

Marney Sofia Poxon Kline
MA Module C – Making Global Neighborhoods: History Refugees and Ethnicity in U.S. &
European Urban History
Professor Sönke Kunkel
Freie Universität Berlin – JFK Institute for American Studies
Summer Term 2022 // Submitted November 2022

Palestinians in Berlin: History through Artistic Expression

Table of Contents

- I. Introduction
- IIa. Palestinians in Berlin, Germany as citizens, refugees & immigrants
- IIb. German politics as they intersect with the Israel-Palestine Conflict
- IIc. The dimensions of the “moral triangle”
- IId. Palestinians in Berlin’s urban and cultural sphere
- IIIa. Palestinian cultural expression in Berlin, Germany
- IIIb. Steve Sabella’s work as a case-study for the power of art to tell subjective histories
- IV. Conclusion
- V. Appendix: Artwork by Steve Sabella (visuals)

I. Introduction

This paper explores the historical background of Berlin's Palestinian community and its social and cultural context today. It examines how Palestinians shape their identities and historical narratives through art. It looks at how these acts of expression factor into public discourse about Palestinian identity and the Israel-Palestine conflict, especially given that asserting Palestinian ethnic identity is considered taboo by many given the highly politicized nature of the conflict and Germany's historical relationship to Jewish people and Israel's founding. This essay asks, "how is art used to express complex ethnic/national identities, and how do Palestinians use it to communicate their history and subjectivity?"

This is a particularly fruitful space of inquiry due to the "moral triangle" that links Germany, Israel and Palestine, as Germany's holocaust of Jews during World War II created massive numbers of Jewish refugees, many of whom proceeded to settle in Israel and contribute to the effort to expel Palestinians in 1948 (and in subsequent years). This in turn helped create one of contemporary history's most long-standing refugee crises and territorial disputes, as millions of Palestinians and their descendants were forced into exile and those who remain in Palestinian Territories live under a brutal military occupation that makes life, at best, unpleasant, and at worst, unlivable. The Israel-Palestine conflict is enduring, encompassing over seven decades of violence and a complex network of global stakeholders – notably the USA, Germany, and former colonial powers such as France and Britain.

In this essay, I argue that Palestinians in Berlin expressing their identity constitutes a cultural and political taboo due to Germany's historical relationship to Jews which has spawned a Holocaust "guilt" culture that, while morally well-intentioned, struggles to hold space for Palestinian trauma and frequently mislabels attempts to do so as acts of anti-Semitism.

Articulating Palestinian identity through art is a form of radical political activism, even when it's not explicitly intended. Further, artistic expression is a way of shaping historical narratives and a mode of telling stories about how Palestinians arrived and exist in Germany; it has the potential to challenge negative stereotypes and preserve Palestinian culture, which faces erasure. It has the power to shape public discourse, opinion, and legislation; and to facilitate dialogue and restorative justice for the embattled populations in question.

I've chosen to focus on Berlin because it is a cosmopolitan hub for immigrants, expats, and refugees – diverse populations that continuously change form and re-shape the city itself. It

is home to one of the largest urban Palestinian communities outside of the Middle East and a place where the history of Germany, Israel and Palestine form a compelling nexus. Given the political charge of this nexus in the German context, there has been little academic inquiry into its dimensions. Beyond that, Germany is home to the largest number of refugees in the EU – in the middle of 2021, for example, Germany reported receiving 1.24 million refugees and 233,000 asylum seekers.¹ The German capital of Berlin is also home to one of Europe’s largest Israeli diaspora communities. It is a city known for its diversity, chaotic political history, and, today, its lively public discourse on moral and political responsibility.

The Palestinian refugee crisis is global phenomenon and the product of a settler colonial project. The Israeli settler colonial project employs Orientalist discourses to justify itself and relies on the political and economic support of the USA and Europe to sustain itself.

While there is ample academic literature on the Palestine-Israel conflict and news coverage of a proverbial global refugee “crisis” stemming from conflict in the Middle East, Palestinian social and cultural life in Germany has not received much nuanced attention. The constellation of available studies, books, and published papers on the topic is sparse but contains several standout contributions. Sa’ed Atshan and Katharina Galor’s 2020 book, *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*, is a field-based study and analysis that explores Germany’s moral obligation to Palestinians and Israelis. In 2019, Jasmin Theresa Grimm and Sally Abu Bakr published “Future Heritage: A Community-Based Exchange between Berlin and Ramallah,” reporting on an initiative that united maker communities in Germany and Palestine and explored the concept of heritage – how it’s preserved and molded through time, and how that process becomes especially challenging in a place that is geographically and socially “torn apart.”² Sarah El Bulbeisi’s book, *Taboo, Trauma and Identity: Subject Constructions of Palestinians in Germany and in Switzerland, 1960 to 2015*, explores the repercussions of the justification, disregard and ‘tabooisation’ of the Palestinian experience of violence” in Germany and Switzerland.³ El Bulbeisi focuses particularly on how German refusal to categorize

¹ “UNHCR - Germany,” accessed September 29, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/germany.html>.

² Grimm, Jasmin Theresa, and Sally Abu Bakr. “Future Heritage: A Community-Based Exchange between Berlin and Ramallah المصنوع تراث.” In *Art Hack Practice*, 1st ed., 99–107. Routledge, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351241212-10>, 101.

