Title
Collecting Contested Identities: The ambiguity of national culture in the Israeli Digital National Collection

Permalink

Journal

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Publication Date
2019

DOI

Supplemental Material

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

In 1949, Moshe Ben-David, then 22 years old and already an established jewelry maker by family tradition, immigrated from his ancestral home in Southern Yemen to the year-old State of Israel. His personal migration, part of a larger wave influenced by a Zionist zeal, was initiated and carried out by the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency that feared for the well-being of the community (Ben Zvi, 1949). The Jewish exodus from Yemen was sparked by the rising tides of nationalism, a political backlash to the failure of the Palestinian cause, and an anti-Semitic sentiment that had flared in the 1947 Aden riots. The perceived sense of immediate threat to the well-being of the community gave way to a decision to transport people to Israel as quickly as possible. The exodus from Yemen—simultaneously conducted in Iraq and subsequently in Iran, Morocco, and the majority of the Arab world—meant hastily leaving without gathering belongings, cultural artifacts, personal records, and documents. As people rushed from city centers to transitory and refugee camps, to makeshift airports, they carried only what they could. It is almost unfathomable that the flourishing Jewish Yemeni community—one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world, deeply entrenched in its territory, and holding a unique cultural and religious tradition—had all but disappeared in less than a year. Ancient Torah books, musical instruments, photographs, personal letters, heirloom rugs, silver, jewelry, and furniture were left behind, lost in transportation, or sold to fund a new beginning, causing a massive loss of community heritage and cultural knowledge (Meir-Glitzenstein, 2015, p. 110). Ben-David experienced this himself amidst a rapid shift from his ancestral home and tradition to a new start in a transitory camp in Israel. Yet unlike many of his counterparts, Ben-David was able to re-engage with his traditions and eventually work as a jewelry designer, retaining a form of cultural heritage once dominant but now mostly lost from his community.

Ben-David was recently recognized for his substantial contribution to the field of Israeli design (specifically jewelry design) by the state's official cultural heritage project, The Digital National Collection. This project recognizes the importance of preserving cultural and social memory and identity (Foote, 1990) through digitizing and accessioning significant, yet pre-existing, cultural collections through a central online

repository.   In its mission to inscribe "intangible" heritage performed in territorial Israel, it faces not only contemporary challenges of digitization and the politics of classification (of culture and of significance), but it is haunted by the ghosts of past erasures such as Arab Jews, women, and Palestinians, all of whom have long been marginalized.   Yet the collection has already managed to generate space and knowledge of some communities that have been historically underrepresented, effectively talking back to these ghosts.   The bigger picture, however, remains more complex as not all gaps in cultural history are treated equally and the project remains unequivocally ambiguous towards its own ethical commitments, whatever those may be.

While this ambiguity might be the inevitable result of the tensions that arise from the project's state affiliation, as opposed to a community archive, it prevents it from taking full advantage of the opportunity to reimagine what *Israeli Culture* includes.   In this article, we demonstrate how the genesis of the Israeli state, as it collapsed multiculturalism in favor of a new ethno-nationalism for the Jewish People, provided the social boundaries that are reflected in the cultural knowledge production of this particular project.   Furthermore, we argue that while this project purports to be of service to all Israelis, it is structured in such a way that precludes specific ethnicities living within territorial Israel from social representation and access. While these lines of demarcation have shifted from the original foundation of modern Israel, for some people they remain largely intact for non-Jewish populations, especially those who are socially and politically perceived as incommensurable with state politics.

Immigration, Cultural Erasure, and the Young State

In its early years, following a massive influx of population, the young Israeli state worked to assimilate over 700,000 (Hakohen, 2003) refugees and immigrants, but lacked the faculties to address many of their most pressing concerns and needs, including permanent housing issues in lieu of transitory tents and labor assignments that were commensurate with their knowledge (Deri, 2017).   The "melting pot" ideology that subjugated the community's specificity to the primacy of the (mostly Ashkenazi and European) state dictated the solutions.

