CHAPTER 1

Activist Memoirs and the Lexicon of Contention

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1 Introduction

Activist memoirs produced in the context of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles are a central genre of 'resistance literature' (Harlow 1987). In her seminal study of this literature – broadly defined in generic terms so as to include poetry as well as fiction and non-fictional writings – Barbara Harlow (1987) argues that its production and dissemination serves struggles for freedom and justice in more than one way. Resistance literature is part and parcel of these struggles and plays a central role in shaping their outcomes. It contributes to mobilising popular support, boosting activists' morale, enhancing a sense of shared purpose, and fuelling resisters' hopes. Beyond these immediate goals, this literature simultaneously serves the more long-term "struggle over the historical and cultural record" – a struggle over public knowledge and cultural symbols that "is seen from all sides as no less crucial than the armed struggle" (Harlow 1987, 7). This chapter highlights the important role played by activist memoirs in the struggle over public memory. As cultural platforms for the construction and reconstruction of on-the-ground knowledge about grassroots resistance, these memoirs help to shape future memories, keep alive a lexicon of contention by providing a platform in which social-normative constraints over the use of controversial terms can be relaxed, and introduce a self-reflexive dimension into the work of activism.

Harlow's study of resistance literature focuses on the prison memoirs of Third World political detainees and members of groups that are victims of oppressive regimes (e.g., Tamimi and Takruri 2022, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian context addressed here). These political prisoners' memoirs are a subgenre of the category of activist memoirs, a broader category that includes another subgenre – memoirs written by so-called 'allies' (Bourke 2020; Leibovits 2023), i.e., dissenting members of an oppressor group, whose memoirs testify to their solidarity with members of an oppressed group through accounts of their activist engagements on its behalf. In publicising these accounts, memoirists consolidate their adoption of the complex position of 'allyship' through the employment of a historically and situationally shaped language of contention.

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The author-protagonists of the memoirs discussed here are all Jewish-Israeli 'allies' of the Palestinian struggle for freedom and equality who have actively participated in grassroots actions in support of the Palestinian struggle for freedom and justice that are routinely under-reported and remain under the radar. Through these activist memoirs, they construct an 'ally' identity and inscribe the stories of their activism in Israeli public memory (and beyond). A considerable number of such memoirs by Israeli anti-occupation activists have appeared in the past two decades, providing a particular angle on the larger story of resistance to Israel's military control over the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Like prison memoirs, these memoirs are a politicised literary genre that draws on their authors' personal experiences of the activist struggles in which they are implicated and constructs a discursive space marked by "communicative vigilance" (Frekko et al. 2015). This vigilance over the use of language is typically enacted through lexical and thematic choices that are considered highly contentious in mainstream Israeli discourse.

Given their authors' complex 'ally' positioning vis-à-vis the Palestinians' struggle, the activist memoirs written by Jewish-Israeli activists devote considerable attention to the process of their authors' self-distancing from their society of belonging and the emergence of their dissident stance. Their authors' participation in shared, border-crossing encounters with their Palestinian counterparts leads to intense reflections regarding their claim to an 'ally' positioning as a personal-political project.

Like all activist memoirs, the anti-occupation memoirs addressed here discursively construct a fleshed-out, singular persona out of the collective experience of social movement participation. As a form of memory work, they are carefully designed, retrospective accounts of past events that incorporate their authors' present perspectives, simultaneously viewing "both the past and the person looking at it" (de Bres 2021, 9). Through the employment of a lexicon of contention, they recount their oppositional life trajectories as narratives of self-transformation that invite intimate accounts of inner turmoil and growing outrage at the scenes of oppression and humiliation to which their activist engagements expose them. At the same time they also register their efforts to sustain a sense of purpose and hope in their protracted struggle.

In exercising 'communicative vigilance,' anti-occupation memoirists pointedly avoid the mainstream lexicon generally used in the Israeli public sphere to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, they serve to de-normalise common usage by employing such provocative terms as 'occupation' or 'apartheid' as lexical markers of an alternative public sphere.[1] Thus, activist

1 Friedman and Gavriely-Nuri (2017) propose a 'dialectic discourse analysis' approach for the study of discourses that normalise and estrange the Israeli military control of the

memoirs delineate a counter-public sphere that largely consists of like-minded audiences who are willing to embrace their authors' dissident stance vis-à-vis Israeli hegemonic collective memory. The 'contentious edge' carried by the memoirs' lexicon of contention is context-specific and, as I will try to show, can shift in 'expressive force' over time. I conceptualise the discursive work performed by words carrying various degrees of 'contentious edge' in pragmatic terms, proposing the notion of 'pragmatic field' to capture the scalar relations of 'expressive force' within a particular assemblage of semantically diverse words that memoirists can 'weaponize' in challenging Israeli mainstream collective memory.

The proliferation of Israeli anti-occupation activist memoirs in the past two decades and the provocative language of contention they employ, need to be understood in relation to recent socio-historical changes in Israeli peace activism and the political positions they encapsulate, to which I now turn.

