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Reviewed by Randa Farah (Department of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario)

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Palestinian Memory between Inscription and Obliteration

The ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians by the Haganah and other armed Zionist organizations during the 1948 war is an untold story of dispossession and displacement eclipsed by pervasive public commemorations of the Holocaust, and celebrations of Israel's establishment. Although the Palestinians played no role in Europe's persecution of the Jews in 1948, they became the victims of the victims when Israel emerged on the ruins of their ancient society. It was indeed a *Nakba*, the Arabic word for catastrophe: approximately 780,000 Palestinians representing over half the population were evicted from their villages and towns, most of which were destroyed and reinscribed as Israeli spaces: Jewish settlements with Hebraized names.

The omission of this history from official, academic, and popular discourses in Europe and North America did not impede its transmission across several generations of Palestinians. The poignancy of this ongoing relationship between inscription and obliteration, between dominant Israeli history and silenced Palestinian memory within specific matrixes of power, victimization, and agency make this book valuable for scholars and general readers alike. Furthermore, this volume both repositions the Palestinian case into mainstream theoretical debates on history/memory/identity and challenges the silencing of Palestinian historical narratives.

The editors of the volume, Ahmad Sa'di, a senior lecturer in politics and government at Ben-Gurion University, and Lila Abu-Lughod, professor of anthropology and director of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Columbia University, have compiled a collection of impressive contributions that weave together the rich and changing tapestry of Palestinian memories. According to the editors, this volume does not purport to be an official history of

1948. Instead, it draws on a range of interdisciplinary theories and methods to highlight the modalities and expressions of memory in the present.

The authors contest the idea that Palestinian collective memory is ontologically given, and agree that no memory is pure or unmediated. They outline its historical emergence, the challenges to it by marginalized voices, and the moral and political implications of its erasure. This collection of sophisticated essays reveals how the process of remembering and forgetting is informed by present contingencies and by factors like gender and generational experience. The authors discuss the heterogeneous manifestations, content, and sites of Palestinian memory, expressed in such forms as oral narratives of refugees and survivors of massacres, and the remembrance and remapping of destroyed villages in court records, in Palestinian cinema, and in various literary genres, especially novels, poetry, and theater. Two of the volume's contributors, Lila Abu-Lughod and Omar al-Qattan, take us along, in the company of their parents, on anguished journeys of return to Jaffa. These returns to "half-ruins" (when those who had lived in pre-1948 Palestine search for the traces of their childhood in heaps of rubble, in houses now occupied by strangers, in old trees that survived uprooting, and beneath Israeli inscriptions) reveal much about the importance of place, generational relationships, and the shape of unrequited memory.

The book pivots around the 1948 war as a calamitous event that ruptured and irreversibly transformed individual and collective lives. As the editors note, however, unlike the memory of traumatic events like the Holocaust, where the passage of time allowed for reflection, remembering, and healing, Palestinian memory is particularly agonizing because it struggles with and against a still much-contested present (p.

3). Sixty years after the *Nakba*, neither the Palestinians, nor the Israelis have achieved a sense of normality. For them, the past is neither remote nor concluded (p. 10).

The *Nakba* has become the primary site of Palestinian collective memory and national identity. In their introduction, the editors contend that the past lives in the present and is, at heart, political (p. 8). They outline its three distinctive features: its production under constant threat and in the shadow of a louder narrative with political force to silence it; its orientation to places and longing for the land (p. 13); and its generational specificity, meaning that subsequent generations have inherited the burden of memory (pp. 19, 21). Yet, this book does not celebrate a subaltern reconstruction of an “authentic” or idealized past. Instead, it reveals the contradictions, inconsistencies, and faultlines of memory, while insisting these do not invalidate the deeper truths held in Palestinian memory, whether recorded in documents, oral testimonies, or found in the experiences of the silenced and the marginalized.

The first part of the volume, entitled “Places of Memory,” begins with Susan Slyomovics’s chapter entitled “The Rape of Qula,” which refers to the destruction of a Palestinian village. The author reads Qula as a *lieu de memoire*, invested with discourses and metaphors of rape. The devastation of the village shattered not only its material culture but also efforts to represent its past (p. 39), as Israeli bulldozers pushed layers of Ottoman, Arab, and Palestinian life onto the scrap heap (pp. 46-47). In turn, Rochelle Davis investigates how and why Palestinians recreate the homeland in village memorial books (p. 94) and journey maps that take the reader on a virtual journey to village places and landmarks (p. 67). Davis argues that, although these creations idealize the rural past, by naming places, landmarks, and people, they inscribe their vision of history on the land through the assertion of authoritative knowledge (p. 60). The section ends with Abu-Lughod’s moving chapter, which chronicles her father’s return to Jaffa, his hometown in pre-1948 Palestine, and explores the author’s relationship to these memories and places. According to Abu-Lughod, her father’s return was about reclaiming the city in which he had been born, the sea in which he had swum as a boy, and the home he had been forced to flee in 1948 (p. 83). Abu-Lughod, however, notes that this alone was not sufficient motivation for her to write about the *Nakba*. Instead, she was responding to continuing Israeli domination

in the form of hundreds of checkpoints that serve as sites of humiliation, violence, stillbirths, house demolitions, the firing of Apache helicopters, and the separation wall.

