

Title: Embroidered Memories: Postmemorial Nostalgia in Palestinian Tatreez

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Abstract: For the descendants of al-Nakba survivors, who have been separated and exiled from their familial homeland in Palestine, memories of life before exile are no longer part of an act of recall, but one inherited and imagined. As seen in the narratives that follow, the memories they inherit from family members are often inflected by nostalgia and a longing for return, which in turn shape their imagined relationship with Palestine and their Palestinian identities. To narrate this ambivalence, young artists practice the traditional craft of Palestinian embroidery, or *tatreez*. As a result, what originated as a form of communication, passed matrilineally, has evolved to incorporate a new spectrum of voices.

This article examines discourses of Palestinian postmemory in the embroidered motifs of diasporic artists. This research examines how family dynamics and exposure to *tatreez* are shaped by gender and each family's postmemory, drawing from online biographies, written autobiographies, and social media posts by the artists, it explores what aspects of their families' histories are remembered by young Palestinians and how these memories are reinterpreted and expressed through contemporary embroidered art. These individuals create art that combines nostalgia, longing, obligation, confusion, pride, and commemoration that characterizes al-Nakba memory and modern Palestinian identity. Each artist represents the perspectives of the descendants of survivors; they claim their stake in history and do so in ways that push the craft, as well as the identities it represents, in an evolutionary direction.

Introduction

Palestinian embroidery, or *tatreez* (transl. *taṭrīz*), is a commonly known symbol of Palestinian heritage (*UNESCO - the Art of Embroidery in Palestine, Practices, Skills, Knowledge and Rituals*, n.d.). Less known, at least in academic circles, are the emotional and social underpinnings that shape its creation. For centuries, Palestinian women employed *tatreez* as a form of communication, donning dresses, or *thobes*, adorned intricately with *tatreez*, to communicate with others about their lives, emotions, and experiences (Saca & Saca, 2006). They embroidered what they observed daily, in the everyday contexts of the village and the family. With each pattern – its color, stitchwork, and thread – comes a story, one that changes alongside each artist's personal experiences. Their *thobes* inadvertently became archives of memory, as each motif serves as proof of their existence (Abadi, quoted in Tomes, 2018). With practice, these women became experts in their craft, possessing localized knowledge that varied from village to village, and passed such knowledge to their children (Weir, 1970). In doing so, they created a mnemonic chain between individuals, one that safeguarded not only a method of performing Palestinian identity but also a way to preserve familial memory.

Over time, Palestinian embroidery developed emotional and social effects, both of which recently took new and unique forms. For Palestinians living in diaspora, *tatreez* may provide

a method through which they process and communicate their ancestral trauma. These individuals descend from those displaced during the creation of Israel in 1948. This event, known by Palestinians as *al-Nakba*, or *the catastrophe*, is engraved into Palestinian collective memory, so much that it now serves as a key marker in their collective identity (Matar, 2005). As is often the case with families who experience mass atrocity, the offspring of survivors develop a close relationship with the memory of this event, a relationship coined by Marianne Hirsch as *postmemory* (Hirsch, 2012). This connection is mediated both privately and publicly, shaped as much by family stories of survival as they are by larger cultural narratives (Fivush et al., 2006). Uniquely, and what is the focus of this paper, certain Palestinian artists produce embroidered art that expresses postmemory. As seen in previous cases with the offspring of survivors, these young Palestinians find themselves adopting artistic endeavours that connect them with their familial pasts (Alfandary & Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, 2022). The thobes and motifs that follow abide by the imaginings of diasporic Palestinians, contextualized by stories that their creators did not experience firsthand, but experienced indirectly.

It is through embroidery that these individuals mourn the losses endured by previous generations. Three different types of postmemorial consequence are analyzed here. First, is the reappropriation of a traumatic familial memory into a personal narrative of survivance, as if to say: *I am a survivor; because we are survivors*. Second, an experience of “missing out” in diaspora, contoured by inherited nostalgia, which inform what offspring believe their lives not only could, but should be, had they remained in Palestine. Here, there is a denial of one’s present circumstances in favour of an imagined alternative, one characterized by the possibilities found in external narratives. Third, a disillusionment emerges from this grief-induced nostalgic gaze. For some diasporic Palestinians who visit Palestine, what they experience pales in comparison to the Palestine of their youth, one they constructed using the memories shared with them by family. Each experience, marked by a sense of conflict, loss, and/or disappointment that did not originally belong to them, demonstrates the ripple effect of collective trauma on the family, further compounding the fact that emotions associated with trauma and loss can be transmitted from person to person, and that such a transmission process occurs across multiple generations.

While postmemory is explored extensively in academic literature, and to some extent in the literature on the Palestinian diaspora (Abu-Lughod & Sa’di, 2007; Sayigh, 2008; Khalidi, 1992), the sentiments shared and inherited between the grandchildren of those who survived the Nakba and the survivor generation is unexplored. This paper is a product of a research project designed to address this knowledge gap (Sheets, 2024). By including inherited memories of resilience and instances of inherited nostalgia, this research adds to the burgeoning literature that expands their analyses of inherited memories beyond solely the negative aspects of trauma (Wolf, 2019), and suggests a need for a more nuanced approach towards the emotions that accompany postmemory. Additionally, this is the first paper to explore postmemory’s role in the making of Palestinian embroidery. In doing so, it brings the emotional and psycho-social undercurrents accompanying the making of embroidery to surface, shedding further light onto an art that, in its earliest documentation, was shelved as an “attire of the past” (Kawar & Nasir, 1980). Lastly, by including a male artist in this analysis, we can observe how gender contours inheritance, while simultaneously highlighting avenues for transmission that break beyond the matrilineal. By bringing these cases to light,

we can further understand how inherited emotions like grief, nostalgia, and resilience transfer intergenerationally, as well as how factors like familial elaborateness/silences, gender, and culture shape inheritance.

Methodology

Research Framework – Why Embroidery, and Why Postmemory?

