

Unchilding by Domicidal Assault

Narrating Experiences of Home during the Second Intifada

Heidi Morrison

Abstract

Trauma resulting from Israeli violence is embedded in the life stories narrated by Palestinians. Oral histories recorded with Palestinians who grew up during the Second Intifada reveal that the home is a central and critical location for Palestinians to trace their memories of war. It is in the intimate spaces of the home that such trauma is exposed. Though rarely addressed in mainstream news and academic publications, the Palestinian home is never immune from violence related to the larger armed conflict, and this has a particularly harmful impact on home's youngest inhabitants. Israeli attacks on the home are part of a larger process of unchilding, that is, Israel's use of Palestinian children as political capital.

Keywords

Unchilding; children; oral history; home; second Intifada; narration; memory; and trauma.

I belong there. I have many
memories. I was born as everyone
is born.

I have a mother, a house with
many windows, brothers, friends,
and a prison cell

with a chilly window!

— Mahmud Darwish, "I Belong
There," in *Unfortunately, It Was
Paradise*

In “I Belong There,”¹ windows are a conduit for Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish to express the significance of home in a world plagued by war, exile, and imprisonment. The drafty window in his prison cell, which represents the chill and isolation of captivity, is contrasted with the abundance of windows in his house, where he has roots and family: a place to belong. In this article, I ask how Palestinians’ memories of the architectural features of their childhood home can help us reframe conventional academic approaches to Palestinian childhood trauma. As scholars begin to question biomedical approaches to trauma that decontextualize their experiences – the widely-used Trauma History Questionnaire, for example, uses a yes/no checklist to assess types and severity of trauma, while charts of mental health symptoms based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders draw on universal typologies – analysis of rooftops, windows, doors, and beds, absent from standard medical journals, may offer an additionally useful way to understand the impact of violence. Israel’s targeting of the home fuels and sustains unchilding, the ongoing, violent, and systematic targeting of children to affirm control and achieve political goals.² Palestinians’ memories of their childhood homes thus provide access points into childhood traumatic experiences and insights into the dynamics of unchilding in Palestine.³

Generations of Palestinian children have grown up experiencing political violence. Typical studies of Palestinian children measure trauma by charting clinical symptoms such as bedwetting and nightmares,⁴ but such studies fall short in the ability to understand the deeply intimate spaces in which traumatic memory resides and manifests. My work draws from nearly ten years of oral-history interviews with Palestinians who grew up during the Second Intifada. My interview cohort consists of twelve Palestinians who were between the ages of six and fourteen at the start of the Second Intifada and are currently between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-two. They are from Jenin, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Qalqilya, Balata, Nablus, the Jordan Valley, Bethlehem, and Hebron.⁵ My cohort is intentionally small because rich communication not only takes time to emerge but also requires multi-part interviews with individuals as well as shorter interviews with family members, friends, and associates.⁶ Oral history captures both semantic memory (facts, ideas, knowledge, concepts) and episodic memory (experiences), of which the latter sheds light on the social, historic, and cultural context in which individuals make meaning of trauma. I use narrative analysis to discern patterns and structures in the narrative of traumatic childhood experiences in these interviews.

These interviews demonstrate consistencies in how Palestinians remember their childhood home: Israeli violence permeated its most mundane, most intimate spaces. Palestinians who grew up during the Second Intifada customarily reference the infamous Muhammad al-Durra incident, in which a Palestinian father’s attempts to shield his son from Israeli gunfire, to no avail, were caught on film; however, Palestinians fill their oral histories with other incidents not considered worthy of headlines. This article takes a metaphorical and analytical “tour” through children’s homes during the Second Intifada, beginning broadly with the home’s infrastructure,

then meandering from the rooftop down past the windows and front door and into the home's interior space, inspecting numerous household objects and ending in the most intimate space: the bed.

Situating the Home in Studies of Palestinian Childhood Trauma

Research into Palestinian childhood trauma has undergone major shifts in the last decade, owing in large part to Palestinian mental health experts questioning conventional trauma paradigms.⁷ Within Palestinian studies, many psychology researchers are now questioning the biomedicalization and pathologization of Palestinian trauma, which uses Western testing instruments to diagnose post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD and treats PTSD exclusively as a mental illness.⁸ Instead, these researchers view trauma in its local context, largely requiring a political rather than a medical solution. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian articulates the particular impact on Palestinian children as a process of “unchildling,” in which “the twisted logic of necropolitics . . . becomes inscribed . . . on children’s living, maimed, and dead bodies, on children who are always already illegitimate nonsubjects.”⁹

According to Shalhoub-Kevorkian, unchildling operates through global and local politics as well as through the “disruption of the intimate.”¹⁰ The intimate can refer to the body, as well as more generally to everyday civilian life, which scholars of Palestine are increasingly examining from historical and contemporary perspectives.¹¹ The biopolitics of the Israeli occupation means that the state maintains a level of control over Palestinian bodies.¹² But Israel’s infiltration of the everyday also makes domestic places, playgrounds, and schools battlegrounds as much as political offices, airways, and military command centers. Obvious and conventional causes of wartime distress, such as confrontations with the enemy soldiers and falling bombs, are thus not the only ways in which Palestinian children experience trauma.

