Mapping Palestine/Israel through Interactive Documentary

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ABSTRACT
Available on publicly accessible websites, interactive documentaries are typically free to use, allowing audiences to navigate through amounts of information too large for standard film or television documentaries. Media literacy, however, is needed to understand the ways that interactive documentaries reveal or conceal their power to narrate. Examining ARTE France’s Gaza Sderot (2008–9), Zochrot’s iNakba (2014), and Dorit Naaman’s Jerusalem, We Are Here (2016), this article discusses documentaries that prompt audiences to reflect upon asymmetries in the power to forget history and the responsibility to remember it by mapping Palestinian geographies that have been rendered invisible. Since media ecologies are increasingly militarized, particularly in Palestine/Israel, interactive documentaries like iNakba and Jerusalem, We Are Here can disrupt Israeli state branding as technologically innovative while minimizing risk of surveillance by avoiding the use of location-aware technologies that transform interaction into tracking.

Documentary films educate audiences, but most audiences are unfamiliar with how documentaries do more than simply represent reality and are unaware that power determines whose perspectives are prioritized. After being awarded at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), 5 Broken Cameras (2011) received wide release. Its visibility, however, distracts from the ways in which the film contributes more to narratives about official Israeli support for documentaries critical of Israel’s policies than to narratives about Palestinian resistance. Despite credited roles as codirectors, the collaboration between Palestinian amateur filmmaker Emad Burnat and professional Israeli filmmaker Guy Davidi was unequal. The film conceals this power imbalance through a character-driven narrative whose protagonist, Burnat, purportedly embodies universal ideas of what it means to be human. The occupation, thus, becomes a personal story. The documentary examines the conflict over several years but reduces history to the present, rendering Palestinian geographies invisible. It documents symptoms and outcomes rather than causes. Criticism remains stuck in an ahistorical and depoliticized present. To imagine a future requires acknowledging the past, particularly the Nakba.

This article examines documentaries that prompt audiences to reflect upon asymmetries in the power to forget and the responsibility to remember history by mapping Palestinian geographies that have been rendered invisible. These documentaries are alternatives to those available relatively inexpensively either as DVDs or on streaming platforms, and to those that are accessible only through expensive subscription services available to members of large research universities. The documentaries examined here are exhibited online without charge. They are also interactive. They require audiences to do more than click the “play” icon. They are

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designed for viewers accustomed to searching for information online. ARTE France's *Gaza Sderot*, for example, allows audiences to select short video files, posted by two teams: one, Palestinian; the other, Israeli. Its website includes word clouds and maps—easy-to-use digital tools that encourage viewers to think beyond testimony alone. The generously financed and heavily produced documentary was featured at IDFA's DocLab, which self-defines as “one of the leading platforms for interactive documentary art and storytelling” that is “shaping the landscape of emerging media and art.”

Innovative technologies, however, can also distract, as the discussion below demonstrates.

Other interactive documentaries confront history and complicate what viewers think documentary can do. Zochrot's *iNakba* (2014), for example, is a mobile app that layers names, locations, and information related to Palestinian villages razed in 1948 onto digital maps. Users can use the app on or off site. Subtitled *The Invisible Land*, the app makes Palestine visible digitally on land now considered Israeli, functioning as an interactive documentary that is mobile and immersive for self-guided exploration. Similarly, Dorit Naaman’s *Jerusalem, We Are Here* layers information about the neighborhood of Qatamon (Katamon), which has been heavily gentrified, onto digital maps. In the same way that Zochrot marks razed villages, Naaman marks original ownership of buildings in Qatamon. In addition, users can access official data from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRW A), officially charged with dispensing services to Palestine refugees, as well as other data from personal accounts—that sometimes function like citizen journalism—then layer them over existing maps in acts of critical cartography that “remap” in an effort to counter dominant power and its abuses. Here, digital tools help shape meaning, and users can contribute more than user comments, which is all that *Gaza Sderot* allows.

By focusing on interactive documentaries, this article shows how digital tools can be manipulated both to facilitate and to impede accountability. Although such tools can distract us with their novelty, they can also help us notice what we might not have seen—or be able to see—not only due to physical distance that exceeds human eyesight, but also due to political conditioning to accept certain perspectives while rejecting others. *Gaza Sderot* maintains a closed and ahistorical narrative structure, depicting “both sides.” *iNakba* and *Jerusalem, We Are Here*, in contrast, are designed for ongoing historicized analysis. They are open to new data. They confront the past rather than report the present. They require users to evaluate potentially conflicting evidence rather than deliver *Gaza Sderot*’s socially acceptable narrative, encapsulated in the tagline: “Life in spite of everything.” *iNakba* and *Jerusalem, We Are Here* communicate across incompatible realities rooted in (mis)understandings of history by leaving it up to viewers to evaluate large quantities of data in relation to other data to which they also have access.

Interactive documentaries are a productive site for developing media literacy and translating work in the social sciences and history for broader audiences. They draw upon work in interdisciplinary fields such as affective cartography and spatial humanities. The kinds of data valued by these fields, such as emotions, are not commonly used in critical area studies, evoking Timothy Mitchell's criticism of purportedly universal (code for neutral and scientific) terms from the social sciences that dominate Middle East studies. Rather than merely representing realities, as *Gaza Sderot* does, *iNakba* and *Jerusalem, We Are Here* present audiences with large amounts of historical and contemporary data through which they must navigate to construct arguments. Palestine's invisible geographies become digitally, if not physically, present. Through the augmented realities of interactive documentary, Palestine's invisible geographies acquire a
digital presence, which then becomes a tool for countering the state and corporate biases discussed below.

