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THE HOUSE AS COUNTER-ARCHIVE: MATERIAL TRACES AND PALESTINIAN POSTMEMORY IN SUAD AMIRY'S *GOLDA SLEPT HERE*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I have made an attempt to examine Suad Amiry's *Golda Slept Here* (2014) through the intersecting lenses of memory studies, postcolonial theory and material culture scholarship. The central argument holds that the Palestinian house functions as a "counter-archive" to settler-colonial erasure. Moving beyond official state archives and nationalist historiography, the narrative foregrounds walls, rooms, domestic objects and architectural remnants as repositories of lived history. Drawing upon Marianne Hirsch's framework of postmemory, Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire and recent interventions in new materialism and thing theory, I contend that the text reactivates inherited trauma through the spatial/material traces embedded within domestic structures, thereby positioning the home as a site of enduring political and historical witness.

KEYWORDS: Counter-archive, Palestinian literature, Postmemory, Materiality, Trauma, Identity

> *In every object there is a being in pain — a memory of fingers, of a smell, an image... Plates, spoons, toys, records, taps, pipes, door handles, fridges, washing machines, flower vases, jars of olives and pickles, tinned food all break just like their owners... All these things are a memory of the people who no longer have them and of the objects that no longer have the people — destroyed in a minute. Our things die like us, but they aren't buried with us.*
>
> Mahmoud Darwish

1. Introduction

The 1948 Palestinian Nakba cannot be relegated to a static historical phenomenon because it constitutes an "ongoing structural condition" that continuously shapes Palestinian realities of displacement, memory production and material dispossession at the same time (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Masalha 2012; Khalidi 2020; Deka 2025). The expulsion of approximately 750,000 Palestinians from their homes during the founding of the State of Israel did not end with the ceasefire of 1949 (Pappe 2006). It persists in the bodies of survivors, in the memories of their descendants and in the objects that were left behind, carried away, recreated from memory or stubbornly refused to move even when the people who used them were forced to go. It is within this enduring condition of dispossession that Suad Amiry's memoir *Golda Slept Here* (2014) situates itself, organizing its narrative around a series of returns to former Palestinian homes in West Jerusalem and saturating that narrative with material artifacts that exceed a merely descriptive function. A rusted cast-iron stopper immovably fixed in a windowsill, a ring of keys preserved for decades after the house they once opened was expropriated, a silver make-up case mourned across half a century, a gilded icon reclaimed from a stranger's possession — each of these objects emerges as a dense locus of memory. They do not simply symbolize dispossession (Amiry, 2014). Rather, they actively sustain and enact it while resisting the logic of erasure that settler-colonial authority has sought to impose over time. The Palestinian house, in this context, is never simply a building. It is a contested archive of lived experience, a repository of intergenerational memory and a site of ongoing political struggle. In *Golda Slept Here*, the houses of West Jerusalem do not serve as background settings for a narrative of displacement. They act as active participants in the transmission of Palestinian memory across generations. Amiry, an architect and writer long attuned to the spatial politics of the Israel-Palestine conflict, structures her memoir around a series of visits to former Palestinian homes that have been occupied by Israeli settlers, converted into museums or left in states of deliberate neglect. Each visit becomes an occasion for excavating what official history has buried and for asserting what colonial authority has persistently sought to erase. This paper proposes to read the objects that populate *Golda Slept Here* not as symbols or metaphors but as material agents in their own right, as things possessed of a form of agency that exceeds the intentions of the human actors who encounter them.

Amiry is obviously not the first Palestinian writer to invest objects with political meaning, and it would be a serious misreading of her memoir to treat it as an isolated or anomalous text. Palestinian writing has long registered the political force of things. Ghassan Kanafani's fiction turns on objects that outlast the people who owned them. Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah*

(1997) tracks return through an encounter with doors, walls and the specific quality of light in rooms not entered since childhood. Mahmoud Darwish's poetry insists on the olive tree, the threshold and the key as materially specific presences whose rootedness in particular soil constitutes the very substance of what dispossession destroys. However, what distinguishes Amiry's text within this tradition is not the politicization of objects (which is by now a defining feature of Palestinian literary culture) but the formal disposition through which that politicization is achieved. Where Kanafani and Darwish tend to direct the objects they invoke by assigning them symbolic weight and narratorial meaning, Amiry's text follows the object, allowing its resistance or persistence to generate meaning without interpretive mediation. When the cast-iron stopper refuses to be pulled free, no narrator explains what this signifies. The object's refusal simply is the significance. It is this quality — the granting of genuine agency to material things — that makes *Golda Slept Here* available to an "object-oriented" reading in a way that most of its predecessors in the Palestinian literary tradition are not, and it is this formal and theoretical dimension that the present paper takes up to analyze. I argue that *Golda Slept Here* constructs the Palestinian house as a "counter-archive". The term counter-archive, as it is used here, refers to a body of material evidence and narrative practice that works against and alongside the official archive to preserve records that dominant power has sought to suppress or destroy. Palestinian houses serve as such archives because they bear within their walls, their architectural details, their domestic objects and their very absence from official Israeli records, the traces of a history that has been actively denied. My analysis proceeds through several interconnected lines of inquiry. It first examines the theoretical frameworks that make such a reading possible, drawing on Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of "postmemory", Pierre Nora's (1989) lieux de memoire and scholarship in "new materialism" and "thing theory" associated with scholars such as Bill Brown (2001) and Jane Bennett (2010). It then turns to close readings of the primary text, tracing how the house functions as an archive of Palestinian memory in the cases of Andoni Baramki, his son Gabi, Nahil, Elie Sanbar and Umm Salim, before examining how postmemory operates in the cases of Amiry herself and Huda al-Imam. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of reading domestic space as archival resistance within the broader field of memory studies and Palestinian literary discourse.