The idea that the architecture of the home can be an access point into trauma is based on the notion that “place” is constructed. “Place” is made through the relationships people have with the space that surrounds them. That is, space becomes place when people give it meaning. Place is thus more than the tangible space that objects occupy: it has social and emotional, non-geometric, dimensions as well.¹³ Since individuals continually interact with their surrounding geography, this process of construction is not unidirectional; rather, place plays a role in self-formation as people’s identities develop in relation to places. During childhood, when the brain is in its most sensitive phase of development, places leave lasting imprints on a person’s memory. Visual, tactile, and auditory experiences perceived by our senses become imprinted on the mind.¹⁴ As Edward Said writes about his childhood, “It is geography – especially in the displaced form of departures, arrivals, farewells, exile, nostalgia, homesickness, belonging, and travel itself – that is at the core of my memories of those early years.”¹⁵ Traumatic memories are often experienced corporeally, and memory not only resides inside the brain, but is also distributed across non-neural systems.

Home is topophilic, a place that engenders feelings.¹⁶ When a person describes their home, they are also describing aspects of themselves.¹⁷ “The house is ‘the topography of our intimate being,’ both the repository of memory and the lodging of the soul – in many ways simply the space in our own heads,” writes Gillian Darley on Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*.¹⁸ The emotional relevance of the childhood home means that memories of it follow the child into adulthood, with long-term impacts on well-being. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard maintains that the home is a human’s first universe and leaves a physical imprint on the human psyche.¹⁹ For example, psychosocial feelings of security, belonging, love, and rootedness may be attached to memories of the architecture and furniture of the childhood home. The home is not just a place of comfort, safety, sanctuary, and love, but also of tension, inequalities, conflict, and pain. Home does not mean the same thing to all, but operates at “a variety of overlapping scales indicating how and where people feel a sense of belonging.”²⁰ Thus, in diverse ways, the home plays a crucial role in children’s lives with long-term effects. It is where they create routines, form identities, and develop relationships and a sense of belonging.

War can turn the home into what anthropologist Marc Augé calls a non-place, a space that people cannot use to consolidate their identity and build personal connections.²¹ War can keep a population feeling perpetually unsettled in their lived space. Further, war can exacerbate already existing dysfunctions, violence, and inequalities in the home.²² Israel has, since its founding, used space as a weapon in its ongoing war on Palestinians.²³ Following the Nakba, Israeli militarization suffused everyday Palestinian life such that “the simple fact of being-at-home constituted, according to the Israeli state, an act of terrorism and an incitement to violence.”²⁴ Yet, in recognizing Israel’s sophisticated system of spatial control, it is important not to fetishize it by rendering such violence abstract.²⁵ Palestinian houses are under constant Israeli surveillance and subject to Israeli attack.²⁶ During the second intifada, Israel turned Palestinian buildings into “layer cakes” with Israeli soldiers stationed both above and below a floor where Palestinians were trapped.²⁷ One of Israel’s micro-tactical techniques was to “move through walls” by blasting holes vertically through ceilings and roofs and horizontally through walls.²⁸ Israeli soldiers occupied homes and used them as military posts for weeks at a time. Sometimes they gave residents the chance to leave and find refuge elsewhere, but at other times they forced the residents to stay locked in one room of the home.

Israel’s assault on Palestinian houses during the Second Intifada disrupted the foundations of well-being that are generally nurtured in the home, such as solid family structures, routines, calmness, and a sense of rootedness.²⁹ From an early age Palestinian children understood that they should leave or disappear from their lived-space. Shalhoub-Kevorkian writes that Israel’s “domicidal ideology” (that is, attacking the home) is a mode of “eliminatory unchilding” and “the cutting [of] the body of the family into parts.”³⁰ Israel’s practice of home imprisonment, for example, forces many parents to become jailers of their children in their own home. “The cruel penetration into the family’s togetherness and safety is an attempt to paralyze the

ability of parents to be present for their children,” she writes.³¹ During the Second Intifada, Israeli soldiers violated not just Palestinian homes, but Palestinian families and Palestinian souls.

As Palestinians recall the Second Intifada, they often describe experiences in jarring contradiction to their expectations of what life should be like. Palestinians commonly remarked that they did not live a “normal childhood” or that their childhood was “stolen.” Mustafa said he did not move from childhood to youth “in a proper way.”³² After a particularly trying encounter with Israeli soldiers as a child, Nur says that she broke down crying and shouted, “I am just a kid!”³³ Her cry conveys a feeling that Israeli soldiers see Palestinian children as bodies, not as children.³⁴ Israeli criminal legislation in the occupied territories has at times lowered the age of majority for Palestinians, legally robbing them of their childhood.³⁵

By no means does this article intend to imply that Israel fully succeeds in its endeavors to abort healthy child development. Multiple forces impact children’s responses to trauma and children are resilient (although the resiliency narrative has its own problems beyond the scope of this paper).³⁶ There is no single home experience; rather, they vary by age, class, gender, and geographic location. Children’s well-being in contexts of political violence is strongly associated with their parents’ mode of parenting.³⁷ For some children, the home is already dysfunctional (with or without war); not all Palestinian homes are peaceful and nurturing sanctuaries were it not for Israeli intrusion. Still, life stories of Palestinians reveal painful memories of Israeli violence in the most unexpected spaces, from pillows to front doors to stoves. My oral history interviews with Palestinians sought to capture their life stories as they chose to tell them, letting the events of the Second Intifada or incidents involving their homes fall where they may. What emerges is clear and consistent memories of trauma embedded in intimate, domestic spaces.

