

Commemorative Economies and the Politics of Solidarity in Shatila Camp

Sixty-four years have passed since Palestinians were expelled from their towns and villages during the events that led to the creation of the state of Israel. The 1948 expulsion, which Palestinians refer to as the *Nakba* (“catastrophe”), marks the loss of Palestine as a physical entity and its birth as a national signifier; it also marks the moment when Palestinian culture became a culture of memory and retrieval. For Palestinians in Lebanon, who have not been permitted to return, commemorating the *Nakba* has become a way of countering denial that Israel engaged in ethnic cleansing, as well as highlighting Israeli responsibility for what is euphemistically called the “refugee problem.” The 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization erased the refugees from the political arena and revealed the Palestinian Authority’s willingness to trade comprehensive right of return for statehood. Oslo effectively asked refugees to forget their dispossession by the people who “taught everyone the importance of not forgetting the past.”¹

Commemorating 1948 became a way of resisting the erasures of Oslo and underscoring that the right of return was not negotiable. This in turn created a situation in which the demand that refugee rights be recognized under international law is often conflated with the ethical imperative not to forget Palestine—a conflation that has been exploited by the Lebanese government, enabling them to claim that by not naturalizing refugees they are upholding Palestinian national rights. There are two related questions I would like to address in this essay: what is the impact of this instrumentalization of memory in Shatila? Might the quest for justice for refugees be better served by arguments rooted in the present-day realities of life in the camps rather than those conceived in terms that imply a phantasmal undoing of history? The fact that the distinction between these two models of political action—one rooted in present-day realities of camp life and the other in nationalist commemoration of the 1948 expulsion—is not able to be sustained as such casts a bare light on the contingency of much of this memory work.

When I began working in Shatila in 2002, the drive symbolically to reclaim and reify the 1948 expulsion as central to refugee identity was at its height. The fiftieth-anniversary commemorations of the *Nakba* in 1998 sought to remind the world what celebrations of Israeli independence were denying and were accompanied by demonstrations in downtown Beirut, widely circulated right-of-return petitions, and public debates—all of which, in turn, were contemporaneous with the emergence of a global right-of-return movement.² In 2000, prior to the “final status” negotiations at Camp David, the right-of-return committee, *A'idun* (“Returning”), formed in Lebanon and

Syria; similar coalitions were established in Jordan, the occupied territories, Europe, and North America. A number of research centers dedicated to raising awareness about refugee rights were also established during this period. In the wake of this institutional mobilization around right of return, a number of oral history projects, plays, films, art exhibits, village histories, and local advocacy campaigns, which sought to document and give voice to the memories of a dwindling generation of first-generation refugees, were initiated. These activities, supported by local and international right-of-return activist networks, NGOs, and political factions in the camps, and tacitly encouraged by the Lebanese government, have reinforced the public perception of Israeli responsibility for the suffering of Palestinians in Lebanon (having created the refugee problem not only through expulsions in 1948 but also by a persistent refusal to let refugees return). They likewise deflected criticism from the Lebanese government and its discriminatory policies that have kept Palestinian refugees in social and political limbo. These commemorative events also consolidated nationalist claims that the refugees, by rejecting naturalization, have adopted a position of principled agency.

A subtle version of this same logic has worked its way into scholarship on Palestinians in Lebanon, ironically through the conduit of solidarity. In an effort to make the historical dimension of their case vividly apparent, much of the work that treats their case continues to address the question of identity primarily through the lens of memory and ancestral ties to villages and towns in Palestine.³ The retrospective gaze of much of the scholarship and activism in the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon over the past decade has been latently prescriptive, often carrying the presuppositions of Palestinian nationalism more or less conspicuously in tow. By focusing on camps as temporary communities, where refugees ready themselves for return, scholarship has neglected new forms of social and political organization that have developed in exile, effectively interpellating refugees as national subjects. This canonical account renders the past as a moral condition and unchanging reality that refugees must inhabit in order to preserve their political identity, rather than a sequence of contingent historical events that has brought them to where they are. In other words, what it means for generations born in exile to return to a place they never left often appears obviated by the need for historical restitution. Much of this activism obscures the fact that the intensity of the longing for return often comes more from the Palestinian elite based in Europe and the United States and international solidarity groups than from refugees struggling to get by in deepening poverty in the camps, whose first priority is survival and for whom the burden of political remembrance has become increasingly hard to bear.

The Nakba Archive

Even while I pose questions about the costs entailed by the institutional and political emphasis placed on the commemoration of 1948 and the historical claims of Palestinian refugees living in exile, I believe that documenting refugee accounts of the 1948 expulsion is critically important. Mainstream discussion of the conflict continues to marginalize the Palestinian narrative and the violent history of dispossession and ethnic cleansing on which the state of Israel was built, while peace negotiations