2 The Changing Contours of Israeli Peace Activism

The subtitle of a book that offers a longitudinal sociological analysis of the Israeli peace movement since its emergence in the late 1970s describes it as "a shattered dream" (Hermann 2009). Indeed, despite the signing of peace agreements with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), both significant steps on the road to regional peace, Israeli-Palestinian relations have remained an "intractable conflict", as this conflict is designated in Daniel Bar-Tal's (2013) book title. On the Israeli side, Israel's political leadership and mainstream society are reluctant to face the moral conundrum of Israel's decades-long military control over millions of Palestinians in the territories of the West Bank and Gaza as well as the human rights violations and suffering it entails for the Palestinian population. The activists whose memoirs will be discussed here are part of a small, politically marginal minority that persists in advocating a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, their mode of operation testifies to a change in Israeli peace activism rather than to its disappearance – a change linguistically marked by its designation as 'anti-occupation activism' rather than 'peace activism,' a usage I will adopt throughout this chapter.

The socio-historical context for this change was recently addressed in an article by sociologist Uri Ben-Eliezer, who describes this new form of peace activism as promoting a "reflexive postliberal peace" (Ben-Eliezer 2023, p. 1). In this grassroots struggle, Israelis and Palestinians join hands in defying the

West Bank. My analysis proposes the pragmatic notion of 'contentious edge' to capture the role of lexical choice in verbal acts of resistance, as will be discussed below.

policies and practices of spatial and social separation that have been increasingly enforced by the Israeli authorities in Israel/Palestine since the early 2000s (and of which the Separation Barrier, or Wall, built roughly between Israel and the Palestinian territories in the mid-2000s stands as a stark emblem, see Katriel and Gutman 2015). This state of separation also shapes the political climate of suppression and denial that surrounds the issue of the occupation in mainstream Israeli society (Cohen 2001). Therefore, anti-occupation activist memoirs stand out as a significant cultural platform through which oppositional activities, the motivations behind them, the lexicon through which they are articulated, and the personal meanings attached to them, can be inserted into the Israeli 'public transcript' (Scott 1990). Thus, even though the goal of ending the occupation is not in sight, the discursive performance of enacting 'allyship' through lexical and thematic choices seeks to contribute to the struggle over the cultural and historical record of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Thus, beyond the more general ascendance of the memoir as an expressive literary genre in recent years (de Bres 2021), the changing face of Israeli peace activism has further contributed to the growing significance of the anti-occupation memoirs that have appeared since the early 2000s.

Echoing Tamar Hermann's observations concerning the failure of the Israeli peace movement, Uri Ben-Eliezer notes that when Israel and the PLO sought to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by launching the so-called 'Oslo Process' in 1993, "Israeli peace movements disappeared almost completely from the political map" (Ben-Eliezer 2023, 1). Yet, distinguishing 'peace movements' from 'peace activism,' he argues that Israeli peace activism has not disappeared but has significantly changed in the past two decades "in terms of organisation, orientation, and action" (Ben-Eliezer 2023, ibid.). The liberal, top-down approach that characterised the Israeli organised peace movement has been abandoned in favour of more de-centralised, dispersed, and radicalised forms of activism that constitute a self-reflexive response to the failure of the older Israeli peace movement. Ben-Eliezer analyses this change as a radical sociocultural shift in the Israeli peace paradigm that emerged in response to earlier failures and involved trust-building grassroots practices of resistance and border-crossing encounters.

In this new activist climate, the organised mass demonstrations and public activities of the earlier peace movement have been replaced by the embodied solidarity activism of small grassroots groups, whose members venture out of their comfort zones to engage in solidarity activism that involves direct contact with Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories. This could take the form of sporadic acts of support such as joining solidarity visits, participating in witnessing tours in the scene of occupation, assisting Palestinian farmers

during the olive-picking season, protecting Palestinian shepherds from Jewish settler attacks, delivering food to besieged Palestinian villages in times of acute crisis, rebuilding Palestinian homes demolished by the Israeli military, monitoring checkpoints, and the like. These activist interventions are accompanied by the ongoing professional assistance offered by professional NGOs in legal and medical matters.

The memories of protest practices and reflections inscribed in anti-occupation memoirs remain largely invisible to mainstream Israeli society and are condemned – and often obstructed – by right-wing vigilante groups. The memoirs themselves circulate mainly in activist circles. Through them, their authors construct their oppositional stance and 'ally' identity through the use of a lexicon that challenges the Israeli hegemonic narrative of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the next section, I address a selection of Israeli activist memoirs as a deliberately crafted, multi-layered subgenre of resistance literature, attending to their linguistic "repertoire of contention" (Tarrow 2013, 16). In particular, I will address some of the ways in which they draw on the Israeli dynamic 'protest lexicon' (Elzen 2023), harnessing its contentious edge to their political struggle by exercising communicative vigilance. Avoiding the officially ordained and obfuscating vocabulary of mainstream Israeli discourse, they use the words 'occupation,' 'apartheid,' settlers (*mitnaxlim*), and settlements (*hitnaxluiot*), terms that bring out the illegality of Israel's military control and the Jewish settlement enterprise. In the following section, I will regard thematic choice as a discursive strategy, discussing, in particular, the ways in which some of these memoirists invoke the memory of the Holocaust, a central component of Jewish-Israeli collective identity, in such a way as to position Israeli Jews, the self-appointed inheritors of Holocaust memory, in the perpetrator rather than the victim role. This controversial claim to role reversal is predicated on activists' acceptance of the reality of the occupation regime and their adoption of the controversial lexical choices used to describe it (as discussed earlier).

