

# Occupied Home-Sharing

## Airbnb in Palestine

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### Abstract

If home is the engine room of Palestinian subjectivities, what does Airbnb do to the functioning of that engine? What do the experiences of Palestinian hosts demonstrate about the logics, presuppositions, and effects of Airbnb as a technology of platform capitalism? This essay makes two arguments: First, in enrolling people into new relations with their homes and the homes of others, Airbnb shapes and is shaped by socialities, modes of exchange, and material conditions. Second, encoded within Airbnb's operation are assumptions that users are located in benevolent, democratic states with functioning infrastructures. An analysis of the platform must thus take politics, history, and culture into account. Part I introduces the concept of "occupied home-sharing" for understanding Airbnb's manifestation in Palestine. Occupied home-sharing highlights that Palestine's hosts are incarcerated and host unfreely. It also helps reframe occupation and settler colonialism as forms of coerced hosting that allow intrusions of violence into home spaces. Part II examines four different aspects of hosts' experiences of the platform: 1) property as flexible infrastructure, 2) gifts, family, community, 3) rejections, and 4) exclusions. The conclusion considers what these help us to understand about the relationship between Airbnb and precarity in Palestine. Airbnb is both a result of existing forms of precarity born from occupied home-sharing and an instrument for mitigating and making worlds within them.

### Keywords

Airbnb; sharing economy; infrastructure; home; hospitality; precarity; platform capitalism; kinship; community; sovereignty.

[I]t is as though the laws (plural) of hospitality, in marking limits, powers, rights, and duties, consisted in challenging and transgressing the law of hospitality, the one that would command that the “new arrival” be offered an unconditional welcome.

Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*

If you are planning to visit a West Bank Palestinian city, one of your options is to stay at an Airbnb. Airbnb.com has something for everyone, from rooms in shared homes to entire apartments or villas. Prices vary between eleven dollars (bedroom in a Ramallah NGO) and four hundred dollars (Jericho villa with a pool) per night. Most listings are concentrated in Ramallah and Bethlehem, with others scattered in Jericho, Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarm, Zababda, and Jayyus. Airbnb is an online “aggregation” platform that facilitates so-called “home-sharing” by connecting producers and consumers, similar to the way Facebook, Amazon, and Uber do.<sup>1</sup> It was established in San Francisco in 2008 and now operates in over 190 countries, with over seven million listings in more than one hundred thousand cities. It is worth an estimated thirty-eight billion dollars.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, Palestine’s Airbnbs look a lot like those anywhere else. A few, like one Ramallah property I rented, are more bohemian, featuring pop culture-based wall art like skateboards and cannabis posters, secondhand mid-century modern furniture, colored walls, and mismatched nightstands. Others promise luxury, like a private room in a “palace” in Nablus (\$15 per night) or like the “Industrial-style Designer Penthouse” in al-Tira (\$185 per night). A few listings are rooms in guesthouses, hotels, and hostels. For a prospective guest from outside Palestine, the experience of booking is also like it would be elsewhere: you browse photographs and amenities, choose your listing and dates, and click the iconic red “reserve” tab.

Yet in other respects, ranging from the aesthetics of properties to experiences of hosting and being hosted, Airbnb is an altogether different beast in Palestine. Forget IKEA furniture, for example. Elsewhere in the world, IKEA is the easiest and most affordable way to furnish Airbnb listings. In the words of *Travel and Leisure* magazine, “Airbnb and Ikea Should Just Go Ahead and Merge, Already!”<sup>3</sup> But IKEA lacks stores in the West Bank and Israel’s restrictions on Palestinians’ movement make a trip to IKEA’s Rishon LeTsiyon, Netanya, Beersheva, and Amman locations difficult, dangerous, or impossible.

Most interiors of Palestinian Airbnbs are instead decorated in the style of an upper middle-class Palestinian household. Furniture looks set for a post-Airbnb, domestic Palestinian future. It is immaculate, colored in earthy creams, browns, and maroons. Seemingly ready for owners to move in, they feature desks and single beds, cartoon-themed bedspreads in children’s rooms, and full-scale kitchens. Living rooms feature formal, imposing sofa and armchair sets arranged around heavy wooden coffee tables. Floor-length taffeta curtains frame windows and veranda doors. Plasma screen televisions are standard. Bedrooms boast built-in closets and matching vanities.

More significantly, the conditions under which Palestinian hosts live prevent them from having the imagined host experience advertised by Airbnb. They lack access to payment technologies required by Airbnb, undisputed property ownership, a distinct currency with which to transact, as well as protection from use of Airbnb by people (such as Israeli soldiers or settlers) who might seek to harm them or their guests. They are sometimes denied the ability to list a property at all, purely due to its location in the West Bank.<sup>4</sup> Hosts cannot guarantee that amenities – like electricity and running water – will function. Experiences of hosting are also shaped by Palestinian obligations of kinship, norms of appropriate comportment, and dilemmas posed when platform-mediated hospitality and politics chafe against one another.

This essay asks a two-tiered question: First, if home is the engine room of Palestinian subjectivities, as the conveners of the 2019 New Directions in Palestinian Studies workshop “Palestinian Homes and Houses” suggested, what does Airbnb do to the functioning of that engine? Second, what do the experiences of Palestinian hosts demonstrate about the logics, presuppositions, and effects of Airbnb as a technology of platform capitalism? I draw on fieldwork I conducted among Airbnb hosts in the West Bank cities of Ramallah and Bethlehem in the past two years, virtual research on the websites of Airbnb and AirDNA (a private company that collects and sells global short-term rental data) between 2018 and 2019, as well as my own experiences as an Airbnb guest in Palestine since 2014. I found hosts to interview through friends and other contacts in Palestine whom I had known since 2007 from conducting long-term fieldwork there for my first book. I chose this route rather than “cold” messaging hosts through the platform because Airbnb host research involves delicate relations of trust. I pursued a few long-form, life history-based interviews rather than a larger number of less in-depth interviews because I was as interested in the stories of how people became hosts (and how these stories were narrated) as I was in hosts’ everyday practices. Airbnb listings from across the West Bank supplemented and gave context to my interviews and guest experiences. Airbnb.com offers a rich archive of information about hosts through profiles in which they describe themselves, through guest reviews to which they sometimes reply, as well as through amenity, location, and space descriptions and photographs. Together these “live” and virtual methods serve to make my broadest point: that drawing attention to what the platform presupposes helps us understand Airbnb as a form of soft infrastructure articulated specifically in specific places, and that an analysis of the platform must thus take politics, history, and culture into account.

## **I. Chromatography and Occupied Home-Sharing**

### **Airbnb as Chromatography: What Does It Do?**

This essay makes two arguments: First, that in enrolling people into new relations with their homes and with the homes of others, Airbnb consolidates and sometimes

transforms socialities, modes of exchange, and material conditions. It shapes the infrastructures of everyday life and tweaks people's senses of futurity. Second, that attending to everyday practices of Airbnb use reveals the platform's logics. For example, Airbnb's use in Palestine reveals that encoded within Airbnb's operation are the assumptions that hosts and guests are located in benevolent, democratic states, that those states have functioning infrastructures, and that "users" are subjects of democratic governance.

