



PALESTINIAN CAMP WOMEN AS TELLERS OF HISTORY

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This paper points to the value of personal narratives as a source for historians of the Palestinian people, arguing from the need to revise concepts of national history to include the experience of nonelite classes, women, localities, and the diaspora. Life stories recorded between 1990 and 1992 with women of different generations from Shatila camp in Lebanon are used to support this argument.

WOMEN'S CENTRALITY TO NATION AND STATE FORMATION, their absence from written history, the inappropriateness of conventional research methods for discovering women "in history"—all these have been the focus of recent feminist theory.¹ But up to now little attention has been paid to the actual role of women in Arab/Muslim milieus in transmitting local histories, even though this lies "under our noses" in daily life and in classic texts about the Middle East, for example Hilma Granqvist's *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village*. For this study, covering all marriages in the Palestinian village of Artas a hundred years back from the time of fieldwork (1925–27), Granqvist relied on two senior Artas women as collaborators and informants.² Their knowledge of local and family histories could certainly be paralleled in the Mashriq, Maghrib, and elsewhere.

Women in Palestinian refugee camps have a rich stock of historical experience in the form of *qussas* (stories; singular *qissa*), transmitted mainly in women's gatherings and family settings. Their stories are fragmentary and particularistic, limited to what the speaker has witnessed or heard directly, since veracity is essential to the *qissa*.³ Camp women's stories about the past are seldom framed in a broader chronological narrative, and because of this they are not recognized as history, either by themselves or others. This point was illustrated for me in 1974, when I asked a young teacher in Burj al-Barajna camp to suggest people who could speak about the experience of being Palestinian. His first list of twenty potential speakers did not contain a single woman. Later, a politicized seventeen-year-old told me, "My mother told us about Palestine but she didn't know the plots." The idea of Palestinian history as "plots" (i.e., international and regional politics) was part of the mind-set of the Resistance movement. For nationalists of this period, national history stood over and excluded the local, the gendered, and the personal.

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Oral life stories are only one of many forms of personal testimony that offer material to historians of the Palestinian experience. The value of oral testimony is both substantive and stylistic: It registers the experience of marginal social sectors, and it preserves some of the social and cultural qualities of direct speech. I propose that the life stories of refugee women from low-income strata do not merely “reflect” national history; they offer the materials for a more complete, more “real” national history—one not narrowly focussed on men, political parties, and the national elite, but taking in women, home, families, nonelite classes, and varied diaspora locales.

Women tell history as witnesses of political events, as political actors whose participation changes over time, and as mothers/housewives/community members whose roles also reflect political, ideological, economic, and social change. Ways of narrating the gendered “self” reflect these multiple shifts. From an array of possible approaches to the topic of women’s life stories as history, this paper selects three: (1) reflections in life stories of historical events, (2) the embodiment in older rural women’s stories of a pre-1948 aesthetics, and (3) dominant representations of the “self” as source of history.

THE SPEAKERS

The life stories that form the basis of this paper were recorded between 1990 and 1992. The eighteen speakers were women who had at some time lived in or near Shatila, a small camp just outside Beirut’s southern municipal boundary, once a main site of PLO/Resistance institutions. Their ages ranged from twenty-six to ninety, and they divided almost equally among “the generation of Palestine” (those born and married in Palestine), “the generation of the Disaster” (those who were born in Palestine and grew up in exile), and “the generation of the revolution” (those born in Lebanon who grew up after the liberation of the camps in 1969). This age span was valuable in offering comparative source material for socially and culturally oriented history writing.

The speakers’ social background also varied: fourteen came originally from villages, four from cities. Eight were from home-owning families outside the camp, six had rights to camp housing, four were homeless squatters.⁴ As for marital status, seven were married, seven widowed, three single, one divorced. Almost all had lost close family members and/or homes through violence.⁵ Educational and work history differences among the speakers pointed to the effects of exile and “progress”: None of the nine born before 1942 had gone to school, whereas all of the nine younger speakers had, with two having completed secondary school and three having reached university. Employment histories showed a parallel shift: Of the nine oldest speakers, only one, a widow, had worked full-time until retirement, while of the rest three had never worked for wages, three had done casual/manual labor in early exile, and two had helped in family shops. Of

the younger nine, all except two were salaried employees. Four worked to support parents, families, or their own households.

