

## DERELICT STRUCTURES

### **Stolen Land: Tracing Traumas in Four Leprosaria in the Jerusalem District**

Suzannah Henty

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the grating of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

– Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972

I was introduced to the Palestinian landscape through a visit to Jerusalem in October 2016, on the occasion of the third Qalandiya International biennial collaborative art event, *This Sea Is Mine*. As an Australian, I was confronted by similar colonial trajectories of indigenous populations in exile in their sovereign land. As a non-Indigenous Australian descended from a settler family who arrived in Australia's Port Phillip District in 1834, the histories that I have been taught are not sympathetic to the realities felt by First Nations in Australia since British occupation. In Palestine, I witnessed for the first time in-person the persecution of Firstness outside of the Australian context.

It was in working for the Jerusalem Show VIII: *Before and After Origins* at al-Ma'mal for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem and the Birzeit University Museum that I was introduced to the work of the Western-trained Palestinian physician Dr. Tawfiq Canaan, a medical doctor, folklorist, and late Ottoman Jerusalemite. In learning of the relative absence of knowledge of Canaan outside of academic circles, and discovering the extent to which he contributed to the documentation and archiving of Palestinian history and tradition, the importance of adding to this ongoing effort to document otherwise unrecorded histories became apparent. Extrapolating from my research of the Canaan archive, here I document the fragmented history of four leprosaria in the Jerusalem district to reconstruct the destroyed spaces and challenge the fictitious stories told today of the exile of the Palestinian lepers in 1948. It is important to note

that the information gathered in this article has been obtained from a variety of sources. Locating information has been difficult, for the Silwan and Surda Mountain leprosaria in particular, and has relied on many oral narratives and conversations.

The existence and navigation of trauma in fragmented and appropriated landscapes dominates the Palestine struggle for return. I believe through the documentation and historicization of sovereign title that there is the potential for the creation of a reparative process of these silenced histories. This paper focuses on the urban Palestinian context in the Jerusalem district using the Mamilla Asylum, Jesus Hilfe Asyl (Jesus Helps Asylum), the Silwan leprosarium, and the Surda Mountain leprosarium to trace the militarization and dislocation of Palestinian medical staff and leprosy sufferers in 1948.<sup>1</sup> The landscape carries in its occupying architecture testimonials of citizenry of space – that is, truths of proper title and its subsequent theft. Acknowledgement of the significance of the conservation of these testimonies is needed to emphasise the process of the return of Palestinians to rightful title to land and its occupying architecture. In understanding the citizenry of space, the writing of human experience becomes an important tool in understanding the transmission of trauma through space and the potential reparation of these traumas through countering the loss and reconstructing threatened cultural narratives. Silenced histories and spaces of residual Palestinian trauma lie at the heart of this discussion. Through documenting the histories surrounding the leprosaria, I aim to contribute to the return to title by documenting this threatened history. First, I will outline the establishment of Jesus Hilfe Asyl before and after the Nakba in 1948. Second, I will piece together the fragmented histories surrounding the exile of the Palestinian lepers and medical staff to Surda Mountain. Resultantly, the aim of this paper is to look at how, why, and for whom history is made, and in doing so highlight how the erasure of cultural narratives acts as a powerful form of psychological colonialism.

## **The Four Leprosaria: Mamilla, Talbiya, Silwan, and Surda Mountain.**

One year before the establishment of the German Colony by German Templars in Haifa in 1868, the German-Protestant Moravian Community established a leprosarium called the Mamilla Asylum (figure 1) in 1867. The leprosarium – which still stands today at 20 Agron Street Jerusalem and is now used as a Lazarite Catholic monastery – was established for the treatment of people suffering from Hansen’s disease, also known as leprosy. Situated next to the ancient Mamilla Pool (figure 2) and Mamilla Cemetery (figure 3), the building was designed by the German architect for the German Consulate, Conrad Schick, with funding from two parties: Johannes Frutiger, a Swiss German banker from Chrischona, Basel, resident in Jerusalem, and a committee developed under the chairmanship of a Swiss missionary and Protestant Bishop, Samuel Gobat.<sup>2</sup> The German investment in the leprosy cause was a result of a visit to Jerusalem in 1865 by the Pomeranian (German) Baroness von Keffenbrinck-Ascheraden of Nehringen, who reportedly was shocked by the number of lepers begging near the Jaffa Gate in today’s East Jerusalem. The baroness