As Palestine becomes increasingly inaccessible to Palestinians, interactive documentaries acquire another valuable function. They operate as mediated alternatives to on-site visits.\textsuperscript{12} They are accessible to Palestinians who cannot travel due to limited mobility based on Israeli ID cards. Although access remains limited by Israel’s regular internet and power cuts in Palestinian localities, alongside antiquated 2G and 3G connections, \textit{iNakba} and \textit{Jerusalem, We Are Here} do not require high-speed internet or vast bandwidth to work. Their use of inexpensive technologies is an important element of their design. As Helga Tawil-Souri and Miriyam Aouragh argue, “Palestinian ‘internet spaces’ are grounded in offline materialities,” noting that Palestinian access to the internet was illegal until 1993.\textsuperscript{13}

By providing detailed analyses of these three examples of interactive documentary, this article models reading strategies (that is, digital literacy) that help us identify how documentaries address viewers differently: \textit{Gaza Sderot} addresses audiences to “humanize” conflict; \textit{iNakba} addresses audiences to elicit accountability; and \textit{Jerusalem, We Are Here} addresses audiences to reclaim historical coexistence between different people as a potential model for the present. Like other forms of cultural production, interactive documentaries are nonviolent “weapons” of resistance against erasure and annihilation.\textsuperscript{14} The discussion concludes with questions about the surveillance structured into the digital technologies used in interactive documentaries since these interface—that is, communicate—with the internet and mobile networks tethered to military technologies, such as GIS (global information systems). Hacking these, however, can productively disrupt Israeli state branding that veils colonialism under neoliberalism.

\textbf{What Are Interactive Documentaries?}

Interactive documentaries may seem unfamiliar, but they are easy to use. They render data into information through the use of interactive tools that are designed to be intuitive. They require audiences to abandon relatively passive positions as \textit{media spectators} and inhabit obligatory active positions as \textit{software users}. Running on laptops and mobile phones, they integrate with the digital environment of our daily online lives by connecting to familiar platforms such as Google Maps and YouTube. They involve multiple activities like “reading, watching, commenting, sharing content, talking to others, filling in a quiz, playing, and clicking.”\textsuperscript{15} To experience the documentary, viewers must instruct software to \textit{perform} certain functions. Clicking on icons makes something happen, such as selecting a media file from a database or adding a layer over a photograph or map. Interactive documentary cannot function without a user.

Some interactive documentaries engage audiences to become comakers by requiring them to select what data to visualize. Many are designed around databases that are open to new data that users can contribute. Rather than fixed final cuts or timed live streams, interactive documentaries have ever-expanding databases to include new material. They reject the idea that documentaries should be exhaustive and conclusive. They foreground what Patricia Zimmermann and Helen De Michiel call “open space documentary.”\textsuperscript{16} We are not given closed arguments to accept or reject; instead, we are given data to organize into useful information. Moreover, the documentaries are informed by scholarship. The makers do not self-authorize to document.

By unsettling the line between documentary maker and viewer, insofar as the software makes possible, interactive documentaries engage audiences in complicated processes of knowledge production—using digital tools in documentary making as an act of \textit{performance}.\textsuperscript{17}
(acts of doing or process) whereby data is made legible as information that offers “a lens and framework for understanding.”\textsuperscript{17} Layering data becomes another way of understanding how history is written. Users activate “if, then” equations when they command software to perform (for example, visualize data or make a calculation) by clicking on icons. Users learn what happens to their perceptions if they reorganize information. Documentaries that include archival footage or layer atop existing digital maps mobilize tension between past and present. More than just reclaiming the past, they reactivate it.

Interactive documentaries can mobilize digital tools to teach users to think about the process of knowledge production. Makers often emphasize both incomplete and subjective qualities of evidence, whether archival images or newly recorded testimony. They emphasize that realities are produced, not simply represented. Documentary practices make knowledge visible, audible, and legible. In some regard, they operate like the Forensic Architecture project’s investigative exhibit, \textit{Ground Truth} (2016), which involved hearing testimonies, collecting documents, and a closing session on Bedouin cultivation of the Naqab Desert.\textsuperscript{18} Interactive documentaries often visualize overlapping realities, emphasizing ones that have been erased from official maps. They work alongside projects such as Visualizing Palestine, whose infographics (“visuals”) often layer Palestinian geographies over U.S. ones—for example, razed olive orchards over New York City’s Central Park in \textit{Uprooted} (2013)—to communicate scale and symbolic importance.\textsuperscript{19} Others, such as \textit{Segregated Roads Systems} (2012), make use of recognizable maps to document inequality. More recent ones pull into focus neoliberal practices, such as \textit{Airbnb Benefits from Israeli Rights Abuses} (2018), and the physical erasure of Palestinian geographies, as in \textit{Heritage under Threat: Israel’s Takeover and Segregation of Hebron’s Old City} (2018).

Because most operate on publicly accessible websites, interactive documentaries are largely free to users, which is partly why they are not widely promoted at film festivals. Links to them circulate through journalism, blogs, and social media. They intervene in a shared digital space, extending documentary practice’s history of intervening in physical space. Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti’s Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (2008–present) leaves Israeli architecture intact as a reminder of ongoing occupation while also repurposing it, so that, for example, Oush Grab military base becomes a park for Palestinians.\textsuperscript{20} Comparably, Emily Jacir’s \textit{ex libris} (2012) counters the Palestinian memoricide in Israeli military archives by reclaiming plundered books marked “A.P.” (that is, abandoned property) and stored in the Jewish National Library in West Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{21} Such projects document by intervening in physical realities. Interactive documentaries can intervene in digitally mediated realities.