Most of the life stories were recorded in “public,” in the presence of family, neighbors, or fellow workers. In this way, I tried to simulate conditions in which *qussas* are naturally produced. Questions from audiences were invaluable as prompts for timid speakers and pointed to themes around which collective memory has been constructed in refugee camps. Though recording sessions varied little in terms of audience, with others present in all but two cases, speakers varied greatly in the way they responded to my request for the “story of their life.” Some launched readily into self-sustained narratives, while others hesitated, depending on audience questions to move from one episode to another. This gave rise to two kinds of recordings (and texts) that correspond to two different genres: the life story (univocal, constructed around a singular subject traced through chronological time); and the testimony (polyvocal and nonchronological, in which collective experience and concerns are in the foreground and the singular subject, the “I,” remains latent).⁶



Three Palestinian camp women exchange stories over coffee. (Joss Dray)

Conditions during the period of recording, characterized by insecurity, impoverishment, intra-Resistance conflict, and decline in national mobilization, are reflected in what people said and did not say. Syrian arrests imposed discretion on speakers and researcher alike, and I never asked about political affiliations. Yet several women spoke with a courage that suggested that current oppression had intensified a habit of testifying that may be gender and class specific. National crisis framed all the recordings—as motive for

speaking, as content and structure, as generating models for the “self”—yet the period of recording also encouraged certain “revisions” to be expressed. For example, despite the public nature of recording sessions, three speakers spontaneously voiced complaints against certain aspects of the “sex-gender system” (for example, coerced marriage), something not likely to have happened under the resistance movement with its prioritization of national struggle.⁷

NATIONAL HISTORY IN CAMP WOMEN’S LIFE STORIES

A striking feature of the life stories is the primordality of the exodus from Palestine as “beginning,” displacing the more usual starting points such as birth, place of origin, or first memories. Most speakers already adult in 1948 began with it, as did many of the “generation of the Disaster,” too young in 1948 to have personal recollections. Only with the “generation of the revolution” did this narrative feature cease. The degree of detail of that terrible journey preserved in memory over four and a half decades signals not only the significance assigned to it retrospectively—as historic mistake, rupture from Palestine and beginning of exile, precursor of other tragedies—but also suggests processes of collective memory formation as individual stories were told and retold in refugee gatherings.

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Hajji Badriyya⁸ (born 1926, married 1943, housewife, never employed), already married and with children in 1948, began her story with the war:

We were all staying in our village.⁹ Nothing was happening. They were fighting Israel, we were staying. At the end, we were sleeping, it was night. My sister-in-law came and woke me: “Get up!” I said, “What’s happening?” She said: “The army¹⁰ has retreated.” “How could it retreat?” “It has!”

Israel was threatening Majd al-Kroom a lot. Because our village has mountains on each side and there’s only one road . . . [Israel] closed the road, but they couldn’t enter our village . . . Perhaps there was some agreement with the army. God only knows. Nothing was happening, and then at nine o’clock we woke up, and people were all leaving. The men were all scattered in the mountains, fighting. They caught the leader of the army. They asked him, “Where are our men?” He said: “Your men are in the mountains, and I am crying for you. I got the order to retreat at two o’clock but I refused to retreat . . . You have no choice but to surrender to Israel.” The young women all got up and left because they had been frightened ever since Dayr Yasin. They left immediately, the men and young women all left. We

walked from Majd al-Kroom until we reached Rmeish [in Lebanon].

Most older speakers gave the briefest of introductions before reaching the *hijra*,¹¹ often by citing the relationships that identify and shape their lives. For example, Umm Ghassan (born 1930, married 1945, occasionally self-employed) began as follows:

I am sixty years old. I had a son, Ghassan, and a daughter, Zuhayra. We left and came to Lebanon. There were planes and cannons shelling us. We ran away. The man stayed at home, he refused to leave. Just me and the kids left. And we came [sighs] to Lebanon. I wish we had died rather than come here.

A detailed *hijra* story comes from Umm Mahmud (born 1933, married 1947, never employed) from Jaffa, married one year before the war:

We left Palestine from the port. My father came and said, "Yallah! You mustn't stay here. The Jews are attacking us." We were afraid about honor, because of Dayr Yasin. So my father took us and we left. [Responding to a question about her husband] I didn't even leave him a note. He used to say, "I won't leave even if the house is destroyed over my head." But my parents . . . took me and we left for the port. There was shelling over our heads while we were at the port. We stayed there waiting for our turn to go. We went in a row-boat, not a ship. It was full. Many people were with us. We set off. My son was only one month old. We hadn't gone far when rain and wind started, we felt that the boat was going to overturn with us on board When we were in the middle of the sea, halfway to Beirut, we had a pregnant woman on board, she was in labor. Who was going to help her? "Oh people! Wake up! We need help, in God's name!" So my aunt, God have mercy on her soul, told her, "Come over here" and made her squat. And a baby was born and it was a boy. They had nothing to wrap him in. I had a bundle of things for my son, so I undid it and gave her some. There wasn't anything to cut the umbilical cord. My younger brother Isma'il had a piece of iron in his pocket. They took it from him and cut the cord.

