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Space and Resistance in Contemporary Palestinian Art: Transgressing Borders through Visual Representation

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Abstract

This dissertation will explore the ways in which contemporary Palestinian artists engage with and transgress borders to create alternative and imaginary 'spaces of resistance'. I will examine visual artworks as they relate to theories of spatialization with reference to scholarship on political and cultural geography. This combination of visual arts, geography and spatial theory is necessary for understanding the relations of power responsible for constructing and enforcing spatial arrangements through the imposition of both physical barriers (i.e. national borders and other territorial partitions) and abstract cultural and ideological divides. Visual representations of borders facilitate an understanding of space as the production and manifestation of numerous political, social and imaginary processes. Given the nature of the Israeli occupation, Palestinian art is unique in its ability to represent physical barriers as a commentary on the convergence of political and social forces responsible for the spatial separations between Palestinians and Israelis. My paper will argue that subversive representations of borders in contemporary Palestinian art underline major flaws and illogicalities in the colonial practice of representing space to suit geopolitical interests. In doing so, these artworks create 'spaces of resistance' aimed at decolonizing the physical and abstract lands and ideas of the Middle East.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

At the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a dispute over territory. Yet, the Palestinian predicament is about more than the loss of homeland. It is about the ways in which territories were taken from peoples and redistributed based on the interests of foreign powers. People situate themselves within spaces through a series of human processes that ultimately define the nature of a given space. In this way, space is the embodiment of identity, self-representation and agency. It exists through a system of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and dislocation. Space can be both a physical territory and an abstract idea. It is the product of recognizing who we are as individuals in relation to the greater world. (Lefebvre, 1974)

The legacy of colonialism is one of spatial politics. European empires colonized the Middle East by imprinting 'geopolitical differences' between the East and West in the form of 'imaginary geographies' of the Orient. The ability to carve up territories and in doing so separate peoples is not only an executive process, but an ideological undertaking. If land symbolizes the right to belong, then ownership of land is the ability to speak for and thus represent a given space. Colonists ultimately succeeded in laying claim to lands by representing the territories and peoples under occupation. In this way, foreign powers colonized not only the physical space of Palestine but also the identity and culture of Palestinians. (Said, 1979; 1994)

In the same way that representations of space were used to colonize the Middle East, subversive elements within Palestinian art practice the decolonization of space by manipulating spatial representations as a way of satirically appropriating the tactics of European colonial powers. Artists achieve this by transgressing visual representations of borders and spatial arrangements through a variety of mediums and platforms. Borders are designed to separate territories and peoples. They exist as enforcers of spatial politics and in doing so project a binary system of power inherent in the process of spatialization. Subversive representations of borders and other separation barriers are political statements against destructive colonial-era spatial practices. These artworks serve as commentaries on the invisible relations of power responsible for the imposition of artificial borders that ultimately resulted in the occupation of an entire land and civilization. By appropriating the spatial tactics used by colonial powers to lay claim to the Middle East, art becomes a site of resistance aimed at decolonizing both physical and imaginary spatial divides. (Ferrer & Val, 2014)

This dissertation will incorporate an understanding of spatial theory in examining the works of multi-disciplinary artists, Mona Hatoum and Larissa Sansour. In recognizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as first and foremost a territorial dispute, my analysis will focus on spatial philosophy as it relates to the treatment of space and borders in contemporary Palestinian art. By introducing a theoretical background in the study of visual artworks, my research highlights the relevant political and philosophical concepts that constitute the foundations of artistic commentaries. (Busch, 2009) I will argue that contemporary Palestinian artists manipulate colonial representations of space as a way of exposing the invisible geopolitical forces responsible for territorial, cultural and ideological separations between the West and the Middle East. In doing so, art becomes a site of resistance whereby subversive representations of physical and abstract borders engage in the decolonization of Palestine.

2. Literature Review

2. 1. Constructing an 'Oriental' Space

Issues of spatiality are well documented in Edward Said's (1979) *Orientalism*; a foundational work for understanding the various political and social forces responsible for the production of territorial and cultural spaces in the Middle East. Said's work is a commentary on the ways in which European empires colonized lands and peoples by imprinting 'geopolitical differences' between the East and West in the form of 'imaginary geographies' of the Orient. His analysis points to a system of values embedded in the human practices of spatialization. The ability to carve up territories and in doing so separate peoples is not only an executive process, but an ideological undertaking that calls into question relations of power at the political, social and philosophical level.

Said's research traces the colonial reasoning behind preconceived notions of the Orient. By creating and reproducing representations of an Oriental space using maps, models, etc., colonial empires demarcated territories and populations to suit their own interests. A case in point is the term 'Middle East' which originated from the directional language of British naval officers when situating the region in relation to Europe. Throughout the colonial period, the lands and peoples of the Middle East existed from the perspective of a Eurocentric understanding of geography. In this newly carved out space, colonial powers projected a singular culture onto inhabitants, relying on European texts and scholarly work as a foremost authority on the peoples of the area. Understanding of regional landscapes and populations coincided with European interests. The result was a constructed space of the Middle East; home of the 'Arab' and ward of the colonial empire. (Sharp, 2009)

Palestine is an interesting example of the politics involved in designating spaces to accommodate an orientalist understanding of geography. During the British mandate period and later with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Western foreign policies influenced the reshaping of national borders to suit colonial and imperial agendas. As a result, Palestinians experienced dramatic reductions in territory as well as the cordoning-off of vast spaces in order to accommodate influxes of European Jewish refugees. In determining the basic cartography of the nation, foreign powers and their interests dominated not only the land of Palestine, but its peoples and natural resources as well. This practice still exists today.

