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From Palestine to Texas: Moving Along with Emily Jacir

Emily Jacir, a Palestinian American multimedia conceptual artist activist, has produced a diverse and vast body of work¹. For this paper, I shall focus on two of her video installations: *from Texas with love* (2002) and *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)* (2002). The first is an interactive installation composed of an hour long DVD played on a loop and accompanied by a sound track that features 51 different songs. *Crossing Surda* is a two-channel video installation that screens footage along with ambient sound. Both works audiovisually follow the “ordinary” act of going somewhere in two different topographies. Thus, their juxtaposition constructs poignant parallels about exclusionary realities on the ground—specifically the discriminatory “laws” aimed at Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT). Adding a new dimension, the camera’s location and movement simultaneously signifies disparity and resistance. After a brief introduction to Jacir’s life, I explain how she conceived of each piece and describe them. Then, I compare these installations in order to parse out intriguing aspects that point beyond checkpoints as “security” measures.

Born into a family from Bethlehem, Jacir was raised in Saudi Arabia, attended school in Rome, and graduated from the University of Dallas

(BA) and Memphis College of Art (MFA). She is academically trained as a painter, and has lived in Colorado, Texas, France, and the West Bank among other places. Currently she works and lives in Ramallah, Palestine as well as New York City, USA. While Jacir’s work is acknowledged and celebrated around the world, she and her work have also been characterized by far right Jewish organizations as “anti-Semitic” (Wright, 2006)². Most recently, Jacir received the Golden Lion Award of the Venice Biennale’s 52nd International Art Exhibition in 2007 for her ongoing work titled *Material for a film*³ (started in 2005), and in 2008, she received the Hugo Boss⁴ Prize administered by the Guggenheim Museum for her entire body of work. This prize is an acknowledgement of Jacir’s innovative approach to conceptual installation art.

Although Jacir utilizes the privileges granted to her by her US passport which enables her to move around Palestine and Israel, Jacir clearly understands the conditions under which other populations live. Desmond Tutu writes (2002) “I have seen the humiliation of the Palestinians at roadblocks. It reminded me of what happened to us in South Africa, where they battered us and heckled us, and they took joy in humiliating us”⁵ (cited in Hammond, 2007, 264).

In general, Jacir’s art is the outcome of actions

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she takes or performs on behalf of or in tandem with those stripped of their basic “rights.” For example, in preparation for her most revered work, *Where We Come From* (2002), she asked Palestinians from around the world “If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?” She then proceeded to document her fulfillment of those requests/wishes⁶. A few years after the Second World War Hannah Arendt⁷ writes, “The very phrase “human rights” became for all concerned—victims, persecutors, and onlookers alike—the evidence of hopeless idealism or fumbling feeble-minded hypocrisy” (269). Jacir lays out the hypocrisy and shows that not much has changed. Her talent is in constructing a minimal approach to such a colossal problem as the Palestinian experience. Jacir simplifies our “human rights” that have become so complicated. Giorgio Agamben⁸ writes in 1996 that the “the inalienable rights of human beings notwithstanding [international humanitarian organizations] ...have proved to be absolutely incapable not only of solving the problem [of mass displacement] but also of facing it in an adequate manner” (19). Through her work,

Jacir solicits her choice of music for this work from Palestinians living in Palestine who respond to the following question:

If you had the freedom to get in a car and drive for one hour without being stopped (imagine that there is no Israeli military occupation; no Israeli soldiers, no Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks, no “by-pass” roads . . .), what song would you listen to?

The responses to this powerful, yet sad, inquiry vary from Lebanese, French, and American pop songs to the Palestinian national anthem. A compilation these songs comprises the soundtrack that the viewer listens to while watching Jacir’s hour-long drive on a perfectly paved and exposed road under optimal conditions—no interruptions, traffic, or patrols.