The core of the *hijra* account of Umm Nayif (born 1912, married 1930, worked in agriculture in early exile) was an anecdote about arriving in Rmeish with four children, drenched in rain, to seek shelter with a woman

she knew of only as “Umm Elias,” and how hard it was to find her because so many Rmeish women had this name. Too long to be quoted at length, this anecdote is noteworthy for its similarity in both form and style to the *hikaya* (folktale), with ordeal, suspense, and “happy ending”—the reunion with Abu Nayif. Most significant, in a second recording session, Umm Nayif repeated the story using exactly the same sequencing of episodes, quotations of her own and others’ speech, set phrases, injections of humor, and tones of voice. This was a story that had been crafted through frequent repetition in family and neighborhood settings into the form in which I recorded it.

With two exceptions, the absence of national politics from older speakers’ first accounts was noticeable, apart from phrases such as “They were fighting” or “The Jews attacked us.” One exception was the oldest speaker, Umm Muhammad (born c. 1900, married in 1915/16, widowed before 1948, worked in early exile), who began her testimony with a dramatic account of a British army raid on the village of al-Birwa:

Someone told the *Inkleez* [British] that there were *thuwar* [revolutionaries, guerrillas] hiding in al-Birwa. So they came and captured them and took them to an open space where there were cactus bushes. It was July. They told the young men to cut the cactus branches, and then they threw them on top of the young men and stepped on them.

Other men, including Umm Muhammad’s son, were ordered to carry heavy stones. The British soldiers stopped the women from taking water to the men:

The *Inkleez* stood in my way. The soldier said, “I’ll shoot you.” I took his rifle and threw it on the ground,¹² and I went on with the water to my son and the other *shabab* under the olive trees. They were black, black, black, you couldn’t recognize them. I poured water in my son’s mouth and said, “Share it among you.”

It is significant that Umm Muhammad begins her story of the British raid with the words, “Al-Birwa was divided into two *dars* [clans], Kayal and Sa’d. Someone told the *Inkleez* . . .” In a later anecdote, she again mentions informers. Men or more politicized women would most likely have suppressed any reference to informers or to internal splits. Women are often “subversive” tellers of national history since their position as keepers of family and local histories gives them a knowledge of internal conflict that nationalism tries to suppress. Younger, politicized, or educated urban women are more likely to censor their accounts.¹³

Not as part of her first account, but during a later visit, Hajji Badriyya told how her uncle and cousin were killed in a British army ambush near Yarqa;

how her father, a guerilla leader, was betrayed and captured in Marun al-Ras and condemned to death; and how, with the help of a friend who bribed a British officer, he eventually was released. Hajji Badriyya's commentary conveys the hard life of the families of the *thuwar*:

From [the time of the ambush] we tasted sorrow. Many of our relatives were killed. We were frightened for my father. When he came to the village we were frightened that someone would inform against him, so we used to go to see him in the mountains. He stayed there. Toward the end they caught him in Marun al-Ras, also there someone informed on him. He came to a family called Kawash, they gave him supper. All the people of the village gathered—a leader had come to the village! And my uncle went to see him there. They met and talked. And while they were talking in the evening, suddenly the army was there. Of course, someone pointed him out.

Older women's recollections make a clearer contribution to social than to political history. For example, Hajji Badriyya told how, because the *thuwar* were paid so irregularly, her mother made cheese that a neighbor would sell for her in Acre. Another story about her mother underlines rural women's mobility and courage:

They told my mother that she should go to *al-mandub al-sami'* [the high commissioner] in Jerusalem. She wrote a letter saying that he's responsible for four or five children, and there's another wife as well: "We have only God and this man. We call on you to have mercy on him." My aunts signed their names. She took Jamal in her arms and went.