**Mapping Territorialized History**

If Palestinian geographies have been strategically forgotten, it is largely because they have been systemically erased. Ilan Pappé describes the Jewish National Fund’s “official Naming Committee whose job it was to Hebraize Palestine’s geography,” and its “archaeological zeal to reproduce the map of ‘Ancient’ Israel [which] was in essence none other than a systematic, scholarly, political and military attempt to de-Arabize the terrain—its names and geography, but above all its history.”\textsuperscript{22} Such erasures are not limited to the past, as Olga Blázquez Sánchez shows when comparing three digital maps of Jerusalem—the Israeli Ministry of Tourism’s Eye on Israel, Google Maps, and OpenStreetMap—to demonstrate how “different spatial representations produce different realities.”\textsuperscript{23} More substantively, she notes the power asymmetries that render Israel’s so-called
separation barrier in the West Bank invisible on Google Maps, yet clearly labeled as “Apartheid Wall” on the open-source OpenStreetMap. Critical cartography challenges dominant narratives by introducing additional information or interpretations. It shows that cartographers’ maps are not representations of reality but visualizations of politics in the guise of representations of reality. Maps make some histories legible and others illegible. They are always “selective representations of reality” that require coding by makers and decoding by users.

Like documentaries, maps are never neutral, nor are they unbiased tools. Their origins lie in territorial control. They visualize sovereignty and narrate history. As Edward Said explains, “Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them.” Google Maps offers one such socially acceptable narrative—a map that appears neutral and scientific. Controlling about 80 percent of the digital map market and generating $3.6 billion in revenue annually, Google Maps appears as a politically unbiased, universally accepted map, yet it has been documented that Google manipulates borders and replaces names based on the user’s IP (internet protocol) address, so that the corporation “routinely takes sides in border disputes.”

Google un-labels places, raising concerns that it has erased Palestine. Microsoft’s Bing, by contrast, labels Palestine as such. Google Maps has actually been central to debates on the digital visibility of Palestine, with one of Israel’s foreign ministers, Ze’ev Elkin, declaring in 2013 that its use of the term to designate what was previously marked as Palestinian Territories was “in essence” a recognition of “the existence of a Palestinian state.” In reality, it is Israel—and not Palestine—that is labeled on Google’s base map (a reference map with basic information), which cannot be altered, although layers can be added to it. Interactive documentaries that use Google Maps activate what Ravi Sundaram terms “pirate modernity,” which he describes as a “refusal of the legal regime pushed by globalizing elites” and of market solutions to political problems.

Google Maps allows users to locate themselves and their destinations to plot routes. Its base map is nonetheless a political representation of space that endorses particular interpretations of history. Linda Quiquivix found that Google Earth, a three-dimensional map composed of satellite images, offers “a history that begins the conflict at 1967” and thus contributes to “forgetting the violence of 1948.” Google’s “cartography from above,” she argues, can be subverted with “cartography from below,” and she offers the example of Thameen Darby’s Nakba Layer (2006), which indicates Palestinian villages on Google Earth in an effort “to help dismantle the colonial status quo” endorsed by Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Before Google Earth moved to “the cloud,” where it is accessible online, it required users to download the software and user-generated layers onto their hard drive. Darby’s layer received so many downloads that it became “available and viewable to all Google Earth users by default,” a feat unimaginable today. Google Earth is now available online like Google Maps, but users have to locate and request layers, which means that critical cartography remains important. Gaza Sderot, iNakba, and Jerusalem, We Are Here all use Google Maps, but only with the latter two are maps central to how users interact with data. Rather than supplementing video testimonies, the maps become sites for examining what Michel Foucault calls “the archaeology of knowledge,” uncovering historical data that has been lost, obscured, or discredited. When rendered legible as layers on maps, Palestinian geographies become digital equivalents to “sites of memory” that connect histories with identities and territories. History and memory accumulate in layers, and interactive documentaries that make use of layers on mapping software function like archaeology or forensics. They mobilize the “spatial testimony” that Hagit Keysar describes in DIY aerial photography of East Jerusalem as a reworking of “the victim-expert
relations in the production of human rights testimonies." The DIY qualities of attaching cameras to kites rather than drones or satellites, she finds, allow activists using them to say: "Do not look at me, look at this image that I have created and listen to my story." In other words, the photography articulates a "shifting away from the reifying and fetishizing of Palestinian victimhood by reclaiming witnessing and its embodied forms of mediation." 39

iNakba and Jerusalem, We Are Here both allow facts to be added to Google Maps's socially acceptable narrative. Their educational function counters state and corporate control of maps as visual representations of history by "dismantling the official layers" that appear on Google Maps in acts of countermapping and radical historiography that entail investigation, persistence, and risk-taking. 41 Risk is less dangerous for Israelis than Palestinians. More readily than printed maps, interactive ones allow for competing conceptions of space to coexist in separate layers. Jess Bier describes the "segregated landscapes" of Palestine/Israel in terms of symmetries that are emphatically unequal, with Palestinian perspectives discounted or refuted by Israeli ones. 42 Zochrot and Naaman accept their obligation to shift thinking about Palestine by directly addressing fellow Israelis and their allies.

Documentaries as Part of an Accumulated Production of "Realities"

Interactive documentaries intervene in accumulated "realities." They work toward a "denaturalization of vision and the political constructions of sight and visibility." In the case at hand, interactive documentaries like iNakba and Jerusalem, We Are Here call into question what most Israelis are conditioned to see as "reality." 43 Ironically, this conditioning has been facilitated partly by documentary. Early documentaries about Palestine were used to mobilize Jewish emigration from Europe. Ella Shohat explains how films such as Land of Promise (1935), emphasizing "the humanitarian and liberationist project of Zionism," were premised upon a depiction of the "backwardly hierarchical structure of the Arab community . . . contrasted with the innovative egalitarianism of the settlement." With the founding of the Palestinian Film Unit in Beirut in 1968, documentary also became, in Nadia Yaqub's words, "part of the creation of Palestinian visibility." 45 As a result, "an imaginative Palestinian geography" was born that addressed "viewers as (potential) fellow resisters from other liberation movements." 46 Mustafa Abu Ali's They Do Not Exist (1974) foregrounded the conflict as modern and political, like other anti-colonial struggles, not as ancient and religious. The film documented the lives of Palestinian mothers and children in the Nabatiyya refugee camp 47 to refute Golda Meir's proclamation that there were "no such thing as Palestinians." 48 The film challenged Zionist propaganda about "a land without a people for a people without a land." 49 It communicated to Western audiences by situating the Nakba within the context of other genocides, including that perpetrated by the Nazis.