Emily Jacir’s other work, *Crossing Surda* (a record of going to and from work) (2002) consists of footage of her commute through an infamous checkpoint between Ramallah and Surda (—both in the West Bank, one of the occupied Palestinian territories). Jacir’s first attempt to record her commute through the closure at Surda was violently interrupted by Israeli soldiers. She was told that “this was “Israel” and that it was a military zone and that no filming [was]

Fig. 1. *from Texas with love*, 2002 video installation; DVD, CD with 51 MP3s, and text courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York



Jacir subversively sketches an adequate direction for us to face.

During her residency in west Texas, Jacir was driving in the vicinity of Marfa⁹ and conceived of *from Texas with love* (2002). Consisting of only one long shot, this video is filmed through the windshield of Jacir’s car from a stationary camera¹⁰ documenting a seemingly never ending open road. The occasional, minute interruptions in the flow of the image—Jacir’s journey—are when she passes another car or vice versa. Otherwise, neither the video’s focus nor exposure changes (Green, 2008)¹¹.

allowed” (Jacir, 2003)¹². They confiscated her videotape, detained her, and threw her American passport in the mud, to no avail. “That night when I returned home,” Jacir writes in 2003, “I cut a hole in my bag and put my video camera in the bag. I recorded my daily walk across [the] Surda checkpoint, to and from work, for eight days.” Jacir turned on the camcorder before she left the vehicle at one end of the checkpoint and turned it off at the other end before continuing her “journey” on an unpaved barricaded road.

This installation consists of two parts. One is

projected on a 16 feet high screen (4:3 aspect ratio and 132 minutes long) in real-time, and divided by the number of the day that Jacir shot the video, e.g., “Day 4 from work.” The viewer hears the ambient sound that is picked up by Jacir’s concealed camera. For example, her footstep on the slushy, dirt-road and the unclear chatter of the passersby are heard. On the opposite side, another screen (a 22 inch monitor) shows, in slow-motion, particular sequences from the projected footage on the large screen without any accompanying sound (for 30 minutes). The slowed down image for the selected sequences replicate the mundane crossing in the congested checkpoint. This risky record of a collective commute illustrates that the lengthy and time consuming process of “crossing” is burdensome and dangerous. For example, the treads of a caterpillar tank covered in mud cuts



Fig. 2. *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)*, 2002, two-channel video installation, courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York

into Jacir’s shadow, elongated by the evening sun, which comes precariously close to an armed soldier whose speculative body posture seems to be towards Jacir and the hidden camera. Here, everything and everyone is slanted.

Far away from one another, Palestine is amputated by the colonial occupation while its geographical foil (“sister city”) in Texas—where *from Texas with love* (2002) was filmed—is primarily remembered through scholarly and fictional texts. Before the independence (1840) the white settlers occupied parts of Mexico in what today is called Texas. More recently, the “law” considers native people from Mexico (and/or Mexican nationals) who attempt to cross into the US as “illegal.” Similarly, the indigenous people of Israel (*former* Palestine) have no or limited access to their ancestral land. Before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948¹³ the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea was identified on the world’s map as Palestine—inhabited by Palestinians¹⁴. The indigenous people of Palestine lived in Palestine one thousand years

before Christ; they were, and are, Arab; however, they can be Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Jewish among other religions or simply non-religious.

The titles of both works engage with movement—location, action, and destination. No destination is indicated in the title of *from Texas with love*¹⁵(2002); however, love becomes a proxy for a destination as the place to go. On the other hand, the laborious title, *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)* (2002) illustrates the arduous task of crossing. It is a constant reminder that “going to and from work” is not a simple task.

The goal (destination) of getting to work and coming back “home” is continuously disrupted by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). However, “going home” is the portion of the recording that is missing from both the title and the image—indirectly raising the question: is there a “home” to return to?

Together these installations are testimonies about the pleasure of movement next to the hazard of captivity. John Durham Peters writes in 2001, “as a verb, to witness” has an “active face,” and is also the “discursive act of stating one’s experience for the benefit of an audience that [is] not present at the event and yet must make some kind of judgment about it”¹⁶. As a witness, and through these two audiovisual testimonies, Jacir supplies the “original” for those who lack the experience of freedom and captivity. Firsthand or otherwise, witnessing implies responsibility. Do we as viewers feel any responsibility when we witness these very different experiences of movement in Palestine and Texas in these two videos—experiences that are anchored on the affiliation of the land and its

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people, or lack thereof?