Only one of the oldest set of speakers, Umm Ghassan, adopted national history as a structure for a life story that told the history of Palestinians in Lebanon, unfolding chronologically without audience prompts. Beginning with the *hijra*, she recounted oppression by the Lebanese army in the 1950s and 1960s, the uprising against army rule in 1969, the army and Kata'ib attacks of the 1970s, the Israeli invasion and massacre of 1982, the restoration of Lebanese army rule, and the Battle of the Camps (1985–87). Into this chronology, she wove personal and family anecdotes that illustrate national and class oppression of camp Palestinians in Lebanon. In the case of the other older speakers and several younger ones, the framing of their lives by national crisis was taken for granted rather than "worked out," and they mentioned only those events that had affected them personally. Such recollections, clear though they were, were not connected together in a national metanarrative.

The younger speakers, invariably better educated and in most cases more politicized, tended to structure personal narrations around national historical landmarks and place their political activities in the foreground of their life stories. National crisis formed part of their earliest memories, their perception of “self” and situation. In spite of caution, most of the women of the two younger generations (the “Disaster” and the “Revolution”) related themselves clearly to the Resistance movement, sometimes giving descriptions of early political activities and Resistance group involvement. For example, Umm ‘Imad (born 1947, married 1968, voluntary political worker), described causing a storm as a young adolescent by raising a call for arms at a meeting that was to have been addressed by Ahmad Shuqayri in Sidon in the early 1960s, breaking up the meeting before he could speak. Zahira (born 1949, married 1974, PLO employee) told of forming a “children’s cell” together with siblings and children from their *harry* (neighborhood), unknown to their parents. Khawla (born 1960, married 1981, widowed, voluntary political worker) began her story with childhood memories of carrying food and water to the fedayeen in the hills above Tal al-Zatar. Rihab (born 1964, married in 1983, divorced, a resistance cadre) began her life story with the liberation of Shatila camp in 1969 and the arrival of the fedayeen. National crisis dominates their life stories not as a cataclysmic event coming from outside, shattering normality, as with most of the older narrators, but as a core element of identity, a mode of perceiving the world and of acting toward it.

Younger women’s stories also gave closer renderings of Palestinian history in Lebanon and of camp life. Of the “generation of Palestine,” none spoke about Lebanese army oppression except Umm Ghassan, whereas later generations offered this as an earliest memory or passed it on as told by parents. Descriptions contained in younger women’s narratives of street life, school, demonstrations, travel to study or work abroad, episodes of violence, and political activities indicate their relative separation from family and home and a more active participation in public life. Reportorial rather than anecdotal in style and structure, younger women’s narratives are locally specific and period conscious, whereas the lives of older women often seem set in a cosmic crisis outside time.

The degree and form of gendering of women’s narratives also differed between generations. Older women’s stories sprang directly from their position as daughters or mothers, as liable to rape, as household managers, and so on; for them Palestinian history was a disaster whose consequences they were forced to live with as women rather than as national subjects. For many older speakers, time was measured by the births of children rather than by stages of national struggle, and their deepest sense of crisis was separation from migrant sons and daughters. In the narratives of politicized younger women, however, the national narrative often suppressed personal,

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gendered experience. Such suppression is exemplified by Rihab, whose first account compressed her struggles with her parents over marriage, divorce, and Resistance group membership into a single sentence. Zahira also did not mention her engagements, marriage, or children during the first recording, explaining later that she assumed I was interested only in politics. Through Resistance group membership, women learned the language of national politics, with its elision of class, gender, and local differences.

Yet, significantly, gender reenters the narratives of some younger speakers as problematic. For example, one who came from a village known for its conservatism told of having to hide her political activities from her family, and another, also a political activist, focussed her whole story on the internal split between her nationalist and feminine “selves.”¹⁴

THE AESTHETICS OF STORY TELLING

Life stories are valued by historians for their “facts” rather than for form, style, and language. Yet form, style, and language express culture and ideology and do so in ways that vary by class, gender, locality, and period. Most older Palestinian camp women’s stories have a dramatic, audience-attracting, and aesthetic quality that is not found—or not to the same extent—in the life stories of younger, educated women.

This narrative art is illustrated in Umm Nayif’s story of her mother’s death (probably from cholera) when she was still a baby, told her by the aunt who brought her up. The baby had crawled to her mother to suckle. Grieving and angry, the aunt “threw” her into a corner, but the dying mother begged for the baby to be brought to her breast. The story is embellished and engraved by the aunt’s phrase about her mother, which Umm Nayif repeats: “*Immik kanat asila bi hal-dar*” (“Your mother was [considered] noble in this house”). The phrase reverberates eloquently against the recording setting, two raw concrete rooms shared by nine people.