3 The Protest Lexicon in Anti-Occupation Activist Memoirs

The study of the language of contention as proposed by Sidney Tarrow (2013) follows the tradition of socio-historical language exploration. As in all instances of the use of contentious language, the author-protagonists of activist memoirs "draw upon a battery of language to describe their identities, their claims, their opponents, and their forms of action" (Tarrow 2013, 20). Their lexical selections from the protest lexicon signal their oppositional stance,

playing "an important role in the construction, the endurance, and the diffusion of contentious politics" (ibid., 21).

Protest lexicons are context-specific and subject to change. As we have seen earlier, the changing face of Israeli peace activism has resulted in a discursive shift from the designation of organised attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as 'peace activism' to 'anti-occupation activism.' This nomenclature stresses the power inequality between the Israelis as occupiers and the Palestinians as occupied. It also privileges the mainstream Israeli historical narrative that grants legitimacy to the state of Israel in its 1948 borders while marking the Palestinian territories occupied during the 1967 War as 'occupied territories' (as will be elaborated below). By the beginning of the 21st century, for more radical activists, the use of the term 'peace,' which had been widespread in grassroots demands for the inter-state negotiations that eventually led to peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, no longer carried a contentious edge. It was replaced by a pointed demand to actively 'end the occupation.'

I clearly remember the day in which this lexical shift presented itself to me in the early 2000s. Coming back home, I found the living room floor of our apartment covered with anti-occupation signs my daughter was diligently preparing for an upcoming demonstration in downtown Haifa. As she was gathering her new signs in large bags, she asked me to help her get rid of a pile of discarded signs that were heaped in a corner of the room. I leafed through the no-longer-usable signs and saw they all included the word 'peace.' This made me realise that this word – so resonant for my generation of activists – was going out of circulation. For the young generation of activists, using the language of war and peace was no longer tenable. This language implied an unacceptable willingness to ignore the structural violence of the occupation regime. Having lost its contentious edge, the word 'peace' had become a deflated symbol, a marker of the political obfuscation associated with a never-ending 'peace process' that was going nowhere.

Radical peace activists prefer using the word 'occupation' as part of their lexicon of contention and – more specifically, and perhaps more modestly – describe their campaign as an anti-occupation struggle that demands an Israeli on-the-ground initiative rather than a quest for a utopian peace. Tellingly, the English version of David Shulman's 2007 activist memoir, *Bitter Hope*, targeted to an international audience, carries the subtitle "working for peace in Israel/Palestine." The subtitle of its Hebrew translation, however, does not include the word 'peace' (*shalom*) but rather describes the book as a selection from the diary of an activist in *ta'ayush*, one of the grassroots groups that emerged in the early 2000s.

In Israeli vernacular discourse, the word 'occupation' (*kibush*), its derivatives such as 'occupied territories' (*shtaxim kvushim*) and other occupation-related terms such as 'colonists' (*mitnaxlim*) carry a heavy contentious edge. The use of these words is studiously avoided by right-wing and even center-left Zionists. It is often frowned upon in current events broadcasting and often ridiculed in right-wing circles, at times through a belittling phonetic distortion (by pronouncing the expression *hakibush,* the occupation, as *akibush*, with an un-aspirated initial sound). Given its highly contested public life, choosing to use the word 'occupation' signals a speaker's or writer's positioning in the more radical left on the Israeli political map. Therefore, a major way in which anti-occupation memoirists construct their language of contention is by insisting, for example, on the use of the term 'occupied territories' rather than the term 'Judea and Samaria,' which is the toponym routinely used in mainstream parlance. These politicised lexical choices perform an indexical function (Silverstein 1976), signalling the memoir authors' stance (Jaffe 2009), i.e. their self-positioning within the cultural-political debate over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and vis-à-vis their potential readers. The vigilance surrounding the use of occupation-related terms by anti-occupation memoirists is part of their claim to an 'ally' identity.

This communicative vigilance over the use and non-use of lexical items points to alternative constructions of collective memory and to alternative regimes of political legitimisation by different sections of Israeli society. For the Zionist left, 'the occupation' refers to the Israeli military control over the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza that began after the 1967 War between Israel and its neighbouring Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, and Syria). This usage implies a radical distinction between the territories included within the State of Israel upon its internationally recognised establishment in 1948, in the wake of an armed struggle that is inscribed in Israeli collective memory as the War of Independence, and the Palestinian territories Israel occupied in 1967. The Palestinians reject this distinction as this use of the term 'occupation' erases their claims to the territories from which some 750,000 Palestinians found themselves displaced in the wake of the 1948 War, unable to return. This massive displacement is inscribed in Palestinian memory as the *Nakbe* (Arabic for 'disaster'). In Palestinian collective memory, the term 'occupation' applies to the whole land of Palestine, and restricting it to the territories Israel occupied in 1967 is a distortion of public memory (Gutman 2017).