³ Bulbeisi, Sarah El. “Taboo, Trauma and Identity: Subject Constructions of Palestinians in Germany and in Switzerland, 1960 to 2015.” Billet. *TRAF0 – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog). Accessed September 22, 2022. <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/25731>.

Palestinians fleeing the Lebanese Civil War in the 1980s as refugees meriting political asylum led to bureaucratic measures that kept this particular population intensely marginalized by excluding them from the workforce, education, and other key societal resources. Dima Abdulrahim's 1992 paper "Islam in a North European Setting: Palestinians in Berlin," is an informative dive into how Palestinians have integrated into German society, a process marked by impulses to return to antiquated societal practices such as polygamy and an emphasis on the imperative to seal Muslim women off from the 'corruption' of Western values/imperialism. It discusses how this community is riven by conflicting impulses to assert modernity but also uphold anachronistic interpretations of Islam and Shari'a law.

The following sources shape this paper's ideological and theoretical lens. Scholar Kathleen Niels Conzen defines ethnicity the following way: "we do not view ethnicity as primordial (ancient, unchanging, inherent group's blood, soul, or misty past)... but (as) a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memory."⁴ In essence, ethnicity is a fluid concept that changes constantly – a form of self-invention shaped by present realities and historical context.

For historical dates and reference to an attempted unbiased narrative arc of the Palestine-Israel conflict, I relied heavily on a textbook published in 2022 titled *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East*, authored by Abdel Monem Said Aly, Shai Feldman, and Khalil Shikaki.

As mentioned earlier, this paper affirms the ubiquitous presence of "Orientalism" in Western discourses, or the idea that Western countries have propagated a "way of seeing" Arab cultures and people that exaggerates their 'otherness,' connoting them with exoticism, backwardness, lack of 'civilization,' and an existential threat to Western values and life. It also regards the Zionist project as one of settler colonialism, or the process of eliminating an indigenous people to replace the population with a settler society. It is ideologically aligned with Noam Chomsky's humanitarian whistleblowing on Israel's settler colonial project and draws upon the historical narratives that he and Ilan Pappé offer in *Gaza in Crisis: Reflections on*

⁴ Conzen, Kathleen Neils, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George E. Pozzetta, and Rudolph J. Vecoli. "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, no. 1 (1992): 3–41. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27501011>, 4-5.

Israel's War Against the Palestinians (2010) and *On Palestine* (2015). Pappé's words in a 2015 interview sum up this stance:

“Zionism is the last remaining active settler-colonialist movement or project. Settler colonialism is, in a nutshell, a project of replacement and displacement, settlement and expulsion. Since this is the project, that you take over someone's homeland and you're not satisfied until you feel you've taken enough of the land and you've gotten rid of enough of the native people, as long as you feel that this is an incomplete project, you will continue with the project. Therefore such a project is based on dehumanization and elimination. It cannot be liberal. It cannot be socialist. It cannot be anything universal because it is an ideology that wants to help one group of people to get rid of another group of people. In most of the universal values, we're trying to offer guidance of how human beings should live together rather than instead of each other.”⁵

Pappé and Chomsky are high-profile intellectuals and proponents of the idea that the international community has a moral obligation to pressure Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian territories and cease committing human rights abuses. They also critically examine the role that the U.S. plays in funding and facilitating Israel's settler colonial project and enabling its ongoing, illegal expansion into Palestinian Territories.

This essay considers key questions raised by Noura Erakat in her book *Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine* (2019). Erakat centers her exploration on the legality of Palestinian Occupation, pondering the cascade of legal decisions that led to Palestinians as an ethnic group being, in many instances, wholly excluded from international law. It raises ethical questions such as, “how do groups decide, *en masse*, which types of persecution are acceptable, and which are not?” Erakat also offers a compelling historical narrative of how early Zionists adopted a *modus operandi* modeled directly on European settler colonialism, rendering it foundationally racist and incompatible with notions of universal human rights.

Drawing heavily on Atshan and Galor's *Moral Triangle*, this paper aligns with their support of Michael Rothberg's advocacy of “multidirectional memory” as a means of allowing recognition of both Palestinian and Jewish trauma, and not seeing them as oppositional or mutually exclusive. His book “Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization” introduces the concept of “competitive memory,” or the “fear that our recognition of another's trauma will dilute attention to our own.”⁶ As an antidote, he offers “multidirectional memory,” or cultivating recognition of everyone's trauma, and harnessing that

⁵ Pappé, Ilan. Ilan Pappé: Israel Is the Last Remaining, Active Settler-Colonialist Project. Interview by Eli Massey, May 5, 2016. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/ilan-pappe-bernie-sanders-noam-chomsky-bds-israel-palestine>.

