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MAKING HOLES IN THE WALL: PALESTINIAN ORAL TESTIMONIES

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The appropriation of Palestinian land and control over the movement of Palestinians is a daily reality. Indeed not a day passes without a Palestinian home full of memories and memorabilia being destroyed by Israeli bulldozers, or without some olive grove, patiently tended and referred to by name across generations, being cleared out for the building of Jewish-only roads and settlements.

Beshara Doumani¹

History is messy for those who must live it.

M-R. Trouillot²

Introduction

In this paper I ask what oral history work can do to counter the daily assault on Palestinian bodies, homes, landscapes, and the social ties that still with difficulty hold their splintered society together? Until very recently, the Palestinian narrative of displacement remained unrecorded because of a combination of interacting factors: the power of the Israeli narrative of return and redemption for Western publics; bias on the part of Western media; the dispersion of Palestinian cultural institutions and intellectuals; neglect by the post-1948 Resistance movement of the need for a people's history, compounded by continual crisis and unsettlement. These external and internal factors were undoubtedly connected. The deafness of Western powers to Palestinian claims of restoration, already

clear in the truce negotiations of 1949 and in the rapid institution of humanitarian aid to the “refugees” by the United Nations, set a pattern of Palestinian/Arab response that prioritized appeals to international decision-makers. Scepticism that oral histories could penetrate the wall of the dominant narrative was implicit in this strategy. In opposition to a strong state in control of the apparatus of history production, Palestinians might well wonder “what value [...] does the halting oral testimony by the defeated have?”³

It is in this global and local context that we can interpret the metaphor used by a woman from Galilee to explain her silence about a traumatizing Nakba experience: “How can those without lips whistle?”⁴ The metaphor “without lips” embraces a range of losses: national representation, international recognition, audience, speech, humanity. Scholars from the field of

1 Beshara Doumani, “Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians: the patrimony of Ihsan Nimr”, *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 36, 2009, p. 4.

2 M-R. Trouillot, *Power and the production of history*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994, p. 110.

3 Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine 1948, and the claims of memory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 12.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

trauma and memory assert that “without the empathetic listener who acts as witness, the story is annihilated”.⁵ The narrative of the Nakba (‘catastrophe’) has not found “sympathy or acknowledgement” among the powerful of the world. Not surprisingly, then, silence or violence have been frequent alternatives to speech for Palestinians.

Silenced in the realm of international politics, Palestinians “told their stories over and over, to their children and to each other”, as well as expressing loss through poetry, fiction and art.⁶ While the pain of loss is ultimately inexpressible in words,⁷ homes and lives in pre-1948 Palestine have become the topos of an intense activity of memorialization, manifested in websites, memoirs, and oral history work, an effort at once individual and collective, entirely disconnected from the national movement leadership. Doumani calls this phenomenon an archive fever arising from the acceleration of destruction as well as “a deep and widespread pessimism about the future”. He criticizes the treasure-hunt aspect of attempting to salvage the past and calls for more emphasis on the “*relationship between persons and texts* that can make archives speak”.⁸ I interpret this in oral history terms as an effort to re-embed what the Palestinian people wants to know about the past in the present. While this paper gives an account of an oral history project carried out mainly among women in parts of historic Palestine,⁹ it ends by questioning oral history’s claim to give voice to the marginalized, and asks: is this enough?

The ‘Voices’ project

In 1998, I travelled from Lebanon to Gaza, in the first stage of a recording project focused on Palestinian women’s stories of displacement. The

project was a continuation of earlier recordings with refugee women in Lebanon, and aimed at forming a national women’s archive. I focused on women because they are always excluded from histories of national struggle, and because in Western eyes they exist only as victims of Arab patriarchy. Before beginning the recordings, I submitted my project to a group of women scholars and activists at Birzeit University. They endorsed my intention to seek out relatively unknown speakers, and suggested that I include some men for purposes of comparison. They also connected me to movement women in outlying areas to help me find speakers. Though choosing speakers without knowing their precise position in local communities comes perilously close to ‘airport sociology’, I had little choice since the time I could spend away from home was limited.

In retrospect my plan to cover the four regions into which historic Palestine has been carved (Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Israel/1948 Palestine) appears over-ambitious for a single researcher. Perhaps my plan was coloured by a traveller’s desire to see landscapes that were still, fifty years after the Nakba, the focus of longing and national self-identification for exiles in Lebanon. It was this desire combined with opportunistic sampling that transformed my project from nationalist archive into a travel book with voices. Travel writing about the Holy Land has traditionally presented Palestinians as illustrations of the archaic, the non-modern and unproductive.¹⁰ Through their voices, they would emerge as agents, producers and reproducers of their society.