Labor was assigned in accordance to the needs of the state and previous employment or profession were not taken into consideration.

Yael Guilat (2001), an art historian who authored the chronicles of Moshe Ben-David and Yemenite jewelry in Israel, argues that in the process of forging its self-representation, the young Israeli government chose to ignore the needs of immigrant communities that did not fit the mold. This was not a result of a chaotic or misinformed government; rather, in her book *Portrait of Pure Exactitude*, Guilat points to a report by ethnographer and scholar Shelomo Dov Goitein, who was closely familiar with the Yemenite community and had urged Prime Minister Ben Gurion to preserve the crafts and traditions of the Yemenite Jews. Despite this, Guilat demonstrates, Ben Gurion ignored the needs of the community in favor of exploiting the immigrants' Zionist zeal and readily available manpower to work the land—casually assuming that Yemenites are uneducated and accustomed to arduous field labor.

As the labor needs of the community were ignored, so did their housing needs—many of the housing assignments were located in the geographical outskirts of Israel. Development Towns were built to protect Israel's territorial stronghold and were settled by the new Israelis at the instruction of the government. Constructed and located by security and political needs (Allweil, 2012; Efrat, 2014), these towns lacked social and economic infrastructure to sustain local economies and had perpetuated the disenfranchisement, poverty, and neglect that befell the Arab Jewish immigration to this very day, producing a lingering intergenerational inequality gap (Swirksi, Zelingher, & Konor-Attias, 2015). The cumulative, intergenerational toll of immigration, housing, and labor was for many years brushed off as merely ungratefulness (Deri, 2017); popular portrayals of the refugees and forced migrants depicted them as zealot Zionists that chose conveniently to migrate to Israel as a preferable option. Yet such cultural suppression overlooked how the Jewish Agency had exacerbated the systemic racism and societal neglect affecting the Yemenite community, among others, which claimed lives and property that were never reclaimed or compensated (Meir-Glitzenstein, 2015).

While other immigrant communities in Israel (Sephardic, Mizrahi, Russian, and Ethiopian Jews) perhaps did not suffer this

particular ordeal, many were subjected to the same treatment, resulting in a loss of lives and identity. The physical trauma and duress endured by an entire generation of immigrants has not been fully reckoned and answered for by the Israeli government, nor reconciled in the public sphere, to this very day stirring strong oppositions to the narrative of immigrant oppression that was nevertheless the lived experience of so many (Deri, 2017).

The trauma extends even further than the physical losses endured by these communities. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, as well as other members of the government, have expressed in internal meetings and documents a deep Orientalist perception and a racist disdain against the culture of Arab Jews (Office of the Prime Minister, 1959). Officials at the time perceived their non-Western way of life and their skill set as essentially irrelevant, and their abilities to prosper in the new state were limited at best. This sentiment eventually resulted in a widespread culture hierarchy that relegated Arab Jewish music, literature, poetry, dance, history, film, arts and crafts, religious traditions, language, colloquialism, social demeanor and, for the most part, food, to the bottom echelon of culture. This left Arab Jewish traditional and new cultural production struggling for its existence outside the public sphere, with limited to no institutional support, causing an unimaginable and irreparable loss in all fields. In this cultural context, Arab Jewish culture has had a diminished presence in all possible representations. It is worth noting that in recent years, though, Arab Jewish culture is being revived and expanded through the works of young poets, filmmakers and artists—such as Yossi Sukari, Dikla, and Nevet Yitzhak—who have each earned cultural capital and high visibility for their works.

