Introduction

During the early 1990s, the recently privatized Israeli television started allocating a special slot during the National Memorial Day programming schedule for homemade soldiers’ memorial videos. After suffering loss, individual family or friends have made the videos, drawing on their innermost registers of mourning and extending a gesture of love for personal, private kin. It is not quite clear how these videos get to television in the first place. They are neither produced nor commissioned by any formal media body, but are an eclectic amalgam of materials, formal structures, and styles, emanating from a range of access to film knowledge and means of production, supported by community outreach, personal initiatives, and voluntary work. In parallel to their broadcasting, or as a result, this mode of homemade commemoration increasingly became a trend and has been supported by a growing semi-official production infrastructure in the private media market. Their gradual standardization notwithstanding, the videos have persisted at the very margins of the National Memorial programming day, almost outside the institutions of television and memory. Late into the night and early in the morning, at the cusps of a state-orchestrated day of monumental grief, the Israeli televisual public sphere is populated by a plurality of singularized, uncanny manifestations of the intimacies of love and loss.

The mediated ghosts of dead soldiers, Benedict Anderson tells us, are leading actors in the communal national imagination. Yet, with mandatory recruitment for every one of its citizens, militarism in Israel is
not an abstraction in the social imagination, but a familiar practice and a citizenry common-sense. An infrastructure of Zionist securitism and domination, the military, it can be argued, is also key to Israeli socialism, an internal structure of radical equality through which every citizen takes an active part in society. Concurrently, a well-established and well-maintained tradition of commemoration has existed in Israel since its earliest decades. Specific to media, this was manifested in the form of films produced either by public television, the Ministry of Defense, or the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). These officially produced visual memorials mobilized the life and death of a particular figure to create a national mythology of heroism, to write a collective biography, to produce a sense of necessity, and to justify the ongoing militarization of Israeli society through the rhetoric of survival, protection, and shared ideals. These formal media pieces take place within a clear hierarchy of memory-production sites and subjects. Yet, the aforementioned homemade videos are nowhere to be found in the national archives or national canon. Did they mark a break from the recruitment of death by the state project? Calling upon the price of loss, the videos differ from, and even seem to undermine, the spectacle of military and memory quintessential to Israeli national ideology. For these memorials and their producers, video has been a means of healing—and the military not a social meta-structure or a necessity for national resilience, but a trivial element, engrained in the most mundane, most prosaic aspects of everyday life.

The cultural artefacts this book investigates are a seemingly haphazard and insignificant assemblage of media productions, prompted by loss. The videos paste together family pictures, home videos, letters, and text messages. These are poor images: marked by VHS interlacing disturbances, sometimes ornamented with tacky 1990s video effects, imbricated with poorly-lit interviews recorded impromptu with the camera’s microphone, often including makeshift thematic montages organized to popular music—a video clip parlance. They are neither a product of a consistent plan nor do they follow a particular production scheme, but are rather arbitrary and relational both in the ways they came into being and their approach to videomaking. The book is populated by an eclectic milieu that leads us down a variety of paths: upon the death of a childhood friend and teammate, one soldier borrows his father’s camcorder and starts interviewing the people surrounding him; following the death of her son, a mother studies basic editing software with which she composes a fairytale-like memorial video; a successful television
producer learns that her friend’s son died and recruits a shooting team to work pro-bono; a sympathetic television director receives a call asking him to support and program a short video by a young film student about the loss of her boyfriend. Film schools, military alumni associations, and local production studios likewise lend a hand and help families make their own memorials. Programmed as they get, loyal to mundane intimacy, the videos’ material texture is melancholic, rudimentary, and inchoate, articulating a sequence of banal transmissions: a jumpy video of a school end-of-year celebration, souvenirs from a family trip, a message on an answering machine discussing plans for the weekend, or a laconic text message: “See you soon.”

What are we to make of these private media when they are shown on television? How do we reconcile these pleas with their context, nearly a century of colonial violence?

