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Framing Visual Politics: Photography of the Wall in Palestine

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Photography of the Wall in Palestine is a site of visual and political struggle. Through conversations with Palestinian and Israeli photographers, I shed light on the visual and national anxiety that photography of the Palestinian landscape produces in the shadow of the Wall's construction. Building on Gil Hochberg's conceptualization of visual politics, through which the Israeli state dominates the visual field, I argue that the significance of Israeli photographers' work lies in visualizing what is made invisible by the state. For Palestinians, the significance of their photography of the landscape lies in resisting the visual politics dictated by the Israeli regime. I conclude by offering questions about the role of photography in subverting visual politics in Palestine and Israel. [Israeli state, landscape, Palestine, photography, visual politics, wall]

> We are saying, what I have heard Edward Said say so many times, that politics must engage in complex dialectical negotiations with questions of form, affect, and sensibility, with cultural formations. We are called upon, in short, to think of Palestine as a work of landscape art in progress, to ask what vision of this land can be imagined, what geographical poetry can be recited over it, to heal, repair, unite, understand, and commemorate this place.
>
> W.J.T. Mitchell, "Landscape and Idolatry: Territory and Terror".

Introduction

Since its construction in 2003, the Israeli Separation Wall in Palestine, or the Wall as I refer to it here, has caught the attention of many Palestinian, Israeli, and international photographers.[1] The Wall stars in much of the past thirteen years of visual representation of life in the occupied Palestinian territories. Its representations have been produced and reproduced by both local and international activists, artists, academics, and journalists. In this article, I argue that the Wall is a structure that embodies Israelis' national anxiety, expressed through keeping Palestinians out of spaces, as well as a visual anxiety, shown by the dilemma of photographic framing. I claim that for Israeli photographers, the Wall is a monument that embodies a national anxiety. For Palestinian photographers, the Wall not only transforms their material landscape but also reflects an anxiety of representation, in which presenting the Wall in photography has the potential to reinforce its presence on the Palestinian visual landscape.[2]

The Wall in Palestine reflects a consolidation of existing visual dynamics under colonization. Gil Hochberg (2015) has argued that the unequal distribution of visual rights signifies Palestinian-Israeli relations. Palestinians' presence and traces on the land are continuously being erased by the Israeli state, while their lives and movements are constantly being watched and surveilled (Hochberg 2015). The Israeli state holds the power to rearrange the spatial and visual domain of the population it occupies. This is a process that Hochberg refers to as "visual politics," in which Palestinians are at a representational disadvantage vis-à-vis the Israeli state. Building on Gil Hochberg's conceptualization of the visual politics in Palestine and Israel, I suggest that Palestinian and Israeli photography of the Wall must be read within such visual politics and ask if photography can contest colonial visual regimes.

In this article, I discuss and analyze conversations with four photographers, two Palestinian, Mohamed Badarne and Yazan Khalili, and two Israeli, Miki Kratsman and Keren Manor, all of whom have explored the Wall in their photography as a tool of political engagement with anti-occupation activism. I also draw on my conversation with Israeli curator, filmmaker, and scholar Ariella Azoulay. I center the discussion on

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the significant photographic work of Palestinian Yazan Khalili, who, like Mohamed Badarne, refuses to represent a replica of the Wall in a visual gesture. I argue that both Mohamed's and Yazan's use of photography of the Palestinian landscape demonstrates an understanding of Israeli visual political context and illustrates what Arjun Appadurai described as "visual decolonization" (Appadurai 1997). By "visual decolonization," Appadurai addressed the use of backdrop photography in the postcolonial world, mostly among middle classes, as an act of self-fashioning and imagining of the nation away from the enforced colonial subjectivities (1997, 5-6). Building on Appadurai's "visual decolonization" and the significance that he attributed to the efforts of imagination required in the work of "decolonization," I argue that the framework of visual decolonization, explicitly manifested in Yazan Khalili's photography of the Palestinian landscape, is a political task that necessitates a sensitive reading of the colonial politics that dominates the visual field.

