

# Materializing Palestinian Memory: Objects of Home and the Everyday Eternities of Exile

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Nada embroiders her life away.<sup>1</sup> She embroiders her books, her dresses, her pillows, her slippers, her couches, her towels, her key holders, her picture frames, her curtains. She embroiders her hopes, her daydreams, her nightmares, her fears. She embroiders to reflect, she embroiders to remember. She embroiders to unravel the burdens of a present suspended by fantasies, overdue: she weaves the past into the present, the past into the future.

It is my third long visit to Nada, and by now, I know that her tears do not run dry. Perhaps my own presence confronts her as a ghostly visitation, as a haunting. Perhaps my own curiosity about a past that, above all, refuses to end, paints me as a revenant. As a distorted fragment of Palestine. As a shard of her wilted hopes. Nada tells me not to worry. She tells me that she always cries – when embroidering, when speaking of Palestine, when thinking about anything outside of the daily logistics of coping in exile. So I continue pursuing unfinished endings, I continue asking about unfulfilled tomorrows. I ask: What if? What if you could go back in time? What would you bring along into exile? What were your parents like? What were your neighborhoods like? What about the corners of your home? Your heart?

A renewed stream of memories comes urgently rushing down Nada's face. She grabs my wrist, only to guide me through a maze of fabrics and needles and measuring tapes and tablecloths and tapestries and photographs and carpets, stacked, one atop the other, in ever-expanding piles that find solace on the borders of her narrow hallways. I hop in between, landing on shrinking islands of cracked tiles. We arrive to the kitchen, where embroidery threads wait on the dinner table, on the

dish drying rack, on the windowsill, on the handles of her mini fridge. They linger between coats of dust, along dried trails of rust. Startling me out of my reverie, the fourth drawer creaks in protest of Nada's enthusiastic pull. She rummages through tangled clusters of orange, of yellow, of blue, of black, of red, and of green threads, carefully extracting an overflowing letter-sized envelope. Her very own archive of longings, suffocated by decades of mistakenly approximated distance.

Nada grips on the corners of her envelope as we settle back down in the living room. Inside was a letter, a letter she received in the spring of 1966, almost a year before her dispossession. It was a letter from Sa'id, sent before his wedding. His wedding to someone else.

Nada carefully pulls the letter out, and while its contents remain beyond my ethnographic sense of entitlement, I am struck by the intricate extent to which she had embroidered the corners of this tired paper. She had woven her threads – her Palestine – in and through their love story, their longings, their dissonant realities. With a mere needle, she had interwoven a persistent paradise with the heartbreak of the present. "Sa'id," Nada tells me, "is Palestine." And Palestine is Sa'id.

For those in exile, Nada drives me to wonder, what is Palestine other than love stories between the wrong people, set in the wrong places? Other than dreaming of people one has never met, other than yearning for homes one has never seen? And in what ways can we collect and understand and measure the folds of these refracted experiences of disaster?

Nada, her needles, her threads, and her heartbreak – unaligned with the ravages of a national tragedy – illuminate the material channels of exile through which Palestinians carry their personal relics of home. Just as Nada embroiders her fantasies into the pores of weathered paper, others place expired passports and rusting housekeys in picture frames, or polish the traces of home in a faded teacup. They entangle their belongings with longings for a lost homeland, as metonymic fragments of home and of the self, as vessels of identification and belonging.

But these objects, too, are at work. "Heavy with memory," they ensnare, they enchant, they glitter, they haunt.<sup>2</sup> They make claims as they tell their stories, as they expose their lifetimes, as they unravel their biographies. They reconstruct the (im)materialities of the homes and dreams that were, involuntarily, left behind. Generations of Palestinians, in this context, hold on to the residues of a universe that is no longer; they invest themselves and their stories in the enduring artifacts of a "lost paradise."<sup>3</sup>

This article sets out to position these acts of investment and enchantment as comprising a practice of remembering that cannot be understood outside an attention to the material conditions of everyday exile.<sup>4</sup> Just as Nada materializes her memories of Sa'id, of Jenin, and of Palestine by embroidering her love letter, other Palestinians exalt the fragments of an idealized past against the material backdrop of an unhomely present. Drawing on several ethnographic encounters in different corners of Amman, Jordan, I ask: What could the objects of home tell us about lost worlds, about how they are reconstructed in everyday domestic spaces of exile? How do these personal belongings organize – and are, at the same time, organized in – everyday practices

of remembering? What could the embodied practices of embroidering, collecting, keeping, arranging, and decorating tell us about how the shadows of catastrophe are lived, furnished, negotiated, constructed, embellished, navigated, and expanded across generations?

By focusing not on what is remembered but on the relationship between people and (the memories of) their things, I seek to afford a closer examination to the unrehearsed practices of recollection that characterize the daily logistics of coping at (and away from) home.<sup>5</sup> I seek, in other words, to foreground the everyday, the routinized, the unexceptional – the seemingly marginal stories that Palestinians may choose to tell. Memory, in this line of questioning, does not stand in for pre-packaged testimony. It does not represent an extractable story; it is not neatly stored, nor readily retrievable to buttress (counter-)narratives of history. Neither is it easily narrated, nor necessarily chronological, nor always coherent, nor ever structured. It is, rather, as a practice: a practice of materially enfolding the past within the shrinking coordinates of the present.

