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# Remembering/Imagining Palestine from Afar: The (Lost) Homeland in Contemporary Palestinian Diaspora Literature

For thousands of years Jews have longed, prayed, and waited for the return to Zion, and culture – literature in particular – has had a significant role in upholding collective memory and identity as related to place.<sup>1</sup> Through the political movement of Zionism and Israel's establishment in 1948, leaving the diaspora for a once spiritual homeland became a lived reality for many Jews. But the Israelis' fight for their state led to the displacement of fifty percent of Mandate Palestine's Arab inhabitants. The *Nakba* – the destruction of historical Palestine and the displacement of a large percent of the Arab inhabitants – thus functions inversely to the Jewish experience. Now, Palestinians, whether Christian or Muslim, long for and write about their homeland, which has similar geographical outlines as the land Jews have held dear for so long. Focusing on the English-language literature of diaspora Palestinians, I will use Sidra Ezrahi's thinking about the role of Zion in Jewish literature and cultural identity as a springboard to explicate the role of the homeland in Palestinian collective memory, identity, and political aspirations. Contemplating the hold this land has on both peoples might aid in understanding the intricacies of the ongoing conflict over it.

Today, only about half of the world's twelve million Palestinians live in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, that is, in areas of historical Palestine. Due to the disputed narratives of Israel and Palestine's history and present, the unresolved political conflict – including the occupation, the status of Jerusalem, the Israeli settlements, and the location of any future borders, as well as the

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<sup>1</sup> Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “‘To What Shall I Compare You?’: Jerusalem as Ground Zero of the Hebrew Imagination,” *PMLA* 122, no. 1 (2007): 220–34.

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ongoing refugee status of some five million Palestinians – the issue of homeland is both urgent and multilayered for all Palestinians, no matter where they live. Political scientists, peace and conflict scholars, and historians have long debated the past, present, and future of Palestine, but today, literary scholars are also called upon to participate. In recent years, a wave of Palestinian literature has appeared that grapples with understandings of home and exile. In the collection *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*, editor Penny Johnson states: “Palestine evokes a particular obligation of belonging in its far-flung ‘inhabitants’ for whom insistent memory becomes a mode of habitation.”<sup>2</sup> Writing at the intersection of memory, imagination, and fraught political issues, the authors contemplate what belonging to Palestine means for its children in the diaspora, providing a striking example of this new Palestinian writing.

Exploring similar questions of belonging, memory, and politics related specifically to Palestine as homeland – lived, lost, and still embattled – I read contemporary English-language literature written by authors displaced in 1947/8 and those born in exile. While an “insistent memory” of Palestine is at the center of the entire corpus, I argue that there are distinct generational approaches to considerations of the homeland. The first generation writes texts of lived experience populated with memories of accurately described places, full of people, sounds, smells, and tastes representing “home.” The next generations, in contrast, produce more diffuse and yet diverse images of Palestine, often in fictional form, created from the imagination, transgenerationally transmitted narratives of a former life, media reports, and sometimes, visits. For the diaspora-born authors, the homeland is much more metaphorical rather than a lived reality as it is for authors born in Palestine, both those who fled and those who remained. But even though the homeland is more abstract, it is nonetheless a central site of Palestinian identity and at the heart of the next generations’ writing.

Sociologist Keith Jacobs maintains that all migrant literature is “a response to and contemplation on the meaning of home,”<sup>3</sup> but I want to suggest that the prominence of the homeland, which moves from a Palestine remembered to a Palestine imagined, is more than a characteristic literary feature of Palestinian diaspora writing. Given the unresolved conflict, in this case, expressive culture has a political function, too. After the devastating losses of the second Intifada, which showed that violence brought no improvement and instead left the peace

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<sup>2</sup> Penny Johnson, “Introduction: Neither Homeland nor Exile are Words,” in *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*, ed. Penny Johnson and Raja Shehadeh (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2013), xi.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Jacobs, *Experience and Representation: Contemporary Perspectives on Migration in Australia* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 102.

process in tatters, these authors turned to culture as a new way to challenge the status quo, by promoting a Palestinian narrative of the past and present of the land that is often unknown in the West. My corpus represents a collective attempt to write Palestine and the Palestinian narrative of the homeland – past and present – into global consciousness, just like American-Jewish author Leon Uris’s *Exodus*<sup>4</sup> did for the Israeli narrative. Literature offers thus more than just an aesthetic longing or memory work within the Palestinian community; it is a cultural tool to reach out to the broader public. The language choice shows that these texts are not intended for an internal Arab audience, as much as it indicates that we are dealing with a diaspora literature where the next generation speaks English natively, and tells a specifically Palestinian story often unknown to non-Palestinians in recognizable formats. There are many Palestinian diaspora communities around the world and I chose language as the basis for my selection because of its direct address to the West, both linguistically and culturally.