The Nakba remains less documented than other instances of ethnic cleansing, which contributes to ongoing unresolved conflicts rooted in modern political claims to land and not in purportedly age-old cultural or religious differences. 50 Israel's declaration of statehood in 1948 precipitated the dispossession of nearly a million Palestinians. Unlike the systematic murder of millions of European Jews by the Nazis in the Shoah (catastrophe in Hebrew)—documented in films like Alain Resnais's Night and Fog (1955) that incorporated archival material—there are relatively few such materials available on the Nakba. 51 It is the Nakba's aftereffects rather than its events that were documented in films, but these were later systemically destroyed by the Israeli army during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. As Rona Sela demonstrates in Looted
and Hidden: Palestinian Archives in Israel (2017), Palestinian archival images and evidence have been censored and erased from memory following Israel’s “vanishing” of the Palestinian Film Archive when the Israeli army entered Beirut in September 1982. The preservation of Palestinian documentary material has largely been an endeavor taken up by women: it includes Khadija Habashneh’s reassemblage of the Palestinian Film Archive and Annemarie Jacir’s curation of the Dreams of a Nation exhibition. Still, missing documents are not unsurmountable impediments to reclaiming history: poetry, painting, and fiction also map Palestinian geographies and compensate for missing, lost, censored, or destroyed documents. Furthermore, Palestinian geographies can also be mapped onto mapping software.

Documenting Palestinian geographies counters Israel’s official archival censorship and historical amnesia, offering Israelis what Gil Hochberg describes as “new ways of seeing” that are “a precondition for overcoming oppressive geo-sociopolitical orders.” iNakba and Jerusalem, We Are Here reject Israel’s transhistorical claim to territory but do not reject its right to exist insofar as Israel is not erased from their maps. They depart from a post-Second Intifada wave of Israeli documentaries, which Raya Morag notes mark a “transition from an era of the witness to the era of the perpetrator” and focus on conflict resolution as a matter of isolated instances rather than focusing on Israeli accountability for systemic violence. As Morag adds, such films are often “guilt-ridden and inherently irreconcilable.” Although Gaza Sderot includes the voices of Palestinians, it does not really grant them permission to narrate, since there is no critical framework provided to make the facts they relate legible. iNakba and Jerusalem, We Are Here consider Israeli perspectives not as incompatible with Palestinian ones but as interdependent with them, albeit asymmetrically and within spaces that are shared unjustly.

**Locating Bias in Gaza Sderot**

Filmed over a period of ten weeks, Gaza Sderot was promoted as a “daily cross-platform documentary series” that published two two-minute films daily. Its tagline of equivalences mobilizes (Eurocentric) humanist values that purportedly transcend politics, and it presents technology as a means to create dialogue. “Under difficult living conditions and the threat of air attacks and bombings, people do keep on working, loving and dreaming,” extoled IDFA’s DocLab. The documentary creates the impression of shared victimhood for Palestinians and Israelis, joining a chorus of Israeli documentary and narrative films that enlist Palestinian collaborators to critique contemporary situations while forgetting historical context.

Gaza Sderot’s design and architecture erase geography and reset history by placing videos from Gaza City and Sderot side by side (see figure 1). The footage is symmetrically balanced. To hear one, the other must be paused and silenced; otherwise, cacophony ensues. Design hence reinforces preconceptions of mutually incompatible realities. “The schism between these two communities is expressed as a visual motif in the interaction design—the divided lives and the divisive border are then replicated and reinforced in the choice and interaction of the user,” observes Siobhan O’Flynn. She adds: “Choose one video clip from one community and we subordinate the other community. Choice grants voice and agency and enforces silencing and immobility, in a simple, elegant interaction and interface design.” The documentary co-opts strategies of citizen journalism, which usually express perspectives ignored by mass media. Design, here, implies balance in terms of contemporary equality (screen time and position), leaving historical inequity unaddressed and perhaps unnoticed by some users.
Gaza Sderot suggests that technologies bridge distance through customizable experiences, data visualizations of topics in word clouds, and mapping software that do not organize data critically and historically (see figures 2 and 3). Word clouds, for example, reinforce false equivalences between “siege” and “Qassam rockets.” Gaza Sderot’s design seems designed to distract—and it has succeeded in doing so with critics. One celebrated the interactive documentary’s design for negotiating “a happy medium between temporal narrative and spatial juxtaposition, with the fluid interface playing an important role in conveying meaning through its ordering and presentation of video segments.”62 This emphasis on how design allows for particular ordering and presentations of videos obscures what the design does to the data by structuring bias into the ordering and presentations. Another critic notices that “meaning” is continuously reformulated through user interaction,” albeit without the user realizing that context is missing.63

Jacqueline Levitin notes that Israeli producer Arik Bernstein initially conceived the documentary for Israeli television to “re-personalize the Israel-Palestinian conflict,” since Palestinians and Israelis have had far fewer personal interactions since the Second Intifada (2000–2005).64 She looks at contemporary events—not historical politics—noting Ariel Sharon’s act of “expelling some nine thousand Jewish settlers from Gaza” in 2005, “Hamas’ electoral victory [which] more likely signaled the falling popularity of the PLO than enthusiasm for the religious practices of Hamas” in 2006, and subsequent “heavy ground fighting between Hamas and Fatah militants that] left Hamas in control of a Gaza cleared of Jewish settlements.”65 Historical context is shallow because Gaza Sderot frames it as such. By raising awareness about everyday life in Gaza, where a “population of half a million [is] suffering from scarcities due to the boycott [that is, the blockade by Israel and Egypt] and Israel’s control of Gaza’s borders,” and Sderot, “where a

Figure 1. Still from Gaza Sderot. A Palestinian resident of Gaza City and an Israeli resident of Sderot are placed side by side. (23 October 2018, Gaza Sderot)
nervous population comprising primarily immigrants anxiously awaited the next ‘red alert,’” Levitin says the documentary “avoids engaging in politics.” Experiences of scarcity and anxiety are daily occurrences in Gaza, for which no alarms are sounded.

