



REVIEWS

Advocacy and Space in Ethnographic Writing

Elena Qleibo

*Landscape of Hope and Despair:
Palestinian Refugee Camps*

Julie Peteet, University
of Pennsylvania Press

Philadelphia, 2005, 260 pages

Peteet highlights in her book the particular position of the ethnographer when dealing with refugees: facing the challenge of advocacy. The scientist, witness to the everyday experience of the refugees, is asked ‘to tell’; to become intermediary for a reality that otherwise goes ignored in the political undercurrents of the Palestinian refugee problem in Lebanon. The task of the anthropologist becomes, then, how to humanize those who have been demonised and marginalised “giving them a voice and bringing their life experiences to others”. The social scientist is not in a neutral position but engaged in an inter-subjective relationship. She assumes the responsibility and becomes a witness through her writing, engaging those who read and transforming them also to be witnesses. Peteet succeeds in doing this; one cannot read her book without getting involved.

Peteet began doing fieldwork in the Middle East in Palestinian refugee camps in the ‘70s. Conditions over the last three decades in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, as well as the Gaza Strip and West Bank, have

Burj il-Barajneh Refugee Camp in Lebanon

been difficult. Life in the camps has passed through various conditions of violence—from low intensity (the first Intifada in the occupied Palestinian Territories) to the warfare of Lebanon’s civil war and Israel’s invasion and siege of Lebanon. This book’s fieldwork was completed in the early ‘90s, in less ‘volatile’ conditions than those of the civil war. Peteet has the advantage of 30 years of experience informing her analysis. In Lebanese camps during the ‘90s, on-the-ground dangers, as she explains, arose from the simple fact of her visibility, since there were almost no other foreigners conducting research or even visiting the camps at that time.

Creating Space

Refugee camps in Lebanon differ from refugee camps in other host countries. In physical organisation, they are made to resemble more those camps in Gaza, rather than the camps in the West Bank. In administration, however, they are a world of their own, governed by camp committees, like the camps in the West Bank. Gaza camps have municipal control, although services such as health care, education and garbage collection is provided by the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA). Camps in Lebanon have been subjected to the political dynamics of rebuilding the Lebanese identity and the country. While Palestinian refugees once found allies in certain Lebanese minority groups, those same groups later claimed that the Palestinian presence was a great evil interfering with the unification of the Lebanese people. They were used as a political tool. Palestinians are not yet permitted to take Lebanese citizenship, work in most jobs, or move freely. They have been moved around and their camps destroyed in attacks by Israeli and Lebanese forces.

The role of refugee identity in Lebanon has also passed through various stages. When the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was very active alongside UNRWA, the term ‘refugee’ was rarely mentioned. But after the PLO’s departure from Lebanon and what has become known as ‘the camp wars’, the status of refugee was invoked as the only tool available for solidifying the Palestinians’ position and achieving their international rights.

Spatial control and management of the Palestinians extends beyond the open-air prisons of the camps in Lebanon, to the wall being built in the occupied Palestinian Territories, and the policy of closure that restricts refugee movements.¹ In the Lebanese camps, refugees are under the constraints of aid regimes, but manoeuvring to make those regimes their own, giving them their own meaning and eventually changing their structures. Space as well, though regulated and limited, is modified by the refugees who inject their own sense of space, social relations and meaning into these areas.

Knowing Palestine

By studying this crafting of place and identity, Peteet offers an alternative to the nationalist focus of the Palestinian refugee problem and gives it a dimension beyond the disparities that are presented in nationalist historiography.

Peteet organizes her book around the themes of place and identity, which are contextualised by structure and agency. The author delves eloquently into the relationship between place and space, and the changing of this space by the refugees themselves over their 50 years of exile.

Peteet depicts the camps as “sites of poverty, marginality, and terror as well as remarkable creativity—places that are both of hope for the future, and of despair” (p. 1). For five decades, the lives of the refugees in Lebanese camps have been tied to two geopolitical spaces: Lebanon and Palestine/Israel. “Palestinian identity formation has unfolded in a spatiotemporal framework of betwixt and between,” she explains, “here and there, then and now, within a local and regional context.”

Al-Nakba, 1948, is the threshold of the disaster that prompted the exile (*al-ghurbeh*), permanent Palestinian themes. It is when time and space are splintered that there is a turning point in the constitution of Palestinian identity.

As Peteet puts it poignantly, the way Palestinians departed from the homeland is not the core issue of the Palestinian problem (did they flee in fear or were they expelled?). The issue is “the consistent denial of an internationally-recognised right of return,” which has informed Palestinian politics in exile.

There is a qualitative difference between the knowledge of Palestine had by Palestinians and had by Zionists. The former, indigenous to the land, knows with familiarity,² while the latter knows about, consciously, and in the process of constructing the physical, mythological homeland.

For Palestinians in exile, the homeland is recreated through the archiving of personal memories and oral history projects and also through actual things. The Palestinian *thobe* with traditional embroidery motives became the inspiration for utilitarian items like pillow cases or tablecloths. Embroidery cooperatives trained women to reproduce these articles, and also to market them. Other kinds of fetishes or memorial symbols include the map of Palestine in gold or wood, worn or carried as ornaments,

Dislocation and exile have pushed Palestinians to objectify of Palestine. Shared experiences and memories give them a feeling of collective/collected consciousness, in spite of living different realities, and in different countries. “[A] particularly inflected Palestinian transnational identity *is* evident” (p. 5).

The Palestinian refugee is inevitably exposed to the pressures and realities of globalised societies, while remaining on their margins. The Palestinian refugee is not a migrant. He/she has not left the country of origin in search of better life. "By definition, refugees have been excluded from the state and can no longer avail themselves of its protection" (p. 24).³ Thus, Palestinians are linked by the same absence.