Video articulates a new claim, a claim for the right to love. This is allegedly a universal right for all, yet as with all rights, while it is granted to the individual, it simultaneously affirms and conforms to the sovereign who grants it. The video memorial contains the fractures of love and life, but it also perpetuates and is compliant with Israeli sovereign power and its pervasive form of authority over its citizens and non-citizens, regardless of the position of individual producers. The claim for the right to love and the desire for a restorative mourning work is not the excess of such power, but its form of maintenance. By its circulation, formation, and standardization, video produces self-sufficient citizens whose right to a private life separates them from those lives taken in their name. In Sovereign Intimacy I show how love and loss are conditioned by an autonomous, expressive, and embodied medium that simultaneously articulates an intimate subject and state-mandated violence. Family mourning imagines a space of love outside sovereign politics. Yet love is not outside militarism or colonization, but at their very core. Israeli settler colonialism, I show throughout this book, permeates and seeks to naturalize place, time, labor, and language itself. Moreover, it imbues the most intimate registers of love, life, and desire. The homemade video memorial’s modes of production and circulation carve an entangled scene of social reproduction precisely because they are divorced from institutional memory productions and cater to different channels of creation and contacts. Here the state military project passes as normal, mundane, part of a familial affectionate exchange; the sovereign becomes intimate.
PRIVATIZATION TENDENCIES

In 2006, a coalition of bi-national organizations co-founded the Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Ceremony, a shared gathering that ritualizes loss not as an instrument of national enmity, but as a platform of recognition and reconciliation. The ceremony, now produced by a vast anti-occupation organizational alliance, endorsed by public figures and intellectuals, and attended by a growing audience, echoes what Judith Butler theorizes as a politics of loss grounded on mutual precarity. Since its initiation, the ceremony regularly links to a controversy. In 2019, for instance, a few hundred vocal right-wing protestors tried to block the entrance for the thousands of participants who attended, accusing them of betrayal, provocation, and sacrilege. As a narrative structure, a scandal represents an instance when a specific social pact becomes visible. Most directly, the controversy around the annual ceremony exposes how Jewish-Israeli memory culture is rooted in an ethno-centric perception, where vital memory is predicated on blunt forgetfulness. Implicitly, the ceremony challenges the long-term bracketing of memory from what Jewish-Israeli society deems “politics.” The scandal of politicizing loss—making it a condition of living together—not only surfaces the uneven distribution of mourning in Israel-Palestine, but discloses how Israelis got accustomed to placing memory in an “apolitical,” consensual locus of privacy. It is not the direct enmity I seek to explore here but the tenants of the liminal sphere of privacy.

Other small-scale scandals flesh out the bracketing of memory from politics. On May 5, 1984, the Israeli daily newspapers reported in their mid-sections that a controversy had erupted during the Memorial Day ceremony in the city of Tel Aviv. Asher Ben-Natan, a bereaved father who was assigned to speak at the event, allegedly voiced criticism in his public address. The context was the aftermath of the 1982 Israel-Lebanon War, a highly disputed invasion of Israel’s neighbor that was presented to the Israeli public as a way of securing the state’s northern border. The invasion aimed to crush structures of exiled Palestinian leadership, culture, and resistance, and led to an eighteen-year-long occupation of southern Lebanon. In his speech, Ben-Natan said that unprecedently, the Lebanon war revealed “a growing gap between the frontline and the home.” A point that seems trivial at first sight struck a chord, triggering post-war sensitivities for an audience still agitated by the fragmenting consensus. Some members of the audience got on their feet and interrupted Ben-Natan’s speech, others hushed the objectors.
and for a few moments, it seemed that the ceremony would be terminated by the heated debate. Those who reproached Ben-Natan did so not necessarily so much because they disagreed with his comments, but because he brought what they perceived to be a political dispute into the sphere of commemoration.