subsequently purchased land outside the Jaffa Gate and contacted the Moravian Church, whose work in Robben Island in South Africa she was familiar with, to develop a hospital for lepers in Palestine. A Unity Elders' Conference was held soon after to establish potential supervisors of the hospital, electing missionaries Friedrich and Magdalena Tappe, who arrived on 20 May 1867, ten days before the consecration of the Mamilla Asylum.

In 1881, the baroness withdrew her financial support of the leprosarium and the Moravian Church's Brudergemeinde (Herrnhut Brothers) acquired ownership. While initially the Palestinian population was cautious of the Christian-run hospital Mamilla Asylum – with only four lepers out of the fifty invited turning up to the hospital upon its opening in 1867 – within twenty years, more beds were required for patients. From 1885 to 1887 a new leprosarium – Jesus Hilfe Asyl, known as the Leper Colony (figure 4), again designed by Conrad Schick – was built at the crossroad of 14 Gedalyahd Alon Street and 17 David Marcus Street in the district of Talbiya, Jerusalem.

At Jesus Hilfe Asyl, Dr. Adolph Einszler, an Austrian Catholic turned Protestant physician who had previously worked with Canaan at the German Hospital in Jerusalem during Dr. Grussendorf's leave, commenced as superintendent and directing physician of the leprosarium. Einszler's wife, Lydia Einszler (née Schick), was the daughter of architect Conrad Schick and passionately studied Palestinian beliefs and practices, magical medicine, and popular culture. Her collection of artifacts and written work on folklore from the 1890s reflect such interest.<sup>3</sup> In 1919, Adolph Einszler died and Canaan succeeded directorship of the hospital.



Figure 1. “Mamilla Asylum Drawing,” image courtesy of conradschick.wordpress.com.



Figure 2. Mamilla Pool, Jerusalem, between 1898 and 1946, from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



Figure 3. Aerial view, Jerusalem: Rehavia neighborhood and Mamilla Cemetery and Pool, viewed from west, between 1928 and 1946, from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



Figure 4. Jesus Hilfe Asyl, year and author unknown, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.

With the British occupation of Palestine, by the end of the First World War the political climate became increasingly heated. One year before Canaan's directorship, the British administration made it compulsory for all lepers to live at Jesus Hilfe. Previously, the Ottoman Empire had allowed lepers to live in Jerusalem, Ramla, Nablus, or Damascus. This influx of lepers restricted Canaan's movement as he consistently had patients under his care.

While Canaan has been recognized for his contribution as an ethnographer of Palestinian folklore, his contribution to the medical field is lesser acknowledged but equally impressive. Canaan's contribution as the leading physician at Jesus Hilfe Asyl and later at Surda Mountain established his standing as a reputed expert in leprosy. According to Philippe Bourmaud, Canaan's work in the field of leishmaniasis – a skin disease spread by the bite of certain sandflies – across Nazareth, Beersheba, Gaza, Nablus, and Damascus as a mobilized medical military serviceman during World War I was a turning point in Canaan's medical career. As such, his undertaking of this role at Jesus Hilfe Asyl was a natural professional progression. In his research of bacteriology and microscopic examination, Canaan contributed significantly to the cure of leprosy, specifically with the topical application of iodine and his discovery of the ancient use of chaulmoogra oil as a remedy.