Placing this article within the theoretical frameworks of migration and memory studies, I will contemplate how the *Nakba* impacts the workings of memory in relation to the homeland, also for the generations born in the diaspora. While I do not compare the *Nakba* and the Holocaust as historical events, I understand them as traumatic chasms for each community that shape collective memory and identity. I will therefore also use memory studies theory developed in relation to the Holocaust to explore the mnemonic aftermath of dispossession and losses for Palestinians.

## 1 Theoretical Considerations: Palestinian Nationhood, Land, Loss, and Literature

Palestinian identities are bound to the land. The tribal system of clans is held together by the paternal line and land ownership. Palestinian expressions reflect the significance of the land, for instance: If you ask where a person lives, you literally ask where their lands are: *وين اراضيك؟* “*Wein aradak?*” The land is also inscribed in customs: Palestinian songs are primarily about it and traditional embroidery designs show what town or area a woman is from, much like last names often indicate a family’s place of origin.

Today, most Palestinians do not live on their land anymore, but the homeland nonetheless binds the nation together. Rashid Khalidi’s groundbreaking study

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<sup>4</sup> Leon Uris, *Exodus* (New York: Bantam, 1958).

on Palestinian identity shows that the land has been the basis of the national movement and self-understanding long before the *Nakba* and the ensuing division of society.<sup>5</sup> The homeland, constructed between memory and politics, is central to what Middle East scholar Rosemary Sayigh calls “the shared sense of ‘Palestinianness’”<sup>6</sup> among a fractured community: those living in the West Bank and Gaza, East Jerusalemites, those with Israeli citizenship (many internally displaced from their ancestral villages and towns), and those in the diaspora. National identities affirm the belonging to a community and place: it is no surprise that *wattaniyeh* – nationalism or patriotism – is derived from *al-watan*, the homeland.

In the terminology of memory studies, sites of memory, that is, elements of the past in which “memory crystallizes and secretes itself”<sup>7</sup> give meaning in the present as they create focal points of collective identity especially in nation-building processes. Palestine – as a location—is a site of memory in its most literal sense. Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argued that places keep groups connected; a community’s existence in one place represents its continuity across generations as is evident in Palestinian self-understanding. However, if historical events such as the *Nakba* shatter the permanence of “generational sites,” the group’s relationship to place and the collective memory of it change drastically.<sup>8</sup> Historian Peter Read calls such locations “lost places” and describes them as sites of communal life that have been destroyed literally and metaphorically, but loom large in the memory of those who lost them.<sup>9</sup> Given the unresolved questions surrounding what “Palestine” means today and will look like in the future, however, both concepts need to be reconsidered for this specific case of a homeland that has varying shapes depending on peace negotiations and the political stance of the beholder. Literary texts engaging with the homeland from different generational perspectives offer new and previously often under-valued material for such considerations.

Much of Palestinian collective memory of the homeland is built around the experience of losses – during the *Nakba*, the Six-Day War, and land dispossessions continuing to this day. The need to remember Palestinian lives *in situ* is exacerbated by Zionist narratives that shed doubt on their existence in this con-

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5 Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

6 Rosemary Sayigh, “Palestinian Refugee Identity/ies: Generation, Region, Class,” in *Palestinian Refugees: Different Generations, but One Identity*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Birzeit: Birzeit University Press, 2012), 13.

7 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7.

8 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 186.

9 Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

tested land.<sup>10</sup> The history and continuation of territorial losses and the challenge to narratives qualify as threats to belonging, providing more reasons for the prominent role of the homeland in Palestinian lives, memories, and narratives. Nira Yuval-Davis, a sociologist, maintains that belonging “becomes articulated and politicized when it is threatened in some way.”<sup>11</sup> Memory establishes belonging and voicing it is a form of cultural resistance. Ahmad Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod, editors of the preeminent study of *Nakba* memory, even argue, “Making memories public affirms identity, tames trauma, and asserts Palestinian moral and political claims to justice, redress, and the right to return.”<sup>12</sup> Literature is a powerful way of making memories public, since, after all, it tells stories and allows readers to identify, making this one juncture where literature becomes engaged in the political conflict. Selma Dabbagh, a British-Palestinian author, for instance, believes “in the power of literature to transport both writers and readers into the skins of other people.”<sup>13</sup> Many call for telling Palestinian stories; to illustrate, Hanan Ashrawi, a senior Palestinian Authority politician with a PhD in literature, after reading an essay by American-Palestinian Susan Abulhawa, asked her to write more about Palestine, because, “We need such a narrative.”<sup>14</sup> Abulhawa’s novel *Mornings in Jenin*,<sup>15</sup> a bestseller translated into twenty-six languages, indeed brought the Palestinian experience to a global audience. She tasks Palestinian authors with countering “Israel’s narrative that has dominated literature until recently.”<sup>16</sup>