What follows is an effort to examine the methodological implications of this framework vis-à-vis future directions in Palestinian oral history initiatives. Because many such projects endeavor to historically uncover the events of 1936–39, 1948, and 1967 despite – and perhaps in order to redefine – archival absences, they tend to nurture a commitment to storing and authorizing oral accounts as historical documents. But how might it be possible to do so, I ask, without privileging structured narrative as the foremost vehicle for mnemonic expression, without overlooking the modes and practices of remembering that adhere neither to testimonial genres of telling nor to the plotlines of event-centered histories? How might such initiatives record, collect, and archive the unspoken practices of memory that we might otherwise track through an attention to Nada's needles and threads, to her embroidered letter, and to the geographical expanse of her heartbreak?

Oral history's approach to "history from below" has had monumental implications for the resonance of Palestinian voices in both intellectual and public discourse.<sup>6</sup> Here I endeavor to expand its reach by suggesting the methodological importance of including in Palestinian oral history projects an ethnographic engagement with the everyday – the very site in which dreams, memories, aspirations, and futurities of home are cultivated (and in some cases, perhaps, abandoned). In so doing, I take up the call for a Palestinian historiography that moves beyond essentialized, structured, and authoritative narratives of indigeneity and displacement.<sup>7</sup> My goal, as such, is to map the continuities, the discontinuities, and the detours of time and space upon which residues of the past resurface, both regularly and abruptly. It is to point toward the mundane eternities of exile: to Sa'id, to the unfulfilled, to the unremarkable, to the uneventful. It is to measure the ways in which Nada's Palestine can be found not in grand eulogies of the nation but embroidered in the corners of her own love letter.

## Carrying the Relics of Home

“If we agree . . . that every person’s world consists of several worlds” – *worlds full of things*, I add – then “the Nakba meant the destruction in a single blow of all the worlds in which Palestinians had lived,” write Lila Abu-Lughod and Ahmad Sa’di.<sup>8</sup> Thus for many generations of displaced Palestinians, the distance between 1948 and everyday exile is furnished with the remembered belongings of the lost home. Doorbells, vases, curtains, books, forks, plates, carpets, blankets, dresses, and photographs crowd everyday currents of longing; they orchestrate plots for daydreams, they color overwhelming fantasies of return. They offer clues to a past that persists, codes to a past that haunts. They so closely dictate the everyday “visitations of memory” that they begin to haunt those who inherit Palestine to a similar degree from which they consume their original owners.<sup>9</sup> “Over time,” writes Suha Shakkour, “the scents of lemon and orange trees, and the shade of olive trees, become so repeatedly experienced in storytelling that they haunt the listener, who has never experienced them almost as much as they haunt the teller.” As a result, “the individual houses, their stones, their secret hiding places come to be seen as unique and [as] worthy of preservation” as the stories of catastrophe.<sup>10</sup>

The objects that, perhaps serendipitously, did follow their owners into the labyrinths of forced displacement come to hold special valence. As exile is prolonged and Palestine – as it was, as it is now imagined, as it is transmitted across generations – becomes increasingly out of reach, these objects continue to “grow” considerably in importance, over time and across generations.<sup>11</sup> They become the vessels of transgenerational transmission, the building blocks of ever-expanding shadows, the glittering residues of a universe that is no longer.<sup>12</sup> Ever cherished, nurtured, and steeped in the memories of the lost home, they become transgenerationally inalienable: they develop the “power . . . to define who one is in an historical sense.”<sup>13</sup> They become, to borrow anthropologist Annette Weiner’s terminology, the “vehicle[s] bringing past time into the present,” carrying the “force of history” while also positioning themselves as inextricable components of a group’s identity.<sup>14</sup>

For a familiar example, we might look to Palestinian housekeys, which are often mobilized from private spheres to public realms – sacralized and charted as symbols of collective loss, thereby binding networks of Palestinians in exile.<sup>15</sup> In his study of Palestinian house keys, Khaldun Bshara cites one of his interlocutors to retell a story in which an elderly Palestinian refugee returned, sometime after 1967, to west Jerusalem for a hospital visit in ‘Ayn Karim. On the way to receive his treatment, the man prompted the taxi driver to pull aside as they approached his home, the home from which he had been displaced. The man told his sons, who were also in the taxi, that the house “was theirs,” before proceeding to knock on the door to share his story with the current Jewish residents. When a debate broke out, the Palestinian man declared: “If this is your home, and this door is yours, then show me the key.” This retort was an incontrovertible point of defense for the Palestinian man, for he was certain “that the new family will not be able to show the key, because he [had] kept it with him since he left more than twenty years [prior].”<sup>16</sup>

Here, we can see how the Palestinian man employs his house key, by mere virtue of its (transgenerational) *inalienability*, as a means by which to identify himself (and his sons) as the rightful owner(s) of the home. “A person can be bound up with an external ‘thing’ in some constitutive sense,” writes legal scholar Margaret Jane Radin.<sup>17</sup> To lose these things is to “lose this claim to the past,” and, by extension, “to lose part of who one is in the present.”<sup>18</sup> It is for this reason, argues Bshara, that thousands of Palestinians in exile hold on to their old keys, even if they do not know whether their doors or homes or neighborhoods survived the Nakba.