However successful Canaan was in his position at the Leper Colony, the political context within which he was working cast a dark shadow of uncertainty on the future of the hospital and the treatment of Palestinians under the new regime. In a 7 January 1948 letter from J. Connor, the Treasurer of the Trust Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel, to the High Commissioner for Palestine in Jerusalem (figures 5 and 6) – sent while Canaan was superintendent and directing physician – Connor requested “any information”

Trust Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel (Incorporated) ①

Board of Management:  
HIEROP C. H. SHAW, B.A., Chairman  
REV. J. CONNOR, B.A., B.D., Treasurer  
REV. F. E. DIBTILL, Secretary  
Tel. TUDOR 3409

Holding Trustee for  
MORAVIAN MISSIONS

Temporary Address—  
42, ONSLOW GARDENS,  
MUSWELL HILL,  
LONDON, N.10

*(S.A.) for the file. A  
British reply should be  
sent. The name of the  
JC/INF.  
Home should actually  
be commended to the Home  
Administration of the City.*

7th January 1948



Your Excellency, The High Commissioner for Palestine,  
Government House,  
Jerusalem, PALESTINE.

PAR(A)

*It submitted reply. word  
PI put in file + return to me 14/1/48*

We have heard with gratitude from the Matron of our Leper Home in Jerusalem that the Palestinian Government has renewed its grant-in-aid of £1700, the first half of which has already been received. As the Mission Board in charge of the administration of this Home, we should like to thank you for the interest and support that the Government has shown in the work of our Leper Home.

We are reluctant, in these times, when the difficulties of the Government are so great, to intrude what must seem a minor consideration, though to us it is of considerable importance. We know that the Matron of the Leper Home views with great misgiving the prospective withdrawal of British Forces from Palestine, and is anxious, as we are, to know what Government will take the place of the present administration. On the sympathy and effectiveness of the succeeding administration will depend, very largely, the continuance of our work among the Palestine lepers. Is it possible for you to give us any information about the administration to whom we should look for counsel and support when the transition is effected in Palestine? If it is impossible at present to make any statement on this matter, it would re-assure us very greatly if we could know that you will recommend to your successors the work of the Home, and pass on to them the view that your Government has held, that it is an Institution worthy of their interest and support. If we could be assured

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that the grant-in-aid would be continued, and that the Leper Home would continue to have a recognised place in the Health Services of the country, we should be able to regard the future of the work with much greater confidence than is possible in the present uncertainty.

If in the midst of the many arduous duties affecting the Government at this time, you were able to give us some information, and an undertaking on the lines I have suggested, we should be extremely grateful.

May we offer to you and to the Government our sympathy and good wishes for the difficult period that lies immediately ahead.

Yours sincerely,

Treasurer,  
TRUST SOCIETY FOR THE FURTHERANCE OF THE GOSPEL (INC).

Figure 5-6. Correspondence from Jesus Hilfe Asyl, 1948, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.

about the succeeding administration in Palestine and asked for assurance that the government grant-in-aid to the Jesus Hilfe Asyl would continue to be provided by the future administration of Palestine. Offering “sympathy and good wishes for the difficult period that lies immediately ahead,” the leprosarium requested that the British government pass on to its successors its view of the good work done by the leper home.<sup>4</sup>

The response from Maurice Dorman (figure 7), principal assistant secretary for the High Commissioner, is exemplary of the sense of foreboding and unknown surrounding the forthcoming withdrawal of the British Mandate. Dorman stated that he has been “directed to acknowledge the receipt” of the request from Jerusalem, but regretted that “no specific information” could be given. Dorman merely noted that the Ad-Hoc Committee in Palestine – established by the United Nations General Assembly in September 1947 to address “the Palestinian question” – had recommended the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, but with an administration for Jerusalem “separate from either the Jewish or Arab state.”<sup>5</sup>

Upon the division of Jerusalem, Jesus Hilfe Asyl was included as part of the Israeli territory in the west of the city. In readily available media concerning Jesus Hilfe Asyl, and in particular the web site for the building, it is repeatedly stated that the Palestinian “staff and patients chose to leave the Home.”<sup>6</sup> It is unlikely that the lepers who were homed and treated decided to leave the hospital considering the presence of Zionist forces expelling Palestinian Jerusalemites.<sup>7</sup> On 29 August 1950, a sale contract was signed between the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael) and the Moravian Church. The Leper Home was transferred to the management of the Ministry of Health of the State of Israel and ran as the Hansen Government Hospital until 2000. The building has since been transformed into the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, a school founded by the “father of Israeli art,” Lithuanian Jewish artist Boris Schatz.