In July 2011, at a ceremony held in memory of soldiers who died during the 2006 iteration of the Lebanon conflict, a scandal once again erupted when a bereaved father verbally attacked the wartime Chief of General Staff, Dan Halutz, who was in attendance. The father, Yoav Tzur, objected to the ex-general’s presence, claiming it was meant to promote his political aspirations. While the father echoed criticism shared by the war’s bereaved families and a large sector of the Israeli public, he was quickly silenced by others. Hagit Rain, who also lost her son in the war, argued that Tzur should have withheld his criticism out of respect for the ceremony and the memories it evoked. When reporters at the event asked for Halutz’s reaction, he said: “I respect this place, the event and the families. I do not wish to argue with a family who lost its dearest.” While their interpretations of the event varied, all sides seemed to agree: criticism or debate were deemed scandalous in the context of the memory of the dead. The gap between the front lines and the home should remain intact, and in the scene of memories, family is sacred while politics (or aspiring politicians) need to keep silent.

While these instances put pressure on the purity of memory as coherent or inert, what is being articulated here is a collective common sense regarding what memory or politics is—or rather what it is not. There seems to be a displaced logic: the memory of the dead—even, or especially, when they have died in a violent conflict which defines national sovereignty and territory—should be “politically neutral.” Such memory, one of the signifiers of Israel’s national narrative and sentiment, which marks the state’s territory and is enshrined in its annual calendar, remains external to debates on the character of the state, its use of military power, and its relations with its citizens and Palestinian and Lebanese non-citizens. Although marked by a public gathering, memory is located in an imagined private sphere of family love and mourning, secured from political critique.

Another dispute reveals a slightly different allocational logic. On September 3, 2007 Israel’s leading newspaper, Yediot Achronot, publicly apologized to a bereaved father for a column written by one of its journalists. The column referred to a correspondence the father had with the ministry of finance’s office while trying to retrieve some funds withheld
by the state after the passing of his son in the 2006 war. The journalist used the parents’ bureaucratic ordeal to harshly attack the ministry Accountant-General’s insensitive administration. Discovering this reference alongside his son’s picture in the weekend newspaper, the father was outraged by what he later defined as a cynical use of his son’s memory. Once again, the father did not reject the underlying criticism, but rather the exploitation of his son’s memory in such a public affair. In that same year, a video the family produced in memory of their son was broadcast on Israeli television. The family’s conflict with the journalist on the one hand, and their production of the video on the other, reveals a tacit assumption about what constitutes privacy, legitimizing contexts, media and authors of memory. It also lays the groundwork for denouncing others as cynical or invasive.

As a shared cultural currency, memory maps, and is even an active catalyst in organizing the social. Marita Sturken differentiates official memory stored in institutional spaces such as libraries, museums, and national archives from private memories that belong at home, while designating cultural memory as what “is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning.” Sturken’s notion of entanglement conveys memory as a vehicle that crosses social scales. Mediated through various institutions, technologies, and forms, memory mobilizes experience and feelings as public manifestations, pertaining to the private/public scheme that underlines the social structure of contemporary liberal democracy. Sturken herself indicates a separate domain of privacy: one’s home, one’s property, one’s personal feelings are kept separate from the public sphere of social interactions. Yet, in the Israeli example, memory is programmed like a bracketed glimpse into a familial intimacy, guarded as such by the artificial separation between politics and loss, money and mourning.

This last controversy exposes more than the social rationale that distributes memory to different social strata: state level, cultural level, and so on. The actual glitch is that it exposes the technocratic management of memory by the state, an act of governance stored at home, hidden behind the public manifestation of personal mourning. Paradoxically, a bureaucratic appeal to a state entity belongs with the family, and a video containing the family’s intimate memories, produced by and for the family, is made available for the public to watch. Feelings of loss become a kind of common currency, whereas calling upon the state’s debt remains a private affair.
I use this set of examples to indicate some of the dominant social perceptions of memory in Israel. While the state has continuously drawn on family as a source of validation and authentication of national memory, this book focuses on the 1990s and early 2000s, when, rather than nationalizing family sentiment, the family became a vector in privatizing memory. This period marks a shift towards privatization evinced in changing ideological paradigms, the emergence of new political subjecthood, new media technologies, and most swiftly, the establishment of a privatized neoliberal statehood. Therefore, privatization is used to characterize a set of interconnected tendencies related to modes of governance, the position of the citizen vis-à-vis the state through the division of private-public, and the growing effect of a market rationale on politics and media production.