In *Israelis and Palestinians in the Shadows of the Wall*, authors Cedric Parizot and Stephanie Abdallah (2015) point to settler activity in the West Bank as an example of the continuation of colonial-era spatial politics by means of 'geographies of occupation'. With the state's political and financial backing, Israeli settlers are able to build upon strategic geographic locations (high-ground territories on top of aquifers and other natural resource deposits) to control resource distributions in the area. Their superior topographical position enables Israelis to effectively regulate the day-to-day activities of Palestinians while simultaneously interrupting indigenous claims of territorial ownership through a system of psychological dependency and conditioning.

The contemporary examples provided by Parizot and Abdallah are a testament to the scholarship of political geographer Geoffrey Parker, whose research stresses a two-part process for states seeking to dominate geographical space. In *The Geopolitics of Domination*, Parker's (1988) research delineates between the effects of power relations at both the 'geopolitical' and 'geosocial' level. States seek to dominate territories in order to possess a bounded and harmonious physical and human landscape. The term 'geopolitical' refers to the state's political forces responsible for designating and enforcing national borders and other physical, territorial partitions. The 'geosocial' represents societal interactions within certain geographical spaces and is tasked with establishing a communal cultural narrative and heritage for the prosperity of the nation-state. In this way, the 'geosocial' encompasses the abstract qualities used to perpetuate nationalist sentiments. In order to preserve both the physical and cultural spaces within a given national territory, there must be a history of cohesive interactions between 'geopolitical' and 'geosocial' forces. In instances where societies and peoples do not support politically imposed borders (as is the case with Palestine), it is the 'geosocial' that presents the greatest threat to the 'geopolitical' when confronting power relations becomes part of a society's structure. (Painter, 2009; Atkinson, 2005)

Said's explanation of 'geopolitical differences' as a determinate for both physical and social geographies mirrors Parker's breakdown of the relations of power involved in constructing nation-states. However, Said's emphasis on the history of Western-imposed borders lends itself to a postcolonial interpretation of geography which highlights the unequal process of territorial formation in the Middle East. His explanation of orientalism focuses on the interrelationship between colonial power and European descriptions of places as a way of manufacturing spaces and organizing peoples for political purposes. In this way, Said's research borrows heavily from the philosophies of several postmodern spatial theorists interested in deconstructing the systems of knowledge responsible for the production of both physical and imaginary spaces.

2.2. Theoretical Approaches to the Production of Space

In *The Order of Things*, French philosopher Michel Foucault (1970) refers to European taxonomies – the process of ordering, classifying and labeling the colonial world – as a contributing factor in the ability of colonial powers to simplify, and thus make sense of the Orient. Visual representations of territorial spaces reflected European ownership of land and people, and eventually influenced the nature of the actual space represented. These processes of spatialization, most evident in the practice of cartography, allowed colonial powers to *know* the region and in doing so exert control over its subjects. (Sharp, 2009; Foucault, 1970)

Foucault's explanation of 'power/knowledge' as a manufacturer of spatial arrangements overlaps with the theories of Henri Lefebvre. In his influential book *The Production of Space,* Lefebvre (1974) argues that space is produced, manifested, and realized by applying a series of political, social and ideological considerations onto a given territory.

In the same way that Parker emphasizes relations of power as being either 'geopolitical' or 'geosocial' in nature, Lefebvre introduces the notion of 'social space' in which space is produced by "subjectivities and psychic states" in addition to material considerations. (Rogoff, 2000, p. 23) Such a combination of political, social and philosophical considerations is necessary for deconstructing the historical and cultural significance of spatial arrangements in the Middle East. (Shields, 1992; Massey, 1994; Harvey, 2004)

In *Spaces of Neoliberalization,* political geographer David Harvey (2005) borrows from the works of Foucault and Lefebvre in describing three distinct types of space – absolute, relative and relational – as a commentary on the interactions between states, societies and physical environments. Harvey's research emphasizes the relations of power implicit within certain spatial arrangements. His system of categorization will be referenced extensively throughout this paper in analyzing the political and cultural significance of select contemporary artworks.

For Harvey, geopolitical power exists when spaces are sectioned off by national borders. This is known as 'absolute space' and its primary function is to delineate between claims of land ownership. The existence of these spaces allows states to regulate territorial boundaries, peoples and natural resources. Foucault's criticisms of 'absolute space' stem from the biopolitical control by which the state exercises and perpetuates sovereignty through bounded and established spatial agreements. The ability to define the parameters of power in the form of territorial borders is a demonstration of sovereignty over the inhabitants of a given space. In this way, land carved out for the purpose of territorial designation is a testament to the political authority of a higher government power. (Mbembe, 2003) Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1977) similarly argues that 'absolute space' constitutes a mode of symbolic domination in which "power relations are perceived not for what they...are but in a form which renders them legitimate." (p. xiii) Within the confines of 'absolute space', national borders function as instruments of discipline and power whereby individuals are organized and more easily managed inside specific enclosures. If the implication of 'absolute space' is the need to abide by absolute sovereignty, then opposition to spatial politics, particularly resistance towards national borders, is a direct contradiction to geopolitical forces.

Geography is relevant because of the people that occupy certain spaces. Beyond a geopolitical understanding of land are geosocial considerations responsible for the production of 'relative' and 'relational' spaces. 'Relative space' is predicated on an individual's interaction with the physical environment. This can account for the variety of diverse perspectives and significations imposed onto a given space. Under this formula, space exists as the result of multiple geometries; in particular, time. This phenonom, known as *spatiotemporality,* explains shifts in territorial boundaries as the result of evolving geopolitical forces that have changed over the years. In the case of Palestine, a discussion of spatiality requires a historical approach to understand the dramatic reductions in territory that occurred during the British mandate period and the subsequent Israeli occupation. Such changes are a testament to the fluctuating levels of geopolitical power responsible for altering the cartography of Palestine over time.

