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Materializing Palestinian nationhood in Lebanese exile. A comparative approach to different trajectories of displacement among Palestinian refugees

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2/ Materializing Palestinian nationhood in Lebanese exile. A comparative approach to different trajectories of displacement among Palestinian refugees

Valeria RANDO

ABSTRACT: *Following a comparative approach, this article analyzes the nationalizing practices among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, in the form of material heritage. In the field of what scholars defined as «banal» nationalism, it examines how particular routine objects articulate different conceptions of national identities. A significant issue concerns the different practices between the community born in Lebanon and the one that, firstly exiled in Syria, experienced a second displacement after the conflict of 2011. Its aim is to show how Palestinian nationhood is embedded in spaces, times and symbols whose incorporation in everyday life functions as collective-identity-building ground for people experiencing long-term, as the Lebanese community, or ongoing, as the Syrian one, diasporas.*

ABSTRACT: *Seguendo un approccio comparato, questo articolo analizza le pratiche di nazionalismo dei rifugiati palestinesi in Libano in forma di patrimonio materiale. Nell'ambito di ciò che gli studiosi definiscono nazionalismo «banale», si propone di esaminare come particolari oggetti articolino diverse concezioni di identità nazionale. Una questione significativa riguarda le differenze tra la comunità nata in Libano e quella che, già esiliata in Siria, ha vissuto un secondo sfollamento dopo il conflitto del 2011. Lo scopo è mostrare come la nazione palestinese si incorpori in spazi, tempi e simboli il cui inserimento nella vita quotidiana consolidi linguaggi di identità collettiva per le persone che vivono una diaspora a lungo termine, come la comunità libanese, o continua, come quella siriana.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Surviving a mythologized catastrophe

Historical events, especially if traumatic, have the formative power to shape collective identities, often leading to the overthrow of a more complex, pluriform pre-existing reality. The case of the standardization of Palestinian national narratives after the *Nakba* – the «catastrophe» which brought to the temporary disappearance of Palestine from both geographical and political maps¹ – is not an exception. If national narratives are products of what Issam Nassar defines a

¹ KHALIDI, Rashid, *Palestinian Identity. The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997.

«historical theology»², and nation-states are nothing more than socio-political productions, people with no lands may easily find in shared consciousnesses built on discourses a place to call nation. The seminal theory of national states as «imagined communities»³, united not through a mere political-economic process, but rather through a cultural-rhetorical and inter-subjective one, is particularly suitable to cases as the post-*Nakba* Palestine, whose political-organizational, socio-economic, demographic and familiar structures were left shattered by the outcome of the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. That year, historian Elias Sanbar argued, led to the disappearance of an entire country and its people «from maps and dictionaries»⁴. In his article *Out of place, out of time*, Sanbar presents the case of the Palestinians as a frame through which the broader question of political uses of history can be raised. Claiming that the key date of 1948 served as a rupture in the continuity of historical space and time in Palestine, leading to the link between catastrophe and identity in exile, he demonstrated to which extent history served as a shield to guard against disappearance, thus how it became an «emergency science» among Palestinians.

First and foremost, as scholar Sa'di argued, the *Nakba* engendered the dispersion (in Arabic *shahat*)⁵. When the dust of the 1947-1949 war settled, the overwhelming majority of Palestinian Arabs, perhaps 700.000 to 800.000 people, between the 77 and the 83 percent of the indigenous population⁶, had either fled or been forcibly expelled from their homes and lands. The Palestinians who remained in what was now a Jewish state made up about 18 percent of Israel's, and lived under martial law for the next twenty years⁷. The society the Palestinians had composed over the centuries was, for the most part, now gone. Hundreds of towns and villages were renamed or bulldozed⁸. Property was expropriated *en masse* through various legal mechanisms⁹. As discussed in *Ibish*¹⁰, Palestinians' losses were felt both collectively and individually, through the simultaneous deprivation of land (in Arabic *ard*) and paternal ownership status (in Arabic

² NASSAR, Issam, «Reflections on Writing the History of Palestinian Identity», in *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture*, 8, 4/2002, 8, pp. 24-37, p. 34.

³ ANDERSON, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York, Verso Press, 2006.

⁴ SANBAR, Elias, «Out of Place, Out of Time», in *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 16, 1/2001, pp. 87-94, p. 87.

⁵ SA'DI, Ahmad H., «Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakba as a Component of Palestinian Identity», in *Political Science, Israel Studies*, 7, 2/2002, pp. 175-198.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

⁷ KANAANEH, Rhoda Ann, and NUSAIR, Isis, *Displaced at Home: Ethnicity and Gender among Palestinians in Israel*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2010.

⁸ KHALIDI, Walid, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*, Washington DC, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.

⁹ LUSTICK, Ian, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1980; PAPPÉ, Ilan, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, London, Oneworld Publications, 2006.

¹⁰ IBISH, Hussein, «A Catastrophe That Defines Palestinian Identity», in *The Atlantic*, May 14th 2018, URL: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/the-meaning-of-nakba-israel-palestine-1948-gaza/560294/>> [accessed 25 October 2023].

'ard), irrefutably leading to a social collapse. Moreover, next to the loss of a homeland, the disintegration of a society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of a hasty process of cultural destruction, it is important to highlight that, whether fled or expelled, virtually no Palestinian was allowed to return: most people who left their homes in 1948 believed they would have soon come back when the fighting stopped, no matter what the outcome. That, though, was a complete delusion: while the majority of scattered people stayed in exile, the ones who came back were put under the legal category of «present absentees», as their confiscated lands were turned into state ones and transferred to Jewish institutions. Since they were temporarily gone, the new Israeli state regarded their absence as the godsend that allowed a Jewish-majority country to suddenly emerge.

Despite that absence not being absolute, however, the reemergence¹¹ of Palestinian identity in exile after the *Nakba* was centrally concerned with cataloging disappearances. As Sanbar argued, the desire to recall and re-create previous ways of life ended up being elegiac, creating a kind of cultural substitution in speech through which to offset the sense of loss¹². Dispersed and lacking national institutions, archives and documents, Palestinians have had to resort to different venues of identity reconstruction: most of the past representations, for instance, were regained because enough material and fertile memories managed to elude the shattering experience of disintegration¹³. Narratives of pre-1948 and the *Nakba* were thus perceived as a crucial site for the preservation of collective memory, especially given that most first-generation Palestinians with experience of 1948 were illiterate, hence oral history was seen as the principal means by which the knowledge of this period has been preserved. In so doing, the «ongoing catastrophe» of Palestine (in Arabic *al-Nakba al-mustamarra*), although historically and geographically differentiated, has been serving as a unifying factor in the faceted coexistence of its components: the inhabitants of the Occupied Territories of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem; the Palestinians citizens of Israel; the communities of the diaspora and, last, the refugees.

¹¹ KHALIDI, Rashid, *op. cit.*

¹² SANBAR, Elias, *op. cit.*

¹³ Among this surviving material, is the rich collection of photographs, letters, lands' ownership documents and keys that will be later discussed.