In line with oral history’s focus on subjectivity, I was concerned to record how women had lived displacement, and how they recalled it, so I searched for speakers who had been displaced in one way or another, or were threatened with displacement. Such sampling may seem arbitrary but it does not raise serious problems of repres-

5 Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history*, New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 68.

6 Sa’di and Abu-Lughod.

7 David Eng and David Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: the politics of mourning*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003, p. 9.

8 Doumani, “Archiving”, pp. 4-6.

9 Palestine’s boundaries were redrawn by the Ottomans and the British. By ‘historic Palestine’ I mean roughly the territory at the end of the British mandate.

10 Issam Nassar, “In their image: Jerusalem in nineteenth-Century English travel narratives”, *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, 19, 2003.

entation since, through the 1948 Nakba, all Palestinians have experienced displacement of one kind or another, whether through expulsion across national frontiers, imprisonment, demolition of the home (or living with the threat of demolition), secondary and tertiary displacement, deportation, or alienation of their environment.¹¹ Using displacement as theme also extended the temporality of the Nakba, for example by highlighting the expulsion of Palestinians from Kuwait after the First Gulf War (an event involving many Palestinians from Gaza). The recordings can thus be classified as topical life stories around experiences of displacement.

In all four regions, the speakers were mainly wives or widows of workers or of minor employees, or themselves filled such positions. Almost all belonged to the low-income class range, though the younger, more educated speakers tended to enjoy the relative security of salaried employment.¹² I realized too late that a bias towards older speakers was built into the project through its focus on direct sufferers of displacement, since this excluded indirect sufferers, for example children of parents who had been expelled, or of prisoners.¹³ Most of those who had been expelled into Gaza or the West Bank belonged to the oldest group, while those whose homes had been demolished, or were threatened with demolition, were mostly in their 40s or 50s.¹⁴ Among the younger speakers all but one had been militants or prisoners. I included two speakers not

of Palestinian birth in my sample, on the basis that “Palestinian” is a chosen political affiliation rather than a matter of paternal descent.

The search for ordinary speakers was problematic in several ways. It led almost automatically to the camps (except in Israel), leaving low-income urban and rural people outside camps unacknowledged. Since the diaspora makes Palestinian communities relatively unknown to each other, I was unaware when I recorded Hajji Um Salah Yassini that she was well-known in Jerusalem as survivor of the Deir Yassin massacre. In any case, the forceful specificity of individual speakers exposed the emptiness of “ordinary” or “non-elite” as social categories.

My interviewing method was to open up the topic of displacement with each speaker, and encourage stories of personal experience to emerge. These developed into continuous personal narratives that wove material of many kinds—family relationships, children, work, sickness and health, political conditions, fears, expectations—into stories dominated by actual or feared displacement. Most stories were clearly propelled by the desire to testify to ongoing national oppression, yet they were far from being only that. On the contrary, they were individual and spontaneous, interwoven with social critique, specific familial and local memories, complaints against the national leadership, ironic anecdote, and concrete details of oppression.

I began recording in the spring of 1988 and ended it in July 2000, just a few months before the al-Aqsa Intifada broke out. By that time I had recorded 85 sessions, some of which included more than one speaker. Of these 22 were carried out in Gaza, 24 in the West Bank, ten in Jerusalem, and 29 in Israel/1948 Palestine. The decision to create an eBook containing all the testimonies was the result of a fortuitous meeting with Barrie Ludvigsen, creator of the Al-Mashriq website. An eBook offered important advantages over print publishing, mainly in making the voices audible in their original Arabic. Problems such as contracts, paper costs, dis-

11 Around 70% of Palestinians were classified as ‘refugees’ in 1948 through cross-border expulsion. Around 29.4% of Palestinians remaining in Israel were permanently displaced from their homes. But wherever they were, 1948 made Palestinians stateless and under alien rule.

12 Occupations included social work, teaching, home production, and domestic cleaning, but there was also a lawyer, a businesswoman, and several NGO employees. Among the eight men two were unemployed teachers; one a journalist, one an UNRWA employee, one a bedouin elder (unemployed), one an ex-prisoner (unemployed).

13 Among the 85 speakers a majority were adult or already born in 1948; the second largest number were those born between 1948 and 1967. Only four of the speakers were born after 1967, thus aged 30 years or less at the time of recording.