For Palestinians, *tatreez* is more than just embroidery; it is a mother tongue taught to a few. For generations, Palestinian women practiced embroidery to facilitate communication between women, both via the archival properties of textiles like thobes (Hunt, 2014), and the social nature of embroidery circles. Knowledge of the craft passed matrilineally, with mothers and grandmothers teaching what they knew to the next generation of women in their families. The motifs produced by women each possessed their own style and wear, marks of distinction that, to the informed reader, hint at the wearer's origins (Munayyer & Sayers, 2020). *Tatreez* was a craft used by women, for women, giving it extraordinary value to those who could neither read nor write, but still desired to document their lives.

Before the 1948 Nakba, Palestinian women embroidered with ornate detail and variation, documenting the daily scenes observed during village life (Saca and Saca, 2006). After 1948, their experiences with colonization and forced displacement during Israel's creation became prominent themes in their artwork, thereby simultaneously politicizing *tatreez* and transforming it into a method of psychological empowerment through which women exerted agency (Dedman, 2023; Salamon, 2016). However, what is relatively unexplored is *how exactly* these individuals use embroidery to document both lived and inherited experiences. Because their embroidery symbolizes what women witnessed on a day-to-day basis, their work now archives history and memory in a way that is unique to the Palestinian people. They became the guardians of this memory, stories inscribed in a language taught only to a few.

When practicing *tatreez*, young Palestinians continue this tradition of using needle and thread to communicate one's thoughts, feelings, and observations about their lives. This makes *tatreez* an excellent object of analysis for those who wish to observe the connections between memory, identity, and the making of objects and cultural performances. To explore the relationships between young diasporic Palestinians and Palestinian embroidery, as well as how their art reflects their experiences in exile, this research uses postmemory as a theoretical framework. Building on Hirsch's (2016) definition, this research explores how the inherited trauma of Palestinian expulsion echoes across generations in diaspora, its subsequent grief manifesting in the form of nostalgia. Even then, what we can identify as postmemorial nostalgia takes on varied shapes, contoured by the nature of each family's mourning. In doing so, this study ultimately investigates how *tatreez* is used by the grandchildren of al-Nakba survivors as they grapple with questions of memory and belonging through the lens of inherited trauma.

Sample Selection

The artists included in this research consists of diasporic Palestinian artists, who are the grandchildren of al-Nakba survivors and who use tatreez as a medium to express their postmemory. These artists were selected based on their background in using tatreez as an artistic medium, as well as their ability to employ modern interpretations of traditional motifs and embroidery techniques. The interviews and artworks analyzed were not created specifically for this research but were pre-existing pieces created independently by the artists. This ensures that the narratives and motivations behind these pieces are authentic and unprompted in these contexts.

Data Collection

Data collection involved a comprehensive analysis of written material, online-sourced interviews, and embroidered artwork from the selected artists. It turns to written material, such as online biographies or autobiographical books, such as Ghnaim's *Tatreez & Tea: Embroidery and Storytelling in the Palestinian Diaspora*. Also included are video interviews, interviews from magazine articles, and social media posts, all found online, which are used to gather perspectives directly from the artists. Lastly, digital images of the artists' embroidered pieces are analyzed, focusing on varying levels of individual and collective narrative representation. After the paper's creation, each artist was informed of the research and provided the opportunity to review the text. All responded, and in doing so provided their consent to publish the research alongside pictures of their work.

Analytical Framework

Artists' interviews and embroidered pieces were analyzed thematically to identify recurring themes and patterns in the artists' testimonies and artwork. Comparative analysis was used to examine similarities and differences across cases. To gauge learning processes and mnemonic transmission of tatreez, interviews were analyzed. The research explores how each artist learned the craft – from whom, how often they practiced, and how they feel when embroidering with that person. I compared this to how often the artist spent time with the individual who taught them the craft (if a teacher was present during), gauging, overall, the extent of familiarity with and connection between to the two variables. I also look at which information is sourced through the friends or family versus outside, public sources, such as books. Notably, since gender factors into this form of mnemonic transmission, I note the genders of both instructor and student, gauging how daughters inherit this craft versus sons, as well as whether the memories come from mothers or fathers.

When observing artists' creations, each piece was first evaluated for its resemblance to traditional tatreez motifs, namely in the level of detail and the extent of replication of traditional designs, using published tatreez dictionaries and ethnographic works as reference points. The intentionality behind the artwork was assessed by examining interviews for stories that did not originate within the artists' own lives but were inherited through familial or communal narratives. The analysis focused on how the artist uses such stories to enhance the impact of each piece, highlighting why the artist chose that motif and, by extension, which narrative gets remembered. Additionally, the artworks' emotive and mnemonic qualities were analyzed to understand how the artist's postmemory of al-Nakba influences their creative expression. Key concepts such as nostalgia, grief, loss, and reappropriation of trauma were identified and related to specific elements within the artworks.

When observing the art, I first gauge to what extent their work resembles whether they explicitly identify links or if they are more subtle in their representations. When comparing to traditional motifs, I observed against prior knowledge obtained through published *tatreez* thesauri and ethnographic works. To gauge the inspiration behind the artwork, including whether postmemory was a motivating factor, I looked to their interviews. I looked specifically for pieces related to stories that did not originate in the artists' own lives (either through familial or public narratives) and searched for how those stories are reflected in their artwork. How does the incorporation of that story enhance the impact of the piece? I looked for intentionality – gauging why the artist chose that story, as well as why they used that motif to communicate it with others. I also observed the level of detail in existing pieces.