On another level, one title resembles a “postcard” from a retreat where the passage is pleasant and amiable (trip). The other summons borders where the passage is treacherous (plight). T. J. Demos writes in 2003, “there is a self-punishing side effect to such enjoyment as driving freely in Texas...[w]hen one endlessly repeats the freedom of movement here, one also continually reenacts the painful reminder of its impossibility there”¹⁷. Nevertheless, each setting, and location, recalls and invokes the other. This is particularly true when one belongs to both the worlds of sovereignty and of confinement. Edward W. Said describes the simultaneous awareness of two cultures, two homes, and two settings as contrapuntal, a phrase he borrows from music to explicate the conditions of exile¹⁸. As an artist and activist, Jacir attentively represents the concurrent component of Palestinian displacement and imprisonment. Her journeys, and or passage, through an adopted country and her own homeland are both political and personal not to mention historical. However, this homeland is on the verge of “disappearance”¹⁹.

In an interview with Stella Rollig²⁰ Jacir says, “being able to drive freely and to listen to music, and at the same time wanting to cry, because this cannot happen back home” (18). As a responsible artist Jacir utilizes this multitude of emotions. *from Texas with love* (2002) is a mundane exercise that records Jacir’s nonstop journey through the barren landscape of west Texas. But beyond that, it envisions liberated Palestinians who imaginatively move without restraint and do as they choose in Palestine²¹. Rather than being trapped and divided. Even if momentarily, Jacir instills the possibility of an undivided land and a peaceful return—an experience that is unlike the collective experience in Palestine under military colonial occupation in *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)* (2002).

In the OPT (*today’s* Palestine), at any point anyone might be stopped, harassed, searched, and/or detained. Ironically, this has been enforced for more than 60 years by the Jewish colonizers/settlers who themselves were historically displaced for almost 3000 years. In 1948, the United Nation’s mandate to partition left Palestinians with only 22% of the historical Palestine, which has been

diminished further since then²². More recently, the OPT has been divided into three areas: “Area A” (Palestinian control), “Area B” (Palestinian civil authority and Israeli military authority), and “Area C” (Israeli control). These zones are not contiguous and they guarantee the division of Palestine and Palestinians from within their territories and society, and repeatedly interrupting and preventing the normal continuation of life. For example Jenin and Hebron—in the north and south of the West Bank—are both part of “Area A,” however, Palestinians who are going from Jenin to Hebron have to change zones 50 times.²³

Israel’s policy of movement restrictions is directly aimed at Palestinians and was implemented after the six-day war in 1967. In 2007 the Palestine Monitor²⁴ reports that these restrictions were relatively light before the first Intifada (“shaking off” or uprising) in 1987. After that, this policy led to a complicated “permit system.” And since the second Intifada in 2000, military blockades, curfews, detentions, and denial of permits have been unbearably heightened. They also report that in 2004, the “restriction of movement peaked at 763 points of closure in the West Bank alone, consisting of military checkpoints, partial military checkpoints, earth mounds, earth walls, trenches, roadblocks and gates.”

These policies are only applicable to the indigenous population of Palestine and not to its recent settlers who are mainly from the western world. In addition, these exclusionary practices have forced Palestinians into exile. “[I]rremediably secular and unbearably historical,” Said writes in 1984, exile “is produced by human beings for other human beings; it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography” (50). Jacir engages her audience with these unbearable conditions through her off-kilter two-channel installation *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)* (2002).

The village of Surda is in the West Bank, north of Ramallah and south of BirZeit—just a few kilometers apart. The Surda checkpoint obstructs movement from Ramallah (where Jacir partially lives) to BirZeit University²⁵ (BZU) (where she partially works and has a studio). Before it was first setup in 2001, this passage connected Ramallah to more than 30 villages in the West Bank. Similar

to the multitude of other militarized checkpoints setup by IDF and spread throughout the OPT, the Surda checkpoint blocks Palestinian access to choice, education, employment, family, freedom, and health for example. It particularly limits access to BZU, the first institution of higher education in Palestine.