In its humanizing and equalizing design, Gaza Sderot conceals its bias. Philippe Bourmaud describes this design as creating “a fake symmetry in an asymmetrical conflict” and “a double illusion of normality,” which “masks 1948 as the destruction of a country and the birth of the...
State [of Israel] in violence.”67 As Tawil-Souri and Dina Matar explain, Gaza is a metaphor—or a nexus of conflicted metaphors—that can distance us from the reality of “1.8 million people who are isolated from the rest of the world,” two thirds of whom are refugees, 70 percent of whom live in poverty, 20 percent of them in deep poverty, and “just about everybody has to survive on humanitarian hand-outs” since 50 percent are unemployed.68 Food insecurity occurs daily; a few hours of electricity may or may not.

_Gaza Sderot_ offers audiences the instant gratification of imagining humanistic solutions by excluding historical context. It effectively resets history in the present. It self-authorizes to narrate on behalf of others via interactive design that frames everyday “slices of life” in Gaza City and Sderot as interchangeable. The tagline, “Life in spite of everything,” perpetuates complicity with violence against the most vulnerable. Israel limits amounts of food, water, fuel, medicine, and electricity permitted into Gaza, producing a humanitarian crisis. The incremental violence of the blockade is both psychologically and physically destructive, especially for children,69 and Israel continues to extract resources, particularly water, from the Gaza Strip. By contrast, Sderot is one of the closest Israeli settlements to the territory and a relocation destination for Arab Jews, who have felt besieged since 2001 when Qassam rockets targeted adjoining areas inside Israel rather than illegal settlements inside Gaza.

Working toward solutions is not as simple as juxtaposing experiences of daily life. Media literacy is vital because _Gaza Sderot’s_ design and architecture refocus attention from historical conditions to contemporary differences, seducing users with an ostensibly unbiased presentation of a problem rendered in user-friendly interactive tools. It looks like citizen journalism, but it lacks democratic politics. The documentary minimizes its use of mapping software, since maps lay bare questions about territory and the Palestinian right of return.

_Immersion in iNakba’s History_

With _iNakba_, Zochrot (Hebrew for “remembering” with a feminine, thus nonstandard, ending and the name of the Israeli organization that produced the app) was conscious of how the mere use of the term Nakba (catastrophe in Arabic), rather than purportedly neutral terms like Arab-Israeli war and 1948 war, did not convey “broad acknowledgement of and accountability for the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages” and the creation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees “largely due to the continued adherence of Jewish Israeli society to colonial concepts and practices.”70 From Zochrot’s standpoint, remembering is an initial step toward accountability. Like B’Tselem—The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, whose short films that document crimes by the Israeli military are mostly for Israeli audiences, Zochrot focuses on educating fellow Israelis. “Our focus on the Jewish target audience derives from its practical and moral responsibility for Palestinian refugeehood, as well as from its privileged power position under the present regime,” the organization states on its website.71 Zochrot’s aim is a “reconceptualization of [the right of] Return as the imperative redress of the Nakba, and a chance for better life for the entire country’s inhabitants.”72 Zochrot integrates historical context into the design and architecture of _iNakba_ to debunk Israel’s myths, among which the most enduring is that Palestinian lands were unpopulated or uncultivated prior to Zionist immigration. Users see historical data on Palestinian villages and farms clearly mapped. Zochrot believes that “peace will come only after the country has been decolonized, enabling all its inhabitants and refugees to live together without the threat of expulsion or denial of Return.”73 _iNakba_ applies such research to how users interact with the app.
With iNakba, users access files containing historical information, visual images, and videos of Palestine’s invisible geographies on Google Maps’s familiar interface, which is often assumed credible in representing geographies without bias. iNakba augments perceptions of reality with content and context. Users can see Israel marked in large letters, yet Palestine marked only by dotted lines. Israel, however, is nearly entirely covered in orange and yellow markers, denoting Palestinian towns and villages that no longer exist (see figure 4). Their sheer density makes clear that Palestine was never “a land without a people.” When users expand the view, Palestinian localities identified with orange markers cover most of the land of present-day Israel. The interface allows what has been rendered physically invisible to be viewable on handheld devices.

Figure 4. A map available through iNakba visualizes Palestinian dispossession. (14 June 2018, iNakba)

Names of Palestinian geographies are labeled in white pop-up windows that appear when users scroll over orange markers. Tapping them opens pages with information on the locality, its 1948 population, the date it was occupied, the names of the military operation and the
occupying unit, and the locality’s history before and during occupation, including depopulation through Israeli settlement (see figure 5). Thus, for Zayta, a tiny village of 380 people, “no traces of houses are left,” iNakba informs the user. The image of a flowering cactus (sabbar in Arabic), which iNakba also offers, provides another layer of meaning. For Palestinians, it symbolizes patience, generosity, and community (see figure 6). 74 Israelis appropriated the word as sabra to designate native-born Jewish Israeli citizens. The late Kamal Boullata, an