Right-wing Israelis, too, pointedly reject the use of the word 'occupation' to designate Israel's rule over the West Bank and Gaza. However, they do so on completely different grounds. Invoking an Old Testament divine promise, they

lay a religious claim to the whole land of Israel, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. In this context of divinely-ordained entitlement, the Palestinian territories are spoken of as 'liberated' rather than 'occupied' and the Israeli settlers lay claim to an age-old indigeneity in the land of Israel, considering the very use of the word 'occupation' a misnomer as "one cannot be an occupier in one's own land" (*ein kovesh be'artzo*), as the settler saying goes.

Thus, through their 'communicative vigilance' around lexical choices, anti-occupation memoirists contribute to the political struggle over the collective memory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its political implications. Their use of such words as 'occupation' or 'occupied territories,' or just 'territories' or 'the West Bank' signals an Israel-centric yet dissident stance that challenges the legitimacy of Israel's decades-long military control over the territories occupied in 1967. The official and vernacularly dominant Hebrew toponym for the West Bank, 'Judea and Samaria' (*Yehuda Veshomron*) with its Old Testament aura is not part of these memoirists' lexicon.

A typical example of such usage is the term "occupied territories" as it appears on the first page of David Shulman's second memoir, which helps set up its oppositional tone (Shulman 2018, 11). So does the subsequent mention of greenhouses "built by colonists (*mitnaxlim*) on stolen land" (ibid., 14). The use of the terms *hitnaxlut*, 'colony,' and *mitnaxlim*, 'colonists' for Jewish settlements in the occupied territories – rather than the terms *hityashvut* (settlement) and *mityashvim* (settlers), or *toshavim* (residents) – carries a contentious edge. It constructs the Jewish settlers in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 as a category apart from those who have settled in other parts of the country and thus points to their questionable legitimacy. For readers of these memoirs, this pattern of lexical selection works to normalise the language of anti-occupation resistance, producing a discursive echo chamber, a linguistic comfort zone in and through which anti-occupation activists can give voice to their dissident stance.

In fact, while the word 'occupation' still has a considerable contentious edge, its use has recently come into question because of the sense of temporariness it connotes. Arguing that the end of the decades-long occupation is nowhere in sight, some left-wing radicals, drawing on the global collective memory of South Africa's past, maintain that the state of affairs in Israel/Palestine is more accurately described as a state of *apartheid*. They point out that the situation on the ground involves the upholding of two differentiated rules of law in the same occupied territory – a regime of military control over the Palestinian stateless population and a civilian regime for the Jewish settlers (Lustick 2019).

On the scale of contentiousness, then, the use of the word 'apartheid' (with the political analysis it encapsulates) is currently considered the most

contentious among the words used by activists in their attempts to de-normalise the status quo. The word 'occupation' still carries a considerable contentious edge in public debate. There were some signs that it was becoming less of a taboo following the outbreak of months-long mass protests against the government's planned overhaul of the judicial system in January 2023. In those demonstrations, anti-occupation activists participated in the mass protests as a recognised 'anti-occupation block' (*hagush neged hakibush*) and anti-occupation banners, signs and stickers became part of the protest landscape, if a marginal one.[2]

This indicates that the contentious edge of words that comprise the protest lexicon may shift over time. It is because of the lexicon's dynamic nature that the exercise of communicative vigilance is necessary. The shifts in the degree of contentiousness carried by particular words can be conceptualised in terms of a *pragmatic field*, which is on a par with the well-established linguistic concept of a *semantic field* (e.g., the field of related 'kinship terms' within a given cultural context). I use the concept of 'pragmatic field' to designate word assemblages linked in terms of their historically-situated contentious edge. In the foregoing discussion, the relevant assemblage includes calls for 'peace' as an aspirational term, calls against 'occupation' and 'apartheid' as terms describing an objectionable state of affairs, as well as invocations of the Holocaust that draw on the collective memory of the Nazi regime, positioning Israelis in the perpetrator role (as will be elaborated in the next section). In the case of this case-sensitive assemblage, the words 'peace,' '(no)occupation,' '(no)apartheid,' and some Holocaust-related terms will be part of the same pragmatic field. Pragmatic fields are not determined by *meanings* like semantic fields but rather by expressive *force*. The words included in a pragmatic field are not defined along *categorical* lines as in the case of semantic fields – 'father' and 'uncle' in the case of the semantic field of kinship terms – but rather in *scalar* terms that designate degrees of contentious force. While semantic fields are *synchronic*, pragmatic fields have both *synchronic* and *diachronic* dimensions, marking the degree of contentiousness that words in a particular assemblage carry relative to one another at a given point in time.