In the lines that follow, I explore this idea of feverishly investing oneself in the inalienable relics of the lost home. I position this practice of material investment as one that can illuminate the everyday, unspoken practices of remembering for Palestinians in exile. And it is precisely because Palestinian claims to return cannot be disentangled from the retrieval of specific sites – namely, former homes – that we must understand exile within the perimeters of the material worlds that were both left behind and carried forward.

## **Exile: The Inalienable and the Uncanny**

Returning to Amman: I sit in Fadia’s study, cozy with an elaborate Persian rug and towering shelves of books on the secrets of running a successful business. We sit between sage in two teacups, between two windows, overlooking rows of unruly shrubs and hills peppered with solemn olive trees. We sit in Amman, 60 kilometers away from Jericho, 72 away from Jerusalem, 113 away from Haifa, and we talk about almost-futures: about the finality of a weekend trip to Beirut in June 1967, when Fadia would forever be separated from her family, from her Ramallah.

After two decades of being displaced from Ramallah to the quiet suburbs of a North American city, Fadia had been keen on moving to Amman. “It is closer to Palestine,” she tells me. “To its mountains, to its trees, to its air,” she continues. “Here, I feel like I can breathe. If we were ever to pack up and move again, I tell my husband, it would be to Cyprus. To Malta. Not to Europe, not to North America.” Fadia tells me that the mountains and trees and air of Amman lead her anxiously to Palestine. “As long as I am forced to be away from Ramallah,” Fadia assures me, “I will keep trying to find the closest version possible.”

With this, Fadia guides us toward the uncanny, what Sigmund Freud described as “that . . . which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”<sup>19</sup> For Fadia, the uncanny creeps into the alleyways of Amman and illuminates its sunsets, it breathes into its hills and blooms in its valleys. It promises Fadia to find Palestine, though refracted in physical space, though “defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream.”<sup>20</sup>

Salma, too, tells me about the uncanny, about the need to remedy its deceit. When I ask her about her rose-colored marble floor tiles, which she had imported to Amman from Nazareth in the late 1970s, she tells me that “Palestine is color.” And as we inspect every corner of her house, as we look through her books and artworks and Palestine-

inspired mementoes collected from her extensive travels across the globe, Salma does not speak about the tragedy of a universe sewn together by fantasies of Jaffa's oranges and Jerusalem's moonrises, nor does she detail the events of her dispossession in 1967. Nor does she readily share any of her personal belongings or anecdotes or experiences. She reroutes my attention, time and again instead, to her floor tiles, to her Palestine, to the fact that she wanted the house that she built in Amman to be colorful. Salma shows me another mode, another practice, another form of remembering: her construction of a house from the fragments of the familiar Palestinian landscape.

Because Jordan borders Palestine, because they share landscapes and sunsets, the materiality of Palestinian exile in Jordan is marked by unsettling approximations. The insistence of the familiar to present itself as uncanny – or, to borrow from Freud more literally, as *unhomely* – brings Palestine into sharp relief, and exile becomes all that Palestine is not. For Fadia and Salma, it becomes a terrifyingly displaced version of home, void of a sea, of sunsets, of orange groves and jasmynes. Surely, a “fundamental incommensurability [exists] between what was taken and what might be given back.” The substitute, argues Stuart Kirsch, “is always inferior to the original, perpetuating the sense of loss.”<sup>21</sup> And it is this sense of loss that concocts a special urgency for Palestinians to entangle the material fragments of an idealized past with the unhomely eternities of the present; indeed, it compels them to embroider, to plant, and to tile their memories of home.

To this point, we may also return to the words of Radin, who suggests that “one’s expectations crystallize around certain ‘things,’ the loss of which causes more disruption and disorientation than does a simple decrease in aggregate wealth.” As an example, “if someone returns home to find her sofa disappeared, that is more disorienting than to discover that her house has decreased in market value by five percent,” writes Radin. “If, by magic, her white sofa were instantly replaced by a blue one of equal market value, it would . . . still cause some disruption in her life.”<sup>22</sup> With this example of the white/blue sofa in mind – presumably derived from a geographic context distant to our own – we may revisit Salma’s colors, to think through her insistence on importing rose-colored marble to construct a house in exile. This insistence, we could argue, entails nothing less than a refusal, enabled by her wealth and class position, to accept the material conditions of estrangement. It is also a refusal to let her expectations “crystallize” around *other* objects, around the uncanny objects of exile.

## The Personal Museums of Everyday Exile

I find Tara between plateaus of paper, between heaps of half-finished thoughts, between barracks of boxed files. Even before I arrived at her doorstep, her stories were already sorted in tentative categories, her photographs were already spilling out of their albums, and her documents were already promised a departure from their vacuum-sealed container. Together, they crowded the shrinking surface of her elaborately carved coffee table.