1.2. After the memory: Palestinians and the Lebanese exiles

For the latter ones – particularly those living in Lebanon whose status is so radically uncertain – the creation of a historical and cultural inventory of relation to the homeland has been posited by many theorists of Palestinian nationalist identity as a way of countering an image of them as detached subjects¹⁴. Therefore, the oral tradition that ended up *mythologizing* the catastrophe became part of everyday practices of belonging among refugees to the point where, merging personal memory with pedagogical commemoration, «the past so thoroughly permeates inter-subjective relations that even generations who did not experience these events are, in some sense, expected to claim them as their own»¹⁵.

With the recent disappearance of the first generation of refugees who directly experienced the dispossession, though, in light of the cultural and material preservation of their memories, it is clear how the space of Palestinian refugee camps became the site of their survivals, leading to the end of a tradition of living memory and the beginning of one of mythicized history. In other words, as the French historian Pierre Nora has emblematically theorized in his seminal work *Lieux de memoire*¹⁶, we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left. The remnants of experience, Nora noticed, still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, have been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility. Refugee camps, thus, now that witnesses of their birth are dying, become *lieux de memoire* – «sites of memory» – because no longer *milieux de memoire* – «real environments» of it. Yet, because of the intention to remember that characterizes them, these places are still distinguishable from *lieux d'histoire*: mere «sites of history».

In line with that, the *Nakba* 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, although in different forms: the memorial preservation of that catastrophe today serves to connect all Palestinians to a specific point in time and space – or rather *out* of them – that has become an eternal present. Yet there is a post-1948 history, diachronically and diatopically localized, that differentiates the experiences of the Palestinian people in the time of different historical events and in the space of different geographical regions, which this article aims to deepen. The legacy of this too-little-narrated history manifests itself in the material heritage of the refugee camps, in their multifaceted and layered space according to the place of settlement and the events that happened, such as wars, natural disasters and further

¹⁴ ALLAN, Diana, «Mythologizing Al-Nakba: Narratives, Collective Identity and Cultural Practice Among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon», in *Oral History*, 33, 1/2005, pp. 47-56.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

¹⁶ NORA, Pierre, «Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire», in *Representations*, 26, 1989, pp. 7-25.

displacements, hence in the objects which, in the absence of archival institutions, serve as historical evidence of a past at risk of oblivion. Survived in a less official way and therefore more interesting for ethnographic studies, rather than in the aforementioned top-down processes – which aim to nationalize a scattered people –, such a varied, anthropological and somehow *materialized* history would rather fall into the category of bottom-up processes, generated by localized experiences and feelings. By differentiating between memory and history, understanding the refugee camps of today's Lebanon as sites of memory attempts to locate the concepts of identity and nationalism within the normal propel of their inhabitants' lives. While the historical *Nakba* is understood to be a common site of beginning, in fact, a number of contradictions, oppositions and juxtapositions have emerged since then. Once this is understood, it seems logical to reconsider this emphasis on the place of the narratives of 1948 in the production of Palestinian national identity as merely historical, while a deeper, living, constantly evolving, periodically revived – and thus *contemporarily* memorial – and disorganized one has been developing unseen in the silence of everyday practices among the inhabitants of the camps.

This article finally analyzes the nationalizing practices of everyday life among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, specifically in the form of material heritage. In the field of what scholars defined as «banal» or «everyday» nationhood, its aim is to examine how particular objects within the ordinary lives of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon articulate conceptions of national and personal identities. A significant issue concerns the different ritual practices of *materializing* Palestine between the community born in Lebanon, who experienced the sole displacement of 1948 *Nakba*, and the one that, firstly exiled in Syria, experienced a second displacement after the eruption of the conflict in 2011. Referring both to the discursive and the material, the study focuses on the analyses of the visible yet unseen, usually excluded from mainstream narratives on refugeehood: Palestinian national identity is indeed materialized in refugees' ordinary *lifehood*¹⁷, embedded within routine spaces, times and symbols whose incorporation in everyday existences functions as collective-identity-building ground for people experiencing long-term, as the Lebanese community, or ongoing, as the Syrian one, diasporas.

¹⁷ The choice of the abstract term, «lifehood», over «life», in this context, is dictated by the reference to the everyday condition of refugees as a status, as a condition, rather than as the mere state that follows birth and precedes death. It is the permanent and enduring aspect of living in the camps that we want to emphasize here: at the semantic opposite to the fleetingness of biological life; the existential condition of generations, as opposed to the mere existence of the individual.

2. Methodologies

2.1. Beyond oral historiographies

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 Palestinians¹⁸. The absence of official state archives, coupled with the loss or geographical dispersal of personal archives, especially for second-displaced communities in the Near and Middle Eastern region, «renders a resort to creative sources the sole avenue by which the contours of a Palestinian past can be reconstructed»¹⁹. In this regard, archivist Hana Sleiman noted the two-fold impact of the absence of a Palestinian state, with the consequent 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 Beirut²⁰. In this fragile context for historical production and conservation, 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 the dignity of historical documents²¹.

The relevance of Palestinian oral archives is thus based on a long tradition of collected memory that understands remembrance as an impulse for a factual and empirical accuracy of events which could challenge the Zionist version of the Promised Land's history. As such, witness testimonies of the *Nakba* are employed to construct a counter-history, to intercept the erasure of Palestinians from the Zionist unfolding of history. Some scholars have argued that to accomplish this task – to effectively speak back against such immense archival gaps – individuals must

¹⁸ SAAD, Dima, «Materializing Palestinian Memory: Objects of Home and the Everyday Eternities of Exile», in *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 80, 1/2019, pp. 57-71.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

²⁰ SLEIMAN, Hana, «The Paper Trail of a Liberation Movement», in *Arab Studies Journal*, 24, 1/2017, pp. 42-67; SLEIMAN, Hana, and CHEBARO, Kaoukab, «Narrating Palestine: The Palestinian Oral History Archive Project», in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 47, 2/2017, pp. 63-76.

²¹ ABU-LUGHOD, Lila, SA'DI, Ahmad H., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948 and the Claims of Memory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007; ALLAN, Diana, «Mythologizing Al-Nakba: Narratives, Collective Identity and Cultural Practice Among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon», *cit.*; DOUMANI, Beshara, «My Grandmother and Other Stories: Histories of the Palestinians as Social Biographies», in *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 30, 3/2007, pp. 3-10; DOUMANI, Beshara, «Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians: The Patrimony of Ihsan Nimr», in *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 36, 1/2009, pp. 3-12; KHALILI, Laleh, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007; MASALHA, Nur, «Remembering the Palestinian Nakba: Commemoration, Oral History and Narrative of Memory», in *Holy Land Studies*, 7, 2/2008, pp. 123-156; PÉREZ, Michael Vicente, «Materializing the nation in everyday life: on symbols and objects in the Palestinian refugee diaspora», in *Dialectical Anthropology*, 42, 4/2018, pp. 409-427; SAAD, Dima, *op. cit.*; SAYIGH, Rosemary, «Palestinian Camp Women as Tellers of History», in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 27, 2/1998, pp. 42-58; SLEIMAN, Hana, CHEBARO, Kaoukab, *op. cit.*

recount the *Nakba* chronologically and with accuracy, in form of coherent narratives²². In his seminal work *Silencing the Past*, for example, Trouillot²³ troubles the interchangeability of history and memory, especially in a framework of «impartial retrieval»: on the level of the individual, he argues, memories do not reveal themselves to us evenly, routinely, chronologically, or in coherent narrative forms – if ever at all.

