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Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity

INTRODUCTION

THE 1948 WAR RESULTED IN *Al-Nakbah*—the immense catastrophe—for the Palestinian people and changed their life beyond recognition. First and foremost, Al-Nakbah engendered the dispersion [*Shatat*]. Between 77 and 83 percent of the Palestinians who lived in the part of Palestine that later became Israel—i.e., 78 percent of Mandatory Palestine—were turned into refugees. Thus, for Palestinians, Al-Nakbah represents, among many other things, the loss of the homeland, the disintegration of society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of a hasty process of destruction of their culture. Rabinowitz has observed that Palestinian identity hinges on the experience of dispossession and exile [*Ghurba*] as well as mis-recognition international of Palestinian rights and suffering.¹ In a similar vein, Elias Sanbar, a Palestinian historian, essayist, and novelist, argues that:

The contemporary history of the Palestinians turns on a key date: 1948. That year, a country and its people disappeared from maps and dictionaries . . . 'The Palestinian people does not exist', said the new masters, and henceforth the Palestinians would be referred to by general, conveniently vague terms, as either 'refugees', or in the case of a small minority that had managed to escape the generalized expulsion, 'Israeli Arabs'. A long absence was beginning.²

The absence and the disappearance to which Sanbar refers was not absolute, however. It has been possible to partly reconstruct the past and regain some of its representations because enough material and fertile memories managed to elude the shattering experience of the society's

disintegration and the stifling international silence. Referring to such historical experiences, Kracauer, the German cultural scholar, writes: "There are always holes in the wall for us to evade and the improbable to slip in."³ Of the surviving material that somehow evaded destruction is the rich collection of photographs that composes the "hard data" about the Palestinians and their society in a number of photography books that will be discussed later.

Following the pioneering works of Anderson,⁴ Said,⁵ and Hobsbawm and Ranger,⁶ social scientists have begun locating identity in the inter-subjective realm, where belonging to an imagined community is constantly reproduced and bolstered through invented traditions, commemorations, the construction of national museums, and the creation of national cultural canons and national heroes.⁷ In the following, I suggest that, in addition to these top-down processes, which aim at the nationalization of the mass of a population, there are bottom-up processes, which are generated through localized experiences and sentiments. Dispersed and lacking national institutions, archives, and documents, Palestinians have had to resort to different venues of identity reconstruction. Similar to various Third World peoples who have experienced centuries of colonization, the question of identity among Palestinians has become intimately connected to the "restoration of the individual's subjectivity"⁸; that is, a national narrative has been constructed through life stories, documents, and viewpoints of individuals. Kracauer argues that history, similar to the reality it aspires to represent, is a configuration of segments.⁹ In line with that, Al-Nakbah is, in the final analysis, about the tragic fate of the men and women whose lives had been shattered, and about their descendants, who continue to suffer its consequences. Random life stories told by individuals, however, cannot create a national narrative with which a whole community can identify unless these stories are located within what Pierre Nora has termed "sites of memory." For Nora,

. . . the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de memoire* is to stop the time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial. . . all of this in order to capture the fewest of signs, it is also clear that *lieux de memoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.¹⁰

Nora's concept of "site of memory" is, I believe, an indispensable tool for understanding the way in which Al-Nakbah has become a constitutive

element of Palestinian identity. Al-Nakbah is a Palestinian event and a site of Palestinian collective memory; it connects all Palestinians to a specific point in time that has become for them an “eternal present.” Given the Palestinians reality, as discussed above, major efforts have been made to reconstruct and preserve the past. These efforts have yielded a number of books, mainly of photographs, which attempt to recreate or conjure up the feeling of how Palestine was before Al-Nakbah. These works will be described and discussed in the following section. Section two will analyze Al-Nakbah as a site of beginning where contradictions, oppositions, and juxtapositions have emerged. An analysis of these processes and their impact on Palestinian collective identity will be unfolded in the third section. This will be followed by a discussion of Palestinian encounters with Al-Nakbah through visits to their former houses—the sites where Al-Nakbah took place, and with which it will always be connected. The fifth section attempts to locate the concepts of identity, nationalism, and site of collective memory within the normal thrust of Palestinians’ lives.

A DEFINITION OF THE MEMORY SITE: PEOPLE AND PLACE

Even 54 years after Al-Nakbah, the literature dealing with this catastrophic transformation rarely goes beyond the detailing of events or the description of places, social groups, political activities, and military operations. In other words, descriptions and affirmations of the pre-Al-Nakbah past have become the focal points for Palestinian, and many non-Palestinian, scholars. In order to exemplify this type of intellectual production, I will describe a few major works.

The first is a photography book called, *Jaffa the Perfume of a City*,¹¹ which represents an extraordinary documentation of Jaffa’s social, economic, and political history, as well as the city’s unfulfilled planning initiatives. The book is composed almost entirely of personal testimonies. The first is by Shafeq al-Hout,¹² whose narrative is a breathtaking journey through Jaffa’s neighborhoods as they were seen during the late 1940s from a passenger’s window in a public bus that crossed the city’s various neighborhoods. Al-Hout serves as a local guide and supplies the tourist—that is, the reader, who is a stranger, to the described scene—with a wealth of information about the history of the city, its social make-up, its personalities, and the historic events that took place in the city’s various sections. Thus, at one street curb:

The bus crosses the square and turns to the left to enter the Salahi Market, another of Jaffa's commercial streets. It is the meeting place of the orange traders. All of the traders are middlemen who had considerable information on every orange grove in Palestine.