In *Place and the Politics of Identity*, authors Steve Pile and Michael Keith (1993) argue that the various perspectives by which space is realized constitutes the "medium through which…contradictions may be subsumed or even naturalized." (p. 19) 'Relative space' is an indication of what certain territories mean to certain individuals and how these relationships have changed over time. A relative understanding of geography provides the framework for competing claims over land ownership. As a result, issues related to identity formation and narrative agency present themselves in the form of spatial contradictions. In Said's (1994) influential essay *Permission to Narrate*, the author argues that the ability of colonial powers to speak for and thus represent ‘others’ assisted in silencing the voices of colonists and manipulating their images to suit the colonial narrative of justified occupation. Said’s argument is a critique of ‘relative space’ in that Western perspectives of the Middle East assisted in transforming both landscape and society to accommodate an orientalist understanding of the region. By retelling the histories of colonized peoples from the perspective of European powers, the imperial narrative succeeded in eliminating indigenous claims of land ownership.

For the majority of theorists, discourse analysis is central to the study of spatialization. Both Foucault (1980) and Lefebvre agree that the use of spatial and strategic metaphors “enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourse are transformed…on the basis of relations to power.” (p. 69-70) However, in choosing to examine representations of borders, my dissertation will analyze discursive practices only as they relate to visual imagery. While spatial discourse undoubtedly constitutes a foundation for conceptualizing relative location, narrative strategies rely heavily on visual representations of space, i.e. photographs, films, news reels, paintings, etc. Both visual and discursive practices assisted in creating an imaginary idea of the Orient, based on a relative (Eurocentric) approach to the Middle East. In this way, ‘relative space’ takes on abstract components in which sensory processes influence one’s perspective of space. (Rotberg, 2006)

‘Relational space’ proposes the most abstract understanding of the human processes responsible for the production of space. It exists in both absolute and relative circumstances. ‘Relative space’ is absolute because of the way two distinct territories exist in relation to/in opposition of one another. It is also relative considering the way comparisons of territorial borders have changed over time. ‘Relational space’ lends itself to a system of inclusion and exclusion, similarities and differences. For example, when looking at a map of the Middle East one can identify the physical space of a given country by distinguishing between the border outlines of surrounding territories. We know what Iraq looks like on a map because the shape of its borders is different from those of Saudi Arabia. However, the process of differentiating between spaces opens itself up to a system of value judgements which are in turn projected onto the inhabitants of a given space. Not only can we identify the physical territory of Iraq on a map, we can construct an image of Iraqi society, culture, land, etc. based on stereotypes grounded within this particular area.

In *Places on the Margin,* Robert Shields (1992) argues that differences in physical geography translate into perceived differences among cultures and societies. People project meanings and characteristics onto unfamiliar spaces in order to emphasize their relation to a particular land and culture:

> Conceptions of space – which are central to any ontology – are part and parcel of notions of reality. Much more than simply a world view, this sense of space, one's 'spatiality', is a fundamental component of one's relationship to the world. The conventions by whereby one separates the real from the unreal, the natural from the supernatural, the reasonable from the insane are expressed through the spatial logic of exclusion and inclusion. (p. 39)

Questioning one's reality as it relates to one's environment has the effect of situating realities within certain spaces. 'Relational space' exists within a system of self-identification based on binary relationships with geographical space. In this way, 'relational space' accounts for the imaginary borders that separate peoples, cultures and ideas.

Similar to Said's understanding of orientalism as an ideological force for labeling lands and peoples, Lefebvre argues that by visualizing and describing territories the idea of a particular space will take precedence over the reality of that space. In this way, "spaces are hypostatized from the world of real space relations to the symbolic realm of cultural significations." (Shields, 1992, p. 47) Visual representations of space contribute to preconceived notions of territories and inhabitants because they have been internalized, imagined and therefore assumed to be true. If space is to be understood as a social construction, it is our imagination, ideology and thought process that interacts with space to question notions of reality.

Lefebvre's analysis of 'relational space' incorporates structures of society that interact with space and time to produce 'spaces of representation'. These 'spaces of representation' serve a more revolutionary function – the ability to expose illogicalities between geopolitical and geosocial forces, both of which are manifested in the form of territorial divides and national borders:

> Socio-political contradictions are realized spatially. The contradictions of space thus make the contradictions of social relations operative. In other words, spatial contradictions 'express' conflicts between socio-political interests and forces; it is only in space that such conflicts come effectively into play, and in doing so they become contradictions of space. (1974, p. 365)

As a result of opposition at the geosocial level, Lefebvre's 'spaces of representation' constitute sites of resistance against geopolitical forces responsible for creating and enforcing spatial arrangements. It is within this realm that space can be appropriated away from the nation-state to accommodate oppositional 'social spaces' that are open to new visions. "If the latter is the zone of the hegemonic forces of capital, these former sites mark possible, emergent, spatial revolutions." (Shields, 1992, p. 70) 'Spaces of representation' signal a detournement of the traditional spatial order and a move away from geopolitical relations of power. They exist in direct opposition to the European representations of space used to colonize the Orient. In this way, manipulating visual representations of space is a primary example of opposition towards geopolitical forces responsible for territorial separations and borders.

In *Geographies of Resistance*, Pile and Keith (1997) borrow from the spatial theories of Lefebvre in describing 'spaces of resistance' as imaginary sites of conflict where "social structures and relations of power, knowledge, domination and resistance intersect." (Shields, 1992, p. 70) These 'spaces of resistance' are a practical application of Lefebvre's 'spaces of representation' in which geosocial opposition is driven towards markers of 'absolute space'. Both terms are used to describe arenas in which socio-political contradictions are realized and opposed. Pile and Keith draw on the works of cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) in demonstrating the existence of 'third spaces' as a sort of abstract forum in which one is able to question the true intent behind spatial arrangements and separations. Both Bhabha and Said incorporate an understanding of oppositional spaces in their scholarship as a way of critiquing the artificially imposed borders of the Middle East.