Infrastructure

Although the home is often considered the private sphere for families, life inside the home is dependent on public systems. The home is a “technical terminal tied to a vast network of sewers, mains, cables, and lines.”³⁸ During the Second Intifada, Palestinians experienced intensified attacks on urban infrastructure, which affected home life. Disrupted connections to water, power, and communications systems prohibited, to various degrees, bathing, cooking, and even reading and homework. Ghada, from Jenin, remembers electricity cuts occurring throughout the Second Intifada, which made it difficult for her family across the West Bank to keep one another informed about their safety.³⁹ Closures of towns and villages, home demolitions, and restrictions on electricity and water – all forms of collective punishment Israel uses against Palestinians in the occupied territories⁴⁰ – had uneven effects across the Palestinian community, owing to the various modalities of home-making. Such conditions were the worst for communities that already suffered from poor infrastructure, such as those living in refugee camps.

Palestinian Bedouin communities were among the hardest hit by infrastructural warfare. Israel has simultaneously forced a sedentary existence upon the Bedouins, who traditionally engaged in nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism, but also made such settlement impossible, as Israeli law does not recognize Bedouins' historical claims to their lands.⁴¹ Bedouins are thus forced to live in precarious limbo without access to basic amenities. These outlying areas in which Bedouins live are also areas subject to settler expansion. Israeli law simultaneously backs settlers' rights to live in these areas (despite international law) and allows for the razing of Bedouins' houses and community buildings.

Qays grew up in a Bedouin community during the Second Intifada; his family survived on the barest of minimums. They had drastically reduced usage of their small generator because of limited access to the main electrical grid. The cost of hauling in tanks of water skyrocketed. Israeli bulldozers dug up soil from around his family encampment, then used it to block access to roads and pastures. One night, bulldozers destroyed his family's tents and hauled them away in a truck. Qays describes the scene after the tent demolition: "And we just stayed sitting. Bare. All we saw were cars in the distance going in and out of settlements that we were not allowed to get in. We had no place to go."⁴² Qays paints a powerful image of the terrain of war in Palestine and its juxtapositions. On one side is his family, empty-handed and homeless, sitting on the dirt. They are peripatetic people now frozen in place. On the other side, Israeli settlements brim with life. Thus, the settlers remained (and remain) connected, wired, and mobile, while the Bedouins are left in arrested conditions.

Israeli medical professionals have warned of the health dangers of living in unrecognized villages. Yet these same professionals turn a blind eye to the structural racism that has obliterated infrastructure and services there in the first place.⁴³ The implication is that Palestinians need Israel to "save" them from their own backwardness. In this way, Israeli attacks on the infrastructure of Bedouin communities, such as that described by Qays, perpetuate an Israeli narrative that demonizes Palestinian parents as unable to nurture and protect their children. Such assaults undermine these communities' ability to care for their children, and thus fit within a broader spectrum of Israeli policies of unchilding.

Roof

Roofs are an essential part of a home, even if they do not come immediately to mind as part of its lived space. The roof's primary job is to provide overhead protection from climatic elements, and its shape and design generally reflect the local climate. In Palestine, roofs are typically flat, which allow them to become open-air extensions of the home: a space for drinking tea and smoking a water pipe, a place to keep animals (pigeons, chickens, watchdogs), the location for water tanks or a catchment for water to fill the cistern, and an airy expanse for line drying clothes. During the intifada, the roof also took on a role in warfare. Israeli soldiers took over roofs as strategic points and sniping positions and demolished rooftop water tanks and solar

panels. Palestinians regularly ascended to their roofs for a view that would allow them to assess the situation in their neighborhood and take a breath of fresh air as respite from the suffocation of curfew. Overlooking the neighborhood from one's roof functioned for some as a statement of ownership and identity. (One need only observe the many flags kept on rooftops by Israeli settlers compared to the difficulties Palestinians experience in attempting to raise flags in urban areas of Jerusalem and Hebron.) Sometimes, Palestinians used rooftops to throw stones at Israeli soldiers in the streets below.

Muhannad's childhood memories in the Balata refugee camp describe the roof as a site of both domesticity and battle. Muhannad captures this duality in a story about two young Palestinian men, Omar and Ali, killed by Israelis on top of a neighbor's roof. Muhannad recalls:

There were two friends, Omar and Ali, they were like brothers. They ate together, drank together. They went to each other's homes all the time. They were very brave young men. They liked to throw stones. They pelted the soldiers with stones. They made slings. God rest their souls. One afternoon, an Israeli jeep passed and they threw stones. Before anything happened, their mother looked at them through the window and said, "Come down. Don't stay up there. The soldiers are out to kill. This is a dangerous situation." They said, "Don't worry about us." They did not listen to her. They drank tea and smoked. Omar was killed in his neck. It went in here and out here [gesturing]. Ali, God bless him, was killed in his stomach.⁴⁴

In Muhannad's account of the incident it is not clear what the two friends were doing on the rooftop at the time they were murdered. Were they throwing stones at the Israeli soldiers? Or were they drinking tea and smoking? The coherence of Muhannad's recollection of the events is of less concern here than his mixing of events in time and place. It is at points of unevenness and imperfection in narratives – those elements that, in the words of Ann Stoler, "disallow neat stories" and "muddy the waters" – where truths unravel.⁴⁵ In Muhannad's memory of these rooftop events, Israeli violence coexists with domestic recreation. He does not remember their death as something that happened to them while they were passively drinking tea and smoking, but instead remembers it in relation to their resistance to Israel (throwing stones). Even in their lived space at home, they could not relax.