In his study of orality, Walter Ong notes the use of set phrases as a mnemonic device.¹⁵ This point is borne out by Umm Nayif’s narrative style, already noted in her *hijra* story. Asked to tell the story of her marriage, she repeated in two separate recordings her own (rhymed) words to the village elders who, because she was an orphan, had taken the parent’s role in trying to persuade her to marry a much older, already married man. First, in a gesture simulating a shaykh (religious or local leader), she wrapped a cloth around her head and then went out to address the villagers who had brought the bridegroom to the doorstep of her brother’s home:

Don’t envy me, o neighbors, for the wedding they are preparing for me/I brought my brother up, and he brought me up/I stayed as I was, and bridegrooms didn’t wait.

Story telling artistry is also demonstrated by Umm Ghassan, who turned each episode in a sustained life story into a substory, with its own narrative structure and denouement. This example, set in the immediate postexodus period, shows several features of the traditional *hikaya* while graphically conveying the new reality of exile:

He [my husband] needed to work, we had spent the money we had brought with us. I had my jewelry. According to our custom, when a girl gets married she takes her *mahr* [marriage endowment] and buys gold jewelry with it. I had with me two bracelets, four rings, and some earrings. I gave him the bracelets and told him to sell them. He sold them for fifteen Lebanese pounds. Ah! It was too cheap. They were gold, real gold. He sold them and we spent it. I gave him the rings. He took them and went to Beirut and worked selling coffee in the city center. He stayed a week He came back and told me, "I spent the money." I took my earrings and gave them to him and said, "Sell them. Try again, be patient!" He took the earrings and went back to Beirut. He worked, he persevered. He was away for ten days, then he came and gave me five pounds. *Hamdillah!* [Thank God!]

This anecdote follows the threefold narrative structure of many *hikayat* (Abu Ghassan takes his wife's gold three times and only succeeds the third time in making a profit). An additional *hikaya* feature is the way the woman takes the initiative and uses an attribute of gender, her gold, to save the situation. The husband appears foolish by contrast, unable to earn a living in a strange city.¹⁶

One of Umm Muhammad's anecdotes exhibits the same tripartite structure, female initiative, and "happy ending":

We were in Acre. We heard the sound of breaking glass. They [the British army] were taking men and putting them in rows and arresting the ones that people had informed about. One room where we were staying had a large lock. I took Muhammad, and my relative brought her son, and we put them in the room and locked it. The British came and asked what was in the room. We told them we didn't have the key. A first patrol came and left. A second patrol came and left. Then came a third, and the officer looked through a crack. He saw something and kicked the door open and took both of them. I said the *aya al-kursi*.¹⁷ The officer brought them back the same night.

The *hikaya*-like qualities of these anecdotes do not detract from their veracity. Rather, they suggest that an essentially true story has been crafted into a form that makes it arresting and memorable.

If we examine the relationship between anecdotes and overall narrative in younger women's life stories, we find two characteristics that differentiate them from those quoted above. First, they do not stand alone as self-contained *qussas*, but are part of larger narratives that give them meaning and which they illustrate. Second, this metameaning testifies to the situation of the Palestinian collectivity (as dispersed, oppressed, target of violence, etc.) and relates the "self" of the speaker to this larger story. Thus both the anecdotes and the narratives of which they form part resemble "reports on reality." Though oral, they reflect the influence of school and media literacy, whereas the older women's tradition of orality is premodern.

A scene that begins Rihab's life story illustrates this difference:

What I remember first and most, the scene that sticks in my memory, was in 1970, when the Resistance entered the camp and threw out the *Maktab al-Thani* [Army Intelligence Office]. At that time I was about six. But . . . the picture was printed on my mind, and perhaps influenced the whole of my life, the entering of the Resistance into the camp, the celebrations and happiness, all the people in the street welcoming the fedayeen. I remember I was far, they were shooting in the air. Of course I was afraid, because it was the first time I'd heard *takhtakha* (bullets) . . . The most important thing was the scene, the fedayeen in their battle dress . . . This is a picture I shall never forget.

