

## APARTHEID: A DOUBLE-CROSSING

### Louise Bethlehem

(The Hebrew University, Jerusalem)

*Examining the mobilization of the term 'apartheid' in Israel, Louise Bethlehem discusses the ways in which dissident Israeli intellectuals, artists and activists contest the erasure of the Palestinian past and present; how they 'speak otherwise' to elaborate a differently inflected Israeli identity.*

In the background stands a ruin: partly collapsed stone walls, a cavity, the roundness of a dome. There are fields receding to a line of cypress trees, perhaps. I reconstruct, filling in the details from memory, or from a template of the ruin (הברוּחַ [*churvah*] in Hebrew; خربة [*khirbe*] in Arabic). This is a landscape so intimately familiar that it does not warrant a second glance. But the camera which fixes the ruin at the center of its frame does not look away. In the foreground, cars are passing. The camera is positioned so as to register the precise rhythms of their passing. One after the other, the cars speed past the ruin – their drivers impervious to its presence and to that of the camera, both. Their staccato passage is held in counterpoint against the silent duration of the ruin. And still the camera does not look away. Nor do I. The lens delivers its freight of commentary slowly, cumulatively. This long spool of cars loops back on itself the way a spool of film in a video installation unfolds, then curls back on itself, begins its broadcast anew. And indeed, it is a video installation that I am recalling, the work of the Israeli artist Oded Shimshon: one of a series of pieces by Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel assembled by

activist curator Norma Musih for the launch of the gallery attached to the learning center of the dissident Israeli organization, Zochrot, on August 30, 2007.

Oded Shimshon's staging of the visibility of the ruin defamiliarizes the landscape in precisely the manner that Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian Formalist literary theorist who gave us the term defamiliarization, might have anticipated. Perception is prolonged in defiance of the habituation that renders a second glance redundant. Perception is prolonged as the movement of the cars that hold and cede the frame, time after time. Their ongoing transience makes the intransience, the intransigence, of the ruin perceptible. For all its unyielding materiality as a signpost of that which has been but has been made to be no more, the Palestinian ruin must nevertheless be brought back into the field of vision of the Israeli spectator, must be re-materialized, through a type of framing. Figure and ground shift position, subtly. It is the *grounding* of the ruin that is made to emerge into the field of vision for the Jewish Israeli spectator. The stone of the ruin is rendered-stonier, we might say echoing Shklovsky's famous phrase. Oded Shimshon's installation deliberately contests the regime of invisibility, as banal as it is violent, that follows on the ideological contract which obtains between the Israeli landscape – I use this adjective advisedly – and a spectator interpellated by Zionist repertoires of the gaze. The eye confronts the historical evidence of this having been an inhabited landscape, saturated with rival cultural, religious and national claims, but they remain subliminal. The gaze confirms the regulatory codes of Zionism, which as the late Baruch Kimmerling, a radical Israeli sociologist pointed out, routinely sanctify oc-

cupied territory as desirable while marking its Palestinian inhabitants as profoundly undesirable. The ruin, I am suggesting, is the "unthought known" of the Israeli cult of landscape in the pregnant phrase of the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas.

*The gaze confirms the regulatory codes of Zionism, which ... sanctify occupied territory as desirable while marking its Palestinian inhabitants as profoundly undesirable.*

In Volume 2 of *The Salon*, Saree Makdisi also gazes out upon ruin; surveys, more significantly, what Anne Laura Stoler might term processes of ruination that bring a certain kind of detritus into being. It is a distinctly political agency – the inscription of power – that is at stake here. Contemplating his visit to the half-demolished neighbourhood of Fietas in central Johannesburg in the company of anti-apartheid activists who grew up there, Makdisi writes: "For anyone who has been to Palestine, the grass-grown wasteland of Fietas looks familiar for good reason: it has its counterpart in every grass-covered ruin of every one of the hundreds of towns and villages in Palestine whose people were driven from their homes in 1948 because a racial logic dictated that they should not live in a space supposedly decreed (by God and the United Nations) to another people; in every wind-swept wasteland of Gaza where many of those same refugees' homes were once again bulldozed by the Israeli army to clear lines of sight and make room for free-fire zones; and in every corner of occupied East Jerusalem." The analogy, *apartheid here/apartheid there*, is an explicit dimension of his commentary, and, to echo his phrase, with good reason. I will not reiterate the specific contours of