Expending conscious effort, the Zionist tries to 'nativise' the European Jew in relation to the place: Palestine/Erez Israel. The construction of diverse myths (i.e. Masada) allows for this appropriation of time and space. Archaeology has been implemental in lending a concrete dimension, and anchoring these myths in real facts. Peteet quotes Dirks: discourse achieves "its full power because of its historical activation in the institutional context of colonial rule." Zionist discourse developed a "seamless continuity in time between past and present" (p. 36).

The appropriation of the Arab landscape, not only through the actual destruction of villages but through the renaming of all details on the map, allowed for further appropriation of space. Time is described in the Zionist context as moving forward, while for Palestinians, it is said to have stood still.

Benvenisti wrote that the Arab communities were "white patches-terra incognita" within the cultural framework of the European Jews. Arab presence had no point of reference, no place within the Zionist framework of perception. "Palestinian place is defined negatively, marking its stagnation and underdevelopment," writes Peteet (p. 41).

The Refugee as an Object

During the first years of the resistance in Lebanon and the active work of the PLO, refugees preferred the term 'returnees'. With the departure of the PLO and the beginning of the camp wars, the refugees' only way of asserting their identity and their rights became as refugees. The card produced by UNRWA became their only proof of their existence and their rights. Their sense of belonging was suddenly being recognized.

An important element in refugee administration is the notion of the pathology of the refugee, one who needs treatment, rehabilitation. This is supposed to follow reintegration into social groups, and the end of dislocation. In the case of the Palestinians, however, the notion of rehabilitation was synonymous to resettlement and re-nationalisation (p. 48).

The Lebanese constitution forbade offering citizenship to the Palestinian refugees, as well as their resettlement and integration. This rejection has made the lives of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon excruciatingly difficult.⁴ Nevertheless, when the return to Palestine was thought to be imminent, preoccupation with a possible

resettlement and nationalisation was at the forefront of the notion of what it meant to be a ‘refugee’.

“UNRWA was both an instrument of power in daily refugee lives and an institution that enabled a Palestinian identity and social cohesion. Moreover, it endowed the refugees with a legal identity in the international arena,” writes Peteet (p. 49). Camps were set up by villages and divided into blocks “thus lending continuity and cohesion to village social organisation and identities” (p. 59). Population surveys were administered and a system of gender assignment of ration cards was arranged by the male heads of family. “As an institution, UNRWA brought Palestinians together in well-defined spaces where their consciousness of themselves was most certainly heightened. Crosscutting the fragmented spaces where Palestinians resided, it connected refugees with one another through the experience of its institutional forms and practices” (p. 64).⁵

In spite of US insistence that UNRWA aid was humanitarian, Palestinians instead argued theirs was a nationalist cause with political content. The notion that the refugees had suffered a shock and needed rehabilitation implied recognition of a dislocation between place, culture and identity.

The Dream

“After 50 years of displacement, place remains a point of departure in formulations of identity for Palestinians. The relationship between place and identity is more about the future than the past, more about where they are now and where they are going than simply about where they have been,” writes Peteet (p. 216).

The dream Peteet uses to conclude tells of a busload of Palestinian refugees from Shatila camp going to Palestine. They choose not to return to their places of origin, and instead build a new village using the ties and relationships they have developed in *al-ghurbeh*. As Peteet points out this ‘futuristic dream’ does not evoke a nostalgic image of the return, but points to the dynamism of the new relationships formed through the years in exile. These allow this imaginary group to go back in a new way, to form a new community. That is to say, the going back is possible—not necessarily to the 1948 villages that no longer exist, but back to the homeland: a new set of relationships and political arrangements in a reconfigured Palestine. In Peteet’s words, Palestinians have resisted “by surviving, by not ceding their Palestinian identity. Their mere existence is a critical commentary on the Zionist project to settle Palestine and claim indigenesness” (p. 219).

It is clear that cosmopolitanism and an attachment to a place of origin are not mutually exclusive. One can be a citizen of a state and have strong attachments to another place. This is the Palestinian par excellence and this is the notion of trans-nationality and of placing him/herself in the world. Edward Said writes about this Palestinian experience,

“Today the Palestinian genius expresses itself in crossings-over, in clearing hurdles, activities that do not lessen the alienation, discontinuity, and dispossession, but that dramatize and clarify them instead.”⁶

For Palestinians in Lebanon going back and the right of return is more than an issue of justice and human rights. As they are now, they live in a vacuum. In a host country that refuses, out of *nationalist* reasons to integrate them and grant them nationality. Thus for them the notion of Palestine remains relevant as the only place to go back to, unless they manage to leave Lebanon and get nationality somewhere else. For them, “the relationship between place and identity is more about the future than about the past... What the past does represent is what has been denied- a safe location, recognition of rights, and a sense of belonging in one’s own homeland, and a process of justice” (p. 216).

Originally from Costa Rica, Elena Qleibo has lived in the Middle East for over 19 years. She is a cultural anthropologist and freelance writer and currently lives in Gaza.

Endnotes

¹ Peteet is currently working on a book about the separation wall.

² As the geographer Tuan explains.

³ Foucault's notion of disciplinary spaces and practices has been used elsewhere to deal with ethnographic research on refugee camps. Yet Peteet is critical of this framework.

⁴ *Film Lemonada* by Hicham Kayed, Al-Jana Lebanese Centre for Popular Arts, portrays the life of Palestinian refugees in relation to work in the camps in a poignant manner.

⁵ UNRWA viewed Palestinians within the organisation in military units: the term for the registered family was *nafar* (the Arabic term referring to units in the military). A refugee camp was called *muaskar*; the Arabic term for military barracks.

⁶ *The Politics of Dispossession*.