With the financial support of Unity Synod in 1957, the Moravian church purchased a block of land in the north of Ramallah on Surda (Star) Mountain upon which a new hospital was built (figures 8 and 9). On 12 June 1960, the new home was opened for the exiled

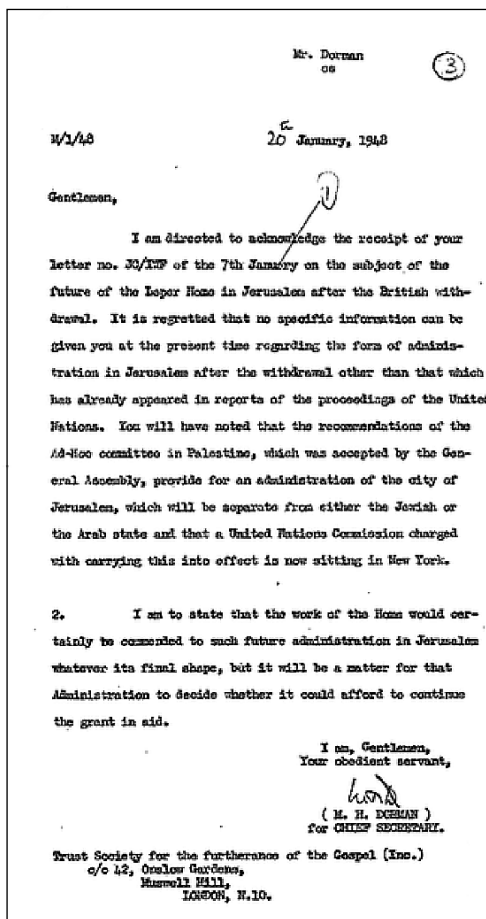


Figure 7. Correspondence from Jesus Hilfe Asyl, 1948, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.



Figure 8. Surda Mountain Leprosarium, year and author unknown, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.



Figure 9. Star (Surda) Mountain Rehabilitation Center, date and author unknown, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.

Palestinian leprosy patients. As a result of Canaan's research into bacteriology and treatments for leprosy, specifically with gorjun and chaulmoogra oil, iodine and sulphur, there was a strong decline in the numbers of housed lepers. While a few lepers remained at Surda Mountain, in 1974 the Unity Synod decided to repurpose the facility for disabled children in Palestine. In 1979, the last leper left the hospital. Today, Surda Mountain is a school for disabled children and is still run by the Moravian Church.

While tracing the displacement of the Palestinian patients and medical staff after 1948 has proven difficult due to the lack of resources and written history, through threading together the various narratives it can be speculated that Palestinian lepers were led first to Silwan before finding refuge at Surda Mountain. According to the Moravian archives, in 1875 Conrad Schick built a third leprosarium in the village of

Silwan, now in East Jerusalem. It is unknown if it was here that the lepers sought refuge. Israeli texts suggest that Palestinians were moved to this facility and cared for by the Sisters of Charity (Soeurs de Charité). The Moravian archives claim that Canaan was not active in moving Palestinian lepers to Silwan, stating: "In 1953 two Moravian nurses, Johanna Larsen and Ida Ressel, led 15 patients to Silwan in Jordan (now the West Bank), where they re-established their work, albeit in cramped, unsatisfactory conditions."<sup>8</sup> French historian Philippe Bourmaud ignores Silwan in his study of Canaan's medical history and claims he "organized a new leprosarium" at Surda Mountain.<sup>9</sup> The newsletter of the Southern Province of the Moravian Church in North America, in January 2001, claims that the lepers found refuge in an "old Turkish leprosarium in Silwan where treatment was insufficient."<sup>10</sup> A Jerusalem life and travel guide corroborates this claim: "Some of the patients chose to leave with the European staff to the Turkish asylum at Siloah [Silwan], and then to Star [Surda] Mountain near Ramallah."<sup>11</sup> According to Salim Tamari: "Arab patients were taken from Talbieh and marched first to a new location in Silwan and then several years later to Surda Mountain north of Ramallah where Dr. Canaan was invited again to become the caretaker."<sup>12</sup> It is a curious note that there was no trace of lepers travelling to the leprosarium built by Conrad Schick in East Jerusalem. Perhaps the Palestinian lepers did not want to find refuge in a Christian facility, or were unaware of its existence; one can only speculate.