It is also true, indeed, that overlapping memory and history risks to overlook, when not to exclude, alternative modalities of remembering that usually exist on the margins of canonical oral historiography. Separating the production of memory from the speakers' present conditions and from their socio-cultural environment of *narrating*²⁴, hence *inventing*²⁵, then *materializing*²⁶ the nation – till the point of *mythologizing* it²⁷ – is a way to accept without any criticisms a group of different individuals as one whole collectivity, and the summation of their testimonies as sufficiently eventful to corroborate a socio-anthropological theory. National identity is a cultural identity formed and transformed in relation to representation: whether in terms of objects, languages, or bodily practice, it is representation that makes possible the legibility of the nation as such. And since it is through the dominant representatives of a nation, hence from their version of historical memory, that we come to know what it means to be part of one, the bias of collective representations around nationhood is soon revealed. So it is not surprising that, even in a sensitive case as the Palestinian one, «national history stood over and excluded the local, the gendered, and the personal»²⁸.

To this list of neglected aspects, we should consider the *banal* one²⁹, namely that embodied in objects. The Palestinian flag; the lands' ownership legal documents; the key of return; the topography of refugee camps and the families locations within them; the oral heritage of histories and popular songs; the food recipes; the collections of letters and pictures; the paintings of Jerusalem and its Dome of the Rock; the olive trees; the embroidered dresses; the murals and the martyr posters, both in public and private settings; all of these objects, while iconizing national narratives and constituting a vision of Palestinian nationhood, can tell us about the enduring and

²² SAAD, Dima, *op. cit.*; TROUILLOT, Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.

²³ TROUILLOT, Michel-Rolph, *op. cit.*

²⁴ SLEIMAN, Hana, CHEBARO, Kaoukab, *op. cit.*

²⁵ HOBBSAWM, Eric, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

²⁶ PÉREZ, Michael Vicente, *op. cit.*

²⁷ ALLAN, Diana, «Mythologizing Al-Nakba: Narratives, Collective Identity and Cultural Practice Among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon», *cit.*

²⁸ SAYIGH, Rosemary, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

²⁹ BILLIG, Michael, *Banal nationalism*, London - Thousand Oaks (CA), Sage, 1995; HEARN, Jonathan S., «National Identity: Banal, Personal, and Embedded», in *Nations and Nationalism*, Hoboken, New Jersey, Wiley-Blackwell, 13, 4/2007, pp. 657-674.

unconscious sentiments of Palestine, as well as those shadows that are cast beyond what the dominant élites biasedly choose to report in their self-representation. Especially now that the generation born before 1948, the witnesses of the catastrophe, began to disappear, the material textures of the past are becoming more and more eloquent in researching the preservation of Palestinian identities in exile, and are silently making their way into the lived spaces of the camps of the present. These spaces are in fact profoundly changed from the period that followed the Oslo Accords and the Second Intifada, when the majority of the academic studies has been carried out³⁰, especially in the case of Lebanon³¹.

2.2 Shifting memories of a catastrophe

Since that time, oral history's approach of «making history from below» has had monumental implications for the resonance of Palestinian voices in both intellectual and public discourse³². Though, the disappearance of the grandparents from the camps' human geographies has started to challenge its methodologies and validity. Thus, an essential component of this research task was to move beyond a view of memory as a retrievable resource containing an essential truth about the past, and to attempt an ethnographic approach to it. As a dynamic practice, «where the fragments of an idealized past are woven into the times and spaces of an unhomely present»³³, such an ethnographical approach to mythicized histories would allow us to enhance existing methodologies of oral history archives, while contextualizing them within the ever-changing spaces of Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut Southern suburbs, Lebanon, where this study was conducted³⁴. By moving beyond paradigms of event-centered histories towards an attention to the

³⁰ ABUFARHA, Nasser, «Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange, and Olive Trees in Palestine», in *Identities*, 15, 3/2008, pp. 343-368; ABU-LUGHOD, Lila, SA'DI, Ahmad H., *op. cit.*; BSHARA, Khaldun, «A Key and Beyond: Palestinian Memorabilia in the Economy of Resistance», in *Working Paper Series*, 2008; DOUMANI, Beshara, «My Grandmother and Other Stories: Histories of the Palestinians as Social Biographies», in *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 30, 3/2007, pp. 3-10; DOUMANI, Beshara, «Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians: The Patrimony of Ihsan Nimr», *cit.*; FELDMAN, Ilana, «Refusing Invisibility: Documentation and Memorialization in Palestinian Refugee Claims», in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21, 4/2008, pp. 498-516; KHALILI, Laleh, *op. cit.*; MASALHA, Nur, *op. cit.*; NAJJAR, Orayb Aref, «Cartoons as a Site for the Construction of Palestinian Refugee Identity», in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 31, 3/2007, pp. 255-285; PETEET, Julie, *Transforming Trust: Dispossession and Empowerment among Palestinian Refugees*, in DANIEL, Valentine E., *Mistrusting Refugees*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, pp. 168-186; SWEDENBURG, Ted, «The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier», in *Anthropological Quarterly*, 63, 1/1990, pp. 18-30.

³¹ ALLAN, Diana, «Mythologizing Al-Nakba: Narratives, Collective Identity and Cultural Practice Among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon», *cit.*; HADDAD, Simon, «Sectarian Attitudes as a Function of the Palestinian Presence in Lebanon», in *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 22, 3/2000, pp. 81-100; SAYIGH, Rosemary, *op. cit.*

³² MASALHA, Nur, *op. cit.*

³³ SAAD, Dima, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

³⁴ The researcher interviewed 20 people among the Palestinian-Lebanese community, selected among those residing in the refugee camps of Shatila and Burj el-Barajneh, and other 20 among the Palestinian-Syrian ones who arrived in Lebanon after 2011 as a direct consequence of the conflict. The participants were aged

material textures of Palestinian exile, the research sets out to position these acts of telling the nation as comprising a practice of remembering that cannot be understood outside an attention to the material conditions of everyday exile. In doing so, it questions

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 generations³⁵.