2. Theoretical framework: Memory, postmemory and materiality

Any serious engagement with *Golda Slept Here* requires a robust theoretical framework that can account for the intersections of memory, materiality

and political dispossession. Three bodies of theory are particularly relevant. The first is Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. The second is Pierre Nora's theory of lieux de memoire or sites of memory. The third is the interdisciplinary field known variously as new materialism, thing theory or material culture studies. Together, these frameworks provide a conceptual vocabulary adequate to the complexity of what Amiry's text performs.

Hirsch (2012) develops the concept of "postmemory" to describe the relationship that the generation following survivors of traumatic historical events maintains to the experiences of those survivors. As Hirsch explains, postmemory is "a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience" (Hirsch 2012, 6). It is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Those who experience postmemory did not live through the events themselves but grow up so saturated by the stories, images and behaviors of those who did that these become constitutive of their own identity. Hirsch is careful to note that postmemory is "not a movement, method, or idea" (ibid., 6) but rather a structure of feeling and inheritance that shapes how subsequent generations relate to a traumatic past they did not personally experience.

Postmemory is particularly relevant to the Palestinian context because the nakba of 1948, the catastrophic expulsion of Palestinians from their homes during the founding of the State of Israel, is a wound that continues to define Palestinian identity across generations. As Edward Said observed, Palestinian experience is structured around the fact of dispossession and "the Palestinian experience of the loss of Palestine" operates as an organizing principle of collective and individual identity (Said 1979, 4). Scholars of Palestinian history have extensively documented the scale and deliberateness of this displacement, establishing it as a foundational act of settler-colonial violence rather than a consequence of war (Pappe 2006; Khalidi 1992). For Palestinians born after 1948, such as Amiry herself, the past is not merely past. It is an ongoing present that shapes how one moves through the world, how one understands the spaces one inhabits, and how one responds to the houses that once sheltered one's parents and grandparents.

Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of lieux de memoire, developed in his influential essay "Between Memory and History", provides another essential conceptual tool. Nora argues that modern societies, having lost their relationship to living memory, create sites of memory to compensate for this loss. These sites can be physical locations, archives, monuments, rituals or symbols. They function as "places where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 1989, 7). For Nora, "memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present" (ibid., 8), whereas history is a reconstruction of the past that is always incomplete and always shaped by present concerns. Memory sites are therefore not neutral repositories of the past but active sites of nego-

tiation between what is remembered and what is forgotten, between presence and absence.

The Palestinian house, as it appears in Amiry's memoir, functions as precisely such a site of memory. It crystallizes and secretes the memory of a Palestinian past that official Israeli historiography has sought to erase. But the Palestinian house is a site of memory with a particular political charge. Unlike the French memory sites that Nora primarily describes, which are officially sanctioned and publicly accessible, Palestinian memory sites exist under conditions of occupation and dispossession. They are sites that Palestinians have been forcibly removed from and that they can return to only through acts of transgression, subterfuge or painful negotiation with Israeli authorities.

The third theoretical framework is that of new materialism and thing theory. Bill Brown's (2001) influential formulation of "thing theory" argues that objects become visible as things rather than objects when they stop working as expected, when the flow of practical life is interrupted and the materiality of the world makes itself felt. Jane Bennett (2010) extends this into a broader political ecology of materiality, arguing that things possess a form of agency, what she calls "thing-power" or "vibrant matter", that exceeds their instrumental function. These theoretical moves are significant for reading *Golda Slept Here* because Amiry's text is saturated with objects that have lost their ordinary function, keys that no longer open doors, photo albums that document lives that no longer exist, coffee tables recreated by carpenters who have themselves been displaced and cast-iron stoppers that refuse to leave even when the people who used them have been forced to go.

