Passports and Palestine: Talismans of Transnational Trauma

For submission to the CARFMS Undergraduate Essay Contest

March 31, 2025

Abstract

This paper explores the Palestinian passport as a talisman of trauma, entangled in bureaucratic violence and historical erasure. Drawing on theories of trauma's latency and manifestations of trauma through spectral and material forms, I examine how the passport functions as both a conduit of dispossession and a site for resistance. Through close readings of Mays Kuhail's *You Don't Have to Look Up Every Time*, Mahmoud Darwish's *Passport*, and Saeed Teebi's *Her First Palestinian*, I highlight how Palestinian literature reclaims the passport from an instrument of surveillance into a symbolic artefact of nationhood. I also consider Ren Allathkani's *Passport of Witness* as a spectral reimagining of the passport, summoning historical absences into the present. Ultimately, I argue that Palestinian narratives appropriate and subvert the passport to challenge Israeli settler-colonial control and affirm an enduring Palestinian identity.

Introduction

Concerns of undocumented immigrants pervade contemporary international politics. The expression has become the shorthand of those who grieve an imagined version of America, the scapegoat of contumely campaigns to make the nation 'great again.' Recognizing the absurdity of these campaigns—built on rhetorics that ignore not only the humanity but sheer contributions of undocumented immigrants to the (inter)national political economy—myriad scholars concerned with human geography, International Relations, and Refugee and Forced Migration Studies have dedicated work to repudiate the anti-immigrant ethos eroding contemporary America. While this work is highly relevant, it frequently fails to address the elephant in the room: the very logics of documentation that support and legitimize migrant precarity, erasure, and oppression. It is often within the confines of a dichotomy expressing individuals as

documented or undocumented that bodies are rendered legal or illegal, legitimate or illegitimate, human or subhuman. In order to address the perpetuation of statelessness for undocumented immigrants and the insidious inequalities that continue to injure, kill and disenfranchise them, disciplines such as Refugee and Forced Migration Studies must actively challenge and subvert the regimes of documentation that platform such harmful discourses as 'the undocumented immigrant.'

Within the context of documentation, I take on one of the most extreme and relevant cases across the past century, exploring the issue of documentation in relation to Palestinians. I specifically address the lack of official documentation vis-à-vis Palestine as an autonomous nation, grappling in particular with passports as the muse of the global citizenship apartheid[1] and accomplice in Palestinian dispossession. Within a particularly precarious and often muted landscape—that is, censorship of dissent to the Israeli settler state and its allies (e.g., the U.S.)—I turn to Palestinian literary texts and art forms as my sites of analysis. Engaging with four bodies of work including Mays Kuhail's *You Don't Have to Look Up Every Time,* Saeed Teebi's *Her First Palestinian,* Ren Allathkani et al.'s *Passport of Witness,* and Mahmoud Darwish's *Passport,* I locate the passport within the broader context of trauma and memory for Palestinians from a transnational perspective. Applying various critical frameworks across the canon of trauma literature, including Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction,* Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters,* and Margaret Hillenbrand's *Negative Exposures*, I conceptualize the ways in which passports are articulated across different media to function not only as travel documents but symbols of forced

[1] Dimitry Vladimirovich Kochenov, Ending the passport apartheid. The alternative to citizenship is no citizenship—A reply, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Volume 18, Issue 4, December 2020, Pages 1525–1530, https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/moaa108

mobility and statelessness, conduits for memory, and sites of both oppression and resistance. Through the examination of passports vis-à-vis creative and literary texts, I engage directly with sites that Palestinians reclaim as 'mediums for our struggle, our frustration, our resistance'[2] and pique the passport as an immediate point of interest for the future of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies. A microcosm for the global documentation regime, the passport in relation to Palestine is a looking glass into the insidious ways that imperial power structures fester and collapse into arbitrary material objects, all within a ploy to deprive individuals from sacred attachments to their lands.