As a European scholar who frequently travels to the West Bank with personal experience in the region, Keith Hammond writes in 2007 that “universities have become centres of resistance” particularly since 1980s (first Intifada)—and the military order 154 regulates higher education by controlling what is taught, particularly to those focusing on Palestinian history and Arab politics (266). He further states that the IDF “want[s] to make higher learning in the West Bank increasingly difficult,” while this is also part of Israel’s policy of “transfer” to uproot indigenous Palestinians (264). Educated Palestinians pose more threat to Israel, but they are also more likely to leave Palestine for better jobs.²⁶

Imagine your daily commute through heavily militarized barricades and occasional live ammunitions. You travel approximately 60 miles (around 96 kilometers) driving 60 miles per hour—that is without stopping, voluntarily or mandatorily. Before the Surda closure the commute between BZU and Ramallah was around 15 minutes. A commute that otherwise would take much less than an hour has become an extended ordeal that is sometimes never accomplished; because at their discretion, the IDF can decide to randomly close the closure and/or not grant passage to the people. Palestinians have to plan ahead for the unpredictable conditions of military occupation, not to mention “mental preparation” for the possibility of a humiliating encounter.

Nonetheless, the two installations (artistically) defy the conditions of occupation by conceptualizing it differently, specifically accomplished through the cameras’ peculiar movements and locations. Both cameras are on the move but one is stable and in-the-open and the other is unstable and concealed which literally replicates the conditions on the ground. The stationary camera undermines the theme of “freedom of movement” as it is contrasted with the lack thereof in Palestine. The bag-held camera, as opposed to hand-held, is

imprisoned in a way similar to the people that it records. Ironically, the compulsory position of the camera in Jacir’s bag—she is told that it is “illegal” to film in the military zones—leaves no option for the camera’s point of view, and that of the viewer (us). We must look down at what it documents; the exclusionary realities on the ground. These videos reassert the necessity of movement and the impossibility of stopping it, independent of any imposed restrictions. In Jacir’s video installations, movement is not in question; rather, its quality and condition is challenged.

While *from Texas with love* (2002) creates a sense of progress regardless of the seemingly long distance that is ahead, *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)* (2002) shows that people are determined to continue, regardless of impassable roads and militarized interference with their livelihood, and peoplehood. Tellingly, the later work is edited and the former is not. As a result they construct a sharp contrast in their depiction of redacted geographies, like Palestine itself—edited and on the verge of being crossed out. The endless space in Texas is a rare commodity in Surda. And, the “back-to-back transfer” that loads and unloads people at the two ends of the checkpoint does not fancy the luxury of transportation; although various vehicles are piled up at each end. Travel in a car while listening to music is enjoyable, and in sharp contrast to exposure to the elements while walking—the cold rain and the wind, for example.

Unlike geographical or national borders that are recognized by the international community and marked in blue, walls and checkpoints are illegally imposed borders. However, they are similarly devised to keep-out and keep-in certain classes of people—or states and territories (e.g., Mexican/Mexico/US, Palestinian/Palestine/Israel). Walls and checkpoints are mute structures that divide places into desired and undesired spaces. They limit or postpone access, develop more apartheid than community, and lessen the possibility of coexistence. Erected as “security” measures, mobile checkpoints are essentially moving borders, in some ways more harmful than permanent ones, making people’s life erratically miserable.