Wafa Ghnaim

Wafa Ghnaim learned *tatreez* from her mother from the age of two. Her first book, *Tatreez & Tea*, documents the traditional patterns passed matrilineally within her family. Through embroidery, both women document and narrate memories of war, exile, reconstruction, and growth experienced in consequence to the Nakba. Ghnaim describes growing up immersed in her mother's embroidery practices, as well as the stories that inspire them. As a child, she and her sisters constantly spent time with their mother, learning embroidery from her, travelling with her when she spoke about *tatreez*, and later helping her run workshops. Ghnaim's mother always spoke about *tatreez*, making sure to share, in detail, stories of the women behind their design. Notably, her mother enforced a level of standard upon her daughters' stitchwork. Ghnaim recalls a childhood memory of a project gone awry, during which her mother insisted she unravel the error and begin again. "I asked her if it was really 'that big of a deal,'" she explains, "and she promptly replied that yes, she could tell that the design was not symmetrical or balanced... I had to take out every single one of my stitches and redo them" (Ghnaim, 2018, 75-6). The time-consuming and repetitive acts of embroidering correctly, while seemingly mundane or tedious, speaks to the artist's intentionality both when performing the craft and narrating its stories. Ghnaim's mother does more than passively transmit her knowledge; she is an active agent in how her daughters learn and understand not only their heritage but also their familial history. Her successful efforts show through Ghnaim's book, which include both detailed instructions on how to embroider her family's motifs, as well as the narratives that explain their existence.

Social bonds formed in Ghnaim embroidery circles build on emotions like comfort and security. "In my family our artistic practice is centered on togetherness," Ghnaim explains, "...*tatreez* brings my family together and in one place" (Ghnaim, 2018, 15). She describes the social aspect of embroidering as essential to the experience, as it allows family members to turn to each other with questions. Intergenerational storytelling practices in families are essential to the way offspring understand and connect with their environments, as well as to give meaning of historical or lived events to the family (Boss et al., 2003). The *way* stories are told – whether through elaborateness or silences, and especially through the emotions displayed during storytelling – influence what meanings are taken away from the experiences shared (Reese & Fivush, 1993; Fivush et al., 2006; Fivush, 2010). This is where we situate postmemory, as the emotional wellbeing of the postmemory generation hinges on the storytelling practices taking place within their families (Wolf, 2019). Yet, while storytelling can consciously or subconsciously transfer trauma to latter generations, family storytelling can also promote posttraumatic healing within families (Kiser et al., 2010). We can see this

case with Ghnaim's family, where storytelling during embroidering promotes a shared understanding of events in a peaceful and supportive environment. "In retrospect," states Wafa, "my sisters and I found art to be so fulfilling as children, maybe because it gave us the many opportunities to see my mother in her most sanguine self" (Ghnaim, 2018, 231). As seen through this statement, embroidery holds positive emotional salience for Ghnaim, as she connects the act of embroidering with the comfort of spending time with her mother as a child. When in times of struggle, she performs this craft, triggering embodied memories of comfort. It is perhaps this connection that Ghnaim shares with the making of *tatreez* that allows her to reappropriate the narratives that accompany in a way that attaches more positive meanings centred around trauma, such as resilience.

In one creation, Ghnaim uses a motif learned from her mother, titled *The Missiles Design* (2018, 118-19). As she explains, the original purpose of the motif was to narrate experiences of occupation: "This motif tells a story of a newly occupied people, observations of modern warfare, and their form of silent protest through embroidery" (Ghnaim, 2018, 110). She describes the visual narrative that characterizes the piece: "[The] placement of the missiles on the dress cut through the dress vertically, as though visually expressing the destruction of the human body, of the center of our own humanity..." (Ghnaim, 2018, 110). She also accredits her mother, whose presence and demeanour she feels gives meaning to the design: "The stories give this design an entirely different presence and demeanor after my mother explains them" (Ghnaim, 2018, 110). For Ghnaim, the emotional connection she shares with the motif relies on the memories and emotions it represents as much as it does the person with whom she shares those memories. Her mother's emphasis on the destructive qualities of the pieces, especially when connected to the destruction of the body, appears in Ghnaim's work. As such she channels the emotive qualities of *The Missiles* and relates them to a spinal injury she experienced, reappropriating the motif and relating to her own life. She channels the themes of the design, of destruction and pain but also of vulnerability and resilience, through the present. Ghnaim (2019) posted her finished piece, which she stitched on a denim jacket, on social media with the following caption:

...I completed my denim jacket in 2019, after one long year of painful, emotional and isolating recovery...that left me unable to walk, stand, sit or lie down... I began stitching my denim jacket in 2018 as a way to cope... I stitched the motif on my back to show the destruction of my body.

Here, Ghnaim turns to embroidery during a time of emotional stress and the act of embroidering offers her a sense of therapeutic comfort. Repetitive stitchwork connects Ghnaim's immaterial experiences to a deeply tactile process. In response to the physical and emotional pain resulting from her spinal injury, she participates in a physical act associated with the embodied memories of embroidering with her mother. Sewing, therefore, evokes notions of habitual life, a material symbol of the mundane repetitiveness that underly memory's elusiveness (Seremetakis, 2019; Crang & Travlou, 2001; Anderson, 2004), selfhood, and home (Ingold, 2022). It connects her to the feelings of sanguinity and comfort felt during childhood, which she now associates to the craft. "It is never too late to come back," she states, "To come home... There is always a place for you in *tatreez*" (Ghnaim, 2018, 396). In the moment of stitching, of ruminating on its memory, she is not alone, allowing her to "cope" with present pain and return to the comfort of "home." Unlike the

embroidery circles of her childhood, however, the end of her embroidering brings her back to the here and now.

Ghnaim connects her experiences – her pain as well as her resilience – to those of the women who raised her. She reappropriates the motif’s symbolism and applies them to her own life.



Figure 1: “Invisible” (2019) by Wafa Ghnaim, reappropriating the original *The Missiles* motif. Embroidery & Photograph: Wafa Ghnaim, Collection: The Tatreez Institute (Tatreez & Tea)
 Source: Ghnaim (2019)

She recalls and employs the emotive qualities of the past to serve her emotional needs in the present. Ghnaim’s succinct replication of *The Missiles* found in her mother’s collection is indicative of the extent of her immersion in both the act of embroidering and the meanings behind the narratives. Out of all the artists discussed, Ghnaim’s tatreez most closely resembles the embroidery produced by women prior to the Nakba. We first see this in the employment of a motif not of her own design, as is the case with the remaining artists, but rather the near-exact reproduction of a

motif embroidered by women from earlier generations in her family. Additionally, she produces her creations using the methods closely instilled by her mother. The repetitive use of the cross-stitch; the long, singular strands of thread with which she creates multi-dimensional pieces; her commitment to never breaking that thread, thereby keeping a neat and tidy backside; the requirement by her mother to unravel any mistakes and begin anew – these details point to the relationship Ghnaim shares with the craft, as well as the type of relationship she shares with the woman who taught it to her. This level of knowledge is not built overnight.