2.3. Visualizing Space in Contemporary Palestinian Art

Lefebvre's analysis of 'spaces of representation' points to the example of Dada as a demonstration of artistic practices capable of transgressing conventional notions of spatiality. His theories draw upon the field of visual arts because of its unique ability to represent both the actual and the imaginable in a way that reveals the arbitrariness of spatialization. (Shields, 1992) Irit Rogoff (2000), author of *Terra Infirma*, similarly employs an analysis of visual imagery as a way to relate political and cultural geography with the more abstract concept of 'social space':

> Instead of art as reflective, an approach was elaborated which we might name constitutive, in which – through historical unframings and psychoanalytically informed perceptions of desire and subjectivity as projected on to texts and images – an understanding of how images (regardless of their origins) shape our conscious and unconscious perceptions of cultural values. Images in the field of vision therefore constitute us rather than being subjected to historical readings by us. (p. 9)

For Rogoff, art is an interlocutor that allows scholars to engage with geography as an epistemic structure. This understanding of visual images, as a medium through which to conceptualize relations of power, is especially relevant when contextualizing practices of spatial resistance. Through images, artists are able to manipulate representations of space and in doing so question why space is perceived in a certain way.

Spatiality plays a unique role in contemporary Palestinian art. At the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a territorial dispute that features heavily in critical artistic commentaries. Helga Tawil-Souri's (2014) argues in *Cinema as the Space to Transgress Palestine's Territorial Trap* that resistance in the form of spatial imagery is a way for Palestinians to exist in relation to their shifting geographies. For Souri, the ability to manipulate controversial and abstracts spatial concepts is also the opportunity to reconstitute one's self "beyond the confines of territoriality." (p. 171) Through visual art, Palestinians represent themselves within spaces of both inclusion and exclusion. Artistic expression functions as a form of spatial resistance through which Palestinians can situate their history and culture despite the geopolitical reality of territorial segregation.

Representations of borders are a central component of the binary relationship that characterizes spatial imagery. These physical and abstract divides are the product of an intricate system of inclusion and exclusion. Essentially, borders are the markers of spatial politics. Given the nature of its occupation, Palestinians experience borders not only as spatial barriers, but also as forces of biopolitical power capable of permeating the political and social fabric of the nation. Fences, checkpoints and the infamous partition wall are more than just physical obstacles. They are symbols of oppression that embody contradictions between the geopolitical and geosocial realities of the Israeli occupation.

From the perspective of Palestinian artists, representations of borders constitute a political statement and serve as a demonstration of the destructive nature of Israeli policies. In *An Aesthetic Occupation*, author Daniel Monk (2002) refers to the depiction of borders in conflict zones as a form of 'immediacy-in-representation' in which symbols or objects constitute the link between history and visual representation. Borders stand in for and "overtake…the reality they name" so that the concept of borders becomes housed in the physical barrier itself. (p. 8)

Images of borders function as a commentary on the invisible relations of power responsible for the imposition of colonial-era spatial politics; specifically, the dividing of territories and peoples based on European interests. Contemporary Palestinian art is unique in its ability to represent juxtaposing geopolitical and geosocial forces as they interact and combat one another in day-to-day life. In depicting this convergence of forces through subversive representations of space, artists criticize the relations of power implicit in notions of absolute, relative and relational spaces. By appropriating the spatial tactics used by colonial powers to lay claim to the Middle East, art becomes a site of resistance aimed at decolonizing both physical and imaginary spatial divides. (Ferrer & Val, 2014)

3. Methodology

3.1. Critical Visual Analysis

Research for my dissertation involved a combination of critical visual analysis and applied philosophical concepts in order to express an original interpretation of select contemporary artworks as they relate to theories of spatiality. Critical visual analysis is useful when attempting to examine the underlying messages and insinuations of a particular image. This approach to visual analysis facilitates an independent and unique reading of images while questioning the epistemic foundations of a particular genre of art. (Sheikh, 2006)

Visual analysis constitutes a critical cultural approach to historical art methods because of its emphasis on contextualizing images within spaces of influence. In *The Social Production of Art,* author Janet Wolff (1993) argues that art is not a romantic or genius notion, but rather the result of a convergence of sociopolitical and economic factors that shaped the development of a given society and in doing so influenced artistic behaviors. Artwork should be read as a temperature of the ideological and cultural practices of a specific place during a specific time. This understanding of visual art emphasizes the role of the audience in responding to and engaging with images. While the intent of the artist in creating a certain piece is significant, it is not the only factor. Once made available to the public, art is offered up for public consumption. The audiences' interpretation of certain pieces is just as significant as the reasons behind the aesthetic and symbolic choices of the artist.

The relationship between art and philosophy has been described by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1977) as "a system of relays within a larger sphere…a multiplicity of parts that are both theoretical and practical." (p. 206) By introducing a theoretical background in the analysis of visual artworks, my research highlights the relevant political and philosophical concepts that provide the foundation for artistic commentaries. (Busch, 2009) In recognizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as first and foremost a territorial dispute, my examination of Palestinian visual arts applies a philosophical understanding of the relations of power responsible for spatial divides. The theoretical components of this paper are well grounded in the works of postmodern philosophers, particularly Foucault and Lefebvre. However, the majority of critical visual analysis draws from my own independent viewings and responses to select artworks. This original analysis is significant for its application of spatial theory in understanding how resistance is visualized in contemporary Palestinian art.

3.2. Defining Contemporary Art

Contemporary art is in some ways a vague label used to categorize artworks that do not fit into traditionally established genres. It is a field of art that cannot be defined based on aesthetic style, subject content or even timeframe. Its divergence from the customary gallery and museum format is what brings together artists of this particular genre. For Palestinian artists living and studying abroad, contemporary art is often a welcomed alternative to the Eurocentric art practices one encounters in the West. Performance and installation artist, Mona Hatoum described her foray into the world of contemporary art as the result of experiencing ostracism while attending an art academy in London. Hatoum was attracted to the marginalized group of contemporary artists because their "experimentation in media and language coincided with their awareness of social issues." (Archer, Brett & Zegher, 1998, p. 35) As a whole, contemporary art is vessel for expressing political commentaries and subversive messages through visual and sensory practices. In this way, it is a genre of art that regularly challenges notions of spatiality by distorting and manipulating representations of space.