All the orange traders in Jaffa used to begin their day with a cup of coffee in Daoud Café, which had a wide yard and shady trees. Some would go further and have a plate of *foole* [fava beans] in Al-Kahlah restaurant. At that table you would find traders such as Said Baydass, Muhammad Abed Al-Rahim . . .

At the end of this market one finds the market of the vegetables. Most of the businessmen here are of village origins.¹³

The eight pictures placed throughout the text give added life and credibility to the narrative: an orchard on Jaffa's east end, the train station, the square of the grand mosque, a group of Jaffa youth dressed in elegant cloths, and so on

Jaffa's last mayor, Dr. Yousef Haikal, writes the second account.¹⁴ Haikal, who received his Ph.D. from the University of London and worked in the judicial system, was mayor of Jaffa during the critical period of 1945–1949. In his testimony, he gives a summation of his activities and accomplishments, which included the building of many public utilities: roads, sewerage systems in the new neighborhoods, etc. Yet the jewel in his crown was the planning project for Jaffa. In order to accomplish the implementation of a modern city plan, he met Egypt's Prime Minister and asked him to assign the project to two senior Egyptian planners: Ottman Refqi Rostum, the senior engineer in Egypt's archeology department, and 'Ali al-Melegi, the head of Egypt's town planning body. They were asked to prepare two plans, one for the rehabilitation of the old neighborhood, while the other was to be a comprehensive plan for the city's spatial expansion. Mr. Haikal then details his attempts to convince Mandatory Government officials in Palestine to change their pro-Zionist policy. Finally, he gives a detailed account of his wartime activities: his meetings with Arab leaders to secure arms shipments, and after the collapse of the front, his unsuccessful attempt to sign a treaty with the Jewish leaders, through the British, which would have converted Jaffa into a non-fighting city. This testimony, like the others, is interspersed with photographs and photocopies of documents.

What motivated Mr. Haikal to write an essay that could have been part of a reelection campaign? The answer, I believe, is two-fold. First, there is an attempt to reconstruct life in Jaffa as it was, and second, since Al-Nakbah, leaders like Haikal have attempted to demonstrate that they

did their utmost to avert what was to become the immense disaster. There are 175 photos of Jaffa and the life of its inhabitants placed throughout the book. The photos include all kinds of Jaffians: workers, students, young, old, women, men, dignitaries and humble people in various sites: workshops, factories, cafes, schools, local clubs, the port, playgrounds, festivities, the local al-Nabi Roubin festival, demonstrations, tours on the Ogea River, etc. There are also photographs of welcoming ceremonies of famous guests. In addition to Palestinian political leaders, various Arab leaders, including the Emir of Trans-Jordan, the Consuls of various Arab countries, as well as Arab cultural figures, most notably Egypt's number one music composer, Muhammad Abed Al-Wahab, visited Jaffa. The living spirit behind this project, Hisham Sharabi sums up the main theme of the book:

This expression [home] gains its real meaning only through direct experience, like the painful experience of the people of Jaffa and all those who left Palestinian towns and villages. For them the longing for the homeland, the house of the forefathers . . . has become part of their inner life that cannot be taken away . . . The person owns his homeland only when he loses it.¹⁵

Other works of this kind include Sara Graham-Brown's *The Palestinians and Their Society 1880–1946*,¹⁶ and Walid Khalidi's *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians 1876–1948*.¹⁷ Khalidi arranges his book in chronological order. Each section begins with an introduction that provides the reader with essential facts concerning the period. Khalidi then includes a wealth of pictures of Palestinians and their lives. Similar to Graham-Brown, he also includes pictures of both Jews and Britons among the book's 345 pictures. In these two books, as well as in others, the use of photography proves to be a powerful tool in rendering the past, for it gives specific glimpses, a timeless presence, and conjures up images of the wider social and cultural milieu of the time. Beyond that, I think that Khalidi's book, by the nature of its material, its style, and the source of the photographs included, tells a great deal about these kinds of books, as well as about the significance of 1948 as a site of Palestinian memory.

Firstly, the title of the book sums up both its content and the underlying premise of its form of representation. *Before Their Diaspora* is about a vanishing past—something that no longer exists—about people and places that have undergone dramatic changes in such a way that the people (those who appear in the photographs and their descendants) would never inhabit the same places or even live in the same area. The purpose of the book is to achieve what photographs can provide of visual proof: evidence that

certifies the existence of a society—one whose very existence and identity have been denied by its antagonists. Referring to what can be gleaned from a photograph, Roland Barthes writes: “The Photograph does not necessarily say what is no longer,” rather “. . . for certain what has been.”¹⁸

Secondly, *Before Their Diaspora* is about the reclamation of an existence that has been shattered and the presentation of a social fabric that has been destroyed. The photographs included in the book were left behind during the war in the studio of the photographer Khalil Raad, who had documented political events and daily life in Palestine for almost fifty years. They were recovered thanks to the daring intervention of Robert Mouchabek, a young Italian man who put his life in danger by undertaking several rescue missions to retrieve the films, which had been left in Raad’s studio.¹⁹ The history of the photographs—as representational objects—epitomize the history of the society they represent: the flux of social life and destruction and reclamation.