Architecturally speaking, the roof represents impermeability, yet in Muhannad's memory, the roof is a membrane through which Israeli violence seeps from the outside world into the inside. A young man in Jerusalem, Munir, sums up the problem when he says, "Even if you run to your home, he [the soldier] will get to your home and take you with him."⁴⁶ When Amir was a little boy in Jenin, he believed that the Israelis had labeled him a resistance leader. Fearing that they would target him at any moment and in any place, he used to ask his father, "Please, Dad, do me a favor and hide me. They are coming to kill me."⁴⁷ One time when Amir heard bullets he ran and hid behind the

water tank on the roof, leaving his parents to search for him for hours. In bittersweet irony, Amir felt protected on the roof as he cowered behind the giant water tank, yet in reality he remained more exposed than ever to bullets from above. Muhannad's memory of the roof reflects the process of unchilding during the intifada, leaving children no safe place to avoid experiencing violence. Even the idea of going to the rooftop to get fresh air was a violent prospect under curfew, exposing children to stray bullets and devastating sights of neighborhood conditions.

Windows

Like rooftops, windows are liminal zones, existing simultaneously on the outside and inside of the home. From a window, the dwelling's inhabitants monitor public space from a protected vantage point. Passersby or neighbors do not always know when or if they are being watched from someone on the other side. Sometimes those on the outside catch glimpses of domestic life through windows; inhabitants expose themselves to the outside when they draw back curtains and blinds or open windowpanes. The sense of vulnerability attached to the window is tempered by an unspoken covenant: neither side will pry by looking longer or peering more deeply than is socially accepted into the other's exposed life. Windows can also serve as portals of communication, drawing people together from the inside and outside or between different houses. Liminality can thus produce a certain sense of comradeship.⁴⁸ This can be seen, for example, in the excerpt from "I Belong There" quoted at the start, where Mahmud Darwish draws parallels between friends and family, and windows. For as potentially vulnerable as windows make people, they also can connote trust in one's surroundings.

Israeli violence threatens this sense of comradeship that windows can represent. In many parts of the West Bank, Israeli occupying forces loom outside the window. This was particularly true during the Second Intifada, when Israeli bullets passed through windows and into homes. One mother in the Old City of Nablus recalls the danger she associated with widows during the Second Intifada: "I was helpless. All the children were young. What could I do? I used to sit and think and cry, but never show them [my emotions]. I would think to myself, 'What if my son looks out the window and they shoot him?'"⁴⁹ Wahid, who grew up in Hebron, recalls, "The problem with the intifada was that the wrong that was happening was excessive. For example, when there was shooting it would reach the windows and homes. You could not stand up in the home and you had to lay down on the floor. They [Israeli soldiers] would shoot randomly."⁵⁰ Wahid seems to accept a certain degree of necessary violence in war, but draws the line at the interior of the home. With his description of a child laying prostrate in a house, blocking out the external world at all costs, Wahid reverses the notion of windows as openings to the outside world. The child is overpowered by the window, losing his footing, both literally in the context of the intifada and metaphorically in the development from infancy to adulthood.

In situations where Israeli soldiers occupied Palestinian houses and turned them into military bases, windows were also dangerous for children. When Hanadi, of

Ramallah, was eleven years old, her family fled to a relative's home as soon as they got word that the Israeli soldiers had taken over neighbors' homes and forced the occupants of each abode into one room. Hanadi's family stayed with a relative for two weeks while Israeli soldiers used her home as a base of operations and an observation point. When she returned with her family, it had been turned upside down. She said she noticed holes in her curtains: "They kept the windows closed and the curtains closed. But they cut the curtains so they could point their guns through them and watch to the outside."⁵¹ Curtains are customarily opened or closed to reflect desired boundaries of privacy (though, of course, there can always be a discreet line of sight from either side). In the situation Hanadi describes, privacy is unequally distributed between the two sides. People on the outside are turned into targets of Israeli weapons and, because of the Israelis' ability to observe the street undetected, possible sources of intelligence could later be used to threaten them and undermine social ties. Under normal circumstances, the greatest danger posed by an open curtain might simply be a nosy neighbor looking for gossip; during the intifada, a perforated curtain could represent death.

Omar describes how Israeli bullets through the window of his family's home in downtown Jenin killed his mother when he was sixteen:

During the intifada, in 2005, I went to work [in a car workshop] there in Ramallah because my family situation was not good and my father was injured. When I was going back from Ramallah to Jenin at the end of the month at 'Anabta checkpoint, the soldiers took me to the settlement. They were drinking and things like this. And they started to beat me. I was young these days. They broke my nose – until today, my nose is not healed completely – and they beat my hand. They beat my hand. I stayed in bed for more than two months. Of course they used the cigarettes to burn me too. I used to be afraid at first when I was young, but later I got used to the situation [mistreatment by occupying Israeli soldiers] and it became normal. This is our daily life . . . this is normal. After that, when I came back from Ramallah, the soldier went to the neighborhood and my mother was standing in the window and she was shot and she was martyred immediately. She was still alive when I was beaten. They were coming after our neighbor and she was standing in the window and she was injured. That was the beginning of 2005. I was awake. We were awake because the soldiers were surrounding the neighborhood. We were all awake. I am the oldest one in the home now. I am in charge of all my brothers.⁵²

Omar conflates the violence of the beating with the violence of his mother's death, which both mark the intifada (and 2005 in particular) as a period of trauma. After explaining how his mother died, Omar turned his thoughts immediately to the fact that his mother was alive during and after the beating. In his narration, he reimposes the timeline of events about the beating, correcting himself from being pulled away

by thoughts of his mother. This comment creates a sense of disjointedness in the narrative. Many victims of trauma have trouble organizing their memories of the past. The comment could imply Omar's relief that his mother lived long enough to help him recover from the beating or his disappointment that she lived long enough to know about the beating. In either case, the comment alludes to maternal love, referencing a time when his mother was there for him. However traumatic, the beating represents a time when he had not yet been thrust prematurely into the role of parent to his siblings and himself. In many respects, the bullet through the window took away any semblance of normality. Earlier in the interview he confides that there was a time when he used to have a childlike fear of war, but that was before trauma became the norm, hardening him into an adult in a child's body. The toll of unchilding does not go unnoticed by the children themselves.⁵³