The artworks I will be referencing can be understood as examples of postconceptual art. This subcategory of contemporary art is referenced extensively in the scholarship of Peter Osbourne (2013), author of *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art.* Postconceptual art as essentially a building upon conceptual art but includes images created with digital technology. Both labels refer to a specific practice among contemporary artists in which concepts and ideas expressed by an artwork take precedence over the aesthetic qualities of the piece. My focus on contemporary Palestinian art has more to do with the messages communicated through visual representations rather than the stylistic qualities used in their display. For this reason, my analysis will concentrate on themes of spatial representations as opposed to providing an in-depth explanation of the various mediums used to critique spatial practices.

4. Main Analysis

4.1. Mona Hatoum and Critical Cartography

Cartography is one of the most common practices of spatial representation. Maps have the allure of situating the entire world in a one-dimensional showcase, transforming infinite and unknown spaces into manageable frameworks. Because maps are so frequently disseminated and referenced as sources of authority regarding world geography, little attention is paid to the political and social forces responsible for the visual representations and labels of nation-states. Sheena Wagstaff (2000), author of *Uncharted Territories*, describes map making as a symbol of conquest and a foremost example of the influence of geopolitical power in shaping spatial imagery. For Wagstaff, the ‘cartographic gaze’ wields “immense power, held by those unnamed individuals who have drawn and re-drawn maps throughout history.” (p. 39) The power to carve out sections of territory for the purpose of nation formation is also the ability to colonize space for the purpose of organizing peoples and resources. Wagstaff’s explanation of the ‘cartographic gaze’ is recognition of the relations of power involved in the visual production and normalization of ‘absolute space’.

For Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, interacting with and manipulating territorial borders is a way of subverting the geopolitical forces responsible for the designation and imposition of biopolitical spatial arrangements. Hatoum’s background as a displaced Palestinian exile has influenced her interactions with geography, preferring to approach issues of spatiality from the perspective of her cross-border, cross-cultural identity. Throughout her career, Hatoum has incorporated themes of space and place as a political and social commentary on the exilic narrative and the relations of power responsible for her status as a Palestinian refugee and expatriate. Hatoum and Lefebvre share a similar understanding of space as something that is not a fixed entity but rather a social construction manifested through the thoughts, actions and processes of human beings. Her artwork emphasizes space as belonging to peoples and in doing so lends itself to the creation of imaginary communities and identities devoid of the geopolitical considerations imbedded in the production of ‘absolute space’. (Knott, 2005; Anderson, 1983)

Subversive cartography is a major theme of Hatoum’s work. The artist has exhibited a number of manipulated maps and world atlases in an effort to interrogate the relations of power involved in the production of ‘absolute space’. Her work similarly presents an alternative approach to the rigidity of national borders in the form of transnationalism. Hatoum’s critical interpretations of cartography are indicative of what Rhoda Rosen (2008) terms the ‘artistic cartographic impulse’. Maps constructed based on a relative understanding of space represent territories from the perspectives of those in positions of power. Several of Hatoum’s pieces including *Map* (1999), *Continental Drift* (2000) and *Projection* (2006) depict global maps sans national borders as an example of what the world would look like in the absence of relative points of origin. Hatoum’s pieces subvert the traditional framework of world geography and in doing so provide the viewer with an opportunity to reclaim the ‘cartographic gaze’. Her critical atlases introduce new and radical interpretations of space, devoid of the human processes that perpetuate territorial separations.

In 1996, three years after the signing of the Oslo Accords, Hatoum held an exhibition at the Gallery Anadiel in the Arab neighbourhood of Jerusalem. The location was significant for the artist whose Palestinian nationality initially precluded her from visiting. The following is an excerpt from Hatoum explaining her inspiration for the exhibit:

> On my first day in Jerusalem I came across a map divided into lots of little areas circled in red, like little islands with no continuity or connection between them. It was the map showing the territorial divisions arrived at under the Oslo agreement, and it represented the first phase of returning land to the Palestinian authorities. But really it was a map about dividing and controlling the area. At the first sign of trouble Israel practices the policy of closure; they close all the passages between the areas so the Arabs are completely isolated and paralyzed. (Rogoff, 2000, p. 87)

The centre piece of Hatoum’s display was *Present Tense*, a simulated world atlas that criticized the geopolitical forces involved in the sequestration of territorial spaces. The artist used blocks of Nabulus soap as a canvas and placed red beads along the surfaces to outline the edges of continents. Her work was an imitation of a global map. However, she reframed from drawing in national borders, preferring instead to emphasize only major land formations.

In the absence of side-by-side nation-states, the audience is exposed to Hatoum’s interpretation of geographical space – it is a simple representation of physical earth, devoid of the political, social and ideological forces that manifest themselves in the form of territorial borders. By eliminating all traces of spatial separations, the artist presents a new understanding of 'absolute space' that makes sense to the viewer engaging in spatial deconstruction within the confines of the gallery. While staring at the world in its most basic and organic form, the audience is left to wonder what constitutes a nation space in the absence of national borders? Where does one country begin and the other end if there are no neighbouring states to enforce claims of ownership? By creating a map in which political and social considerations do not influence spatial arrangements, Hatoum highlights the significant role geopolitical positionality plays in constructing and normalizing 'absolute space'.