The Mamilla Asylum and Jesus Hilfe Asyl buildings are physical manifestations of how history – through the writing of landscapes – can be stolen. Having been claimed

in Israeli territory, the history of the two buildings has been re-written into Israeli narratives whereby the practical use of the buildings and the landscapes surrounding the buildings have been occupied in the construction of Israeli identity. The Mamilla Asylum – surrounded by the Mamilla Pool (an ancient reservoir, drained since 1948 with Zionist-planted eucalyptus plantations) and Ma'man Allah (Mamilla cemetery, Palestine's oldest Islamic cemetery that was half-destroyed in order to construct "Independence Park") – exists in a place of great conflict, a traumatic landscape and a space of pain in the history of Palestinian exile and ongoing occupation. The walls of Mamilla Asylum encompass a confluence of traumatic human experiences – by both sufferers of leprosy and Palestinians experiencing exile and occupation – and as such it needs to be considered a significant site in the Mamilla district's collective history. Jesus Hilfe Asyl in Talbiya speaks from a different angle in understanding how contemporary Israeli occupation in West Jerusalem is an activating factor for sites of residual trauma. The building in Talbiya, situated in an affluent district, was constructed as a site of hope, medical development, and democratic treatment of leprosy sufferers. As we have seen, Jesus Hilfe Asyl was borne out of the success of the Mamilla Asylum, out of the establishment of trust after initial hesitation, hence representing significant community development in Jerusalem pre-1948. In this building, Tawfiq Canaan succeeded as superintendent and directing physician and contributed momentarily to the cure of leprosy. In 1948, Canaan was violently exiled from his position, along with his Palestinian patients. Today, the Bezalel Academy of



Figure 10. Lepers, Jesus Hilfe Asyl, year and author unknown, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.



Figure 11: Lepers and water cisterns, Jesus Hilfe Asyl, year and author unknown, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.



Figure 12: Jesus Hilfe Asyl, year and author unknown, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.





Figure 13: Medical staff at Jesus Hilfe Asyl, year and author unknown, copyright Moravian Church Archives, London.

Arts and Design occupies this space and denies the expulsion – claiming that as a result of the “War of Independence,” staff and patients *chose* to leave the home. This falsified history acts as a colonial device to feed apartheid. These two leprosaria speak to the extremely traumatic time when the suburbs bordering the Old City, a space co-inhabited by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, was violently occupied in 1948 and to the continued denial and erasure of their true histories.

On the other hand, the Silwan and Surda Mountain leprosaria sit on another side of history. Existing on Palestinian territory has meant that the Silwan leprosaria (both the old Turkish leprosarium and the Moravian leprosarium) are barely traceable in written histories. The struggle for survival has meant that the conservation of architectural histories has suffered. As the educational center for children with disabilities practices within the Surda

Mountain leprosarium, it is easier to imagine the construction and establishment of the leprosarium in 1957–1960 to house the displaced lepers and to trace the existence of trauma in the geopolitics of the building. The connection, linking and contribution to the writing of history of these leprosaria in Israeli-occupied territory on both sides of the Green Line, in East and West Jerusalem and today’s West Bank, is an important step in understanding citizenry of space and sovereign title.

Through writing this history and the true reading of a building there is a possibility of better understanding sovereignty and the return to stolen spaces for Palestinians. Reconsidering and questioning the leprosaria is only one step in what can be done for all pre-1948 buildings in Israeli-occupied territory. Stolen histories and appropriated lands are perpetuated by propaganda of denial and falsified histories epitomized by the story of the leprosaria in Jerusalem: So, what about the other buildings in West Jerusalem? These, too, are stolen places denied acknowledgement and history. It is the job of the historian to rewrite these histories truthfully and, in doing so, recognize the trauma that exists within the walls of the buildings.