History of the Palestinian Passport

Tracing the history of the Palestinian passport will be our starting point, albeit a confusing one to clearly delineate. Because the passport as we know it today is largely a byproduct of the Great Wars, it is no surprise that the landmark Mandatory Palestine passport (mandatory as in under British Mandate) came to fruition during the Interwar period, between 1925 and 1948. Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the League of Nations had allocated a dual mandate that gave Britain administrative responsibility over both Palestinian inhabitants and international society, although this binary in practice translated to obligation towards (Palestinian) Arabs and (often foreign) Jews, respectively.[3] This dual responsibility was highly troublesome and problematized the effectiveness of the Mandatory Palestine passport. As Lauren Banko articulates in *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship,* the British highly favoured the settlement of foreign Jews

---

[2] Shaban, Leila Haseba. *Passport of Witness*. 2024. Gold foil stamping, Risograph. Booklyn, 2024. *Booklyn*.

[3] Ginat, Avital. "British Mandate for Palestine." 1914-1918-Online (WW1) Encyclopedia, December 7, 2018. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/british-mandate-for-palestine/.

onto Palestinian territories in line with the agenda of transforming Palestine into the 'national Jewish homeland.' The paradox arose not least in the fact that preferential treatment to foreign Jews subverted native Palestinians' claims to citizenship within their own lands, especially for those that were dispersed across the diaspora. Such an absurd configuration was not lost on the Arab population, who fervently addressed the contradictions in the press:

> New Jewish immigrants would receive Palestinian citizenship with few restrictions apart from residence in the country for two years prior to their naturalisation. The Arabic press seized on this point of contention and portrayed it as a glaring example of the unfairness of the British colonial policy of privileging a foreign group over the Arab population of the region.[4]

While the imposition of citizenship laws in Palestine was already problematic by conflicting ideas of nationality and citizenship between the British and Arab Palestinians, the two-year naturalization laws for foreign Jews contradicted legal residency provisions within the West itself —where five years was the standard throughout Europe and America.[5] This is no surprise by the knowledge that the British had collaborated with Zionist leadership to create these provisions.[6] Expanding these contradictions, this configuration is absurd vis-á-vis the fact that in December 1925, Palestinians across the diaspora were refused passports or certificates of nationality, while

---

[4] [1]Lauren Banko, "The Notion of 'Rights' and the Practices of Nationality and Citizenship from the Palestinian Arab Perspective, 1918–1925," in The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918-1947 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 78.

[5] Banko, "The Notion of 'Rights'," 80–81.

[6] Ibid., 80.

"any Jew in the world [was permitted to] acquire Palestinian citizenship rights" through the Citizenship Order-in-Council.[7]

This agenda is highly relevant to the contours of the Palestinian passport under British mandate because it elucidates the arbitrary nature of citizenship and statehood under the logics of empire. The capacities of the Mandatory Palestinian passport between 1925 and 1948 were severely hindered; despite constituting an official passport and substantiating that the holder was a Palestinian citizen (holding a separate nationality from a British national), Palestinian governance and statehood was still treated as abstract. While part of the naturalization process reiterated the oath "I swear that I will be faithful and loyal to the Government of Palestine," lifelong Zionist and attorney general for Mandatory Palestine Norman Bentwich wrote in 1933 that "it is clearly impossible to do liege service to an abstract notion like the Government of Palestine."[8] It is no doubt, however, that rather than possessing an inherent abstract quality, Palestinian self-governance was ravished by neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism under British mandate, and was not in fact an unfathomable notion as Bentwich might have suggested. Foremost, Banko notes that regardless the 1948 Nakba and the continued dismissal of Palestinian nationhood vis-à-vis the passport now (e.g., the Palestinian Authority passport), it remained a fact that "the territory's native Arab population had been constituted as political subjects as well as legal citizens for more than two decades."[9] As Fateh Azzam further notes in "Palestinian (Non)Citizenship,"

---

[7] Ibid., 81–82.

[8] Bentwich, Norman. "Palestine Nationality and the Mandate." *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* 21, no. 4 (1939): 232. https://www.jstor.org/stable/754593.

[9] Banko, "Introduction," 21.