Marianne Hirsch's chapter "Objects of Return" from The Generation of Postmemory is also centrally important to this analysis. Hirsch observes that objects, including photographs, domestic interiors, household items and items of clothing, play a crucial role in return narratives, serving as "testimonial objects, lost and again found" that "structure plots of return" and "embody memory and thus trigger affect shared across generations" (Hirsch 2012, 206). Ordinary objects, Hirsch argues, "mediate the memory of returnees through the particular embodied practices that they elicit" and "can also revive the affect of the past, overlaid with the shadows of loss and dispossession" (ibid., 207). This insight is fully borne out in Amiry's text, where domestic objects serve as mnemonic triggers that bridge the gap between a living past and a displaced present.

Finally, the concept of the counter-archive requires some elaboration. Jacques Derrida's foundational analysis of the archive in Archive Fever (1995) establishes that the archive is never merely a neutral repository but always a product of power. The archive institutionalizes what is to be preserved and what is to be allowed to perish. Postcolonial and settler-colonial theorists have extended this insight to argue that colonial archives are structures of epi-

stemic violence that erase indigenous and colonized peoples' histories (Stoler 2002). The struggle to construct alternative records from within conditions of dispossession is one that indigenous and postcolonial peoples across many contexts have engaged in as a fundamental act of political self-determination (Coulthard 2014; Mignolo 2000). The counter-archive is a practice of recovery and resistance that works against this erasure by assembling and preserving what the colonial archive has discarded. In the Palestinian context, as scholars such as Nur Masalha (2012) have argued that erasing Palestine and appropriating its material and cultural heritage has been fundamental to Zionist colonial practices. The Palestinian house, with its architectural details, its domestic objects and its stories, constitutes what I call a "counter-archive" to this erasure throughout my paper.

3. Architecture as archive: The house beyond shelter

Amiry's narrative methodology is fundamentally informed by her praxis as an architect. This professional training engenders a granular attentiveness to built environments, distinguishing her work from more conventional Palestinian return narratives. She does not simply describe houses in general terms. Rather, she records the specific materials, proportions and architectural details that make each house a unique historical document. Consequently, this architectural gaze subtly transforms mere descriptions into a form of literal/cultural preservation and makes the text itself function as an archival record of a built environment that is under an active threat of historical distortion.

The houses of West Jerusalem that Amiry visits are not just generic domestic spaces. They are specific products of a particular historical moment, built during the British Mandate period (1918 to 1948) by Palestinian architects and craftsmen using local materials and following local aesthetic traditions. Nahil's family house, for instance, is described in careful architectural terms. It follows the liwan-house layout, a traditional Arabic domestic form:

> The elevated one-floor houses have pitched roofs with red Marseilles tiles, also typical of the British Mandate. The most beautiful architectural details are the five huge arches of the front façades. Their bright white stones contrast beautifully with the pink, even eighty years after they were built. While the middle entrance arch is wide and flat, the two arches on either side are of the same height, but narrow and pointed. (Amiry 2014, 60)

This description is not merely decorative. It places the house within a tradition of Arab architecture that has been systematically dismantled and replaced by Israeli settlement patterns. To record such a house in such detail is to resist its erasure.

Andoni Baramki's house is the most elaborately described in the memoir, partly because Andoni himself is an architect and partly because the house he built has been transformed into a museum of Israeli history. Andoni designed and built several landmark buildings in Jerusalem during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s. His own house, which he always referred to as nour hayati, meaning the light of his life, was not merely his home but a masterpiece of his craft (Amiry 2014, 25). The loss of this house was therefore a double loss. It was the loss of a home and the loss of a work of art. When Andoni gazes at his house from the roof of the adjacent YMCA building every Saturday for nineteen years, he is doing something more than expressing nostalgia (Amiry 2014, 26). He is bearing witness to his own creation and asserting, through the very act of looking, that the house is his.

The conversion of Andoni's house into the Tourjeman Museum, an Israeli museum of historical significance, is an act of profound spatial politics. It takes a Palestinian architectural achievement, strips it of its Palestinian identity and reinscribes it within a narrative of Israeli national history. This is precisely the kind of spatial stratification that scholars of settler colonialism have analyzed in terms of the layering of one history over another. Patrick Wolfe's (2006) foundational argument that settler colonialism is characterized by the "logic of elimination" of the native applies here not only to the physical displacement of Palestinian families but also to the symbolic displacement of Palestinian architectural heritage. Studies of Palestinian villages demolished and repurposed after 1948 have shown how this process of spatial overwriting operates at a systematic, nationwide scale (Slyomovics 1998). The museum does not simply occupy a former Palestinian house. It actively works to make that house into an Israeli space, layering Israeli history over Palestinian memory.

Amiry's attention to architectural detail is therefore a form of counter-archival practice. By recording what the houses looked like, how they were built, who designed them and what memories they hold, she creates a textual archive that resists the spatial politics of erasure. Her observation as an architect that "Architectural details lose their historic significance once removed from their cultural context" is immediately followed by the reflection that this is "similar to the Palestinians who lost their significance once they were removed from their natural habitat, their homeland" (Amiry 2014, 72). This analogy between architectural heritage and human identity is not merely rhetorical as it seems to reflect a deep understanding of how built space and human identity are mutually constitutive, and how the destruction of one is always also the destruction of the other.