In this disrupted world, windows can lose their functional role in the home. Households lose the customary distinctions between day and night signaled by the uncovering or covering of windows. Parents may not open windows to let in fresh air; children may not vie among each other for the chance to turn window shutters, feeling the morning sunrays on their cheeks, or sit perched in windowsills calling out to friends playing in the street below. In periods of curfew, when a child opens a curtain, it was likely only to glean information about looming threats and the neighborhood conditions. Nur recalls, "I used to go back and forth in the home looking through windows. They [Israeli soldiers] may be standing in the trees and they may have had guns and they may have shot at me."⁵⁴ Trees as military observation points and sniper perches are the reality of unchilding. As the parents of Hala, a young woman from Qalqiliya, told their children, "The walls have ears."⁵⁵ Home becomes a cage. Hana states, "If they [children] open the window of the home, they see the [separation] wall. If they listen to the TV, they hear the occupation. All their life is about the occupation."⁵⁶ In a world of unchilding, windows were not vantage points to see fresh horizons. Instead, they were quite literally dead ends: sites entailing the end of lives.

Israel's weaponization of windows perpetuates distrust in the younger generation, by making them feel unsafe in their own home and unprotected by their family. Palestinian Counseling Center (PCC) psychologist Dr. Shadi Jaber describes the long-term impacts of distrust on Palestinians:

Loss of trust is a collective feature and it becomes an individual feature. I can say that the Palestinians in general feel mistrusting. They feel mistrusting of the world. The international law says something and nobody is putting this in action. It is mistrust that the world is not protecting us, nobody is protecting us. They don't trust people; they don't trust systems. You internalize what you hear and what you see and it affects you to the point that you will even start mistrusting your neighbor, your brother.⁵⁷

One role of parents in their children's lives is to, metaphorically speaking, "open the window" of hope for their children. When parents have to "pull the curtain closed"

on their children, this shades children's ability to imagine a better life ahead. In "I Belong There," Darwish finds some relief in his prison cell by recollecting mental images of seagulls, waves, and meadows: "a panorama of my own." During the Second Intifada, the panoramas for children were grim, remaining embedded in their memories into adulthood.

Front Door

"Borderlines of any sort, physical or symbolic, are manifestations of cognitive classifications," explains anthropologist of architecture Irene Cieraad.⁵⁸ The front door separates the interior of the house from the street, making it a transitional space leading from public to private, a threshold between the outside world and the inside world.⁵⁹ There are rituals linked to spaces of transition and, conventionally, transitions of status at the front door are ritually controlled and marked by tacit agreement.⁶⁰ Rituals of reception may include: a knock (or other form of announcement), recognition or introduction, exchange of greetings, and invitation/permission to enter. Rituals of passage normally spell out hierarchies in space. Not everyone can succeed in crossing thresholds.⁶¹ Such rituals also send the message that the visitor is entering a new social structure, with its own set of rules and expectations. Bypassing these rituals at the door undermines the host's dominion over the home. When Israeli soldiers demolish front doors to enter homes, they violate rituals that govern this transition. In many Palestinians' memories, the front door is a reminder of home invasions and arrests, which often occur in the middle of the night. In their memories of the Second Intifada, narrators connect the front door to assaults on personal privacy and the body.

During the 2002 Israeli invasion of Jenin's refugee camp, which resulted in the leveling of the central neighborhood, Israeli soldiers took over strategically located homes. Israeli soldiers locked Hamza and twenty members of his extended family, including children and a pregnant mother, in a single bathroom inside their home for three days. The family sat trapped inside while the soldiers oversaw atrocities in the camp. The bathroom door dividing the twenty-one family members from the soldiers took on an important role. It became, in a sense, the new front door for the family: it divided their cramped personal space in the bathroom from the Israeli soldiers occupying the rest of the house. Hamza's mother's memories of this experience focus on the heat, overcrowding, physical discomfort, and lack of food. However, Hamza's memories focus on his confusion about what was happening in the rest of the house. He describes hearing foreign sounds on the other side of the bathroom door, particularly the Israeli soldiers speaking Hebrew and mercenaries speaking what he perceived to be a Lebanese Arabic dialect. Hamza explains the profound sense of alienation he felt within his own home, "[I felt] afraid. Scared. I was scared mostly from their shouting and loud voices. One [family member in our room] knocked on the door and asked permission to leave to use another bathroom [in privacy]. The Israelis shouted and then they brought him a pan. Only once in a while could we leave to use the toilet."⁶² Forcing the family members to excrete their bodily waste in front

of one another and into cookware drove home the message that the soldiers now set the rules in the home. The soldiers arbitrarily allowed the private use of the restroom, which only furthered Hamza's feelings of vulnerability. Hamza's family finally left the bathroom (and the home altogether) when they heard the Israeli soldiers broadcast evacuation announcements from loudspeakers throughout the neighborhood. In their exit, the front door reversed its customary role as a barrier protecting domestic space into a portal to escape violated domestic space.