> Palestine is already a state in accordance with both declarative and constitutive theories of statehood definitions, as it does have a broadly defined territory (although still in need of precise, recognized borders), a permanent population in the territory (and outside of it), and a government (albeit not entirely sovereign) with the capacity to enter into international relations and agreements, which it has been doing.[10]

Azzam's article was written in 2019, meaning it is important to frame it within the context of time. First, contours of Azzam's argument were already extrapolated from works published in the same year as Bentwich's article.[11] But what is most important in the time-gap between Bentwich and Azzam's respective articles is the continuum in which official Palestinian governance exists as an abstract concept, especially as demonstrated through the passport. Despite the legitimacy of the Mandatory Palestine passport—most importantly as a corroboration of an individual's citizen status as Palestinian—it lacked substantial influence in the way of a travel document. Today, the closest document to an official Palestinian passport is the Palestinian Authority passport, which, compounded with highly limited transnational authority (e.g., entry into countries sans additional visa requirements) is not an officially recognized passport, but rather a 'travel document.' Here is where the aforementioned continuum becomes significant: even as Palestine has repeatedly proffered the contours of a state since at least 1933, coming into recognition as a state by 146 UN

---

[10] Fateh Azzam, "Palestinian (Non)Citizenship," *The Middle East Journal* 73, no. 4 (2019): 588.

[11] League of Nations, *International Conference of American States*, Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, Dec. 26, 1933, art. I, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20165/v165.pdf.

countries today,[12] its recognition vis-à-vis the passport has arguably deteriorated rather than improved. Since the 1948 Nakba, not only have millions of Palestinians across the diaspora relegated to non-Palestinian forms of identification (e.g., Jordanian and Egyptian citizenship) to escape statelessness, has the Israeli settler state been vested the power to distribute various forms of identification (e.g., blue IDs, green IDs, etc), but the highly contentious Palestinian Authority passport does not achieve the essential function in which the Mandatory Palestinian passport began to encompass—that is, corroborate the citizenship of their bearer as Palestinian citizens.

Where we take off from here is a return to the premise of Lauren Banko's book, to trace the process of 'making citizens.' As Banko asserts, "Such a process involves more than paper decrees that determine a legal status as issued from the imperial centre; instead, making citizens involves practices that are social, political, cultural and symbolic."[13] My take on Banko's premise is not to therefore disregard paper decrees such as the passport. Rather, as the paramount sign of citizenship status[14] and a necessary evil in the context of transnationalism, I am more interested in the point of deviating from paper decrees administered by the empire. Instead, I am concerned with exploring how Palestinians have negotiated statehood and citizenship by

---

[12] "UN Experts Urge All States to Recognise State of Palestine." *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, June 3, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/un-experts-urge-all-states-recognise-state-palestine.

[13] Lauren Banko, "Introduction," in *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918–1947* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 5.

[14] For example, Erdal et al. describe "the materiality of citizenship as manifested through the passport itself." See Marta Bivand Erdal, Elin Martine Doeland, and Ebba Tellander, "How Citizenship Matters (or Not): The Citizenship–Belonging Nexus Explored among Residents in Oslo, Norway," *Citizenship Studies* 22, no. 7 (2018): 712, https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2018.1508415.

appropriation of the passport—in which they might evoke, reimagine, subvert, or destroy the document in tandem with their push for the right to return.

Filtering Trauma and Destroying the Passport

A hallmark of trauma is its latency, where 'traumatic' events are not fully experienced at the time that they occur but are constructed as traumatic and affective through compulsive repetition. The very essence of trauma lies in that it registers as a non-experience, acting as "a haunting or possessive influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition."[15] This latency—per Cathy Caruth's reimagining of the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* ('deferred action')[16]—is integral in understanding how trauma operates in a continuum that collapses linear temporality. Moreover, it is crucial to Dominick LaCapra's formulation of the tendency to act out. Extrapolating from Freudian psychoanalysis to conceptualize two ways of remembering trauma—'acting out' and 'working through'—LaCapra conceives the former as directly related to the repetition compulsion, the proclivity of conflating the present with the past as if being haunted by ghosts.[17] Working through, the process of gaining critical distance from the given problem, is posited as the preferred mechanism of remembering trauma. However, even as LaCapra insists that it is through this mechanism that one becomes "an ethical and political agent,"[18] he acknowledges

---

[15] Anne Whitehead, "Introduction to Part I," in *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 5.

[16] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 6.

[17] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 142–143.