This scene does not constitute a self-contained anecdote, but rather functions as "beginning" for the whole life story, announcing its meaning and

direction. Unlike the storytellers quoted above, Rihab aims to report the scene as it "really" happened, hence the attempts to return and improve the description, to add details forgotten at first. We note also the appearance of self-reflection: "the scene that sticks in my memory," "influenced the whole of my life," "I was afraid . . ." In the anecdotes told by older

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WOMEN'S REPRESENTATIONS OF "SELF" AS HISTORY

Oral historian Luisa Passerini's theory of the "self" as social rather than psychoindividual points to the use of personal narratives as source for the historian, one that illuminates the critical intersection between structure and

culture.¹⁸ The representations of “self” embedded in the Shatila life stories have much to tell us about collective history, the influence of personal models on political action, generational differences, and specific diaspora conditions.

Out of the eighteen recordings, the majority (eleven) contain clear collective “self” stereotypes. I took as evidence for these stereotypes anecdotes of speakers’ actions, allusions to the collective situation, overall tone, and mode of relating the “self” to national crisis. In consultation with colleagues, I named these three configurations the “struggle personality” (five cases), the “confrontation personality” (two cases), and the “witness to tragedy” (four cases). In seven cases, no single “self” stereotype dominated. Neither age nor other background characteristics explain the exceptionality of these cases since they were spread across all generations and statuses. But two of the women had been physically separated from the Shatila community for many years, rupturing sociocommunicative exchange, while three others clearly belonged to the category called “*sitt fil-bayt*” (“lady of/in the house”) and, I guessed, had been minimally involved in national politics. Two others were highly educated and introspective, characteristics that may dissolve collective-based stereotypes of the “self.” Audience participation may also have tended to fragment “self” stereotypes.

To demonstrate representations of the “self” properly in a life story text requires extensive quotation. Here I merely wish to give an idea of the value of camp women’s “self”-representations as history, as reflectors of continuity and change in national struggle and of local diaspora histories. Such continuity and change is most clearly demonstrated by the “struggle personality,” which was spread across all three generations and appeared occasionally in narratives dominated by other stereotypes or by none. The qualities associated with the “struggle personality” as told by camp women in Lebanon—strength, courage, resourcefulness—are preeminently those of Palestinian rural women before 1948. They are mainly expressed in stories of confrontation with hostile authorities (British, Israeli, Lebanese), but there are also shifts that reflect ideological transformations.

Umm Muhammad’s confrontation with a British soldier quoted earlier is archetypal not only in courage demonstrated by the narrating “self” but also in the fact that Umm Muhammad acts to help a family member, her son. A similar example comes from Umm Ghassan and takes place in a much later period, when Lebanese army control over the Beirut camps was restored following the Israeli invasion and massacre of 1982. She told how she confronted the *Maktab al-Thani* who wanted to take one of her sons for questioning:

I told them, “They slaughtered my son in the massacre, I have no other son but him, he’s the father of these children.” They told me, “He’ll come back, *hajji*.” I knew it was

a lie. I told them, "I don't trust you." I didn't let them take him.¹⁹

However, a story of confrontation told by Umm Subhi (born 1941, married 1958, never employed), set in the same period of army arrests, carries a significant difference:

People came and said that the Lebanese army [soldiers] were hitting one of the sisters (i.e., a Resistance cadre). It was the time of the army. I was washing clothes. When I got outside, I found it was true. One of the soldiers had got her in an alley and was pressing his baton against her stomach. No one in the camp dared to approach except me . . . I approached and said, "Why are you doing this? She's a girl not a man." He said, "You're from the camp?" I said, "I'm a daughter of the camp, like those kids you are arresting." He said, "Are your children among them?" I said, "All of them are my children." "And this girl, how is she related to you?" "She's also my daughter. Every Palestinian girl is my daughter and every Palestinian boy is my son."

The point to be noted is the ideological change that has taken place in popular understanding of "family" from kin to political collectivities—camp, Resistance group, and Palestinian people. Though this shift reflects Resistance discourse, a cultural basis exists for it in popular concepts and practices of "mothering."²⁰

Khawla's recollections of her childhood in Tal al-Zatar camp in the early days of the resistance point to another new aspect of the "struggle personality," that of defying family to undertake political action:

We children used to take food and drink to the fedayeen. In 1973 there was fighting with the Lebanese army. The resistance fighters were spread in the mountain. We made sandwiches and went out to the mountain with them; we took them blankets and jerseys. And on the way back, we filled water gallons and took them to them. I was only six or seven at the time, but I was brave and enthusiastic. Of course my parents were conservative, so I had to go secretly, with other women. I used to tell my parents that I'd been hiding in the shelters. My brother was a military leader, (and so) when I went with the women I didn't let him see me.