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**10** This is codified in the trope “A land without people for a people without a land,” which, in the words of Edward Said, is an example of Israeli hopes to “cancel and transcend an actual reality – a group of resident Arabs – by means of a future wish – that the land be empty for development by a more deserving power” (Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* [New York: Times Books, 1979], 9). The sentence, most famously used by Israel Zangwill and Golda Meir, has received much critical attention. Historian Anita Shapira, for example, explores its role in Zionist discourses (Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 41ff). Said and Khalidi (*Palestinian*, 101), have studied the implications for Palestinians.

**11** Nira Yuval-Davis, “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 197.

**12** Ahmad H. Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3.

**13** David B. Green, “A Conversation with British-Palestinian Writer Selma Dabbagh,” *Haaretz*, October 1, 2012. <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/books/a-conversation-with-british-palestinian-writer-selma-dabbagh-1.467660> accessed June 6, 2016.

**14** Olivia Snajie, “The Many Lives and Languages of a Palestinian Novel,” *Publishing Perspectives*, March 21, 2012. <http://publishingperspectives.com/2012/03/the-many-lives-and-languages-of-a-palestinian-novel/>.

**15** Susan Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).

**16** Snajie, “Many Lives.”

Much recent Palestinian literature reflects the impetus of working for a common goal in interesting relational forms that introduce more than just individual life stories. The Palestine memories brought together in this chapter participate in building a place of individual and collective experience and belonging, too. Especially in life writing, the texts themselves are relational in that they tell the story of the writer along with the story of her family and community, bringing the Palestinian cause – as a whole – to the fore. The sheer number of anthologies speaks to a concerted collective effort to make Palestinian voices heard.<sup>17</sup> Even academic studies of contemporary Palestinian identities, in which interviewees tell their stories,<sup>18</sup> contain “the fragments of a collective national journey.”<sup>19</sup>

Most of these collections are arranged along the experiences of generations and their incisive political events such as 1948, 1967 (the *Naksa*, the “setback”), and the Intifadas.<sup>20</sup> As the literary texts show, diaspora Palestinians were shaped by the experiences of migration, too. Human rights scholar Victoria Mason maintains that for the Palestinian case, researchers need to consider what exilic generation a person belongs to because the question of displacement is not resolved politically and thus continues for many.<sup>21</sup> Or, as American-Palestinian Randa Jarrar writes in her novel *The Map of Home* that depicts a refugee family’s continued search for a place of long-term belonging: “Baba said that moving was part of being Palestinian.”<sup>22</sup>

But it is not only one’s generation that influences outlook and texts; contexts are also significant. The meaning of the homeland or opinions on the right of return differ depending on the situation people live in, whether under Israeli occupation, in a destitute refugee camp in war-torn Syria, or as German citizens,

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17 Cf. Jo Glanville, ed., *Qissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women* (London: Saqi, 2006); Johnson and Shehadeh, *Seeking Palestine*; Ismail Khalidi and Naomi Wallace, eds., *Inside/Outside: Six Plays from Palestine and the Diaspora* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2015); Yasir Suleiman, ed., *Being Palestinian: Personal Reflections on Palestinian Identity in the Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

18 Cf. Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences in Palestinian Exile* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Fiorella Larissa Erni, *Tired of Being a Refugee: Social Identification among Young Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon* (Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications, 2014); Dina Matar, *What It Means to Be Palestinian: Stories of Palestinian Peoplehood* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Arthur Neslen, *In Your Eyes a Sandstorm: Ways of Being Palestinian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

19 Neslen, *Sandstorm*, 4.

20 Julie Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 98.

21 Victoria Mason, “Children of the ‘Idea of Palestine’: Negotiating Identity, Belonging and Home in the Palestinian Diaspora,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2007): 271–85.

22 Randa Jarrar, *A Map of Home* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 9.

to name but some possibilities. In a sociological study of Canadian-Palestinian diaspora identities, Ismat Zaidan finds that even though none of her interviewees consider Palestine a future place to live,<sup>23</sup> “Homeland remains the key element in understanding notions of identity and home.”<sup>24</sup> The geographer’s subjects are comparable to the authors’ in my corpus and her finding about the centrality of the homeland is also mirrored in the literature of the English-speaking diaspora.