As Asher Ben-Natan rightly pointed out, the first Israel-Lebanon War (1982) marked an ideological crisis. The war engendered a movement of conscientious objection, mass anti-war demonstrations, and furious public debate. For Jewish Israelis, the Lebanon conflict and the first Intifada—a massive uprising of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank in 1987—were no longer conceived as “no-choice” wars of defense, a prevalent perception of previous wars. These were not delimited “events,” but rather derailed and unending military conflicts, a perpetual war contributing to an ongoing state of exception. Media coverage presented the Israeli public with a popular resistance movement that was countered by disproportionate military force. The IDF’s brutal response undermined Jewish-Israeli society’s popular conception of a “moral army.” It is important to note that what changed was not the form of power—the state deprivation and oppression of the Palestinian population goes back to 1948—but its visibility within Israeli society. With a constant stream of casualties in a perpetual war, the narrative of a heroic death justified by a greater cause lost its impetus. During the 1990s the debates around the Oslo accords (1993) and the assassination of Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin (1995) were another manifestation of this internal crisis of legitimacy. Recurring suicide attacks during the early 2000s brought violence into the heart of Israeli civil society, no longer confined to the fractured Palestinian and Lebanese territories. The attacks introduced a new sense of victimhood into the conflict, making the Israeli public even more fixated on its own share of suffering. As the events of war and conflict became more contested, the memory of the dead was detached from the political discord, and was guarded as a safe, consensual site of social unity. Conversely, both violence and memory became habitual and mundane.
Introduction

Within the growing fracture between Israeli civil society and sovereign politics, the family emerges as a firm, continuous social institution. During the 1990s, a series of omissions, accidents, and fatal incidents contributed to a sense of growing mistrust between the public and the military. In the first and second Tze’elim incidents (deadly misfires during two military exercises that occurred in 1990 and 1992), the lack of accountability from the IDF high command created a sense of wariness among families whose sons served, or were about to serve, in the army. Controversies related to mishandling of soldiers’ corpses and the withholding of information from families—for example, the scandalous deposit of soldiers’ remains outside of caskets without the families being notified after a failed commando operation, or an affair involving the National Institute of Forensic Medicine and its withholding of body parts and tissues of dead soldiers—made the public mistrust the military’s handling of soldiers’ bodies and lives.11 Military gravestones and soldiers’ epitaphs, which according to a 1949 state law have to have a unified appearance and wording manifesting equality and unity, were highly contested sites during these years.12 Families’ appeals to the supreme court asking to revise the unified epitaph—to add names of the dead’s siblings13 or to change the terminology about the cause of death—were made as a claim on history, memory, and kinship. In the aftermath of the most disastrous event during the Lebanon period, the crash of two helicopters near the northern border that precipitated the Four Mothers movement (see prologue), the families appealed to the supreme court asking that the epitaph refer to the event as it was known in public: a disaster, rather than the state’s terminology of “accident.” In his ruling in favor of the families, Judge Yaakov Turkle wrote that the common phrase “has turned seventy-three families to one family whose last name is now ‘The Helicopter Disaster.’”14

The ruling, and more so its prose, is worth pausing on, as it shows the power that the family gains and the affective terminology of kinship that Israeli law has adopted. Israeli sovereignty yields to the family. In the later Lebanon period, the scandal of the state’s omission could not be covered by the glamorous cloak of heroism or the novelty of the cause: here, too, the national myth was undermined, challenged by the bereaved family. As the new political subject, the family is like a modern Antigone, whose call upon body and kinship—intimacy—challenges the sovereign.

These threads delimit a double movement: first, the crumbling of what stood at the heart of Jewish-Israeli society collectivism, namely, the narrative of defense and the persistence of the military as a popular