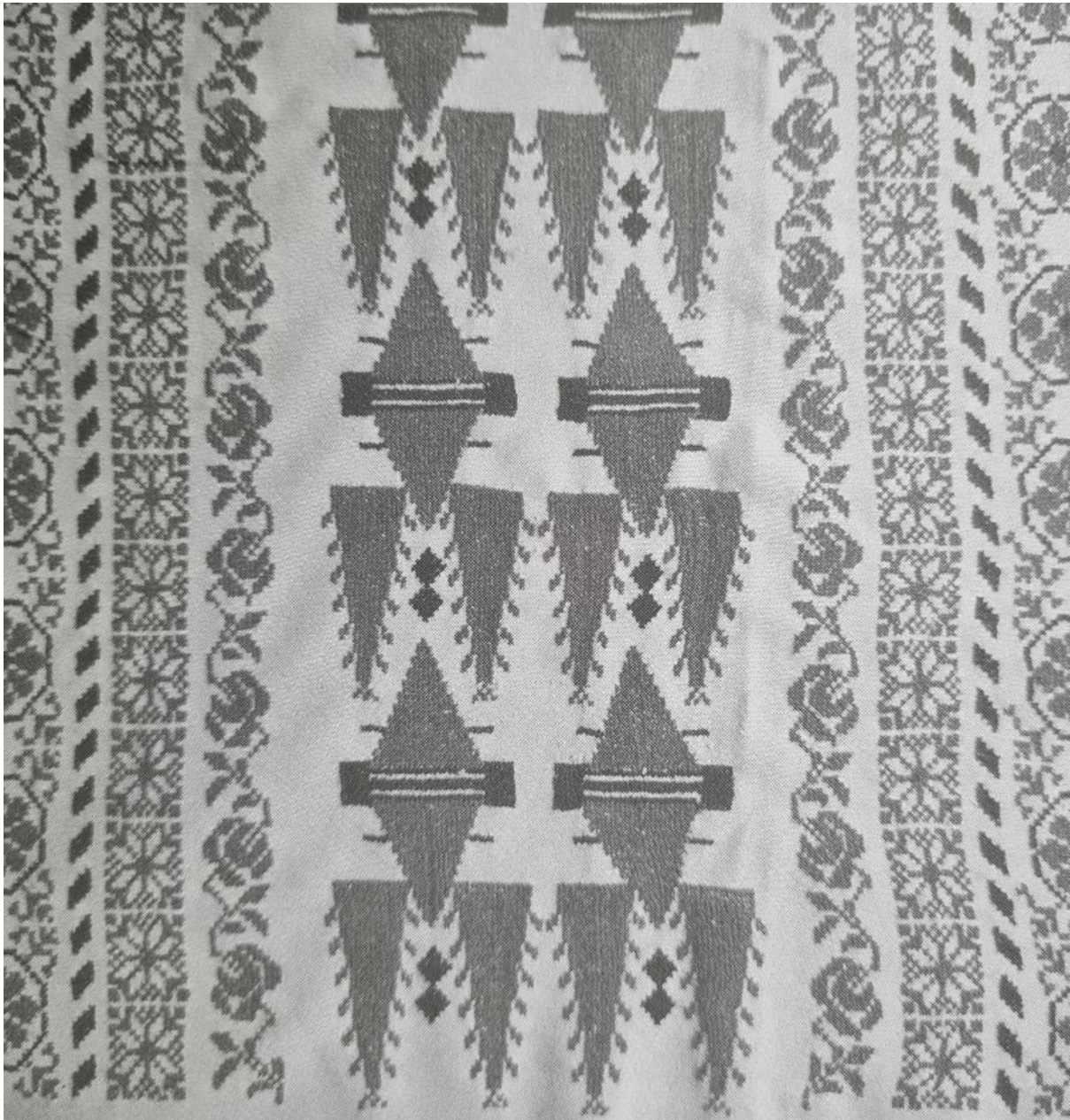


Figure 3: *The Missiles* (1974-78), original design (enlarged). Embroidery: Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, Photograph: Wafa Ghnaim, Source: “Tatreez & Tea: Embroidery and Storytelling in the Palestinian Diaspora” (2018), page 118.

Source: (Ghnaim, 2018)

Abudail Sisters (Naqsh Collective)

Figure 2: *The Missiles* (1974-78), original design, passed intergenerationally within the Ghnaim family. Embroidery: Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, Photograph: Wafa Ghnaim, Source: “Tatreez & Tea: Embroidery and Storytelling in the Palestinian Diaspora” (2018), page 119. Source: Ghnaim (2018: 119)

The Naqsh Collective, co-founded by sisters Nermeen and Nisreen Abudail, is another set of artists who communicate nostalgia through pieces representative of tatreez. Like Ghnaim and her mother, these women were socialized into embroidery from an early age. The sisters

learned embroidery from their mother, but also draw inspiration from their father's furniture-making. Alongside their mother and their aunt, they craft personal narratives both on and off fabric to, as Nermeen states in an interview for Abu Dhabi Art, "express something inside, to share others', their feelings, and to share our feelings with others" (2021b). By forging this relationship with embroidery, they found they could answer larger questions about their past, their family's past, and Palestine's past, all of which, to them, remained elusive. They found themselves investigating their family's history, immersing themselves in the narratives they knew since they were children, but felt they took for granted. "When we dug deeper in the heritage of our culture, we knew more of the stories that took place," states Nermeen, "but we never captured the essence of why, when, where, who, all of that. That was the beginning of the who process for us" (2021b). To establish a connection to their family's past, they look for answers, any missing detail to the narrative that they feel relates to their lives today, a pattern common to the offspring of survivors (Frosh, 2020). Tatreez, therefore, simultaneously becomes a symbol of their heritage and a method through which they can connect with their family members, both in the present and through the past.