[18] LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, 144.

that avenues of working through are scarce or even eliminated in contemporary thought. With acting out as the dominant tendency, the passport—an object ostensibly meant to enable movement—becomes a paradoxical instrument of trauma. Rather than facilitating freedom, it serves as a perpetual reminder of dispossession, restricting movement and ensuring that Palestinians remain trapped in an inescapable cycle of re-experiencing their displacement.

Mays Kuhail's *You Don't Have to Look Up Every Time* exemplifies the exhausting routine of basic movement within and without Palestine, particularly vis-à-vis the fixity, control, and segregation that accompanies Israel's colour-coded ID system for the Palestinian population. In fact, Kuhail's protagonist experiences the textbook latency of trauma as soon as she escapes the confines of this identification system, when she is finally able to act with the impulse and autonomy that Israeli-issued documentation precludes:

> Post-traumatic stress syndrome shows up for people who've experienced trauma. They often experience it when they've found safety. They regulate. A soldier coming home, survivors of abuse, survivors of natural disasters, a few examples to name. For someone whose safety is outside their home, for someone enduring ongoing trauma, PTSD can show up differently.
>
> Mine shows up when I learn that spontaneity exists. That I can plan to drive to another city the day of. That it doesn't have to be an ordeal. I don't need my green ID and Lina doesn't need her blue ID and we don't need to go on two separate roads to get to the same city.[19]

---

[19] Mays Kuhail, "You Don't Have to Look up Every Time," *So to Speak*, 2023, https://www.sotospeakjournal.org/mays-kuhail.

The narrator describes the latent experience of trauma that arises after she is temporarily freed from the constraints of her Israeli-issued green ID, and Lina from her blue ID. This identification system has drawn sharp comparisons to South African apartheid and Native reservations[20] and is an oppressive way of restricting legitimate Palestinian residents of the West Bank, Gaza, and Israeli territories from crossing into other zones, where "even those fortunate enough to have legitimate residence ID cards still face a permit regime which is even more complex and ruthlessly enforced than the pass system of the apartheid."[21] Hitherto, Lina confirms these documents as forms of surveillance imposed upon them by the Israeli apartheid state: "Knowing them, they'll [...] plaster a red label onto your passport with a star next to the barcode. High security threat."[22] By naming spontaneity as the trigger for her trauma, Kuhail's protagonist criticizes the coloured IDs as direct contraventions to her autonomy, asserting that it is through their abandonment that her and Lina can achieve as unadulterated a task as walking together to reach the same city. By way of subversion, the denouement of the short story pictures the women searching for wallets to hold their IDs, in which they toy with the idea of framing the green and

---

[20] Julie Peteet, "The Work of Comparison: Israel/Palestine and Apartheid," *Anthropological Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2016): 247–81, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43955521.

[21] Jennifer Loewenstein, "Identity and Movement Control in the OPT," *Forced Migration Review*, August 27, 2024.

[22] Kuhail, "You Don't Have to Look up Every Time."

blue documents in orange Spanish leather—a colour that bears striking resemblance to the faded patinas of the Mandatory Palestinian passport. In this very act of reframing their IDs, even if temporarily, the women not only subvert the arbitrariness of these colour-coded documents but reclaim the power to redefine their movement and identity, recolouring the documents in which the Israeli settler state has long used to, in the words of John Torpey, exert monopolization over the legitimate "Means of Movement."[23]

The esteemed Mahmoud Darwish similarly wrote about the passport in his 1964 poem, *Passport.* Likewise gesturing towards the oppressive identity documentation system under the Israeli settler state, Darwish denounces Israeli-administered passports as documents which fail to encapsulate the transcendent Palestinian experience. Employing the same motif of colours, the first stanza articulates the violence that the passport imposes upon Darwish—not least as an undersaturated and extractive document that "suck away my colour."[24] While at the time of publishing, Israel did not yet introduce the colour-coded identification system (introduced three years later, in 1967) it was in 1964 that various amendments were made to passports administered to Palestinians, including the removal of 'Palestine' in passports as the place of

---

[23] John Torpey, "Coming and Going: On the State Monopolization of the Legitimate 'Means of Movement,'" *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 3 (1998): 239–59, http://www.jstor.org/stable/202182.