⁶ Atshan, Sa'ed, and Katharina Galor. *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*. Kindle Edition. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. (Kindle Locations 117-121).

to enrich public discourse and honor everyone's memories and struggles in a mutually constitutive way. He shares, "the other's history and memory can serve as a source of renewal and reconfiguration for the self — granted one is willing to give up exclusive claims to ultimate victimization and ownership over suffering."⁷ It's an ethical vision that upholds historical relatedness, inviting people to work through "the partial overlaps and conflicting claims that constitute the memory and terrain of politics."⁸

The following section of this paper summarizes key statistics and discourses surrounding the Palestinian community in Berlin, Germany. It draws on the studies mentioned above and the fieldwork of Atshan and Galor. It considers various urban studies on the presence of Arab immigrants in Berlin, along with news coverage, which overwhelmingly conveys the taboo status and marginalization of Palestinian voices in the German cultural sphere.

Finally, I'll look at several artworks from Berlin-based Palestinian artist Steve Sabella, whose prolific career is a case study in the use of art to "humanize" one's struggle, put forth one's subjectivity, and narrate Palestinian history in terms that are legible to Western audiences — all of which offers a glimpse into the potential for Berlin and Germany to provide a context for restorative justice. In 2016, Sabella published a memoir titled *The Parachute Paradox* that inspired this research paper. Sabella works with the power of imagery to produce its own reality, a tool that can be used overcome what he terms the "colonization of the (Palestinian) imagination," the phenomenon that he describes as the most psychologically debilitating aspect of Israeli Occupation.⁹

IIa. Palestinians in Berlin, Germany as citizens, refugees & immigrants

Germany is home to the largest quantity of refugees in the EU and about 80,000 Palestinians, making it the largest Palestinian community in Europe. However, it has only recently gained the reputation of Europe's most welcoming country for foreigners fleeing wars and humanitarian crises.¹⁰ In 2015, former Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to allow one million refugees to

⁷ Atshan, Sa'ed, and Katharina Galor. *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. (Kindle Locations 117-121).

⁸ *Ibid.* (Kindle Locations 123-125).

⁹ Steve Sabella, *The Parachute Paradox* (Kerber Verlag, 2016).

¹⁰ Bulbeisi, Sarah El. "Taboo, Trauma and Identity: Subject Constructions of Palestinians in Germany and in Switzerland, 1960 to 2015." Billet. *TRAF0 – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog). Accessed September 22, 2022. <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/25731>, 1.

enter Germany, most fleeing war zones in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. This decision marked a seismic shift in public perception of Germany, marking it as a Western country with unusual willingness to accept, tolerate, and integrate foreign people. Domestic attitudes range from welcoming (*Willkommenskultur*) to hateful and isolationist, as seen in the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, a far-right group with thinly veiled sympathy for many Nazi ideas.¹¹

Defining Palestinians' refugee status has proven difficult for Germans since receiving an influx of Palestinians fleeing the Lebanese War in the 1980s, and more recently, those fleeing the civil war in Syria. Before that, in the 1960s, a small number of Palestinians trickled into Germany on work and study visas. In 1948, Israel displaced over 700,000 Palestinians, and in 1967, several hundred thousand more. Every year on May 15, Arab communities worldwide commemorate the "Nakba," or the "Memory of the Catastrophe" that occurred in 1948, when Israelis effectively displaced much of the Palestinian population and disassembled their society, making way for the establishment of the State of Israel.

Due to the German bureaucratic categorization of most Palestinian immigrants as lacking a distinct nation of origin, it is difficult to access reliable estimates of their population in Berlin. A meta-analysis performed by Atshan and Galor suggests there are about 45,000.¹²

According to Ralph Ghadban, a Berlin-based scholar of Lebanese origins, "Palestinian refugees from Lebanon constituted more than 44 percent of the Arab community in Berlin in the early 2000s and more than 75 percent of the Palestinian community in Germany."¹³ Scholar Sarah El Bulbeisi elaborates on this topic:

"Among Palestinians in Europe the most vulnerable group are the Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, due to their legal status. Palestinians who fled the Lebanese civil war were not recognized as political refugees in Germany, as German administrative practice only grants political asylum if there is evidence of state persecution. The German authorities wanted to send them back, but Lebanon didn't sign the return agreement. This policy led to the *Duldungsstatus* (toleration status), a temporary postponement of their deportation. The factual impossibility of deportation led to repeated renewals of this status, which resulted in the so-called *Kettenduldung* (chain toleration) – toleration for years. They were denied the right to education, work, financial grants and social benefits."¹⁴

¹¹ Atshan, Sa'ed, and Katharina Galor. *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. (Kindle Locations 917-929).

¹² *Ibid.*, (Kindle Location 1174).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Sarah El Bulbeisi, "Taboo, Trauma and Identity: Subject Constructions of Palestinians in Germany and in Switzerland, 1960 to 2015," Billet, *TRAF0 – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), accessed September 22, 2022, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/25731>, 1-2.

El Bulbeisi explains that these refugees experienced an entirely different socioeconomic reality than those who migrated to Germany in the '60s on valid visas, who integrated more seamlessly despite finding themselves in exile, refugees sur place, after Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. Along with many other scholars, El Bulbeisi problematizes how Germany handled the Palestinian migrants fleeing the Lebanese War in the 1980s. Suspended in a long-term limbo-status, unable to work, study, or integrate, this community experienced profound societal marginalization causing many people to participate in unofficial/illegal economies and contribute to high crime rates, low literacy rates, general social dysfunction, and an increase in patriarchal modes of social organization that disempower women.

