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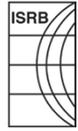
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Abstract

The fragmentation of Palestinian lives into exile, under occupation and within Israel has led to a complex interweaving of collective memory and individual memories in the attempt to come to terms with and represent this existence. Central to Palestinian self-understanding is the key interruptive event of the *Nakba*, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 which disrupted the people's links to the land of Palestine – not only for Palestinians in exile but also for those within present-day Israel. Memorialization practices, such as those undertaken in village memorial books which record in detail the Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948, work to foster a collectivity linked across generations and borders. However these practices also repress marginalized voices, especially the voices, experiences and perspectives of women. By highlighting these voices, by engaging in collecting memories and by critically assessing the process of collective memorialization, the authors reviewed present a decentred, complex and kaleidoscopic version of Palestinian self-understanding and identity.

Keywords

Gender, historiography, identity, memory, *Nakba*, Palestine

Rochelle A Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2011; xxiii + 328 pp.: ISBN: 9780804773126, \$70 (hbk), 9780804773133, \$24.95 (pbk)

Fatma Kassem, *Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memory*, Zed Books: London, 2011; 272 pp.: ISBN: 9781848134232, £70.00 (hbk), 9781848134249, £18.99 (pbk)

Dina Matar, *What it Means to be Palestinian: Stories of Palestinian Peoplehood*, IB Tauris: London, 2010; 224 pp.: ISBN: 9781848853638, £14.95 (pbk)

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'We are ... more than scattered body parts'. On one level these words from the Palestinian poet, Rafeef Ziadah in her spoken poem 'Breathe' can be read as being about children killed in an Israeli raid, their bodies scattered over a beach in Gaza. By asking how one writes about these children without reducing them to mere victims, statistics and scattered body parts, Ziadah demands more – that the Palestinian people not be treated this way either.

The elderly displaced women that Fatma Kassem interviewed in her book about gendered memories engage in a similar refusal. In talking about themselves, they often open with the words, 'I am not from here'. But after the negation, after saying what one is not and demanding to be treated as a human subject, the question remains: what type of subject? How does one write about Palestinian people without reducing them to body parts scattered in various locations – dispersed over the Middle East in exile, locked down in Gaza and the West Bank, and living as unwanted extras in a Jewish state? And how do Palestinians narrate their memory and history so that they are more than voiceless victims of their own experiences?

These three books all address the relationship of memory, history and collective existence for Palestinians, approaching the topic from very different vantage points. Much has already been written about the role of Palestinian memorialization processes (e.g. Khalili, 2007; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 2007), and these books fit into this literature, critically analysing as well as carrying out the collecting of Palestinian memories, thereby shedding a more general light on memory practices and identity in the modern world.

What it Means to be Palestinian takes the most general approach to the topic, seeking to directly answer the question of what being Palestinian means by providing a wide selection of snapshot stories by Palestinians of their lives from the *Nakba* (the ethnic cleansing during and after the 1948 war) to the First *Intifada* of 1987–1993. In contrast, *Palestinian Village Histories* is a more academic book, a complex and beautifully written meditation on memory and history, addressing these subjects by looking at the contemporary production of local histories of Palestinian villages which were destroyed and depopulated in the *Nakba*. Of the three books, *Palestinian Women*, for all the broadness of the title, is the most specific and personal – a partly autoethnographic work that seeks to uncover the hidden narratives of elderly Palestinian women in Israel who experienced the *Nakba*. While written on different scales and intended for different audiences, the central problematic for all three books is the relationship of memory and history for present-day Palestinian understandings of the collective self. If we are not scattered body parts, then what are we?

In Pierre Nora's 1989 essay 'Between memory and history', the article that initiated the still ongoing 'memory boom', he posited a distinction between memory and critical historical practices. He wrote of history and memory besieging each other, history being 'perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it' (Nora, 1989: 9). To an extent Nora echoes Yosef Yerushalmi's (1982) idealization of memory as an organic process disturbed by historians. This organic metaphor has been rejected by most subsequent writers, who, drawing on Maurice Halbwachs' work, foreground memory's constructed nature and see it as contingent on present-day concerns (e.g. Klein, 2000; Zerubavel, 1994). These three books all highlight this constructed

creative element of memory: it is a socially located process, as Rochelle Davis says, one which transforms data and establishes new forms of meaning for it (p. 127). And so rather than history and memory 'besieging' each other, these books posit a more complex dialectic between memorial practices, history and historiography.