[24] Darwish, Mahmoud, and Zdravko Saveski. "The Passport." Leaves of Olives, 1964. https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/darwish/1964/passport.htm.

assignment and the cessation of "issuing, renewing, or amending passports with seal[s] bearing [the] word 'Palestine.'"[25] The removal of 'Palestine' from the passport is engaged in the second stanza of *Passport*; however, rather than nominally addressing the effacement, Darwish describes how the symbolic constituents of Palestine are deprived from the identity document in this violent act:

> All the birds that followed my palm / To the door of the distant airport / All the wheat fields / All the prisons / All the white tombstones / All the barbed boundaries / All the waving handkerchiefs / All the eyes were with me, / But they dropped them from my passport.[26]

Darwish is gesturing towards trauma in the vein that the passport is representing a non-experience, in which it is literally excluding the memories, experiences, and essences of the Palestinian experience from its repositories. Despite the fact of these very intricacies and existences—the birds, agriculture, imprisonment, death, partitions, and likely the keffiyeh, all testaments to the Palestinian experience—the Israeli settler state engages in their deliberate effacement vis-à-vis the passport in order to preclude any negotiations or expressions of

---

[25] From Document 30, "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel." See: National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1964–66, POL 32–1 PAL, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume 18*, Confidential; Immediate; Limdis. Drafted by Lucien L. Kinsolving; cleared by Davis, Jernegan, Stephen Campbell of IO/UNP, and Harriman's Special Assistant Frederick Chapin; approved by Harriman. Also sent to Jerusalem and repeated to Amman. Accessed [Month Day, Year]. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v18/d30.

[26] Mahmoud and Saveski, "The Passport."

Palestinian identity from occurring through the documents. It is therefore through the renunciation of his passport that Darwish engages in a formidable act of resistance, acknowledging the paradox of a settler state attempting to define his identity:

> Stripped of my name and identity? / On a soil I nourished with my own hands? / […] from my hand springs the water of the river / All the hearts of the people are my identity / So take away my passport![27]

Aligning with Banko's reminder that Palestinian identity and the making of citizens transcends paper decrees administered by the imperial centre, Darwish looks inward to the immutable nationhood of Palestinians as the true authority for his identity. By rescinding an Israeli-administered passport, Darwish destructs the materiality used to control the movement and expression of Palestinians, shifting the jurisdiction of Palestinian identity into the intrinsic "hearts of the people" rather than the tyrannical devices of the Israeli body politic.

Reimagining The Passport as a Talisman of Trauma

It might be in a mere sentence that the passport appears in narratives of Palestinian trauma. In some of the stories I have selected, the passport is uttered no more than once within the context of a larger story. Against the grain of Jeffrey C. Alexander's social theory of trauma, we must therefore ask whether these fleeting references render the passport a force of individual suffering rather than a matter of collective trauma, the latter a "blow to the basic tissues of social life that

---

[27] Mahmoud and Saveski, "The Passport."

damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality."[28] In fact, I point to the scarcity of references to the passport as an intentional design, in which exiguous but powerful allusions to the passport, multiplied across various works, locate the passport as a significant talisman of trauma for Palestinians. As I've hitherto explained, the passport has been enmeshed in various ploys to impose nonrecognition upon Palestine as a legitimate state. But importantly, it has also been an integral element of the 'symbolic renderings' that have sprung Palestinian collective traumas into being, particularly in regards to creating "arguments about what must have been and what should be."[29]

While Darwish's act of resistance in terms of the passport was in the renunciation or even destruction of Israeli-administered identity documents, other Palestinian authors grapple with historical mementos that remain in the present. If the passport functions as a talisman of trauma —collapsing past and present—these authors reclaim it as a site of resistance rather than erasure. In Saeed Teebi's short story "Her First Palestinian,"[30] Nadia, a lawyer and wife of the Palestinian protagonist (Abed) immerses herself in the history of Palestine, taking on various pro bono initiatives to support the Palestinian cause. At first, Abed is her teacher — addressing the Mandate, the Nakba, the Second Intifada — and when he shows Nadia his grandfather's Palestinian passport, this is the talisman that she employs in a fervent attempt to break the collective amnesia of Palestine's being:

---

[28] Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 9.

[29] Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 4.

[30] *Her First Palestinian* is a collection of short stories by Teebi, with the first story as the namesake, "Her First Palestinian."