The author-protagonists of activist memoirs – like radical activists in other discursive contexts – exercise communicative vigilance when drawing on the

2 This chapter was written before the Hamas assault on Israeli southern towns and kibbutzim on 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent (and ongoing) war on the Gaza Strip. Notably, other terms have become prominent in the contentious lexicon, such as 'war crime' and 'genocide.' Exploring the uses of the lexicon of contention discussed here, including invocations of the Holocaust, in discourses surrounding these recent events must await further study.

particular pragmatic fields that make up their dynamic lexicon of occupation-related terms. At the same time, they avoid the use of hegemonic terms in discursively performing their oppositional stance. Through these linguistic means, they underscore their 'ally' identity in the context of solidarity activism vis-à-vis their Palestinian partners. In so doing, they also signal a particular positioning in relation to the cultural memory of Israel/Palestine, one that acknowledges the story of Jewish national revival and legitimacy as a home for persecuted Jews within the 1948 borders but rejects claims grounded in a religious-nationalist cultural memory that invoke ancestral roots and a divine promise. Anti-occupation activists neither support nor directly contest the Israeli erasure of the Palestinian memory of the 1948 disaster, the *Nakbe*. They recognise its dire implications for Palestinian life in following years yet their activist efforts generally centre on the ever-growing plight of the stateless Palestinians, who have been living under Israeli military rule since 1967.

4 Self-Positioning in Israeli Anti-Occupation Activist Memoirs

The Israeli anti-occupation activist memoirs addressed in this study are old-style, stand-alone books, each of which capitalises on the figure of a particular author-protagonist, who is engaged in resistance to the Israeli regime of control over the Palestinians through a variety of grassroots oppositional practices.[3] This shared participatory experience of grassroots activism is at the heart of these memoirs. I elaborate on some aspects of this experience based on a corpus of six memoirs written by anti-occupation activists since the outbreak of the Al Aqsa Palestinian Intifada in the early 2000s, drawing on them selectively with an eye to the ways in which memoirists construct their self-positioning. In Helena de Bres' classification, these texts represent modern and hybrid memoirs since they narrow in "on a particular aspect of the author's experience: a relatively short time period, specific event, or select theme" (de Bres 2021, 11). These memoirs also include essayist elements that offer meditations on moral and political issues that amplify the narration of personal life events.

The author-protagonists of these memoirs, like many other anti-occupation activists in Israel, are middle-class, well-educated professionals, academics, and students, for whom writing is part of their life trajectory. Many are women, which is not surprising given the central role women play in Israeli grassroots

3 The memoirs addressed in this chapter include Chayut (2009), Hammerman (2016), Kirstein Keshet (2006), Nirgad (2004), and Shulman (2007, 2018). Translations from Hebrew texts in this chapter are my own.

activism as well as in literary pursuits. Some of these authors are widely recognised public intellectuals belonging to the older generation of left-wing liberal activists. The overall picture of the occupation regime the memoirs document is one of systemic and systematic abuses that routinely violate the Palestinians' human rights. Each memoir testifies to the ills of the occupation in particular times and places – winter at the Qalandia checkpoint (Nirgad 2004) or activist engagements in the South Hebron Hills (Shulman 2018). Each testifies to its author-protagonist's various attempts to confront or alleviate the abuses he or she witnesses. These personal memories take the form of anecdotal fragments, often written in a diary-style chronological order and employing a repetitive poetics of excess that invokes the grinding reality of protracted activist efforts.

By documenting scenes of life under occupation, these memoirs explain and legitimise the oppositional stance that fuels their authors' activism, providing glimpses of their personal motivations, fears, and misgivings. At the same time, they also bring out the joys of activism as highlighted in Carrie Hamilton's (2010) work – the small triumphs of occasional successes, the sense of self-liberation that may attend activist defiance, the exhilaration associated with border-crossing solidarity, the comfort of a shared lexicon, and the simple unanticipated pleasures of "doing things together" (Becker 1986).

A major thematic thread that runs through these memoirs involves narratives of moral awakening that tell the story of their authors' personal-ideological shift concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This shift is attended by a recognition of the Palestinian *Nakbe* as well as of Israel's role in perpetuating the hostilities through its occupation regime. The memoirists' individual paths to anti-occupation activism are thus narrated as tales of conversion that model the possibility of personal change, foregrounding the sense of purpose and hope the activist struggle may bring.

For some activists, as for David Shulman (2007), this change of heart and mind was a gradual process. Born and raised in the American Midwest, he was first drawn to Israel at age 18 by his love for the Hebrew language. He decided to stay and became a world-renowned scholar of Indian Studies, uninvolved in local politics. The initial trigger for the profound change he experienced in relation to Israeli politics was the country's shift from a left-wing Labour to a right-wing nationalist government following the 1977 elections. He recounts the impact of this political change in sharp terms: "The rise of the Israeli right, from 1977 on, shocked me, infuriated me, and undermined my faith in the world I lived in … I watched in horror as Israel transformed itself into a paranoid, smug, and violent ghetto" (Shulman 2007, 4). His ensuing personal journey was a "slow, cumulative, and uneven" (ibid.) process, fraught with doubts and exasperation in the face of Israel's unrelenting occupation policies. After

ten years of "participating in demonstrations, listening to speeches and feeling foolish," he volunteered one day a week in a legal aid organisation, *Hamoked*, that "conducts strategic litigation and advocacy against Israel's violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip."[4]

Following his exposure to the Palestinians' plight, in the early 2000s he became deeply involved with the anti-occupation group *Ta'ayush* (Arabic for 'life in common'),[5] a Palestinian-Israeli co-resistance group that was established in the fall of 2000, whose "consistent emphasis on action, in real time, on the ground" (Shulman 2007, 9) appealed to him. The story of his involvement with this group, the sense of border-crossing solidarity with Palestinian farmers and shepherds, and anecdotes of conflictual incidents with the Israeli military make up the bulk of his memoirs. These autobiographical episodes are interspersed with self-reflexive commentary on the significance his grassroots activism acquired in his life.