routinely elide core issues of justice and accountability in reductive formulas like “land for peace” that do not address historical grievances.⁴ Scholars and commentators continue to emphasize the importance of bearing witness to the Palestinian experience and argue that peace will only be possible when Israel concedes that Jews have been not only victims but also victimizers.⁵ Since 2002 I have worked on an archival project, recording video testimonies with first-generation refugees in camps around Lebanon about their experiences during the 1948 expulsion.⁶ As first conceived, the Nakba Archive was highly idealistic, aiming to create an audiovisual archive that would document historical claims and serve as a resource for future scholars and activists working on pre-1948 Palestine and the expulsion. The goal was to find ways to create public forums around the collection—through film and print—and potentially point the way to a jointly elaborated historical narrative, in which concrete grievances and crimes might be acknowledged as part of a more involved process of historical restitution. While the model of historical justice established by South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission seems a distant possibility given the current political impasse, it is clear that reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians will depend on a shared historical narrative that acknowledges the suffering of both peoples. In an age of reparations, in which truth commissions and criminal tribunals in Rwanda, South Africa, and the former Yugoslavia have been promoted by international human rights institutions as instruments of historical accountability and restorative justice, the absence of any truth-telling process in the Israel-Palestine conflict represents a striking exception.

The process of recording several hundred testimonies for the archive, while I lived and conducted doctoral research in Shatila camp in Beirut, revealed stark discrepancies in the ways experiences were narrated in the course of formal interviews and in the more idiomatic contexts of everyday life. My involvement with the archive radically altered my understanding of the selective ways 1948 is remembered and forgotten, publicly and privately, and I grew more critical of the view that narratives of displacement were sustaining structures of belonging and attachment among refugees in exile. While elders were usually happy to be interviewed—often lamenting that we had not come sooner when their memories were sharper—second- and third-generation refugees were skeptical about the usefulness of such a project and cynical about the intentions that lay behind it. “Why are you documenting the problems of the past and not looking at how we are suffering *now*?” I was asked. Others posed the rhetorical question of why I believed anyone was going to listen to these stories after so many years of not listening. The most persistent question that I faced, however, was “What difference is this going to make for us?”—something I could not answer.

These encounters raised uncomfortable questions, forcing me to critically reevaluate the assumptions that had informed my thinking about the archive and the politics of what we do and do not witness in the field. What was at stake in these acts of remembrance for refugees in camps like Shatila? In making an archive that searched for certain kinds of national “truths,” was I implicated in the structural forgetting of other, less “usable pasts”?⁷ Was I in fact engaged in a coercion of memory? By approaching eyewitnesses as living links with Palestine, and their narratives as tools for regenerating collective meanings within a political field, do such quasi-

institutionalized initiatives in some sense prevent elders from mourning their losses in more personal terms? Particularly unsettling for me as an ethnographer was the way in which I began to see how outsiders like myself, not only anthropologists and foreign researchers but also activists, volunteers, and solidarity groups, have played a key role in articulating and sustaining this nationalist metanarrative that often seems so removed from everyday realities. My interactions with NGOs and political factions, both in Shatila and other camps, made visible the extent to which local institutions have mobilized a nationalist narrative and are minting its coin, often for the pragmatic reason that heritage projects invoking the right of return generate investment and support from global solidarity networks.

To an activist committed to the right of Palestinians to self-determination and to restitution, an archive documenting the events of 1948 seemed compelling and important. The ethical obligation that those of us in sympathy with the aims of Palestinian nationalism may feel does not, however, entitle us to speak politically for those whose lives have been determined by these events. Commemorative projects that peg the past to nationalist politics have created a hierarchy of events *worth* remembering and bearing witness to. Occluded from view are the everyday forms of suffering experienced by refugees and emergent subjectivities not conforming to the communitarian ideals of nationalism. Lacking the moral and political clarity of the 1948 expulsion, or the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, the two instantly recognizable symbols of collective victimization, everyday histories of grinding poverty are elided because they do not further—and in some cases actively subvert—the goals of Palestinian nationalism. The experience of living and working in Shatila brought into focus the residual experiences and suffering of several generations of refugees silenced or left unassimilated by this nationalist narrative. It also revealed with great clarity the contradictory ways that 1948 is remembered and the dialectical relations being generated between past and present, memory and motive. Arguably, these institutionalized commemorative practices and academic studies that compulsively look back to this event as the core of national identity are making it harder for subsequent generations of refugees to articulate a sense of identity and belonging in terms of present realities and aspirations. Empathy may draw us into history and nourish a desire that the events of 1948 be neither denied nor forgotten. Empathy may likewise also cause us to lose sight of distinctions, the ways in which the past does and does not continue to shape the present.

Commemorative Economies: The Nakba Industry

One morning in May 2004, at the start of what some residents of Shatila jokingly refer to as “the tourist season,” I stopped by Najdeh, a women’s NGO, to see Samar, a friend who worked there.⁸ During the summer months Najdeh becomes the institutional home for a steady flow of foreigners, principally activist delegations and volunteers working with children. On this particular day, a battered minibus was parked outside the entrance, and I could hear foreign voices over the early-morning din of the camp. Inside, a group of middle-aged Americans, mainly women, were seated around a small table littered with pamphlets about Najdeh’s work. When I entered, Mazen, a young Palestinian-American working with a U.S.-based right-of-

return organization, was midway through a presentation on the history of the 1948 expulsion. I found a chair at the back of the room and sat with Umm Qasim, one of the center's coordinators. She explained that the group was part of a New York coalition that had come to Shatila to learn about the problems Palestinians faced in the camps in Lebanon.