In a 1992 paper, academic Dima Abdulrahim offered a revealing portrait of the Palestinian experience in Germany in the 1980s. Applying for asylum, she explains, “was a long and complicated process for the applicant which culminated in either recognition as a persecuted political refugee or deportation.”¹⁵ She elaborates on how the bureaucratic protocols that aimed to handle this flow of immigrants had a devastating impact on their ability to thrive:

“It can be argued that the procedures of political asylum functioned as a 'total institution' aiming at the segregation of asylum seekers and the circumscription of their social and economic action placing them in a position of dependence and control. The procedures determined the marginal character of asylum-seeking communities and denied them participation in formal public life. They also determined the transient and temporary character of these communities. Asylum laws intervened in all aspects of the lives of hopeful refugees, either directly or indirectly. People were very often housed in collective premises and were not allowed to leave the - then walled - city without prior permission from the police. Adult and further education was not possible. Legal employment was not permitted for all practical purposes. To meet the basic needs of asylum seekers, social benefits were given in the form of cash, vouchers and food rations.”¹⁶

Between 1985 and the present, a series of legal amendments have sought to remedy the social dysfunction, marginalization and stigmatization of the Palestinian community in Germany caused by this initial series of administrative faux pas – but efforts are ongoing. Today, Palestinians in Germany are still denied a national identity, having been categorized as stateless (*Staatenlose*) before 1985, and then as unresolved (*ungeklärt*) following legal modifications thereafter. Abdulrahim explains, “Palestinians believe this to be part of an international conspiracy aiming at the annihilation of their national identity and claim to the land. The affirmation of Palestinian identity is turned into a form of political struggle.”¹⁷ Thus, identifying

¹⁵ Abdulrahim, Dima. “Islam in a North European Setting: Palestinians in Berlin.” *Cambridge Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (1992): 97–108. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23817351>, 98.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

as “Palestinian” and visual acknowledgements of Palestine’s existence (i.e. the national flag) are often considered gestures of activism and political resistance in the context of German society.

IIb. German politics as they intersect with the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Germany’s diplomatic role at the nexus of Israeli, Palestinian and German politics is complex and reveals the contentious nature of its role as a world leader and quasi-mediator in the Israel-Palestine conflict. From a diplomatic perspective, Germany has staunchly supported Israel since the end of World War II, following the collapse of the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler’s genocidal campaign to exterminate Jews. In 1952, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer signed the Luxembourg Treaty with Israeli leader David Ben-Gurion, guaranteeing West Germany’s support of the Jewish State of Israel and ongoing reparation payments to Israel. (By contrast, Soviet-controlled East Germany established official diplomatic contact with the Palestinian Liberation Organization during the 1960s and took an anti-Zionist political stance.) Despite supporting Israel, West and now-unified Germany has sent a steady flow of humanitarian aid to Palestine over the past several decades, constituting one the largest donor countries to The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development sums up the national approach as follows: “Germany regards its efforts for stability and opportunities in the Palestinian territories, not least, as an expression of its special historical responsibility for the security of Israel.”¹⁸

After the Oslo Accords of 1993, for example, Germany increased aid to Palestine and advocated for Palestinian self-determination. Support for Israel has generally remained unwavering, apart from a few German politicians who have criticized Israel’s justification of the 1967 War, the First Intifada (1987 – 93), the Second Intifada (2000 – 2005) and Israel’s war with Lebanon in 1982, the Gulf in 1991 and 2003, and its siege of the Gaza Strip between 2008 and 2014.¹⁹

¹⁸ “Palestinian Territories,” Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://www.bmz.de/en/countries/palestinian-territories>.

¹⁹ Atshan, Sa’ed, and Katharina Galor. *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, (Kindle Locations 792-797).

IIc. The dimensions of the “moral triangle”

Published in 2020, Atshan and Galor’s *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians* provides a critical scholarly investigation into Germany’s moral responsibility toward Israeli and Palestinian people given its role in generating the acute need for a safe homeland for Jewish people during World War II, contributing significantly to the conditions that led to the dispossession of millions of Palestinians. The book focuses on the “Gordian Knot” between these three populations, especially as it plays out in Berlin, a city where many Palestinians have settled by necessity and many Israelis have migrated by choice. Atshan and Galor argue that Germany has a distinct moral obligation to equally acknowledge Palestinians’ and Israelis’ historical experience of dispossession. Their research and analysis suggest that Germany’s current political and cultural climate makes it taboo to do so.

The Moral Triangle opens with a description of Yael Ronan’s play *Third Generation*, a play that the Israeli government originally tried to shut down on charges of anti-Semitism. In it, Ronan places the conflict in an international context that spans a multitude of ethnicities, nationalities, and generations. Responding to the question of why Israeli officials found the performance so threatening, Ronan shared that the “the idea of a ‘triangle’ that connects Germans, Israelis, and Palestinians challenges those who do not want Palestinians to be rendered legible as victims of the historical circumstances that have led Germany to support Israel since the Holocaust.”²⁰ Meanwhile, post-war German culture is dedicated to acknowledging its Holocaust guilt via rigorous *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (working through the past), entailing many physical memorials to murdered Jews, broad coverage of Holocaust history in German schools, criminalization of acts of anti-Semitism, and preferential treatment of Israelis within its immigration policies. This constitutes a firm and necessary acknowledgement of Germany’s responsibility to compensate for the war crimes of Nazis.