This complicated and fraught period in Palestinian history has left only traces of what might have happened to the Palestinian lepers in 1948, the places that the exiled may have travelled to for refuge and medical help and the trauma that must have been felt in this violent displacement. Tracing the wounds in these four buildings, marked by honest dedications to help the sufferers of leprosy on one side and – in particular with Jesus Hilfe

Asyl – the subsequent dislocation of this history and ownership of space on the other side gives an important understanding of considering citizenry of space as a return to sovereign title. Rewriting what has been written about the marching of Palestinian lepers to today’s “West Bank” interrogates how, why, and for whom history is written. The story of the Palestinian lepers before and after 1948 is a case study in how a building can adopt the trauma of an experience through its appropriation and silencing by oppressing forces. Through it, perhaps, we can begin to think about the subtle ways in which buildings and constructed spaces need to be freed from false historicization.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 The Mamilla Asylum and Jesus Hilfe Asyl were both designed by German architect for the German Consulate, Conrad Schick. The superintendents and physicians in charge of Jesus Hilfe Asyl were Dr. Adolph Einsler (from 1848 to 1919) and Dr. Tawfiq Canaan (from 1919 to 1948).
- 2 Paul Peucker, Lanie Graf, and Markus Gill, “Moravian Work in Jerusalem,” *This Month in Moravian History* 9 (July 2006), online at [www.moravianchurcharchives.org/thismonth/06\\_july\\_jerusalem.pdf](http://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/thismonth/06_july_jerusalem.pdf) (accessed 22 January 2017).
- 3 Philippe Bourmaud, “‘A Son of the Country’: Dr. Tawfiq Canaan, Modernist Physician and Palestinian Ethnographer,” in *Struggle and Survival in Palestine/Israel*, ed. Mark LeVine and Gershon Shafir (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 104.
- 4 J. Connor, Treasurer, Trust Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel (Inc.), to the High Commissioner for Palestine, 7 January 1948, courtesy of Moravian Archives (Bethlehem, PA).
- 5 M. H. Dorman, for Chief Secretary, to Trust Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel (Inc.), 20 January 1948, courtesy of Moravian Archives (Bethlehem, PA). Dorman was referring to Special Committee for Palestine (UNSCOP), which recommended the partition of Palestine into two states with a Special International Regime for the city of Jerusalem. Put forth on 29 November 1947, this recommendation was endorsed by General Assembly Resolution 181. See Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: One World Oxford, 2006), 37.
- 6 “1950 The Hansen House Is Sold to the Jewish National Fund,” Hansen House web site, online at [hansen.co.il/en/story/#The-Hansen-House-Story\\_\\_1950-The-Hansen-House-is-sold-to-the-Jewish-National-Fund](http://hansen.co.il/en/story/#The-Hansen-House-Story__1950-The-Hansen-House-is-sold-to-the-Jewish-National-Fund) (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 7 Bourmaud, “‘A Son of the Country,’” 105.
- 8 “Dedication of Star Mountain in Ramallah, June 12, 1960,” *This Month in Moravian History* 54 (June 2010), online at [www.moravianchurcharchives.org/thismonth/10\\_06%20Star%20Mountain.pdf](http://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/thismonth/10_06%20Star%20Mountain.pdf) (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 9 Bourmaud, “‘A Son of the Country,’” 105.
- 10 “Care for Former Leprosy Patients of Star Mountain,” *MCPS Newsletter* (January 2001), as quoted in Salim Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 200.
- 11 “Behind the Wall // Historic and Art Exhibition: Hansen Hospital,” *JerCity.com*, online at [www.jercity.com/eng/events/20373/Behind-the-Wall-Historic-and-art-exhibition/Jerusalem/](http://www.jercity.com/eng/events/20373/Behind-the-Wall-Historic-and-art-exhibition/Jerusalem/) (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 12 Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea*, 94.