Khawla's nationalist enthusiasm carries her into actions that have to be kept secret from her parents and brother. Her "struggle personality" can only

be expressed in childhood and early adolescence, and in periods of crisis. While humorously complaining of the conservatism of her parents' village, at the time of recording she had just settled down to a second arranged marriage.

Though at first glance the "challenge personality" seems only a variation of the "struggle personality," examination shows a crucial difference based in stance toward gender rules. Whereas traditional practices of national struggle are easily incorporated into women's domestic routines, the "challenge personality" contests the constraints of the "sex-gender system," with contestation continuing into adult life rather than burning out in adolescence.

The two life stories expressing the "challenge personality" were given by speakers of different ages, one born in 1938, the other in 1964, and set in two very different politicoeconomic contexts. The older speaker whose story expressed challenge in the domestic/social domain had cut off all relations with her family in revolt against a marriage forced on her against her will; and, as a widow, had brought up her children through her own earnings. This exceptional rebellion against social and family norms was powered, certainly, by a strong personality; but it was also made feasible by conditions in the 1960s—low cost of living, plentiful jobs for women in urban camps, UNRWA aid, and free housing.²¹

Beginning with the entry of the fedayeen to Shatila camp, Rihab's life story continues through a series of battles that she witnessed or took part in: the army attack of 1973, the two-year war (1975–76), the massacre of September 1982, the Battle of the Camps. Underlying this chronology of battles is Rihab's will for personal independence, which at first finds expression in national struggle. But what gives Rihab's life story its specific "challenge" stamp is the way she extends practices learned in national struggle into relations with her family on issues of marriage, divorce, work with the Resistance, and mobility. Alone among the speakers, Rihab underlines the way involvement in national struggle gives women weapons to challenge the "sex-gender system":

I will choose my life according to what suits me. And there's no way that anyone can impose anything on me. I have this revolutionary logic not only in my national work but also in my personal life. *Of course they are linked.* [Emphasis added].

These two "challenge" narratives suggest that women's relationship to family and the question of marriage is closely linked to economic conditions. The small number of cases (two) makes any generalization impossible, but I would suggest that the "challenge personality" is not produced by national struggle alone (though national struggle may favor its crystallization, as in Rihab's case). Perhaps it is most likely to appear in periods of crisis and

zones of contestation (e.g., Lebanon and the occupied territories), but we may suppose that women's desire to challenge gender constraints is ever present, requiring only a forceful personality and a favorable context to be manifested in action.

The "witness to tragedy" configuration appeared only in the stories of those who had borne the hardships of early exile and the losses of the resistance period. Loss has particularly afflicted women with brothers, husbands, and sons of an age to join the resistance. The four women who narrated their lives in this mode were all children in 1948 and married in the 1950s. Of the seven widows, it was the youngest who had lost their husbands through violent action.

Umm Subhi was one of the prime exemplifiers of tragedy in this sample.²² Three of her sons had been killed in the Battle of the Camps, the family home was destroyed, and two daughters were widowed. At our first meeting, she burst into tears and began her story thus:

We suffered tragedies, it was very hard. We were made homeless, we faced difficulties in homelessness. We were the victims of a catastrophe. Our children went, our homes went. We were displaced, and we didn't find people to look after us.

She likened Palestinians to "people who spend the summer in the Ghor," that is, wandering nomads without homes or property. Early in her narrative she evoked her own death: "I had an operation about three months ago. I wept not because I was ill, but because if I died there was no son beside me."

Umm Noman (born 1937, married 1951, voluntary political worker) gave a life story that was a bare chronicle of displacements and losses. It began, "All our life has been lost. Since I was born I have seen nothing in my life but wars. In sixteen years I lost four homes." As if for an official record, she listed the full names of sons killed or "disappeared," as well as all the homes she had been displaced from: Kabri (Palestine), south Lebanon, the Biqa', Nahr al-Barid camp, Burj al-Barajna camp, Tal al-Zatar camp, and Shatila (both in 1982 and again in 1985).

Nozira (born 1948, unmarried) was a Red Crescent employee who had lost her parents and all six brothers. Interviewed just after the feast of 'Ashura (July 1992), she said that she had spent the day of the feast alone, whereas in the past resistance delegations always visited the families of martyrs on national or religious occasions.

I'm alone in the house, all my family are gone [i.e., dead]. If I stop working, no one will offer me a bite. I've got nobody but God. Our *dar* had eight men, but now it's ended, like a house sealed with wax.