Thirdly, the book conveys the undifferentiated social life that has followed Al-Nakbah, where the lines that separate the public and private spheres became blurred. The private sphere is now governed by the collective fate of the Palestinians, an infiltration that has made possible the exhibition in photography books of many photographs intended for private remembrance. Moreover, it has endowed private photographs with a representational status in relation to Palestinian society as a whole. The public and collective roles of these photographs were neither intended nor foreseen when they were taken. Walter Benjamin argues that, due to “optical unconsciousness,” photographs include images and meanings that were neither perceived nor intended by the photographer.²⁰ I think that the effect of this unintentional aspect is wider than the content of the photograph, since it also relates to the photograph’s future uses.

The main goal of these books is, in a nutshell, to present Palestinian life as it was before al-Nakbah. These books are not, however, works of history. Edward Said has rightly commented²¹ that, before *The Question of Palestine*,²² there were no histories of Palestine written by Palestinians. These are books of remembrance. They aim to render the past as it was lived and experienced. Moreover, they attempt to construct a purity for the described experiences and to give them a timeless presence so that they can serve as sites for Palestinian collective memory.

THE CHASM

As I have already mentioned, Al-Nakbah led first and foremost to the dispersion of the Palestinian people and to the loss of their homeland. Almost every Palestinian has, in one way or another, been affected by the immense catastrophe. In addition, Al-Nakbah led to the emergence of two categories of Palestinians: the Palestinians of the inside [*Felistenio al-Dakhil*] and the Refugees [*Felistenio al-Shatat*, or *al-Kharij*], as they are referred to in the national discourse. This kind of distinction is characteristic of Palestinian culture, which has traditionally differentiated between two opposite realms and two different realities: the inside and the outside. The architecture of a traditional Arab house gives expression to this opposition. A wall usually surrounds the house, and, in the middle, there is a gate through which one enters, not only physically but psychically as well. After entering the gate, one's state of mind, attitudes, and behaviors alter. The inside is the place of intimacy, closeness, privacy, warmth, informality, and happiness. Outside, different rules govern and an entirely different attitude is necessary. The outside is the dispassionate world of competition and struggle, the place where the public gaze is always present, scrutinizing, inspecting intervening, and frequently punishing.

Al-Nakbah is the moment when a part of the Palestinian people became homeless; after which they could never feel at home. These Palestinians have been deprived of everything home signifies and provides. The history of the Palestinian refugees under Arab governments and Israeli rule, as citizens or under the military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, has been one of constant harassment and oppression, and has aggravated the Palestinians' sense of homelessness. The absence of home became a constant source of misery. In light of this, the house key has become the last symbol of home, a reminder that, before Al-Nakbah, Palestinians had a different life—a life where the home stood at its center as a haven to which one could return. The house key is also a symbol for the return—the return not only to the house that was left behind but also a return to normality, to a life filled with dignity and warmth. Thus the key has become a material symbol for the refugees' state of mind. It is also the last legacy that a father bequeaths to his sons, as in the following case:

When A.Z's father was dying, he called his children . . . into his room for a last family gathering. A frail, very old man from Haifa, he had spent his last thirty-four years in a state of agitated disbelief at the loss of his house



Said Al-Nahri's cartoon of an elderly Palestinian waiting by the bus sign that reads "the return" (*al-Awada*). His destination tag on his suitcase reads, "Palestine" (*Filastin*).

and property. Now he murmured to his children the final faltering words of a penniless, helpless patriarch. "Hold on to the key and the deed," he told them . . .²³

Even those who have consciously attempted to minimize the effect of the pre-Al-Nakbah past on their lives and the lives of their children have found it difficult to do so. The experience of Edward Said's father exemplifies this group of Palestinians:

In the end the past owns us. My father spent his life trying to escape these objects [photographs, dresses, objects severed from their original locate, the rituals of speech and custom, etc.] Little of it remained with him except a fragmentary story or two, an odd coin or medal, one photograph of his father on horseback, and two small rugs. . . . But as he grew older, he reverted to old Jerusalemite expressions that I did not understand, never having heard them during the years of my youth.²⁴

In the absence of a home, a private house at the individual level and the homeland at the collective level, a rootless life of wandering prevails. Mahmoud Darwish, the national poet of Palestine, renders these feelings as follows:

My homeland is a suitcase.
 And my suitcase is my homeland.
 But . . . there is neither a terminal nor a wall . . .
 My homeland is a suitcase
 I open it in the nights as a bed
 And sleep in it,
 I make love with women in it
 And bury in it my beloved ones
 Accept it as a destiny
 And die in it . . .²⁵

Edward Said associates homelessness with a deep sense of insecurity, which finds expression in his nervous habit of over-packing²⁶ for even short trips. Homelessness has thus become part of the consciousness of exiled Palestinians.