This article is a product of fieldwork in Palestine in 2012, during which I interviewed Palestinian and Israeli photographers who photographed the Wall in artistic or journalistic form. I also interviewed Palestinians whose lives were affected by the Wall's construction and Israeli activists against the Israeli military occupation. My research goal was to examine the ways in which photographs in Palestine and Israel are sites on which political struggles take place in both overt and subtle forms. Through key Palestinian and Israeli interlocutors, I was introduced to both Palestinian and Israeli photographers whose work specifically addressed political issues like violation of human rights in Palestine, racism against African refugees in Israel, or gendered violence. Photography and artistic visual expression are an immediate medium of engagement through which my interlocutors articulated political statements or established personal relations to the lands or landscapes around them. Using our conversations, I reveal one layer of the Wall's story, highlighting the dynamics between its materiality and visual structure in a militarized landscape. It is through their work and words that I present an analysis of this conflicted political and visual reality.

Scholars have claimed that the Palestinian landscape is shrinking in the shadow of the Israeli military occupation and Israeli colonial expansion policy on Palestinian lands (Abu-Lughod, Heacock, and Nashef 1999; Benvenisti 2000; Graham 2002; Hanafi 2009; Mitchell 1999; Shehadeh 2008; Weizman 2007). Through erasing the Palestinian landscape and the replacement of this landscape with Israeli military architecture, like the Wall or the construction of Israeli settlements, a solidification of the process of erasing the Palestinian visual presence from photographic representations of the landscape takes place as well. Within this visual politics of dominance, the work of erasing and absenting, and the visual engagements with the vanishing landscape in Palestine, make political reclamation significant. I investigate the Palestinian landscape and its representations in photographs as politicized sites of visual struggle in order to ask: How does the Israeli-constructed Wall generate a visual dilemma for photographers? And, how can we imagine the work of visually subverting colonial relations?

In *Visual Occupations,* Gil Hochberg (2015) offers an elaborate investigation of the forms of visual dynamics and politics at play in Palestine-Israel. Hochberg explores Israel's dominance in dictating the visual politics of the landscape. She takes the Wall as one example that demonstrates this visual dominance. The Wall is among many Israeli architectural structures in the occupied Palestinian territories that gradually renders Palestinians invisible to the Israeli eye (Hochberg 2015, 18). However, as a tool for removing Palestinians from the landscape, the Wall is a structure whose visual appearance is intentionally made invisible to Israelis, as it is built away from their cities and inside Palestinian urban spaces. This mechanism, she argues, is aimed at further concealing the very act of invisibility itself (Hochberg 2015, 18-21). As Israeli military violence is efficiently concealed from Israeli citizens' eyes, representing the Wall to an Israeli audience becomes a politicized act. In exposing these visual politics, the Wall, I argue, is understood as a structure that embodies Israel's visual anxiety, which is manifested through Israelis' desire to belong to a nation without witnessing the violence required to become that nation. For Palestinians, however, photographs of the Wall do not simply project the visual politics of the colonized landscape but also suggest ways to resist the dominant visual politics dictated by the Israeli regime.

The Political Frames of the Wall in a Photograph

Photographs are not merely representational; they are political gestures in which events are inscribed and

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archived. Here, my conceptualization of photographs is inspired by the writings of curator, filmmaker, and scholar Ariella Azoulay and anthropologist Christopher Pinney. Azoulay argues that a photograph "bears the seal of the event itself" (Azoulay 2008, 300). Deconstructing and reconstructing the events in a photograph requires that we perform a thorough reading of the photograph and the context within which it is framed. Azoulay invites us to "stop looking at the photograph and instead start watching it" (2008, 14), inscribing a temporal and spatial dimension onto our reading and interpretation of the photographic image. I take up Azoulay's invitation in this research, asking my readers to watch the photographs and to ask not only what photographs show, but also what they can do (Pinney 2004). What is meaningful about the photograph is not simply what is seen or what is captured by the camera lens; it is also what is made significant politically. Hence, I focus on the relationships my interlocutors develop with the landscape through making photographs as an act of political encounter.

Engaging with the political frame of the photograph as the condition and consequence of an encounter situates it in the larger sociopolitical context that produces it, and identifies the political statements the photograph projects. Azoulay (2011, 11) suggests a useful characterization of the photographic encounter: "[A] photograph is the product of an encounter of several protagonists, mainly photographer and photographed, camera and spectator." Understanding the photograph as such, she argues, enables a more sincere discussion of photographs removed from the dichotomy of "inside and outside": the dichotomy of viewed/viewer, or the dichotomy between what lies inside and what lies outside the frame of the photograph. Stated differently, Azoulay asks what is left out when the subject of the photographed is viewed (2011). Referring explicitly to photography of Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation, she argues that the aforementioned dichotomies between "inside" and "outside" have enabled the hegemonic viewing of the "disasters that befall others as if the disasters that struck 'them' were a (political) trait of theirs, as though they had not been governed alongside the viewers of their photographic images" (2011, 11). Hence, the viewer's political relationship to the photograph and the photographed subjects is projected onto the reading that the viewer produces of the photograph.