For other activists, however, the first step on the path to activism was an unanticipated jolt that resulted in a sharp shift in perspective and a prolonged process of self-questioning and political re-education. These led to growing doubts about Israel's hegemonic collective memory as taught in mainstream schooling and as reiterated in mainstream media. Thus, for example, for Yehudit Kirstein Keshet, an activist in the checkpoints monitoring feminist group *MachsomWatch*,[6] who moved from Britain to Israel as an ardent Zionist in search of a place of belonging, the radical shift in perspective that triggered her activism was a moment of epiphany. At that moment she realised that the Israeli hegemonic narrative of nation-building, which failed to acknowledge the Palestinians' rights as well as their plight, was untenable. In her words:

> My epiphany came during a conversation at a dialogue group in Beth Sahour, near Bethlehem, early into the first Intifada (1987–93). I was convinced that if properly presented, by me, the Israeli perspective would be accepted, the Palestinians would 'agree to live in peace with Israel,' and the Occupation could end. Our host at the meeting [...] retorted that Palestinians, too, feared annihilation, desired the Right of Return, wanted their national aspirations recognized [...] How banal [...] How Israel-centric not to have thought of it oneself. That moment marked the end of denial

4 The quote is from the *Hamoked* website (https://hamoked.org/ (last accessed 31 July 2023).
5 See the *Taayush* website (https://taayush.org/ (last accessed 31 July 2023)).
6 See the *MachsomWatch* website (https://machsomwatch.org/ (last accessed 31 July 2023).

> for me and resulted in a search for a new narrative of history [...] (Kirstein Keshet 2006, 4)

In this case the memoirist's change of heart was triggered by her Palestinian interlocutor's insistence that Israelis and Palestinians were entitled to the same political aspirations and to the same individual and collective rights, including the right to return to their ancestral homes, the right to self-government and freedom of movement and speech. Tellingly, her Palestinian interlocutor's piercing assertion of human dignity turned out to be a powerful transformative tool that launched Kirstein Keshet on a path of political self-education and grassroots activism. She turned to the memory of the Holocaust and not to the universal language of human rights to justify her change of heart. She invoked Holocaust-related terms, such as 'Nazi' and – in the Israeli context – 'bystander,' as warning signs to a self-positioning she was determined to avoid: "Remembering the silence of the majority during the Nazi/fascist period impels many of us to speak out, now, while there is still time" (Kirstein Keshet 2006, 42).

Noam Chayut's memoir (2009), too, tells the story of an unanticipated shift in his self-positioning by invoking Holocaust-related language and imagery. His shift of heart combined a growing sense of moral unease at the tasks he found himself performing as a soldier of the occupation with a moment of epiphany that jolted him out of his taken-for-granted position as the ultimate heir to Holocaust memory. Gun in hand as a soldier of the occupation, a chance encounter with a little Palestinian girl led him to the stark realisation that he was a perpetrator of evil rather than its ultimate victim, as Israeli schooling about the Holocaust had led him to believe.[7]

The very title of Chayut's book, *My Holocaust Thief*, underscores the centrality of Holocaust memory in the construction of Israeli identity and brings it into dialogue with the reality of the occupation. Chayut's narrative of transformation from self-perceived victim to victimiser, tells of an encounter with the Palestinian 'other' in which he is led to question the morality of his military role. He, too, does so by invoking the memory of the Holocaust, indeed by re-configuring the term 'Holocaust' and making it part of his lexicon of contention. He recounts that one day he entered a small Palestinian village as the commander of a few military vehicles assigned to patrol its streets.

7 Armed with this new understanding, he eventually joined the ranks of the veterans' organisation "Breaking the Silence," a high-profile anti-occupation NGO that collects, disseminates, and archives soldiers' personal accounts concerning their oppressor role in upholding the occupation regime (Katriel 2021). For more information, see the *Breaking the Silence* website (https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/ (last accessed 31 July 2023).