I develop both arguments by examining micropractices of hosting in Palestine. Airbnb requires the ability to be paid electronically, ideally with a credit card or a PayPal account, for example. How do people for whom occupation makes access to both difficult become hosts? The ideal-typical Airbnb user is both guest and host. What does that mean for people whom occupation prevents from traveling? What does renting out a property to strangers nightly do for people who have been rendered precarious by decades of intergenerational dispossession of land and property? What does stranger hospitality look like for those accustomed to home invasions? How do colonial subjects view the fact that a foreign company mediates transactions with guests? What, in other words, does what we might think of as "occupied home-sharing" look like?

Ample scholarly and media attention over the last decade has been devoted to Airbnb, but rarely highlighting hosts' experiences. Most observers have focused on the scales of states (for example, regulation) and cities (for example, housing supply), and on guest experiences. Some have argued that platform-mediated economic exchanges (including ride-hailing platforms like Uber) are generating more "authentic" travel experiences, what Derek Thompson calls "superior simulacra of the local experience for leisure travelers," generating new social relations and companionship among people who would otherwise not have met.<sup>5</sup> Others see platforms like Airbnb and Uber transforming the nature of work, blurring the line between the personal and professional and between home and work, and requiring affective labor for capitalist profit.<sup>6</sup> Some, though fewer, have analyzed forms of resistance to Airbnb's perceived negative effects, Airbnb's legal implications, and the impact of Airbnb on dwellings themselves.<sup>7</sup> But analyses of the platform have thus far been polarized: We are shown Airbnb's corrosive capacities (its role in gentrification, segregation, discrimination, dispossession, and displacement, and in the "touristification" and "disneyfication" of cities, as well as its tax evasion and "data hunger"),<sup>8</sup> or its redemptive possibilities (bringing owners higher rents and real estate prices and allowing struggling long-term renters to supplement incomes by subletting parts of their homes). This essay builds on the less-developed scholarship that focuses on how Airbnb reshapes people's definitions and experiences of home to ask what Airbnb generates, or makes possible.<sup>9</sup>

My premise is that context matters for how Airbnb affects lifeworlds, thereby challenging the presumption of Airbnb's universality.<sup>10</sup> Both proponents and critics tend to argue that the platform's effects are universal. With the exception of some studies on its effects in the Global South or the diverse regulatory responses it has prompted, Airbnb is seen as part of a globally conceived "sharing economy."<sup>11</sup> Airbnb

is viewed as democratizing (turning anyone who uses it into an entrepreneur guest/host who can, according to its motto, “belong anywhere”),<sup>12</sup> or it is neoliberalizing and anti-labor.<sup>13</sup> Airbnb’s image of universality is built on the idea that the platform hovers above states. It appears to be extraterritorial. In some ways, *it is universal*: The platform can be accessed from anywhere in the world (with internet) and the basic formula for becoming a guest or host is the same wherever one decides to do it. All you need is a (free) account. In these senses, Airbnb seems to bypass dominant administrative arrangements that govern territories, for example, by enabling hosts not to declare their incomes to tax authorities. Its collaborative consumption model and use of mobile applications implicitly challenge borders and territorially-fixed power structures. But how does Airbnb function, and with what effect, in places whose undemocraticness is the most acute – in carceral, colonized, militarized, and war-ravaged places? What is revealed about the platform by how it functions in such contexts?

I propose that we understand Airbnb as a social, economic, and political chromatography paper. Chromatography paper is a technique to analyze the chemical composition of substances that we might remember from high school biology class. It can come in thin rectangular, white strips. When dipped vertically into a solvent, the paper absorbs the chemicals present in that solvent as the solvent ascends the paper strip, creating a watermark. The paper diffuses the various molecules in the solvent according to the polarities of the molecules and the solvent. If the strip reveals more than one color, that means the solvent must have more than one kind of molecule. When the platform goes live in a territory, Airbnb is “dipped” into that territory to varying effects; these effects reveal something about the molecular components of the place into which it is dipped. Chromatography paper changes colors when dipped, revealing its propensity for change. So, too, Airbnb’s effects on a place reveal something about the platform itself. Chromatography paper also displaces water as it is dipped, causing the water level in a glass to rise. The volume of the water in the glass remains the same but its relationship to the glass, its distribution (some is absorbed into the paper), its appearance to the human eye, and its movements, are all changed. What does Airbnb similarly transform in appearance, distribution, movement, and experience?

One of the most obvious senses in which Airbnb is chromatographic is as the largest publicly available archive of homes and interiors in the world. It renders visible that which had been visible to only few. Take the case of Ziad Alwan, a Palestinian from ‘Ayn Yabrud, a West Bank village. Ziad moved his family to Chicago, where he works as a truck driver to make a better life for them after the Israeli settlement of Ofra seized his family’s lands. In 2018 he was “stunned to see images” of his father’s lands posted online “in a listing for a luxurious bed and breakfast run by settlers.”<sup>14</sup> The platform gave a newly visual dimension to Ziad’s dispossession. It offered an intimate, if virtual, way for Ziad to experience the domesticity, including the decor and view, of his dispossessors.

Airbnb’s visualization of Ziad’s dispossession motivated him to become more politically active. His decision had far-reaching ramifications. After criticism of

Airbnb's listing of properties on West Bank settlements – with their location listed as “Israel” – mounted, a coalition of groups including Human Rights Watch and the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement formally called on Airbnb (and booking.com, a similar site that lists both hotels and private residences) to delist West Bank settlement properties. They argued that the hundreds of Airbnb listings in West Bank settlements discriminated against Palestinians because Israel prohibits West Bank Palestinians from entering settlements (unless they work there). This means those listings are closed to Palestinians who technically reside on the same territory. The listings allowed Airbnb to benefit from Palestinians' dispossession since the listings are located on land taken by force from its owners.<sup>15</sup>

By November 2018 the groundswell of international support for the campaign compelled Airbnb to state that it would delist roughly two hundred settlement listings. In response, dual-citizen (Israeli-American) settlers, whose listings were to be removed and who were potential renters, filed a lawsuit against Airbnb in Delaware, claiming discrimination. Airbnb reversed its decision to delist the two hundred properties in April 2019. Ziad Alwan and other Palestinians on whose land the relevant listings were located, along with two Palestinian villages, filed counterclaims against the settlers. Represented by the Center for Constitutional Rights, they argued that the settlers' listing of properties constituted war crimes, crimes against humanity, and discrimination on the basis of religion and national origin. They also brought claims of trespass and unjust enrichment against the settlers on their lands.<sup>16</sup> The countersuit drew further attention to the issue of settlements and became the basis for an international campaign in which tens of thousands of people pledged to deactivate their Airbnb accounts on 15 May 2019 (Nakba Day) to protest the platform's profiting from illegal settlements.<sup>17</sup>

### **Occupied Home-Sharing**

To share can mean to divide an object, distribute it in shares, apportion it, and transfer use or possession of that object or part of it, as for example when someone cuts open an orange and distributes pieces of it to friends. Another definition signifies joint use, participation in, enjoyment, or receipt of something. An instance of this is the joint use of a room by two siblings. A third definition describes the action of one party, where that party takes part in something, enters a field of play, to enjoy it – thereby *becoming* a party. If I see you laughing at a joke and smile in your direction, I am sharing in your pleasure, taking some for myself without diminishing the amount that you possess. This sharing-as-receiving inverts the first definition of the term, which signifies giving to others as letting go. This sharing is a kind of gift-giving. It is assumed that the gift is freely given. The person giving it is free to give and the thing given is hers to give.