Audience members who have been conditioned to picture geography as divided into fixed territorial entities are forced to examine their relative positions in relation to Hatoum's idealized representation of space. Her work hints at a bridging of civilizations. National and ethnic identities do not exist in a world without borders. Instead, Hatoum's map is an open space where people are free to move around without being labeled 'immigrant', 'foreigner', 'refugee', 'exile', etc. Her fluid interpretation of geography is a commentary on identity formation and its relationship to both absolute and relative space:

> The culture and geopolitics of closure, confinement, wall-erection, is impiously questioned by Hatoum's aesthetics of border-crossing. This is particularly evident in the different maps the art has produced…blurring the distinction between closeness and distance, familiarity and strangeness. The memory of a "double vision", of simultaneous dimensions and overlapping territories is impressed in Hatoum's cartography. Time and space are inseparable…" (Ferrer & Val, 2014, p. 20)

Cartography not only shapes space but also the way one thinks of a particular space. Hatoum's mockery of the Oslo agreement map is a satirical display of resistance towards Israeli occupiers attempting to narrate spatial arrangements within Palestine. Her message is most evident in the materials she chooses to incorporate. The Nabulus soup – a reference to historical traditions and cultural practices that span over a period of centuries – demonstrates a direct link between the land of Palestine and its native peoples. The location of the exhibit itself, situated within the disputed territory of Jerusalem, similarly denotes Palestinian "claims over land, memory, and the right to narrate." (Jabri, 2001, p. 39) The presence of Israeli forces on Palestinian land is represented in the superficially imposed red beads. With only water, the artificial existence of territorial entities will dissolve, leaving only the outlines of continents and islands behind. Removed from the political forces that delineate between nations, and the social forces responsible for constructing abstract ideas of peoples and cultures, nothing is left but physical land.

For Hatoum, nations and borders are political and social constructs superficially imposed onto spaces and peoples through a series of human processes. It is not possible to situate one's self within *Present Tense* without drawing upon predetermined notions of 'absolute space' based on relative points of origin. In this way, Hatoum is able to emphasize the role of geopolitical positionality in influencing our understanding of geography. By creating a global map in which political and social considerations do not exist, our perception of space reverts back to basic land formations, rather than territorial entities. Her work is an example of what Alix Ohlin (2002) terms 'artistic cartographic impulses' – a way for artists to undo traditional geographic processes by exposing contradictions between what is presented before us and what we know to be true. Manipulated and unconventional representations of space are able to deconstruct the conventional meanings of spatial arrangements by introducing a new way of visualizing and understanding space. Hatoum's maps are a direct criticism of the colonial logic of division and control. Her treatment of space is the redrawing and reframing of borders to highlight the effects of colonial practices on Palestinian land. *Present Tense* is also a suggestion of an alternative world in which societies and identities no longer formed in relation to designated nation-states. Instead, Hatoum's approach is transnational. Her map embodies the merging of cultures and peoples so as to propose a civilization untouched by geopolitical relations of power. This postcolonial approach to political and cultural geography is similarly adopted in the short films of Palestinian director Larissa Sansour.

4.2. Larissa Sansour and Palestinian Film

Palestine was first introduced to the Western world via the lens of a video camera. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, European and American filmmakers promulgated images of a land and people that suited an orientalist perspective of how Palestine and Palestinians should appear. Curiosity and interest in religious studies fuelled the 'biblification' of Palestine to accommodate the expectations of a predominately Christian audience. Film directors and photographers captured historical and religious monuments but failed to accurately portray locals engaging in regular, day-to-day affairs. (Nasser, 2007) Instead, Arabs were featured in postcards and travel magazines as an illustration of the exotic lands and peoples of the Orient. Palestinians had very little self-representation in their visual imagery and moving image practices. As a result, the native population was virtually erased from their own landscape giving rise to the popular myth of Palestine as a 'land without a people, a people without a land.' Palestinians (Shohat, 1989)

In the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, restrictions on artistic expression were lifted slightly within occupied territories. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Palestinian cinema emerged as a popular genre of media and art. Filmmakers saw cinema as a way to reverse the cultural narrative that had been written for Palestinians from the perspective of Western colonists. Film became a way to unify the voices of a displaced and beleaguered population. The idea of a national cinema took on great importance as individuals began recording their lived experiences under occupation for audiences around the world. (Tawil-Souri, 2014) In this way, Palestinian films contributed to an idealized notion of homeland; distinguishable for its emotional significance, not necessarily for its physical space. In *The Continuity of Trauma and Struggle*, Haim Bresheeth (2007) explains:

> The stories told within the films not only function as devices for delivering historical detail and personal memory but also…they offer a voice to the unsung and unheard continuing tragedy of Palestine, constructing a positive space for national and individual existence and identity today. (p. 165)

Through cinema, Palestine became an abstract space of nostalgia for those who attached sentimental value and meaning to what used to be a national territory. Because so much of the physical land of Palestine was divided and occupied, the *idea* of the homeland is what united a culture despite its scattered population.

Representations of space in Palestinian films take on metaphorical qualities in the imaginations of filmmakers and audience members. Images of physical space contain abstract meanings and messages that correspond to the psychological challenges of living inside occupied territories. Film is a medium through which artists criticize the spatial logic of Israeli policies. (Shohat & Stam, 2014) Given the sheer number of physical barriers used to restrict freedom of movement, popular genres of cinema include 'Check-Point Cinema' and 'Tora Bora Cinema'; both are references to the circuitous routes people use to avoid running into Israeli Defense Forces. As explained by Sobhi al-Zobaidi (2008), cinema constitutes a "passage, a crack, a flight, a leap, wherein Palestinians…'weave our space as we go, constantly reconstituting ourselves in relation to changing geographies'." For exiled Palestinians living abroad, spatial separations and the complications that arise from identifying as a displaced person also appear as popular motifs of national cinema. Palestinian directors have endured many challenges attempting to represent a cohesive national narrative for an uprooted population. However, a shared trait Palestinians relate to is the role of spatiality in the formation of national consciousness. (Alexander, 2005)