Nermeen and Nisreen employ their modern, diasporic lens as they create their art; their postmemorial gaze is evident in a series of thobes they designed in 2020. Their exhibition, titled *A Thobe Story*, consists of ten thobes depicting scenes of everyday life in Palestine. The artists describe the scenes as narrative-driven, inspired by their "memories" or, better yet, memories they never experienced firsthand. They assert that such experiences rightfully belong to every Palestinian, akin to their belief that every Palestinian woman deserves a thobe embroidered with tatreez. "For us," states Nisreen, "we never had the chance to create our own thobes, when we were young, preparing for our wedding ceremonies or any stage in life" (2021b). Through this statement, their grief becomes apparent. However, these women do not mourn memories of loss. Rather, they mourn memories lost, memories manifested as unrealized possibilities. They mourn not just any missed chance, either. Specifically, they wish for what they believe are inherently Palestinian experiences.

One thobe is inspired by a local rite of passage, a *Leap of Faith* (2020), as titled by the artists. "Akka is known for the high wall, overlooking the sea," states Nermeen in an interview with Art Dubai, "The youngsters would jump off the cliff and go back to their moms, saying, 'I'm a man on my own...'" (2021a). The motif shows a group of young men standing in line, waiting to make their definitive leap. Surrounding the image are traditional embroidery designs, done in the traditional cross-stitch pattern. Discussing their inspiration, Nermeen states, "This is something we would have loved to witness, or live, or have done. Recreating this moment in the way we see it, in our way of tatreez and craft, it gives us some kind of satisfaction, that we are reliving these moments, or living it on a personal level" (2021a). "My heart is there," states Nisreen in their interview with Abu Dhabi Art, further emphasizing the sentimental quality of the piece (2021b). Imaginative and emotional aspects contribute to the development of this piece, as the two women do not draw from lived experiences of jumping from Akka's cliff. Instead, they depict how they imagine the experience might feel. These recreations are steeped in nostalgia; it is their attempt to satisfy the feeling of "missing out" on life in Palestine after their family's expulsion.

This imaginative aspect of historical memory, according to Maghbouleh (2010), is a necessary component to the nostalgia in postmemory and postmemorial art. She argues that certain postmemorial artistic forms, such as those practiced by members of the Iranian diaspora, are concerned with imagining *what could have been*. This point takes precedent in their imaginings, more so than looking to grapple with what was, or as an attempt to memorialize what they believe should be remembered. Rather, what she regards a “subjective nostalgia,” is characterized by a claim to an imagined future that was never actualized (Maghbouleh, 2010), and we see these themes in the thobe’s motif. Nermeen and Nisreen claim it is this sentiment that inspired this collection. “Our attempt in creating a Palestinian



Figure 4: *Leap of Faith* (front), by Nermeen and Nisreen Abudail (2020). Photograph courtesy of the Naqsh Collective.

Source: (Abudail and Abudail, 2020)

thobe,” Nisreen states, “is to imagine living our missing experiences of our beloved Palestine... Embroidery, for us, is a craft invoking spirits of times past... [My sister and I] found that there were a lot of untold stories that we would like to tell” (2021b). Through statements such as these, we can see how telling stories allow the sisters to experience them vicariously, therefore ameliorating their suffering.

This raises the question: what informs these emotions? Mourning something means understanding what has been lost, yet certain experiences were not actively taken away within either sister’s lifetimes. Rather, they inherit the loss from previous generations, through the stories shared with them by those they know. As such, in these sisters’ stories, we can see a blurring of private and public domains, not uncommon in cases of postmemory (Hirsch, 2012). Such blurring begins at the level of the family, where earlier generations share autobiographical narratives of survival with an offspring. Then, the offspring compliments this narrative with the stories and research originating outside the family but used all the same to fill the any gaps in knowledge left behind (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). The individual then situates themselves within this picture, as if to say that their life is a product of the imagined timeline. It is this relationship between the individual, the family, and the collective that arises from the blurring.

Jordan Nassar

Jordan Nassar, a New York-based American artist, creates works based on traditional Palestinian embroidery. He is the son of a Polish mother and of a U.S. -born Palestinian doctor. His paternal grandfather, a Jordanian Palestinian, immigrated to the United States as a teenager. He uses embroidery as a medium to explore how latter-born, post-1948 generations understand their familial pasts and their relationship to Palestine. Nassar’s case, like those discussed in this writing, is emblematic of what it means to experience life as a diasporic Palestinian. In his work, he expresses the layered desires to reclaim potential identities and experiences lost because of the collective trauma occurring generations before him. At the same time, his interest in tatreez simultaneously queers the craft, calls into question assumptions about Palestinian gender norms, and restructures a traditionally matrilineal chain of transmission. This demonstration of plurality makes room for emerging identities to make their way to the forefront as much as it proves that this process has, to an extent, already taken place.

Nassar’s relationship with embroidery, like those mentioned previously, is riddled with the same complexity that characterizes his relationship with his Palestinian heritage. Throughout his childhood, he received mixed ideas of life in Palestine before the Nakba. According to the artist, “the whole outside world was telling me something conflicting with what my family was telling me at home” (2019). While navigating a society that gazes upon Palestine and Middle Eastern countries through an Orientalist lens (Said, 2016), he also grew up surrounded by narratives of what he describes as idealized Palestine. He accredits the latter to his father’s influence, whom he felt depicted their family’s lost homeland as utopic. These narratives are commonly recalled among diasporic groups, an experience coined as “displaced nostalgia” (Vanderbilt, 1993) or “inherited nostalgia” (Maghbouleh, 2010). It serves as an integral part of development in diaspora, mending identities severed upon expulsion by emphasizing shared origins and shared characteristics (Naficy, 1993). In

Nassar's family, a past life in Palestine is viewed nostalgically to remedy a present that obscures its value, and to connect the family with that nostalgia. His father's nostalgia brings forth visions of pre-Nakba Palestine, occurring within and to serve a challenging present.

