

Mapping memories, charting empathy: framing a collaborative research-creation project¹

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ABSTRACT

This short dialogue presents the theoretical framework used by the two authors – a visual artist and a social anthropologist of Judaism – as the starting point for the development of a scientific partnership. The aim of the collaboration is to explore the potential of “research-creation” (Giacco et al. 2020) to find alternative ways of representing ‘difficult stories’, like those of Jewish migrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. Specifically, the authors are experimenting with creative visualisations inspired by maps, in all their various forms and in all meanings of the word.

Keywords

memory, Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews, Libya, research-creation, creative mapping

To Martina from Piera

I can’t remember exactly when or where my fascination with maps began, so I can’t say it was love at first sight. However, to continue the metaphor, we have always had a stable relationship. Wherever I travel, the first thing I do is ensure I have a map of the city I am visiting: a ‘real’ paper map, with no internet or connection problems. I consider this an essential object, one which allows me to set off without worrying about getting lost.

A reproduction of a historic map of Venice, purchased in a small print shop in Campo San Tomà in the city, has followed me on several house moves. However, the first time I went to Venice, when I started university, I bought a map of the city at the railway station. Before setting out on a route among the city’s *calli* and *campielli*, the narrow streets and small squares that would only later become familiar, I would make sure I had a landmark to navigate the labyrinth of alleys, bridges and arcades. I still have that map, creased and mended with sticky tape. And for the last few years, I have also owned a colour print of a 1929 map of Tripoli, the hometown of your grandparents Antonio and Narcisa.

Like you, however, I have never been to Tripoli. Or at least not physically. The Tripoli I know is the one described by the people I have talked to during my research: men and women who were born and lived in Tripoli, Jews from Libya who between the 1940s and

1960s decided – or were forced – to leave their homes and move across the Mediterranean and beyond.² People like Rachele, who was born in Tripoli in 1922 and passed away in Milan in 2012, whose family roots and routes in her long, intense life trajectory included, among other places, Izmir (or Smyrna), Jerusalem, Rome and Caracas.



Fig. 1. Old Map of Venice.



Fig. 2. Old Map of Tripoli, Libya, 1929.

The stories I deal with are the memories of North African and Middle Eastern Jews. They are difficult stories to tell for those who have directly experienced displacement, loss and hardship across the Mediterranean, as with every story of forced migration; but they are also difficult for me to ‘re-tell,’ as I try to make sense of their inherent complexity and heterogeneity. Their heterogeneity is often equated with historical unreliability (Bensoussan 2014), and their complexity has become much thornier given the political charge these migrations have assumed in recent decades (Baussant 2018).

In my efforts to throw light on the complex processes these Jews underwent in their forced migrations, I see my ethnography as a “diary of the streets I walk” (Roberts 2012, 6), the streets being the recollections, emotions and perceptions of my interlocutors. I soon realised that this land made of life stories, this labyrinth of memories and recollections, did

not merely extend across a temporal Cartesian plane: its complexity also required me to go downwards (Ridge et al. 2013; Rossetto 2017). I needed deep maps, “a different way to achieve the goal of capturing complexity” (Bodenhamer 2015, 17); “thick maps” (Presner et al. 2014) to deal with the layers of history and the multiplicity of spaces; and “sensitive maps” (Olmedo 2011) as an experiential and experimental tool to “establish respectful and creative relationships” between the researcher and her interlocutors in the research field (Mekdjian and Olmedo 2016, 1).

But why mapping, you may be wondering. At first, I turned to maps because the interviewees themselves inspired me to do so. They often adopted a spatial language and various cartographic practices spontaneously, such as sketching a map on a piece of paper or using objects on a table to reconstruct the former urban environment. Later on, I interpreted these as an invitation from my interlocutors to embark on a virtual journey through the streets of their past, as a way to try to ‘take me there’ and “to walk in their shoes” (Jones and Ficklin 2012, 103). Is this not how empathy is forged? “A complex imaginative process involving both cognition and emotion,” the ability to take up another person’s psychological perspective and imaginative experience while maintaining “a clear sense of my own separate identity” (Coplan 2004, 143)?

With these ideas in mind, I decided to write to you to invite you to work together on a research-creation project, to find an answer to a question I have long pondered: does the form of a map – whether creative, deep or thick – fit the knowledge – complex, diverse or contradictory – embedded in a life story?