After coffee was served Mazen recounted for the group a story Samar had just told him about her father. "I want to share with you Samar's story," Mazen began:

When her family first came to the camp in the early 1950s from Tripoli, where they had been living since they were forced out of Palestine in 1948, her father planted the same trees and plants they had in Palestine . . . He also planted a grape vine that he tended every day. During the 1982 Israeli invasion his house was destroyed and so were the plants and the vine . . . Afterwards he rebuilt his house and planted another vine that he calls the symbol of his future and of his hope.

This narrative, as relayed by Mazen, sought to highlight the continuity of Palestinian culture, the tenacity of peasant traditions and localized structures of belonging in exile. The hope alluded to is implicitly that of return. As Mazen brought his presentation to a close the moral of the story was made explicit: "The right of return and the desire to go back to Palestine, to our villages, is at the center of every refugee's identity. The real Nakba was not just the loss of our land but the total destruction of the social fabric." The director of Najdeh, who had accompanied the group, then added, "It is very important that you tell your communities in America how the refugees in Shatila are suffering and how we still remember our villages in Palestine and want to return to them." A member of the group, deeply moved, then responded, "Please tell Samar and your colleagues here that we haven't given up on them."

For the next few hours I accompanied the delegation as they were escorted by Samar through the camp, first to the Shatila mosque to see the tombs of refugees buried during the sieges of the War of the Camps, and then on to the burial ground for the victims of the 1982 massacre, just south of the camp.⁹ The group wandered around the memorial site taking photos and looking at the graphic images that had been erected on large billboards around the periphery: montages of black and bloated bodies piled in the streets and in the foreground a woman screaming. The display was framed by the words "What is . . . the Guilt She Committed [*sic*] to be Murdered."¹⁰ As we stood in the shade of one of the trees near the entrance, Samar recalled her own memories of the massacre for the group. About half an hour later the same dusty minibus pulled up outside the gate of the grounds to take the visitors back to their hotel.

As I reflected on the day's events later that evening, I was struck by the almost total absence of any discussion of the everyday life and concerns of camp residents. Shatila, when it was discussed at all, was presented as the negation of everything believed to constitute an authentic Palestinian community. The discussion had been thematically dominated by an idealized pre-1948 Palestine, a backdrop of cultural and political wholeness against which the camp—temporary, fragmentary, defined by abnormality and lack, without cultural integrity or intrinsic worth—figured as a pathological foil. Mazen's talk, structured around a succession of nostalgic descriptions

of life in Palestine and interwoven with accounts of the steadfast perseverance of refugees in Lebanon since, presented the identity of Shatila's residents as a matter of memory and relation to the past. Communal identity appeared animated by what had been lost and by its mnemonic reproduction. By dwelling on the ideational and historical registers of refugee experience, and invoking the abstract and unchanging symbols of Palestinian nationalism, Mazen had effectively glossed over the history of the camp itself, the material conditions shaping the lives of Palestinians in Shatila today, and the fraught relations that refugees have with their host society. For Mazen there appeared to be a felt conflict between attending to local forms of affiliation and belonging that have taken root in Shatila after generations in exile and with the messy realities of everyday survival, on the one hand, and foregrounding an undimmed continuity of attachment to a Palestinian homeland, on the other.

During the time that I worked in Shatila I attended many similar commemorative events organized by NGOs, not only for the Nakba but also the Sabra and Shatila massacre, the other instantly recognizable symbol of collective victimization. As Palestinians in Lebanon have found themselves marginalized and excluded from negotiations, the political and institutional value placed on practices commemorating Palestine and the history of the expulsion has increased. The growing prominence of camp NGOs as mediators of national claims and cultivators of nationalist sensibility is also part of a broader shift in the Palestinian resistance movement in Lebanon. After the departure of the PLO in 1982, which marked the end of the military struggle for national liberation among Palestinians in Lebanon, refugees have increasingly addressed their claims to the international community, framing their struggle in terms of human rights and international law.¹¹ A consequence of this shift has been the evolution of a rights-based approach to activism, promoted, in large part, by civil institutions in the camps. Like Najdeh, many NGOs operating in the camps have turned to commemoration and testimonial as a way of attracting the attention and support of a besieged international human rights community. The simplified narrative of 1948 trumps the ethical quagmire of the present reality by attracting foreign investment in the very institutions (schools, cultural centers, etc.) that have come to form the locus of social agency for refugees. While these commemorations clearly do have resonance for refugees, they should also therefore be understood as part of the economic pragmatics of everyday life, not merely as a form of political claims-making and cultural transmission.