However, public discourse on the matter lacks nuance and fails to capture the complexity behind the present-day political conflict linking Israel, Palestine, and Germany. *The Moral Triangle* performs a much-needed discourse analysis on “questions of memory, trauma, narrations of the Holocaust, experiences of the Nakba, trajectories in pursuit of reconciliation, pathways of migration, policies toward refugees, integration of religious and ethnic minorities,

²⁰ *Ibid.*, (Kindle Locations 97-101).

Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, European politics, and the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.”²¹ Using an anthropological approach, Atshan and Galor interviewed hundreds of Berlin residents of diverse ethnic and political backgrounds on these topics. Many avoided talking about these issues for fear of reprisal or damage to their career.

Samir, a Berlin-based restaurant owner who arrived via Lebanon said: “describing the difficulties of our life as refugees or descendants of refugees would insult the Germans.”²² He felt grateful for the opportunity to live in Germany and have a new life, but sad that he couldn’t talk about his trauma. Meanwhile, the “majority of Germans (they) spoke to, including highly educated and informed individuals, were unfamiliar with the term or concept of ‘Nakba,’ and only a few were truly familiar with the history and trauma of Palestinians.”²³ They also saw Jews as the main victims and more entitled to a “right to exist” in Israel-Palestine and military protection to avoid another Holocaust. Many leftists believe these attitudes and rights should also be applied to Palestinians. Atshan and Galor summarize:

“We found that the compassion underlying many Germans’ recognition of moral responsibility toward Israelis, which we agree is to be lauded, largely has not been extended toward Palestinians. This ethical shortcoming should be corrected. Second, it explores how Berlin has become a site of possibility where space is opened up to confront trauma and injustice and build alternative multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious publics. This has allowed Israelis and Palestinians in the city to identify points of intersection and to shape their lives alongside each other with a sense of equality and mutual recognition.”²⁴

Thus, Berlin, home to about 10,000 Israelis and over double the number of Palestinians, is conceived of as a place where Germany’s moral obligation to empower both these populations can be reified. Germany has modeled restorative justice for Jewish people – what stops it from modeling that for Israelis and Palestinians who live within its borders?

²¹ Atshan, Sa’ed, and Katharina Galor. *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, (Kindle Locations 104-107)..

²² *Ibid.*, (Kindle Locations 549-550).

²³ *Ibid.*, (Kindle Locations 467-469).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, (Kindle Locations 1807-1811).

IId. Palestinians in Berlin’s urban and cultural sphere

Berlin’s Palestinian community is spread throughout the diverse metropolis of about 3.6 million people but concentrates heavily in the historically working-class neighborhood of Neukölln. While the demographics of Neukölln are diverse and shifting rapidly, it is home to *Sonnennallee*, known by many as the “Arab Street” of Berlin, a place where Arabs have built an urban landscape that evokes Middle Eastern culture.²⁵ There are restaurants, shisha bars, barber shops, and grocery stores full of Arab people, food, and consumer goods. Other demographics – like students, expats, and German people from diverse income brackets – are folded into the social mix. In a paper titled “‘Multi-Culti’ vs. ‘Another Cell Phone Store’: Changing Ethnic, Social, and Commercial Diversities in Berlin-Neukölln,” author Anna Steigemann describes Neukölln as a place where “rather abstract concepts, such as globalization, migration and diversity, take a concrete and local form.”²⁶ She recalls Jane Jacobs’ metaphor of the “sidewalk ballet” that animates urban spaces with “processes of socialization, negotiation, and eventual mutual understanding.”²⁷

But descriptions are rarely so sanguine. In studies conducted for *The Moral Triangle*, academics Atshan and Galor discovered common discourses of contempt towards Arabs in this area, with sentiments such as: “We are no longer at home here,” “Neukölln is dangerous,” “There was a radical increase in crime,” “Most of them can’t even read,” “It is a different culture,” “They kill their children and wives in the streets,” “The terrorist attacks have made life here impossible,” “I’m a feminist, and I can’t stand how they treat their women,” and “It’s like in the Middle East: dirty and untidy.”²⁸ Meanwhile popular news coverage of Muslim people in Berlin, particularly those in Neukölln, focuses overwhelmingly on instances of criminality, unemployment, income inequality, failed integration, and welfare dependence.

²⁵ Jamal, Hebh. “In Berlin, a Fight for Palestinian Identity — and a Place to Call Home.” *+972 Magazine*, February 14, 2022. <https://www.972mag.com/palestinians-berlin-refugees/>.

²⁶ Anna Steigemann, “‘Multi-Culti’ vs. ‘Another Cell Phone Store’: - Changing Ethnic, Social, and Commercial Diversities in Berlin-Neukölln,” *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies* 12, no. 1 (2020): 83–105, <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v12.i1.6872>, 84.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁸ Atshan, Sa’ed, and Katharina Galor. *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, (Kindle Locations 984-987).