To Piera from Martina

Cartography is the only interesting, indeed the only possible, way of thinking about something like a biography, or a relationship with places or between life and places. Biographies are usually linked to time, but time is too intimate, and it is also connected to memory... since I am so forgetful, I prefer space and places, so it is better to project a life onto a large, imaginary city.³

I love maps, in the widest possible sense of the word, and I have been using them and experimenting with them in many different ways for some time. I’m forgetful too, and agree entirely with Agamben’s thoughts in the quotation above. I’d also add that a map can bring time and space together and move in multiple temporal and spatial dimensions simultaneously. It can choose how they are assembled and how they cross over. And it can opt to consider emotional time and space too. A map is an attempt, and the form it takes is one of many possible ways of representing the story of a life. It contains a desire to see, to watch, to go beyond verbal language and to enter inside events, which are considered on multiple levels but laid out on a single, shared surface. And to observe what effect this has, and how the events intersect, whether they meet or stay distant, detached and nontangential, but

nevertheless on the same plane, part of the same story. Allowing one to explore new potential directions, trajectories, traces (including hidden traces) and narratives.

A map is never unambiguous. It always wants you to ask yourself a question: where am I, both within the map and compared to the map? To work out the ‘where,’ I first consider the ‘who’: my relation (and correlation) with whatever the map represents. The map takes on meaning through my positioning – through the position I take – and through the context in which it is created and then interpreted. And often in this step, in this drift or shift, the meaning changes and is reinterpreted, presenting both a risk and an opportunity.

This was the first thought I had when you told me Rachele’s story: where do I stand in relation to this story? How can I look at it and then represent it?



Fig. 3. Work in Progress, Martina Melilli, Rovereto (Italy), July 13, 2020.

I grasped – and sought to tackle – the issue I found myself facing, trying to give Rachele’s memory all the space it needed to exist, to be, in its specific details and individuality. Suspending judgement, going beyond classification and looking into the gaps and intersections we are urged to ignore by the dualistic polarity that underpins the world familiar to us, where everything is either good or bad, right or wrong, respectable or not respectable, and so on. First of all, I tried to acquire all the content and information available, digest it and give it an order in a defined space. The result was an initial map – a mental map, if you like, packed full of information, and a first step towards something else, something as yet undefined, definitely lighter and simpler. But to make something lighter, you first need to see everything, or work out what has been left out, or what emerges (or re-emerges).

Observing and reflecting on this first map led me to design my vision of Rachele’s map, her hypothetical treasure map depicting the most precious things in her memories. A map I imagine she would have kept in a handkerchief, one she always kept in her pocket or tied around her neck or hair. Both for protection and to ensure she could always find the right

road.



Fig. 4 and 5. Work in Progress and Storyboard Rachele Abravanel, by Martina Melilli, July 21, 2020.

I asked her daughter Manuela if, by any chance, she still had one of Rachele’s handkerchiefs, perhaps embroidered with her initials. And I searched the town where I live, Rovereto in Trentino, northern Italy, for a woman of Arab culture and origin who could embroider my design onto Rachele’s handkerchief. Through the embroidery, another route crosses this land, another hidden story. And the cotton thread and Souad’s hands have the job of reuniting and retracing the broken threads of history, seeking to reconcile times, spaces and stories, both in ideal terms and in their intentions. Meanwhile, I shoulder all the responsibility for this action I have created, instigated and chosen.



Fig. 6 and 7. Preparatory drawing and embroidered Mindili (my handkerchief), Martina Melilli, Rovereto (Italy) September/October 2020.

Notes

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² Between the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948 and the end of 1951, about 350,000 Jews from Arab countries – mainly Yemen, Iraq and Libya but also Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia – moved to Israel in a complex migratory phenomenon that “has become a source of both nostalgia and widespread contention” (Meir-Glitzenstein 2018, 114). Several thousand Jews were still living in the Middle East and North Africa in the late 1960s and early-to-mid-1970s, but various events that destabilised the entire area almost completely eradicated their presence in the region. Colonial and post-colonial tensions, the rise of Arab nationalism and the Six-Day War between Israel and Arab countries in 1967 encouraged, and forced, Jews to leave the countries they had called home for centuries (Abécassis and Faü 2011). There are now only a few thousand Jews left in the region, mainly concentrated in Iran, Morocco and Tunisia.

³ Interview with Giorgio Agamben by Roberto Andreotti and Federico de Melis published on 13 May 2000, in *Alias* 3 (19): 2-5, quoted in Pignatti 2011, 6.

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