These works delicately question the notions that “all human beings are born free and equal” (Article 1) and “freedom of movement” (Article

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13) stressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1951)—based on a Kantian code of ethics. Closures, mobile or not, point to the discriminatory nature of “basic human rights.” The insistence on the term “basic” suggests that there are degrees of this entitlement. The journey on an open road in Texas is a routine, as the passage on a road in Palestine filled with blockades has come to be routine. However, neither one seems to be an ordinary practice when they are put forth in the context of the Palestinian struggle for self determination. Julie M. Peteet, anthropology professor at the University of Louisville writes in 2007 that “violently crafted and maintained borders,” both “[locks] Palestinians in and [keeps] them out”.²⁷

The lyric “Born free, as free as the wind blows, born free to follow your heart” (John Barry, 1966) in *from Texas with love* (2002), particularly reminds us of the idealism of “basic human rights” that is not evident in *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)* (2002) and also not a possibility (for now). This is how Jacir (2003) explains the experience:

All people including the disabled, elderly, and children must walk distances as far as two kilometers depending on the decisions of the Israeli army at any given time. When Israeli soldiers decide that there should be no movement on the road, they shoot live ammunition, tear gas, and sound bombs to disperse people from the checkpoint.

Therefore, the process of “going to and from work,” symbolic of people’s other routines, becomes a debacle with the “zone of danger,” as one of the

ways that scholar Irit Rogoff conceives of borders²⁸. “It’s not a comfortable territory to live in,” as another scholar, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “[h]atred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.”²⁹

In a recent commentary, art critic Jonathon Green in 2008 randomly singles out Madonna’s “Material Girls” and Shaaban Abdel Rahim’s “Bakrah Israeli” (“I Hate Israel”) from the sound track of *from Texas with love* (2002) to argue that “Jacir uses the slipperiness of global media to recontextualize, integrate and finally fuse one culture’s commodity pop music with another’s political aspirations, suggesting . . . that all distinctions have fallen away between the political and the aesthetic”³⁰. Although distance is minimized due to the advent of technology, Jacir’s work illustrates the heightened disparity amongst different nations—particularly Palestinians and Israelis/North Americans.

For more than a week, Jacir secretly records the movement of the people who themselves are being monitored by the IDF soldiers. Her surveillance of the surveyor is an act of defiance. And, for just a day through collected songs, her camera tells a different story. Emotionally driven and subversively informative, these installations create a vivid contrast between restricted mobility and “freedom of movement.” Through Jacir’s work we experience the discriminatory practices that favors “basic human rights” only for certain geographies and nationalities. We witness that people’s place of birth and affiliation alleviates or aggravates their well-being. Yes, you can drive forever in Texas—especially moving from the north heading south—but these works show that Texas and Israel have borders and a history of state violence and corruption in common.