The Palestinian house as historical document also operates through what might be called a temporal layering. The houses Amiry visits are not frozen in their pre-nakba state. They have been altered, adapted and repurposed

by successive occupants. Elie Sanbar's family house in Haifa, for instance, has had its interior staircase collapse, leading the Arab tenants to build a bridge directly to the second floor from the upper road:

> As a result of the Israeli policy, the tenants could not repair the staircase leading to the house and so the stairs collapsed. This meant that the tenants could no longer get to the second floor from the garden. They now reach it from the upper road. (Amiry 2014, 115)

This makeshift architectural solution is itself a document of the absurdity of Israeli property law which prohibits both Arab landlords and Arab tenants from maintaining houses designated as absentee property. The house thus becomes a physical record of the legal and political contradictions of the occupation. Each architectural alteration or act of neglect is a layer of historical sedimentation that tells a story the official archive would prefer to suppress.

4. Material traces and inherited trauma

If the architecture of the Palestinian house constitutes one layer of the counter-archive, the domestic objects within those houses constitute another. *Golda Slept Here* is populated by objects that have outlasted the lives of those who used them, keys carried in pockets for twenty years, photo albums lost and mourned, silver make-up sets left behind in the haste of departure, Persian carpets sold as stolen goods, cast-iron stoppers fixed into stone windowsills and gilded icons retrieved from Russian nuns. These objects are not props or symbols. They are active participants in the transmission of memory or, in a way, agents of what Hirsch calls the "affect of the past, overlaid with the shadows of loss and dispossession" (Hirsch 2012, 207).

The case of Gabi Baramki is particularly instructive in this regard. When Gabi was away studying in Beirut at the time of the nakba, his parents were forced to leave their house in West Jerusalem without being able to take the family photo albums with them. The loss of these albums, Gabi came to realize upon reuniting with his displaced family in 1949, meant that "he had lost his past, his childhood and teenage memories" (Amiry 2014, 41). For him, "A photo album meant existence" and its absence meant there was no proof "that he had ever had a life in Jerusalem" (Amiry 2014, 41). This formulation is striking in its implications. The material object of the photo album is not merely a record of the past. It is constitutive of the self. Without the album, Gabi's identity is literally undocumentable. The loss of the object is the loss of the archive and the loss of the archive is the loss of the self.

Hirsch's observation that "testimonial objects, lost and again found, structure plots of return" and can "embody memory and thus trigger affect shared

across generations" (Hirsch 2012, 206) is subtly confirmed by the episode of the cast-iron stopper in Nahil's former bedroom. When Nahil visits her family house after sixty-three years of absence, a rusted cast-iron stopper in the shape of a woman's bust fixed into a stone windowsill catches her eye. She immediately recognizes it as belonging to her former bedroom. When both Nahil and Huda separately try to pull the stopper out and find that it will not move, the narrative attributes to it a quality of intentionality. It seems to refuse "to leave home" (Amiry 2014, 64), thereby reinforcing the permanence of the objects of daily use in their houses while Palestinian people were torn away forcibly. This is a moment of what Bennett (2010) would call "thing-power" i.e. the vitality of matter asserting itself against the violence of dispossession.

The material objects in Umm Salim's story are equally resonant. Having been forced to leave their home in the al-Ajami neighborhood of Jaffa in 1948, Umm Salim regrets most bitterly not being able to take with her the silver make-up set given to her as a wedding present. Fifty-seven years later, she retains a vivid recollection of its aesthetic value:

> At the time we didn't realize that this would be it. If I had known, I would have carried a wedding present: a silver make-up set given to me by my women friends. It was truly beautiful.' There was a long pause before Umm Salim continued. 'Actually all the furniture in our house was brand new and beautiful. (Amiry 2014, 126)

She and her husband Edmon later learned that their new furniture, carefully selected and imported from Russia, was sold on the open market. So persistent was her attachment to these objects that she had a replica of the coffee table made by the same carpenter who had also fled Jaffa for Beirut. The one object she does still possess from her Jaffa home, a gilded icon of Christ brought to her later by a Russian nun, is described as "the one thing" she still has from among all their possessions (Amiry 2014, 130). This singular object takes on an almost talismanic quality. It is the survivor of a material world that was otherwise entirely dispersed.

The transmission of memory through objects and spaces is not limited to those who experienced the nakba firsthand. It also operates across generational lines, shaping the postmemory of those who were born after 1948. Amiry's own encounter with the railway line near Nahil's former house is one example. Seeing the tracks, Nahil recollects spending "the best days of their childhood" on those tracks, and Amiry records that "the power of the passing train, as well as its whistle and steam, constituted one vivid image that they carried with them into Diaspora" (Amiry 2014, 64). Research on Palestinian communities living in displacement has confirmed that such spatial and sensory memories are among the most durably transmitted elements of inherited

identity, shaping how subsequent generations imagine and relate to a homeland they have not personally inhabited (Feldman 2006; Farah 2009). In this context, the railway line is not merely a piece of infrastructure. It is a mnemonic object that carries a whole world of Palestinian childhood experience. For those who experienced that childhood, it triggers direct memory. For those who come after, it becomes an object of postmemory, a material trace of a world they did not inhabit but have inherited.