As a form of exchange, sharing is a key element of what we think of as socialization and social solidarity, and as such has been paid much attention by anthropologists and other scholars including Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, and Marilyn Strathern. To be social – to be of society – is to know how to share. If the home is a primary site of socialization, it is also the ultimate site for learning about and through sharing.

How a home is shared can instantiate and help reproduce society, as Pierre Bourdieu observed.<sup>18</sup> If to share is to divide something by breaking it down, for example, breaking (re)generates a social whole.

Yet definitions that positively moralize sharing assume that the social is good, or at least whole. What if the social is broken, hostile, or exclusionary, or was never whole in the first place? Are colonized people obliged to share with their colonizers? What if sharing is coerced? What if one shares an object that is not one's own, as Israeli settlers do when they list properties on Airbnb, or an object that substitutes for an absent object, as when Palestinian refugees list homes in refugee camps? Can refusing to share be a moral good?

The term occupied home-sharing helps us think both about how political conditions intervene on Airbnb's much-touted ideal of "sharing" and about Palestine, at multiple scales. It is most obviously helpful for framing the intersection of platform capitalism and military occupation by highlighting the fact that the people who host the listings with which I began this essay are occupied – incarcerated – hosts. Their daily lives are structured by occupation. As the hosts of one listing, "Private, Ensuite Room in Dheisheh-Bethlehem" in Dahaysha refugee camp, explained: "Because we can't travel the world we like to invite the world to our house." Occupied home-sharing helps us foreground that listings are on occupied territory. The term is helpful also for juxtaposing listings in Palestinian cities and on Jewish-only settlements to reveal hosts' uneven positionalities.

Moreover, occupied home-sharing helps us reframe familiar experiences of occupation. Palestinians are forced to "share" their homes with soldiers during military raids. They are forced to "share" their homes with Jewish settlers at gunpoint.<sup>19</sup> During evictions-as-sharing, the home-ness of a home is deconstituted, broken down into component parts (shelter, furniture, memories), some of which can move with the people evicted and some of which cannot. When Israel demolishes Palestinian homes, families are forced to ask to share the homes of neighbors, many of whom are refugees already living in tight quarters because *their* original homes are also occupied. This is coerced sharing; it allows the intrusion of violence into the space of a house.

Settler colonialism can also itself be understood as occupied home-sharing – a gift coerced out of the giver and a territory apportioned and enjoyed jointly but unevenly. Calling it "home-sharing" signals the colonizer's felt entitlement to enjoy shelter, to make home, on the territory, to develop intimacies with and on it and to invite others to do the same, as a kind of proliferation of occupied home-sharing ad infinitum.

The hosts in this essay demonstrate that the different scales of occupied home-sharing are related. Their relationship is productive. As a specific *iteration* of occupied home-sharing, Airbnb is both a result of existing forms of occupied home-sharing and can mitigate them and make worlds within them. The remainder of this essay explores social, affective, and political possibilities that Airbnb opens up and forecloses. It offers a way to think about the fact that there are also listings in Gaza and other occupied territories like Kabul, Baghdad, Kashmir, Mogadishu, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Northern Cyprus, but also in settler cities like Manhattan and Canberra. What

socialities are made possible, and what political logics are furthered, as occupied home-sharing proliferates? To set up preliminary answers to this question, I begin by introducing Palestine's Airbnb hosts.

### **Who are Palestine's Hosts?**

I was provoked to consider the question of context when I first searched for a Ramallah Airbnb in 2014. I typed in "Ramallah" and discovered that Airbnb's algorithms make no distinction between a listing on an Israeli settlement and one in a Palestinian city. Booking thus requires the ability to differentiate Israeli settlement names from Palestinian locales and Israeli from Palestinian hosts, and to recognize and situate local landmarks. You would need to know that being "a two minute walk from Bethlehem University and a five minute walk from the Nativity Square" means that "Bright Shine" listing is in Bethlehem. Further evidence of the platform's poor (or negligent) geolocation system is the fact that when you type "Bethlehem, Palestine," its location is listed as "Ari'el," a settlement that is closer to the northern West Bank Palestinian city of Nablus than it is to the southern city of Bethlehem, whose nearby settlements include Har Homa, Gilo, Efrat, and Beitar Illit,

I decided to learn about the Palestine-based hosts who were managing to offer hospitality under these conditions. I draw on conversations with Munadil, a host in Bethlehem, and from Sarah and Iyad, both hosts in Ramallah. Munadil is a refugee from al-Malha (Jerusalem) who works as a journalist. He has listed an apartment on Airbnb.com for four years. Sarah is an American married to a Palestinian in Ramallah. She has been hosting one of her husband's family apartments on Airbnb since 2012. Iyad is a foreign-educated Palestinian techie who had just begun hosting his sister's apartment when we met.

Only a small number of residents in West Bank Palestinian cities and villages are Airbnb hosts. Compared to nearby locations like Tel Aviv and Beirut, the number of hosts per capita is miniscule. Most have probably not heard of the platform. Those who have may know more about the international campaign critically examining Airbnb's collusion with occupation than about how to use it. Yet, at least before the Israeli military placed West Bank Palestinian cities under total closure following the coronavirus pandemic outbreak, the number of Palestinian Airbnb listings had been growing. In August 2019, AirDNA calculated that Ramallah alone had 124 active rentals. That number marked a steady increase from 2016. Listings have been satisfying guests, with 85 percent receiving at least 4.5 stars out of five. Most are booked at least one and up to ninety days a year (38 percent average occupancy) and make hosts an average of \$603 monthly (July 2019).

Palestinian Airbnb hosting seems to be a middle- and upper middle-class practice, and thus it offers a window onto how certain strata are making and experiencing property, home, kin, and technology. This is, first and foremost, because a hosting prerequisite is having extra space: an extra room in one's own home or a property one is not using. It would be nearly impossible, for example, for my friend Mustafa to rent out a room, let alone an apartment, on Airbnb. He grew up and lives in a four-

story building in the densely populated al-Am‘ari refugee camp beside al-Bireh where the apartments are inhabited by his parents, his own six-person family, and his two brothers’ families, and where he periodically houses his sister and her family when they visit from Germany, and his other sister who has had to escape a family feud in Jerusalem.