> One time I showed Nadia a passport that belonged to my grandfather, which I had long treasured and kept away. It was leather-brown, torn and dated 1945. The covers said Palestine in three languages, including Hebrew. She posted a picture of it online, and captioned it "Evidence".[31]

Nadia's caption is particularly savvy, foremost because of how disciplined it is. Its brevity and weight are a refusal to make lengthy explanations about Palestine's existence, suggesting instead that the document speaks for itself. But further, the caption is brilliant in its conflation of the passport as evidence, not least because many Palestinians kept their Mandatory Palestinian passports after the Nakba — presumably as proof of original claims to their land. UN officials in the 1950s described the "worn dog-eared Palestine passport" as a symbol of identity treasured by Palestinian refugees,[32] for despite its inefficacies vis-à-vis British and Zionist agendas, it was ultimately a powerful symbol of Palestinian nationhood and the pathway to an eventual statehood. For all of the confusing and paradoxical arrangements that the British had made under the Mandate, provisions that interfered with the creation of Palestine as an official state under the autonomy of native (Arab) Palestinians, it was irrefutable that native Palestinians were both politically and legally legitimate subjects between 1925 and 1948, a fact that was corroborated through the passport. As Banko reminds, "they did not simply exist in nationalist imaginings but

---

[31] Teebi, Saeed. *Her First Palestinian*. House of Anansi Press Inc, 2022., 4.

[32] Feldman, I. "Refusing Invisibility: Documentation and Memorialization in Palestinian Refugee Claims." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4 (November 23, 2008): 498–516. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen044.

were defined legally in regulations as a demographic entitled to passports, identity documents, measures of civil, political and social rights and international recognition."[33]

Importantly, Nadia's caption 'evidence' does not produce a passive and unaccompanied description of the passport as proof in the mere sense that Palestine had existed as a land and nation predating Israel. Rather, to reiterate Alexander, by providing this preliminary evidence the passport accompanied an active reimagining of "what must have been and what should be," foremost symbolizing the conferral of citizenship upon Palestinians, then the autonomous statehood that should have, and still should, follow suit. From this evidence—the framework of the Palestinian Authority passport—begins a good starting point for understanding how Palestinians are negotiating the symbolic renderings of their trauma by subverting and appropriating the passport.

On Witnessing, and Restoring the Palestinian Narrative

Powerful work has emerged out of the trauma literature, expanding upon the importance of witnessing in the creation of trauma narratives. In "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," Dori Laub describes how the registration of massive trauma is a reciprocal interaction between the trauma survivor and the listener, where "by extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself."[34] If we have agreed that the passport is a talisman of trauma, however, the reciprocity in the act of witnessing is endangered. As Helga Tawil-Souri notes, ID cards and passports do not perform a mutual exchange of

---

[33] Banko, "Introduction," 21.

[34] Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening." *Testimony*, October 18, 2013, 57.

information but are "a mode of 'one-way communication'—keeping in mind that the state apparatus determines their meaning. […] the interaction between Palestinians and the Israeli state apparatus takes place mostly through an instrumental and tactile form of color and paper rather than through human interchange."[35] If the relationship between the survivor and listener mirrors that of the Palestinian and the Israeli passport officer, what Laub and Whitehead implore as the dangerous binary between the witness (as the active subject) versus the survivor or their testimony (as passive subjects) unfortunately manifests.[36] The Israeli state—as the distributor of passports and assuming the role of passport officers—assumes a violent role in "witnessing" Palestinian trauma as manifest through the talismanic passport. What then, are the mechanisms that exist in order to restore the state of Palestinian passport holders as autonomous subjects, claiming authority over their own narratives? One answer is ghosts and spectres; stylistic adjustments to or representations of the passport that mirror manifestations of the margins.

The final piece I invoke is an anthology of poems, songs, photos, and other art by a number of contributors, framed into a passport by Ren Allathkani and Stephanie Adams-Santos. Titled Passport of Witness, the anthology is conceptualized as "much more than a book" but rather "a living document"[37] — an animation that is highly evident through the lens of Avery Gordon's Ghostly Matters and Margaret Hillenbrand's Negative Exposures. In the latter text, Hillenbrand references Gordon's work on spectrality, in which ghosts (namely in the context of

---

[35] Tawil-Souri, Helga. "Colored Identity." *Social Text* 29, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 83.