Challenging Narratives of the Wall's Photography

My conversation with Mohamed Badarne, a Palestinian photographer who is an Israeli citizen, revealed how his understandings of the photographic event echo those of Azoulay. For Mohamed, the Wall is not an object that could stand on its own or out of context.[3] Our conversation was eye-opening, leaving me with more questions than answers about the position of the Wall in photographs and photographers' intentions in capturing the Wall. I was introduced to Mohamed through a common friend in Nazareth, where he was working in a youth project for a nongovernmental organization. Having an Israeli identity card enables him to cross Israeli military checkpoints without obtaining military permits, unlike Palestinians with Palestinian identity cards who are required to apply for Israeli permits. He lives near Nazareth, far from any daily interaction with the Wall.

In the past, Mohamed had photographed the Wall, but he never displayed the photographs in an exhibition or published them. His photographic projects often centered on people's stories, like "Come Back Safely" on Palestinian workers who cross the checkpoints daily to work in Israeli cities, or "Unrecognized Games" on the Palestinian Bedouin children living in unrecognized villages resisting Israel's displacement policies.[4] He told me that most photographic exhibitions about the Wall he attended lacked vision and that he would rather imagine a work of photography of the Wall that is away from the Wall's visual and physical structure and instead centers on stories of people's lives that were shattered by the Wall. Like other Israeli and Palestinian photographers I talked to, for Mohamed the Wall is not only a canvas or a board on which stories rest, waiting to be told. Rather, the Wall is a structure that is fixed neither in space nor in time.

A photograph of the Wall, Mohamed repeatedly said, should tell us the stories of those whom the Wall continuously renders physically and politically invisible. To do so, he insisted, the key is time: one should photograph a tree next to the Wall through a long period of time. This will visually demonstrate how, gradually, the tree dies from floods in the winter because the Wall blocks the drainage of rainwater and how in summer it suffers from lack of water and care because the Wall blocks the movement of people. Mohamed explained his reflections on the details that are found in proximity to the Wall but are missing in most of the photographic depictions he saw:

> When I started photographing, I mainly took pictures of visible structures, like the Wall. After a while, I stopped. There were numerous projects about the Wall and most of them were photographs of the Wall in a one-on-one setting: the

> photographer versus an object. In this type of photography, the details get lost....The Wall is photographed like an object or a background, as if there is a statement that we always are obliged to say: "the Wall is there"....If I wanted to photograph the Wall, I would pay attention to details through a long period of time, and I would also follow stories of people who are affected by the Wall.

An encounter with the Wall, according to him, should not be captured only with a confrontational photographic gesture; it can also be theatrical or mediated through narratives. Otherwise, details of the Wall are lost. The Wall is not only a material object that functions as a barrier, he said, but also a structure that holds stories of lives caught next to it; it has a capacity to contain social details inscribed into its structure by people who live near and through it. He added that not many people are interested in the narratives and stories that the Wall generates. He argued that Palestinian photography is often centered on events and not on narratives, saying, "We have events that make up the photographs, but we rarely have photographic vision with political implications." A photographic project with "political implications" offers abstract and material relations with the Wall's present and future:

> We [Palestinians] have events, violent confrontations, we have amazing valuable photographs of these events; but there are not many exhibitions with real political photographic vision that are related to cultural, social, or political implications.... There are thousands of images of the Wall, but almost none of them closely follow the stories of those who are left behind the Wall. The question I ask here is how to turn the Wall into a cause, into a visual and visible cause.

What Mohamed suggests here is a watchful engagement with the political frame of the photograph that relies on the premise of watching the stories that photography narrates. For him, capturing the Wall in a photographic frame is one thing, but narrating a story that the Wall tells through photographs is a different kind of political work, which, he argues, many Palestinian photographers overlook. The importance of the latter, according to Mohamed, is twofold: firstly, to avoid the danger of presenting the Wall as a beautiful structure that is also naturalized as part of the landscape; secondly, to avoid the loss of stories and details that the structure of the Wall increasingly accumulates:

> The Wall now became something that is used as a background on which other objects are displayed....I think when we photograph the Wall we lack the proper research to proceed in photographing it. We should focus on one issue, one detail about the Wall and go deep with it. Like the story of that woman whose laundry never dries because the Wall is blocking the sun.