Sansour's short films are a commentary on the abstract de-territorialization of Palestine. Her work attempts to decolonize and deconstruct the Western perspective of Palestine in the minds and imaginations of the audience. Sansour's genre of short films appropriate Western cultural values and ideas in order to expose the illogicalities of the Israeli occupation. Her understanding of space and borders reflects that of Hatoum in recognizing territorial divides as the product of geopolitical relations of power reminiscent of colonial-era politics. However, Sansour's interactions with space follow the tradition of Palestinian filmmakers in approaching borders as more of an abstract barrier than a man-made wall. Her films emphasize the imaginary and ideological borders separating Israelis and Palestinians. In this way, Sansour's films transgress spatial divides in the form of imaginary border crossings through visual representations. (Tawil-Souri, 2014)

Sansour's short film *A Space Exodus* (2009) was screened at festivals as a stand-alone film and as the center piece of a series of art exhibits featuring companion photographs and installation pieces. The film features a Palestinian astronaut (played by Sansour) in outer space planting a flag on the moon. She loses communication with the mainland operator, appropriately named 'Jerusalem', and floats aimlessly away into space. In the total abyss of outer space, the astronaut lacks the ability to communicate with any relevant centers of power. Her directionless drifting is a metaphor for a lost Palestinian identity in search of an independent government and nation-state. With no physical mechanism to ground the astronaut, she experiences a sense of disillusionment and displacement as she struggles in vain to make contact with 'Jerusalem'. A connection is made between the wandering state of the astronaut and the fate of Palestinians who have been disconnected from their homeland – their center of origin and communication – and must find a way back through the open and infinite outer space.

Space Exodus is a satirical appropriation of Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke's *A Space Odyssey* (2001). It employs themes of scientific realism to represent the ambiguous standing of Palestinian politics, culture and identity in the aftermath of the Oslo II Accords. Sansour's film highlights the negation of space as is relates to Palestinian identity and the political prospects of reclaiming a homeland. (Tawil-Souri, 2011) *Space Exodus* evokes the diverse spatialities and temporalities that characterize the Palestinian experience. Sansour suggests that the primary divides between Israelis and Palestinians are not man-made borders, but rather the imaginary borders reproduced through social and political practices. There exist cultural and ideological separations between Israelis and Palestinians that supersede territorial divides. (Younis, 2012; Shohat, 2003)

One of Sansour's most controversial films, *Nation Estate* (2012), similarly links an abstract understanding of cultural divides with the territorial dispute at the centre of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The nine-minute science fiction film, accompanied by a series of movie stills, shows the protagonist (played by Sansour) navigating through Palestine; except the land of Palestine has been turned into a high-rise, futuristic building. Major cities and cultural centres have been compartmentalized into individual floors. Classic landmarks such as the Dome of the Rock have been replicated to exist within the enclosed building underneath its fluorescent lightings. An accompanying photograph from the exhibit depicts the 'Mediterranean Floor' equipped with a luxurious indoor swimming pool. The interior of the skyscraper is similar to that of a shopping centre or mall with fake statues of cultural landmarks enclosed within its marble walls. The building is sealed off from the outside world by a thick wall several stories high.

Sansour's film is the satirical reduction of Palestinian society into a given space. The controlled environment of the skyscraper represents a dystopian outcome to the conflict in the Middle East. *Nation Estate* treats the land and peoples of Palestine as a relic to be show-cased in a museum-like environment. Cities and societal characteristics are organized and ordered. Notions of 'relative space' are called into question by the depiction of Palestine civilization of a thing of the past. Chiara De Cesari (2012) describes Sansour's film as a form of anticipatory representation, which calls nations into being by representing them before they exist. This futuristic outlook on the nationhood of Palestine evokes a sense of nostalgia. In witnessing a sarcastic, almost humorous interpretation of what the homeland might look like one day; Palestine is represented as spatiotemporal nation that exists only in the memories and imaginations of people.

In an interview with Haniya Rae (2013), Sansour describes her use of science fiction as a form of political commentary on the Middle East conflict:

> I think I am most comfortable when I function in a parallel space that's not separate from political reality, but somehow comments on it from a different portal. The crisis in the Middle East has been ongoing and repetitive and I feel solutions on the ground have reached an impasse. It is somehow necessary to change the way we approach commentary on the subject. I do think that erecting a meta-space that functions according to its own autonomous abstractions and logic could be more effective in finding ways of dealing with the problem at hand, than using our standard tools of analysis.

The artist interacts with space in an illusory and abstract fashion to communicate political messages that cannot be understood in traditional formats. Her films manipulate representations of space so as to emphasize the role of the imaginary in our understanding of land and land ownership. The Palestinian predicament is more than the loss of homeland. It is riddled with ideals, expectations and fears of the future. It is a struggle for recognition and agency within both physical and abstract spaces. The very notion of a culture being condensed into a high-rise skyscraper frames issues of territorial space in terms of geopolitical interests seeking a quick-fix solution by throwing money and corporate sponsorship at a complicated and delicate regional conflict. In *Nation Estate*, the land of Palestine belongs to a futuristic business completely disassociated with the cultural values of Palestinians. All that is left of the past exists within the imagination.

