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*comparative studies of south asia, africa and the middle east (cssaame)* seeks to bring region and area studies into conversation with a rethinking of theory and the disciplines. the journal is committed to working across temporal divides and asking how concepts and practices might be rethought and redeployed through new narratives of connection and comparison

## about borderlines

*borderlines* offers open-access scholarship that experiments with and seeks to forge new connections between area and theory. published by the editors of *cssaame*, it complements the journal by featuring original work in formats that differ from the scholarly articles and forums that are usually featured in the journal. it includes multimedia work, short essays, and interviews. it also offers additional content that enriches individual articles published in the journal, such as visual material, archival documents, and online commentary and discussion

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## Charting Intimacy in Refugee Families

By *Jianne Jamil*

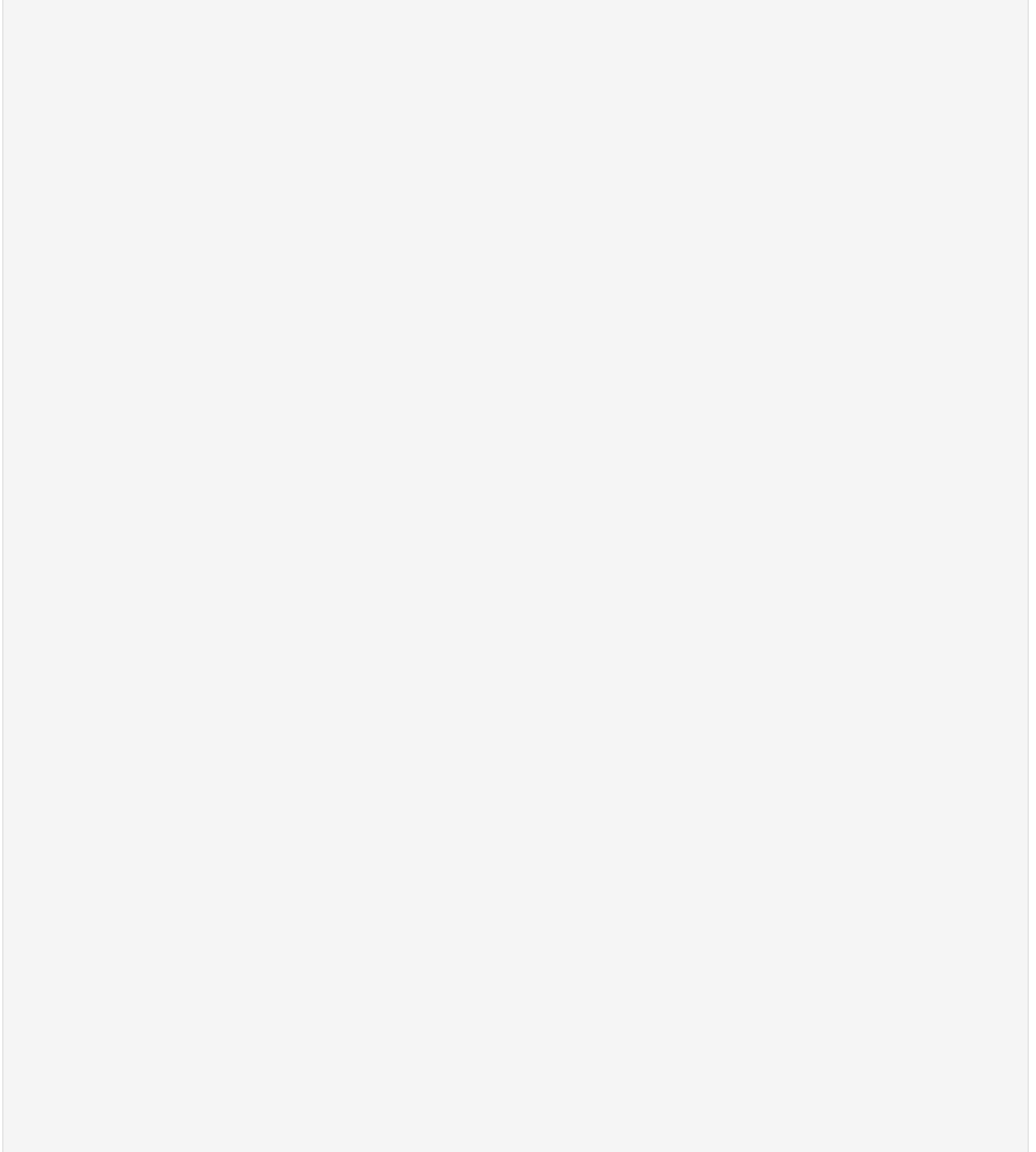
May 15, 2015

*The following is part of a series of short posts on photographic practice in Palestine. In the fall of 2014, Al-Azza's work was exhibited at Tufts University, an event facilitated by Amahl Bishara and her students, a few of whom are featured here in the series. Though focused on the work of Mohammad Al-Azza, the posts speak to the broader situation of artistic practice in Palestine and its effective censorship under the ongoing occupation, but also to questions of intimacy and the public role of photography in the context of conflict.*

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As I walk through Tufts University's Slater Gallery, admiring Mohammad Al-Azza's "From These Streets," I was drawn to the photograph entitled "[Map of Palestine](#)." Its subject is an elderly woman's face reflected in a mirror fragment she

held in her hand. The fragment itself had been broken into the shape of historic Palestine. As I took in the photograph, I heard Al-Azza talking to someone behind me, explaining that the elderly woman is his grandmother. The emotions I felt exploring that image are emotions Al-Azza and I share, a melancholy for our grandmothers. My own grandmother has been mourning her homeland, Syria, torn apart by a civil war. For me, the value of the photograph was no longer purely artistic; it was historically and personally meaningful as a testament to a tragedy of another nation and another family. Both Syria and Palestine today are experiencing tremendous loss and misery. Both Mohammad's grandmother and mine lost their homes due to war and conflict. The loss, hopelessness, and deep sadness engraved in his grandmother's eyes are the same that I witness in my grandmother's eyes today.