The theories of signifying homelands outside geographical borders are multiple and well-established in the academic field³⁶. Questioning the ways in which nationhood happens outside of national movements, they all take inspiration from Michael Billig's seminal work *Banal nationalism*³⁷. Focused on the ideological habits that reproduce the nation, he suggested to look at nationalism within the implicit, repetitive, and symbolic reinforcements that assume the presence of nations. In a similar vein, other scholars have underscored the significance of routine practices for the making of what they call «everyday nationhood»³⁸ or «national sensorium»³⁹, focusing on the ordinary and stepping further to consider the relationship between nationalism and objects in the performance of daily practices. Also in the field of Palestinian studies, studies⁴⁰ have given considerable attention to the question of national meaning and identities through practices including that of the material preservation of heritage⁴¹.

Khalili, for instance, examined the importance of material objects in the context of commemorative practices in Lebanon, analyzing the collective rituals that enact nationhood

between 25 and 40 years old, alias the 3rd generation of the *Nakba*.

³⁵ SAAD, Dima, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

³⁶ ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C., «Iconic Consciousness: The Material Feeling of Meaning», in *Thesis Eleven*, 103, 1/2010, pp. 10-25; BRUBAKER, Rogers, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007; EDENSOR, Tim, *National Identity, Popular Culture, and Everyday Life*, Oxford, Berg Press, 2002; FOX, Jon E. MILLER-IDRISS, Cynthia, «Everyday Nationhood», in *Ethnicities*, 8, 4/2008, pp. 536-576; HEARN, Jonathan S., *op. cit.*; ZUBRZYCKI, Geneviève, *Material Matters: Materiality, Culture, and Nationalism*, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2017.

³⁷ BILLIG, Michael, *op. cit.*

³⁸ FOX, Jon E. and MILLER-IDRISS, Cynthia, *op. cit.*

³⁹ ZUBRZYCKI, Geneviève, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ ABUFARHA, Nasser, *op. cit.*; ABU-LUGHOD, Lila, SA'DI, Ahmad H., *op. cit.*; FELDMAN, Ilana, *op. cit.*; KHALILI, Laleh, *op. cit.*; NAJJAR, Orayb Aref, *op. cit.*; PÉREZ, Michael Vicente, *op. cit.*; PETEET, Julie, *op. cit.*; SAAD, Dima, *op. cit.*; SWEDENBURG, Ted, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ In her work among refugees in Gaza, for example, Feldman (FELDMAN, Ilana, *op. cit.*) emphasized the critical role objects play in the presentation of individual and collective claims: constituting what she calls a «visibility field», objects such as flags, keys, and legal documents all offer tangible evidence of Palestinian claims to their homes, self-determination and existence as an identifiable people, hence they justify dispossession and the right to return.

within the fabric of everyday life among Palestinian refugees⁴². These representations, she suggests, are not merely discursive: they are, rather, externalizations of memory that provide an occasion for examining the meaning and transformations of Palestinian nationalism in concrete forms, constituting a field of visibility that sustains awareness of Palestinians as a people with collective experiences and interests. As such, Palestinian objects also have their place: yet, these are not objects of exceptional use, nor the embodiment of «hot nationalism»⁴³, but rather created for and used within the practices of everyday life. Memory, then, also needs to be re-signified and understood as an ordinary practice: its recollection in material objects abruptly surfaces in unspoken moments, quietly hanging on walls or displayed on a desk, carefully spread out during a coffee ceremony, yet impossible to be known, if isolated and de-contextualized, for its meaning alone.

Inspired by the aforementioned studies' reckoning with class and gendered dynamics of exile, their ethnographical approach to the history of memory, and their attention to the ways in which the past unremarkably resurfaces in everyday spaces, this article aims to understand different forms of materialization of national memory in exile among groups of refugees who have faced different trajectories of displacement. All of these studies, in fact, despite being extremely valid, took into account only one community of refugees for each diasporic context. The outcomes of the Syrian conflict and the general dynamics of contemporary refugee movements in the Middle East, though, force us to address the secondary displacement of Palestinian refugees who, after the start of the conflict in 2011, lost any form of protection from the Syrian state and found themselves in a double refugee status, stateless from the moment they left Palestine. Among the number of Palestinian refugees displaced inside Syria, around 250.000 according to the UNRWA⁴⁴, more than 70.000 were forced to seek asylum in neighbouring countries, primarily to Lebanon, where the estimated number reaches 50.000⁴⁵, a large part originating from the Yarmouk camp in

⁴² KHALILI, Laleh, *op. cit.*

⁴³ BILLIG, Michael, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, a UN agency that supports the relief and human development of Palestinian refugees, established in 1949 by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to provide relief to all refugees resulting from the 1948 conflict. United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (2019), Palestine Refugees from Syria in Lebanon, URL: < <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees-syria-lebanon> > [accessed 31 July 2023]; United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (2022), About UNRWA, URL: < https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/about_unrwa_2022_2pager_eng.pdf > [accessed 31 July 2023]; United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (2022b), Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: Struggling to Survive, URL: < <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/palestine-refugees-lebanon-struggling-survive> > [accessed 31 July 2023].

⁴⁵ It is difficult to estimate the accurate number of Palestinian refugees who have entered Lebanon from Syria. As mentioned before, the UNRWA gives the number at around 50.000, but these figures should be viewed with caution as they do not come from a specific census of Palestinian Syrian refugees in the

Damascus. Through familiar kinship and transnational solidarity networks among diasporic contexts, whether for marital or economic reasons, Palestinian cross-border mobility from Syria to Lebanon was facilitated, and the two communities – coming from the same nation, yet separated since 1948 – eventually met, carrying different heritages of remembrance of the same catastrophe⁴⁶.

2.3. The dignity of the everyday

Once the theoretical context and the ethical positioning of this research has been explored, what follows is an effort to examine the methodological implications of this ethnographical framework in light of 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 historicizing oral testimonies based on the loss of the nation, rather than their reconstruction in exile. Scholars have recognized the issue of re-building national identity in the Palestinian diaspora, deepening the way in which nationhood, for forcibly displaced people, embodies in the objects of everyday life. But how could this be done without considering the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon from a historical-anthropological perspective, following their dynamic development and growth since the *Nakba*, through the Lebanese Civil War, to the outcomes of the recent Syrian refugee crisis? How might academic research otherwise record, collect, and archive the unspoken practices of memory that we might trace through an attention to the everyday objects of social actors and to the geographical expanse of their dreams and ambitions?

Through the adoption of an interpretive theoretical perspective, following the belief that research *on* human beings *by* human beings cannot yield objective results, the aim was to expand the existing studies' reach by suggesting the methodological importance of including in Palestinian oral history projects an ethnographic engagement with the everyday, their continuities and possible discontinuities and deviations. The question is, therefore, how such sites of cultivation of dreams, memories and aspirations for the future – namely the Palestinian refugee camps – could, during a 75-year long displacement, produce different forms of material

country, but are based on the number who have crossed the border between the two countries and registered with the UNRWA to get aid.