When I first started conducting research for the Nakba Archive in Shatila, I was taken to speak with elders, widely recognized to have "important" memories. Among the first of these local sages that I met, and subsequently came to know well, was Abu Nayyif from Majd al-Krum. After brief introductions, we were seated, and without prompting he launched into a long narrative about his village. Questions or interruptions were not permitted, so we sat and listened to his stylized memoir, which had the air of a well-paced and practiced performance. The narrative showed signs of prescriptive plotting, astutely touching on key political tropes: close relations with local Jewish communities, perfidious Albion, escalating acts of violence, a perilous journey into exile, the hardship of early years in Lebanon, and the establishment of the camp, in which his father had been a major figure. This is not to belittle these

experiences or cast doubt over their veracity, more to note the ways in which this narrative—by foregrounding a rhetoric of authenticity and moral edification—seemed marked by an internalization of the protocols of testimony. It was as if Abu Nayyif, anticipating the expectations and sympathies of his audience, emphasized those elements of his own history that might generate identification and empathy and which could be understood in terms of the political interests of the collective. This was also suggested by the fact that his story was structured around episodes marked for some kind of future redemption. As he brought his narrative to a close he turned and gave us a penetrating look: “If I could go to my village tomorrow I would leave everything I have and walk,” he said. Raising his voice a notch, “I would be happy to live under a tree with the sky as my roof and the earth my bed. It would be enough just to die in Palestine.” And then as if on cue: “The right of return is our most important right—we will not give it up for anything.”

Over coffee, once the “interview” had formally finished, Abu Nayyif showed me a photograph album of images of himself with various delegations, with foreign officials and volunteers from a host of different countries—joking that his house was “like the United Nations.” He is clearly proud that representatives from local NGOs regularly take their visitors to see him as part of their tour of Shatila. A local celebrity, he has fashioned his identity as a narrator of the Nakba and does not disappoint. Through these acts of witness he is both a representative of the community and an agent of collective identity and experience. This might be understood in terms of a poetics of maneuver that allows the “I” to speak for the “we.” Through narrative, Abu Nayyif tries to evoke solidarity from his audience, interpellating the viewer as secondary witness in this “rhetorical space of intersubjectivity.”¹² On the various occasions when I saw him talking with visitors to the camp, the form his narrative took was almost identical; his guests were normally invited to ask questions at the end, sometimes prompted by the “guide”—what, for instance does Abu Nayyif think about the right of return? To which his resounding answer would be, “If I could go to my village tomorrow, I would leave everything I have and walk . . .” These strategies of performance and persuasion point to an economy of memory, in which particular versions of the past become standardized and circulate almost as commodities; but they also illustrate the ways in which a transnational discourse of testimony may be shaping local practice, informing the processes by which individual experience becomes social text and public past.

The dissonance between what is being said and what is being felt in the course of these acts of bearing witness must in some sense be a response on the part of the speaker to what he or she imagines is being—or can be—heard. As I came to know Abu Nayyif better in the course of living in the camp, I began to notice how the same events could be discussed in radically different terms in other contexts. His niece became a close friend, and I would often find Abu Nayyif talking with her husband when I called to visit. In these informal family settings his memories (built almost entirely around his experiences in Shatila and rarely straying as far afield as Majd al-Krum) took on a fluidity and depth, at times a sharp humor, largely absent in the somewhat somber narrations given to visitors. After the Geneva Accords were made public, he refused to come with us to a demonstration outside the UN building,

telling me, with a certain impatience, that it was a waste of time and that everyone “knows” the right of return is impossible. Through these interactions with Abu Nayyif and other elders in Shatila, I became more aware of the ways in which this rhetorical language of collective dispossession, struggle, and return that has come to index “Palestinianness”—which finds voice in these more “official” contexts—has lost its resonance, not only in the minds of elders like Abu Nayyif but also, as I came to discover and will discuss below, among younger generations of refugees in the camps.

In the course of everyday conversations with elders and their families, I found that pre-1948 Palestine or the events of the expulsion emerged as anecdotal reminiscence that was supple, associative, and more deeply concerned with commenting on the present than memorializing the past. On one occasion it was the aroma of *za'tar* (wild thyme) that sparked a series of interconnected memories, taking Umm Saleh first to Jish and the memory of picking *za'tar* in the mountains with her grandmother—describing how it was used in cooking and the memory of a particular incident when she had seen a snake in their courtyard as a child—before turning to a recent visit with her sister in 'Ayn Hilwa camp, where she had seen, and smelt, families pounding their own *za'tar*. That this unsystematic weaving of events and places at first appeared to me as a passing anecdote, rather than a narrative about the Nakba, points to my own biases and limits of imagination as to what constituted a historical narrative worth recording. It illustrated for me the way in which prescribed conventions of bearing witness were also shaping what I was listening for, giving primacy, for example, to emotionally charged moments in which national narrative and self-narrative intertwine. Umm Saleh's stories, like many others that I have heard since, suggest a refusal to force partial memories into an interpretive schema, those moments that cannot be sutured into a continuous narrative of moral or cognitive coherence. The value of this fractured reminiscence, however, may lie in its ability to enact a doubling of witness, transmitting not only historical details but also the shattering effects that this history has had on the lives of those who have lived it.¹³

The different ways in which these elders in Shatila relate to their memories of Palestine invite us to question the notion that this is a community actively transmitting and preserving local histories that restore Palestine in social memory in the matter of a palimpsest or represent a collective call for retributive justice. The ambivalent discourses of memory and collective meaning-making that I encountered did not fit extant paradigms for public witness, which presumes that a unified narrative of “what happened” can be communicated and documented. My initial concern that the suffering and loss of 1948 needed to be documented—as materials for political advocacy—presupposed a consensus about a shared understanding of the past and the need to bear witness to it. I was surprised, initially even disappointed, when I discovered that this need to bear witness to 1948 was not foregrounded in people's narratives, but I came to realize how this pointed to the alternative ways that violent history and adversity in this community are being dealt with. This complicates the binary of victimization and agency that is often assumed. Clearly these alternate registers of remembrance suggest other means of coming to terms with the past, other ways of imagining the future than the politically motivated goal of retribution.