The concept of mnemonic triggers is also relevant to understanding how trauma operates in Amiry's text. Cathy Caruth's (1996) influential account of trauma emphasizes its quality of belatedness or latency, arguing that the traumatic event is not fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence but returns later, often in the form of repetitive symptoms or intrusive memories. Caruth describes trauma as "the wound of the mind" that is characterized by "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self [...] and imposes itself again" through repetition (Caruth 1996, 4). This temporal structure is evident in the stories Amiry collects. The trauma of the nakba does not simply belong to 1948. It returns, again and again, in the form of the weekly gaze from the YMCA rooftop, the painful visit to the converted museum and the reluctant storytelling of an aged woman well into her nineties.

The pluralistic model of trauma that Roger Luckhurst (2008) and others have advocated is also relevant here. Luckhurst argues against the tendency to universalize trauma as an abstract and unspeakable experience, insisting instead on its specificity and its representability in particular cultural and historical contexts. The traumatic responses recorded in *Golda Slept Here* are strikingly individual and specific. Andoni expresses his trauma through obsessive architectural observation and courtroom confrontation. Gabi expresses his through painful laughter. Nahil expresses hers through a combination of recognition and estrangement. Umm Salim represses hers through deliberate silence until the moment of narration. Each of these responses is shaped by the particular circumstances of the individual's displacement and the particular objects and spaces that serve as mnemonic triggers.

5. THE HOUSE AS COUNTER-ARCHIVE

The concept of the counter-archive brings together the spatial, material and mnemonic dimensions of *Golda Slept Here* into a single analytical frame. If the official Israeli archive constructs Palestinian houses as "absentee property", the counter-archive that Amiry constructs through her memoir asserts the opposite. It insists that these houses are Palestinian, that they carry within their walls and their objects the living memory of Palestinian families, and that

no legal category of “absentee” can erase the presence of those who built and inhabited them.

The most explicit confrontation between the official archive and the counter-archive occurs in Andoni’s courtroom scene. Andoni brings to the Israeli court a land deed, house tax receipts, his architectural drawings of the house and the bunch of keys he has carried in his pocket for twenty years of separation from his home (Amiry 2014, 35). These objects constitute his counter-archive which is of course, a collection of material evidence that asserts his ownership against the legal category of the absentee. When the judge declares that Andoni is an absentee and that his house is absentee property, he is deploying the power of the official archive to override the evidence of the counter-archive. Andoni’s response is to challenge the ontological basis of the legal category itself: “An absentee, how can I be an absentee when I am standing right in front of Your Honour?” he demands (Amiry 2014, 36). And when the judge attempts to place him in the category of present absentee, Andoni’s answer cuts to the heart of the colonial logic at work: “Sir, the Palestinians are ‘absentees’ only because you do not allow them to be present. And those of us who are present are considered absent” (Amiry 2014, 36).

This scene is a microcosm of the broader contest between the official archive and the counter-archive that structures the entire memoir. The Israeli legal system, with its categories of absentee and present absentee, is a product of what Ann Laura Stoler (2002) calls “archival governance”. In simple, this means using records and classifications as tools to control and manage colonized people. By classifying Palestinians as absent regardless of their physical presence, the Israeli state produces a legal reality that overrides material and lived reality. Andoni’s counter-archive, with its land deeds, tax receipts, drawings and keys, challenges this legal reality by insisting on the evidence of a material world that existed before and beyond the categories of Israeli law. In this apparatus, Rashid Khalidi’s observation about the Palestinian predicament presents an oppositional point. Khalidi describes what he calls “a gradual but so far inexorable century-old process” through which “the Palestinians have been removed from more and more of their ancestral homeland, their property and their patrimony seized, and their very identity and existence as a people placed into question” (Khalidi 2010, xxvi). However, one must note that this process is not just physical. It is also archival at the same time. The erasure of Palestinian presence requires the production and maintenance of an official record that represents Palestinian absence as natural, legal and permanent. As such, the counter-archive that *Golda Slept Here* constructs works against this representation by assembling a record of Palestinian presence that is personal, embodied and material.