The most horrific experience for Amani during the Second Intifada occurred when Israeli soldiers demolished her house in Jenin with the family still inside. Amani tragically lost her younger brother in this ordeal and endured prolonged hospitalization for her own injuries. When she describes her painful memories of that night, Amani includes details linked to the front door. She says, "They did not knock on the door. They kicked a big stone into it. They said, 'In three seconds, if you don't come out, we will destroy the home.'"⁶³ Within the broader context of murder, injury, and home demolition, the soldiers' lack of a knock on the front door seems relatively insignificant. However, in Amani's memory, the use of a stone instead of a knock to get the family's attention was important; it symbolized the violence of the home destruction itself. Amani also recalled the precise time limit (three seconds) that the Israeli soldiers gave the home's inhabitants to evacuate, offering no opportunity to open the front door and permit their entry, ignoring and disregarding Palestinian sovereignty over their domestic and private spheres. Amani's description of the otherwise minor events that played out at the front door before the catastrophic home demolition captures her memories of the soldiers' disrespect for the family's sovereignty over their home.

During the Second Intifada it was not uncommon for Israeli soldiers to bang on front doors in the middle of the night as a way of rousing inhabitants before a house raid. Often Israeli soldiers shouted for all the men in the house to come out to the street, forcing them to face the wall in their underwear, hands tied. It was common practice for soldiers to enter before women could properly cover themselves; sometimes soldiers forced women to remove headscarves (supposedly to verify that they were not men in disguise).⁶⁴ Mahasan recalls the night Israeli soldiers came to arrest one of her brothers at their family home in Bethlehem:

They [the Israeli soldiers] surrounded the home. They came and knocked on the front door. My father opened the door and they pushed him with their guns. My father was just standing there and staring at them, smoking. They forced all my brothers to walk naked [in their underwear] and told my mother to go without her scarf. They called my brother who they wanted to arrest by his name. They knew his name. They hit him continuously on his head and just pushed him in the jeep. He was naked, just with underwear.⁶⁵

In Mahasan's memory, the presence of Israeli soldiers at the front door is linked to the hypervisibility of the Palestinian body. Israeli soldiers exercised control and domination via the bare Palestinian body. This corporal violence is much the same as

what occurs at checkpoints, where Palestinian bodies are sorted according to sex (and at times forced to remove clothing or otherwise bare themselves).⁶⁶ What Mahasan witnessed at her doorstep included elements of unchilding: the treatment of bodies as threats that need to be controlled, the inflicting of pain on the flesh, and the lack of a place for children to safeguard their bodies. Further, when Mahasan says that her father “was just standing there and staring at them, smoking,” she conveys a sense of helplessness on his part. As part of unchilding, Israel undermines Palestinian social structure by stripping parents or other adult family members of their ability to protect and nurture their children and provide safety and order in the home.⁶⁷

During the Second Intifada, Hanadi and her family were forced to leave their home when Israeli soldiers occupied it for a week and then left it in shambles. The first family member to return was her grandmother, who found the front door missing altogether. Hanadi explains: “First my grandmother walked back home. We called her on the way asking if she had her key. She said, ‘I don’t need a key . . . I don’t need a key [to the home], it is destroyed, so I don’t need a key to get in.’ . . . She was pretty heart-broken.”⁶⁸ Hanadi’s grandmother turned around and left when she saw the extent of damage the Israeli soldiers had done. Hanadi mentioned that the Israeli soldiers left the back door to the home standing, but with an imprint of a soldier’s boot on it.

The grandmother’s words (“I don’t need a key”) convey a sense of resignation and defeat: a continuation of the Nakba. Destruction in the present can evoke deep-rooted legacies of loss, what Ahmad Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod describe as “an existentially felt relationship of the past to the present, one potentially unfolding itself into a future.”⁶⁹ In Palestinian culture, grandmothers are traditionally holders of keys of homes lost in 1948. The symbolism of the key is manifold: it is a reminder of the expulsion of more than seven hundred thousand Palestinian Arabs from their homes during the founding of the state of Israel, and a symbol of Palestinians’ right to return to these homes and, more generally, to reclaim the property stolen during and after the 1948 and 1967 wars. The removal of the front door and the wreckage of the home’s interior undermined the grandmother’s efforts to undo some of this damage by recreating family unity, privacy, and integrity in the home.⁷⁰

Dining Area and Kitchen

Palestinian mothers often speak of their homes as vessels of unity, love, care, and hope, expressed through the rituals of cooking, meeting, and maintaining social and familial ties.⁷¹ The dining area and kitchen are places where these activities come together. They therefore became targets of domicidal assault during the Second Intifada. For example, one young woman from the Balata refugee camp recalls that when Israeli soldiers entered a home looking for someone, they often poured the salt, sugar, rice, and flour on the floor and then covered it with oil and kerosene to ruin it.⁷² A mother from Jenin recalls the Israeli soldiers who occupied her home helping themselves to the bread on her dining-room table,⁷³ and another woman recalls soldiers opening refrigerator doors during home searches.⁷⁴

Memories are multisensory, so trauma may be embedded in the smell of bread or the sight of sugar. Children in particular are more prone than adults to experiencing the world through their senses because they might not yet have developed the language capacity to fully articulate what they experienced, been fully aware of what happened, been given permission to speak about it, or learned what it meant. Nonetheless they feel trauma in their bodies: “They viscerally experience the impact of their environment on their own well-being.”⁷⁵ Because of food’s ubiquity and its sensory qualities, traces of traumatic memory are often intertwined with it, and especially with staples. Israeli settler colonialism cements its power through a variety of spheres, including sensory phenomenon – the sights and smells of occupation.⁷⁶

A young man from Balata connects the routine practice of domestic cooking with fear of Israeli soldiers. After describing Israeli soldiers searching a neighborhood friend’s house during the intifada, Muhannad’s thoughts turn to his family’s reaction: “We were terrified. We said: ‘Will they [Israeli soldiers] come [here too]? Will they come in the house?’”⁷⁷ Muhannad went on: “What would be your feelings if you were in the kitchen boiling an egg or a potato and suddenly you found behind you a soldier sniffing? What would be your feelings? What would be the fear that overtakes you?”⁷⁸ Muhannad describes the oppressive occupation as one that works through overt surveillance, even in the kitchen.