Transmission and Transformation: Commemorating 1948 among Shatila's Youth

What of the younger generations of refugees in Shatila? What role does the Nakba play in their lives? The dialectical tensions that lie at the heart of this renaissance nationalist interest in the history of 1948 and the concept of return, which I outlined above, were starkly revealed to me during an event that I helped organize in Shatila to mark Nakba Day in May 2004. With the help of a local NGO we mounted a screen against one of the buildings near the main entrance to the camp. The films we had selected—a collection of documentaries, interviews, and features about Palestine and the history of 1948—were to be shown over two evenings. For the opening night we had chosen a series of six fifteen-minute excerpts from interviews that we had filmed with elders in Shatila about their memories of Palestine. The elders had enthusiastically encouraged us, and we thought the interviews would be of interest to their families and the community more generally. A small group of about twenty people gathered—mainly the interviewees and their families—perched on plastic chairs, or watching from the balconies that overlooked the street. Kids sat on the hoods of parked cars, enjoying the novelty of street cinema, if not altogether gripped by the subject matter.

About ten minutes into the first interview with Umm Waseem, Muhammad Hasanayn—the brother of Hasan Hasanayn, who, with Shadi Anas of Burj al-Barajna camp, was killed in a demonstration at the border in October 2000—came up to me and asked when we were planning to show “the film about Hasan.” I explained that the idea of the event was to commemorate the events of 1948 and that we did not intend to show any films about Hasan. At this point I had to leave to get an extension cable for the projector. When I returned five minutes later, I found that a large crowd had gathered. As I got closer, I realized that the tape had been changed, and instead of Umm Waseem talking about the air attack on her village of Sufsaf, we were now watching news footage from Al-Manar (Hizbollah’s TV station) of the demonstration in which Hasan was killed. Among the chanting protestors projected above our heads were recognizable faces from the camp, lobbing stones and scurrying away from the clouds of tear gas; some of the more fearless could be seen trying to climb the wire fence. Bullets were fired by panicking Israeli soldiers on the other side, and then there ensued a confusion of running bodies and blood; about seventeen people were wounded, two fatally. This footage then cut to images from the camp: Hasan’s distraught mother and grieving family, lines of people coming to pay their respects, before culminating in a funeral procession in which several thousand mourners marched, carrying Hasan’s coffin through the streets on a wave of anger.

Among those who had gathered to watch and remember, some were animatedly pointing out friends and relatives, while others cursed as the Israeli jeeps darted across the screen; many were crying and visibly upset. The mood was somber, in marked contrast to the distracted manner of the crowd when we projected the first interview. The tension and grief were palpable. It was clear that the Nakba had been upstaged by the representation of these recent events in the camp’s history. When Muhammad saw that I had returned, he came over: “Look how many more people there are now,” he said, grinning. “People are not interested in watching old people talk about the past—besides, we’ve seen all these stories before.” Then, turning to Mahmud—a

friend who had helped organize the event—he added, “I’d rather be watching Umm Kulthum [the great Egyptian singer] than these old guys! I also have a video that was made by a doctor who was at the demonstration which shows Hasan going to the hospital—even more people will come tomorrow if you show this one.” After we’d packed up, I hung around talking with friends, who, as they put it, had “come to support” me. They were not surprised that the event had not drawn a crowd, noting how few people had even remarked on the significance of the day.

This experience suggested to me that these official forms of remembrance, rather than narrowing the gap between nationalist history and subjective memory in the community, may in fact be pushing these two modes of remembering farther apart. This event, as with others that I attended, clearly seemed to elicit boredom. The manner in which the screening was upstaged by the interests of the audience, however, suggests that such acts of public remembering bring personal memory and collective history into dialogue in ways that may be reconfiguring understandings of self and community. The sense of solidarity generated by the scenes of riot and demonstration presumably derived in part from the emotional reminders of moments in which they had been actively involved in events rather than simply distant observers. It also points to the ways in which many youths in the camp today actively resist the portrayal of themselves simply as victims. As one friend put it to me after the screening, “People like to remember how they felt at this time—there was a lot of hope in the camp then.”

The poor attendance at the film screening, as well as the conflict that ensued as to which history should be remembered at this event, is indicative of the way in which younger generations born and raised in the diaspora are finding it difficult to absorb these originary narratives as part of their own identity or as a frame for national belonging. This was something that I came to better appreciate through my friendships with second- and third-generation refugees. Ala’a, a teacher at one of the UNRWA schools in the camp, expressed the feeling of historical claustrophobia that the focus on a Palestine of the past engenders:

Although we are still living the results of the Nakba, my generation didn’t experience it, and I refuse to inherit it . . . When I think of the Nakba and how Palestine used to be, I don’t think of it as just some beautiful place where people sat under the trees eating fruit; I think of it as a normal life that I was not part of. When I hear elders who lived the Nakba talk about it, and the things they experienced, I sympathize with them, but sympathy changes. My memories are different from my father’s, and my problems are different from his also. It’s as if all we need to know is the slogan “Palestine is ours”—but to really feel that you are from a place you need to know it. I’ve learned about Palestine, but I know and love Lebanon—there’s a difference of experience. There is much about our history here that remains hidden and ignored—for instance, why did it take us so long to start a resistance here? We have to ask ourselves this. Why, even after the revolution [PLO] came here, did we fail to liberate Palestine?