Her summation of the Palestinian experience in Lebanon was the grimmest of any:

We suffered, we Palestinians who came to Lebanon in 1948.
We sacrificed our children, our homes, our money and, at
the end of it, all we are is widows and orphans.

CONCLUSION

Up to now, there has been no hegemonic or “official” version of Palestinian history, and in the present political turmoil it is not likely that one will be produced. Rather, the current deepening of the diaspora and proliferation of cultural institutions encourages a multiplicity of particular histories, each with its own “authority” and intended circle of readers. The village, city, and camp histories that have been produced in recent years can be seen as attempts to recuperate textually places that no longer exist or are threatened with demolition, incorporation, or forgetting. Though a symptom of crisis, this proliferation of registers creates space for local and diaspora experiences that might otherwise be erased. Yet work already done suggests that local research committees are as likely as national institutions to omit women as tellers of history and to adopt narrowly normative approaches to gender and the “domestic domain.” Contesting such narrowness of the nationalist imagination, this paper has pointed to women’s recollections as rich sources of national history, culture-laden and inflected by specificities of gender, class, origin, period, and diasporic region. Their omission would leave us with an impoverished history unable to explain how, in spite of everything, the Palestinian people’s struggle has persisted.

NOTES

1. Ellen Fleischmann, “Crossing the Boundaries of History: Exploring Oral History in Researching Palestinian Women in the Mandate Period” in *Women’s History Review* 5, no. 9 (1996), pp. 351–71; Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid eds., *Recasting Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Judith Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Eleni Varikas, “Gender and National History in Fin de Siecle Greece” in *Gender and History* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 269–83; Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias eds.,

Woman-Nation-State (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

2. Hilma Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1931, 1935).

3. Palestinian Arabic differentiates between the *hikaya* (fable, folktale) and the *qissa*, an account of a real happening, either in history or in the speaker’s experience. The telling of *hikayat* (defined by men as *kizb*, lies) is traditionally the specialty of women, the *qissa* of men. See Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, *Speak, Bird, Speak Again* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 2–3.

4. Rights to camp space are limited to “original” families or to newcomers who

bought or rented from them as they moved out. Others who built on vacant areas around the camp were not allowed to return after the "Battle of the Camps" (1985-87), nor were they indemnified, since UNRWA's housing indemnities are restricted to those inside camp boundaries. Differential relations to housing thus give rise to different socioeconomic statuses.

5. Only five speakers had not lost a close family member through war. Five of the thirteen mothers had lost one or more children, four speakers had lost parents, two had lost brothers, and two husbands.

6. This difference of categories appears to be associated with age and educational level, with most of the "life story" narrators being younger and better educated than those who gave "testimonials." However, there were exceptions that suggest that experience, social status, and consciousness make a difference to how speakers respond.

7. See Rosemary Sayigh, "Gender, Sexuality, and Class in National Narrations: Palestinian Camp Women Tell Their Lives," forthcoming in *Frontiers*, 1998.

8. All names used in this article are fictional.

9. The speaker uses "*biladna*," our country.

10. The Arab Salvation Army, a pan-Arab militia led by Fawzi al-Qawuqji.

11. The word *hijra* (migration) is used by Palestinians in Lebanon for the exodus of 1948. Some commentators believe that this usage consciously evokes the departure of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers to Medina.

12. As Umm Muhammad told this anecdote, she vigorously reenacted her con-

frontation with the British soldier, demonstrating how she had wrestled his rifle from him. A tall, strong woman even in her nineties, she wore the black headband called *amta* that signals special piety.

13. See Ellen Fleischmann, "Crossing the Boundaries," p. 364, for an example of a politicized woman "editing" a testimony.

14. See Sayigh, "Gender, Sexuality, and Class."

15. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 33-36.

16. See Muhawi and Kanaana, *Speak, Bird*, p. 36, on women as initiators and heroines in folktales.

17. A verse from the Qur'an invoking God's protection.

18. Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), "Introduction."

19. Umm Ghassan's son ultimately was kidnapped on his way to visit a friend and never reappeared. When I recorded with her, she was raising the children of two of her sons.

20. Julie Peteet, "Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone," forthcoming in *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture* 23, no. 1 (1997), pp. 103-29.

21. For more about this speaker, see Sayigh, "Gender, Sexuality, and Class."

22. This is the same Umm Subhi whose story of confrontation with the Lebanese army was quoted earlier. Struggle and witnessing tragedy are linked in camp women's narratives, as Palestinian destiny and as class- and gender-specific formations of the "self."