A Different Fate for Moshe Ben-David

Ben-David's story, on the other hand, followed a somewhat different path that allowed him to preserve his historical family practice of jewelry making and eventually earn widespread recognition of his standing and contribution to the field of Israeli design. After settling into the transitory camp and skipping around odd jobs, Ben-David tells of his emerging relationship with Ruth Dayan—instigated by masterfully woven, heirloomed carpets—that eventually resulted in a job offer to make jewelry

for Maskit, a new government project Dayan headed. Dayan, a social activist, prominent public figure, and wife to iconic General Moshe Dayan, had aligned herself with the cause of nation building and established a first all-Israeli fashion house, hiring Fini Leitersdorf—a Jewish-Hungarian Fashion designer residing in Israel—as its head designer. In order to construct a unifying, somewhat utopian, cosmopolitical aesthetic identity, the newly formed Maskit drew on designs produced by the budding state's multicultural population, which fully included Arabs among them. Additionally, Leitersdorf and Dayan tapped immigrant Jews and local craftspeople to enlist in their ranks: Yemenite Jewelry silversmiths and designers, local (Jews and non-Jews) artists, Palestinian pattern weavers, Bedouin fabric makers, etc. Despite Maskit's financial ebbs and flows, Ben-David thrived as one of the company's jewelry designers, and in 1964 he was named manager of the jewelry department at Maskit, a position he held until his retirement in 1977 (Guilat, 2016), when he established an autonomous practice which has remained successful and celebrated to this very day.

Historians have extensively researched and written about the Maskit project. Its prominence and influence are recognized as central and essential to the constitution of Israel's fashion industry. Maskit has been mythologized, lauded in academia, popularized as a household name and identified as a preeminent mark of Israeli originality. Yet, there is a clear cut between the expansive narrativization and eminence of Leitersdorf and Dayan's role and the limited attention awarded to their craftspeople from whom the design aesthetics were inspired (Bat-Yaar, 2010). A preference in history and culture, specifically towards constructs such as the entrepreneur and the *auteur*, are by no means surprising nor special, and are a result of reliance on Intellectual Property law to define socially fluctuating conditions around authorship (Gaines, 1991). Thus, Leitersdorf and Dayan embraced Ben-David's practice as quintessential to the construction of an Israeli aesthetic, yet the three of them were not awarded the same cultural visibility and valorization in society. Given the broader context of social and cultural subjugation experienced by Arab Jews in the process of relocating to Israel, we cannot exclude the possibility that the difference in academic and cultural recognition and the difference in presence in archival collections between Ben-David,

Leitersdorf, and Dayan was, at least partially, a continuation of the oppression experienced in other aspects mentioned earlier—from housing to labor to social rights to cultural marginalization.

Ben-David's heritage—comprised of his life's work as a jewelry designer and the accompanying records of his extensive activity—was excused from the corollaries of erasure and was allocated resources to be preserved, proliferating his existence for perpetuity, granting him and his legacy not only historical standings but also cultural capital and presence. This is a marked exception to the prevalent and systemic erasure of marginalized communities—Ethiopian, Arab, or Russian Jews, Palestinians, Bedouins, Druze, Circassians, Armenians, and women—in cultural institutions and social narratives of the state of Israel.

The Rule, The Exception

In 2015, Ben-David's private collection of records—documenting his jewelry design and jewelry making practice spans over 70 years—was chosen to be included in the National Digital Collection, a project devoted to the preservation of visual culture and commissioned by the State of Israel Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage. The Collection specifically focuses on four fields of visual culture: design, theater, dance, and architecture. The project lacks any current institutional or organizational support and resources for preservation and conservation; rather, its goal is to create a new, meaningful corpus of data that will facilitate a better understanding of those fields and broadly expand research opportunities.

To establish an all-new repository with no existing framework, the National Digital Collection has mapped pre-existing collections that are mostly inaccessible to the public either due to guardianship in the hands of private individuals requiring significant efforts to access them, or because they are housed in institutions (private or public) but have not been for preservation and digitization. Out of the survey of pre-existing collections, the National Digital Collection's executive committees assesses the significance and contribution of each collection's author and their records to the field of Israeli culture. After a ranking has been set, some collections are taken to temporary custody at the National Library (the parent and

executing organization of the Digital National Collection), where staff extensively catalog and digitize files, then return them to their owners. The resulting information—the digital instance of the records and their associated metadata—will be uploaded to a digital, open-access platform dedicated to the project. It is crucial to note that the project limits its scope to digital stewardship, focusing labor and resources on cataloging, digitizing, and accessibility to digital copies of the records.