Academic Sarah El Bulbeisi argues that the systemic violence and erasure that Palestinians face in Israel and Occupied Palestine follows them to the northern European context, where there is a “moral occupation through the European imagination,” that renders Palestinian trauma and subjectivity eroded and unrecognized.²⁹ She calls this a “discursive form of expulsion” that began with the Nakba in 1948 and continues to this day.³⁰ While many Palestinians in Berlin have integrated into German society, life in Neukölln for the average refugee can bear this reality out: many interact predominantly with other refugees, Federal Border Police, or immigration bureaucrats; many live in insecure housing situations and ghettoized conditions that silo them off from their host society and produce deep social dysfunction.

IIIa. Palestinian cultural expression in Berlin, Germany

While it is in many ways politically taboo for Palestinians to articulate their identity, subjectivity, and history in Berlin, the city is also a diverse, open-minded metropolis that affords Palestinians opportunities to do so to some extent. Research reveals a plethora of activist groups in the city that give voice to Palestinian identity. This includes The Saot festival, an interdisciplinary multi-day event that stands in solidarity with Palestine via film-screenings, readings, concerts, and cooking lessons – all aiming to combat cultural marginalization. There is Dabkeh Al-Awda Berlin, a dance troupe that performs Palestinian folkloric dance and voices the Palestinian right to return. Berlin is home to several Israeli organizations that criticize the Occupation of Palestine including Berlin Against Pink-washing, an activist group that opposes Israel’s use of LGBTQ-friendly rhetoric to mask its human rights violations in the Occupied Territories, BDS berlin, a non-violent boycott movement, Jewish Antifa Berlin, and Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Near East.

Despite regular battles over what can and cannot be said on the topic, Berliners have often made space for artistic expression about the Israel-Palestine conflict that recognizes the plight of Palestinians. Nonetheless, many Palestinian artists in Germany face both charges of

²⁹ Sarah El Bulbeisi, “Taboo, Trauma and Identity: Subject Constructions of Palestinians in Germany and in Switzerland, 1960 to 2015,” Billet, *TRAF0 – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), accessed September 22, 2022, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/25731>.

³⁰ Sarah El Bulbeisi, “Taboo, Trauma and Identity: Subject Constructions of Palestinians in Germany and in Switzerland, 1960 to 2015,” Billet, *TRAF0 – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), accessed September 22, 2022, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/25731>.

anti-Semitism and attacks from the far-right.³¹ Throughout Berlin’s Muslim enclaves, one may spot the ubiquitous cartoon symbol of “Handala,” or a “young, barefoot refugee boy with spiked hair whose back is turned to the viewer; he does not grow, and his face will not be seen until Palestine is free.”³² In his article “Arts in Dark Times,” writer Ahmad H. Sa’di explains how Palestinians use art to grapple with the existential destruction that occurred during the Nakba in 1948. The “allegorical language” of such art “augments (its) meaning and might open a window into the world of the Palestinians, who lack archives, official historical narratives, and institutions of remembrance.”³³ Thus artistic expression on this topic is not only a radical act of asserting Palestinian subjectivity in communities that mostly attempt to ignore it, but also an act of record-keeping and archiving – in other words, an act of writing, or ‘doing’ history.

In a similar vein, in 2020, scholars Jasmin Theresa Grimm and Sally Abu Bakr launched a project called, “Future Heritage: A Community-Based Exchange between Berlin and Ramallah” in which they facilitated collaboration between German digital media artists and Palestinian craftspeople, ultimately finding ways to preserve traditional Palestinian pottery (heritage) via 3D scanning and printing. The project leaders explained their goal:

“(we) seek to explore new ways of articulating and distributing cultural heritage within the context of the Palestinian political situation. In the Palestinian Territories, daily life is interrupted and autonomy and future perspectives barely exist. Palestinian culture is geographically torn apart. Heritage, therefore, is the element that unifies generations but is practiced daily as an antiquity, glorifying the past and neglecting the future. Memories overlay the present... to reaffirm Palestinian existence. Slowly transforming the actual cultural heritage through craft (in our case, pottery) is an attempt to formulate and emphasize new narratives.”³⁴

By fusing markers of Palestinian culture that require ongoing “doing” (i.e. pottery) with modern modes of production, this exchange project helped Palestinians preserve their cultural heritage for the future. Like Conzen’s definition of ethnicity as an ongoing “process of construction” that itself modulates historical memory, Grimm and Abu Bakr’s exchange project reified the idea that heritage is not “antiquity, but rather... a living organism that is open to

³¹ Ruairi Casey, “‘It Has Crossed a Line’: Palestinian Artists Targeted in Germany,” accessed July 11, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/7/palestinian-artists-targeted-in-germany-documenta-15-art-festival>.

³² Atshan, Sa’ed, and Katharina Galor. *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020 (Kindle Locations 2554-2556).

³³ Sa’di, Ahmad H. “Arts in Dark Times.” *Third Text* 36, no. 4 (July 4, 2022): 311–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2022.2083819>, 1.

³⁴ Grimm, Jasmin Theresa, and Sally Abu Bakr. “Future Heritage: A Community-Based Exchange between Berlin and Ramallah التراث المستقل تراث.” In *Art Hack Practice*, 1st ed., 99–107. Routledge, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351241212-10>, 101.

access, owned by communities and reproducing itself in a cycle of constant change.”³⁵ Similar to a species in an ecosystem, a cultural identity is subject to constant evolution; and it can be preserved or rendered extinct.