Hosts tend to be cosmopolitan. Many have experience living or traveling abroad and most speak English and other foreign languages (such as French or Hebrew). One of my hosts responded to an early message to tell me that she was in Canada (getting a law degree), so her father would give me the key. Her sister had a master’s degree in climate change policy from a Spanish university and had prepared the unit’s information booklet in perfect English. Yusra, host of Tulkarm’s only listing, studied in France for two years and her host profile says that she speaks fluent French and English. Jalal, host of the flashy “Rozana Penthouse” listing in al-Zababda near Jenin, has lived in Paris and Amman. Karam, host of an apartment in Rawabi, Palestine’s first planned city, is an academic at the New School in New York. He speaks English, Spanish, and French.

Some have experience as Airbnb guests. Iyad, in Ramallah, had thought to host an Airbnb after staying at a friend’s Airbnb in Germany. Yusra had stayed in Airbnbs in Spain and Italy. Leena, a Ramallah host since 2012, had stayed in Airbnbs in Jordan and the United Kingdom. Many have long-term exposure to, and relationships with, foreigners in Palestine. As a journalist in Bethlehem, a major international tourist destination, Munadil has been working with foreigners throughout his career. Jenin’s listing is a room in a cultural center that hosts international volunteers. A few hosts, like Sarah in Ramallah, are non-Palestinians. Listings’ interior designs also mark hosts as people with resources. Much of the furniture looks expensive. Occasionally it looks like it was purchased outside the West Bank. The “Industrial-style Designer Penthouse” in al-Tira, for instance, features an unmistakably IKEA item: a turquoise RÅSKOG caddy. Even at the relatively low price of \$34.99, this IKEA caddy adds cosmopolitan flare in the Palestinian context. The issue here is less the cost of the item than it is physical access to it.

Though elite, Palestine’s listings are not professionally managed. Hosting is an amateur practice. Most hosts seem to be property owners or their family members, not property management companies, which have taken over Airbnb management in other places like Athens, Barcelona, and London. The poor lighting and less-than-flattering angles and the presence (in a few cases) of a used toothbrush and fridge magnets suggest nonspecialist photographers for Palestine’s listings. These homegrown initiatives are reliant on people who do other things for a living, in this sense living up to Airbnb’s original conceit that one does not need training to be a host. Palestinians have had an active tourism industry for centuries. But through Airbnb, people employed as journalists, web developers, engineers, academics, consultants, teachers, cafe owners, aid workers, artists, and lawyers are entering tourism, many for the first time.

Part II examines four different ways in which Palestine’s hosts experience

the platform. The conclusion considers what these help us understand about the relationship between Airbnb and precarity in Palestine.

## II. Hosting's Socialities

### Property as Flexible Infrastructure

Airbnb is what infrastructure studies scholars call “soft” infrastructure, a system of technology services that supports economic and social standards and functions, such as transmission of information. It requires, and also facilitates, use of “hard” infrastructures like buildings, roads, and electrical wires. Through its “soft” and “hard” features, it transforms infrastructures of daily life like housing and property.<sup>20</sup> It intervenes on existing layers of precarity caked onto Palestinian life by dispossession, exile, and debt. It transforms properties into temporary homes, for example, allowing properties to serve multiple purposes simultaneously. It renders properties into what we might think of as “flexible infrastructures” by committing them to be specific kinds of infrastructures under specific conditions.

Roughly 30 percent of Palestinian Airbnb listings are entire homes.<sup>21</sup> Many are homes that people have inherited, bought or built and that were being kept empty, in reserve for future habitation, sale or rent. Munadil, the journalist, grew up in Bethlehem's 'Ayda refugee camp with two brothers, two sisters, and their parents, who were both United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) employees living on modest salaries. By the 1980s, his parents had saved enough money to buy land outside the camp. By 1990, they had saved enough to build a two-story house there, with one ground-floor apartment into which the family moved and two second-floor apartments, which stood empty.

When Munadil married Majd, an engineer, they moved into the larger of the two upstairs apartments, where they continued raising three children. His brother Hani moved into the smaller apartment with his Ukrainian wife a few years later. After four years in the smaller apartment, Hani's wife became pregnant with twins and they decided to move. Munadil and Hani's father died soon thereafter. Munadil inherited the apartment in which he and Majd were living; Hani inherited the apartment that he and his wife had left. Munadil decided to buy Hani's apartment from him as an investment for his own children.

Munadil did not have the money for the purchase, but the idea of securing housing or an investment-in-property for his children was too appealing to pass up, even if it meant straining his finances. For Palestinians, as for populations across the Global South, investing in real estate has long been considered more reliable than other forms of investment, likely made appealing for that purpose by privatization of land. Munadil and Majd already owned a small piece of land in Bethlehem that they could sell to buy Hani's apartment. But Majd argued against selling that land, preferring to

take out a bank loan. “Better that we be in debt to a bank but have the land than to lose the land,” she argued. Munadil took out a seven-year loan, selling his car to secure a down payment. Majd pitched in from her savings. Their newly purchased apartment sat empty, furnished (Hani had left the furniture) and ready for a future when the family would need it.

Soon the loan became onerous. Munadil’s media company was in the red and his two daughters had started private school. He needed money. But the thought of finding a long-term renter was unappealing. Palestinians often keep homes as reserve properties, or reserve wealth, empty for years. Renting to locals can yield relatively low rents, and rental laws offer tenants strong protections, including by keeping rents down for “rent-controlled” properties at a symbolic amount.

Sarah, a Ramallah host I have known since 2014, lives in a small building her husband owns. The building has a cafe downstairs and three apartments. Sarah, her husband, and her son live in one apartment. They rent out the other apartment (where I stayed) on Airbnb. The third apartment has been rented out to a (now) elderly woman for decades for a very low rent. Not only is it nearly impossible for Sarah and her husband to ask the woman to leave; the tenant can also legally pass the apartment on to her children when she dies. The elderly woman was ill when I recently saw Sarah and her husband. They were stressed that the tenant’s son would move in during her last weeks of life to take over tenancy upon her death. The downstairs neighbors of Iyad, another Ramallah host, had been paying fifteen dollars monthly rent for the past thirty years. Before her death, Iyad’s aunt had paid five Jordanian dinars (seven dollars) for an apartment on Ramallah’s highly valued al-Manara Square for fifty or more years. Better, many owners think, to keep a property empty than to enter a contract one cannot get out of.

At the time that Munadil and Majd sought a solution to their predicament, Airbnb had recently become accessible to Palestinian users. Through the platform, they could rent out for finite, pre-set periods of time and their guests would not count as renters under Palestinian law. They could vary prices depending on the season and capitalize on Bethlehem being a tourist destination. Thus, since 2016, Airbnb has served as an infrastructure buttressing Munadil’s family against precarity. The income he and Majd obtain through Airbnb helps secure them financially against the weight of their loan. It allows them to hold onto the additional piece of land they own, which can be liquidated or built upon for their children. And it allows them to invest in the future in a way informed by aspirations for upward mobility. As refugees, their children have the ability to attend UNRWA schools for free. But Munadil and Majd prefer to send their daughters to a private school, a choice made possible by Airbnb. From the money their listing made between April and August of 2018, they were able to pay the private school tuition for both their daughters for the year. Munadil expressed satisfaction at having paid the sum up front, which mitigated the indignity of worrying month to month if he could afford his daughters’ education.