In the process of sorting the knowledge and records of individuals that have been pivotal to Israeli culture, the Digital National Collection chose to focus on Ben-David's collection of Yemeni jewelry design. The decision followed the fact that both Leitersdorf and Dayan's collections have been deposited or catalogued with well-resourced collections. Furthermore, both Dayan and Leitersdorf have been prominently exhibited, researched, and discussed as central figures at the helm of the seminal Maskit project. Ben-David's collection was exhibited and presented along the years, as well as included in some historical research and existing catalogs, but has not been extensively appraised, described, cataloged, nor earned institutional affiliations thus far. The desire to save Ben-David's collection from ill fate, as well as emphasize a diverse set of design practices, ultimately led to the decision to include Ben-David's jewelry collection and personal documents. The choice to also include Ben-David's work—not merely through the documents that reflect his practice as an employee in Maskit or through Leitersdorf or Dayan's already accessioned collections, but rather through the records of his individual practice, marks a departure from the prevailing perception of *what* and *who* constitutes Israeli design practices. This inclusion hints at an equivocation of Ben-David's Yemenite practice and knowledge to that of Western practices, placing both within the designation of national importance. This is not to say that some sort of conceptual equality has been achieved, but to point to an action that intentionally and willfully goes against the grain.

However, it is also important to note that Ben-David's inclusion points to the exclusion, or lack of capability to include his contemporaries—the many other craftspeople, such as Palestinian pattern weavers and other Yemenite Jewelry designers, who worked under Maskit and were not inducted into the collection. Maskit's records, for unknown reasons, were not

kept in an orderly fashion, providing little evidence and records to the exact demographics and occupations of Maskit's employees. In turn, this exclusion leads to further difficulty locating Mizrahi or Sephardic designers that might have also worked at Maskit and have not retained their practice upon retirement. The loss of the company's archival and employee records prevents us from knowing each person's heritage, which obfuscates the Maskit project's intention of cosmopolitics—how it tried to use ethnic heritage to construct a new Israeli identity.

The collection's attempt to face these surmounting difficulties by insisting to include Ben-David is commendable. Past erasures have created a ghost from the absent (not just of persons, but of a sense of belonging), and we argue that a public rediscovery of what was lost does something to reconcile that ghost. Yet the disparity between Ben-David and those left outside the collection reveals a much broader issue than the technical difficulties that face this specific endeavor. Would Ben-David's practice, i.e., that of Yemenite jewelry design, have been significant enough to be inducted into the collection if it had not been a part of a fashion house based in Western practices and led by Western Jews? And if so, for Palestinian fabric weavers who experienced a similar path, would they be excluded from the collection? This last question has yet to be answered. The collection might choose to include, if possible, such collections, yet the hardships of accessing and accessioning collections that have been historically neglected and disenfranchised makes this task exponentially more difficult and costly.

Ben-David's inclusion is a minor reconciliation in a sea of debt collected over 70 years of erasure from the State of Israel, yet it is incredibly meaningful. It offers to a future generation of designers and researchers the perspective of Yemenite knowledge as part of the origins of their contemporary culture. This would not only allow those of Yemeni descent to feel represented, proud, and valued, but members of other ethnic groups to rethink the hegemonic narrative that declared Europe as the sole bedrock of cultural production in the State of Israel's early days. Ben-David's story is but one occurrence in a vast field; hundreds of thousands of immigrants poured into Israel in its early years and hundreds of thousands were forced out, resulting in an inevitable massive loss of records and a systemic cold shoulder to innumerable others.