## 2 “What Am I Without Palestine? And What Is Palestine Without Me?” The Homeland of the *Nakba* Generation

Authors from the *Nakba* generation explore questions of an inhabited homeland, displacement, and exile, throughout driven by a sense of loss.<sup>25</sup> Sociologist Zarefa Ali writes, “Displaced Palestinians give the impression that in Palestine they lived in paradise, and as the Zionist forces occupied the lands, destroyed their homes, and forcefully displaced them, they were turned into refugees whose problem is left without solution until today. This has become the central theme of narration of Palestine as ‘the lost paradise.’”<sup>26</sup> Most commonly, these voices longing for a lost home are recorded in oral testimonies, a significant source in the scholarship of Palestinian history and culture.<sup>27</sup> English-language literature by authors who

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<sup>23</sup> Ismat Zaidan, *Palestinian Diaspora in Transnational Worlds: Intergenerational Differences in Negotiating Identity, Belonging and Home* (Birzeit: Birzeit University Press, 2012), 87.

<sup>24</sup> Zaidan, *Palestinian Diaspora*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> The quotation in the section heading is from Jean Said Makdisi, “Becoming Palestinian,” in *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*, ed. Penny Johnson and Raja Shehadeh (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2013), 177. The authors’ retelling of 1948 and other events of Palestinian history also works along relational lines. Communications scholar Lena Jayyusi has argued about *Nakba* memories that “Each new tale is an echo within the echo, focusing and conjuring the collective predicament through the individual, and ramifying the significances and symbolic meaning of the individual experience through the collective.” Lena Jayyusi, “Iterability, Cumulativity and Presence: The Relational Figures of Palestinian Memory,” in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, ed. Ahmad H. Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 110.

<sup>26</sup> Zarefa Ali, *A Narration Without an End: Palestine and the Continuing Nakba* (Birzeit: Birzeit University Press, 2013), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 66–7.

fled Palestine is much less common than oral history. The corpus is also small compared to the following generations.

Historian Annette Wieviorka has shown how, in the wake of the Holocaust, the witness became an increasingly important social figure. Within the contemporary cultural regime of memory, witnesses who lived through and now testify to horrific events shape our understanding of the past. By choosing life writing in its most testimonial form, the generation of the *Nakba* also establishes itself as witnesses who are documenting a lost life in Palestine. The witnessing stance gives historical gravitas and is, by definition, an embodied one, as the witness's body attests "to the past and to the continuing presence of the past."<sup>28</sup> By including tastes, smells, and sights, the body and its sensual memories are brought into the text and place the authors and, by extension, also the readers, in the homeland. Linking this with the experience of displacement, the readers encounter Palestine first as lived-in, then lost and longed for.

Frequently, texts are penned by former Jerusalemites, a Palestinian urban community that was particularly well-educated. They write about the city that figures in the cultural memory of all Abrahamic religions and therefore translates also for non-Palestinians, meaning that a Western audience might identify with the texts and their political impetus. But the Jerusalem we encounter is not that of Scripture; instead, the central motif is home. Such life writing portrays pre-1948 Palestine as a place of family, community, tradition, and everyday life. These images are interwoven with memories of the *Nakba*, life in exile in the wound of displacement that never healed, and discussions of the ongoing conflict. These elements go beyond the task of life writing; they are part of the political charge of Palestinian literature: writing the pre-*Nakba* experience means writing against a Zionist narrative that challenges Palestinian history on the land. Writing the *Nakba* experience personifies their losses, and writing the post-*Nakba* experience means bringing an unresolved situation to the reader's awareness.

One of the first well-known diasporic English-language texts relating the *Nakba* experience is Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*. The titular Fatima worked for the Karmi family and was a mother figure to Ghada. The Karmis lived in Qatamon in West Jerusalem, along with other Muslim, Christian, and some Jewish families. The memoir is not only a transnational history of the family; it also includes a history of Arab Jerusalem, including a description of Qatamon as a secular, mixed neighborhood where the relations between the religious and ethnic groups were harmonious. Indeed, after the *Irgun*, a Zionist paramilitary group,

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<sup>28</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 88.



attacked the King David Hotel and killed ninety-one people in 1946 during the battle for independence from the British Mandate,<sup>29</sup> Karmi reports that German-Jewish refugee neighbors condemned the attack, believing that the Jewish underground's actions "will destroy everything we have worked so hard to create here."<sup>30</sup>