an argument which is rehearsed in much the same form by various voices within the activist and dissident intellectual community in Israel, on the part of both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. Rather, I would like to point to the manner in which Saree Makdisi's use of the term "apartheid" functions in much the same way as the placement of Oded Shimshon's camera does in order to make access to certain occluded forms of knowledge and practices of resistance possible. It is this that I take to be exemplary for the purposes of a political critique.

The use of the term "apartheid" has a discernible history of application in Israel. The word has, in fact, long come to stand apart as a term in the Hebrew lexicon. *Aleph, pey, resh, tet, hey, yud, yud, daled*. Untranslated yet transcribed in a modality of translation that Jacques Derrida, in dedicating his book *Specters of Marx* to the anti-apartheid activist Chris Hani, once identified as metonymic. "One name for another, a part for the whole: the historic violence of Apartheid can always be treated as a metonymy" he writes, and continues, "At once part, cause, effect, example, what is happening there translates what takes place here, always here, wherever one is and wherever one looks, closest to home." Derrida's invocation of apartheid to frame what one sees when one looks closest to home has long had particular resonance for me. For you see, I am a "long-distance South African," in Denis Hirson's beautiful formulation. One who has lived in Israel since 1985. I cross the phrase "closest to home" twice. A double-crossing. But in crossing it as a historian of apartheid-era South African literature; in crossing it through what my translator Oded Wolkstein and I have recently termed the "emergent allegory" of the Hebrew-language version of my book on the subject; in crossing

it, more significantly, through the devices of an analogical pedagogy, I have come to learn that "apartheid" functions less as metonymy than as catachresis – or new naming – in the context, precisely, of what Saree Makdisi analyses as Zionism's properly *linguistic denialism*.

I have come to learn that "apartheid" functions less as metonymy than as catachresis ... in the context, precisely, of ... Zionism's properly *linguistic denialism*.

Consider one of the very earliest mobilizations of the analogy between the spatial regimes of the newly independent State of Israel and the increasingly strident apartheid state on the part of Azriel Karlbach, the editor of the liberal Zionist newspaper *Ma'ariv*, in December 1953. Karlbach is writing against the backdrop of the staging of the Hebrew-language version of the musical based on Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* by the national Israeli theater, *Habima*, in May 1953. (I owe this citation to the generosity of my colleague, Eitan Bar-Yosef, who is meticulously plotting the history of that production). Karlbach contests the appropriation of Palestinian land through increasingly ramified constitutional and bureaucratic means, and the rendering available of this land to kibbutzim and collective settlements – his ideological opponents within the national hegemony. The Palestinian owners of the land, he writes caustically, have been prevented from accessing it "ever since the end of colonialism and the end of racist land laws and the end of discrimination and the beginning of human rights and the sanctity of democracy were declared in this land". Addressing his daughter, Karlbach invites her to join him in a

hypothetical visit to "one of the homesteads on this stolen land .... They will speak there of a [theatrical production based on the novel] of a courageous author who raised his voice in his own country against the oppression of the blacks at the hands of the whites – despite the fact that he himself is a member of the white race. And they will speak there loftily against racial supremacy and against the theft of indigenous land in far-off Africa .... And then turn your ears away from the noble words, and turn it towards the good earth of the land on whose soil these speeches are borne. Listen – and you will hear: This beloved country cries too. And you will arise and you will grow up and you will remedy the injustice – and you will silence that cry" [my translation]. The fact that the word apartheid is never explicitly used is less significant than other omissions. The pointedly Biblical rhetoric of the passage carried by the subjunctive verb forms of the Hebrew identify Karlbach as a Zionist. It is the state's political mismanagement, to his mind, of land allocation that he wants to contest: not, it should be noted, the legitimacy of Zionist nationalism. The analogy with South Africa proceeds through Karlbach's attachment to Paton's own anachronistic, and pointedly Biblical, poetics. We witness the compact of one liberal with another.