Airbnb holds property in reserve for owners in a legal system that gives long-term renters quasi-ownership by creating a new category of unfamiliar-guest-but-not-

regular-renter that can be comfortably assimilated into the workings of an owning family, while also creating a new experience of property as something protected but exploitable. Munadil and Majd had hesitated to bring what Munadil called a “stranger” (*hada gharib*) into the house through long-term rental. They preferred for the house to “stay with us” (*idall ma ‘na*). These phrases expressed that ownership is undermined when one’s property becomes another’s home. Ownership in this context is less the ability to extract value (through rent or sale) than it is the ability to change use of the property at will.

In Ramallah, Iyad began hosting when he failed to find ideal long-term renters for his sister’s apartment. She had financial pressures that she needed to alleviate. She was working in the United Arab Emirates and had taken out a mortgage to buy the place as an investment. She was looking for someone who would only want a one-year or eighteen-month contract. That would keep the apartment open for use in an uncertain future. Iyad paraphrased his sister’s concern: “Maybe I’ll be back.” She had to consider the question of her return as well as the fact that the timing of return was uncertain. A foreign renter would be ideal as foreigners leave. Second best would be a young Palestinian family trying to buy their own place elsewhere. Single, male, or older Palestinians were a no-go. They might want to stay indefinitely. Iyad convinced her that putting the apartment on Airbnb would “stop the bleeding” (that is, her economic woes). She agreed and they decided the nightly rate—forty dollars. With a hopefully high monthly occupancy rate, that could cover the loan amount plus a small margin. Iyad was also trying to convince his retired parents to list their place.

A small dive into the stories of Palestine’s hosts reveals that occupation, exile, and dispossession are at the core of many of the experiences of precarity that Airbnb helps mitigate. The mother of one of my hosts in Ramallah was a political prisoner in Israel who has been serving rounds of administrative detention for years. Renting the family apartment on Airbnb offset some of the expenses – lawyers, prison fees, loss of income – associated with her long-term incarceration. Though not all the forms of “bleeding” Airbnb helps stop are so obviously political, they still reflect the particular difficulties that Palestinians face. Munadil and his parents had to build wealth in land through debt because, as refugees, they had begun with little. Iyad’s sister did not know if and when she was going to return to her apartment in Palestine because, given Palestinians’ history of being expelled from the Gulf, she could not be sure how long the UAE would be hospitable toward her. She also could not imagine if and when conditions in Palestine improve enough economically that she could live there and help Iyad take care of their parents.

Airbnb creates the material conditions for spontaneous care of others – a need for care made especially acute for displaced populations. The fact that the two upstairs apartments had been empty when Munadil and Hani got married in Bethlehem had enabled them to live rent-free. When their father died one of Munadil’s sisters, who enjoys a high salary in Canada, gave up her share of the father’s house. Munadil insisted that the house would always be “hers” as well – she was always welcome. When Majd suggested putting the smaller apartment on Airbnb, Majd argued that

foreigners, whom Munadil and Majd anticipated they would draw, were lighter (*akhaf*) and easier (*ahwan*) to host than local, long-term renters. Foreigners' imprint on the use value of the property could be limited and controlled, thus allowing the space to remain available for Munadil's sister whenever necessary. My own experience trying to book Airbnbs in Ramallah supports the idea that hosts in Palestine value being able to use their properties whenever they need them, for example for a relative visiting from abroad. After issuing "request to book" queries I received several host replies stating that booking was not possible even though my dates had appeared available on Airbnb's calendar. Hosts explained that they were going to be using (or lending out) the apartment, off-platform, during my dates.

Yet practices of belonging to emplaced community and those of belonging to the "global" community Airbnb thinks of itself as promoting sometimes conflicted. Using Airbnb to secure flexibility of property use had its drawbacks. Sarah in Ramallah began our conversation with a story about being "punished" by Airbnb because she had canceled a reservation. Her brother-in-law had decided to visit, and his dates overlapped two days with a booked Airbnb guest. "What do you do?" she asked as if the answer were obvious. But I could tell that she faced what she saw as a dilemma. She had invested years into hosting well and receiving great reviews. She had become a "superhost" on the platform, which meant that her listing was featured prominently on the site and could garner higher prices. She was supporting the cafe she and her husband ran downstairs and was making enough money to be able to fly back to the United States to visit her family with some regularity. Yet in the context of the family into which she had married, it was unfathomable that she would reject her brother-in-law's (off-platform) request to stay in the apartment. Sarah was a host, not the property owner. She did not set the priorities for the space. Those priorities, it turned out, valued hosting family over making profit or maintaining good standing on the platform. She asked the Airbnb guest if she could change his dates or if she could put him up in a hotel for the first two nights. He became angry and complained to company representatives. In response, Airbnb blocked Sarah's listing from being rented for the dates she had canceled. After Sarah canceled the guest booking to host her brother-in-law, Airbnb removed her "superhost" status and placed a public statement on her page that she had canceled on a guest, damaging her credibility on the platform and her chances of securing future bookings.

### **Gifts, Family, Community**

In adding to the social and semiotic flexibility of Palestinian property in housing, Airbnb also proliferates the possibilities for new social relations. It does so first because hosting is often a family affair, extending historical Palestinian practices combining business and family, and business and homes.<sup>22</sup> Munadil and Majd's Bethlehem listing is booked about twenty days per month, mainly by Europeans, North Americans, and Russian-speakers. Guests stay between a day and about a week, though one had recently stayed for fifty days. Munadil and Majd clean the apartment

themselves. They spend between ten and fifteen hours per week on hosting, often also enlisting Munadil's brother Hani (who studied in Russia) to help them coordinate with the many Russian-speaking guests who come to visit Bethlehem's holy sites. Before guests arrive and while they are in Bethlehem, Munadil, Hani, and Majd make themselves available for guests' questions on email, phone, and Facebook, along with the free texting and phoning applications Viber and Whatsapp.