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**Figure 5.** A screen from the *iNakba* app that projects the historic Palestinian village of al-Walaja on top of the present-day Jewish settlement Aminadav. (14 June 2018, *iNakba*)
artist and historian of Palestinian art, has argued that on the one hand, “Israeli Jews raised the indigenous plant to the status of a national symbol; on the other, Palestinians saw in it the very incarnation of their national dispossession.” For Boullata, cactus hedges in so many of the earliest photographs of Palestine conveyed how the “thorny and tenacious plant” served to mark borders between farms. The choice of the image of the cactus, then, is important symbolically. Its meaning exceeds what the photo represents.
Significantly, iNakba does not layer photographs over live images captured on a mobile phone’s built-in camera, as is the case with locative AR (augmented reality) games like Pokémon Go. Instead, it presents photos and texts on the screen, prompting users to compare two distinct realities: a physical present with a mediated past. “Amidst tall grasses, wild flowers, and trees covering parts of the site, one can see a well, still in use,” reads the app’s description of Zayta, but its “surrounding lands are cultivated by Israeli farmers.” Many Palestinian villages are now...
marked by forests planted by Israel to conceal and deny their prior existence. Their size and shape reveal one aspect of what Saree Makdisi calls an “erasure of erasure,” processes by which Israel erases its erasure of occupation to itself, if not to the world, by camouflaging walls with attractive vegetation on the Israeli side while leaving concrete bare on the Palestinian side. In the case of Zayta, iNakba provides data on the Jewish National Fund’s plans for a kibbutz.

iNakba also maps de-territorialized Palestinians living in refugee camps, including the Neirab camp in Syria, with a current population of some 20,000 inhabitants living in a former barracks in a 0.15-square kilometer area, whose housing situation UNRWA describes as “deplorable”; or the Shatila camp in Beirut, which, along with the adjacent Sabra camp, was the scene of a notorious massacre in 1982. The information provided by the app includes, for example, UNRWA data on current environmental conditions in Sabra and Shatila, which are described on the app as “extremely bad” with “damp and overcrowded” shelters and a “sewage system [that] needs considerable expansion.” Images for the nearby Burj Barajneh camp (population of nearly 18,000) include an informal electrical grid whose dense web of wires covers the street like a canopy. The camp, iNakba tells users, is “overpopulated” with “narrow roads” and “an old sewage system,” and it is “regularly flooded in the winter.” In Mar Elias Camp, home to 674 refugees from the Galilee, there is a “high incidence of chronic disease.” Although improving infrastructure might be interpreted as ruling out a future return, public health issues can also not be ignored. The app documents and maps such complexities.

iNakba’s design and architecture allow users to move through the database at their own pace and to contribute images and texts of their own. With the “Contact Us” button, users can send an email or place a phone call. This sort of engagement unsettles conventional distinctions between documentary maker and audience. iNakba becomes a collaborative project. iNakba documents an unresolved history by visualizing historical geographies and historicizing the environmental consequences of “making the desert bloom,” notably in Gaza, where water is diverted into Israel causing an ongoing humanitarian crisis. The app is also mobile, allowing users who feel safe traveling to compare historical photographs of sites with their current physical remnants. iNakba promotes Zochrot’s larger aims of opening discussion on the right of return by reactivating Palestinian history through a mapping of Palestine’s invisible geographies with augmented realities of historical data. Its launch in Israel turned into a breaking news story, exemplifying how documentary can initiate discussion outside the elitist spaces of film festivals. The app enables the ongoing and uncomfortable process of accountability to unfold rather than providing feel-good solutions that foreclose discussion and distract with interactive technologies, as does Gaza Sderot.

**Jerusalem, We Are Here as Revisiting History**

Media maker, scholar, and educator Dorit Naaman’s *Jerusalem, We Are Here* is an ongoing interactive documentary to remap the former Palestinian neighborhood of Qatamon, which is now considered a Jewish neighborhood. Naaman says that reading Ghada Karmi’s *In Search of Fatima*, she noticed that Karmi’s landmarks were “now unmarked,” and that the streets now bore “the names of Israeli militaristic landmarks from the 1948 war.” While half of the neighborhood is comprised of original Palestinian houses, very few are marked by stone carving inscriptions, so the houses exist, but their Palestinian owners are actively erased and forgotten. “Through this process, I realized that if we—as Israelis—do not face the past and remedy its wrongs,” Naaman writes, “we will have no future.” Initially Naaman imagined looking for
descendants of the dispossessed. Rather than record oral histories that might interest only family and historians, she imagined developing interviews into public art and activism by projecting the interviews onto Qatamon houses because, as she explains, “I am an Israeli and I really wanted to force the Israelis to come to terms with al-Nakba.” At the same time, it felt “wrong to ask people to experience their trauma or to tell me their story of loss just in order to educate Israelis,” she adds, signaling the violence of Gaza Sderot’s voyeurism. Naaman actually refers to Gaza Sderot as what she wanted to avoid, namely, an experience of watching “stories of people from both places” and concluding that “people suffer on both sides.”

Jerusalem, We Are Here’s Arabic title, Ya Quds, nahnu huna, honors the city’s Arabic name, al-Quds. The project conveys a reverence for the city by those who know and love it—and acknowledges that it was (and remains) an Arab city. Users move virtually through streets, past and present, via mapping software that renders visible the city’s invisible geographies where the historical mix of ethnicities, religions, and cultures has been erased or diminished. Naaman’s documentary is guided by accountability for past dispossession and by hope in light of historical coexistence. She notes that “1948 is almost 70 years ago, and we need to collect the memories and documents from the people who are still around, who remember. There’s a sense of urgency to this.” The project is set in West Jerusalem, but some residents of Qatamon found themselves in East Jerusalem, which has been under occupation since 1967 and was annexed by Israel in 1980. Its Palestinian residents are policed by checkpoints and their movements tracked by surveillance cameras, rendering the occupation both physical via infrastructure and digital via surveillance.