While Karlbach can point to the theft of land, he cannot name the *nakba* (نكبة) – the Palestinian national catastrophe of 1948 – as such. There is a generational consistency here. In his editor's introduction to an anthology of Hebrew poetry representing the *nakba* written between 1948 and 1958 published recently by Zochrot, Hannan Hever points to the manner in which Hebrew poets of the period assimilate the Palestinian historical trauma in a form of premature closure. The *nakba*, where present in

their writing at all, is present more often than not, as indirection, euphemism, circumlocution within the redemptive retrospect of the Zionist narrative. The first-person testimony of Palestinian refugees regarding life in Palestine before 1948, as well as regarding the expulsion and its aftermath, which exists in taut counterpoint in the anthology to the body of poems it collects throws the omissions of the Hebrew literary canon into stark relief. Hever points to a cyclical erasure of memory: a forgetting that preserves the Palestinian past just beneath the skin in the way that Hebrew toponyms preserve Palestinian place-names in barely disguised form in order for the work of forgetting to be orchestrated again and again as an index of Zionist mastery. It is as if in the Hebrew form of the place-name, the Jewish settlers perfect the end result of conquest without wholly severing themselves from the traumatic repression occasioned by this very conquest.

Where the term “apartheid” brushes against the grain of the Hebrew language which hosts – and is unsettled – by it, its use exceeds the seductions of a purely gestural politics. To invoke “apartheid” as signifier is to render certain signifieds especially salient. Saree Makdisi has enumerated some of them for us, as has Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel who uses the notion of a “creeping apartheid” to focus on Israeli policy within the Green line as an “undeclared” political order that is continuing to entrench differential citizenship under its sovereignty. Hanan Hever and Yehouda Shenhav have pointed to the potential gains, viewed from the perspective of knowledge production and, implicitly, political agency, that might result from viewing the Occupation through the optic of “colonialism”.

Adi Ophir and Ariella Azoulay, for their part, in a crucial recent Hebrew-language volume on the Occupation mobilize the idea of a “regime that is not one” – there is a studied allusion to feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray here – to stress that the governance of the Occupied Palestinian Territories has become integral to the Israeli regime itself. The Occupation, they claim, while historically contingent, should no longer be thought of as extraneous. On the contrary, the bifurcation of the Israeli regime between two forms – the rule of law together with limited ethnic discrimination on the one side of the Green line, and military occupation together with the rigid ethnic stratification of space on the other – itself comes to characterize the consistency of a regime committed neither to permanent annexation of, nor to withdrawal from, the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In providing a new conceptual language with which to think about the Israeli state, Ophir and Azoulay join other dissident Israeli intellectuals in delineating the anatomy of “racism without racism” in David Theo Goldberg’s sense. The mobilization of “apartheid” intersects this trajectory, but other options exist.