Airbnb consolidates the status of the Palestinian home as a kind of public space, challenging the idea of intimacy as something contained within the walls of a house, where the public begins outside the threshold.<sup>23</sup> Palestinian thinkers are increasingly exploring the power of hospitality as public, political praxis. Architect Sandi Hilal, for instance, has a project on what she calls "refugee hosting," which turns a staged refugee's living room (*al-madhafa*) into a space where refugees host non-refugees in Sweden in spaces provided by the project. Refugees exercise what Hilal calls "their right to be a host" as a political act subverting exile. The project proposes that hosting itself is a form of temporal, spatial, and narrative ownership that does not require title to property: refugees "no longer feel themselves passive guests in the new destination but *owners* of their own present and story."<sup>24</sup> Hilal's framing helps us understand Sarah's sense of ownership accrued through years of hosting her husband's apartment in Ramallah, and her dismay when her husband's family compelled her to cancel a booking in favor of hosting her brother-in-law. The Palestine Hosting Society (PHS) is a live art project of traveling, pop-up meal events (for example, "Family Dinners," "Our Nablus Table") for forty to sixty guests at a time.<sup>25</sup> PHS dinners reverse hosting's mobility rules by *traveling to guests* to bring them flavors and stories of Palestinian dishes under threat of disappearance. PHS's philosophy shares Hilal's idea that "hosting is power" both because it brings visibility and because it asserts a dispossessed or threatened person's agency, in some sense performing a reversal of the vulnerability of being a guest/refugee. We can think of hosting by Munadil and Majd in Bethlehem, refugees hosting foreigners with more mobility and resources than they possess, as refugee hosting in these terms. Forced – occupied – home-sharing seems to be reversed.

Airbnb hosting is like a nesting doll of more hosting. The fact that Palestinian hosts open their properties to foreigners through an online platform might be all the more subversive because it creates daily opportunities for them to decide to give (or to withhold) gifts of various kinds. When guests arrive, for instance, Munadil picks them up from Bethlehem's main checkpoint or from the bus stop from Jerusalem. Munadil takes guests on a short tour of the city before bringing them to the apartment and showing them how things work. Check-in includes offering guests free water, fruit, and a home-cooked dish. He offers advice about sightseeing in Bethlehem, Hebron, and Jericho. If a guest stays for multiple days, Munadil and Majd invite them over for a meal or tea.

Munadil also offers guests tours that highlight the ongoing Nakba, the term meaning "catastrophe" that Palestinians use to describe their mass displacement at the hands of Zionist militias in 1948, and continuing occupation. Tours last two and a half to three

hours. He takes guests to ‘Ayda camp, the Wall, the Church of the Nativity, the Old City, Bethlehem’s market, and nearby al-Walajah village. He discusses refugee and water issues. He thinks of tours as part of what he calls “political” or “community” tourism. He charges twenty-five to thirty dollars per hour. That he charges fits with Airbnb’s logic that everything can be commodified – it becomes an “experience” to be sold on the market. Airbnb encourages commodifications of many kinds, turning homes into spaces with “amenities” and hosts into “providers” offering a menu of services.

Yet a host can also decide what is worthy of, or necessitates, commodification, and when. Munadil only ends up accepting money for tours about 20 percent of the time. In 80 percent of the cases, he told me, he “cannot” take money. He explained that guests “enter the heart” (*budkhulu lal-qalb*). It would feel wrong to charge them. The customer–provider relationship breaks down when a different relationship, or its possibility, appears. Something about Munadil as businessman – which a friend who knows him well affirmed is one of his strongest, most long-standing identities – softens. The phrase “enter the heart” suggests an opening. Munadil becomes porous, susceptible to guests. What he thinks causes them to enter the heart is their interest (*ihitimam*) not in him personally but in the Palestinian struggle. There is a long-standing tradition of foreigners traveling to Palestine to convey or perform solidarity with Palestinians under occupation, a tradition sometimes more cynically referred to as “occupation tourism.”<sup>26</sup> Given Bethlehem’s highly developed hotel industry and connection to organized international religious tours, many Airbnb guests in Bethlehem are likely those who are already familiar with Palestine and are therefore less fearful about staying in independent apartments. This might account for the high percentage of guests who are able to “enter” Munadil’s “heart,” undermining the possibility of becoming targets of economic extraction. Or perhaps the currency with which Munadil is paid for tours is *ihitimam* itself, such that to take money would be to charge guests twice. Either way, what we see here is that Airbnb users’ moral and affective sensibilities set limits to Airbnb’s commodifications.

In Munadil’s hesitation we also see that an important feature of Palestinian hosting is that it creates opportunities for the assertion of connection-beyond-commodification, of community forged on alternative terms. Commodification of the home by Airbnb thus offers avenues for commodification’s opposite. Sometimes assertions are made through refusal to commodify otherwise commodifiable relations. Sometimes they suture hosts to guests. And at other times hosts assert their belonging and commitment to communities in their midst rather than to Airbnb’s “global community.” One more mode of assertion works through refusal to host inappropriate guests, to which I turn in the following section.

## Rejections

A constitutive power embedded in hospitality is the power to reject, as the Derrida quote that opens this essay proposes. Each host I spoke with had rejected or canceled

at least one booking. Someone had requested to book Munadil's apartment in Bethlehem for a few days. Majd, who managed online communications, accepted the request and sent directions to the apartment. On his way through Bethlehem's checkpoint, the guest called Munadil, whose phone number was listed on the site, to confirm his check-in time. Munadil detected an accent and realized that the guest was Israeli. The guest confirmed this, but said he had another passport. Munadil told him to turn back. "If you come here, I can't protect you," he said. "And I can't have my community wondering who you are and giving me a hard time." Munadil canceled the reservation. "To be honest," he told me, "I wasn't comfortable with an Israeli coming to the apartment. What was he going to be doing there?"

In rejecting this Israeli guest, Munadil asserted a kind of host sovereignty, if briefly and uncomfortably. Airbnb offered a rare chance for an incarcerated, colonized host to constrain the colonizer's freedom of movement, both to reverse roles and to reverse flows of Israelis that have been entering Palestinian spaces, including as tourists, for as long as the state of Israel has existed.<sup>27</sup> This represented a reversal of the way that hospitality can *test* sovereignty, as Andrew Shryock has shown with his work among the Balga Bedouin in Jordan. Shryock shows that the extent to which a host is able to provide shelter, food, and protection indexes the host's sovereign ability to muster and wield resources toward the creation and management of a household.<sup>28</sup> For the Balga Bedouin, sovereignty is manifest in giving and generosity. Airbnb hosts in Palestine may exercise this form of sovereignty as well, for example by offering guests home-cooked meals free of charge, as Munadil, Majd, and Sarah often do. But whatever protection hosts may offer – for example from the weather or from the public gaze – is upended by their guests' exposure to the Israeli military. The latter form of exposure is all the greater in a Palestinian home that could be the target of an army raid at any time of day or night, as a Palestinian Airbnb would be. Yet in rare moments like the one Munadil had on the phone with his Israeli guest-to-be, Palestine's Airbnb hosts can exercise an additional form of sovereignty by making an Israeli guest who expects to feel welcome, feel *unwelcome*. This is sovereignty because the gift could be given but is withheld.

Palestine's Airbnb hosts are able to wield this symbolic form of sovereignty because Airbnb can function extraterritorially. Munadil rejected his guest under Airbnb's protection. If the guest were to have turned out to be an aspiring settler and had forced his way into Munadil's house – a practice Israel might have backed with force, as it systematically does<sup>29</sup> – that would have been poor guest behavior from Airbnb's perspective. At the very least, Munadil would have been able to leave the guest a negative review.