This interview powerfully reflects the way in which younger generations are expected to miss keenly something that they themselves have not experienced losing. Ala’a’s

comments suggest that this highlighting of 1948 as a productive historical moment is provoking a sense of frustration among second- and third-generation refugees who have developed their own forms of rootedness and belonging in Lebanon. His comments intimate that the freighted heritage of the Nakba appears to be erasing—rather than bringing into focus—the concrete historical details of 1948. It is as if this fetishization of the national entity, as a “beautiful place in which people sat under trees eating fruit,” in which Palestine is signified metonymically through bucolic imagery, is producing a derivative and self-conscious sense of solidarity. Here again we sense the referential dissonance of a nationalist discourse out of joint with local realities, in which ruptures and inconsistencies are smoothed over. As Ala’a observes, this has entailed a troubling leveling and streamlining of Palestinian history in which other chapters of violence and loss in Lebanon are obscured or willfully “forgotten” because of their political sensitivity, or because they foreground the divisive ineptitude of the PLO.

On another occasion, while visiting an elderly friend, Umm Jamal, I spoke with her youngest son, Mahmud, who works in a factory about an hour outside Beirut that makes bread ovens. He had just returned from work and invited me to join him for a coffee while I waited for his mother to return. Having heard a little about the archival project from his mother, he asked about my research and then turned to me with an air of barely concealed frustration to ask, “What’s the point of your research?” As I tried to stumble into an answer, he cut me off:

What is going to come of this for us? Many foreigners like you come to the camp, and they do research—they ask us questions about the past, about the Nakba, who died, what we felt, about the massacre, about our sadness—and it’s like it’s a thrill for them. We cry and they profit from our tears, but things stay the same for us. The electricity is still shit, we have no rights and this kind of thing just makes us suffer more. For this reason I don’t think any research people like you do will make a difference. Okay, so it’s true that many people here don’t know the history of Palestine—I think that we should try to solve this through better education. But the problem is people don’t really care anymore—and they don’t have the time to care. All we do now is think about survival—this kills our desire to be a better people. We don’t have time to think about our culture or our history—we are dying in this struggle simply to exist . . . I believe that after two years there will be no more Palestinians here. I am taking an Australian passport [through a recent marriage to a Lebanese woman living there whom he met online] . . . so you see soon we will all be gone.

Like Ala’a, Mahmud expresses a concern about the voyeuristic way that past suffering in the community is being engaged, and how this focus on the past hides from view the present conditions that refugees face. The expectation that increased interest on the part of the international community will lead to the amelioration of their situation is being replaced by a perception that these encounters bring few benefits for the community.¹⁴ The “victim” status that much of the research in the camps has helped to create is having the troubling effect of making legal tender of the suffering associated with 1948, as well as the massacre in 1982, while devaluing more mundane and

everyday experiences of suffering linked to poverty and the discriminatory policies of the Lebanese government.

These angry interventions by Ala'a, Mahmud, and others forced me to reconsider the implications for younger generations of refugees of producing an archive in which remembrance and witnessing is framed in such exclusive terms. Not only does it necessarily create a hierarchy of admissible and inadmissible memory; it also assumes a set of criteria for what forms of suffering have the power to interpellate witnesses. What struck me most forcibly about their comments were the uncomfortable questions they raise about what I—as a privileged Westerner—was doing recording these traumatic pasts or trying to bring subaltern histories into view. Both Ala'a and Mahmud suggest that in Shatila people do not have the luxury to judge or blame. It is a simple matter of survival. If we probe the origins of the “thrill” that Mahmud speaks of, what do we find? He suggests that the very people who purport to be trying to alleviate their suffering—activists, scholars, researchers, NGO and aid workers—may also be the ones who are minting and circulating this currency of symbolic violence. The use of testimony as a means of mobilizing solidarity has created the troubling situation in which intimate and painful memories are authenticated by “making their interiority ever more present, as if experiences were commodities that were being advertised.”¹⁵ By documenting histories of violence and suffering in marginalized communities, are we, as we often claim, introducing the possibility of real change in people's lives? Or are we just easing our own consciences, indulging in what Luc Boltanski calls a “politics of pity”?¹⁶ Allen Feldman, in his analysis of the role violence plays in “theaters” of witnessing, argues that the validity of these acts depends as much on the violence of the signifier as the signified; it depends, in other words, on the processes by which we, as activists, scholars, and researchers, authenticate certain forms of historical memory or political claims-making and rank some forms of violence and suffering over others (i.e., through expert knowledge, truth-claiming procedures, and mass media).¹⁷

Farukh, a friend of Mahmud's who had been sitting silently, listening to our conversation and playing with Mahmud's niece, decided at this point to join in:

Let me tell you a story. When I was a child—after my father was killed during the war—I was able to go to a center in the camp that was created to provide for orphans. Every month we were given money, and once a year some representatives from the foreign organizations would come to visit the center. When this happened, there were people on the committee that would intentionally ask us not to put on our best clothes—because they thought that it would be better for them if we appeared poor. You could say they were begging off us . . . You know, ever since I was young, I wanted to be a poet—and I can realize this dream, not like Mahmud who wanted to be a doctor but is not permitted to practice here. I keep my power by going on. I have tried to focus on my education because I feel that I will get another nationality—I don't want to ignore my nationality as a Palestinian but I know that it is impossible for me to return to Jaffa and I don't want to go to the West Bank or Gaza, so why keep talking about this? I am sure that I can do many things if I get German citizenship.