Mohamed's discomfort with photographs of the Wall lies in the danger of its depoliticized and naturalized visual representations, through which it becomes the material and metaphorical background on which events in Palestine are viewed and framed through. Therefore, in order to generate meaning while avoiding a simplified representation, a photograph of the Wall has to be constructed by daily events in people's lives. A photographic framing of the Wall does not hold a political statement against it; instead, it created a visual anxiety for Mohamed. By "visual anxiety," I refer to the anxiety produced by the potential of hegemonic readings to hinder photographers or viewers from having a political agency when producing or analyzing the photographs. Specifically, I refer to photographers' anxiety in having their work miscommunicated, misread, or misused by viewers who hold hegemonic political views.

When we had our conversation in 2013, Mohamed did not have photographs of the Wall of his own to show because he was anxious about producing uncritical photography of the Wall. Four years later, I followed up with Mohamed to ask if he had eventually photographed the Wall. By then, he had moved to Berlin and I was back in Toronto. We carried out this conversation over the phone. I asked him if he had photographed the Wall since our last conversation. He replied that he had taken only a few photographs of it, and then he said, "I want to show you a photograph that speaks to many issues, like the walls inside us as well as outside of us; it is a photograph that asks the viewer to imagine the story the photograph tells." For Mohamed, this photograph (Figure 1) provides a commentary on how "for us Palestinians we recognize the Wall in any other walls we see, like in noise barrier walls along highways or a wall in a house." He then claimed that in this photograph, one could not see the historical process of the Wall; all that is there is the event of intervention, a hand reaching out from one side to another:

> I took this photo of the Wall in Bethlehem, but for me the location is not important, I would not add it in the caption of the photo because it could be anywhere. There is no sky, no land and no city in this photograph. I think we cannot speak

FIGURE 1. 2014. Mohamed Badarne©. Used with the permission of the photographer.

> of physical geography anymore, but perhaps we are living in a reality that is beyond geography, this is why I am speaking from a position out of place. For Palestinians, any wall, like a symbolic wall between you and me, or the remains of the Berlin Wall, reminds us of the separation Wall.

Mohamed's Wall photograph represents an abstraction of the Wall. He deliberately chose not to capture an identifier for this fragment of the Wall, such as the posters or graffiti that covers it. It is also a photograph that invites viewers to watch it as the questions it presents catalyze the unfolding of stories in their imaginations. Is this hand reaching out to the Palestinian side of the Wall or to the annexed Israeli side? Are we watching a hand awaiting an ordinary exchange of goods or perhaps a hand that greets someone on the other side? Or are we watching a gesture of resistance against the Wall?

The viewer of this photograph is required to reflect upon his or her position in relationship to the photograph and imagine a narrative that this reaching hand is relating. There is a sense of dislocation or disorientation in a context where locations are excessively marked along ethnic, national, or political lines. While the Wall, as a political and a military structure, was set up to delineate geopolitical and visual boundaries of Israelis and Palestinians, Mohamed's photograph asks the viewers to challenge the hegemonic gaze that views the Wall as a dividing structure between two sides or two nations.

The Photograph as a Sentence

Mohamed's reading of the visual politics that the Wall generates is not only about the act of erasing Palestinians or the Wall from the Israeli visual and discursive field; it also addresses uncritical representations of the Wall that fail to challenge these visual politics. For Israeli photographer Miki Kratsman, the challenge of this visual task is different. As an Israeli, Miki argues that the Wall, the consequences of which are often ignored in the Israeli mainstream media, carries a strong political statement when presented in a photograph. I met Miki Kratsman during my research in June 2012. I decided to speak to Miki after searching for Israeli photographers whose work was critical of the Israeli military occupation. Miki is a prominent Israeli photographer whose work richly visualizes the Israeli occupation of Palestine. He was one of the few Israeli photographers who disseminated and published photographs of the first Intifada to Israeli mainstream media. We met in his office in Bezalel Academy for Art and Design in Jerusalem. From his east-facing office window, one can clearly see Palestinian towns and the Wall cutting through inhabited areas.