It may be humorous and even grotesque to juxtapose Israeli state force with a bad review on Airbnb. But a structural point about the company's ability to mediate between Palestinian host and Israeli guest stands. Through Airbnb's mediation a refugee and colonized subject denied access to his land (Munadil cannot travel to al-Malha where he is from, only thirty minutes away) established a physical boundary with his colonizer, deciding who could enter his property and under what conditions.

Munadil's cancellation of the Israeli's booking was also an assertion of belonging to a community of neighbors and to Palestine more broadly. It upheld the norm that views an Israeli Jew in a Palestinian city as a likely threat, as well as the norm that considers socializing with an Israeli Jew potential evidence of collaboration with Israel's security services against other Palestinians. Munadil weighed his options and decided that acceptance by his community, and protection of his home, were more important than his status on a platform – a status that was compromised by his cancellation, as I discuss below.

Iyad's sister in the Gulf also found herself weighing community against Airbnb hospitality. She received a booking request for her apartment in Ramallah from a Palestinian man in Jordan. Excited that someone wanted the place, she accepted. But after a few days she revoked it. She was not sure, Iyad told me, seeming to understand her dilemma. His sister's requester was a single man from Jordan seeking to stay for three days. What would he be doing? Her friends lived in the building. What would they say? The thought implied that a lone Palestinian man might have sinister intentions. He might bring unmarried women over, for example. When Iyad himself had been looking to rent a place long-term in Ramallah, he recalled facing similar hesitation from landlords. To overcome the constant rejections, he had ended up speaking only English and claimed that he was not Palestinian.

The use of Airbnb to circumvent social norms has become a large enough issue that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is now also addressing it. The tourism ministry has been investigating who owns and manages Palestinian Airbnbs and how many there are because, as Munadil put it, the PA is concerned about people “who have relationships” using the properties. By this he meant extramarital sexual relationships. As in other instances – like closing Beit Aneeseh restaurant in Ramallah, a favorite among expats and artists, following rumors that it was operating as a brothel (and for illegal drug trade) – the PA sought to adjudicate cultural mores around where and how people congregate.

Similar concerns about societal norms precipitated a bind that Sarah recently faced in relation to her Ramallah listing. An American woman booked the apartment for two weeks. Upon arrival, she informed Sarah that her West Bank Palestinian boyfriend would be staying with her. Sarah told her that she would not be able to do that and argued that because Palestinian law forbids Palestinian hotels to allow Palestinians to stay as unmarried couples, and Airbnbs were essentially hotels, the same was illegal in an Airbnb. The American woman, whose credit card had been charged by Airbnb for the full two weeks as soon as she had checked in (one of Airbnb's automatic features), was irate. She argued that Airbnbs are not hotels. That was the whole point.

Hosting the couple would besmirch Sarah's local reputation. She worried that the neighbors would see the couple coming in and out of the apartment. She called the neighbors “nosy, gossiping women” and noted that the man was from a refugee camp. The class optics were especially tricky. The apartment was just upstairs from her own family. The entrance was not private; guests entered from the street. The bedroom window faced neighbors and a refugee camp. The American woman left, canceling

the reservation. Sarah's refusal to host the couple echoed her cancellation of the other guest's booking to allow her brother-in-law to stay in the apartment. Both rejections allowed her to assert morally appropriate belonging to her husband's family and to the neighborhood. When an Israeli Jerusalem host rejected a booking by my friend Kristen, her prospective host made a similar assertion of community belonging, in this case along political lines. Kristen's Airbnb profile picture featured the Palestinian and Mexican flags together as a symbol of solidarity. The host denied her booking, explaining that Kristen's profile picture had made him "uncomfortable."

Yet these assertions of community come at a price. Airbnb metes out consequences for rejection. The platform's universal idea of community ("belong anywhere") can chafe against the actual communities to which platform users (not to mention critics) belong. Munadil lost his "superhost" status by canceling the reservation of his Israeli booker. After canceling, Sarah's American almost-guest requested a refund from Airbnb. A few days later, Airbnb representatives deducted the two weeks' rent – plus the cleaning fee – from Sarah's credit card, which she had had to connect to her account in order to become a host. Sarah seemed indignant as we discussed it over tea. She felt that Airbnb had willfully ignored Palestine's legal regime and social mores. She felt betrayed by the platform, which has a reputation as one that often rules in favor of hosts. Sarah was also an American dealing with an American company. This might be why her sense of indignation at not receiving good customer service was so much greater than Munadil's, which, if present, was undetectable.

## **Exclusions**

Occupied Palestinians' Airbnb experiences are shot through with disadvantages, risks, and exclusions that can also compound those Palestinians face as a result of occupation. Platform use exposes hosts to potentially dangerous physical, social, and political encounters. These stem from the mixing of Airbnb's properties as a technology and financial instrument with Palestine's structural inequalities. It is likely that there are fewer Palestinian listings than there are Israeli listings, for example, not only because Israel is squeezing Palestinians onto less and less territory, sending Palestinian real estate prices skyrocketing and people into denser living conditions, but also because of Israel's longstanding campaign to discourage tourism to Palestinian areas.

It is, moreover, likely due to the uncertainties that accompany being an occupied host that Palestinian listings have flexible cancellation policies at a higher rate than listings in almost any other location for which AirDNA collects data. A flexible cancellation policy means that a guest canceling at least twenty-four hours before check-in receives a full refund. Cancellation less than twenty-four hours before check-in results in a charge for only the first night's stay, and cancellation after check-in gives guests a refund for any unused nights they had booked. A host is left little time to find a replacement guest, and thus a flexible cancellation policy can mean a host loses even more money. Compare Ramallah's 77 percent flexible cancellation policies to New York (27 percent), Madrid (33 percent), Berlin (37 percent), Rio (39 percent),

Tel Aviv (43 percent), Beirut (47 percent), New Delhi (58 percent), and Istanbul (60 percent), for example. Only Sindh, in Pakistan, and Caracas, Venezuela, have higher percentages of flexible cancellation policies, at 86 and 87 percent, respectively.

Airbnb is also premised on a sense of stranger sociability that may not be achievable in Palestine – or perhaps in other occupied contexts. Israeli hosts on settlements cannot have Palestinian guests. Palestinian hosts have to worry about accidentally welcoming their colonizers into their homes. They have to worry about their reputations being sullied by the use of their properties for activities their communities find inappropriate partly because of how limited mobility is for those communities. If they had fewer restrictions on mobility, unmarried Palestinian couples might pursue privacy further afield, for example across the Green Line where fewer people know them and where being married is not a criterion for booking a hotel.