The political uses of memory as a technology of national consolidation, and the ways in which competing memory cultures contest the same territorial

and historical ground, have been extensively theorized in scholarship on memorialization and collective identity (Young 1993). This political dimension of Amiry's archival practice is also evident in her single-line dictums that captures the opposing mnemonic politics of Palestinians and Israelis:

> The Palestinians try hard to forget when they should remember
> The Israelis try hard to remember when they should forget
> The Palestinians refuse to be victims.
> The Israelis make sure that they remain the only victims. (Amiry 2014, 10)

This formulation is asymmetric in a revealing way. Palestinian forgetting is presented as something enforced by the trauma of dispossession and the weight of exile, a defensive strategy against unbearable pain. Israeli remembering, by contrast, is presented as a project of legitimation, a way of grounding Israeli national identity in a land that belongs to others. The counter-archive that Amiry constructs is therefore not only a challenge to Israeli spatial politics. It is also an intervention in Palestinian collective memory, an exhortation to remember what has been painfully forgotten. Huda's obsessional practice of house visits is another dimension of this counter-archival project. As Amiry describes her, Huda is someone who has made it "a point to conduct frequent visits to former Arab houses" and for whom "hardly a week passes without Huda venturing on such a visit" (Amiry 2014, 54). These visits are not simply acts of nostalgia or political protest, though they are both of these things. They are acts of counter-archival inscription. By repeatedly returning to these spaces, mapping their architectural details, identifying their Palestinian owners, and bringing journalists and television reporters who serve as "alternative tourists" (Amiry 2014, 54), Huda produces a counter-archive of Palestinian domestic space that sets itself against the Israeli archive of settlement and national memory.

The house visits that Huda conducts carry a real risk of arrest and confrontation with Israeli settler families. They are therefore not merely symbolic acts. They are political interventions in a contested spatial order. Lisa Taraki (1990) has argued that Palestinian cultural practices, including literature, art and architecture, function as what she calls sumud, a concept of steadfastness and resistance that involves refusing to be displaced or erased. The house visits in *Golda Slept Here* exemplify this sumud. They are practices of insisting on presence in the face of legal and physical forces that construct that presence as impossible or illegitimate.

The counter-archival function of the narrative is also evident in the way Amiry handles the politics of naming. The conversion of Palestinian place names into Hebrew names has been a systematic project of the Israeli state since 1948. As Meron Benvenisti has (2000) documented, the Negev bedouin

place-name map, the Hebrew naming of Arab villages and the replacement of Arabic geographical terms with Hebrew ones constitute a comprehensive spatial renaming that works to erase Palestinian geography from the landscape. In *Golda Slept Here*, Amiry consistently uses Arabic place names and Palestinian family names, insisting on a geographical and genealogical record that stands against this renaming. The Musrara neighborhood, the al-Ajami neighborhood of Jaffa, the Aweidah compound and the names of the families who lived in these places are all carefully preserved in the text as elements of the counter-archive.

6. Postmemory and its discontents

The most intimate dimension of *Golda Slept Here* is the examination of postmemory as it is experienced by Amiry herself and by her friend Huda. Both women belong to what Hirsch calls the post-generation, those who grew up after the traumatic events that shaped their parents and grandparents, and who carry those events as "a profound personal connection" that "approximates memory in its affective force" (Hirsch 2012, 5). For both Amiry and Huda, the Palestinian houses of West Jerusalem are not simply historical sites. They are the material repositories of a personal past that is simultaneously their own and not their own, inherited but not directly experienced.

Amiry was born in Damascus in 1951, three years after her parents were forced to leave their home in Jerusalem during the nakba. She therefore belongs, as she is fully aware, to the "postgeneration". Her memoir opens with her sleepless arrival at a friend's house in Jerusalem, just down the road from her parents' former home. The proximity of that house, and her awareness that she was herself conceived in Jerusalem even though she was born in Damascus, produces a paradoxical feeling of intimate estrangement. She longs to see the terrace on which her sisters spent their childhood, to conjure the reddish-brown puppies that went missing after her family's departure, and to enter spaces that she has constructed entirely from "tales" and imagination (Amiry 2014, 10). This constructive process, whereby postmemory is built up from heard stories and transmitted affects rather than direct experience, is one of the defining features of what Hirsch identifies as familial postmemory. Amiry's confession that she had to construct her father's lost house in Jaffa "from tales and imagine it from far, far away" (Amiry 2014, 10) is a precise account of how familial postmemory works. The house is present in her imagination not because she has been there but because she has inhabited it through narrative. When she finally stands on the terrace of her parents' Jerusalem home, she reports that she "remembered" words spoken there by her sister Anan as a three-year-old child, at a time before Amiry herself was born.

This is the paradox of postmemory rendered in its most acute form: a memory of an event that the rememberer could not possibly have witnessed.

Amiry is also honest about the limits of her postmemory and the ways in which it coexists with other forms of trauma. She acknowledges that she has buried the heavy burden of her family's story in Jaffa and that she was "not prepared to dig up" that story while accompanying her protagonists on their house visits (Amiry 2014, 57). This reluctance is itself a form of traumatic response. Cathy Caruth's (1995) account of trauma as characterized by the paradox of an experience that is both demanded and refused, both compulsively repeated and actively avoided, is relevant here. Amiry's inability to visit her father's house without him, combined with her compulsive need to record other Palestinians' experiences of returning to lost homes, enacts precisely this paradox.