Miki told me that when he first saw the Wall in Jerusalem in 2003, his reaction was that this "Wall [was] so beautiful, it [was] too beautiful"; this is why from a photographer's perspective, he continued, "the Wall is very problematic." He then described in what ways the Wall inscribes a strong *textual* statement on the landscape (Figure 2):

> [The Wall's] architecture...how it moves and shifts...is a hysterical statue. Yet, it is difficult to photograph it because it is too textual. It is a symbol, it is a super symbol; it reflects a lot, to a point that you always lose when you photograph it, because it is always stronger than you. In fact, it does not leave you space for thinking. It is very difficult to leave a space for thinking or a space for a liminal interpretation. There is only one option and one only. It is for that reason that some photographers cease photographing it.

Miki's description of the Wall as "too textual" connotes a similar statement articulated by Ariella Azoulay, who claimed in my June 2012 interview with her that "a photograph is *a sentence*." For Miki, a photograph of the Wall is not a sentence that is open for many rereadings: it is a limiting sentence, one that has very limited space for interpretation. This is the reason, Miki added, that photographers who support the political ideology behind the Wall are reluctant to photograph it, because a photograph of the Wall is always equivalent to a political statement against it. Miki's account attributes a strong agency to the photograph of the Wall and to the Wall itself as a visual structure, which resonates

FIGURE 2. The Wall in Abu Dis, Jerusalem, 2003. Miki Kratsman©. Used with the permission of the photographer. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

with Azoulay's statement articulated during my interview with her that "no photograph stands outside ideology," or the framework through which photographs can be read.

"When taking a photograph of the Wall, one writes a clear statement." Miki repeated this sentence many times during the interview. When I asked him to explain the meaning of this statement, he replied, "it is closure, apartheid, evil and occupation." A photograph of the Wall makes the viewer helpless; it does not leave a space for reflection, he continued. "I have taken many photos of the Wall, but now I stopped photographing it; I am not capable of taking it out of its context; it is winning over me. It is stronger than me." For Miki as an Israeli photographer, encounters with the Wall—whether directly or via a photograph—are encounters preempted by defeat and a kind of reversal in relations, where the yet-to-be-made photograph overpowers the photographer.

Since my first encounters with photographers, mention of the name "Activestills" would recur in many conversations. It was suggested that I talk with members of the Israeli Activestills group. I contacted them through their website and received a reply from Keren Manor.[5] A month later, in August 2012, I met with Keren in a café in Tel Aviv where she lives. Like many Israelis, Keren does not encounter the Wall often. To see the nearest section of the Wall, she needs to drive approximately thirty minutes to the east. Keren described Activestills as a collective of primarily Israeli activist photographers who started working together in 2005. The members of the collective met during the weekly demonstrations against the Wall in Bili'n, a village in the West Bank near Ramallah. What made the consolidation of the group possible, she told me, were two interests shared by the four photographers who initially formed the core of Activestills. The first common interest was that each of the photographers was a political activist and an active protestor against the Wall and the occupation; the second shared interest was that each of them was already building their own photographic archive of protests against state oppression in Palestine and inside Israel. "Many of the photographers I know, including me, felt that we go to participate in demonstrations in the West Bank, but we do not do anything with the material collected, especially because we cannot publish this in any Israeli mainstream media or any institutional media," Keren explained (Figure 3). She also added that creating a platform for people to see what the mainstream media concealed from their sight was an urge shared by some photographers she knew.

Keren, like Miki Kratsman, claimed that photographs are powerful; they hold a power to affect people's consciousness and raise awareness about social and political issues. Like other photographers I talked with, Keren and Miki related to their engagements with the Wall as an affective encounter, described through its power to transmit emotions. They claim the moment of encountering the Wall is a communicative moment: there is a lot to see, capture, and articulate. Keren talked about the wall as a "photogenic" structure (see Figure 3), explaining:

> When I go to take photographs of the landscape and I see the Wall, I do not deliberately aim at photographing the Wall so much. I feel that the Wall is already widely photographed. It seems like the Wall has become this banal object to be photographed. There are so many images of the Wall; the Wall has become the *prostitute of photogra-*

FIGURE 3. The Wall in Anata, 2006. Keren Manor/Activestills©. Used with the permission of the photographer. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

> *phy*. Here it is again, another photograph of the Wall, but we saw this already. My feeling is that it is easy to take photographs of the Wall. The Wall is very *photogenic*. It is even perfect for photographers; its grey shade can be used for measuring or fixing camera light.