As such, Nassar's grandparents' grief overflows not just to their children, but to their grandchildren as well. Because of the traumatic nature of Palestinian dispossession, survivors often reminisce about their previous homes in Palestine, emphasizing the sudden loss of land, to which they still felt connected, and a nostalgic lens on the moments when they still lived there. When they shared these stories with their children and grandchildren, the younger generation inherit their nostalgia, which they now use to shape their understanding of how Palestine should look and feel to them. In turn, they imagine the Palestine described by their parents and grandparents, one shaped by a gaze developed out of longing, but with little grounding in the present. It is for this reason that Nassar expresses wariness at his father's disposition, which he feels led him to over-romanticize the past. "My father internalized this Palestinian identity and is very attached to it," he said in an interview with *Harper's Arabian Bazaar*, "but it isn't real – it's romanticized nostalgia of this utopian homeland" (Nassar, 2019b). The Palestine that exists, for many of these people, is imagined.

In his interview, Nassar explains how the idealized vision of Palestine he constructed ended abruptly after his first visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Faced with the reality of Palestinian land under occupation, he realized the dissimilarities between Palestinian life and his diasporic romanticization, fully aware its irony: "I've been going to Palestine since I was a teenager. It is beautiful, but it's beautiful like a lot of places. It's a normal place, on Earth, with people living. It's not a fantasy utopia" (2020). Returning to Palestine, for him, did not feel like the longed-for and cathartic return impressed upon him by his family. Instead, he realized the imaginative aspects of his identity, reducing them to utopian visions shaped by familial nostalgia, and rendering them as unrealizable. After the experience, Nassar (2020) became aware of his attachment to the land through the lens of his inherited nostalgia and idealization. In realizing this, he also began recognizing it amongst his peers (2020):

I had been thinking about different Palestinians I interact with, in New York, or in America, or outside of Palestine, and I had noticed, among many different people, this way of talking about Palestine that was very utopian and fantastical. Everything was rolling hills and olive trees; everything was perfect and beautiful in their minds because they don't get to go there.

Through his observations, he identifies a collective memory or representation of Palestine transmitted to individuals not living within the region. In this description, Nassar identifies a relationship between diasporic Palestinians and their homeland – a relationship that produces feeling both very alien and deeply familiar. In response to his observations, Nassar turns to embroidery. He designs motifs that reflect his imaginings, which he regards as "the possibility of Palestine in the minds of diaspora Palestinians who have never been there" (Nassar, 2020). His emotional ambiguity, while it reflects one element of diasporic imaginings, suggests less of distance by generation or location, but more distance in emotion, which then exasperates the other two. In this case, the nostalgia experienced, while fixated on a place lost to time, is actively rooted in the present and triggered by the relationship between what once existed and what is now desired.

Although Nassar never learned Palestinian embroidery from his Polish mother, he knew of it since an early age. His father, upon returning from visits to Palestine, decorated his childhood home in the United States with embroidered pillows and wall-hangings (*Jordan Nassar: Biography*, n.d.). However, it was not until Nassar grew older that he incorporated tatreez into his artwork, using the medium as a method for connecting with his Palestinian heritage. He initially drew inspiration from embroidery books and later collaborated with female embroiderers in the West Bank. His creations are inspired by traditional patterns, which he uses as a blueprint for his design, and upon which he subtly adds his own touch. In his art, Nassar creates his own designs, then instructs the women to complete sections of the embroidery. He initiates each piece by arranging patterns from his mental repertoire. He sends his ideas to women in Hebron, who embroider the designs he renders. Upon receiving their stitchwork, he then complements their stitching with his own choice in coloured threads, integrating them into his landscapes. On the one hand, we observe what he advertises on his website as the “longstanding familial, matrilineal transmission of the embroidery tradition in Palestine.” On the other, we observe Nassar’s “painterly impulses” (Bacon, 2018), contextualized by his diasporic upbringing in New York.

Yet, while Nassar claims his landscapes contrast to the traditional, matrilineal designs, we see a continued theme of matrilineal transmission in Nassar’s art as well. He distinctively searches for personal tastes that “slightly differ from woman to woman,” he explains in an interview with the American Folk Art Museum, “or she’ll have picked up certain tendencies from her mother or grandmother, who taught her” (Nassar, 2022). Additionally, instead of learning embroidery techniques from his own mother, however, he acquires his inheritance by way of surrogacy. This speaks to the fractured nature of inheritance, particularly the methods through which individuals belonging to families dominated by postmemorial silences construct their understandings of the past. Nassar’s embroidering origins, his books of patterns upon which he built his own imaginings, although they do not contain patterns passed down intergenerationally like those found in the Ghnaim family, all the same serve to shape his understanding of how he should perform the craft. Even then, one receives only a limited extent of knowledge through books, as the sensorial experience of embroidering can only be learned through performing the act of stitching. It was not until he encountered women in Palestine that he could receive the full understanding that he knows today (Bacon, 2018). Nassar outsourcing parts of his designs reflects the extent to which he may outsource his inheritance. Ultimately, he pulls from multiple sources: from that of his father, who gave him his first taste of embroidered art, and whose memories of Palestine are laced with nostalgia, as well as from the women in Palestine, both indelibly connected to shape his view of himself as a Palestinian. In this, he combines both paternal and maternal influences to create a signature brand of embroidery that is unique to him.

The spirit of Nassar’s work emanates from the patterns created in dialogue between his ideas and those of the women in Palestine – the narratives they produce as well as the frames that encapsulate them. We can see how his imaginative workings contribute to the making of his piece, *Brick Walls and Closed Windows* (2019), a fantastical piece that narrates his experiences being the “other.” The canvas displays two images. The women’s embroidery, which takes up three-quarters of the piece and is rendered in colours and designs of their choosing, replicates the traditional motifs originally embroidered in villages prior to the Nakba. Meanwhile, Nassar’s embroidery, positioned neatly at the canvas’ middle righthand

corner, foils the traditional imagery with its unconventional pattern and colour pallet. Various shades of blues, greens, and grays, colors not often found in traditional tatreez, depicts Nassar’s interpretation of the “dream” Palestine he envisions. His stylistic choice portrays scenes of rolling landscapes, while never providing any clear recognition of the places he depicts. Rather, he keeps his images purposefully ambiguous, representing the ambiguity of diasporic imaginings.