The Digital National Collection, Genesis and Mission

The Digital National Collection has by now digitized and cataloged dozens of collections across its subfields (even if unevenly), resulting in one of the state's most comprehensive cultural preservation undertakings, with substantial resource allocation. Some of the project's stated missions to collect and preserve culture are already being successfully addressed by digitizing collections, assisting collections to find or establish repositories, and expanding the production of metadata around these collections. Yet, despite these highly beneficial contributions to the cultural community in Israel, more could be done by the Collection's mission statement to address some of the major political and operational questions that arise from its attempt to preserve Israeli culture, given the fact that neither Israeliness nor culture are fixed terms in our social discourse. Furthermore, one cannot perceive the project as being generated without historical residues and ghosts. In *Ghostly Matters,* Avery Gordon (1997) uses the cultural products of a society to demonstrate how the absence of people and their traces deeply troubles a society, and that we must speak back to the ghost to achieve reconciliation, not ignore it.

Historical immigration, military regime, and continuous oppression of marginalized communities have shaped the context of cultural knowledge and archival collections. While we have demonstrated the loss of records in Arab immigrant communities, other communities were subjected to other types of record erasure—Palestinian documents held by the state archive (Sela, 2018) or Bedouin's oral society represented through a singular bureaucratic lens. This is not to say that records are absent or non-existing simply because we have no way of knowing (Hofstadter & Yavne, 2016). Yet these historical accounts suggest a diminished presence of many marginalized communities as well as a preference towards Jewish cultural heritage. Despite the demonstrable presence of these issues and their prevalence when attempting to define and collect culture, the Digital National Collection assumes a veil of objectivity and perfunctory, insisting on not directly addressing any political agenda. While the presumption of objectivity is itself a masked agenda (Fish, 1989), the collection's posted

mission statement garners some further insight into some of the political constraints and agenda beneath the surface.

In a blog post published in the National Library Blog, the Digital National Collection explains that one of its missions is to provide better understanding of how historical records and cultural production shaped Israeli society. According to Zaksenberg's (2017) blog post, access to the Digital National Collection "will allow a reevaluation and renewed understanding of the creative processes, development of each professional field and their impact on culture and society in Israel." Oren Weinberg, the director of the National Library, points further to the social possibilities of this project: "for the first time there is a national recognition in the importance of the historical materials of these fields as an inseparable part of the understanding of the cultural, social and political environment of Israel" (Zaksensberg, 2017). In the section dedicated to the design cluster, the blog mentions the time frame of the project as "from the beginning of settlements in the land of Israel at the end of the 19th century till present day" (National Library, 2017).

Evident in its mission statement are both the clear and lucid understanding of the social capital and power that is derived from this public platform, as well as the implicit association with a timeline of Zionism. The Digital National Collection was conceived by the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage––part of a larger scale effort ("Road Marks Project") to solidify, cement and elaborate the cultural and historical connection of the Jewish people to territorial Israel through: (a) the expansion of existing archeological sites, historical museums, and monuments ("tangible"); and (b) the establishing of archives that collect and preserve cultural records ("intangible"). The ministry defines its mission in regard to heritage as the "exposure, preservation, rehabilitation and development of national heritage sites . . . tangible heritage and intangible heritage such as museums, archives etc." Specifically relating to intangible culture, the ministry states it engages in "digitizing archives . . . investing in Hebrew literature, language, music and traditional music, films and historical cinema, dance folklore, ceremonies and historical documentation of the national heritage legacy" (Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage, n.d.).

The association, funding, and genesis by a governmental ministry in charge of constituting the Israel-Jewish identity as a

historically indelible fact, assigns the Digital National Collection with a second assignment: (a) to prioritize those records that pertain to a Zionist narrative of Israel, (b) to establish a paper trail of Zionist presence in Israel, and (c) to reject any notion of an illegitimate claim to the land. However, the collection does retain autonomy, and the de facto situation varies from the political association. The project's collecting range is not entirely predefined in its mission statement nor by the Ministry; rather, the executive committee of each branch (dance, theater, architecture, design) determines its collecting range.