Huda's postmemory presents a different but equally illuminating case. If Amiry's postmemory is marked by ambivalence and reluctance, Huda's is marked by an obsessive insistence. Where Amiry "plunged into silent gloom", Huda was "actively incensed" (Amiry 2014, 57). Huda's frequent house visits have been instigated by her grandmother's tales about the rich Palestinian life before the nakba, and her first visit to the family house as a child right after the 1967 war triggered an addiction that she has maintained ever since. Amiry observes that "her facial expressions, neurotic energy, and the frequency of her nervous laughter indicate to the keen observer the deep exhaustion resulting from an addiction bordering on obsession" (Amiry 2014, 55). The language of addiction is significant. It suggests that Huda's postmemory is not simply a form of political commitment but a compulsive psychic structure that has taken over her relationship to the past.

What is most interesting about Huda's postmemory, however, is the way it manifests as a sense of entitlement and belonging in spaces that she has never inhabited. When she accompanies her older cousin Nahil to visit the latter's childhood home, Huda feels very much at home while "everything about Nahil conveyed a strong sense of estrangement" (Amiry 2014, 59). This inversion is counterintuitive. Nahil lived in the house. Huda did not. Yet it is Huda who feels at home and Nahil who feels like an intruder. The explanation lies in the different relationship each woman has to the house. Nahil's memory of the house is direct and therefore subject to the shock of return, the painful contrast between how the house was and how it is now. Huda's relationship to the house is entirely mediated through postmemory, through her grandmother's stories and her own repeated visits. She has never known the house as it was before 1948, so she cannot experience the shock of its transformation. Instead, she has built up an imaginary relationship to the house as it is, imbued with the affect of her grandmother's memories, that gives her a sense of belonging that Nahil's direct memory cannot sustain.

This paradox of postmemory illuminates a broader dynamic in *Golda Slept Here*. The book suggests that postmemory, though indirect compared to the immediacy of actual traumatic confrontation, can sometimes be more sustaining and more politically effective than direct traumatic memory. The postgeneration, shaped by inherited stories and transmitted affects but not burdened by the shock of direct experience, may be better placed to engage in sustained political action. Huda's tireless house visits are the evidence of this. She can do what Nahil, Andoni and Gabi cannot, return again and again to these spaces without being overwhelmed by the gap between memory and present reality, because her relationship to these spaces is already mediated by narrative and imagination.

7. Memory against history

One of the most sustained arguments that *Golda Slept Here* advances is that memory is not merely a private psychological phenomenon but a counter-historical force capable of challenging the authority of official historiography. This argument is made not through abstract declaration but through the concrete practices of Palestinian individuals who refuse to allow the dominant historical narrative to swallow their personal pasts. The house visits that structure so much of the memoir are the most visible expression of this counter-historical impulse. These visits are acts of what the secondary literature on the text calls "active remembrance", practices of returning to and marking former lived spaces that transform the passive act of recollection into a visible, socially meaningful and politically charged form of commemoration (Masalha 2012).

The visiting Palestinians who slip in and out of settler-occupied West Jerusalem are, as the text makes clear, not issuing threats or demanding immediate restitution. They enter like what Huda herself terms "ghosts", to visit their fathers' gardens and orchards, to reinforce their identities, and to reactivate the sense memories of objects and places they once enjoyed (Amiry 2014, 219). Despite the stereotypical image of Palestinian men and women as troublemakers or security threats, these individuals enter prohibited areas only to rescue the remaining shreds of their memory from the pull of an all-encompassing and dominant history. The act of visiting is therefore simultaneously an act of remembering and an act of defiance, a refusal to accept that the Israeli state's legal erasure of Palestinian presence constitutes an actual ontological erasure.

The relationship between memory and history in *Golda Slept Here* is explicitly oppositional. Nora's foundational distinction is instructive here: "memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects; his-

tory binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and relations between things" (Nora 1989, 9). Amiry's text exploits precisely this distinction. By focusing on the concrete, the specific house, the particular stopper, the individual family album, the named street, the memoir builds a counter-historical record rooted in the material and the personal rather than in the abstract and the institutional. As Masalha argues, the disciplines of history and memory ought to function as "a site of hope, liberation and decolonization" (Masalha 2012). In *Golda Slept Here*, memory performs exactly this liberatory and decolonizing function by challenging the claims of a history that has been shaped entirely by the requirements of Israeli power. Gabi Baramki's museum visit is the most concentrated illustration of memory's counter-historical power. When he stands in the queue to enter the Tourjeman Museum on 12 June 1983, aged fifty-three, Gabi is surrounded by young Israeli visitors who are there to validate the historical significance of what the museum commemorates. For them, the building is a national monument. For Gabi, it is his home, the house his father designed and built, from which his family was expelled thirty-five years earlier. The brochure he reads in the queue becomes, in his hands, an instrument of alternative reading. Where the official text of the brochure describes the museum as "a meeting point, a place to clarify and discuss questions concerning war, peace, conflict and reconciliation" (Amiry 2014, 45), Gabi reads it through the lens of his own memories of Palestinian family reunions at the divide between the West and East quarters of Jerusalem. His personal memory does not simply supplement the official history. It actively contradicts and destabilizes it, revealing the historical contortions that have turned a Palestinian family home into an Israeli monument.