Like Mahmud, Farukh's comments allude to the potential for change being generated by an increasingly heterogeneous community that is being left untapped by a communal solidarity that draws on invocations of a shared culture and past. Both Mahmud and Farukh are clearly invested in the lives that they hope are about to begin for them elsewhere. It is as if the idea of emigration serves as an alternative to the narrative of redemptive return which they have been brought up with. Ala'a's identity and aspirations are shaped as much—if not more—by daily communication via e-mail with a brother in Canada than with his family in Badawi. Simplified representations of refugee identity and aspiration, epitomized in slogans like “return” (*al-'Awda*), are reductive, erasing agency and diversity of opinion about what return would entail. While for first-generation refugees “return” means to a physical place that has been experienced and lost, Farukh's generation appears to understand it in more abstract terms—as a restoration of dignity and justice, the right to respect oneself and be respected.¹⁸ Remembrance and bearing witness, oriented as they are toward “truth-telling,” must accommodate these new political identities and conflicting viewpoints.

Conclusion

While much of the writing, research, and advocacy work in the camps in Lebanon continues to focus on how these communities relate to their past and to Palestine, few have explored how refugees imagine the future and what their hopes and aspirations might be. By foregrounding, for political reasons, the need to bear witness to the violent history of 1948, not only are such studies obscuring from view seemingly more mundane—though no less devastating—everyday forms of suffering in the present; they may be eliding the creative ways in which different generations of refugees are dealing with this traumatic past, their hopes for the future, and the new subject positions being created in relation to it. In thinking about the applicability of a truth and reconciliation model to furthering the cause of justice for Palestinians in Lebanon, it would seem necessary to involve the Lebanese in this process. Because refugees are typically viewed as the embodiment of unrecognized national claims, both in nationalist discourse and international diplomacy, their political and legal claims are almost always discussed with reference to Israel. And yet clearly these local histories of suffering in exile that form part of this longer history of dispossession and displacement—in which Palestinians have been both the victims and perpetrators of extreme violence—suggest that other actors also need to be brought into the process, notably the Lebanese government.

Although the phenomenon of internationally subsidized commemoration in the camps is viewed by many in the community as a troubling form of business, it also reveals the workings of a pragmatic agency on the part of refugees.¹⁹ The opposition to which I have been gesturing in the course of this discussion—between the reified, the codified, and the officially nationalist on the one hand, and the supple, the pragmatic, and the quotidian on the other—is a clarifying opposition, but it is not at every point a load-bearing one. To critique the content of official institutional commemorations of 1948 in the camp (in contradistinction both to private rituals of remembrance and to the pragmatic demands of everyday survival) is also to become aware of the critical role these very practices play in the securing of international funds and the

involvement of NGOs, in addition to the less formal but no less crucial bonds of solidarity and sympathy from outsiders, without which the economic and spiritual life of the camp would become even more impoverished. In other words, the *performance* of what I have critiqued as reified nationalist tropes might itself be understood as part of the supple, dexterously responsive grammar of everyday practice.

What is more problematic about this cottage industry of commemoration is the pressure that it brings to bear on generations born in exile. Refugees in Shatila do not seem to constitute a “mnemonic community,” either in the sense of being connected to Palestine and to one another through primordial attachments to territory and tradition, or through the increasingly remote agenda of nationalist politics. This raises a critical question: if second- and third-generation refugees are no longer primarily connected through affects (the transmission of traumatic memories), or through inherited attachments to ancestral villages, what model of community and “people” is needed? If we conceptualize Palestinian refugees in Lebanon not as an anomalous group out of place but as a community in its own right, how might we imagine this redefinition of the relationship between nation, people, and place so that these disjunctive trajectories of identity and belonging might be accommodated? More importantly, how do we acknowledge the impact of deterritorialization without renouncing legitimate territorial claims?²⁰ Given the exceptional position that Palestinian refugees occupy within the refugee regime, in which their status and rights as political subjects are legally defined in terms of a particular event—the 1948 expulsion—and not in terms of their current condition, questioning the coherence of nationalism, or pointing to a disaggregation of people and land, has far-reaching consequences. Merely to pose such questions about the way Palestinian nationalism is now a contested category, or what now constitutes collective belonging in this context, places one in an acute ethical quandary. Israeli policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians has often been described in terms of establishing “facts on the ground”; such “facts” can be military and strategic but also cultural and historical. The Palestinian refugee diaspora’s depth of attachment to the land of Palestine—and to the right to return—is an iconic centerpiece of this struggle, so the risk exists that bringing it into the light of scrutiny may be miscast as a concession. Yet this is necessary, since what has been under scrutiny in this discussion is as much the politics of solidarity as the politics of nationalist remembrance. To critique solidarity is not to erode it, but rather to strengthen and reaffirm it.