14 Home demolition threatens Palestinian citizens of Israel as much as those in the Occupied Territories.

tribution, and the brevity of shelf life would be removed. There would be no limits on visual material; and with the increasing democratization of cyberspace there was hope that the original speakers could visit the site.¹⁵

Conclusion: Making oral history work for marginal communities

If they persist, even weak voices can pierce walls and subvert the legitimacy of powerful narratives. Memory work of many kinds –commemorations, marches, websites, oral history recordings–brings together Palestinians in their scattered communities,¹⁶ and these manifestations are de-centralized and local, they are sustained by an increasingly desperate need for recognition and restitution. “Memory is one of the few weapons available to those against whom the tide of history has turned. It can slip in to rattle the wall”.¹⁷ People separated from their environment by force, whether through slavery or settler colonialism, inevitably use memory as basis for resistance.

The ‘Voices’ project may be placed within the unruly line of Palestinian memory work. Yet self-reflection suggests problems that relate to central questions in oral history. Among them is the question of how can we register experiences such as loss of country or loved ones that words cannot convey or deform? The displacement stories I recorded tell little of how displacement felt at the time of its occurrence, or of how speakers survived and resisted it. The monopoly of speech as medium of expression in oral history deflects attention from culturally shaped ways people work through loss and disruption, for example through “the efficacy of small acts”.¹⁸ The anthropological method of

participant observation may be a necessary complement to oral history here.

While mobilizing the victims of displacement as ‘speakers’, the project also paradoxically passivized them through imposing on them the role of witness, and pre-selecting their topic. I assumed history’s value to them instead of problematizing it. By adopting a nation-state framework an archival project exercises a symbolic force vis-à-vis the speakers, precluding real self-expression. Looking back, I reflect that the speaker whom I stumbled upon accidentally in Shati’ camp, who told a long tale of abandoned homes, alien places, childbirths, accidents and sicknesses, was perhaps telling me of the failure of the national movement, and of the insertion of my project within it. Research work dominated by the idea of the national risks reinforcing class inequalities, or at least of not confronting them.

A third point of interrogation concerns how an oral history project can benefit the communities that provide data? Oral history has assumed that by ‘giving voice’ to marginal groups it could write them into history, but it has not theorized what kind of history marginal groups need, not how recovering their own history can make a difference to their marginality. In rare cases marginal communities have been incorporated into oral history research as users and beneficiaries, for example in the Angledool project, which aimed at making their history available to an uprooted segment of the Murri people of North-West Australia in the form of a CD-Rom (Flick and Goodall 1998).¹⁹ Community members were invited to help “indigenize” the CD-Rom by selecting materials and adapting navigation for mainly illiterate users. Though some of the historical archives used were “indigenous”, e.g. songs, traditional narratives, and family photos, others were colonial, e.g. government records and missionary papers. Thus the degree to which the history used for the CD was authentic Murri history is questionable. And though the research

15 The e-Book’s first edition was launched in June 2007 under the title ‘Voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement’: <http://almashriq.hiof.no/voices/>

16 Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and martyrs of Palestine: the politics of national commemoration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 6-7.

17 Sa’di and Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba*, p. 6.

18 Linda Tabar, “Memory, agency, counter-narrative: testimonies from Jenin Refugee Camp”, *Critical Arts: a Journal of South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, special issue on “Cultural Studies in/and the Middle East”, 12, 2, 2007, p.15.

19 Karen Flick and Heather Goodall, “Angledool stories: Aboriginal history in hipermedia”, in *Oral History Reader*, ed. by Rob Perks, London, Routledge, 1998.

report tells how the CD-Rom was made, it does not tell how it was used by the Murri community or what its after-effects were over time.

The most serious limitation of both the giving-voice and the community-as-beneficiary approaches is that crucial decisions lie outside the research community. Its members are positioned as informants, respondents, subordinate partners, possibly beneficiaries. To deepen its radical potential, oral history work needs to find ways to engage more profoundly with marginal communities through inviting participation in the initial choice of research topic, even though this choice is bound to be discordant and contentious. Indeed it is exactly through the contentiousness of topic choice that researchers could locate different ideological perspectives on the value of history to marginal communities. It is topic choice and methodologies that link research to Western-produced theory and world-views that profoundly discriminate between the West and the rest. The imperatives of indigenous research are “the survival of peoples, cultures and languages; the struggle to become self-determining; the need to take back control of our destinies”.²⁰ Finding ways to “indigenize” research and to feed results back into the community as tools for future struggle and self-determined development, would give oral history a role in de-colonization practice that would justify its claims to radicalism.



²⁰ Linda Tuhawi Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*, London, Zed Books, 1999, p. 39.