⁴⁶ AL-HARDAN, Anaheed M., *The Catastrophes of Today and the Catastrophe of 1948 in Syria*, Columbia University Press, Blog Archive, 2016; ALLAN, Diana, «Commemorative Economies and the Politics of Solidarity in Shatila Camp», in *Humanity*, 4, 1/2013, pp. 133-148; ALLAN, Diana, *Refugees of the Revolution: Phenomenologies of Palestinian Exile*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2014; DORAÏ, Mohamed Kamel, «Palestinian refugees and the current Syrian conflict: from settled refugees to stateless asylum seekers?», in *Social and Political Science*, 2016, pp. 158-173; STEL, Nora, «Facilitating Facts on the Ground. The politics of uncertainty and the governance of housing, land, and tenure in the Palestinian gathering of Qasmiye, South Lebanon», in *The Program on Governance and Local Development*, Working Paper No. 5, 2015, pp. 1-30.

projection of the same nation at depending on the region of exile, the legal conditions experienced there, and the possible confrontation with other conflicts, separations and family dispersals. In other words, whether and in what possible and different forms abandonment is expressed within the Palestinian experience of exile. Hence the final discussion attempted to compare the qualitative-data sets emerged from the two case studies, taking into consideration the different forms of identification with Palestinian spaces, objects and pictures in exile: that is the material heritage of national belonging and its various meanings for the two compared communities, the latter of whom – having suffered a further dispersion – was forced to separate from the memorial familiar collections, by this time scattered in the rubble of the Syrian conflict. In so doing, this research took up the call for a Palestinian historiography that moves beyond essentialized and universalistic narratives of indigeneity, displacement and return. Its goal, indeed, was to map the continuities and the discontinuities, in personal experiences of collective memory, upon which residues of the past silently resurface among the two aforementioned communities of refugees.

3. Discussion of the results⁴⁷

3.1. Memory as an object of history

A study on the materialization of Palestinian identity, obviously, could not lead to a list of objects without giving complexity to the definition of identity: a term to be declined in the plural form. Choosing to analyze two communities extremes, and inevitably simplifies, this plurality: since each individual, potentially, may have developed their own material lexicon on what Palestine in exile means. But the fundamental objective of the research revolves around the analysis of languages, albeit alternative, perceived as communitarian: the identity at the center of the focus is one, the national one, but declined locally. Therefore, it is on the remembered stories, the human, inaccurate, incoherent ones, as symbolic as childhood memories can be, rather than

⁴⁷ Qualitative data resulting from in-depth and key-informant interviews have been analyzed from a comparative approach, by comparing the findings and themes emerged from the two case studies of this research: the objects of national identification for the Palestinian-Lebanese community residing in the two accessed refugee camps, and those for the Palestinian-Syrian one now secondly-displaced in Lebanon, both living in and around Beirut, despite having experienced different trajectories of displacement. The objective of comparative data analysis is, by this approach, to investigate self-identification and sense of belonging claims across a subset of all possible worlds. For many social scientists, these worlds' borders are mainly based on nation-states scales; but they could be, of course, any forms of organization or collectivity. The claim of this choice is based on the assumption that, despite the Palestinian nation being a whole, its people suffered and experienced – thus (re)acted – different contexts, developing an extremely diverse spectrum of languages of belonging.

the refined ones of institutions, that this research wanted to focus primarily. Or, using Nora's categories, on memory, rather than history.

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past⁴⁸.

The oral and material heritage of pre-*Nakba* Palestine, among the inhabitants of the Lebanese refugee camps, was directly experienced by a generation that is disappearing from these spaces. That being said, since modern memory is properly archival, meaning that «it relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image»⁴⁹, what the study of the unsaid, of the invisible – in other words of the daily unconscious – has proposed to seek was the translation, objectified but still private, of a conception of land and identity based, instead, on the post-catastrophe. Therefore, the main focus of the reflection was centered on the experience of exile, on the unrepeatability of the individual in plural and diversified communities, rather than on the singular community reproduced always equal to itself in the unambiguousness of the only possible version of collective history. This has turned out to be a lot more difficult to investigate for the Palestinian community in Lebanon, compared to those displaced from Syria, for a series of historical and socio-economic, as well as undoubtedly political reasons. In fact, the individual memory of the nation in the Lebanese camps has been largely absorbed by its historical reconstruction: the positioning of the Palestinian community in Lebanon, its role during the civil war and the unjust accusation of responsibility for the economic collapse of the nation, placed in the delicate confessional framework of Lebanese society, partly explains the categorical exclusion of the Palestinians from the socio-economic life of the host country, leading back to the exodus of 1948 and the return to the villages in Galilee, respectively, the sole cause of suffering and the only invocable right. If it is true that the fulcrum of the present Palestinian identity revolves around the concept of catastrophe, in each of its possible declinations, the generations born and raised in exile have been educated to self-represent themselves in a coherent manner with respect to the historicized past of 1948.

⁴⁸ NORA, Pierre, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

Thus, the *Nakba*, from an experience of collective trauma, has become an epistemological caesura: the turning point for a narrative shift on the «invented» nation⁵⁰. It is a question of a present inevitably characterized by the loss of the nation – as well as further wounded by the defeat of 1967, and, for the communities in exile, condemned by the Oslo Accords – which has made it more urgent to develop a strict line of schooling for the documentation and the transmission of historical memory. Through this operation of epistemological sacralization – which united the dispersed nation, abstracting it in dogma – memory was able to crystallize itself in the founding myth of May 15th 1948, letting itself be besieged by history. Historically, in states that have realized their national ambitions, the nation has ceased to be a cause and turned into an obvious issue, history has become a social science, and memory transformed into a private matter. However, this cannot be said for the case of Palestine. In fact, considering the continuous and timeless nature of the Palestinian catastrophe, emblematically condensed in the Arabic expression of *al-Nakba al-mustamarra*, «the ongoing catastrophe» – its eternal presence, albeit in continuous evolution, subject to continuous change, deformation, even the possibility of manipulation – the limit of a discourse aimed at musealization rather than memorial production, at the historicization of collective experience rather than the vocalization of individual experiences of history, is therefore evident.

On the other hand, in the Romance languages there is a linguistic deficit between experiencing stories and making history, the latter being understood as the intellectual operation that makes the former intelligible. The English language contrasts *stories* with *history*, while revealing the common root of an aspect of storytelling linked to the unofficial nature of memory and one, instead, to the authority of scientific knowledge. Arabic is instead different, as it differentiates between *tarikh*, «history», and *qussas*, «stories». Moreover, within the spectrum of «stories» it distinguishes the narrated – *qussas* – from those properly lived – *hikayat*. The distinction between the two ways of historicizing became extreme with the emergence of historical awareness – in the Palestinian case centered around the key date of 1948. But there is another aspect, that is the ambition for coherence, which has progressively cornered the former – personal memory – to concentrate on the latter – historical authority. It is a political act, above all, that Oslo has crystallized, and that research such as this one aim to question, or at least to problematize. Memory and history, it bears repeating, are not synonymous: living in memory, perpetuating it, striving to conserve it in patrimonial form would not force anthropological theory to coin the expression of «sites of memory». Existing, in that case, would mean that every gesture, even the most daily, even the most private, would be experienced as the primordial repetition of timeless

⁵⁰ HOBBSAWM, Eric, *op. cit.*; LEWIS, Bernard, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1975.

practices in a perfect identification between action and meaning⁵¹. With the appearance of the trace, however, of the mediation and distance between the two concepts of memory and history – in other words with the explication of parallelism: and it is worth emphasizing that when two things are parallel, they neither coincide nor are they destined to never meet – the reign of the former was abandoned to enter that of the latter.