NOTES

Some of the ethnographic material for this article has appeared elsewhere. An earlier version was published in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod and Ahmad Sa’di (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). I also address the themes pursued here in my book *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

1. Edward W. Said, “Truth and Reconciliation,” *Al-Abram Weekly*, January 14–20, 1999.
2. While refugees are normally not permitted to organize demonstrations outside the camps, that year the department of internal security issued permits to camp representatives, enabling them to conduct right-of-return rallies throughout the country.

3. See Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010); Laleh Khalili, "Grassroots Commemorations: Remembering the Land in the Camps of Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no. 1 (2004): 6–22; and Julie Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

4. The recent 2011 commemoration of the Nakba in Lebanon is a case in point: the significance of the unprecedented rally of 50,000 Palestinian refugees at the Lebanese-Israeli border, demanding the right of return, which ended in the killing of ten protestors and the wounding of 130 others by Israeli fire, received almost no coverage in the international press.

5. See Mohammed Bamyeh, "Palestine: Listening to the Inaudible," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2003): 825–49; Nur Masalha, "Remembering the Palestinian Nakba: Commemoration, Oral History and Narratives of Memory," *Holy Land Studies* 7, no. 2 (2008): 123–56; Ilan Pappé, "Humanizing the Text: Israeli 'New History' and the Trajectory of the 1948 Historiography," *Radical History Review* 86 (spring 2003): 102–22; and Edward W. Said, "Memory, Inequality, and Power: Palestine and the Universality of Human Rights," *Alif* 24 (2004): 15–33.

6. See <http://www.nakba-archive.org>.

7. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

8. Not her real name. Where requested, or where I have felt that the interests of friends and informants might be adversely affected, I have used pseudonyms.

9. The "War of the Camps" (*Harb al-Mukhayamat*), when the Lebanese Shi'a militia, Amal, attacked and besieged the camps in Beirut and the south, lasted for three years (1985–88); during this time much of Shatila was razed.

10. This mass grave, which is said to hold between 800 and 1200 bodies, served as a garbage dump until 1999, when it was turned into a commemorative site by Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shi'a political party which controls the municipality of Ghoubeyri (where Shatila is located).

11. See Lori Allen, "Martyr Bodies in the Media: Human Rights, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Immediation in the Palestinian Intifada," *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 1 (2009): 161–80; and Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

12. Wendy Hesford, "Documenting Violations: Rhetorical Witnessing and the Spectacle of Distant Suffering," *Biography* 27, no. 1 (2004): 105.

13. Samera Esmeir regards the fragmentary quality of 1948 narratives itself as a form of witness: "Death generates present absence and nonexistence. It is something that lives on with its survivors . . . Incoherence, contradictions and absences should be understood as signifiers of something that is still present." Esmeir, "1948: Law, History, Memory," *Social Text* 21, no. 2 (2003): 45.

14. There is a sense—as Stevan Weine observes in his analysis of media coverage in Bosnia—that victims are being exposed to "an unwanted parody of genuine witnessing." Weine, *When History Is a Nightmare: Lives and Memories of Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 183.

15. Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience, the Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times," in *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 4.

16. Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

17. Feldman is one of a growing number of scholars who critique testimonial practice and literature, arguing that texts that purport to represent the experience of Third World subalterns must be situated in a global marketplace where disempowered communities come into discourse as already exploited and politically marked, and that such texts serve only as pretexts for the further accumulation of knowledge and power. Feldman, "Memory Theaters, Virtual Witnessing and the Trauma-Aesthetic," *Biography* 27, no. 1 (2004): 163–202. See also Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Enquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Peter Redfield, "A Less Modest Witness: Collective Advocacy and Motivated Truth in a Medical Humanitarian Movement," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (2006): 3–26.

18. The shifting attitude of Farukh's generation toward "return" resonates with the controversial claims made by Sari Hanafi about its diminishing significance in refugee communities. See Hanafi, "Rethinking the Palestinians Abroad as Diaspora: The Relationships between the Diaspora and the Palestinian Territories," in *Homelands and Diasporas: Holy Lands and Other Places*, ed. André Levy and Alex Weingrod (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 97–122; and "Opening the Debate on the Right of Return," *Middle East Report*, no. 222 (March 2002): 2–7.

19. In the last five years this criticism of the instrumentalization of the cause by NGOs based in the camps has become increasingly vocal, gaining notoriety through the lyrics of Katibeh Khamseh (Fifth Battalion), a rap group from Bourj al-Barajneh camp and Harat Hurayk: "The associations / They have the money of the nation / The associations / They take away what they give / But people are dying." Cited in Nicholas Puig, "'Welcome to the Camps': The Emergence of Palestinian Rap in Lebanon, a New Social and Political Song," in *Manifestations of Identity: The Lived Reality of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, ed. Muhammad Ali Khalidi (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2010), 113.

20. See Beshara Doumani, "Palestine versus the Palestinians? The Iron Laws and Ironies of a People Denied," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 4 (2007): 49–64; and Dan Rabinowitz, "Post-national Palestine/Israel? Globalization, Diaspora, Transnationalism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 757–72.