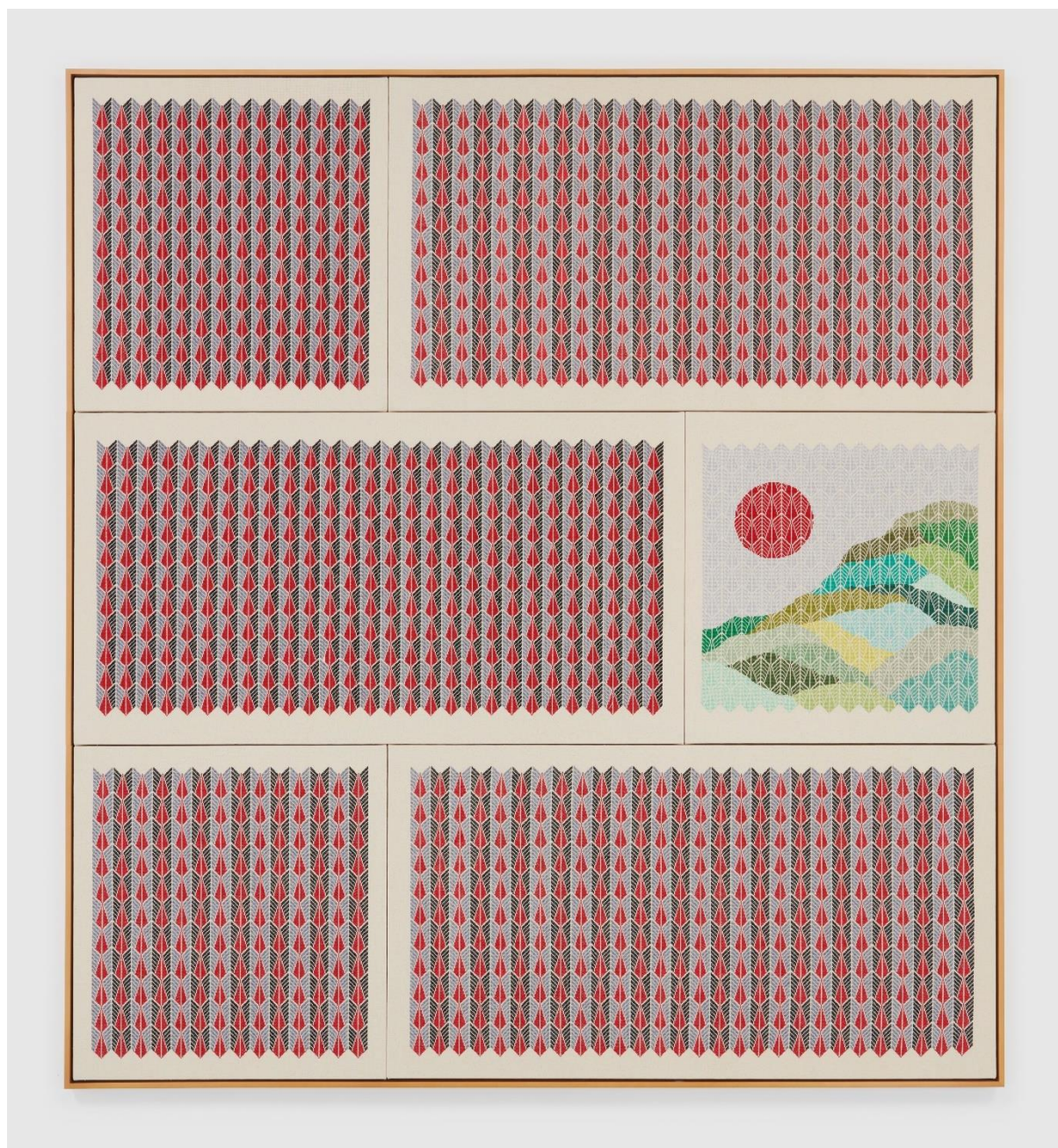


Figure 5: JORDAN NASSAR, *Brick Walls and Closed Windows* (2022). Hand-embroidered cotton on cotton, 93 x 86 x 1 in. (236.2 x 218.4 x 2.5 cm). Courtesy of the Artist, Private Collection and James Cohan, New York. Photo by Phoebe d'Heurle.
 Source: Nassar (2022a)

The contrast between “traditional” embroidery against his own imaginative designs is telling. We see a tension between the two narratives, two temporal layers, two imaginings. Both images are contributed, concretizing Nassar’s relationship with his understandings of both his

familial culture and history through the stitching of his imaginings into a canvas already adorned with densely worked motifs. The juxtaposition of the two images emboldens their contradictory nature, yet it is also clear that the two images depend on one another to narrate a complete story. He forcibly places his imaginings in the frame, as if not only to disrupt the story already in place but also to continue it in his own words. Nassar's designs – the rolling hills in nontraditional colours – represent sentimentalized, and at points inaccurate, diasporic visualizations of their distant, ancestral homeland. When placed next to traditional tatreez motifs, created within Palestine and embroidered with traditional colours, the difference highlights the uniqueness of Nassar's perspective (Nassar, 2019a), which is intentional:

This notion - that I'm doing this traditional craft, but I'm kind of doing it wrong - is this metaphor for how it feels to be a diaspora. I didn't grow up within the culture. As much as I love the culture, I don't get it exactly right. I'm a foreigner when I'm there. The pieces embody that.

Nassar's art encapsulates images of a way of life “that only really exists in the minds of diaspora Palestinians, a utopian vision based on their parents' and grandparents' reminiscences of the old country, mixed with their own imaginations” (Nassar, 2019a). Displayed in galleries, it is a public site of memory, communicating what Hirsch describes as *affiliative postmemory*. He neither attempts to reproduce the utopian visions of Palestine communicated to him by previous generations, nor does he rely solely on these narratives. Rather, he creates visions of Palestine that are subject to his own imaginings, generated from an amalgamation of both lived and inherited experiences (Keightley & Pickering, 2012). Nassar appears to use embroidery to depict the tensions he feels within himself, between what aspects of his life he imagines and expects to be so, and what he accepts as reality. By omitting the specificities of Palestinian day-to-day life from his motifs, he emphasizes the diasporic inclination to romanticize Palestine as an idea, rather than acknowledge its reality.