Yet the memorial collectivization of the Palestinian heritage in exile, its transmission in historical form, if on the one hand has suffocated the real and private memory, on the other – by ignoring it – has left it the freedom to develop unseen, exercising the right to inconsistency and oblivion. Furthermore, real memory, precisely because it is in constant motion, is more difficult to subject to analysis and criticism. For academic studies it is in fact much easier to deconstruct standardized and widely shared narratives – such as those of the loss of historic Palestine – than those, not yet normalized, of its reconstruction in exile. Ultimately, this research aims to deal with this matter: so easy to deny in oral narratives, less so in the intimate and private sphere of everyday objects, the Palestinian identity of exile proves to be able to be made explicit in alternative, personal, incoherent, dialectical, vulnerable, deformable, contradictory, destructible, finally forgettable, languages.

3.2. Losing Yarmouk: re-signifying home and return

From the comparative approach of this study, the results of participatory observations and semi-structured interviews led to the development of the following points. First of all, that the experience of a second catastrophe, for the Syrian Palestinians, has called into question the thesis of the decades-long stabilization of Palestinian exile. New diasporic trajectories, from the perspective of contemporary migrations that are no longer sedentary, but fluid and dynamic, have led to awareness of the instability of refuge, the porosity of borders and the multiplicity of identities for dispersed people in the Middle Eastern region. Having experienced a further displacement, for the community of Yarmouk, has led to the re-signification of the term *nakba*: the catastrophe of separation from home, the martyrdom of the loved ones, the uncertainty of exodus and the progressive disillusionment of return, from narrated and inherited story, *qissa* (singular form of *qussas*), suddenly took on the features of the lived one, *hikaya*. And today, more than ten years after that second loss, in the absence of standardized narratives, legal protection and political projects for the recognition and reunification of the community is still a living memory, therefore extremely fragile, forgettable and mortal. Obviously, there are no attempts to make a museum of Syria in the spaces of the Lebanese exile: above all because, as has already been said, the standardized discourses on the Palestinian diaspora foresee that the homeland, and the consequent goal of return, is one and only, namely to historic Palestine. Furthermore, since the

⁵¹ NORA, Pierre, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

Syrian catastrophe initially targeted a particular group, both citizens and non-citizens, men of military age, forcing dissidents into prison, martyrdom or, at best, exile, the community already disintegrated in the first diaspora was further decimated by the war and the political positioning of individuals in it. It is clear that the Syrian Palestinians who fled to Lebanon in 2012 did not bring their house keys with them: nor crockery, work tools or collections of photographs. Firstly, because the escape had not been planned; secondly, and more evidently, because their families – the elderly, children and women – would have remained: or if displaced, as would later have happened, they would have prioritized other destinations, above all within Syria. But would it be so hard to imagine? After all, those of Syria are the houses in which three generations of Palestinians have articulated their lives for more than seven decades. The gesture of keeping the key would have been spontaneous: the hope of returning to it completely understandable.

If not in the objects, however, which the outcome of this research has proved not to have been massively preserved, from the camp of Yarmouk to the Lebanese exile, it is in the life stories, in the rituals and in the forms of sociality that the question of a double home, of a double reconstruction – and a possible double destination of return – emerged with greater force. Similar objects and practices that the great-grandparents had brought with them from Palestine, such as drinking coffee or the value of identity papers and land ownership's documents, seem to have been reintroduced from Yarmouk, but dressed in a new influence and incomprehensible meanings for the community of Palestinian refugees in the camps of Lebanon. For example, during one of several afternoons spent in Shatila in conversation with Kareem – a Palestinian refugee originally from 'Akka and now further displaced from the camp of Yarmouk – a detail came to light as we drank coffee. I was bringing the typical cup with flowers and leaves to my mouth without accompanying it from the *sahen*, the support saucer, when he spontaneously exclaimed *al-finjan wbeit hamahek*, an expression difficult to translate from Arabic referring to the family of the spouse and to the care about in-laws. In short, sipping coffee from a cup without a plate, on my part, would have meant not appreciating my mother-in-law. This, to my surprise, is a Syrian custom that is completely alien to Palestinians and Lebanese who have never been exposed to it. When I spoke to the other participants from Yarmouk about this idiom, on the other hand, they all recognized it and laughed at it with nostalgia, rediscovering in the cultural – and evidently banal – basin of idioms a space for the affirmation of identity and personal memories.

The same ritual object, a traditional cup of coffee, which in semi-structured interviews with Lebanese Palestinians had emerged as an eloquent symbol of connection to their national origins, took on a completely different meaning in an informal conversation with a Syrian Palestinian, proving that personal memory, when not subjected to national history, leads the sense of belonging to be expressed in the beginning, rather than in the origin: that is the space of the first displacement which, observed now with real and not imagined nostalgia, takes on the features of

a possible place of home. A similar aspect emerged from the comparison between the value attributed to documents: among the objects that express national identity, legal and administrative ones such as passports or birth certificates come easily to mind, especially in an exceptional case such as that of Palestinians, whose very particular existential state manifests itself in a series of prohibitions, interdictions and impediments that the borders, checkpoints or airports seem to demonstrate every time they come across them. In showing me the objects from her family archive that survived 1948, Dana, a Palestinian refugee in Burj el-Barajneh, pulled an old piece of paper protected by a transparent plastic bag from a pile of books and diaries. It was her grandmother's birth certificate, dated 1946, from the village of Al-Kabri, filled out in Arabic and Hebrew, which in the tragedy of the exodus, two years later, the great-grandparents took her with them to Lebanon. For her, however, more than a living piece of her personal identity as an exiled and a Palestinian, it is rather a collective historical testimony. Youssef, on the other hand, who was born and raised in Yarmouk, to my question about an object identifying his national identity, seemed to have no hesitation in showing me his Canadian passport: even if smelling new, although both his houses are now reduced to unrecognizable rubble, it is the instrument which, according to him, can guarantee his return, to Damascus as well as to Jaffa, and which has already guaranteed his reunification with the family in Beirut.