The acts of personal remembering in *Golda Slept Here* are never purely private. They are fundamentally social and collective, connecting individual experience to the broader landscape of Palestinian dispossession. Even in the opening pages of the memoir, Amiry's sleepless mind moves outward from her own circumstances to encompass her father's memories of the Palestine Broadcasting Service where he worked, and her mother's life moving between Jerusalem, Ramallah, Salt, and Damascus. In depicting her father as someone who "shied away from talking about his personal pain and immersed himself in starting a new life" in the diaspora, Amiry places him within the larger generational pattern of the nakba generation, those who chose survival over testimony (Amiry 2014, 9). This movement between the personal and the collective is characteristic of the memoir's approach throughout.

The reconstruction of Palestinian national identity is another dimension of *Golda Slept Here* that emerges clearly from the counter-historical current running through the text. The book does not subordinate individual stories to a collective national narrative. Rather, it allows individual cases to accumulate into a picture of collective dispossession that speaks to the Palestinian

cause of national self-determination without reducing any individual life to a mere example. The complex relationship between nationalist cultural practice and individual lived experience has been a central concern of postcolonial scholarship, which has shown how literary texts can negotiate the tension between personal testimony and collective political claims without resolving it into simple allegory (Lazarus 1999). The satirical song in the first chapter frames the loss of individual houses within the larger picture of Palestine as a stolen homeland, depicting the land as a bride "never consulted" in the successive decisions that stripped her of her identity (Amiry 2014, 13). The elegy-like song ends with the observation that:

> As Diaspora ended for one people
> Diaspora started for another
> A new nation remembered, an old one forgotten. (Amiry 2014, 13)

This formulation tacitly captures the zero-sum logic of settler colonialism with bitter precision. The political dimension of the book's engagement with national identity is also evident in its attention to what the Palestinian historian Masalha has termed "toponymicide" i.e. the systematic replacement of Arabic place names with Hebrew ones as a strategy of spatial erasure (Masalha 2012). Gabi's understanding of the name substitutions executed by Israel in the case of historical landmarks such as the Tourjeman Post and the Mandelbaum Gate, and Amiry's bitter recognition of an Israeli resident's reference to the nakba as the "War of Independence", are examples of this toponymicidal logic being resisted through the counter-archival practice of naming (Amiry 2014, 68). To insist on the Arabic name, to remember what a place was called before the renaming, is itself a political act of memory against history.

8. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Suad Amiry's *Golda Slept Here* constructs the Palestinian house as a "counter-archive" to settler-colonial erasure. Through close attention to architectural detail, domestic objects, personal narratives and the practices of house visits, Amiry assembles a record of Palestinian presence that sets itself against the official Israeli archive of absentee property, Jewish settlement and national memory. The house functions in this record not merely as a backdrop or a symbol but as an active agent of memory transmission, a site where the past materializes in the present and where the postgeneration encounters the inherited trauma of its predecessors.

The theoretical frameworks brought to bear in this analysis, Hirsch's theory of postmemory, Nora's lieux de memoire, Bennett and Brown's accounts of material agency, Derrida and Stoler's theorizations of the archive,

and Caruth and Luckhurst's pluralistic trauma theory, have proved complementary rather than competing in their application to Amiry's text. Together, they illuminate how the Palestinian house functions simultaneously as a material repository of lived history, as a mnemonic trigger for both direct memory and postmemory, as a site of legal and political contestation and as an embodied archive of resistance to dispossession.

The implications of this reading extend beyond the specific case of Palestinian literature. In settler-colonial contexts around the world, from Australia to Canada to South Africa, indigenous peoples have similarly had to construct counter-archives out of domestic space, oral tradition and material culture in the face of official archives that either erase or distort their histories. The Palestinian case, as analyzed through Amiry's memoir, offers a particularly rich and articulate example of this counter-archival practice because it is conducted by a writer who is also an architect, and who therefore brings to her narrative a dual sensitivity to the political stakes of built space and the mnemonic power of architectural detail.

The question that *Golda Slept Here* ultimately poses is not simply a question about Palestinian houses. It is a question about what counts as an archive, who has the authority to constitute one, and what happens when the official archive is itself a structure of violence. By insisting that a rusted cast-iron stopper, a bunch of keys carried for twenty years, a photo album lost in the chaos of exile and a gilded icon retrieved from a Russian nun are all elements of a legitimate historical record, Amiry challenges the epistemological assumptions that underlie colonial archival practice. She insists that living memory, embodied experience, and material traces are as authoritative as legal documents and state records, and that the archive of the dispossessed is as real and as valid as any other.

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