4.3. Laila al-Shawa and Walls of Separation

Sansour's film screening was accompanied by an exhibition of posters and photographs taken from the movie itself. I will briefly draw attention to one poster in particular because of its reference to a tradition in contemporary Palestinian art of engaging borders in relation to larger social settings. Sansour created a mock movie poster depicting the high-rise *Nation Estate* building surrounded by concrete walls that separated the futuristic skyscraper from the actual, present-day land of Palestine. Her poster is a satirical interpretation of Austrian graphic designer Franz Krausz's *Visit Palestine* (1936). A Jewish immigrant who traveled regularly to Jerusalem, Krausz produced a series of landscape images throughout the 1930s and 1940s aimed at encouraging Jews to visit the holy land. His posters were created prior to the Nakba and drew inspiration from the Zionist narrative of European Jewish immigrants settling in Palestine and reconnecting with biblical prophecy. Krausz's *Visit Palestine* has been the subject of much satirical appropriation including a remix by Zan Studio in Ramallah. In 2010, the studio artists released a replication of the poster that depicted a giant concrete wall blocking the original landscape scene. The remix image symbolized the changes Palestinians have experienced since the creation of the state of Israel; walls of separation now prohibit their access to Jerusalem. (Davis & Kirk, 2013)

Sansour's poster is a reference to a tradition among Palestinian artists of depicting walls, check-points and other barriers of separation in the context of lived, social spaces. These territorial divides are physical manifestations of geopolitical power that exist at the geosocial level. Artwork is capable of representing these invisible forces as they relate to a wider cultural and societal space. Human interactions with walls and partitions offer a sarcastic commentary on the oppressive forces responsible for managing people within certain spatial arrangements. In this way, visual art is capable of juxtaposing geopolitical and geosocial forces to expose major flaws and illogicalities with the processes of spatialization.

The artworks of Laila al-Shawa offer a perfect example of this convergence of power reproduced through visual representation. Her series *Walls of Gaza* produced between 1992 and 1995 showcase Palestinian children interacting with the walls in the camps of Gaza. Shawa's *Children of War, Children of Peace* is a commentary on the lived consequences of political events. In an image titled *Plate 80*, Shawa photographed a young Palestinian boy leaning timidly against a concrete wall. A red target is superimposed onto the photograph so that viewer appears to be staring at the child through the barrel of a gun. (Lloyd, 1999) The boy has been marked because of the space in which he occupies. If walls are manifestations of political decisions, then the binary spaces these partitions create determine one's relationship to the political process. This is the logic of geopolitical positionality. Shawa's work is a commentary on "the existence of a traumatized generation of Palestinians" whose identities and societies have been shaped in response to geopolitical relations of power. (Ali, 2015)

5. **Conclusion**

In the same way that representations of space were used to colonize the Middle East, contemporary Palestinian art engages in subversive manipulations of spatial configurations to deconstruct and decolonize the spatial politics imposed onto Palestinian land, culture and ideology. By reconfiguring spatial arrangements, artists are able to expose the relations of power responsible for colonial-era borders and partitions. In doing so, artworks inspire sources of resistance and expression against Israeli occupation. Images of borders function as protests against the controlled environments created by Israeli policies of surveillance and management. By subverting the customary logic of geopolitical positionalities, artists depict spatial divides as irrational and self-serving methods for enforcing biopolitical control. In this way, contemporary Palestinian art propagates alternative ways of interacting with borders so as to engage viewers in spatial deconstruction through visual representation.

For Mona Hatoum, critical cartography is a way of making evident the geopolitical forces responsible for the creation of 'absolute space'. Her subversive maps are devoid of conventional territorial designations and introduce the notion of a world unencumbered by the logic of the international nation-state system. Hatoum's treatment of space as belonging to peoples rather than governments opens up the realm of geography to a universal notion of inclusion and belonging. Her work is an attempt to overthrow the binary relationships that exist within spaces of separation. This idealized understanding of space similarly translates into issues of identity formation. In a world without national borders, peoples and their identities are part in parcel of a larger foundation of acceptance that requires no relative perspective or understanding of different cultures. A globe composed of a singular territory would allow people to grow in harmony with their surroundings. Hatoum's work is an expression of resistance against colonial-era policies of division and control. In a world without spatial separations, management of peoples is impossible and therefore welcomed.

Sansour's short films are similarly a source of opposition against the territorial divides that reproduce themselves in the form of ideological separations between peoples and cultures. Her manipulation of space is a humorous commentary on the lack of human interaction with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Her reduction of Palestinian society into the folds of Western culture is a satirical reaction to her own experiences as a displaced Palestinian woman. For Sansour, nations and cultures cannot be treated as commodities of spatial logic. Her films emphasize the humanity and existence of a Palestinian people whose culture is regulated and controlled by geopolitical forces.

Her approach to space is unique in its ironic negation of Palestinian identity. In the absence of an international support system, the land of Palestine has been divided into easy-to-fit spaces for the consumption of geopolitical powers. Her films are a testament to a displaced population that lacks a grounded center of origin and as a result drifts aimlessly towards the unknown. Sansour's work is a call to action for Palestinians experiencing disillusionment with the international political system. By sarcastically condensing Palestinian land and culture at the request of Western governments, Sansour communicates the hazards of allowing the future of a nation to be determined by geopolitical decision-making.

For Shawa, borders exist in many different forms and for a variety of purposes. Spatial separations are symptomatic of geopolitical forces seeking to condense populations for easier management. The artist imposes symbols on her own photographs to call into question the ways in which geopolitical forces levy labels and stereotypes onto peoples through spatial logic. The existence of physical walls and partitions are made all the more problematic when introduced within a lived space of humanity. In this way, her work is a commentary on the future of displaced Palestinians attempting to reconcile life and identity within a binary system of spatial arrangements. Her work suggests the violent consequences of physical and psychological occupation. By portraying the victims of spatial politics through the lens of a camera, the viewer becomes the force responsible for imposing geopolitical considerations onto land and people. This reversal of roles, from witnessing to engaging, forces the viewer to deconstruct preconceived notions of Palestinians living in spaces of militant exclusion.

The artworks featured in this dissertation embody expressions of opposition against the spatial practices of Israeli occupation. By manipulating colonial representations of space, contemporary Palestinian art exposes the geopolitical considerations responsible for the territorial, cultural and ideological separations that exist between East and West. For Palestinians living in displacement, art constitutes a source of resistance against the invisible forces of power responsible for their predicament. In this way, manipulating space through the visual representation of borders engages viewers in an abstract decolonization of Palestine.

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