Here, Keren articulated one of the strongest imageries of the Wall as a photographic scene. Describing the Wall as "photogenic" or, utilizing a patriarchal lexicon, as "the prostitute of photography," Keren shed light on how the Wall is made and remade as an effeminate site of attraction for politicized photographers, and a structure that a priori projects a repetitive imagery of itself. As some photographers with whom I talked articulated, the Wall's power stems from its ability to trigger emotions. Photographs of the Wall, for Keren, represent truths that are not debatable, or constitute non-negotiable sentences, as Miki suggested. Many people whom I talked with during this research expressed fear that the Wall, its presence, its political and psychological effects on people, on the land, and on the landscape are everlasting. A photograph of the Wall, Keren stated, is a photograph that has always already been seen. This is because it is, in Keren's words, "in your face" and very easy to capture in a frame or to replicate. The Wall, she emphasized, "simplifies everything to one clear image." It leaves no space for complication or conflicting connotations, she said, echoing Miki's observation. The situation on the ground is very complicated and politically layered, she added. However, the Wall, she insisted, "has only one dimension, I do not know how to explain it." Keren's difficulty in articulating the "one- dimensional" aspect of the Wall suggests that the interpretive meaning of the Wall was so socially and politically embedded in its material form that the structure itself could only be interpreted in one way. It became an example of a military architecture that embodies what Eyal Weizman has described as the "vertical politics of separation" (2007, 15).

Subverting Visual Politics

The Wall preoccupies many Palestinian photographers. While for Israeli photographers like Miki Kratsman and Keren Manor a photograph of the Wall represents the politics of national and visual separation, for Yazan Khalili the Wall is first and foremost a structure that projects an aesthetics of destruction that infiltrates Palestinians' sight on a daily basis. This is illustrated through Yazan's photographic work about the Palestinian landscape, which reflects a sense of representational anxiety. In his project *On Love and Other Landscapes* (2011), Yazan Khalili narrates a story of absence and longing for a disappearing sight by retelling a story of love and loss.[6] Published as a book, this work depicts photographs exchanged with the artist's previous lover at the end of their relationship. Yazan brought a copy to show me during an interview I carried out with him in a café in Ramallah. "If you look at this work," he said, "you do not see the Wall." He told me that although he had photographed the Wall in other visual projects, in *On Love and Other Landscapes* (Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7) he articulates his hesitations about confronting the material structure of the Wall outside the photographic frame. He insisted that the moment when the photographer encounters the Wall is a charged moment. He said: "I ask, as a photographer, where is my role, my political role to refuse to work with the Wall...or to refuse to deal with it as an item of representation? Is it impossible for me not to photograph it, or, to pass in the landscape and not see it."

Yazan lives in Ramallah, and his movement between different Palestinian cities in the West Bank or inside Israel is contingent on obtaining Israeli military permits. Of all the people I interviewed who are portrayed in this article, the Wall affects Yazan's life, mobility, and landscape the most. Yazan's photographic work spoke strongly about the predicaments of capturing the landscape of military occupation. Our conversation, held in November 2012, centered on the politics of Palestinian photographic replication of the Wall. I later realized that what Yazan was capturing in his photographs was precisely the landscape that remains in the shadow of an ongoing destruction of the Palestinian landscape.

FIGURE 4. *On Love and Other Landscapes*, 2011. Book, 91 pages, size 46 × 32 cm. Yazan Khalili©. Used with the permission of the photographer. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

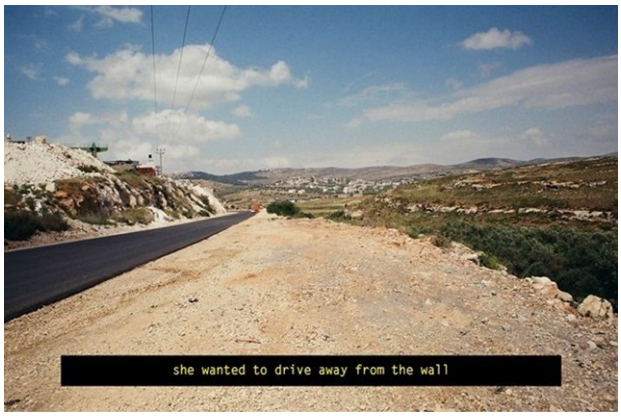

FIGURE 5. *On Love and Other Landscapes*, 2011. Book, 91 pages, size 46 × 32 cm. Yazan Khalili©. Used with the permission of the photographer. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