In the second section, entitled “Modes of Memory,” Lena Jayyusi posits that Palestinians remember new events and experiences in relation to the *Nakba* (p. 110) and direct such memories toward the reclamation of national history (p. 117). Rosemary Sayigh, the author of the following chapter on women’s narratives, suggests that simply writing women’s stories into history is not enough. We must also shift our understanding of what constitutes history and challenge the social structures and attitudes that constrain women’s speech and agency (p. 154). Analyzing cinematic representations of Palestinian experience and history, Haim Bresheeth argues that the directors of such films are engaged in a project of reclaiming Palestinian identity and of reassembling the fragments of collective national memory (p. 183). In his discussion of films featuring the demolished village of Saffuriyya, Bresheeth observes that James Young, who studied Zionist commemorations of the Holocaust through the planting of forests, fails to mention that most of these forests arose on the ruins of hundreds of Palestinian villages—including Saffuriyya—bulldozed in the 1950s to remove all signs of earlier Palestinian habitation (p. 164). For Bresheeth, memory is not enough; “one must employ fiction, one must play (*spiel*) in the Freudian sense, and one must tell stories” (p. 183).

“Faultlines of Memory” is the final section of *Nakba*. It begins with Omar al-Qattan’s chapter, which argues there is no single memory, but many tangled memories of people who meet at crossroads traversed by others (p. 191). Like Abu-Lughod, Al-Qattan draws on his father’s return to Jaffa, which generates new questions on generational relationships, memory, and place. The author suggests that Palestinians need no longer think of memory simply as assertion and testimony, but as the point of a new departure, one given coherence and meaning by the memory and history of the *Nakba* (p. 204). Rather than limit the discussion to how women remember the events of the *Nakba*, the chapter, co-authored by Isabelle Humphries and Laleh Khalili, examines the content of their remembrances. They posit that women have rarely been acknowledged as conduits of *Nakba* memory, and then document the recurring themes in women’s narratives; rape and the loss of jewelry, family, communities, and livelihoods

(p. 223). In the subsequent chapter, Samera Esmeir tackles the relationship between Israeli positivist law and historiography in her discussion of the massacre at Tantura, a Palestinian village near Haifa. Esmeir posits that incoherence, contradictions, and absences in oral narratives signify the death of human relationships and the destruction of an entire society. This entails a different reading of the testimonies, a reading that seeks to understand the tragedy of a society in the absences and gaps (p. 249). Basing her article on research in Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon, Diana Allen questions the focus on collective identity by researchers and activists, which, in her view, obscures contradictions among generations regarding the *Nakba*, everyday forms of suffering in the present, as well as the creative ways in which Palestinian refugees deal with their traumatic past.

The book concludes with an afterword, in which Sa'di explores the relationship between representation, history, and morality. He outlines western attitudes to the Palestinians, who are considered insignificant victims compared to the need to calm Western conscience following the Holocaust (p. 298). The 1948 war, Sa'di observes, has been presented as a modern version of the story of David versus Goliath, of young, disciplined, civilized Jews confronting a sea of backward Arabs. In Israel, too, the majority continues to bury the history of ethnic cleansing. Thus Sa'di asks how long it will take before Palestinians

are heard or allowed to have moral weight. (p. 310).

For scholars, this book will shed light on how a stateless nation, exiled for almost six decades, negotiates, challenges, and reshapes collective memory. Most scholars today distinguish between an official hegemonic history promoted by state institutions, and challenges to it by popular memory or memories by marginalized segments of society (even when they acknowledge the boundaries between them are not rigid). In the Palestinian case, the absence of a sovereign state renders the relationship between an official Palestinian history and memory unstable; for example, Palestinians have no national schools, museums, etc. available to the nation at large to promote the "official version." In fact, all Palestinian histories, those of the elite and of the marginalized, pose as the subaltern in relation to narratives of the more powerful. By acknowledging the credence and significance of Palestinian stories of displacement and exile, and by providing a venue for long-smothered voices, this book urges the reader to follow the trails of memory in the landscape and in the stories scattered across borders and refugee camps. To imagine a peaceful resolution to the conflict, it is of vital importance that the Palestinian history of displacement and dispossession be acknowledged, heard, and understood. This book goes a long way toward doing just that.

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