IIIb. Steve Sabella’s work as a case-study for the power of art to tell subjective histories

Berlin-based Palestinian artist Steve Sabella’s work bears out a similar ethos. Without stated political intentions, his work grapples with the state of exile in which Palestinians have existed since 1948. He articulates this situation with the concept of the “Israeli colonization of the imagination” as summed up by the analogy of a tandem sky-dive in which “there is an Israeli on the back of every Palestinian, controlling all aspects of life – the Israeli always in control... (placing) the Palestinian under constant threat, in a never-ending hostage situation.”³⁶ His art, which he regards as an inquiry into the “genealogy of the image,” offers powerful modes of storytelling and activism.³⁷

After a lifetime battling for the right to live peacefully in his native East Jerusalem, Sabella ultimately landed in Berlin in 2010, where he developed a sense of peace with his identity and overcame much of the psychological turmoil that Israeli Occupation wrought upon him since birth. While having experienced discrimination and violence at the hands of the Israeli military, Sabella also “passes” as a Jewish person due to his appearance, education level and fluency in Hebrew and English, allowing him to witness perspectives he otherwise would not access and empathize with Israelis. Living in Europe, he challenges people to describe to him “what a Palestinian look(s) like,” as he is regularly told he does not seem like an Arab or Palestinian.³⁸ In his memoir *The Parachute Paradox*, Sabella reflects on his role as an artist in Berlin: “In the world of art, there is no reality, only imagination. As long as there is one Palestinian who imagines a free Palestine, the Occupation has no chance. The time has come for the language of life. My awareness of life intensified when I learned the be in Berlin – to just be, and let be. I

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁶ Steve Sabella, *The Parachute Paradox* (Kerber Verlag, 2016), 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 301.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

learned to process life without filters. To look at reality and see it as it is and then go deeper and beyond.”³⁹ Sabella thus articulates how, despite considering himself in exile, Berlin has opened up a space within him that allows him to speak a universal language (“the language of life”) and access an internal sense of liberation. Regardless of where you are born, he reflects, “the moment we get detached from the umbilical cord, we become bound, tied to an infinite number of other attachments. Life after that becomes a process of liberation, about our endless resolution to free ourselves from everything.”⁴⁰ He thus views his struggle as a universal one, one in which we transcend petty politics and vie to understand ourselves as citizens of planet Earth. His perspective is valuable precisely because it is artistic and spiritual, although much of his identity on paper has been decided by a cynical geopolitical context.

When asked about his origins, Sabella ponders: “We are from a place, a city, or even a street. What if you live in a different country every ten years over the course of a lifetime? Which one do you stay true to?”⁴¹ Mired in confusion over what constitutes an identity and a sense of belonging, Sabella creates art that asks viewers to linger in the universality of such questions.

In *The Parachute Paradox*, Sabella shares his belief that whoever controls imagery controls narrative, and whoever controls narrative holds power. While the power to control imagery and narrative is always contested and shifting, Sabella argues that Israelis have overwhelmingly won the battle to construct and disseminate imagery that upholds their narrative and enables them to continue to commit human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories. “The military defeat of the Arab World by Israel,” he explains, “was quickly followed by the collapse and defeat of its image. The Arab world could no longer generate images of value, allowing others to generate its image. In reality, the Arab nations are now fighting for the liberation of their image.”⁴² He continues:

“I have met Palestinians born in the diaspora who felt they were under Occupation despite having never set foot in Occupied Palestine. This impression had to do with the power of the Occupation, which started with the land and then shifted to occupy the minds through the colonization of their imagination... Today the Palestinian image requires not only visual liberation, but also a tremendous amount of visual correction. Only then, reality begins to change.”⁴³

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 243.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 248.

His insight recalls the thousands of Palestinian people who were born far away from Palestine – in places like Berlin – but who still experience the effects of occupation via marginalization in their home countries and inherited trauma from older generations. A large part of Sabella’s artistic work seems to be an effort to put forth imagery that resists this “colonization of the imagination” and articulates Palestinians’ right to exist.

Steve Sabella’s recent artwork “Everland” converses with Abu Bakr and Grimm’s exchange project, taking up the mantle of preserving Palestinian heritage in a joyful, inclusive way that transcends borders. The “Everland” photographic tapestry bursts with color, merging diverse traditional Palestinian embroideries in a collage, a craft that women produce to tell the story of their ancestry.⁴⁴ Sabella describes it as “proof of presence that no power can uproot from the people’s imagination, a celebration of collective identity and narrative that gets renewed, awakened every time we see or touch its beauty.”⁴⁵ He continues to elucidate on the digital photographic medium:

“*Everland* is not stitched with cotton, wool, or silk, but with digital threads weaved on a new fabric of life, on the fabric of light. And if the light falling on the earth is always new, how can we stay the same? We are creatures of the light. And the light shines in all the colors of the world, creating the threads of our life. And it is up to us how we weave them together. Every time *Everland* will be on display, its nine squares will be put in a different constellation, including their orientation to any side. This way, (it) will always have endless possibilities, creating a new visual, forever changing... (*Everland*) is the land of Palestine, with roots stretching everywhere... (however it) has fallen off the map of the world – sidelined, lost its center.”⁴⁶

Everland brings up a common theme in Palestinian art: using art to combat the ongoing threat of erasure; and responding to the threat by finding innovative ways to resist it. In 2004, Sabella produced another powerful artwork called *Till the End* that communicates the devastation wrought by Israeli settlements, a project that continues to displace Palestinians from their homes today, notwithstanding the fact that international courts have ruled it illegal.⁴⁷ *Till the End* featured stones that Sabella collected from areas in Occupied Palestine that he felt were threatened by imminent demolition or seizure. He photographed where each one came from and printed it onto the stone: “they had been there,” he explained, “witness to everything around them” and belonged to the land itself, transcending political turmoil and impartially surviving

⁴⁴ Sabella, Steve. *Everland*. 2020. <https://stevesabella.com/everland/>.