Yerushalmi once claimed that collective memory is a quintessentially Jewish possession, since Jews, because of their unique diasporic existence, had to rely on collective memory while other groups could rely on fixed archives to create a sense of the collective self (Yerushalmi, 1982). This somewhat overblown claim acquires some real meaning when applied to Palestinians, a people without the resources of a state, and whose fragmented existence since 1948 has relied on collective memorialization practices to fight against the ever-present threat of their own collective disappearance.

As Rochelle Davis relates, the changing political fortunes of Palestinians have directly impacted their historical and memorial practices. During the 'revolutionary years', the period from the mid-1960s when Palestinians began in earnest to reclaim their identity and struggle for their land, history writing was dominated by large-scale narrative frameworks, with individual memories being subsumed into a teleological and nationalistic historiography. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 interrupted this process. During the invasion, the Israeli army seized the main PLO archives in Beirut and so the centralized historical resources which other national groups could rely on were no longer available to Palestinians.

Another result of the invasion was the decentring of the PLO, with its relocation in Tunis, from the lives of many Palestinians. Further, the post-Oslo fragmentation of Palestinian political leadership, as well as its ongoing crisis of legitimacy, has resulted in Palestinians not being able to rely on central institutional resources to create a collective history. They have needed to turn towards local and personal resources, more diffuse and more personal means of remembering oneself to be Palestinian. It is no coincidence that the 'village books' – painstaking descriptions of individual villages in historical Palestine – only started to be written in the 1980s, or that the Palestinian 'memory boom', especially the recounting and collecting of individual memories of the *Nakba*, really took off in the 1990s.

Such practices were necessary to fill a deliberately created gap. When Palestinians talk of being denied 'permission to narrate', they refer to more than a textual process but also to the material conditions that interrupt this permission (Said, 1984). The textual process should not be dismissed; Davis talks of the 'strong institutional opposition to the use of Palestinian memory as a historical source, precisely because giving it validity means taking seriously what is expressed' (p. 148). One rather notorious example of this opposition is by the celebrated Israeli historian of the *Nakba*, Benny Morris, who relies exclusively on (mainly Israeli) written sources, and dismisses Palestinian oral testimony as emotional, manipulative and ahistorical. This skewed historiographical environment explains in part why all three books contain passages arguing for the value of Palestinian oral history. What is significant is perhaps less the arguments made for a fairly central technique in contemporary history writing, and more that authors feel the need to make the argument in the first place.

While all three authors reflect on the difficulties of writing about Palestinian memory, none do so as trenchantly as Fatma Kassem, for as a student at Ben Gurion University in

Israel she was most directly subjected to Zionist pressure. Chapter 3 of her book recounts the obstacles she faced as she sought permission from the university to investigate Palestinian memories of the *Nakba*. Normal academic procedures were suspended, legal advice was sought over her use of such words as ‘*Nakba*’, insinuations of disrespect of Holocaust victims were made because she used the term ‘first-generation since the *Nakba*’, and so on. She relates a compelling and at times Kafkaesque story which presents a sobering insight into the erosion of academic freedoms within Israel.

Reflecting on the censorship she faced, Kassem talks of how this internal censorship is based around linguistic terms, is directed at Palestinian researchers since they are seen as less ‘objective’ than Jewish Israeli ones, and above all is triggered by the attempt to record Palestinian stories. Significantly, she did not merely fear that her academic career would be derailed by the objections made by a senior academic in the university, or that the politically motivated academic monitoring organizations in Israel would descend on her, but also that her husband and family would be targeted, a experientially based sense of fear common to Palestinians in Israel. While her project was eventually approved, the censoring and self-censoring she went through, as she observed, replicated the silencing mechanisms that blocked her subjects from openly narrating their lives.

‘What it means to be Palestinian’: Collecting memories of the decentred subject

There is a more indirect but very real block to the permission to narrate, or put another way, a more practical reason for the growth of a multiple and diffuse process of remembering. This is the multiple experiences that have been forced on Palestinians. Over the last 60 years, Palestinians have had to deal with the original disconnection from the land and an ever-widening fragmentation of their lives – whether in exile, under occupation (and a further division could be made between the West Bank and Gaza), or as unwanted citizens of a Jewish state. Palestinian lives fit into no unitary narrative that could encompass the ambitious question which Dina Matar asks: What does it mean to be Palestinian?

This explains the form of her book, a carefully curated collage of Palestinian stories and experiences. The book is structured chronologically and divided into historical sections – pre-1948, 1948–1964 and so on, with the final section detailing experiences of the First *Intifada*, the uprising against Israeli rule in the Occupied Territories. Each section consists of a brief introduction to the era and an explanation as to why the particular stories were collected, with the lion’s share of the section and the book as a whole consisting of the stories themselves. In doing this, Matar succeeds in authoring a compelling and very readable overview of Palestinian history.