Tara tells me of her family tree project, for which she has travelled to Palestine three times over the past two years. She retraces the jittery steps of her journeys, with the dizzying romanticism of exilic loss and longing: she paints the sunsets of Nablus, the shorelines of Haifa, the skies of Jaffa, and the valleys of Ramallah. “It was my life’s dream to be able to return, to ask my questions,” she explained. Tara was born in Jordan, and for thirty years, she lived between Montreal and Amman. Eventually, she received a Canadian passport that allows her to see Palestine for a few days at a time.

Tara reconnected with her family members who remained in Palestine and were willing to help her decipher the mystery of her mother’s family, who had, in her words, “gone extinct.” In her search, Tara followed the branches of her family trees, collected documents, photographs, books, jewelry, and stories, eventually landing on what she tells me is the most valuable item she could ever own: her great grandmother’s silver purse. Today, it hangs in her bedroom in a picture frame, juxtaposed with a photograph of her great grandmother.

Like Tara, Amjad longed to own a few objects that knew his grandfather’s “scent.” Born in Amman, and also having lived alongside an idea of Palestine that was ever-elusive yet ever-present, he embarked upon a journey to Nablus to find his late grandmother’s attic. There, he found a suitcase, coated with dust and dirt, inhabited by mice and cockroaches. He carefully opened it much to the “disgust” of his aunt, who had been living on the property at the time. “I found, inside . . . you wouldn’t believe,” he tells me, “a *Palestinian* passport issued by the British Mandate, property deeds for land in Jaffa, and checkbooks from the Jaffa branch of the Arab Bank.” Nonetheless, he lamented, his aunt fixated on the filth of the suitcase. But Amjad was captured. Passport, property deeds, checks: he had found magic, glitter, gold-plated breadcrumbs leading him back to Jaffa. “These documents,” Amjad faced his aunt, “guarantee your rights against dispossession.” His aunt retorted with indifference, while walking away: “It’s all gone. Otherwise, wouldn’t we be in Jaffa instead of here?”

This question continues to tighten its hold on Amjad. “So long as the past perseveres,” he shares with me, “we, Palestinians, are guaranteed to lose everything.” So long as the Nakba is ongoing, Amjad will continue to confront a reality riddled with the presence of absence; he will continue to retrace the trajectories of expired paper, of passports and property deeds and checkbooks that belong to institutions and places and people and homes that no longer remain.

It is no surprise that this Palestinian “archive fever” has persisted seven decades into exile, for the loss engendered by the events of 1948 is “not a moment, but a process that continues.”<sup>23</sup> The threat of losing it all again – of “going extinct,” in Tara’s words – has prompted many Palestinians to collect family albums, street signs, cooking utensils, land records, and textbooks. They frame, display, and exalt the items that had once constituted an inventory of everyday existence in Palestine.<sup>24</sup> For generations of Palestinians who have lived in the shadows of the Nakba, “the history of the past . . . is concentrated in an object that, in its material substance, defies destruction.”<sup>25</sup>

Lana, another displaced Palestinian living in Amman, tells me that she transformed her mother-in-law’s embroidered *thobes* into upholstery for the chairs that occupy the

foyer of her apartment. “The thobes simply cannot remain in my closet. They must be placed at the forefront, for all to see.” Upholstered, framed, burdened with the responsibility to never disappear. This fossilization of everyday objects also points to a Palestinian desire to counter a historical narrative that is so profoundly shaped by material loss. Revisiting Weiner’s framework of inalienable possessions, we can see that the practice of nurturing the objects of home “adds to the value of [a Palestinian] past,” thereby rendering “the past a powerful resource for the present and for the future.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, the task has turned into a “national duty” of sorts, a duty to compensate for the lack of institutional infrastructure by creating personal museums where official ones have not yet been expansively established.<sup>27</sup>

It must be noted that this responsibility to undertake a “national duty” in one’s home is a formula with deep historical roots. In *Men of Capital*, historian Sherene Seikaly details the fraught social landscape of Mandate Palestine, which featured at its pinnacle the figure of the “social man,” who was scientific, rational, and deeply invested in private property and individual freedom, and his mate, the scientific housewife, who was hardworking, fashionable yet frugal, and committed to the “minute” management of her domestic space. Seikaly’s subjects – the Palestinian social man and woman of thrift – cemented the boundaries of social distinction while simultaneously imagining themselves as the collaborative forerunners of a *nahda*, an Arab awakening. They posited their new, localized understandings of economy as the “prognosis for wakefulness.”<sup>28</sup> And key to this narrative was their invoking of an “eternal heritage.” They positioned “the grandiosity of [the Arab] past . . . [as] reducible to one transhistorical essence, a ‘commercial disposition’ that was ready to be lit once again.”<sup>29</sup>

In this narrative, the inner workings of a broader Arab economy were conceptualized as parallel to those of a precisely measured, managed, and surveyed domestic space. Thus, a homemaker’s ability to manage her home as a “realm of authority” enabled her family’s full participation in national life.<sup>30</sup> If we follow Seikaly’s powerful assertion that these “figures, norms, territories, understandings of politics, and narratives . . . continue to haunt the present,” and that indeed, they “continue to inform the Palestinian social, however dispersed it may be,” then we are presented with an opening to explore the gendered and classed dynamics that inform the contemporary social distinctions that undergird the practices of collecting Palestine in exile.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, we must ask: Who is able to wakefully rescue the “eternal heritage” of Palestine, the material culture that was scattered by the Nakba? Who is successfully able to establish a distinctly Palestinian “realm of authority” at home in exile?