When the violence between Jews, Arabs, and the British forces that preceded the end of the British Mandate in the years 1947–8 took over Jerusalem, it left a lasting impression; even the eight-year-old sensed how "events succeeded each other with a relentless momentum, heading for some cataclysm. And we were being pushed uncontrollably by this momentum, powerless to stop it."<sup>31</sup> The Deir Yassin massacre of April 1948 caused widespread fear among Arabs in Palestine.<sup>32</sup> It also precipitated the Karmi family's flight. When leaving Jerusalem, the girl turns around in the backseat of the car for a last glimpse of Fatima and their family dog, a moment that stays with her forever. The image signifies the lost homeland – Karmi never sees either one again: "Like a body prematurely buried, unmourned, without coffin or ceremony, our hasty, untidy exit from Jerusalem was no way to have said goodbye to our home, our country and all that we knew and loved."<sup>33</sup> The Palestinians might not have had a state, but nonetheless, calling Palestine "her country" encapsulates the author's sense of localized belonging.

Growing up in the United Kingdom, Karmi suppresses her memories, partially because she wanted to assimilate and partially because she observed how debilitating her parents' losses during the *Nakba* and their longing for the lost homeland were for their later lives. But childhood memories erupt when she sees footage of a victorious Israel in 1967, against the backdrop of Jerusalem's most iconic site: "The vast tiled courtyard in front of the Dome of the Rock used to make a perfect playground for hopscotch, and the historic arches, pillars and holy sanctuaries were ideal for games of hide-and-seek."<sup>34</sup> For her, the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque are childhood memories, placing her in Jerusalem-as-home.

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**29** On June 22, 1946, the *Irgun* bombed the building, which at the time housed the British Mandate Authority's central offices, including its governmental and military headquarters for the area. The ninety-one victims were not only British, indeed, the largest number were Arab, as well as some Palestinian Jews and others. Another forty-six people were injured.

**30** Ghada Karmi, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (London: Verso, 2002), 71.

**31** Karmi, *In Search*, 113.

**32** On April 9, 1948, fighters of two Zionist militia groups, *Irgun* and *Lehi*, attacked the Jerusalem village of Deir Yassin and killed over one hundred Palestinian villagers, though the number is still contested. Afterwards, the forces took some survivors and paraded them through the streets of Jerusalem. Both acts were condemned by the *Haganah*, the Jewish leadership's paramilitary force but nonetheless caused terror among Palestinian Arabs.

**33** Karmi, *In Search*, 123.

**34** *Ibid.*, 370.

Returning for the first time in 1998, thirty years after this awakening and fifty years after her departure, Karmi encounters a city she does not know. She only finds her Jerusalem when she hears the Al Aqsa muezzin's call to prayer: "Mesmerised, I went to the balcony windows and threw them open, the better to hear it. On it came, over the Wailing Wall, over the huddle of poor Arab housing, over Israel's brash buildings, its luxury hotels, its noisy traffic. The unmistakable sound of another people and another presence, definable, enduring, continuous. Still there, not gone, not dead."<sup>35</sup> In sounds, she finds parts of her childhood home in a place that is now layered with other realities, a moment that has meaning far beyond a sensual recovery of memory.

In 2015, Karmi published a follow-up memoir in which she relates her experiences from 2005, the year she spent in Ramallah volunteering for the Palestinian Authority (PA). *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* complicates Karmi's previously clear notions of Palestine, as she encounters a developing country run by bureaucrats and often contentious internal politics while under military occupation. She identifies changes at odds with the displaced person's understanding of the homeland: first, Palestine has become the West Bank and Gaza; second, what she believed was an absolute stance concerning the refugees' right of return has been shattered even among Palestinians living under PA control; and finally, the realization that her memories have little to do with the contemporary reality. She has "travelled to the land of my birth with a sense of return, but it was a return to the past, to the Palestine of distant memory, not to the place that it is now."<sup>36</sup> Life has moved on and the hopes and dreams of those living in the area of historical Palestine are not those of diaspora Palestinians. This makes *Return* a story of disappointment, of a failed recovery of space and memory.

While Karmi repeatedly writes about Jerusalem itself, the sense of being out of place, that is, in exile, is at the heart of much of Edward Said's writing. He describes his Jerusalemite childhood and flight from Palestine in his poignantly entitled *Out of Place*. Providing the foundation for his life-long intellectual (and presumably personal) struggle with the question of exile, his memoir is more focused on being "in place" than on the period after the family's flight when he was twelve in December 1947. And yet, starting out, Said declares his intention: to record "an essentially lost or forgotten world" because "many of the places and people that I recall here no longer exist, though I found myself frequently amazed at how much I carried of them inside me in often minute, even startlingly concrete, detail."<sup>37</sup> These memories are driven by his sense of displacement: "it is geog-

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 451.

