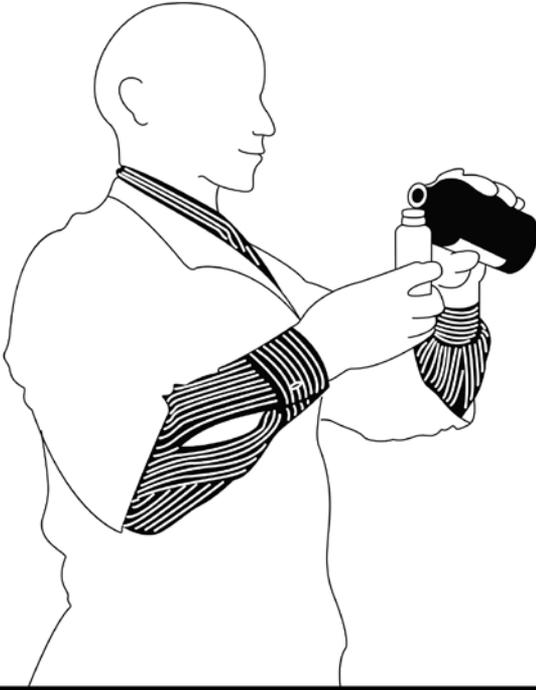
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المصراة / al-musrara

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دكتور صليبا سعيدي

مغلق منذ عام 1948 closed since



Dr. Saliba Saedi

al-musrara

المصراة

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