For one, we can detect how the practice of memory unfolds within differently situated material ecologies. While Nada embroiders the corners of her own letter, Salma possesses a seemingly weightless ability to import, curate, and re-frame the inalienable landscape of home, and Fadia moves from a North American suburb to build a life in Amman. In the same vein, the socioeconomic factors that afford Tara and Amjad the ability to visit Palestine and to personally track down their own objects of home are not evenly experienced. As a result, certain subjects are endowed with the capacity to determine the contours, rules, and regulations of authentic self-recognition. And if we

afford attention to their everyday material worlds, we can trace the historically rooted social distinctions that both enable and delimit everyday practices of remembering.

## **Narrating the Contours of Catastrophe**

For many Palestinians, the Nakba is experienced as fragmented and incoherent. It is at once the site of death and that of identification. It places loss as the “point of reference for other events, past and future,” rendering impossible an orderly sequence of time.<sup>32</sup> Above all, it casts a shadow. It weighs the present with a ghostly past that insists on returning – tangentially, randomly, spontaneously – like “an ache, an ache from a sickness [Palestinians] didn’t know [they] had.”<sup>33</sup>

But these aches, these ghostly visitations, are not limited to the experiences of those who directly witnessed the events of 1948. As long as Palestinians are still denied the right to return to their homes, the Nakba will persist, the past will have not yet passed, and exile will remain an inherited state.<sup>34</sup> Thus the contours of catastrophe, with its temporality of “tragic cumulativeness,” continue to invade the present for first-, second-, third-, and fourth-generation Palestinians, who, like Nada, Fadia, Salma, Tara, Amjad, and Lana, wait – hesitantly, patiently, and wholeheartedly in exile – to return to themselves: to unfulfilled love stories, to suspended sunrises, to entangled embroidery threads, to a past that persists despite all that may indicate otherwise.<sup>35</sup>

The tyranny of this amorphous waiting constitutes a transgenerational experience that is spoken neither of nor about but around. Silence enshrouds the cruelty of transmitting a “wounded identification,” it cleans up the incoherence of persisting exile.<sup>36</sup> As a result, memories of Palestine are storied not along the lines of disaster, but rather in fractured and anecdotal forms of unrehearsed everyday reminiscence that, like an ache, are “supple, associative, and more deeply concerned with commenting on the present than memorializing the past.”<sup>37</sup> Thus what may be perceived as a gap or an incoherence in oral testimony should not be measured against the extent of narrative availability; it should, instead, stand in as a signifier of fracture, of a persistent Nakba, “of something that is still present.”<sup>38</sup>

Increasing attention to the injustices of the Nakba have mandated, however, that intensely personal memories, often disjointed and disconnected, be molded into structured narratives of devastation that might incite political action. Testimonies of Palestinian life before 1948 and of expulsion are positioned as poignant materials for political advocacy and as evidence that authorizes claims of past and present injustice.<sup>39</sup> This shift, with its requirements to remember the past accurately, chronologically, and in narrative forms, has foregrounded literary testimony as the normative genre of memory narration, thereby marginalizing and dismissing partial, fragmented, and scattered recollections in favor of event-centered accounts of expulsion and of violence.<sup>40</sup>

Thus we must pause and ask: What happens to Nada, to her embroidered letter, and to Sa‘id, when all that counts as worthy of remembering is that which is collectively considered to be sufficiently eventful, sufficiently political?<sup>41</sup> What happens to Salma

and her tiles, to Tara and her family tree, to Amjad and his expired passports? And how can we begin to narrate, from a distance, catastrophes that have not yet been concluded?

## **The “Peculiar Violence of Memory-Work”: Historiographies of Silence**

The perimeters of historical production, formally defined by the mobilization of archival and documentary evidence, have been exceptionally out of reach for those producing scholarship on Palestine and the Palestinians. The absence of official state archives, coupled with the loss or geographical dispersal of personal archives, renders a resort to creative sources the sole avenue by which the contours of a Palestinian past can be reconstructed.<sup>42</sup> In this context, oral history has gravitated to the center of Palestinian historiography. Interviews and testimonies of Palestinian life before and around catastrophe are being conducted, recorded, collected, and archived – with a feverish urgency and in every corner of exile – as “historical document[s].”<sup>43</sup>

The promise of Palestinian oral history is fueled by an understanding of memory as that which “propels” history, as the source that might allow us to inquire into the “accurate, empirical facts about what happened.”<sup>44</sup> Here, memories are not opposed to written history; rather, they supplement, enhance, and in some cases, overturn and correct the written record. As such, witness testimonies of the Nakba are employed, with urgency, to construct a counter-history, to intercept the erasure of Palestinians from the Zionist unfolding of history. But to accomplish this task – to effectively speak back against such immense archival gaps – individuals must recount the Nakba chronologically and with accuracy, in forms of coherent narrative.