⁴⁵ Sabella, Steve. *The Parachute Paradox*. Kerber Verlag, 2016, 318.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ Sabella, Steve. *Till the End*. 2004. <https://stevesabella.com/artworks/till-the-end/>.

brutal conflicts.⁴⁸ Sabella collected one of the stones from a house owned by a man named Charlie. Upon visiting the property, he met Charlie and asked how he came to own the property; Charlie narrated the day he inherited it in 1967:

“We looked through the windows and saw Israeli soldiers surrounding the house. Their orders were to open the door. But my father resisted. He held the front door with his back as they tried to force their way inside. The soldiers then sprayed the door with bullets, killing my father on the spot. They then continued their march down the road, as if nothing had happened. With the war raging on, we had no choice but to bury my father in the garden.”⁴⁹

Steve proceeds to reflect, “I thought if all of this had happened to this house, the number of narratives behind the façade of every occupied Palestinian house must be unthinkable – a reality within reality, trauma without end.”⁵⁰ Sabella’s stones from *Till the End* thus bear out grim, impactful histories that otherwise might not receive an audience. His work encourages viewers to scratch beneath the surface of tangible objects to reveal powerful historical narratives that shape people’s identities and have continuous societal ripple effects.

In another project, titled *Mentalopia*, Sabella examines how the concept of nationality places rather arbitrary and de-humanizing hierarchies upon human bodies.⁵¹ Referencing the nationalities of a group of artists that he assembled, he scanned tiny stamps from each of their countries and printed them out in “life-size” dimensions. He then merged each artists’ portrait onto each stamp randomly, hanging the prints with hooks on metal chains. The final impression “revealed the clashing connotations like the low price we suddenly had on our heads when representing others” and rendered the artists as “confused, residing in a foreign space, appearing lost.”⁵² Sabella’s work thus encourages viewers to consider their own blindness as they conceptualize otherness, the comparative value of different humans, and how they assign value to themselves via notions of ethnicity and nationality.

IV. Conclusion

This paper is an introductory attempt to articulate the cultural and historical context of Germany’s Palestinian population, weaving their present-day situation into a broader

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵¹ Sabella, Steve. “*Mentalopia Exhibitions.*” *Steve Sabella (blog)*. Accessed November 23, 2022.

<https://stevesabella.com/mentalopia-exhibitions/>.

⁵² Sabella, Steve. *The Parachute Paradox*. Kerber Verlag, 2016, 187.

international context that considers Germany's and Western countries' role in creating their predicament. In exploring the dimensions of the Palestinian community in Berlin, I've focused on art as a medium to tell subjective Palestinian histories in ways that are non-violent and conducive to collective healing. I also consider it a medium through which marginalized groups can contribute to efforts to "write" or narrate their own histories in ways that reach diverse audiences.

The Palestine-Israel conflict is an emotionally and politically charged topic with particular weight in the landscape of Berlin, a city shaped by a history of political violence and persecution and the former presence of its own "separation wall," which was removed only three decades ago. Today, it is a diverse, progressive metropolis that large numbers of Palestinian, Muslim, Jewish, and Israeli people call home. It is a place that, at least in principle and in popular imagination, prioritizes governing its population without heavily discriminatory policies and modes of oppression. It is a city known for grappling with the ghosts of its past with an explosive culture of free expression – whether that be through visual art, music, protest, or any number of other modalities. It is thus a rich territory for exploration of the Palestine-Israel conflict and the intense traumas that both populations have endured. The artwork of Steve Sabella is just one case study in the power of art to communicate complex political identities and stimulate public imagination, empowering people to envision a world where all human beings enjoy basic dignities. Sabella offers the following piece of advice on overcoming a struggle: "If you can get through these periods with the help of a supportive guide, you will come to see that it was an act of grace that brought you to your knees, to make you self-aware."⁵³ Perhaps the confluence of Israeli and Palestinian immigrants in Berlin, Germany is just that: an act of grace that brings us to our knees, to make us self-aware.

⁵³ Sabella, Steve. *The Parachute Paradox*. Kerber Verlag, 2016, 269.

V. Appendix: Artwork by Steve Sabella (visuals)



>> Sabella, Steve. *Everland*. 2020.
<https://stevesabella.com/everland/>.



>> Sabella, Steve. *Till the End*. 2004.
<https://stevesabella.com/artworks/till-the-end/>.



>> Sabella, Steve. *Mentalopia Exhibitions*. 2007.
<https://stevesabella.com/mentalopia-exhibitions/>.

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