Airbnb disorients and disappoints Palestine's hosts. Hosts expect that if they can list a unit, they can become users like anyone else in the world, receiving tailored customer service from the platform. Yet there are many examples of Airbnb behaving as if ignorant of where it has landed. A West Bank Palestinian host named Mousa wrote the following message on an Airbnb community message board in 2016: "We are a Palestinian [*sic*] family and with the assistance [*sic*] of our Israeli friend [*sic*] we try to open an account of Airbnb. The problem is that we cannot approve our location. We live in a small village but even when we try to put the name of the big city near us (Qalqiliya) it is not possible to set our location." Airbnb's algorithms failed to recognize the major West Bank city of Qalqiliya, presumably insisting on listing the unit as being located in Israel. But Mousa was equally frustrated that "the people from Airbnb are not responsive." Airbnb, which was meant to oversee this arrangement, offered no contact for redress. When Sarah first listed the family's Ramallah apartment, Airbnb offered to send her a photographer to shoot the space. But it hired a Jewish Israeli photographer, not accounting for the fact that Israel has effectively prohibited Jewish Israeli civilians from entering Palestinian cities (except Hebron) since the mid-1990s. The photographer never showed up and the company did not think to hire a Palestinian professional photographer instead.

One of the most obvious ways in which Munadil felt Airbnb overlooked his circumstances in Bethlehem involved the method of payment. To open an Airbnb account one needs a way to pay and receive payments through the platform. Credit cards and PayPal are the most commonly used methods. But most West Bank Palestinians lack credit cards and Palestinian banks have had difficulty establishing them. The Bank of Palestine, for example, had to first convince Visa and Mastercard that Palestine is a place worthy of its own country codes.<sup>30</sup> It does not help that Palestinians lack their own currency and the post-Oslo arrangement prevents them from having an independent central bank and creating money. Many businesses do not accept cards, likely a demotivating factor for locally-based Palestinians to obtain cards. Some are discouraged by the banking sector's suspicious stance toward Palestinians. Iyad, in Ramallah, was irritated that even a simple bank transfer from a Palestinian bank to another bank was onerous. "The clerk asks why you're doing the

transfer,” he said, implying the bank’s suspicion about his political motivations: “It’s like an interrogation.” Israel denies many Palestinians legal West Bank residence. An estimated fifty thousand cannot apply for a credit card because they lack identification. And a few, like Iyad, prefer to live without credit cards for ideological reasons. PayPal, meanwhile, which operates in 203 countries worldwide and on Israeli settlements, has refused to serve people with West Bank Palestinian bank accounts.

Until recently Munadil thus had to mobilize international networks to keep an Airbnb account. A friend’s uncle in France was allowing Munadil to use his PayPal account. Once the uncle would receive the money from Airbnb, he would wire it to Munadil’s friend in the West Bank. The friend would then wire it into Munadil’s bank account. This system cost Munadil extra. PayPal was charging 5 percent for the initial transaction when a guest would pay for a reservation. PayPal charged another 5 percent for wiring the money to Munadil’s friend. That was on top of the 3 percent commission Airbnb keeps from all hosts for each booking. (In August 2018, Airbnb rolled out an Airbnb debit card and Munadil cut the middlemen out of his transactions.) It is in this sense that Airbnb offers reversals of Palestinians’ legal subject positions, for example by facilitating the power to host and the sovereignty to reject, and while Munadil’s leveraging of transnational social networks also embedded him in those networks-as-community. Yet Airbnb simultaneously obstructs Palestinians’ direct access to the platform by assuming that its users enjoy the privilege of citizenship in democratic states.

## Conclusion

Airbnb in Palestine may tell us something about the relationship between precarity and platform capitalism. Airbnb often generates precarity, but not always or not only. Airbnb can help people who are already precarious for other reasons leverage the precarity that Airbnb generates to become less precarious.<sup>31</sup> It allows them to access and to create pockets of certainty; for instance the certainty of being able to spontaneously care for others (Airbnb guests or family members) by hosting them and the certainty that a property can be restored for changed use to its owners at any time. It offers a way to “lightly” use a property while waiting for a relative to return from abroad, a child to marry, a wife to be released from prison – even a state to be established. It alleviates the waiting manifest in an empty apartment. Giving up one’s time through the labor-intensive process of hosting strangers nightly allows one to keep a property available, and “closer,” longer. Labor time is exchanged for property time.

However, the socioeconomic position of most of Palestine’s hosts suggest that relief from precarity is mainly available to the least precarious. It is an elite tool that contributes to society’s further stratification. And Airbnb hosting is itself precarious work. It lacks benefits or stability, as became painfully clear when the coronavirus pandemic hit in the spring of 2020. It is based on the whims of the market, on obtaining

good reviews by pleasing customers, and on the presence of foreigners in Palestine. Hosts have an income only as long as researchers, aid workers, and occupation tourists travel to Palestine and, as always, as long as Israel allows them to do so.

Hosts have an income only as long as Israel allows religious tourists to access holy sites unregulated by Israeli-sponsored tour guides and only for as long as they can successfully cram work that requires twenty-four hour attention into already exhausting, low-paid workdays. One of Munadil's Bethlehem guests had said that she would arrive at 11 pm. She did not. She eventually called to say she would arrive at 1 am. Had she been interrogated at the airport? Had she stopped to eat? She did not say. Munadil could not ask. He felt it would be rude – the kind of rude that gets you a bad review. “We always want five stars,” he told me. He was affectively as well as financially attached to the evaluative system of the platform. The couple had to rise at 6 am to get the girls off to school and themselves to work. Munadil told Majd to go sleep. He would stay up. But sleep overtook him. He did not hear the phone around 2 am when the guest finally arrived. She left, leaving a scathing review on Munadil's page. He and Majd lost their superhost status again. Majd had to work doubly hard with subsequent guests to reinstate it.

The host stories in this essay also reveal limits to the chromatography analogy, or ways in which it can be complicated. As much as Airbnb reveals, it also conceals. Palestinians host despite the many challenges they face doing so *as Palestinians*. For good hosting can require deemphasizing challenges in favor of offering guests, not all of whom are there to experience occupation, the experience of being on vacation – of escape. Airbnb also hides histories of dispossession, for example, when it renders settlement and Palestinian listings commensurate.<sup>32</sup> This is the dark flipside of Sandi Hilal's idea that hosting is power. Hosting does not require ownership, or a just pathway to ownership, to be powerful. And it can override the very question of property ownership (and its history) by letting a host own her “own present and story” instead. Hosting does not differentiate between just and unjust stories. It can enhance the credibility of a settler-host's story as much as it can enhance that of a refugee-host in a Palestinian camp.

Finally, it is not enough to think of the chromatography analogy as if there are hundreds of Airbnb strips, each “dipped” into its own separate glass of solution (or country). Better to think of the glasses being connected by a system of open tubes. Solution spills and sloshes from the one to the other. Or, better yet, we can think of the glass as one large one, encapsulating the many spaces in which Airbnb operates. This is how we can begin to understand the fact that, while some Israelis are listing West Bank settlement properties on Airbnb, contributing to settlements' rising real estate prices, high settlement prices are driving other Israeli investors to investment opportunities outside Israel/Palestine. The preferred investment destination for many is currently Greece, where a decade of austerity has pushed Greeks to sell their properties to foreign investors, many of whom – Israelis especially – are buying properties to list them on Airbnb.

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**Epigraph:** Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Doufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000), 77.

#### Endnotes

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