The author’s strategy of letting the subjects speak for themselves is programmatic. She writes, ‘I was wary of generalizations that could make the subjects – the “others” we research – seem at once more coherent, self-contained and different from “us” than they might actually be’ (p. 5). Through trying to efface the distance between reader and storyteller, and through taking a back seat in her own book, Matar also seeks to avoid treating the storyteller as colonized victims – possessors of experiences about pain,

which the metropolitan reader can read and reinterpret so as to remain, in bell hooks's (1989) critique, the central speaking subject. Matar manages to give her interviewees the space to relate more than their experiences but also articulate their own interpretation and analysis, and to be authors of their own lives. Many of her interviewees are writers themselves, well able to represent themselves and construct meanings out of their experiences.

This indicates the value of stories in cohering a collective self, a theme familiar to social movement theorists. Wuthnow (1996) has argued that storytelling transforms people into communal entities but with their own individuality, or rather with their own stories. The ongoing search for coherence and the need to reach out to listeners, explains the need for such stories for Palestinians. As Edward Said, quoted in Davis, says, 'there seems to be nothing in the world which sustains the story: unless you go on telling it, it will just drop and disappear' (p. 149).

But the stories that Matar presents serve more than a programmatic function. These episodic accounts may be the best way of telling the story of a people united by a sense of their peoplehood, yet divided by the very experiences which have created the collective sense of self. This point has previously been made in discussions on Palestinian fiction and how it tends towards fragmented narratives and subjectivities, conflicting viewpoints and so on, not simply in order to genuflect to postmodernist sensibilities, but because this – as well as the allusive, fragmentary poetic form – more truly reflects Palestinian experience than, say, the European realist novel that emerged from a relatively coherent sense of community, nation and geography (Cleary, 2002).

What narrative, but a fragmented one, would be able to encompass the various experiences of being Palestinian represented in this book? The stories range from taking part in a failed coup in Syria in the 1950s, being beaten by a Jordanian teacher for mentioning the word 'Palestine', living in fear inside Israel in the 1970s, fighting in the 'war of the camps' in 1980s Lebanon, painting pictures of the beach in Gaza in a turn of the century Israeli jail, to mention but a few examples of 'what it means to be Palestinian'.

As these examples indicate, violence, which had not played a central part in Palestinian life before 1948, has come to dominate it. Dina Matar shrewdly notes the different tones with regard to violence, in particular the pride expressed during the 1960s and how that transmuted into a sense of victimhood in the 1970–1987 narratives. These 1980s stories of meaningless loss are overwhelmingly tragic, before they give way to tales of a new rebirth of meaning during and following the First *Intifada*. Thus the book itself follows a clear narrative arc, giving the reader a useful introduction to Palestinian history. Matar is an astute editor, and this book successfully narrates a multiple and decentred collective self, rich with insight on Palestinian lives.

'Palestinian village histories': Producing collective history

The collective Palestinian self-narrated in Matar's book is above all an exiled subject. As such, it seems that contemporary Palestinian identity is radically discontinuous from a pre-1948 identity based on a relationship to the land of Palestine. And yet in this contemporary decentred Palestinian identity, both the land and exclusion from the land remain

central. Rochelle Davis's monograph – a decade in the writing – looks at this Palestinian relationship to their land, seen as a very concrete link to one's village or town of origin rather than simply a conceptualized attachment to 'The Land', and she asks how these ways of remembering Palestine play a part in reconstituting Palestinian identity.

Davis's topic is village memorial books, books which she characterizes as intrinsically interesting as well as playing an important part in contemporary Palestinian identity and history production. These village books record in painstaking detail the existence of things that no longer exist – the hundreds of Palestinian villages within Israel that were emptied of their population during and after the 1948 war. Village books include detailed description of the natural and built landscape, human geographies of the villages, genealogies and accounts of people who lived there as well as their customs and way of life. The authors are usually from the villages themselves, currently living in exile, although some village books were produced under the aegis of Birzeit University's Centre for Research and Documentation of Palestinian Society. Davis uses these books to ask how Palestinians produce their own history – why it is done, who it is directed towards and what the content of this history is.

The context of the village books is the need, highlighted above by Said, for Palestinians to tell their stories, to assert their existence as Palestinians by asserting their past in Palestine. Village books are a means of creating a collectivity – giving hope for an autonomous Palestinian future by presenting the existence of such a Palestinian past. They can be read in terms of being a struggle over authority – a way of granting individuals the rights and responsibility to represent Palestinians and prescribing how this should happen. Davis talks extensively of how the writers of village books try to create an authoritative voice – by writing in an authorial style, by in-depth research and wide consultation, and by reflecting and transmitting social norms.