Even the issue of return is an obvious and thorny difference between the two communities. If the term *nakba*, «catastrophe», and that of «home», *beit*, are re-signified, if the imagined nostalgia of the origin is accompanied by the experienced one of the beginning, then it is evident that also the *'awda*, «return», ends up taking on multipurpose facets. What is certain is that preserving the memory of a place means guaranteeing the possibility of returning to it. The question therefore concerns which memory we take care to preserve – whether that of historical Palestine or that of Palestine in exile. From the interviews, it emerged that for the Lebanese Palestinians, the homeland to be preserved is the pre-1948 one, or, in the case of the martyrs of the resistance, the one linked to the post-Oslo state borders: little space is guaranteed for making museums, for example, to the fallen ones in exile and for the ones in exile. There is a memorial to the victims of the 1982 massacre in the camp of Shatila, but as of today it is closed, and none of my interviewees ever mentioned it. On the other hand, the Syrian Palestinian community showed that it is starting to collect, in memorial form, its own experiences and memories of what Yarmouk was. This is the case, for example, of the many dead under the Syrian regime that my interviewees did not hesitate to define as *shuhada*, «martyrs», even without printing their portraits on the streets' walls. The outcome is that of similar narratives, more or less objectified, to which different meanings are attributed: crystallized and statically linked to the history of the 1948 catastrophe, in the case of the Lebanese exile; dynamic, contradictory and questioned by the memory of 2011, in the case of the Syrian community. By nature, multiple yet specific, plural yet individual,

spontaneous memory defies the suspicion of history. The first is rooted in the concrete, in spaces, in gestures; the second, on the other hand, is closely linked to temporal continuities, progressions and relationships between artifacts, which can be more easily musealized in the form of a material object or, more and more, of a visual image. Consequently, by belonging to everyone and to no one, history exercises its claim to universal authority⁵²: and the key to the return, so present in the Lebanese camps and with no more owners, is an exemplary proof of this.

Resorting once again to the categories theorized by Pierre Nora in his *Les lieux de memoire*, it will be said, undoubtedly simplifying, that the approach to national identity for the Lebanese Palestinian community has emerged as more historical; while that of the Syrian Palestinians as purely memorial. If analyzed from the favored perspective of material heritage, this is easily explained by noting how the forced detachment from inherited culture – banally, from the objects kept by the grandparents in the Syrian exile to ensure the immortality of Palestinian memory – has produced a sense of distrust, for a generation forced into two exiles, towards materialization. Since everything that had been collected, preserved and musealized in Yarmouk has been lost, even the immovability of history – and of the history of identity in exile – has been called into question, problematizing the sense of a catastrophe to mourn as well as that of a house to rebuild and a memory to return to. The great absence of Syrian Palestinian women, due to the major flight of men who escaped the coercive military service in Syria, may have influenced the non-preservation of certain objects and the non-reconstruction of certain spaces, especially domestic ones. If Rosemary Sayigh was right in defining women as «subversive tellers of history»⁵³, guardians of private and spontaneous memories – those who more than others lend themselves to material objectification – then their absence from the earliest Syrian exodus, similarly to that of the elderly, suggests itself as one of the possible reasons for Yarmouk's memorial mortality.

But it is worth remembering: that what is immortal – that is to say mythical or divine – is not alive, but the opposite. What, in other words, can die, meaning that it cannot survive the passage of time: the perishable, the forgettable, the mortal, this is what is actually living. The double displacement has led to a sudden and unexpected approach to the direct experience of catastrophe, re-signifying it, even without such a widely shared material or narrative reproduction. The destruction of places of Palestinian memory in Yarmouk has triggered a new mechanism of spontaneous memory production. The difference with respect to pseudo-museum spaces existing in the Lebanese camps⁵⁴, is remarkable, where ritual practices and traditional objects are preserved by a dying generation to capture their testimonies in a collectively

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁵³ SAYIGH, Rosemary, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Such as *Deir al-Shaikhuka*, in Burj el-Barajneh, preserving a rich collection of old cookware, coffee sets, keys, and instrument for agriculture from pre-1948 Palestine.

recognized version of identity and sense of belonging. The refugee camps in Lebanon are out-and-out archives: and since living memory is no longer able to remember, they – the *lieux* – become a deliberate and calculated secretion of lost memories⁵⁵. On the contrary, the living memory of Syria does not allow, or at least not yet, the foundation of new sites of memory, calling for the foundation of museums, the celebration of anniversaries, the organization of ceremonies or the pronouncement of elegies: since the fundamental event, the starting point, has not yet been collectively historicized. In other words, it still belongs to the individual. Experiencing the *Nakba* evidently remains the founding pillar of any Palestinian identity, but what slips here is the approach, the positioning, the perspective of understanding it. From passive transmission, the exodus has changed into active reflection: from inheritance, into its reproduction.

3.3. Beyond the object: reconstructing the social self

It should be wondered, however, if an act of collective historicization for Syrian Palestinians and their experience of double displacement was actually at play, what material objects could be selected for its eventual musealized preservation. The practicality of evacuation, and not the archival need to make history, is what in the aftermath of 1948 saw collections of keys, crockery, work objects, photo albums, documents and traditional clothes piled up in the non-existent cellars of exile: the survival, in other words, of a way of being in community, well before standardizing discourses were imposed on the daily living practices of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons. In this case, surviving was a social act rather than being a historical-archival one.

One way to investigate these survival dynamics of Palestinian exile could concern following the displacement trajectories of families – this time intact – within Syria. Academic studies have confirmed Yarmouk's attempted social reconstruction among internal displaced, analyzing, for example, neighborhood reproduction practices within the Qadsayya suburb of Damascus, where many Yarmouk families have been displaced⁵⁶. In some corners, Qadsayya seems to duplicate Yarmouk's social network, such as the bustling market of Lubyā street, which many of this research's interviewees often mentioned. That same Lubyā street, which took its name from a village in the sub-district of Tiberias in historical Palestine – following the custom of the first generation of naming the place of exile after the village of origin which was also seen in the analyzed Lebanese camps – is today a ravaged shadow of itself, destroyed sixty-four years after the destruction of its namesake. Reproducing neighborhood spaces, although unrecognizable, therefore becomes a means of preserving their community: the domino effect of replication of

⁵⁵ NORA, Pierre, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ AL-HARDAN, Anaheed M., *op. cit.*

places that begins in Palestine confirms that its mechanism of self-reproduction also perpetuates in secondary displacement.