The product of a decade’s work in building relationships and gaining trust, the documentary opens with a video of Anwar Ben Badis and Mona Halaby—both Palestinian, though only Ben Badis lives in Qatamon. They sit inside Jerusalem’s Lev Smadar theater, formerly The Orient, then Regent Cinema. As red curtains open to unveil the silver screen of another era, images appear of theater manager Fernando “Nando” Schakleff during the 1940s. Nando had a passion for home movies, and Naaman joins Ben Badis and Halaby to watch his images of Jerusalem and family holidays spent in Haifa, Jaffa, and Tel Aviv as violence erupts all around. By the time Nando returns to Jerusalem from his family holiday, his home movies have already become documents of the city prior to destruction and dispossession (figure 8). “From home movies to citizen journalism, Nando documents his hometown’s destruction,” the video explains, adding that, “Like most Palestinian Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, and other non-Jewish citizens of Palestine, Nando will eventually be expelled.” The video ends with Ben Badis, Halaby, and Naaman exiting the theater and going on to “revisit Katamon to uncover its lost stories” (figure 9). They thus reactivate history by providing a polyphony of subjective interpretations of space that reject the simplification of complexities in expository “voice of authority” or “fly-on-the-wall” observation, both of which position one perspective as the only one. By offering two different tours by two different guides, the interactive documentary rejects the notion that knowledge can be reduced to a single point of view. Naaman is not, as in an observational documentary, an invisible observer but an on-screen participant, who guides audiences on her tour of the neighborhood but does not privilege it more than the tours by Ban Badis and Halaby.

Jerusalem, We Are Here is an archeological project that operates with different politics than the kind of Israeli documentaries that attempt to reconstruct “ancient” history. Viewers delve deep into history to explore repressed archaeologies of knowledge. In some regards, the documentary engages in the multilayered forensic analysis that Eyal Weizman identifies as a “politics of verticality” by which occupation occurs at the different levels of surface, subsoil, and airspace. Here, history has been erased at all levels. Prior to 1948,
Qatamon was predominantly inhabited by Greek Orthodox Palestinians, along with some Protestant Armenians, mostly professionals, merchants, and educators. Today, it is considered a Jewish neighborhood, but it has been so gentrified that “one is more likely to hear English or French than Hebrew [since] Israelis are simply priced out,” observes Olga
Gershenson.92 Still, its “distinctive Arab architecture,” has reduced Palestinians to consumable style rather than historical presence.93 By digging down through layers of history, the interactive documentary makes present digitally what has been made absent both physically and politically.

Not only has the past presence of Palestinians been erased from Qatamon, but so too the past violence by the Zionist “pioneers.” According to Benny Morris, the majority of Qatamon’s population fled during the “Haganah raid on the night of 5–6 January” 1948, and Jewish residents also fled due to “Arab intimidation.”94 Fighting culminated at the Monastery of St. Simeon, which fell under Jewish control on 2 May 1948. The Haganah exploded the Semiramis Hotel, believed to be an Arab militia headquarters, resulting in “regrets at the loss of innocent lives” by the Jewish Agency and the removal of officers responsible.95 Morris finds “the Haganah raiders blew up additional Qatamon houses on the nights of 9 and 13 March,” so that “by the end of March, only a handful of families remained.”96 Qatamon was repopulated with Jews expelled from the Old City by the Jordanians.97 By 1949, Qatamon looked “like a slum,” as masses of Arab Jewish refugees arrived. Single-family houses became homes to multiple families. Qatamon was renamed “Gonen” by the Israeli authorities.

Jerusalem, We Are Here is available in Arabic and English, and will eventually also be distributed in Hebrew. Users can select: virtual tours with audio commentary by guides, experts, and witnesses; black-and-white and color photographs; ambient sounds and music; and detailed information about the sites and the people who lived, worked, or entertained in them. They can also select particular points along the tour route to move through mediated representations of urban space (figure 10). They can watch short videos produced collaboratively that deal with brief or imagined visits to houses now altered beyond recognition. The project mobilizes an interactive map with historical information and images. Layers over the base map are color coded to indicate buildings constructed before or after the Nakba, as well as ones that have

Figure 10. An interactive virtual tour within the documentary. (15 June 2018, Jerusalem, We Are Here)
been identified as the houses of specific families, or the buildings of embassies, factories, monasteries, and so forth. Google Maps’s base map can be layered with printed maps from 1934 and 1938, or with aerial photographs, or maps from 1918, 1946, and 2016. The information on Smadar Cinema, for example, includes a photograph of the official marker in Hebrew and English. The photo is annotated to indicate that the Palestinian era of the cinema’s history has been omitted. The project remaps Qatamon, “not street by street, but house by house,” so that it “disrupts distinctions between public and private, inside and outside, past and present” in an interplay between the “materiality of the streets and buildings” and the “evanescence of histories, memories, and stories.”

Users constantly encounter prompts to read more or contribute to the documentary. Like iNakba, there is no way to consume all of the data at once. It requires revisits that invariably follow different trajectories through the site’s architecture.

Reviewing its permanent installation at Zochrot in Tel Aviv, Gershenson says the documentary “makes many Israelis uncomfortable,” eliciting reactions summed up in the words, “I don’t want to feel guilty.” Guilt is often a defense mechanism against the discomfort of being held accountable, much like white rage and fragility in other settler colonies.

Jerusalem, We Are Here is not aimed only at educating Israelis, whose discomfort is Palestinian pain. Naaman realized that the documentary needed to be online rather than as an on-site installation, as she had initially imagined. “It needs to be accessible to Palestinians in refugee camps,” she explains. “It needs to be accessible to anyone in the world who can’t come or won’t come.” As Zimmermann and De Michiel point out, “The project builds a virtual space with no checkpoints.”