One mother in Ramallah recalls how she could not even feed her children in peace:

I remember one night I was feeding them [the children]; they were so young. They were sitting around a small table and a soldier came knocking on the door and he was screaming. He said, “If you don’t open the door, I will blow it open.” I heard that the neighbors got out, so I felt a bit safe. So I opened the door. I remember the look on my children’s face. My son had a piece of bread that he was going to eat, but he dropped it very slowly, as he was terrified even to move his hand.⁷⁹

As in other cultures, bread is for many Palestinians a symbol of maternal love and nurture. Mahmud Darwish opens his poem “To My Mother,” for example, with the line: “I long for my mother’s bread.”⁸⁰ The mother quoted above averted the threat of explosives, but it is almost as if the boy’s fallen bread represents a breach to motherhood itself: she could not protect her son from extreme fear. While a little boy dropping a piece of bread is itself far from a calamity, it remains seared in his mother’s memory as evidence of unchilding by domicidal assault.

Atmosphere

Although domestic atmosphere is hard to study empirically, it is nonetheless an inherent part of habitation.⁸¹ For many Palestinians, feeling “at home” means feeling safe. Palestinians often hang the evil eye or hand of Fatima on or near front doors to ward off harm. My interlocutors explained repeatedly that Israeli home invasions disrupted not just the physical home, but the *feeling* of home.

When Israeli soldiers turned Ghada's home into a military post during the April 2002 invasion of Jenin, she was denied her place of refuge from Israel's occupation. Ghada describes the change in home atmosphere she felt the moment she opened the front door to her home after the Israeli soldiers' departure:

We opened the door and it is rubbish. It's not our home. They peed on the ground. They used my bed and my sister's bed. They slept there and the smell was very bad. They just used it freely, as if it was their house and they could do whatever they wanted with it. I felt like I never met people like this [before]. They broke also the door of my mother's room because my mother's room looks directly at Jenin camp. They broke it and they broke all the windows after they left. They destroyed 50 percent of our home and you know, as I told you, my father was not good financially so we were in bad problems. They destroyed our home. We were very shocked.⁸²

Ghada indicates that the home is more than just the structure or the items within it. The arrangement and order of items in the house no longer represented her family's identity. The house as a sanctuary from impurities and the contamination of the outside world was defiled. The disarray and filth that Ghada confronted in her home environment struck her at a visceral level:

This was the first time we saw the occupation inside our home. We felt then we were really occupied. [It was worse than] even my struggle to [find food to] feed my family and what I saw happening in the camp. When they invaded our home, it was real evidence of the occupation. I felt like now we were occupied. Now we were witness to what they were doing. I felt like they were doing this inside my home, even though I was not a combatant. I was just a little child. And my father and my family were just Palestinians. They just wanted peace. They were not doing anything. They were not holding guns, they were not.⁸³

Ghada remembers the home invasion as an ultimate form of military occupation, more invasive than any other interaction with soldiers. It is as if the occupation of her home not only destroyed a domestic space of refuge, but was also a direct blow to the core of her selfhood, a violation of the sanctity of her personal sovereignty and her inherent dignity as a human being. She felt violated materially, personally, intimately, and bodily. She concludes her story with these words: "I feel like the occupation really occupied me before it occupied Palestine."⁸⁴ The occupation of Palestine did not have full meaning for Ghada until the occupation of her home, which was also the occupation of her selfhood – or, metaphorically speaking, her inner atmosphere.

Bed

The objects in a home can orient people toward the past, present, or future in different ways at different times. For example, young couples may link the furniture they buy

to the creation of a new family. Expectant parents may connect purchases of children's accessories to a baby's arrival. People demonstrate their social status to friends and relatives by means of the quality and quantity of home décor. The value of household objects comes from their relationship with the owner. Identities are wrapped up in household objects, which serve as "clues and signs" to our existence.⁸⁵ The bed is one such household object that recurs in my interviews with Palestinians.

Beds are often the ultimate "personal domestic sanctuary" within the sanctuary of the home.⁸⁶ The bed is where people go to enter a state of unconsciousness that puts them at their most vulnerable.⁸⁷ Sleeping and dreaming are fundamental to physical and mental health. In childhood, the bed can be the site of the maternal tucking-in and a place to hide for safety when afraid. A popular lullaby (Fairuz's *Yalla Tnam Rima*) sung in Palestine depicts a sleeping baby ("the beautiful rose") protected by her mother and father. (Palestinian singer Amal Murkus's *Bhallelak* is of the same genre.) During the intifada, however, Palestinians acidly remarked that Israelis could spy even on their dreams.⁸⁸

When asked to describe any violence she experienced in childhood, Nur's thoughts turn to several incidents that took place in the bedrooms of her family home during the Second Intifada. Nur's younger brother slept with shoes next to his bed because of the constant threat of an Israeli night invasion. It was common practice for Israeli soldiers to rouse children from homes about to be bulldozed; there are accounts from the 2002 Israeli massacre in Jenin of children walking barefoot across trash and rotting corpses.⁸⁹ Nur's parents often put cotton balls in their children's ears to allow them to sleep better through the disruptive noises of gunfire and bombing. Nur recalls watching from the opposite side of her home as a bomb destroyed her bedroom:

The first time I saw the bomb [in the sky], I was not afraid. I was just looking at it like nothing would happen. I was just staring. But when the bomb came in the direction of my home, that was the moment I felt scared. I knew that everything in the world has life and life is good. The moon has a life, so it's beautiful. The sun in the morning is beautiful. So why does the bomb have life, but it's not beautiful?⁹⁰

Nur could not reconcile the beauty she usually associated with life with the deadliness of the falling bomb. It was as if the experience prematurely awakened her to the world's harshness.