Taking the first issue, Davis repeatedly calls these village books 'transitional', their transitional nature being both temporal and textual. As the exiled generation that remembers Palestine is dying out, these books which collect their memories will be the way the '48 territories will be known to any future generation of Palestinians in exile. And so they are transitional in that they are oral histories, but written down and seeking the form of authoritative texts.

The search for a respected authorial voice means that the form of the village books tends towards an impersonal 'authorial style', which often flattens the complexity of the lives recorded. Davis compares this to the 'compilation style' of some village books. In the former, the voice of one author is heard, presenting agreed-upon facts; in the latter compilation style a diversity of voices are presented, allowing facts to emerge from the collected stories. The compilation style (the form of Dina Matar's book for instance) can be seen as a fuller way of telling history and offers a more 'real' and complex description of the villagers and villages. Interestingly enough, the books written under the aegis of Birzeit University are those which give freest voice to the villagers. This is partly because of the ethnographic training of the authors, but also perhaps because their institutional affiliation bestows on their work an authority which others cannot naturally assume. In addition, as Davis notes, the authorial style, which disguises the voices of the villagers, is not merely done to gain authorial legitimacy but also from fear of Israeli retribution on specific villagers.

These books must also appear legitimate to the villagers themselves. Davis traces the collaborative nature of the village books; while commonly they have one (male) author, the information is gathered from a variety of sources – drawing primarily on the memories of the older generation with some supplementary archival research. The books are exhaustive but necessarily incomplete, and even though there are rarely enough resources for a second printing, the authors express the desire for future revisions and ask for feedback from the readers. Thus they are seen as being a collective project, albeit one shaped by the demands of authorship.

Authors situate their books within and help create a nexus of responsibility between past and future generations. The duties are as follows: it is the responsibility of the older generation to pass on their information; it is the responsibility and the right of the younger ones to learn it. The reason for foregrounding this particular rights/responsibility nexus and transmitting the memories of life in Palestine is in order to counter an omnipresent worry among contemporary Palestinians that they are losing their history. As such, village books enable the younger generation to be told Palestinian history without the pain (for those who experienced it) of endlessly retelling it.

These books then seek to create a community across generations and borders, and to cultivate a sense of responsibility among Palestinians to the continuity of the collective self. Memories of nation and village intertwine and pin the villagers to a specific place, to each other and to the sense of Palestine; these grassroots narratives create multiple ties for the collective self to recognize itself as Palestinian. Davis does not idealize the type of community being represented, and possibly the most interesting part of her book asks what is remembered and what is forgotten. The process of memory selection is no more ‘organic’ than any other social process, and Davis is attentive to the pressures that lead to certain memories being valorized and others repressed.

The didactic intent of these books is after all a central rationale for their production. They aim to teach Palestinians the specificities of the village they come from, but also the ascribed ethos of village life. Inevitably there is a certain idealization of village life in order to forward these values – those of ‘generosity, shared concerns, and shared welfare’ (p. 93). An intriguing part of this idealization are memories of friendly interactions with Jews which are retold in many village books, a memory beautifully described by Davis as ‘a nostalgia for what might have been’ (p. 193), in contrast to the present-day state of hostilities.

However, memories are also created by a process of selective forgetting. The entire narrative of Palestinians being in villages, when about a third of the exiled population was urban (in addition, as Davis notes, some of the larger Palestinian ‘villages’ had thousands of inhabitants), is in itself a forgetting process, a conservative reaction to perceived urban liberalism and disintegration of values in the diaspora. In this idealization of prelapsarian village life Davis identifies a certain flattening process where any extremes of poverty and wealth are glossed over. In addition, there is an effacement of how Palestinian villages, with their local saints and specific cultural practices, diverged from present-day traditional values. Most importantly though, Davis discusses how the role of women is downplayed in these books; the extent to which women were economic actors and workers is almost completely ignored in order to fit into a present-day narrative of what a traditional village is like.

'Palestinian women': Telling memory against the grain

This appears to be the bind in which collective memory traps its collectivities. On one hand, it is a way for oppressed groups to avoid erasure by telling an alternative narrative to those who dominate them, those who can rely on more institutionalized historical sources to authenticate their own narratives. On the other hand, collective memory can be seen as socially repressive, presenting a false picture of the past in order to service the pieties of the present. Is there any way that memories of the past can be used to critique as well as idealize the dominant ideologies of the dominated? Another way of putting it is to ask whether memory, like history, can be read against the grain? Fatma Kassem's book serves many purposes, and one is to answer this question in the affirmative.

