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The Once and Future Ghost(s): reflections on memory work in Israel-Palestine

The Middle-East conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is ostensibly about a struggle for land and water. Yet much more than this it is a struggle for recognition, for legitimacy and, above all, for redress of past injury. This conflict takes the form not only of increasingly bloody and fatal warfare but also of impassioned rhetoric, an endless cycle of who-hit-who back first accusations, of historical claims and counter-claims that stretch back into depths of time, to the Bible, to the Canaanites, to the time of Genesis.

The two narratives, the Palestinian and the Israeli while contradicting each other on every point, contain many similar motifs : loss, dispersion and exile. They are parallel narratives which can never meet, except on the battlefield, haunted by the twin ghosts of victimhood: the Nakba refugee, the Holocaust victim. While these twin spectres mirror each other, it seems that they must also cancel each other out. The rights of one can only be achieved by the elimination of the other.

In this paper, drawing theoretical inspiration from the works of Avery Gordon, Paul Gilroy, Ella Shohat and others, I will explore the discourse around the twin spectres of Nakba and Holocaust as reflected in the media, press and public commemoration rituals as well as in the memory work of individual Israelis and Palestinians. I will show how the image of the Palestinian in Israeli discourse has become distorted and identified with the Nazis, while on the Palestinian side Israeli actions are perceived as a replication of the Nazi crimes against the Jews. I will ask how these warped images not only perpetuate and recreate past wrongs, but also how they presage a haunted future, doomed to endless repetition . Ending on a more positive note I will suggest what may appear as somewhat utopian remedies for exorcising these unquiet ghosts.