The committee—comprised of academics and prominent practitioners but no archivists—is charged with the task of prioritizing the different collections as they consider their contribution to the field of culture. They attempt to balance representation between well documented yet highly significant figures and lesser known yet not less important creators. The committee of each branch is independent of its parallel in the other fields, leading to increased autonomy that can address specific issues that may arise. This inevitably leads to significantly varying guidelines and goals, where one committee will decide to focus their efforts on previously underrepresented groups, while another will decide to focus on prominent figures with decaying documents.

The analysis of the Digital National Collection's own mission statement, its parent organization's mission statement, and its inner organizational structure are important to understanding its political position as a spectrum of influences. While the political genesis may favor a clear Zionist agenda, the collection itself might favor preservation, and the committees themselves will opt for cultural inclusion. This is a tricky ambiguity that allows for a multiplicity of political agendas to co-exist with a single entity, and this might just be the reason for its sustainability over a highly contested subject such as Israeliness and culture. While this ambiguity allows for certain latitude of actions—such as including Circassian dance groups or Yemeni designers—it also creates a space for perpetuating certain pitfalls with regards to its timeline, its ability to reach underrepresented collections, and to collect evenly across cultural and language barriers.

Collecting Contested Identities—Who Gets to Be Israeli

While the Digital National Collection is not a traditional archive, it holds much of the same social construct and affect, at least in as it "wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies" (Schwartz & Cook, 2002, p. 2). Furthermore, extensive archival scholarship had demonstrated how archives reify national identity through and are themselves "what made up colonial authority" (Stoler, 2002, p. 91).

Implicit in the Digital National Collection's mission is the assumption that Israeli identity—who and what belongs to it—is a generally cohesive notion that can be transfixed into a repository in the same manner that a camera captures a given optical reality (arguably, even that can be contested with the advent of digital technologies). While the public discourse is slowly shifting towards a wider spread recognition of past exclusions of Israeliness, such as Yemenite or other Arab Jewish cultures, the exclusion of non-Jewish minorities, chiefly Palestinians (20 percent of the population) has only been exacerbated. One event in particular brings into sharp focus the contestation and division over the shared past of Palestinians and Israeli Jews and the demarcating lines of a legitimate Israeli identity.

The colloquially named Nakba Law ("Catastrophe" in Arabic), passed in 2011, has levied punishment—revoking of public funding—against those who commemorate Israeli Independence Day through mourning (among other circumscription). For Palestinians, it is impossible not to mourn the day in which, as Lila Abu-Lughod and Ahmad H. Sa'di describe, "[a] society [was] disintegrated, a people dispersed, and a complex and historically changing but taken for granted communal life was ended violently," leading to the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians. They continue: "The Nakba has thus become, both in Palestinian memory and history, the demarcation line between two qualitatively opposing periods. After 1948, the lives of the Palestinians at the individual, community, and national level were dramatically and irreversible changed" (Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007, p. 3). The effects over the Palestinian social psyche are not contested by the law, nor can they be. Its aim is clear, to erase and demarcate the social line

of what is permissible in Israeli society and under the Israeli national identity—to not value Palestinian history. This law indicates the inability of a larger Israeli umbrella to hold space for Palestinian memory and identity (Shenhav, 2012). This law is not an isolated case, there is also the Nation-State Law that demotes Arabic to an unofficial language passed in 2018 and the human rights NGO monitoring law that passed in 2016. We point to these not to open a discussion over the legal battle over identity in Israel, but to demonstrate both the high stakes that are the corollary of being included in an Israeli identity as well as the systematic erasure and marginalization experienced by Palestinians—citizens and noncitizens alike (Adala, 2018).

This is further evident when inspecting memory and culture institutions. A lack of resources and acceptance had led to a complete absence of Palestinian archival presence, either through autonomous archives or exclusion from state archives, except Palestinian records withheld by the Israeli army. Some museums collect and display art by Palestinians and small institutions have repositories of records and artifacts that were salvaged or preserved. Palestinian literature, film, and art do receive funds, albeit extremely limited. Yet public resources for the inclusion, preservation, and display of Palestinian heritage, culture, and history are demonstrably scarce and unequal, and are not up to par to what is needed. All that, despite specific laws that mandate equality within the State of Israel regardless of ethnicities.