This idea, however, that “history is to a collectivity as remembrance is to an individual” is not one that can stand without difficulty.<sup>45</sup> In his seminal work *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot troubles the interchangeability of history and memory, especially in a framework of impartial retrieval. On the level of the individual, this is because the contents of our mnemonic “cabinets,” he argues, are “neither fixed nor accessible at will.”<sup>46</sup> Memories do not reveal themselves to us evenly, routinely, chronologically, or in coherent narrative forms – if ever at all.

Can we thus, Trouillot asks, confidently exclude from history all events not sufficiently remembered, not clearly revealed, and not yet assigned with importance? When this question is scaled up to a collectivity, further problems emerge: How can we determine where to start history, which memories to erase, and whose to exalt? Carrying the weight of methodological individualism, this storage model of memory-history “assumes not only the past to be remembered but the collective subject that does the remembering.”<sup>47</sup> It abandons imperative issues of how and why collectivities decide which events to include or to exclude in processes of storying the past, and it eclipses how and why individual memories may have adjusted to each other. It separates, that is, the production of memory from the conditions of the present, and from the social

and material conditions that determine the perimeters of collective engagements with time and the past. In so doing, it uncritically accepts what counts to a collectivity as sufficiently eventful and, therefore, worth narrating, thereby excluding and overlooking the alternative modalities of remembering that otherwise exist on the margins of canonical historiography.

We must ask, then, of the scholarship that collects and draws upon Palestinian oral testimony: In the effort to remedy archival gaps through the treatment of memory as history, how might one avert the risk of mirroring the tenets of positivist history, where the webs of power informing the process of historical production are overlooked, where the event punctuates the flow of narrative, where a “truth regime” reigns, where past and present are sharply separated?<sup>48</sup>

Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler argue that even those who critically study the colonial tend to unwittingly posit memory as a repository of subaltern truths, as the raw matter of counter-history. This tendency, they suggest, is undergirded by the conviction that subaltern memories contain “trenchant political critiques” that are “housed as discrete stories awaiting an audience,” “poised to be tapped” and uncovered.<sup>49</sup> Therein lies the “peculiar violence of memory work,” as Penelope Papailias calls it, where researchers expect memory to unfold as pre-packaged historical testimony, “as spontaneous and as spirited as an oft-repeated folktale or folk song.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, it is the organized search for these “camouflaged” circuits, the insistence on the “romance of resistance,” and the fixation on the heroics of their extraction and recognition, that assumes the hyper-production of memory and the prevalence of structured modalities of telling.<sup>51</sup>

Here, it is important to qualify that a focus on the subaltern figures of Palestinian history (the *fellah*, the camp dweller, the woman) does not necessarily lead us to recover the voices of the unheard, nor does it necessarily enable the formation of an alternative historiographical model. Though such approaches are importantly committed to politically and historiographically remedying an uneven record, they must actively avert the risk of privileging the memories that most successfully and coherently narrate the unheard version of “what actually happened.” And to do so, they must actively avoid compressing memories, as well as their narrative (and) form, to fit a single iteration of loss – a single iteration that can, all the same, produce powerful material for political advocacy.

While Nada’s letter, Salma’s tiles, Tara’s family tree, Amjad’s suitcase, and Lana’s chairs do not revolve around “what happened” – around adversaries or heroes, compelling plots or violent struggles – they can tell us about the “enduring sentiments” of Palestine, and about how the material “textures of the past” that make their way into the lived spaces of the present, surfacing abruptly, often in unrehearsed, unspoken moments.<sup>52</sup> In this way, they poignantly redirect us to the “sensibilities that cast a much longer shadow over people’s lives and what they choose to remember and tell about them.”<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusions: Future Directions in Oral History Archives

As we envision, construct, and grapple with the complexities of a Palestinian archive,<sup>54</sup> we must recognize the monumental importance of the work that many oral history projects have done to amplify the resonance of Palestinian voices in both scholarship and popular outlets. We must recognize that the recorded testimonies of uprooting, of expulsion, and of displacement remain central to achieving justice for Palestinians, in that they make it clear – against all archival silences – *what actually happened* in 1948. But still, we must confront some methodological difficulties. Namely, we must ask: How might we navigate our commitment to historiographically reconstructing Palestinian voices without fixating on a search for the “essential historicity” of Palestinian memory?<sup>55</sup>

Haunted by Nada, by her needles, by her threads, and by the risk of dismissing her longings, I wish to conclude by calling for an alternative to structured memory-work, one that allows us to mark out “a space for the unrehearsed recollections of those who are convinced that their tellings are not what makes up real history at all.”<sup>56</sup> For this, I argue that we must foreground the everyday. We must record and collect the practices of remembering that adhere neither to testimonial genres of telling nor to the plotlines of event-centered histories: we must portray the refracted personal catastrophes of the Nakba, appearing in the form of Nada’s letter, Salma’s tiles, Amjad’s passports, Tara’s family trees, and Lana’s chairs. And we must also grapple with the shadows of the Nakba, with the classed and gendered dynamics of exile, as we explore how the past resurfaces – most often in mundane and unremarkable ways and in everyday spaces.