In describing her return to a home destroyed by the soldiers who had occupied it during the Second Intifada, Hanadi noted the bed mattresses in particular. The home she returned to was unrecognizable, with picture frames on the ground, books destroyed, curtains cut with peepholes, and soldiers' names inscribed in soot on the walls. It was common for soldiers to carry out such destruction in homes they occupied, with reports of soldiers stomping on religious symbols in homes as well.⁹¹ Hanadi recalls with detail the impact of the home occupation on the mattresses: they were moved around, slept in, stained with mud, and saturated with urine.⁹² It was as

though the soldiers had not only defiled the innermost sanctuary of the home, but had marked their territory.⁹³

Conclusion

War scholar Carolyn Nordstrom writes that a nuanced perspective on violence moves beyond the gruesome physical acts of brutality that are so often the focus of journalistic reports, official statements, and popular movies to encompass the deeper and more enduring violence of “destruction of home and humanity, of hope and future, of valued traditions and the integrity of the community.”⁹⁴ Through Palestinians’ life narratives, we are afforded an opportunity to expand the customary way war is represented. In these narratives, the home emerges as a site of unchilding. By examining different domestic spaces one by one, this article argues that Palestinians’ memories of the home serve to explicate in detail the wounds of war on children. This is not a call for diagnostic manuals and handbooks on mental health to start referencing windows, beds, and doors in their checklist of trauma symptoms; but there is an urgent need to recognize the profound danger children face in their very homes. In this article, “home” was taken to mean the architectural space where one lives. If we expand home’s meaning, we see that unchilding reaches also into the soil, leaves, and sky: the architecture of the world. As Darwish concludes his poem “I Belong There”: “I have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from them a single word: *Home*.”

Heidi Morrison is associate professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse and senior visiting research fellow at Tampere University’s Center for Excellence in the History of Experience. This article is the result of support from the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH), the Palestinian American Research Center (PARC), the Fulbright Scholar Program, the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, UCLA’s Center for Near Eastern Studies, and Tampere University’s Center of Excellence in the History of Experiences. The article received critical feedback from Brown University’s New Directions in Palestinian Studies (NDPS) 2019 workshop, Penny Mitchell, Gerry Iguchi, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Alex Winder, and anonymous outside reviewers.

Epigraph

Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems* (University of California Press, 2003).

Endnotes

- 1 See epigraph. Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems* (University of California Press, 2003), online at poets.org/poem/i-belong-there (accessed 28 September 2020).
- 2 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 3.
- 3 Scholars are increasingly listening to Palestinian children's voices to understand how children's lives are transformed by Israeli violence against the home. See, for example, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "The Political Economy of Children's Trauma: A Case Study of House Demolitions in Palestine," *Feminism and Psychology* 19, no. 3 (2009): 335–42. For a more general reading on the ongoing militarization, destruction, and invasion of the Palestinian home space as central aspects of the Zionist project, see Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Sarah Ihmoud, "Exiled at Home: Writing Return and the Palestinian Home," *Biography* 37, no. 2 (2014): 377–97.
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- 5 I have conducted more than sixty multipart oral history interviews with this cohort since 2011. Some interviews were conducted in English and others in Arabic, which I transcribed with the help of a native speaker. When citing interviews conducted in English, I have taken the liberty of correcting interviewees' grammatical mistakes in order to ensure clarity.
- 6 For examples of oral history projects that similarly tap into the narrator's larger network of family and friends, see the works of Kathryn Nasstrom, Valerie Yow, and Irum Shiekh. Scholars who seek to understand Middle Eastern history and society through a bibliographical and life-story approach include Edmund Burke III, Dina Matar, Laetitia Bucaille, and Leyla Neyzi. See, for example, Dina Matar, *What It Means to Be Palestinian: Stories of Palestinian Peoplehood* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); and Laetitia Bucaille, *Growing Up Palestinian: Israeli Occupation and the Intifada Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
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 - 30 Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Incarcerated Childhood*, 98–99. About the countless Palestinian cases of kinship disrupted by Israeli violence, Orna Ben-Naftali states:

- “This significance attached to the institution of the family explains the right to respect for family life, a right recognized in peacetime and in wartime, both internationally and domestically.” Orna Ben-Naftali, “K: Kinship” in Orna Ben-Naftali, Michael Sfar, and Hedi Viterbo, eds., *The ABCs of the OPT: A Legal Lexicon of the Israeli Control over the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
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 - 91 Mansour, "Week in Jenin." Calculated humiliation of Palestinians is a tactic used by the Israeli occupation. See Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Trapped: The Violence of Exclusion in Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 49 (Spring 2012): 6–25; Nina Gren, *Occupied Lives: Maintaining Integrity in a Palestinian Refugee Camp in the West Bank* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2015). Hanadi, author interview in English, Ramallah, 25 July 2012.
 - 92 Hanadi, author interview in English, Ramallah, 25 July 2012.
 - 93 Male urination on targeted locations is a way of identifying one's territory, and excretions can be a form of violent appropriation. On a symbolic level, the soldier's urination on the mattress can be seen as a marking of territory on the body of the child. See Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," in *Biopolitics: A Reader*, ed. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 165.
 - 94 Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 123.