FIGURE 6. *On Love and Other Landscapes*, 2011. Book, 91 pages, size 46 × 32 cm. Yazan Khalili©. Used with the permission of the photographer. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

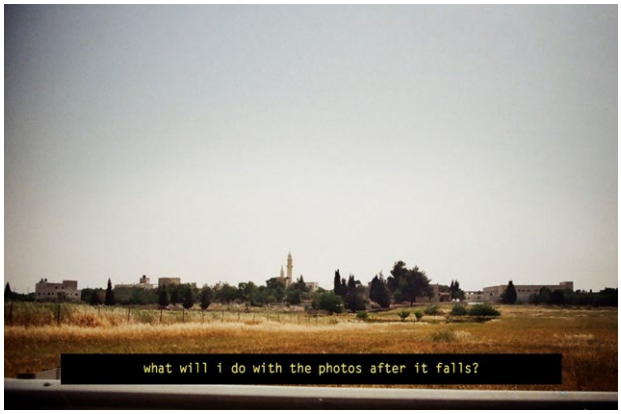

FIGURE 7. *On Love and Other Landscapes*, 2011. Book, 91 pages, size 46 × 32 cm. Yazan Khalili©. Used with the permission of the photographer. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

The Wall is not absent in Yazan's work; rather, it is present through the textual narration captioning each photograph. As a result, one reads the book with anticipation of an encounter with the Wall in the photographic frame, but such an encounter never takes place. A photo book of a "Wall-less" landscape of Palestine defies the purpose of the material presence of the Wall on the landscape—the very essence of its erection, which is to be constantly *encountered* and *seen* by those who are affected by its presence in their spaces. Yazan told me that one of his concerns in working with photographs of the Wall is to attempt to shift Palestinians' gaze inward, toward themselves, in a way that removes the catastrophe from their self-representation and self-identification. Thus, I argue that Yazan's work illustrates best what Hochberg (2015, 7) calls challenging the visual regime, as his work is built on the premise of identifying and contesting the visual politics in which Palestinians are at a representational disadvantage vis-à-vis the Israeli state.

For Yazan, the Wall left Palestinians to deal with the visual dilemma of representation and identification. "Can we resist the Wall by photographing it, or should we resist the photograph framing it?" he asks. To understand this conundrum, Yazan explained to me how the Wall is "our photographed tragedy":

> Israel's imposed Wall became ours, like a symbol of our tragedy and catastrophe. The Wall became us, and we then became our tragedy. The problem with oppression is not only that the Wall *is* in the landscape, but also that the landscape itself *becomes* the Wall....I do not want to engage with the Wall, but it still comes back at us....The Wall comes back and we are almost obliged to reaffirm its existence....The Wall is rendered a Palestinian object. It becomes a Palestinian aesthetics, like the destruction of Gaza, it became *our* aesthetics, aesthetics of destruction....Reaching some kind of solution should not be through the reaffirmation but the complete erasure of the Wall.

Yazan's efforts to produce a photographic collection of the landscape in Palestine without the Wall require an imagination of oneself and a self-fashioning that defies Israel's visual dominance that constructs a defeated and tragic image of Palestinians. Yazan's photographic work, thus, can be described as "visual decolonization," following Appadurai (1997), which primarily rests on the postcolonized subject's agency in countering an internalized colonial self-image.

The Wall remains a source of anxiety for Yazan: "I was afraid that the image of the Wall would turn into an event itself," he told me. His fear was that the

Wall "becomes the occupation and all there is to capture of the Israeli occupation, instead of shifting the gaze towards the infrastructures that produced it." His concerns shed light on the failures of the work of representation in achieving resistance to Israeli visual dominance, namely, those representations in which the Wall was made into a synecdoche or a metonym of the occupation. Instead, one should see the Wall as one brick in the structure of occupation that was later symbolically replaced by this whole structure. Ultimately, what I describe here are Yazan's efforts to subvert and challenge the colonial politics of landscape representation in Palestine.

Yazan's work with the Palestinian landscape amplifies the Wall's presence through the force of its absence, and through the potential of photography to absent it. Put differently, through Yazan's photographs, a Wall-less landscape of Palestine offers a rereading of the past, and a contemporary reading of the present reality that establishes new forms of relating to the landscape that could envision and encompass a possibility for the destruction of the Wall. Yazan's work is a response to hegemonic, uncritical representations of the Palestinian landscape. For him, entertaining absence and presence in the art of representation of the Wall promotes a removal of the Wall from Palestinian imaginary landscapes and identifications. Therefore, in his work, the Wall is included in the Palestinian landscape through the premise of its exclusion, which acts to reverse the effects of the Wall's exclusionary force on the lands and landscape; or, articulated differently, to destabilize the Wall's force in the process of visual destruction of the Palestinian landscape. I refer to this task as working within the framework of "potential visuality," which builds on Azoulay's conceptualization of "potential history" in the work of photography (2011, 2013).