An essential component of this task involves moving beyond a view of memory as a retrievable resource that contains, in its essence, a truth about the past. Instead, I have proposed approaching memory ethnographically: as an ever-changing practice, a practice in which fragments of an idealized past are woven into the times and spaces of an unhomely present. Such an approach will only allow us to enhance the existing methodologies of oral history archives, to move beyond paradigms of event-centered histories, beyond essentialized narratives of indigeneity, and towards an attention to the material textures of Palestinian exile – to the stories, to the daydreams, to the realities, and to the futures that Palestinians may wish to tell.

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## Endnotes

- 1 All my interlocutors are anonymized via pseudonyms in this article.
- 2 Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 14.
- 3 Rosemary Sayigh, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 1979), 10.
- 4 I build on a tradition of conceptualizing memory as practice. See Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, "Introduction: Forecasting Memory," in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), xi–xxxviii.
- 5 Here, I also follow the lead of Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler, who advocate the study of memory as an "interpretative labor," a labor in which the scholar must focus not only on *what* is remembered, but also *how* something is remembered. Memory, for Stoler and Strassler, is an "ongoing and uneven production process," where "idioms of the past are reworked with a differently inflected but equally active voice in the present." See Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial: Memory Work in 'New Order' Java," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 1 (2000): 9.
- 6 Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London: Zed Books, 2012).
- 7 Beshara Doumani, "My Grandmother and Other Stories: Histories of the Palestinians as Social Biographies," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 30 (Spring 2007): 8.
- 8 Lila Abu-Lughod and Ahmad H. Sa'di, "Introduction," in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, ed. Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 9.
- 9 Omar al-Qattan, "The Secret Visitations of Memory," in *Nakba*, ed. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod.
- 10 Suha Shakkour, "Return to Palestine," in *Sacred Mobilities: Journeys of Belief and Belonging*, ed. Avril Maddrell, Alan Terry, and Tim Gale (New York: Routledge, 2016), 190.
- 11 Staffan Appelgren and Anna Bohlin, "Growing in Motion: The Circulation of Used Things on Second-Hand Markets," *Culture Unbound* 7, no. 1 (March 2015): 143–68.
- 12 See Aarthi Ajit, "Oral Heirlooms: The Vocalisation of Loss and Objects," *Oral History* 43, no. 2 (2015): 70–78.
- 13 Annette B. Weiner, "Inalienable Wealth," *American Ethnologist* 12, no. 2 (1985): 210.
- 14 Weiner, "Inalienable Wealth," 210, 223.
- 15 For more on Palestinian house keys, see Scott Webster, "Post-Domicide Artefacts: Mapping Resistance and Loss onto Palestinian House-Keys," *Cultural Studies Review* 22, no. 2 (November 2016): 41–64.
- 16 Khaldun Bshara, "A Key and Beyond: Palestinian Memorabilia in the Economy of Resistance" (Irvine, CA: Center for Global Peace and Conflict Studies, University of California, Working Paper Series, 2008). No page numbers available, see footnote 4 in Bshara's paper.
- 17 Margaret Jane Radin, *Reinterpreting Property* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 37.
- 18 Weiner, "Inalienable Wealth," 210.
- 19 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *Collected Papers*, ed. Ernest Jones, trans. Alix Strachey, vol. 4 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1934), 389. For Freud, the definition of "uncanny" as the "unfamiliar" is incomplete. Freud states that the "uncanny," which can be literally translated into the "unhomely," contains a double meaning, one that oscillates between "that which is familiar and congenial" and "that which is concealed and kept out of sight." Anthony Vidler (see note 28, p. 23) notes that for Freud's purposes, the multiple significations of the German word *unheimlich* (uncanny, unhomely) were promising; they "served at once to clarify the operations of the uncanny as a systematic principle as well as to situate its domain in the domestic and the homely. . . . To this end, Freud deliberately approached the definition of the *unheimlich* by way of that of its apparent opposite, *heimlich*, thereby exposing the disturbing affiliation between the two and constituting the one as a direct outgrowth of the other."
- 20 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 7.
- 21 Stuart Kirsch, "Lost Worlds: Environmental Disaster, 'Culture Loss,' and the Law," *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 2 (April 2001): 169.