The book is based on interviews with 20 women currently living in the cities of Lyd and Ramleh in modern-day Israel, all of whom experienced the events of 1948. These cities were ethnically cleansed of most of their inhabitants in 1948, and today remain majority Jewish Israeli cities, containing a large minority of Palestinians living in urban ghettos. Unlike the preponderance of elite voices in Dina Matar's book, the women that Kassem interviews are marginalized by more than their Palestinian status – they are elderly and poor, they are within Israel and they are women. This subordinated status makes representing these women all the more complicated. Kassem is attentive to nuance and hidden meanings from her interlocutors, many of whom feel they have no story to tell, nothing worth representing. Much of the book seeks to interpret the apparently innocuous phrases they use, such as 'we migrated' rather than talking of being refugees, or asking what the phrase 'the days of the Arab' means and so on. This technique carries the danger that the author's interpretation rather than the interviewees' words become dominant, but Kassem throughout offers a convincing, well-argued interpretation.

Her main argument is that it is fruitful to see Palestinian experience in gendered terms – this sheds light on the imagining of the body and the home as well as the events of 1948; a light which reveals more than the experience of marginalized Palestinian women in Israel, but which can be used to construct an alternative imaginary to present paradigms which, Kassem argues, exclude the experiences and opinions of women. If gender is repressed and women silenced by the village books, Kassem's book works against this omnipresent silencing. She manages to reveal a complex mixture of speech and silence in how the interviewees talk about their experiences, arguing that their language, devoid of such terms as '*Nakba*', is more conciliatory as well as containing a greater sense of agency than official patriarchal Palestinian discourse. She also argues that they speak both a language of resistance and of coming to terms with living in a Jewish state. This may be true, but a deeper analysis of what 'resistance' is would be necessary in order to convince on this point.

Kassem's autoethnographic approach interweaves the collective and personal stories of Palestinian women in Israel. Through discussing how her own family's stories of dispossession shaped her and her understanding, she reveals how such personal family stories intertwine with as well as undermine national narratives and the gendered relations of the nation. It is fascinating to contrast Davis's account of how women's roles are effaced in village books, with the retelling in the Kassem family and in this book of the stories of their active, passionate grandmother during the *Nakba*.

Kassem wonders at how her elderly interviewees keep returning to the events of the *Nakba* in retelling their lives. She argues that it remains an event they need to make sense of in an ongoing way, precisely because of its senselessness. The *Nakba* involved a near-complete unravelling of the meanings and relationships they had constructed in the world. Thus the constant return to the events of 1948 is not a melancholic replaying of misery, but a necessary process to make the incomprehensible comprehensible. As such, the *Nakba* can be seen as a double-edged event for Palestinians. On one the hand, it destroyed Palestinian society, root and branch, dispersing a settled population from its homeland. On the other hand, it is the sign under which the Palestinian sense of self has been recreated. As Kassem's book shows, it does not simply serve as a reference point for those in foreign lands, but also for Palestinians who stayed in their land in what could be called internal exile.

Nevertheless, 'the *Nakba*' is a problematic sign. Hassan Khader (1998) has argued that the term, with its connotations of sudden unavoidable catastrophe, is disempowering. Likewise, Kassem's interviewees refuse the term, referring instead to their 'migration', as a means of reclaiming some sense of agency over the process. At the same time, indicating the shifting contours of memory and meaning, Kassem talks of how for second generation Palestinians such as herself, the word '*Nakba*' has a different effect, one which centres their political agency. In bringing to light the shifting interpretations Palestinians make of their own history, Kassem adds to a multilayered understanding of the role of memories and collective memory.

Looking at memory not in the collective singular but in the individual plural

Collected memories rather than collective memory are, according to Christopher Browning (2003: 39), the correct orientation of the historian. He suggests that in order to properly incorporate memories and testimonies into academic histories, writers needs to allow for a multiplicity of voices from the past to be heard, voices which cannot be dominated by any single discourse of the present. These books fulfil this role, their strength lies in the fact that they do not engage in special pleading for any one unitary 'Palestinian collective memory', but use the oral histories they collect and analyse to provide a complex historiographical understanding of present-day Palestinian experience.

History is never more meaningful than when it faces erasure and denial, something which explains the contemporary significance of Palestinian historiography and memorial practices. The dialectic process of memory production and attempted erasure does not merely mirror what it means to be Palestinian, it serves to reimagine and coalesce the kaleidoscopic collective Palestinian self. In discussing the blockages and the institutional channelling of these memories, in collating, recreating and critiquing these stories, these three books not only provide an insight into the creative role of memory in forming present-day collectivities, but serve to an extent as an agent of this formation.

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Biographical note

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