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Endnotes

- 1 For more on Jacir's work visit www.alexanderandbonin.com the gallery presenting her art.
- 2 Jessica Robertson Wright, "Contemporary Palestinian Art: Moving in from the Margins", (article presented at DIWAN: A forum for the arts, 2006). Paper available at: www.arteeast.org/artenews/artenews-articles2006/jessica-wright/jrwright_paper.pdf (last accessed February 3, 2009).
- 3 This title is named after a chapter in a book about Wael Zuaiter who was exiled in Italy. He was one of the first Palestinian intellectuals and artists assassinated by Israel in 1970s. He was in the process of translating *Thousand and One Nights* from Arabic to Italian. Some of the bullets that killed him pocked holes in Zuaiter's copy of this book which he carried in his pocket.
- 4 Ironically, Hugo F. Boss was the founder of Hugo Boss AG, the clothing company that designed black uniforms for Heinrich Himmler's Schutzstaffel (SS) and Hitler Youth during WWII (perfumeshop.dk). Although the partition of Palestine was discussed between the British Empire and Zionist movement prior to WWI, it was only after WWII that it was enforced by the United Nations.
- 5 Keith Hammond, "Palestinian Universities and the Israeli Occupation", *Policy Futures in Education*. 5:2 (2007): 264-270.
- 6 For example, Jacir signed "a condolence book for Raisal al-Husseini" for Reem who have never been to Palestine; visited Jihad's mother—"visit my mother, hug and kiss her"—who only has a Gazan I.D. (Identification Card); and paid Mohmoud's phone bill—"pay my phone bill"—because he lives in Area C where there are no post offices. These are all trivial requests but not under occupation.
- 7 Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966/1951): 269.
- 8 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without end: Notes on politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000/1996): 15-26.
- 9 It is important to note that Marfa is known as a site for contemporary art installations and films, somewhat relevant to Jacir's work. For example, the installations of Donald Judd, and the location for James Dean movie *Giant* (1956), *There will be blood* (2007), and *No country for old man* (2007) among others was in Marfa. Judd is known for "[revolutionizing] practices and attitudes surrounding art making and the exhibition of art" (www.juddfoundation.org). *Giant* is an epic film that deals, among other themes, with the mistreatment of the native inhabitants of Mexico. *There will be blood* is about the corruption and destruction caused by the oil industry. And, *No country for old men* explores the crime and violence the border enables.
- 10 I assume that the camera is installed on the dashboard.
- 11 Jonathan Green, (2008). *Artbrain*. Journal 3. www.artbrain.org (accessed December 2, 2008).
- 12 Emily Jacir, (2003). www.daratafunun.org (accessed March 3, 2008).
- 13 This year, 1948, is known as al-Nakba (catastrophe or disaster) to the Palestinians and the Arab world.
- 14 Read *A peace to end all peace: The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the modern Middle East* (New York: Avon Books, 1989) by David Fromkin for the history of the Middle East and Palestine.
- 15 I find it interesting that one of the most famous films in the spy film series *James Bond 007* is titled *From Russia with love* (1963), similar to Jacir's title. This can be accidental; nonetheless, it is a reminder of the role of Britain in Palestine's partition.
- 16 John Durham Peters, "Witnessing", *Media, Culture & Society* 23:6 (2001): 709.
- 17 T.J. Demos, "Desire in Diaspora: Emily Jacir", *Art Journal*. 62:4 (2003): 76.
- 18 Edward W. Said, "The Mind of Winder: Reflections on Life in Exile", *Harper's*, 50(1984): 49-55.
- 19 One of the most recent books on the "disappearance" of Palestine is *Disappearing Palestine: Israel's experiments in human despair* by Jonathan Cook (London: Zed Books, 2008).
- 20 Stella Rollig, "Stella Rollig – Emily Jacir Interview." In *Emily Jacir: Belongings: Works 1999–2003*. Bozen: Austria. O.K Center for Contemporary Art Catalog: 6-19.
- 21 Read Beshara Doumani's article *Palestine versus the Palestinians? The iron laws and ironies of a people denied* (*Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXXVI.4(2007): 49-64) for the tension between identity (Palestinians) and territory (Palestine).
- 22 Phyllis Bennis, *Inside Israel–Palestine: The conflict explained*. (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications, 2007): 12-14.
- 23 Camille Mansour cited in the anthology edited by Derek Gregory et. al., *Violent geographies: Fear terror and political violence*. (New York: Routledge, 2007): 99.
- 24 Palestinian Monitor. www.palestinemonitor.org. (accessed November 21, 2008).
- 25 Visit www.birzeit.edu, this university became a member of the Association of Arab Universities in 1976.
- 26 Keith Hammond, "Palestinian Universities and the Israeli Occupation", *Policy Futures in Education*. 5:2 (2007): 264-270.
- 27 Julie M. Peteet, "Unsettling the Categories of Displacement", *Middle East Report* 244 (2007): 627.
- 28 Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirmis: Geography's visual culture*. (London: Routledge, 2000): 113.
- 29 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands, La Frontera: The new Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999/1987): 20.
- 30 Jonathan Green, (2008). *Artbrain*. Journal 3. www.artbrain.org (accessed December 2, 2008).

Selected images from artist Emily Jacir precede each section, juxtaposing photographs with Arabic and English text. An indispensable work for popular and scholarly collections. Summing Up: Essential. Whereas writing on Palestine is often encumbered by the baggage of ideology, and writings from within Palestine are unfortunately few, this collection of essays frames itself as writing in search of Palestine, seeking less to represent a place than to capture its imaginations...Throughout, the authors work to untether the hyphenated 'nation-state,' embracing instead the future of a people.