<sup>36</sup> Ghada Karmi, *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (London: Verso, 2015), 313.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Said, *Out of Place* (New York: Knopf, 1999), ix.

raphy – 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.<sup>38</sup> To illuminate the experience of displacement, Said retains and discusses specific memories of placement in Palestine, whether it is the family’s book business in Jerusalem, a summer spent in Ramallah, or even more naturalized memories of belonging. To illustrate, in his school, St. George’s, which most of his male relatives had attended, he “felt totally at home; for the first and last time in my school life I was among boys who were like me.”<sup>39</sup> Belonging here means similarity – the opposite of being the Other and of being in exile.

The Saids lived in Talbiyeh, a West Jerusalem area that after 1948 became Israel. Like Qatamon, it was a majority Arab neighborhood, a fact today often ignored. For Said, this means an erasure even of his memories. He finds it challenging “to accept the fact that the very quarters of the city in which I was born, lived, and felt at home were taken over by Polish, German, and American immigrants who conquered the city and have made it the unique symbol of their sovereignty, with no place for Palestinian life, which seems to have been confined to the eastern city, which I hardly knew. West Jerusalem has now become entirely Jewish, its former inhabitants expelled for all time by mid-1948.”<sup>40</sup> This erasure of a pre-*Nakba* Arab presence in West Jerusalem is akin to what has happened to the destroyed Palestinian villages in what is now Israel. Not only were their inhabitants displaced from the land and from mainstream Israeli memory, in *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*, historian Meron Benvenisti shows how Israel renamed formerly Arab locations to create a Jewish narrative of the land.<sup>41</sup> Yet, while Qatamon and Talbiyeh officially became Gonen and Komemiyut, these names never took hold in everyday use. Today, the memory of its former residents is primarily found in the Arab architecture and in texts like Said’s, since even the Arabic names have been converted into Hebrew.

Said’s younger sister, Jean Makdisi Said, also describes Talbiyeh in her memoir. Born in 1940, she only has a girl’s memories of Jerusalem, but her childhood recollections feature centrally in *Teta, Mother, and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women* as a structural device to tie the transnational family history to Palestine, while also drawing a vivid image of the city as home. Having only lived in Palestine as a child, Makdisi is helped by external mnemonic aids like photographs to recall her homeland. One memory, however, is different and tangible:

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38 Ibid., xiv.

39 Ibid., 106.

40 Ibid., 109.

41 Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*, trans. Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

“Jerusalem often comes back to me in a series of scents. I smell Jerusalem in the jasmine and the orange blossom, the smell of a lemon being squeezed, the smell of cinnamon sticks in syrup, the bay leaf and olive oil of the soap from Nablus they used to wash us with.”<sup>42</sup> Memories triggered by smells and tastes tend to be strong, characterized by an immediacy seldom achieved in less embodied forms of memory.<sup>43</sup> While establishing herself as an embodied witness of a Palestinian Jerusalemite community, Makdisi simultaneously reminds her readers that she is also an exile, as smells bring back her lost home in other places.

Losing Jerusalem is much more than the loss of a home; it is also the loss of the Palestinian homeland that defines personal and collective memories and identity. These losses also underlie Makdisi’s essay “Becoming Palestinian.” She writes: “My native Jerusalem, of which I only have some childhood memories, continues to be the ideal model of home, my *heimat*, where the past, present and future meet in my mind.”<sup>44</sup> Despite and perhaps because of the experience of exile, Jerusalem is the “ideal” home; it is her *Heimat*. The place anchors her memory of idealness, offering a sense of unquestioned belonging before displacement.

The memory of lost wholeness and the unresolved conflict make Makdisi’s writing political: “To be from Jerusalem, and to have lost it, is to be attached to the struggle for Palestine and therefore to the heart of Arab history.”<sup>45</sup> Voicing memories allows establishing the lost home as real and reifies it against a double loss – in reality and in memory:

Holding on to the past clutching at it as it flies away and would otherwise fade into oblivion, embodying it and rendering it concrete in individual memories, memories of places and faces, clothes, foods and rituals. This is not a futile and damaging personal fixation; it is a politically charged community action which feeds the urge for redeeming justice ... Remembering restores my mother’s rightful place in her native Galilee where her father, the pastor, taught her to identify and love the fields where Christ walked.<sup>46</sup>

Here, Makdisi highlights the significance of nationality and ethnicity over religion – their Palestinian identity unites all the authors, no matter whether they are Muslim or Christian. Simultaneously, she also brings in Palestinian places beyond Jerusalem.

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Said Makdisi, *Teta, Mother, and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Co. 2005), 27.