What then, does the State of Israel have to lose in a more comprehensive inclusion of Palestinian culture and history? As the Ministry of heritage proclaimed, it is its mission to reinforce the relationship between Jewish Israelis and the territory of Israel. In the territorial zero-sum game, one can understand the Ministry's single-sided mission in relation to the exclusion of Palestinians as both an affirmation of one relationship (Jews-land) and the negation of the perceived opposite relationship (Palestinians-land). The project's statement to preserve Israeli culture only further perpetuates the exclusion of Palestinians from Israeliness.

This is not to claim by any means that Palestinian identity should be erased or assimilated into Israeliness, nor to determine what the Palestinians do or should seek or desire, but that the perception of Palestinians and Israel as mutually exclusive fuels

hatred and invisibilization in the Jewish-Israeli public sphere. It is incumbent upon us to reorient that perception to allow for Palestinians, as well as other minorities, to be included with their self-stated identity in the national discourse. It is crucial to realize that these questions of recognition in the Israeli context are not limited to public social reconciliation of past trauma or ghosts. To be recognized as Israeli, whether through cultural attributions or legal standings, carries enormous repercussions to policy, rights, and resources, in a political landscape that denies the de facto governance of over 3 million stateless Palestinians. Additionally, we must not overlook the growing sentiment in Israeli society that Palestinians and Palestinian narratives should be excluded from the public sphere and human rights (Cohen, 2014).

Structural Pitfalls of The Digital National Collection

The Digital National Collection, at least publicly, avoids reference to politics of representation or historical injustice. It is impossible to determine whether it is an agreement of silence with its parent organization's political mission, or the opposite. Ambiguity around these specific politics can be found in the National Collection's actions to address *some* issues, such as the representation of non-European Jews, and the choice to avoid others. In this next section we wish to review some of the ambiguity around the Collection's practical choices, as well as demonstrate their political nature and the ambiguous picture they draw towards the project's ethical commitments—whether they be Zionist or anti-colonial.

Collecting Period

The association with a Zionist timeline, briefly mentioned in the collection's website, limits the scope of the collection in accordance to a specific ideology, suggesting that any records that are not pertinent to Zionism are irrelevant. This distinction might be reasonable for a topical archive or collection such as the Zionist Central Archive. As a national level collection, the exclusion of whatever is outside the scope of Zionism, reduces significantly the ability of the project for preservation. Cultural

production in Israel and Palestine did not follow ideological lines and was created by Jews and non-Jews before Zionism as well as outside and against Zionism. How will the collection be able to represent records that oppose this ideology such as Palestinian dissidence posters or records that are simply outside the scope of the chosen timelines such as Jewish art that predates 1881? Adhering to Zionism as a leading time frame violently excludes a whole range of cultures and records that do not fall under this purview, and skews heavily the historical representation possible in the collection.

Pre-existing Collections

The Digital National Collection reliance on pre-existing collections helps facilitate its operation, alleviating some of the financial costs that research and accessioning require. It also allows for the majority of the materials entering the collection to be more meaningful and robust due to their pre-established preservation (in contrary to records that are scattered across different collections or sources). However, it also presents a limitation. Many of the pre-existing collections are already assembled due to existing resources that allowed them to be collected and stored. Some were a result of existing institutions, others a result of familial care, but all were a result of an understanding of the importance of preservation and a privilege in resources to do so. Relying on these collections' preferences, though, means that we are limited by pre-existing preservation practices, and pre-existing knowledge as well, which can hinder the possibility of generating or excavating new knowledge that had been omitted in the past. In general, these pre-existing collections serve to reproduce the already privileged and existing hegemony.