As photographer Mohammad Al-Azza explains, "I call this photograph "Map of Palestine." In 1948, Palestinians lived a nakba or catastrophe. During the 1948 war, more than 400 Palestinian villages were destroyed, and over 700,000 Palestinians became refugees. They were never allowed to return to their homes. Today, these refugees and their descendants number approximately 7.4 million, 5 million of whom are served by the United Nations

Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). In my grandmother's face, I can see the decades of Palestinian suffering, from 1948 until today." Photo credit: Mohammad Al-Azza.

It was the intimacy captured in this picture that fascinated me the most. I saw a profound exchange between Al-Azza and his grandmother staging such a personal and surely difficult scene. It would have been unlikely that a foreign journalist could access this private space and capture this emotional scene. Yet, the emotive power of this photograph is not solely enclosed in the private sphere. The reflection of the grandmother's visage at the center of the glass map points to an emotional and political geography beyond the frame. The shape of the mirror fragment explicitly points to the state of Palestine today, shattered and fragile. The grandmother's reflection represents several generations of oppression and fear. She is the emblem of stateless people defending their territory with perseverance to the point of exhaustion; the wrinkles written into her face and hands represent the age of a long and wearying conflict. From the intimacy of Al-Azza and his grandmother, Al-Azza elevates her into a representative role standing in for the Palestinian community, first, by framing her image in the shape of Palestine, and, second, by making the photograph speak to the public of the exhibition space.

The essence and beauty of this photograph lies in the many layers folded in upon each other: the artistic, the historical, and the emotional. Sharing such a personal and heartbreaking image would not have been easy for me. I applaud Al-Azza for his honesty, generosity, and talent in capturing words I could never say.

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