<sup>43</sup> Andreas Hartmann, “Geschmack in der Kulturwissenschaft,” in *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung: Ein interdisziplinäres Lexikon*, ed. Nicolas Pethes and Jens Ruchatz (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001), 231.

<sup>44</sup> Makdisi, “Palestinian,” 160.

<sup>45</sup> Makdisi, *Teta*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Makdisi, “Palestinian,” 166.

Recently, more *Nakba* generation memoirs have been published that bring to life other locations in historical Palestine, among them the writings of historian Hisham Sharabi, an American Palestinian who remembers Jaffa in *Embers and Ashes: Memoirs of an Arab Intellectual*<sup>47</sup> and Salman Abu Sitta who published the only English-language memoir about pre-*Nakba* Palestinian life in the Beersheba district.<sup>48</sup>

Taking a new perspective and adding one significant contemporary Palestinian location – the refugee camp – poet and environmental scholar Sharif S. Elmusa contemplates his life, which was shaped by both 1948 and 1967, in “Portable Absence: My Camp Re-membered.” Elmusa has no personal memories of pre-*Nakba* Palestine, even though he was born in the ancestral village near Jaffa. He was a few months old when his family fled Al-Abbasiya, and found refuge in the Al-Nuwayma camp close to Jericho: “still in historic Palestine and yet across a new border from my parents’ home on the coast.”<sup>49</sup> Studying in Cairo in 1967, Elmusa also lost this second home, the liminal space of the refugee camp, now a conscious experience repeating his parents’ fate. Since he was absent during the war, “Israel denied me, as it did hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians, the right to go back not only to the territory that became Israel in 1948, it barred us in a similar fashion from the West Bank and my camp, Al-Nuwayma. I became, as a consequence, a ‘displaced person,’ in the UN’s legal lexicon, a refugee from a refugee camp.”<sup>50</sup>

In 1971, Elmusa moved to the United States to continue studying and this voluntary migration after two forced displacements causes him to further contemplate the meaning of home and “the quandaries of exile and unrequited homesickness.”<sup>51</sup> He states that an exile, unlike the expat who will go home, or the immigrant who wants to belong to a new place, “lingers in a state of suspense, floats, lighter than the social liquid, does not fuse.”<sup>52</sup> The meaning of “homeland” is particularly significant to the man who grew up in a refugee camp, which “was by definition not a home – it was a temporary transit station, even if my childhood there, despite the lack of modern technological comforts, was largely a happy one, filled with play and warmth of family and friends, and was

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47 Hisham Sharabi, *Embers and Ashes: Memoirs of an Arab Intellectual*, trans. Issa J. Boullata (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008).

48 Salman Abu Sitta, *Mapping My Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2016).

49 Sharif S. Elmusa, “Portable Absence: My Camp Re-membered,” in Johnson and Shehadeh, *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*, 23.

50 *Ibid.*, 30.

51 *Ibid.*, 23.

52 *Ibid.*, 26.

a ‘looking-forward.’ No one had any desire to stay in the camp or acknowledged it as his or her home.”<sup>53</sup> For Elmusa, life in a refugee camp is the “quintessential Palestinian experience, both actual and symbolic” and adds further urgency to the unresolved questions surrounding Palestinian homeland and refugees.<sup>54</sup>

After Elmusa became an American citizen, he managed to visit the area of the ancestral village and the refugee camp, both of which were razed to the ground. His family places were thus all lost to the visitor: the village because it was never truly his and was then destroyed; the camp because it was only ever a liminal space rather than a home, and happy childhood memories could not and cannot change this sense of eternal homelessness. He stays “in a frame of mind akin to the blues – feeling homesick when you don’t have a home.”<sup>55</sup> Home is a complicated notion, most of all because in the refugee camp: “Home was Palestine, the opposite of the camp, and the future was going to be the reverse of the here-and-now.”<sup>56</sup>

Elmusa interweaves his contemplations with poetry, adding layers of sensuous memories. The first poem, for instance, which opens the essay, describes the hills of Palestine, with “red poppies swaying in the breeze” of winter.<sup>57</sup> The poems show that the landscape, that is, nature itself, is a kind of home for the author born into the loss of a definable location. In this, his experience differs greatly from that of the authors above who have lived memories of a homeland and can place themselves in a Palestine in which they belong unquestionably.