Language Inaccessibility

As mentioned before, Arabic-speaking peoples (Palestinians, Bedouins, and Druze) are a significant part of the Israeli population, with a tradition and cultural production that stretches centuries into the past. Yet, the Digital National Collection—reflective of many other institutions—lacks the

resources and scope to collect, catalog, and make available its materials to Arabic speaking populations or making Arabic based collections accessible. That is not to say that there is no desire or successful attempts to mitigate this gap, yet systemic neglect and an overarching social standing of Arabic, prevents the collection from dealing with this form of exclusion in a fully engaged way. This is by no means an insular occurrence—the recent controversial Nation State Law removed Arabic's official status, betraying government language and cultural bias.

The national trend towards exclusion of the Arabic language from the public sphere is reflected in the Digital National Collection in two ways: the epistemological and language-based barrier to survey, research, access and catalog Arabic inscribed collections, and a pending decision to not present the final website through any bilingual interface. Collections inscribed in Arabic, research about major cultural producers that are written, and any information housed in Arabic-speaking institutions are to a very large extent inaccessible to the committees that govern the collection. The committees cannot evaluate documents and findings in a language they do not understand. Even for collections that are known through research done in other languages (Hebrew or English), the absence of catalogers precludes the development of any measurements to the collection's scope, importance, and possible contribution, automatically leading to its classification as irrelevant. Furthermore, having few Arab and Palestinian staff diminishes the ability to communicate, negotiate, and build trust with existing collections in the Palestinian, Bedouin, and Druze communities, which in turn diminishes the resolution in which collections in those communities can even be found and researched. Although a lack of such trust had already foiled some collections from being included and digitized, an attempt has been made to involve Arab dance collections in the project.

Furthermore, the (not yet final) decision to not create an Arabic interface for the website excludes an entire segment of the population from the collection. The demand for Arabic speaking communities to either learn Hebrew in order to participate in this national project, or simply be left out, only further perpetuate the erasure and mistrust experienced for decades. Yet this is a compounded problem, as it also sends a message of intolerance and to the Hebrew-speaking

communities Arabic, Arabic art, Arabic culture is not a part of Israel's national culture. This choice provides a resounding answer to the question of *who gets to be Israeli*—not those who consider Arabic culture and language as a defining characteristic of their identity.

While structural problems within the National Digital Collection can be overcome, we argue that the epistemic marginalization of Arabic cannot. Not operating in a bilingual structure, where roughly one-fifth of the population speaks Arabic, limits the ability to respectfully understand what is valuable to these communities or communicate with members of the community about existing collections; in short, marginalizing Arabic hinders an already fraught relationship from building trust. An effort to represent a national culture should include the myriad of cultural identities that comprise that culture.

Conclusion

What Ben-David's story demonstrates for us is the ability to bridge, include, and reconcile ghosts of past oppression by redefining in an expansive way the boundaries of culture. While his inclusion marks a somewhat new path forward for the Yemeni community and possibly more, it is also a scar, a reminder of all those who were erased or marginalized beyond visibility. Today, the battle of cultural identity and historical narratives means the Palestinian-Israeli identity is demarcated out of our society.

These tensions under which the collection operates are a sign of the current political landscape, where inclusion and exclusion carry meaningful and practical repercussions and the pendulum tilts heavily towards exclusionary nationalism. It is almost impossible to imagine a system that will operate under the current conditions and perform up to the task of undoing past erasure to create a more just representation of what Israeli culture is and can be. And yet the Digital National Collection's contributions and partial reconciliations are extremely meaningful as they do something to settle an historical ghost. They are, however, insufficient in the face of the increasing demarcation of minority groups from representation in the public sphere. Not because of the project's good intentions or political constraints, but because only a full inclusion of the narratives of the oppressed—chiefly that of the Palestinian Nakba and sense

of national identity that predated 1948—can lead to a new horizon in the political moors of the Israeli Society's current situation. Inclusion and recognition in this collection should not be the aftereffect of a possible future political solution; rather, inclusion must be the necessary step to beginning a new process.

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