Jerusalem had been a city where, for centuries, Jews, Christians, and Muslims—both Palestinian and non-Palestinian—lived peacefully together, traded, and sometimes married. Jerusalem, We Are Here rekindles this history, digitally erasing checkpoints, walls, and barriers. It layers the economically and racially segregated Jerusalem of today with its multiethnic and multireligious past. Users can toggle between “Tours,” a component of the documentary that adds information to Google Street View panoramas, and “Remapping Jerusalem,” another component of the documentary that visualizes physical and political realities at different dates over Google Maps’s base map. Some maps are rendered by hand; others, by aerial photography. Street View provides an intimate IP look into communities subjected to erasure and surveillance thanks to policies ranging from security to gentrification. The perspective is at the eye level of a pedestrian. It is neither bird’s eye from aerial surveillance, nor is it bag level, as in Emily Jacir’s Crossing Surda (2002), in which the artist/filmmaker deploys countersurveillance by documenting her commute from Ramallah to Birzeit University with a camera hidden inside her handbag. It simulates visual experiences of occupying space with one’s body without feeling intimidated, thereby allowing Palestinian users to occupy space digitally without the accompanying fear of occupying it physically.

**Hacking Surveillance?**

While iNakba and Jerusalem, We Are Here avoid the occupation-complicit politics of Gaza Sderot, they do not escape the complicity that is built into our reliance on technologies designed for military use. Enhanced visibility of Palestinian geographies brings enhanced surveillance by Israel. The interactive documentaries allow users to “visit” Palestine from the relative safety of their homes, but our homes are identifiable on GPS via IP addresses and AGPS (assisted GPS used on mobile devices). The systems that push content to users (click-to-view) also pull (or identify) location to network providers in what has been termed “participatory surveillance.”
In other words, the very act of participation subjects users to control. Just as closed-circuit video cameras monitor physical space, every movement in cyberspace is tracked. The data is stored on servers where it can be sorted and rendered into information. Mobile phones operate with GPS and SIM (subscriber identity module) cards that facilitate state surveillance. Palestinians are familiar with Israeli police arriving at their doorstep thanks to GPS.104 Jewish Israelis are also not immune to surveillance: performances such as the Occupy WiFi project (2014) by artist-activist Yoav Lifshitz with the Israeli Pirate Party collective bypassed state laws on public protests by operating in the invisible space of free Wi-Fi.105

Google’s parent company, Alphabet, actually offers credits to nonprofits for using its Google Maps platform, allowing them to harness an “immersive location experience”106 that “integrates seamlessly with iOS, Android, and desktop applications,” luring activist and advocacy groups alike.107 In so doing, Google collaborates with states to consolidate cartographies of power embedded in corporate security regimes.108 Google Maps, then, functions like a checkpoint, though not necessarily like the Israeli ones segregating Palestinians in the post-Oslo zones whose boundaries are unmarked on Google Maps. Alternatives exist, such as Creative Commons’s cartography and documentation software.109 Early on, Zochrot used OpenStreetMap, and iNakba does not require GPS (common on apps with wearable displays on hardware, such as headsets or eyeglasses) so that participation is not locative and thus averts some of the participation-as-surveillance risks inherent in location-specific software.

iNakba and Jerusalem, We Are Here intervene in Israel’s self-branding as a digitally innovative state. Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein note that Israel is “what some have called the most important technology incubator next to Silicon Valley,” yet few acknowledge that “growth [is] fueled by the sector’s close ties to the military industrial complex, with technologies honed in militarized contexts frequently reengineered for civilian ones.”110 Innovation takes the form of “techno-security” that loosens the “distinction between civilian population and combatant population” and erodes the foundations of international law.111 Installed on mobile phones, GPS reconfigures ideas of mobility and visibility: on one hand, it enables precision when traveling; on the other, it involves being tracked.

Information technologies are imbricated in Israel’s post-Oslo occupation of the Palestinian territories and its ongoing siege of Gaza. They intersect with other neoliberal hasbara (official propaganda deployed to burnish Israel’s image internationally) efforts, such as depicting illegal settlement in the West Bank as beneficial since it makes employment in factories and businesses possible for Palestinians.112 The neoliberalism of Brand Israel, a state strategy to shift international perception of Israel from leader of the occupation industry to leader of the global business and tourism industry, distorts many from addressing violence mobilized in the name of Israel and Judaism against many Palestinians and their supporters—and therefore, what is needed here are historical perspectives, not market solutions. As Pappé contends, Nakba denial prevents conflict resolution. It is accountability, rather than sympathy and awareness, that is needed to survive increasingly militarized and monetized media ecologies. “The silenced past needs also to be reconnected with the vocal present,” argues Lena Jayyusi, so that the active processes of silencing, including ones to come, can be subverted.113 Such silences affect us all.

The significance of Palestine/Israel to the broader world has been articulated by many leading thinkers. As Wendy Brown writes, “If Israel’s plight stems in part from having been established as a settler colony precisely when colonialism across the globe was being condemned and dismantled, [and] if it is in this regard cursed by a globally rejected past in its present, Israel also seems to have the strange honor of honing the demographic and political-military tactics
and technologies of the global future.” Despite the risks of militarized and monetized surveillance inherent to operating across internet and mobile networks, iNakba and Jerusalem, We Are Here promote accountability and capacity to think historically and empathetically. They adopt strategies that reject Israel’s militarized counter-resistance, whether monitoring physical and virtual spaces or profiting by selling such technologies to repressive regimes. They engage a “thinking through digital media” that adjusts to situational contingencies and intervenes in localized spaces. They can provide virtual transportations for Palestinians, unable to travel due to Israeli restrictions, and visual translations for Israelis, unable to recognize what appears invisible to them. They can alter perceptions and build solidarities—if we know how to read them critically to avoid being distracted by the technologies themselves. And, it must be said, some aspire to help resolve conflicts and others to perpetuate them.

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