Disembarking from the vehicle, he performed a routine procedure called 'stormy deployment,' which involves holding a gun in hand and pointing it in the direction of one's gaze. In this case, this military posture of intimidation was performed close to a group of children immersed in play. As he stood there, fixing his gaze – and pointing his gun – at the playing children, the image of one particular little girl, who was transfixed in fear, became etched in his memory. In his words:

> [...] she froze in her tracks, went all pale, and appeared horrified. She neither screamed nor ran, just stood there with a horror-stricken face and gazed at me with her dark eyes ... And then she wakes from her frozen state, turns around silently, a thin girl in bright clothes, and bolts away, without looking back, runs and disappears among the olive trees [...] (Chayut 2009, 59)

Deeply shaken by the girl's obvious sense of horror at the sight of Israeli soldiers, Chayut comes to see himself through her eyes and begins to question the Holocaust-related collocation of 'absolute evil' (usually attributed to the Nazis), which grounded his view of himself as a Jewish victim turned into an Israeli soldier who defends his nation. He says:

> She took away my faith that there is an **absolute evil** in the world and that I am fighting against it. For this girl I was the **absolute evil** ... The moment I understood that I was the **absolute evil** in her eyes, the **absolute evil** that dominated me till then dissipated. And since then I've been without my Holocaust, and since then everything in my life has been gaining new meaning. (Chayut 2009, 63, emphasis in the original)

The little girl's gaze liberated Chayut from the hold of the collective memory of the Holocaust, depriving him at the same time of a moral shield against his growing sense of discomfort regarding his military pursuits. The process of self-examination and retrospective reflection that engulfed him brought back memories of the nationalist and militaristic socialisation he had undergone as an Israeli child and soldier, casting it in a new light. For Chayut, relinquishing the victim position and accepting the responsibility attached to his military role, spelled a new kind of freedom, a freedom to re-think his self-positioning vis-à-vis Israeli collective memory and question its implications through his activism in "Breaking the Silence" and through the writing of his memoir. In this process, the term 'Holocaust' shed its accustomed meaning as a distinctive

Jewish catastrophe, a semantic shift that led Chayut to feel that it was stolen from him, as the book title suggests.

Invoking the memory of the Holocaust so as to position Jews as perpetrators of evil rather than as victims of terrorism is a highly contentious discursive move in mainstream Israeli culture. Although this move has been identified as one of the narrative possibilities found in Israeli literature and film (Steir-Livny 2016), it is one fervently avoided in political discourse. This taboo against comparing Israelis to Nazis is highlighted by historian Idit Zertal's (2022) op-ed in the liberal daily *Haaretz,* where she refers to it as an intellectually crippling 11th commandment that Israelis have informally added to the biblical Ten, namely: "Thou shalt not compare." For Chayut, challenging the power of this injunction was a liberating step towards claiming responsibility and taking action.[8]

For David Shulman, too, as recounted in his second activist memoir (2018), taking the path of resistance spelled personal freedom, the freedom to reject a social order that placed him in the role of the oppressor. Rejecting this role, he sought to reclaim his sense of freedom by cultivating his 'ally' identity, openly supporting the Palestinians in their struggle for freedom and equality. He describes his newfound freedom as marked by moments of exhilaration at the very possibility of resisting domination, claiming to have found a surprising kind of freedom in refusal in the South Hebron Hills: "[...] I stand on some barren hill or in a field, the officer tells me to leave, threatens me with harsh punishment. This happens all the time. This 'no' instantly comes to define my sense of freedom [...]" (Shulman 2018, 64–65)

Similarly, Ilana Hammerman, a staunch and dedicated anti-occupation activist of many years as well as a highly regarded writer, translator, editor, and public intellectual, attests to finding freedom in the capacity to say 'no.' Her memoir uses the anti-occupation lexicon of contention described earlier to express her outrage at the unrelenting oppressiveness of the occupation regime, including the maddening bureaucratic machinations devised against the Palestinian population that she comes across during her activist forays into the occupied territories (Hammerman 2016).

Hammerman is aware of the severely limited effect of her attempt to offer solidarity and practical assistance to the beleaguered Palestinians, who are

8 Since the events of October 7, 2003, Holocaust language and imagery have been frequently invoked in Israeli public discourse with reference to the Hamas brutal attacks on Israeli civilians, which invoked the cultural memory of Jewish victimhood. At the same time, the Israeli relentless war of retaliation on Gaza has positioned Israel in the perpetrator role, triggering Holocaust-related accusations of Nazi-like genocidal practices in the international scene.

crushed by Israel's control over their lives. Like David Shulman, she celebrates the sense of freedom that comes with saying 'no' to the regulations of the Israeli authorities, describing how it allows her to open up and say 'yes' to the human encounters occasioned by her forays into the West Bank towns and villages. In her memoir, as in her op-ed essays in the press, she berates members of the Zionist left for their "armchair allyship," for failing to act on their liberal beliefs and reach out to the Palestinians in defiance of official regulations. In her words: "The greatest 'yes' of all is to say yes to personal and civil disobedience" (Hammerman 2016, 298).

Notably, even though Hammerman occasionally mentions her participation in various organised resistance events by radical activist groups of the kind recounted in Shulman's memoir, the story of her grassroots activism is constructed as an individual feat of border-crossing solidarity (as hinted by the book's original Hebrew title, which reads *A Woman on Her Own*). In fact, her memoir can be seen as an extension of her earlier solitary forays into the backyard of Israeli society, notably her exploration of the life world of women who are sex workers (Hammerman 2004), an emerging literary genre that has been analysed under the heading of "documentary literature" (Turetzky 2017).