[36] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 8.

[37] Ren Allathkani and Stephanie Adams-Santos, *Passport of Witness* (New York: Booklyn, 2024), gold foil stamping, Risograph, https://booklyn.org/catalog/passport-of-witness/.

literature and trauma fiction) posit the signs that "a haunting is taking place,"[38] where manifestations of social figures—perhaps killed off in a moment of collective social suffering—are re-emerging demanding to be reckoned with. Applying this spectrality onto 'photo-forms' as a way of restoring public secrets into historical archives, Hillenbrand describes how "photo-forms [can] look like phantoms because their makers actively spectralize them. Ghostliness is the dominant visual language of the photo-form—whether poignant, satirical, fugitive, vengeful, or uncanny."[39] The basic anatomy of Passport of Witness marries the basic premises of the photo-form and spectrality in order to subvert the Palestinian passport, in a manner that not only allows for its reclamation but the renegotiation of its contours entirely. The anthology itself is modelled after the Mandatory Palestine passport of Allathkani's grandfather, in which Allathanki carved out certain facets of the original passport that she deemed inaccurate or harmful to a reimagining of a passport from the Palestinian lens. The cover itself extrapolated from the Palestine Poster Project, taking a photo delineating an architectural structure, then removing its centre—one which was fraught with a 'spectacular, fetishized oasis' that misrepresented the true essence of Palestine. Upon closer examination, the structure on the cover of Passport of Witness mirrors but also subverts the original image on the Mandatory Palestine passport, in which the arms of the English Lions become the branches of olive trees, and the British crown is replaced with a dove holding an olive branch. Allathkani et al. therefore spectrally alter the passport's original colonial imagery—rendering symbols erased, replaced, and reimagined. This subversion of the passport is

---

[38] Avery F. Gordon and Janice Radway, "Her Shape and His Hand," in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, NED-New edition, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

[39] Margaret Hillenbrand, "Introduction: Staking out Secrecy," in *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.

an important culmination of resistance; under Teebi's logic that the passport is "evidence," one could argue that Palestine functioned as a state-in-the-making, but British policies prevented it from fully forming. Hence, Allathkani appropriates the British Mandate passport and remakes it —summoning the ghosts and spectres of unfulfilled promises and anchoring them in the Passport of Witness.

Finally, the first page of the anthology delineates a silhouette of a person (again, with the centre removed) encompassing the words 'Who am I? Where am I from?' Hillenbrand's Negative Exposures explores how photo-forms can embody spectrality, particularly when the artist deploys creative shadows and outlines to articulate the shapes and contours of ideas frequently relegated to public secrecy. In the Passport of Witness, the (non)image of the person in the passport gestures to a shape, a ghost, that is both present and absent, visible and invisible, delineated and erased, making "extraordinary demands on the reader to produce closure."[40] Forcing the viewers to reckon with the ghostly contours of an undefined silhouette in the biometric photo placeholder, Allathkani et al. therefore implore viewers to confront the spectres of Palestine that society has long sought to suppress, while carving a site in which the silhouette might be filled — by the faces of Palestinians who will continue to appropriate the passport as part of their right to return.

Conclusion

The Palestinian passport—or its imposed absence—exemplifies the paradox of documentation in forced migration studies: a mechanism that ostensibly affirms identity and mobility but, in

---

[40] J. Fall, "Resisting through and with Comics," *Society + Space*, 2015, https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/resisting-through-and-with-comics.

practice, entrenches statelessness and immobility. This paradox resonates far beyond Palestine, mirroring the struggles of refugees and undocumented immigrants who navigate borders without the protection of a recognized nation-state. Just as the passport for Palestinians is a talisman of trauma, for the forcibly displaced worldwide, the lack of documentation—or the possession of one that restricts rather than enables movement—becomes a marker of exclusion. Through literary and artistic reclamations, Palestinians redefine the passport's symbolic power, asserting an identity that exists beyond the limits imposed by settler-colonial and bureaucratic regimes. Their re-imaginings challenge the assumption that legal recognition equates to belonging, highlighting the broader crisis of forced migration in which documentation is both a tool of control and a site of resistance.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012.