- 22 Radin, *Reinterpreting Property*, 64.
- 23 Beshara Doumani, "Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians: The Patrimony of Ihsan Nimr." *Jerusalem Quarterly* 36 (2009): 4.
- 24 Whereas most of these objects might have once constituted an inventory of mundane everyday items, their survival into exile assigns them special importance. The murky inclusion of government documents (such as property deeds and passports) into this list is one that must be further explored in the Palestinian context, given that the establishment of the document-issuing state itself is still awaiting a future moment. For a noteworthy analysis of the agency of "make believe" government documents through an Actor Network Theory lens, see Navaro-Yashin, "Make-Believe Papers."
- 25 Weiner, "Inalienable Wealth," 224.
- 26 Weiner, "Inalienable Wealth," 224.
- 27 Vera Tamari, "Tawfik Canaan – Collectionneur Par Excellence: The Story Behind the Palestinian Amulet Collection at Birzeit University," in *Archives, Museums, and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, ed. Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 85.
- 28 Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 48.
- 29 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 47.
- 30 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 6 ("minutely"), 62 ("realm of authority").
- 31 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 172 ("haunt the present"), 52 ("however dispersed").
- 32 Abu-Lughod and Sa'di, "Introduction," 5 ("point of reference"); Said, *After the Last Sky*, 25 ("orderly sequence").
- 33 Fawaz Turki, "Reflections on al-Nakba," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 10.
- 34 Lila Abu-Lughod, "Return to Half-Ruins: Memory, Postmemory, and Living History in Palestine," in *Nakba*, ed. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 79 ("not passed"); and Janet Abu-Lughod, "Palestinians: Exiles at Home and Abroad," *Current Sociology* 36, no. 2 (June 1988): 63 ("inherited state").
- 35 Lena Jayyusi, "Iterability, Cumulativity, and Presence: The Relational Figures of Palestinian Memory," in *Nakba*, ed. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 107–34.
- 36 Omar al-Qattan, "The Secret Visitations of Memory," in *Nakba*, ed. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 194–95; Abu-Lughod, "Return to Half-Ruins," 89.
- 37 Diana Allan, "The Politics of Witness: Remembering and Forgetting 1948 in Shatila Camp," in *Nakba*, ed. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 260.
- 38 Samera Esmeir, "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura," in *Nakba*, ed. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 249.
- 39 See Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Allan, "Politics of Witness," 268; Abu-Lughod and Sa'di, "Introduction," 17.
- 40 Penelope Papailias, "Writing Home in the Archive: 'Refugee Memory' and the Ethnography of Documentation," in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. Francis X. Blouin, Jr., and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 402–15.
- 41 A similar line of questioning has been convincingly initiated by scholars – notably Rosemary Sayigh – who have attended to the silencing of women's narratives in their treatment of Palestinian popular memory and historiography. They argue that women's personal recollections are often silenced because they may complicate nationalist histories. This line of argument is congruent with my insistence on the urgency of attending to the everyday experiences of exile. See: Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinian Camp Women as Tellers of History," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27, no. 2 (1998): 42–58; Frances Hasso, "Modernity and Gender in Arab Accounts of the 1948 and 1967 Defeats," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 4 (2000): 491–510; and Isabelle Humphries and Laleh Khalili, "Gender of Nakba Memory" in *Nakba*, ed. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 207–28.
- 42 Archivist Hana Sleiman notes the two-fold impact of the absence of a Palestinian state (and the resultant lack of official institutions that would record and construct a Palestinian history) and the Israeli "appropriation and destruction" of Palestinian archives and archival projects (as in the case of the 1983 bombing of the Palestinian Research Center in Beirut). See Hana Sleiman, "Archiving Palestine: Building a Digital Platform for Oral History," interview by Mohamad Ali

- Nayel, *Status*, 17 August 2015, online at [www.statishour.com/en/Interview/141](http://www.statishour.com/en/Interview/141) (accessed 10 October 2019); Hana Sleiman, "The Paper Trail of a Liberation Movement," *Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (2017): 42–67. For recent examples of creativity in the use of sources, see: Seikaly, *Men of Capital*; and Maha Nassar, *Brothers Apart: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).
- 43 Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 137. This move has generated controversy among some Israeli revisionist historians who view archives as the only ideologically and empirically impartial source from which the events of 1948 can be reconstructed. Many scholars of Palestine have recognized this position as a method of silencing and excluding Palestinian voices and accounts of the past. See, for example: Nur Masalha, "Remembering the Palestinian Nakba: Commemoration, Oral History, and Narratives of Memory," *Holy Land Studies* 7, no. 2 (November 2008): 123–56; Susan Slyomovics, "The Rape of Qula, a Destroyed Palestinian Village," in *Nakba*, ed. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 27–51; Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (New York: Verso Books, 2015); and Fatma Kassem, *Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memory* (London: Zed Books, 2013).
- 44 Slyomovics, "Rape of Qula," 32.
- 45 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 14.
- 46 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 14.
- 47 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 16.
- 48 Esmeir, "Memories of Conquest," 230.
- 49 Stoler and Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial," 7.
- 50 Papailias, "Writing Home," 410, 413.
- 51 Stoler and Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial," 8; and Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (February 1990): 41–55.
- 52 Stoler and Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial," 39.
- 53 Stoler and Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial," 8.
- 54 For a recent discussion of shaping a potential Palestinian archive, see: Ann Stoler, "On Archiving as Dissensus," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 38, no. 1 (May 2018): 43–56.
- 55 Papailias, "Writing Home in the Archive," 413.
- 56 Stoler and Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial," 38–39.