There is therefore another constant, apart from the catastrophe – that is the tendency towards socialization – which gathers the Palestinian communities around the sense of their own condition of exile. This seems to confirm the intuition about the social rather than spatial essence of Palestinian life in Yarmouk. Reconstructing it proves possible only starting from its sociality: and in the intimate and individual – or rather, in the intimate and individual experience of the social – this attempt at reproduction, neither historical nor archival, is already underway in the intricate, contradictory and often unconscious labyrinth of remembering. And memory, as has been said, is also and above all a guarantee of return. Seemingly denying its material preservation, the memorial heritage of this exceptional community proves to be a constantly changing process; being always present and always current, it preserves within itself the fragile dimension of becoming. It has already been said that the possibility that Yarmouk will be forgotten makes it a mortal memorial space, and therefore alive: only what can die, because it can be forgotten – and this is no coincidence – can say it is truly alive. On the contrary, the memorialization efforts of three generations of displaced people have ensured that the mythical memories of pre-48 Palestine will never die. This, if what has been said above is logical, at least instills the doubt that such memories are alive, even for the generation that experienced them is now disappearing: willingly or not, those who have chosen to occupy the position of crystallizing the memory and passing it on, immutable, to future generations, they have become the authors of a decisive act of «post-memory», where «post» signals, more than a temporal delay and a mere location, an aftermath⁵⁷. Described as the relationship of second generations with strong, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their birth, but which were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right, post-memory dynamics often find an informal space of transmission in the family, as well as an idiom of remembering in the genre. The language of the family, as well as that of the body, as reported by Hirsch⁵⁸, defines a form of expression that is at the same time more direct and ruthless than social and public discourse. And yet post-memory is not a movement, method, or idea, but

a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience [...]; a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ HIRSCH, Marianne, «The Generation of Postmemory», in *Poetics Today. International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication*, 29, 1/2008, pp. 103-128, p. 106.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

Though, the culture of history that is expressed in the wreckage of the lost house, the inherited symptomatology of loss, in the relics of a time that is no longer, is not in fact equivalent to the culture of experienced memories of everyday traumas: at the same time, the *lieux de memoire*, like museums or memorials, are far from being *milieux*, living environment of it, untranslatable in material form as long as the experience is alive. On the contrary, unarchived objects that still carry the vital load of their existence – objects that exist by themselves, and not for an external gaze – until not musealized yet, or musealized but then destroyed, carry the action and meaning of the *Nakba* to rejoin. These, for decades parallel but without ever coinciding, have regained their mutual adherence when the generation of grandchildren has retraced the exodus of the grandparents, reproducing it out of history, not in myth but in reality; violating it; spontaneously and constantly updating it; eventually, unconsciously reproducing it. The same happened with the approximate attempts at social reconstruction in the second exile of which, to the inexperienced eyes of a foreign researcher as I am, there is still no trace. Since those memories have not yet been historicized – going against the idea of a single return, and affirming the possibility of a second home – then the space of their exercise cannot be a site, not a *lieux*: but a *milieux*, a living environment, open to the possibility of oblivion, therefore real.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Pluralizing Palestine: towards new academic writings on exile and home

What form of memory we want to give space to, without placing it in sterile display cases, is therefore the question from which a new narrative of Palestinian identity in exile should begin. Besieged by history, the places of memory in the Lebanese camps have neutralized their *milieux*; the biographies of musealized objects today tell the story of a nation, rather than a community, in which every Palestinian, in every era, can potentially identify. The extraordinary strength of such narratives is not in itself harmful: but it risks stifling the momentum of narrating an alternative reality, of active resistance, for too-long victimized diasporic communities.

Yet the tension between social reconstruction and material preservation is not in itself antithetical. Upon closer inspection, it will in fact be clear that the reconstruction of their place of belonging in exile, for the Palestinians of Yarmouk, is also material, albeit inspired by the community drive that denies attachment to the actual, material home⁶⁰. Is it thus a matter of time? Perhaps, to see this materialized we have to wait: perhaps the act of objectification requires

⁶⁰ The case of the gathering of secondly-displaced Palestinians from Syria in an apartment in Furn el-Chebbak, Beirut, for more than six years after their arrival in 2012, might prove to be the act of second exile's joining together, as well as a first step in socially reconstructing one-national-self. This, in fact, seems to retrace the same survival thrust of the first generation of Palestinian refugees in the aftermath of 1948.

the time of stasis that the new dynamics of migration and displacement in the Middle Eastern region seem to persist in denying. It has been analyzed how the first refugee camps in Lebanon reflected the community aggregation of the villages of Galilee: the musealization of those origins came later, with the eventual stabilization of temporariness. The key itself, perhaps the most emblematic icon of exile, became a symbolic object when it was intuited that return was becoming utopia and refuge a permanent condition: until then, it must have maintained its use value, jealously preserved in the belief that there still was a door to open.

However, as times change, so do the forms and surfaces of self-expression. The reconstruction of Yarmouk, given the multiple diasporic trajectories of its community, did not take place in a single fixed space: as did not the one of the hundreds of evacuated and destroyed villages in the Galilee⁶¹. Yet, more than between Yarmouk and the Galilee, more than between 2011 and 1948 – catastrophe against catastrophe – what this research ended up bringing together is, metaphorically, 1949 with 2012: the day after the destruction, the capacity for resilience, the reconstruction effort in exile, the confirmation that Palestine is more than a geographical land, it is a way of being in society, a daily act of resistance, a people bound by ties, capable of recognizing each other, and at the same time renew itself, not only in loss and destruction but also, and above all, in its innate ability to recompose itself. And to do it starting from the neighborhood: which is perhaps the dimension that, above all others, these two communities separated for seven decades and now reunited in their own way have shown that they have always and profoundly had in common.

In conclusion, to put it in literary terms – borrowing the reflections of Professor Said⁶² – in his *Theory of the Novel* Georg Lukács contrasts the epics with the novel: the classic that emanates from stable cultures, where values are clear, identities settled and life unchanging, to the literary form of modernity emancipated from the unreality of fantasy. The novel, he states, is the form of transcendental homelessness: or, without forcing the metaphor, that of the modern exile. The mythical Homeric Ulysses finally returns to Ithaca, the only world possible, which has remained to him faithful and intact for over ten years. On the other hand, the Irish James Joyce – another exile, almost thirty centuries later – under the same semantic field, turned to be the spokesman of a feeling that aspires to the possibility of new worlds, of other destinations, of multiple dreams, of corruptibility, of betrayals and forgiveness, of deep and human contradictions, in one only long day. And as long as Palestinian life resembles a never-ending Odyssey; as long as Ithaca stays an idealized and distant destination, yet always the goal of every wandering; as long as Penelope is forced to secretly keep the promise of her fidelity, while everyone suspects she will soon forget

⁶¹ KHALIDI, Walid, *op. cit.*

⁶² SAID, Edward, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2001.

the exiled Ulysses, it will be up to the narrator of our era to choose how to tell the life of hundreds of thousands of refugee-pilgrims: if as an epic chant or as a modern novel. Not only it is appropriate, but also necessary to start telling Palestinian lives in exile as open-ending stories embellished with new directional trajectories; to re-signify the return as a journey towards oneself, rather than towards a land – be it Palestine, Syria or Lebanon; to claim, against criminal Zionist narratives, not the surrender: but the inadmissible existence of the Palestinian humanity – that is, as such, open to new ambitions and dreams. Seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision⁶³. Most people, in fact, are aware of one nation, one family, one home: exiles, instead, are aware of at least two. Now is the time for academia – and not only literature – to make space for these pluriform *hikayat*, «life stories», and for Palestine to be finally told not as a grammar, but as a way of being: not just as an origin, but as a solid, existing and dignified beginning. Wherever it might be, wherever it might lead to.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

THE AUTOR

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