Even when Palestinian refugees have been treated fairly, and this has been the exceptional case, most are convinced that feeling at home in a foreign land represents a betrayal. Expressing this sentiment, Mahmoud Darwish writes: “The wheat is bitter in the fields of the others, and the water is salty . . .”²⁷ Moreover, every warm feeling almost automatically reminds Palestinians of their homeland and its houses, fields, etc., as in the case of Abu-Quaise, one of the protagonists in Ghassan Kanafani’s novel *Men in the Sun*.²⁸ This story, which belongs to the genre of immigrant literature, underscores the contrast between pre- and post-Al-Nakbah, and the dreadful fate of the refugees.²⁹ Abu-Quaise was in a provincial city in southern Iraq. He had a feeling of suffocation from the dust, heat, sweat, and the bargaining with local guides, who could smuggle him to Kuwait where he could make his living. Exhausted from all of that, he tried to get some rest by laying on the wet sand of Shat Al-Arab. As he began to enjoy the intimate feeling of his heart beats against the wet surface, his thoughts took him fifteen years back to his village and the family field. His happy daydream—of being a farmer who realizes that the season of the plow is approaching—was rudely ended, however, by the sudden awareness of his reality as a lonely destitute refugee.³⁰ These contrasts came to highlight his tragic death shortly after that, along with two other fellow illegal Palestinian immigrants in a border crossing not far from Shat Al-Arab.

Although Palestinians who stayed behind remained at home in some sense, they found that their whole existence had been radically altered. During the first few years, they suffered from existential anxiety—they were insecure about their immediate future and uncertain about the whereabouts of their relatives and loved ones. With the passage of time, and particularly since the early 1960s, their future has seemed more secure, but their yearnings have only increased. Only after the 1967 War have Palestinian citizens of Israel been able to meet some of their relatives.

Furthermore, Al-Nakbah is associated with a rapid de-Arabization of the country. This process has included the destruction of Palestinian villages. About 418 villages were erased,³¹ and out of twelve Palestinian or mixed towns, a Palestinian population continued to exist in only seven. This swift transformation of the physical and cultural environment was accompanied, at the symbolic level, by the changing of the names of streets, neighborhoods, cities, and regions. Arabic names were replaced by Zionist, Jewish, or European names. This renaming continues to convey to the Palestinians the message that the country has seen only two historical periods which attest to its “true” nature: the ancient Jewish past, and the period that began with the creation of Israel. What happened in between is treated as an aberration from the “natural” flow of the country’s history.³² In his article entitled “The Transformation and De-Signification of Palestine’s Cultural Landscape,” Falah writes:

In this process of cultural landscape transformation, one party systematically attempted to eliminate the other’s attachment to their habitat. Places that were the loci for Palestinian culture and national identity, the vessels of a collective memory of the region’s palimpsest-like cultural landscape, were obliterated in acts of de-signification.³³

For Palestinians, this entails an estrangement from their physical and symbolic environment and landscape. Only memory has been able to save them from alienation and self-estrangement. Thus, the books of memory described earlier gain significance because they aim to preserve some kind of pure or intact past.

One of the major and tragic changes that occurred after Al-Nakbah and as a result of it was the confiscation of Palestinian-owned land by the Israeli State. The land, which had for centuries been considered by Palestinians to be a major source of wealth, influence, status, and dignity, was transferred to Jewish ownership and use. By the early 1980s, according to Abu-Kishk’s account, the State had already confiscated over 70 percent of

land owned by Palestinian citizens of Israel.³⁴ Many Palestinian intellectuals have articulated the apprehension of Palestinians regarding the State's policy of expropriating land; This was vividly expressed in Darwish's poem "Identity Card," when the policy of confiscation was forcefully underway:

Record!
 I am an Arab
 You have stolen the orchards of my ancestors
 And the land which I cultivated
 Along with my children
 And you left nothing for us
 Except for these rocks . . .
 So will the State take them [also]
 As it has been said?! . . .³⁵

Palestinians, particularly those of the inside, have also witnessed the appropriation of their culture. Since 1948, and especially since the mid-1970s, there has been an attempt to establish a native Israeli culture that is neither European nor Oriental; i.e., an authentic non-exilic culture. This project has progressed through the expropriation of many aspects of Palestinian culture.³⁶ Traditional Middle-Eastern foods such as hummus, falafel, tabouleh, koubbeh, etc., have been co-opted from Palestinian cuisine and are often presented as typically Israeli. Local herbs that Palestinians use for cooking and healing, like Za'tar, have also become part of an Israeli "nativist" approach. Moreover, in a recent development, graves—mostly of Palestinians or Arabs—have been adopted by various Jewish populist religious groups as "Saints' graves" or "*Kivve Zadekim*." Palestinian culture has thus become a pool from which Israelis pick and choose in order to build an "authentic" Israeli culture.

In sum, Al-Nakbah was the moment in history when the Palestinians' world order, which had been considered part of the "laws of nature," was violently and dramatically altered: their legal rights as having Personae—that is, as being legal subjects—were greatly diminished or obliterated altogether; their cultural and physical environment underwent a dramatic transformation; and their existence as a national community ceased to be taken for granted.

The immense catastrophe thus imposed itself as the major site of Palestinian collective memory. It is the starting point for a plurality of experiences which can be grouped together under the rubric, "The Conse-

quences of Al-Nakbah.” In addition to the destruction of an entire society, Al-Nakbah represents an unbridgeable break in the time, place, and consciousness of Palestinians.