Azoulay argues that photographs are a reliable source for narrating the past and imagining a potential history. She introduces the concept of "potential history" in the context of photography prior to 1948. Through this idea, she offers possible readings that photographs produce, mainly in an attempt to re-narrate the past in a way that allows for a critique of the present. Potential history, for Azoulay, is a framework and a tool that enables us to see "new forms of relations as a real possibility" (2013, 572). Reflecting on Azoulay's attribution of potentiality to photography, it is significant that Palestinian photographers with whom I spoke did not often offer a reading of "potential history." Instead, they suggested a reading of the present with reverse projection into the past and future. It is instead a framework of "potential visuality," which calls for a refusal to engage with representations without projecting, through photography, political statements onto the present or future conditions in the shadow of visual dominance of the state. This framework recognizes the visual politics at play in making and reading photography. In other words, the moment the Wall infiltrates photographs of the Palestinian landscape, the present can neither be narrated nor represented without juxtaposing it with a rereading of how conditions were different prior to the Wall or how they will be different in the future.

Conclusion

My conversations with these four photographers, Israeli and Palestinian, illuminate the visual anxieties that are projected onto the Wall. Despite its widespread representation in photography, the Wall is a convoluted structure that frustrates many photographers. The visual field, which includes ways of seeing the landscape and the work of photographic production, in the context of a military occupation is a site of struggle over what remains, both in landscapes and imaginations of a possible, viable future.

As my interviews demonstrate, photographs of the Wall, as described by Israeli photographers Miki Kratsman and Keren Manor, cultivated a singular, fixed, and simplified story about the complex geopolitical context in Palestine-Israel. For them, photographs of the Wall capture the regime of separation and military occupation, thereby narrowing readers' ability to construct a different interpretation. My conversations with Palestinian photographers disclosed that, under a state of military occupation in which the landscape is militarized and colonized, they were faced with a dilemma. Since much of their landscape is blanketed with military structures, the Palestinian photographers, Yazan Khalili and Mohamed Badarne, were never at ease with capturing the Wall in photographs without insisting on projecting a political reading of the tragedy it created. Their work speaks volumes about, and redirects the focus to, the centrality of the political relations people continuously reconstitute with the landscape and with photographs.

Questions that now should be further explored include the following: Can we speak of an emerging form of landscape photography in Palestine that operates as a platform to visual decolonization? How can the work of photography subvert the colonial or hegemonic visual politics? These questions invite us to embark on the anthropological task of further interrogating the processes of production and consumption

of photography in locations where photography is utilized as force of legal, political, or cultural domination and colonization. Today, the route of the Wall in Palestine is a site for protests against the Israeli occupation, and the Wall's gray bricks are canvases on which Palestinians write political statements and draw anti-occupation graffiti. Photography of the Wall has played a strong role in documenting these protests; however, it is through a critical reading of the visual politics of the Wall, as well as the photographers' positionality in relation to these politics, that this form of photography has the potential to move beyond a representational role and begin a process of visual decolonization.

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Notes

[1] By capitalizing the first letter of the word, I intend to signify the singularity of the experience that the Wall has produced in me and many people to whom I have spoken.

[2] In representing the works and words of Palestinians and Israelis, I am aware of the positioning of my interlocutors in this settler colonial context. My stand here views Palestinians as colonized and Israel as colonizer (El Sakka and Hilal 2015; Masalha 2012; Salamanca et al. 2012). Having said that, representing narratives of both Palestinian and Israeli interlocutors can be interpreted as an attempt to produce two equal sides of the story. My intention is not to reproduce such scholarly writing, but rather to highlight the politics of visual struggles in a colonial setting.

[3] Interview conducted in Haifa in April 2012.

[4] Mohamed Badarne's website: http://www.mbadarne.com/, accessed November 23, 2016.

[5] Activestills website: http://www.activestills.org/, accessed March 10, 2014.

[6] http://www.yazankhalili.com/index.php/project/on-love-and-other-landscapes/, accessed November 6, 2016.

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