Conclusion

Using postmemory as a theoretical framework, this research explores the postmemorial nostalgia felt by members of Palestine's diaspora. These individuals, artists who descend from those who fled Palestine during the creation of Israel, each learned tatreez in ways unique to their families. They turn to the craft not only as an expression of Palestinian culture, but also as a medium through which they communicate the grief inherited from previous generations. Their artwork, which they created independent from the research, and, therefore, of their own volition, serves to represent the Palestinian diasporic experience as felt by the offspring of al-Nakba survivors. Using the artists' online biographies, written autobiographies, online interviews, and social media posts, this research probes how family dynamics and exposure to tatreez at a young age are influenced by gender and the nature of each family's postmemory. It then determines what about their families' pasts is remembered by young Palestinians, as well as what is reappropriated through modern embroidered art.

As such, this piece serves to discuss how Palestinian embroidery mediates family and collective memory. With Ghnaim's jacket, reappropriated narratives of resilience emerge, while the illustrative thobes of the Abudail sisters articulate lost legacies, pointing to experiences that should have been ensured by birthright, but inevitably were not. Simultaneously, Nassar's dreamscapes, with their enigmatic qualities, endeavour to bridge the gap between an imagination steeped in inherited nostalgia and the stark reality of lived

experience. Collectively, these artistic endeavours – their making and symbolism – unveil how inherited familial narratives and emotions assimilate into the minds of postmemory generations. Although the art produced may not always conform to traditional embroidery patterns and methods, the forced associations between memory, emotion, and representation structure their encounters with the craft and the audiences' interpretations. Even when the textiles are not worn on the body, the artists wear them metaphorically, ushering in new modes of embroidery that, in the process, bear witness to the craft's historical role as a medium of knowledge and inheritance. This study advances our understanding of inherited emotions, particularly those of postmemorial nostalgia. It delineates diverse forms of nostalgia, such as degrees of elaboration versus silences within familial narratives. It examines elaborateness versus silences through a gendered lens, thus adding layers to our understanding of embroidery's mnemonic function in constructing social identities rooted in shared emotions and memories.

In each instance of Palestinian embroidery, distinct levels of replication characterize the stories presented. This paper posits that the succinctness in each artist's narrative, symbolized through the exact replication of traditional motifs, mirrors the artist's relationship with postmemory. The intricacy or ambiguity of the art reflects the "gaps" in memory and narrative that demand attention or "filling" from the artist. Individuals lacking tangible connections, when the art of sewing was not extensively taught by their mothers, imagine alternatives. Such instances also arise from "silent" families, compelling offspring to guess or imagine details that fit their emotional connection with the narrative. Those immersed in the craft and its storytelling practices during their upbringing possess a more substantial foundation, rendering imaginative elements less pronounced in their art, as fewer gaps need filling in their imagination. The transmission of craft knowledge within families, it appears, correlates with the degree of elaboration evident in subsequent generations' designs.

How one acquires embroidery skills is gender-determined, shaped by who can spend more time with women in the family, thereby gaining exposure to their knowledge, memories, and emotions. A comparison between Ghnaim's and Nassar's art illustrates how the level of elaboration between familial storytelling manifests in diasporic art. Nassar's highly symbolic and imaginative dreamscapes, while driven with intent, bear little resemblance to the patterns adorned by women in the past. This discrepancy could be attributed to the way he adopted the craft, learning not from the women in his family but from a group of women in Palestine. However, gender alone does not exclusively determine who receives elaborate stories or who can engage in this craft to respond to their nostalgia. We see this clearly with the Abudail sisters, who, while they learned how to embroider from their mother like Ghnaim, produce art with a concept and aesthetic that bear closer resemblance to Nassar's designs. We also see this in the relationship between Nassar and his father. The postmemory received from his father contours his identity, and, therefore, his art. Embroidery, it seems, may be gendered, but storytelling is known across contexts. This suggests more factors that shape elaborateness and silences in families, or, at the very least, more at play when it comes to the factors that shape one's ability to communicate postmemory.

Branching from the first conclusion, the experiences felt by the offspring of those who survived the Nakba are characterized by postmemory, an area that remains unexplored at the intersections of Palestine studies, social psychology, and trauma studies, and within modern contexts. This research brings Palestinian postmemory to the forefront as a first step in

remedying what Sayigh (2013) claims is Palestine's exclusion from the "trauma genre." The artists under consideration, whose lives are indelibly shaped by postmemory, create new artistic motifs that serve as reflective embodiments of the postmemorial experience on an individual level. Their work illuminates the forms through which these experiences manifest and find expression. Consequently, it contributes to our understandings of how the trauma inherited by the descendants of those who survived mass atrocity is received, processed, and communicated. Moreover, it beckons further investigation into the role of textiles, such as embroidered patterns, as mnemonic sites that harbour and convey both individual and collective memory. Simultaneously, their art serves as a demonstration of how family and public memory intertwine in both the construction of life narratives and the creation of cultural production. Whether sharing familial narratives like Ghnaim or articulating personal desires and imaginings, as seen in the works of Nassar and the Abudail sisters, these artists expose deeply personal worlds to public scrutiny. The once-private domain of each family becomes palpable to the broader public, affecting a merging of these two realms. This, of course, leaves room to question not only the impact of such blurring as young Palestinians construct an understanding of al-Nakba in diaspora, but of the process of blurring that occurs amongst postmemory generations alike. In accordance with Hirsch's (2019) insight, these practices operate as the "connective tissue between divergent but related histories of violence and their transmission across generations." Delving deeper into the utilization of embroidery as a conduit for memory, both past and present, promises to yield insights applicable to various instances of postmemory, both within and beyond the Palestinian context.

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