AL-NAKBAH: TIME, PLACE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The Palestinians thus began to use Al-Nakbah as a temporal reference point. They would say, for instance, that an event took place two years after, or one year before, Al-Nakbah. Moreover, demographic cohorts are constructed according to it. Thus, the generation that endured the 1948 War is called the generation of Al-Nakbah. Those who were born after it are referred to as the post-Al-Nakbah generation. This use of Al-Nakbah as a point of beginning also gives various phenomenon different, even contradictory, meanings. The Al-Nakbah generation, for example, possesses knowledge regarding what happened; they were there, they lived in Palestine as it was, and they bear the memory; however, this generation is often accused of not doing enough to defend Palestine. For Palestinian leaders of the time, therefore, it is still important to explain and justify their wartime behavior. The post Al-Nakbah generation can only imagine what happened, or make short visits to different sites in order to imagine how things used to be.

Al-Nakbah is the violent moment which also created an unbridgeable break between the past and the present. It represents an end to normality; i.e., this split disturbed the “normal” evolution of history. At the national level, Palestine has not developed in the same direction as other “Third World Countries” have—colonization, struggle, and finally independence. Al-Nakbah is an anticlimax where the promise of independence turned into a nightmare. In the absence of the fulfillment, consequently, the promise has imposed itself on the lives and consciousness of Palestinians in three ways: obsessive preoccupation with the past; a constant dealing with speculative questions such as what would have happened if. . . ?; and, a struggle to return to normality.

Normality ended with Al-Nakbah at both the individual and communal levels. Comparisons between pre- and post-Al-Nakbah are always in the background of any discussion or thought on Palestine, and the preference is always for pre-Al-Nakbah life. Post-Al-Nakbah has always been associated with abnormality. In order to shed light on how Al-Nakbah became a decisive point in the transition from normality to abnormality, I will bring forth three experiences. The first is an autobiographical narration by

Hisham Sharabi, who left Jaffa in December 1947 in order to pursue his MA studies at the University of Chicago. He returned approximately one year after he finished studying, not to his family's house in a wealthy neighborhood in Jaffa, but rather, to a small, rented apartment in Beirut. His first meeting with his family highlights the abnormality of the situation:

. . . [M]y mother received me with tears . . . I kissed my grandmother, aunts, and asked about my grandfather. My grandmother told me that he was not well. He sat in a dark corner of the house and watched what was going on, as if he were not sure what was happening. I am not sure whether he recognized me or not. He had changed dramatically. His white hair grew long, his dress was old and torn, although in the past he used to wear the finest clothes and pay special care to his appearance . . .³⁷

In the case of Sharabi, Al-Nakbah is associated with impoverishment, exile, and insanity.

The second text is Emile Habiby's piece of documentary fiction, *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptomist: [A] Palestinian Who Became a Citizen of Israel*.³⁸ In this book, Habiby lucidly renders the experience of a Palestinian who endured the transformation of Palestine. Unlike Sharabi and his family, Habiby's anti-hero, Saeed, is able to return from Lebanon to Israel, only to witness the expulsion of many other Palestinians. Saeed can go back to his hometown, Haifa, because he served as a collaborator. Although, as an informer, he did everything he could to satisfy the State and to bolster its security, he constantly failed in his endeavor. Unable either to disconnect himself from his pre-1948 history or to reaffirm his Palestinian identity, he finds himself in a mental hospital in Acre not far from the secondary school he attended before 1948 and where, as an adolescent, he experienced his first love. Similar to the previous text, Al-Nakbah is associated with insanity. Moreover, while the pre-1948 period is associated with pleasant memories—early adulthood, romance, and innocence—the post 1948 years are remembered as sad and disgraceful—the period of collaboration, hypocrisy, defeat, and self-estrangement. Eventually the State, through the Shin Bet [State Security Police], endeavors to reach the inner layers of Saeed's consciousness, where scattered sites of affinity to the past remain, and to erase them. Thus he is driven to the secret police headquarters where he is accused of not recognizing the territorial integrity of the State and of setting up an insurgency. The policeman details his accusations as follows:

The Big man thinks that your devotion is a cover up for disloyalty. The Big man reflected on your genealogy and found strong indications that you pretend stupidity rather than being stupid. Why have you not loved other than Yu'aad (will return), and have not married other than Baqiah (staying still) and have not given birth other than to Wala'a (loyalty)?

In the light of these accusations, Saeed asks:

Has not the Big man ever asked why was not I born other than Arab and have not found any homeland other than this country?⁴⁰

Saeed's rhetorical question mirrors the accusation that the Big man levels against him. He was found guilty of non-collaboration with the State's policy of wiping out the symbols of Palestinian identity and memory. He associated himself with people whose names signify Al-Nakbah as a site of Palestinian memory: Yu'aad [determination to return], Baqiah [sticking to the homeland], and Wala'a [loyalty to the people and the homeland].