There are similarities between the literature documenting journeys taken by their authors in the Israeli backyard, ethnographic reports of fieldwork in the margins of Israeli society, and memoirs that relate to under-the-radar activism that finds its place off the beaten path. There are also resonances between the dilemmas of self-positioning and self-writing addressed by the authors of these increasingly blurred genres of documentary writing. To what extent are they able to refrain from imposing their preconceived frame of reference on the 'otherness' of the social reality they seek to describe and interpret? While ethnographies, which are not auto-ethnographies, purport to reconstruct the lifeworld of the cultural other, and documentary literature is designed to familiarise readers with the less visible corners of the society they live in, memoirs, even those of activists engaged in a collective pursuit, prioritise their author-protagonist's personal voice. Each of the memoirists discussed here adds his or her personal note to the larger story of what it means and how it feels to claim a dissident position vis-à-vis one's culture of belonging through the unconstrained use of a lexicon of contention, such as 'occupation'-related terms, in challenging its central components of hegemonic collective memory, such as the Holocaust.

In sum, for Israeli anti-occupation activists, embarking on the path of resistance is a significant step in a long journey of assuming an 'ally' identity. They do so both by engaging in oppositional action and by testifying to their activist engagements. This discourse-centred activism is mainly enacted through

communicative vigilance in the form of lexical choices, including the reconfiguration of Holocaust language in Israeli collective identity, positioning Israeli activists as 'allies' in the Palestinian struggle against the occupation.

5 Concluding Remarks

Though largely restricted to the echo chambers of radical left activism, anti-occupation activist memoirs exercise a measure of mnemonic control in the context of social silencing. They do so through lexically-grounded communicative vigilance, and by cultivating a measure of expressive stability for dissident voices in a hostile and rapidly changing media ecology. They provide a discursive site in which the lexicon of contention is dominant. I have proposed the pragmatic notion of 'contentious edge' by way of capturing the dynamics of resistance enacted through lexical and thematic choices that constitute the protest lexicon of a given dissenting group. This notion points to the work that contentious language can do in the struggle over public agendas, the positioning of social players, and the reinvigoration of controversy in contexts in which its absence testifies to suppression, silencing, and erasure rather than social consensus.

Activist memoirs play an important role in the struggle over the historical and cultural record. Indeed, they perform all three dimensions of memory work identified by Ann Rigney (2018) in the memory-activism nexus. They are cultural platforms in which memories *of* activism are constructed and reconstructed. They make use of historical analogies to enact memory *in* activism, whether by providing precedents and models of past resistance (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent struggle, *satyagraha*) or by invoking the collective memory of a particular collective past (e.g., the Holocaust, its victims and perpetrators). Memoirs as a genre of resistance literature can also be seen as a form of *memory activism* (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023), i.e. as interventions designed to shape the ways activist struggles will be inscribed in future memory.

The anti-occupation memoirs I have studied address fundamental tensions associated with their activist engagements. Their self-distancing from hegemonic ideologies and official policies is coupled with a deep personal investment in the Israeli state as a source of identification and belonging. This tension is reflected in their use of words that carry a contentious edge. These words are at once legible yet objectionable within Israeli mainstream discourse, positioning their users as dissenting members of the society they belong to.

Furthermore, memoirists are highly self-reflexive about their activist engagements. While their detailed accounts of grassroots involvement in

border-crossing solidarity activism underscore the central activist values of persistence and tenacity, they also reveal misgivings about the ultimate value and meaning of their activist pursuits, a tension captured in the oxymoron employed in the title of David Shulman's first memoir *Dark Hope* (2007). Yehudit Kirstein Keshet extends this mixture of hope and scepticism to the act of memoir-writing itself, which she considers as part of the struggle over future memory. At the end of her memoir, which highlights Israeli women's monitoring of soldiers' conduct at military checkpoints, she takes this scepticism a step further. Going beyond the frustration associated with the sense of futility that often attaches to protracted activist engagements, she raises the unresolved, tension-filled possibility of co-optation, saying:

> Yet the question remains: whose voice will dominate? Will the memories of protest focus on the Occupation and its evils [...] or will the protest become part of collective self-congratulation, yet another proof of our, Israel's, moral superiority as though to say that although there is no partner for peace, despite the terrorist attacks, merciful mothers went to succour the 'enemy.' And perhaps that, too, is part of the truth. (Kirstein Keshet 2006, 155)

This question brings forth the complexity of the 'ally' position claimed by anti-occupation activists, pointing to the irony encapsulated in the possibility that they will be used as 'fig leaves' by the repressive regime they seek to dismantle. Yet it also raises the possibility of a more ambiguous positioning, one that does not reduce political players into an oppressor/oppressed binary that distinguishes good from evil. By providing a public platform for such questions in the field of grassroots activism, activist memoirs open a space for self-doubts and tentativeness amidst the din of protest slogans and calls to action. Exercising communicative vigilance over the use and non-use of words as well as over the invocation of cultural memory, the anti-occupation memoirs construct dissident voices that offer reflections on the meanings, possibilities, and limitations of their grassroots engagements, including their tenuous position as 'allies.' In so doing, they enrich the cultural conversation on activism in new ways.

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