[What political consequences, what visions of solidarity among ... “the governed” might arise were the term \*nakba\* to have currency ... for Jewish citizens of the state more generally?](#)

What political consequences, what visions of solidarity among the category Ariella Azoulay terms “the governed” might arise were the term *nakba* to have currency, not only for anti-Occupation activists in (what remains of) the Israeli left but for Jewish citizens of the state more generally? In her recent

work on *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay re-writes “the political” as the sphere of relations between “the governed”, whether they are bearers of the privilege of citizenship or not. In the model that she proposes, cultural analysis (of photographic archives depicting the ongoing Occupation of Palestine, for example) can be liberated from the structural determinants of “politics” constrained by notions of sovereignty that have coalesced in the collective fictions of the putatively democratic nation-state. The nation-state, she argues, brings bonds of identification between the citizen and the state into being through a variety of ideological means causing citizens to forget that they are: “first and foremost, *governed* .... This, then, allows the state to divide the governed – partitioning off noncitizens from citizens – and to mobilize the privileged citizens against other groups of ruled subjects. An emphasis on the dimension of being governed allows a rethinking of the political sphere as a space of relations between the governed, whose political duty is first and foremost a duty toward one another, rather than toward the ruling power”. It is just such a disposition towards “political duty” that I take to underlie the interventions of the organization Zochrot, to which I have already alluded.

Zochrot exists to narrate the *nakba* in Hebrew in an effort to contest the linguistic and ideological erasure of Palestinian life and to create a basis for a different political configuration. It organizes tours led by Palestinian refugees to destroyed villages, or to mixed cities having large pre-1948 Palestinian populations, during the course of which signs commemorating Arabic street names erased from public space after the establishment of the State of Israel are posted in an effort to reference the oc-

cluded histories of these places – including histories of co-existence. The organization is committed to teaching the history and geography of the *nakba* and to translating relevant material into Hebrew. It undertakes advocacy projects, organizes demonstrations, and participates in the activities of refugee organizations. The Zochrot Learning Centre in Tel Aviv houses an art gallery which has staged important interventions, including Ariella Azoulay’s crucial exhibitions *Constituent Violence 1947-1950* and *Architecture of Destruction*.

Zochrot exist to narrate the *nakba* in Hebrew in an effort to contest the linguistic and ideological erasure of Palestinian life and to create a basis for a different political configuration.

The gallery exists alongside a Hebrew-language publication *Sedek* (סדק), a word which literally means crack or fissure, but which evokes a not-quite homophone, צדק [tzedek] – that is to say, justice. Both gallery and publication seek to stage work and analysis “produced on and as a consequence of the Nakba” and to open a “critical, civic discussion” rooted in the category of place and the relationships woven around it in the formulation of curator-activist, Norma Musih (<http://www.zochrot.org/index.php?id=585>). The linguistic subversion present as a willed *différance* in the title of the journal *Sedek* is played out in the very name of the organization itself. Zochrot (זוכרות) is the feminine plural form of the verb to remember – an imperative which is routinely associated with the Holocaust for Jewish Israelis, as activist and Holocaust scholar Amos Goldberg recently pointed out to me. The adoption of the feminine form challenges the normative pre-

scriptions of Hebrew grammar, and with it the masculinist, often also explicitly militarist, dimensions of gendered public space in Jewish Israeli culture – a dimension of its activity that brings it into alliance with the social and epistemological challenges posed by the exemplary radical women’s organization Machsom Watch/Checkpoint Watch.

In its resolute production of discourse, in Hebrew, but also in Arabic and in English, Zochrot stages an ongoing allegorical performance of a differently inflected Israeli identity – to the extent that allegory means, literally, to speak otherwise (from the Greek *allos*, other, and *agoreuein*, to speak). “I almost forgot”, says the male speaker in the advertising poster altered by Zochrot activists as a provocation or aide-mémoire on Independence Day/Nakba Day 2008. “I almost forgot”, he voices through the addition of the Zochrot balloon caption, “that the Palestinian refugees did not always live in refugee camps”.



Used with permission. For the full intervention, see the Zochrot web-site: <http://www.nakbainhebrew.org/index.php?id=418>.

The increasing diffusion of the term “*nakba*” (נכבה) in Hebrew, untranslated but transliterated, *nun, chaf, bet, hey*, suggest that the politics of solidarity with the Palestinian cause has resources that exceed separatism, or the entitlement of a mere standing apart.