The third text is an ethnography of a Palestinian family's life history. The title of the book, *Days of Honey, Days of Onion*—an Arabic proverb—reflects the contrasts described earlier. It provides details of the life of an "ordinary" Palestinian family living in Kufr Qara'. The family head, Abu Ahmad describes Al-Nakbah in concrete terms:

The war had been a terrible time for our people. Kufr Qara' had been emptied and we were scattered like leaves all over the area. We lived like refugees for eleven months, never knowing whether we'd be able to go back. When we finally did return in April 1949, and the Jews let us go to our well and get water, I felt that our nightmare was over. Soon, I thought, life would go back to the way it was before the war . . .

It was not long before I could see that it wouldn't be that way . . . They wasted no time in letting us know that life was not going to be as it once was. . . . In a way, they turned the village into a prison . . .⁴¹

Although he does not make direct comparisons between pre- and post-Al-Nakbah periods, a latent comparison between the two is present in the narrative, since Abu Ahmad details the events in chronological order: for example, the State confiscated their land, which was of good quality, and gave it to Jewish settlements; as compensation, they were offered rocky land of poor quality.⁴¹ Life and work thus became harder. Later on he is

asked to collaborate, a function that grew out of the new status of Palestinians in Israel—a group that the State constantly watched over and strictly controlled.

BACK ON THE THRESHOLD

About a month after the end of the 1967 War, the Israeli authorities allowed the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to enter Israel. In addition, as part of the “open bridges” policy, Israel allowed Palestinians residing in Arab countries to enter for short periods. After the signing of the Oslo Accords, many Palestinians, including PLO leaders, were also able to make such visits. Elias Sanbar, who visited his former home in Haifa, has questioned the motives of Palestinian who make these short visits to their former houses and villages: “What is the traveler looking for when he returns to his country, the place of his birth or of his death?”⁴² Despite the fact that Sanbar offers a range of motives, he does not exhaust all of the possibilities. Rejection of the whole idea of such an encounter has been an option preferred by many.

A great number of personal accounts of such visits or the refusal to make them are available. In addition to autobiographies, *Al-Karmel*—the Palestinian cultural journal—devoted considerable space to the section “The Memory of Place and the Place of Memory,” where many Palestinians described their encounters with Al-Nakbah sites. By and large, such experiences can be divided into four types.

First, the visit can be understood as an endeavor to re-experience, even for a few minutes, the pleasures associated with the place. For some Palestinians, the place—i.e., the home, the village, etc.—has come, with the passage of time, to be symbolized by specific objects such as an apricot tree, the children’s playground, old olive trees, and so on. The return in this case represents the fulfillment of the fantasy of rolling back time and re-experiencing pre-Al-Nakbah life. Mahmoud Darwish, who was allowed to make a short visit after twenty-six years, described his experience as follows: “I went back to being a child . . . I touched the trees and the stones, and felt as if I hadn’t left. Time had stopped, and the circle was closed.”⁴³ Unable to accept the harsh reality of alienation, some “visitors” have tried to renew their bond with the place by taking away with them small objects: a few stones, a handful of soil or a bottle of water, etc., as precious mementos. In many cases, however, these visits have turned out to be a painful, even

agonizing, experience. Muhammad 'Ali Taha, a Palestinian citizen of Israel originally from the destroyed village Mi'ar, took his cousin to the ruins of their village. Taha writes: "[W]e went to the eastern well; there he looked for the apricot tree but did not find it. The apricot tree had disappeared. Two tear drops came out from his eyes, which he tried to hide; [after all,] men are not supposed to cry."⁴⁴ Other visits have ended in sickness or exhaustion, and some Palestinians have even been driven away by the police following complaints by Jewish residents about Arabs who are making noise or wandering around near "their" houses.

Second, there are some who simply stand in front of the house or the property without trying to enter. Sharabi, who left Jaffa in 1947 to pursue his studies in the United States, came back to Jaffa in 2001 for a short visit, and he was able to see his family house. He did not try to enter, however. He refused to enter his family's house as a visitor.⁴⁵ Edward Said responded similarly when he came to Jerusalem with his children after the death of his mother.

I simply did not want to go inside the house, although my kids urged me to go in. I pointed out the window of the room in which I was born. They said "Daddy, don't you want to go in and look at it?" I said No, I didn't. It was as if there were a part of my past which was really over and associated with the fall of Palestine which I couldn't reinvestigate. I couldn't visit once again."⁴⁶

Susan Slyomovics's research on Ein Hod, a former Arab village (Ein Houd), which was converted into a settlement for Jewish artists, not only brings forth the names of the current occupants of many houses and their former owners—with some pictures of the former owners pointing to their houses—but also highlights the absurdity of the situation. Slyomovics exposes the fact that many of the Palestinians from Ein Houd reside in an unrecognized village just outside their former village, literally in front of their former houses. She also comments on the pointing finger: "[It] is a normally accusatory gesture that has found its exact expression in this visual mode; it simultaneously demands mourning and seeks justice."⁴⁷