Allathkani, Ren, and Stephanie Adams-Santos. *Passport of Witness*. 2024. Gold foil stamping, Risograph. Booklyn, New York, United States of America. https://booklyn.org/catalog/passport-of-witness/.

Banko, Lauren. "The Notion of 'Rights' and the Practices of Nationality and Citizenship from the Palestinian Arab Perspective, 1918–1925." In *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918–1947*, 78. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Banko, Lauren. "Introduction." In *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918–1947*, 5. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bh2hc3.4.

Bivand Erdal, Marta, Elin Martine Doeland, and Ebba Tellander. "How Citizenship Matters (or Not): The Citizenship–Belonging Nexus Explored among Residents in Oslo, Norway." *Citizenship Studies* 22, no. 7 (2018): 712. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2018.1508415.

Bentwich, Norman. "Palestine Nationality and the Mandate." *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* 21, no. 4 (1939): 232. https://www.jstor.org/stable/754593.

Darwish, Mahmoud, and Zdravko Saveski. "The Passport." *Leaves of Olives*, 1964. https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/darwish/1964/passport.htm.

Fall, J. "Resisting through and with Comics." *Society + Space*, 2015. https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/resisting-through-and-with-comics.

Feldman, I. “Refusing Invisibility: Documentation and Memorialization in Palestinian Refugee Claims.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4 (November 23, 2008): 498–516. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen044.

Gordon, Avery F., and Janice Radway. “Her Shape and His Hand.” In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed., 8. NED-New edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt4hp.5.

Ginat, Avital. “British Mandate for Palestine.” *1914-1918-Online (WW1) Encyclopedia*, December 7, 2018. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/british-mandate-for-palestine/.

Hillenbrand, Margaret. “Introduction: Staking out Secrecy.” In *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China*, 1–44. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220qjk.6.

Kochenov, Dimitry Vladimirovich. “Ending the Passport Apartheid: The Alternative to Citizenship Is No Citizenship—A Reply.” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 18, no. 4 (December 2020): 1525–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/moaa108.

Kuhail, Mays. “You Don’t Have to Look up Every Time.” *So to Speak*, 2023. https://www.sotospeakjournal.org/mays-kuhail.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421414003.

Laub, Dori. “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” *Testimony*, October 18, 2013, 57.

League of Nations. *International Conference of American States, Convention on the Rights and Duties of States*, Dec. 26, 1933, art. I. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20165/v165.pdf.

Loewenstein, Jennifer. "Identity and Movement Control in the OPT." *Forced Migration Review*, August 27, 2024. https://www.fmreview.org/loewenstein/.

Peteet, Julie. "The Work of Comparison: Israel/Palestine and Apartheid." *Anthropological Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2016): 247–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43955521.

Shaban, Leila Haseba. *Passport of Witness*. 2024. Gold foil stamping, Risograph. Booklyn, New York, United States of America. https://booklyn.org/catalog/passport-of-witness/.

Torpey, John. "Coming and Going: On the State Monopolization of the Legitimate 'Means of Movement.'" *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 3 (1998): 239–59. http://www.jstor.org/stable/202182.

Tawil-Souri, Helga. "Colored Identity: The Politics and Materiality of ID Cards in Palestine/Israel." *Social Text* 29, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 83. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-1259488.

Vladimirovich Kochenov, Dimitry. "Ending the Passport Apartheid: The Alternative to Citizenship Is No Citizenship—A Reply." *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 18, no. 4 (December 2020): 1525–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/moaa108.

Whitehead, Anne. "Introduction to Part I." In *Trauma Fiction*, 5. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r2534.4.

"UN Experts Urge All States to Recognise State of Palestine." *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, June 3, 2024. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/un-experts-urge-all-states-recognise-state-palestine.

Document 30: "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel." National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1964–66, POL 32–1 PAL, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Volume 18. Confidential; Immediate; Limdis. Drafted by Lucien L. Kinsolving; cleared by Davis, Jernegan, Stephen Campbell of IO/UNP, and Harriman's Special Assistant Frederick Chapin; approved by Harriman. Accessed [Month Day, Year]. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v18/d30.