Third, these visits are sometimes an attempt to comprehend Al-Nakbah and to change its consequences. The first writer to depict the growing discrepancy between pre- and post-Al-Nakbah Palestine and the increasing cleavage between reality and memory is the novelist Ghassan Kanafani in *A Returnee to Haifa*, published in 1969.⁴⁸ The story is about an

imagined visit of a Palestinian refugee, Saeed S., and his wife Safiah to their former home in Al-Halissah neighborhood in Haifa, soon after the 1967 War. The visit is not only about seeing the house, which is now inhabited by a Jewish widow and Holocaust survivor, but is mainly to meet their son, who was left behind when he was five months old during the great panic that surrounded their flight and was raised by the new occupants of the house. Through painful dialogues which that Saeed and Safiah have with their “son,” who has been raised as a Jew and has served in the army, they discover new meanings for the concepts of identity and affinity. In the novel, Saeed asserts that “Palestine is more than a remembrance, a son, a picture, Al-Halissah neighborhood. For us it was a search beneath the dust of the memory, and look what have we found beneath that dust . . . new dust! We were mistaken when we considered the homeland as relating only to the past.”⁴⁹ For Kanafani, “the man is the cause (for which he struggles),”⁵⁰ and the “homeland is the future.”⁵¹

Regardless of the effectiveness of Kanafani’s politics to which his novel gives expression, many exiled Palestinians have endeavored to return to any part of Palestine and to do their utmost for the sake of a better future. Among these is Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, who left Jaffa on 4 May 1948 and returned for the first time on 8 December 1991. Abu-Lughod discovered that the life of the city had dramatically changed.⁵² Jaffa, which had once been a leading Palestinian cultural, economic, and national center, as well as a cosmopolitan export-import city, had become a slum. This transformation epitomizes the destruction of Palestinian society. In 1992, Abu-Lughod left the United States, where he worked as a professor of Political Sciences, and came to settle in Ramallah. He explained his move as follows:

When I first came back after forty years, I went to every corner of Jaffa . . . I made up my mind that I must end my living in exile. Palestine is still here, I am part of this Palestinian development, and therefore I can make a contribution and live in peace with myself in Palestine.”⁵³

Abu Lughod held many positions. He was a professor at Bir-Zeit University, as well as a vice-president, and initiated numerous projects such as the establishment of the Center for the Development of Educational Curricula. He also helped draft the document for the “Palestinian Memory Museum.”⁵⁴ He died on the 23 May 2001. In his will, he asked to be buried in Jaffa next to his father and brother. The Shin Bet tried to stop the funeral from taking place. Ironically, it was his American passport and not by virtue of

his birth in Jaffa, that made the fulfillment of his final request possible. He closed the circle. He will stay in Jaffa forever; he fulfilled his right of return although he did so as a dead man.⁵⁵

Fourth, many Palestinians have rejected the idea of making visits to their former homes altogether. In contrast to other types of reaction, this response reaffirms the unbridgeable gap that exists between the past and the present. It represents a refusal to touch the realm of memory and to deal with the unbearable pain that unavoidably follows. An expression of this position can be found in Sallah Hazeen's article "The Village That I Have Never Visited."⁵⁶ Although he has had many opportunities to visit Ein-Karim, the place of his birth and of his ancestors, and despite his obsessive thinking about it, he has flatly rejected the idea of revisiting. His father and uncle also refused to re-encounter Ein-Karim. His father, for example, forcefully pushed away a handful of soil from Ein-Karim that a visitor brought and kept shaking his clothes to make sure that nothing of it stuck on his clothes. When, after many years, his son asked him to explain his odd behavior "he said many things . . . from which I [his son] understood that he did not want anything that would prove that Ein-Karim still exists in reality."⁵⁷

IDENTITY IN PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF THE MICRO-LEVEL

The segments of life stories of the individuals—either fictionalized or real—discussed in the last two sections call into question the level of abstraction that is commonly used in social science—including that of Anderson⁵⁸—discussions on identity. Following Fortier,⁵⁹ I think that the local context in both its social and spatial makeup should be considered as a constitutive dimension of identity. In this respect, Fortier writes: ". . . practices of group identity are about manufacturing cultural and historical belongings which mark out terrains of communality that delineate the politics and social dynamics of 'fitting in'."⁶⁰ Indeed, the stories of return/non-return were not about Palestine in the abstract sense; rather, they were about specific locations, specific villages/towns, specific homes and cemeteries, and particular landmarks. The details of small items, the feelings of familiarity and intimacy with places, people, and objects, is what, in the final analysis, give concrete meaning, at the individual level, to abstractions like national identity and nationalism. The wealth of such

details lies at the heart of Ibrahim Abu-Lughod's experience of return, as recorded by his daughter. Recounting her impressions after her father's decision to return, she writes:

. . . he was excited to be there, feeling at home not because he had ever lived in this West Bank town [Ramallah], the summer resort of the wealthy when he was a young boy in Jaffa, but because he was living among fellow Palestinians.⁶¹

The warmth that he felt was not only because he was living among his people—where he enjoyed the flow of communication and shared sentiments and political aspirations—but also because he was close to Jaffa, the place of his childhood and early adulthood and, as it turned out, the place of his burial. Thus she writes:

He was eager to show us the whole of Palestine . . . He specially wanted us to go to Jaffa. His tour, the same one he gave anyone who came to visit, was about claiming and 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."⁶²

Similar to Abu-Lughod's life story, other Palestinians usually begin their personal accounts by recounting some intimate details about their families or neighborhoods. John Tleel, a Jerusalemite, and his family became refugees by moving about 50 meters from their house as a result of the 1948 War. He began his personal story by detailing his family's history:

My family name is Tleel and can be traced back approximately four hundred years. On a family tombstone dated 1833 in the Greek Orthodox cemetery on Mount Zion there are two inscriptions, in Arabic and in Greek, and an engraving of tools used by goldsmiths. My great grandfathers were goldsmiths. "Tleel" or "It-Tleel," as it is engraved on family tombstones, is an Arabic name [that] means "the one who plates metal with silver or gold."⁶³

The author then offers abundant information about specific places where small, but meaningful, events in his life took place. These sentiments toward places have been transferred from one generation of Palestinians to another. Describing this phenomenon in general terms, Sanbar writes:

“An obsession with places, from general topography to the details of the tiniest street, would . . . preoccupy them, with Palestine traveling around the shoulders of its children.”⁶⁴

DISCUSSION

Concepts like national identity, nationalism, and site of collective memory as sociological abstractions should be viewed as having firmly anchored roots in the concrete lives of ordinary people. The fact that almost every Palestinian and every region has his “share” in Al-Nakbah explains, in my opinion, its timeless, multifaceted, and complex nature.

Given the fact, however, that dramatic events such as Al-Nakbah change places and landscapes as a result of deliberate efforts by its perpetrators—such as the de-Arabization of the country referred to earlier, or due to the passage of time—the question of representation becomes unavoidable. I will discuss this question by exploring the representation of the cactus tree as symbolizing the transformation of Palestine.

Various Palestinian artists—most notably ‘Asim Abu-Shaqra (1961–1990)—have drawn the Palestinian landscape from an angle that highlights what is absent; namely, the destroyed villages and their inhabitants. In Abu-Shaqra’s early paintings, the cactus trees were located in their natural milieu, and they are seen as if they still fulfill their function—they serve as hedges to identify village borders. Their empty surroundings, however, underline their existence as a reminiscence of communal lives that have been wiped out. In later paintings, the cactus tree was severed from its natural habitation and placed in a flowerpot. This “forced migration” is presented as agonizing. In one painting, for example, the cactus tree was drawn as a black fist of thorns bursting against stormy skies, while, in another, the shadow of the pot that falls on the window still highlights the absence of the moon.⁶⁵ The cactus tree as a representation of Al-Nakbah has undergone a metamorphosis: it has moved from its living environment to representational terrain. Like the site of collective memory, however, the cactus tree has proven to be resistant to death and forgetting. When asked about the reason for choosing the cactus tree as his painting object, Abu Shaqra answered, “because of its amazing ability to flower out of death.”⁶⁶

The metaphor of the cactus tree points to two characteristics of Al-Nakbah as a site of memory: first, its ability to reclaim new terrains, to acquire new meanings and representations, and to maintain its powerful

presence; and second, its adaptability to the new reality wherein the Palestinians live in scattered communities, thus, lacking the institutions that produce official narrative and icons of commemoration. Every Palestinian has thus come into possession of his or her own portable cactus tree placed in a flowerpot, which can be taken wherever one travels.

CONCLUSION

Sites of memory are essential for social cohesion and national identity. They provide the framework, the dimensions, and the points of reference for individual life stories and values. Sites of memory are subjective and, as such, they cannot be refuted, nor can they be subjected to a detached account or to a comparative analysis. This is so because they represent the subjective account of a group of people, not of certain historical events that have influenced its life greatly, but the way in which these events are grasped, interpreted, and felt. Various sites of Palestinian collective memory exist, mostly tragic: Al-Nakbah, the defeat of the 1967 War [Al-Naksah], Black September, Land Day, the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, the First Intifada, etc. Yet, Al-Nakbah has remained the main site of Palestinian collective memory for various reasons. First, the event itself changed Palestinian society beyond recognition; moreover, it has had a lasting impact on the lives of Palestinians since its occurrence. Second, Al-Nakbah represents a decisive breaking point between two qualitatively different realities, with different rules that govern before and after. Third, Al-Nakbah is the beginning point of the current history of the Palestinians. The roots of the other sites of memory, cited above, are firmly anchored in it.

I think that a political solution to the diverse aspects of the Palestinian problem would not change its centrality as a main site of Palestinian collective memory, although, it might decrease the intensity of the feelings associated with it. Rosemary Sayigh⁶⁷ in her research on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, described their feeling of being expelled from Paradise, a sentiment that is not particular to this segment of Palestinians. The personal testimonies noted above suggest that they are widespread among Palestinian communities in Palestine, as well as in the diaspora.

In conclusion, I would argue that the imperatives and conditions created by Al-Nakbah will continue to exercise great impact on the lives of Palestinians in the near future, and thus will continue to form a hallmark of their identity.

NOTES

*The author wishes to thank Rebecca Kook, Tagreed Al-Saeid, Anton Shalhat, and Catherine and Neve Gordon for discussing with him this subject and for putting their personal books at his disposal. Special thanks are also due to Michael Feige, the special editor of this volume for his encouragement and patience, Paul Kelemen for his invigorating ideas and his constant support, encouragement, and friendship, and to Professor Lila Abu-Lughod for her insightful remarks on the final version. The author is, however, solely responsible for the arguments and data included in this article.

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33. Falah, “The 1948 Israeli Palestinian War and Its Aftermath, 257.
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