### 3 “What Is It that Ties Us All Back to Palestine?” The Homeland of the Exilic Generations

In the case of diaspora-born authors, the similarities of the witnessing texts dissolve even more as they already do with Elmusa; we encounter diverse conceptions of the homeland.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, Palestine and its past and present, both as a country and as a site of memory, feature centrally with significant points of interest being Jerusalem and the refugee camps. This corpus, which is larger than that of the *Nakba* generation, also employs a wider choice of genres than the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 23–24.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>58</sup> The quotation in the section heading is from Mischa Hiller, “Onions and Diamonds,” in Johnson and Shehadeh, *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*, 179.

authors who document the loss of the land in life writing. Fitting with the need to imagine historical Palestine, the novel, which Edward Said drawing from Georg Lukács, calls “*the* form of ‘transcendental homelessness’,”<sup>59</sup> becomes a frequent generic choice.

Growing up in the diaspora influences the writers and their texts in multiple ways. Not only is their English native, but questions of hyphenated identities, the connection to Palestine as the homeland, and what it means to be Arab in the West also loom large. Moreover, the advantage of having a Western passport figures prominently: some authors – unlike Palestinians living in Arab countries – could visit Israel, Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Given that these authors were born in the wake of a catastrophe that cut off connections to families, land, and tradition, their literary texts perform “memory work.” Elsewhere, I introduced the concept of memory work as “an individual’s conscious, voluntary, and methodical interrogation of the past within collective frameworks, predominantly the familial one” for children of Holocaust survivors’ engagement with both their parents’ survival and the lost European Jewish origins.<sup>60</sup> The significance of the past also underlies the texts of most authors who, in the words of historian Beshara Doumani, himself a son of *Nakba* refugees, were “born after Palestine.”<sup>61</sup>

The daughter of 1967 refugees, Susan Abulhawa was born in Kuwait, spent part of her childhood in Jerusalem’s Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi orphanage and came to America as a teenager. She knows her place of origins and in her novel *Mornings in Jenin* the representations of Jerusalem and the West Bank are vivid, but historical Palestine is only accessible through memory work and the imagination. Her sweeping family saga tellingly begins in a bucolic pre-*Nakba* Palestine and we encounter the olive tree, the steadfast villager, bread baking in a *taboon*, and the gold anklets of the young Bedouin. This assembly presents recognizable images recreated from Palestinian sites of memory and transgenerationally transmitted narratives not drawn from lived experience.

The protagonist Amal was born in the Jenin refugee camp after her parents escaped their village during the *Nakba*, and she dies in Jenin during the 2002 IDF incursion while visiting the homeland with her American-born daughter. Abulhawa’s description of the refugee camp, the setting of world-changing history and

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<sup>59</sup> Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, ed. Marc Robinson (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1994), 144.

<sup>60</sup> Nina Fischer, *Memory Work: The Second Generation* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.  
<sup>61</sup> Doumani, Beshara. “A Song From Haifa,” in *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*, ed. Penny Johnson and Raja Shehadeh (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2013), 18.

everyday events, is evocative of Elmusa's childhood teachings that a camp is not a home, the "United Nations refugee camp stretched below me in one square kilometer, so many souls packed in for the long and stubborn wait to return to their Palestine."<sup>62</sup>

More than any other place, Jerusalem speaks to Amal who, like the author, lived in Dar Al-Tifl orphanage before her migration: "I am the daughter of this land, and Jerusalem reassures me of this inalienable title, far more than yellowed property deeds, the Ottoman land registries, the iron key to our stolen homes, or UN resolutions and decrees of superpowers could ever do."<sup>63</sup> Even though neither Abulhawa nor her protagonist lives there, Jerusalem is the central site of Palestinian belonging and not a lost place, not least because of its contested status. The city itself is family to which she has a natural connection, a sense of belonging the refugee camp can never provide.

In other texts, this unbreakable link is more tenuous. In Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly*, the different generational experiences are presented in a range of female Palestinian-American characters – four mothers and their daughters – who together provide a tapestry of the Palestinian experience in America. The mothers' memories revolve around life in Palestine during the *Nakba* as well as under Jordanian and Israeli rule, but for the daughters, the homeland is created out of family and cultural memory enhanced by imagination.

Siham's vivid Jerusalem memories bring in a strong lived presence of the homeland. Even visually the city is part of her family's American life; on her wedding picture the "Dome of the Rock, with its golden cupola, was visible in the background."<sup>64</sup> The golden dome is a central icon of Palestinian identity and a visual symbol of the Arab past and present in Jerusalem.<sup>65</sup> This preeminent site of memory of the Palestinian people draws the community together like an ekphrastic description of the Western Wall in a Jewish diaspora text.

Like in Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*, the other contemporary Palestinian space is the refugee camp where Huda, like Siham belonging to the maternal generation, grew up. Upon his first visit, her American-Palestinian husband was

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<sup>62</sup> Abulhawa, *Mornings*, 162.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> Susan Muaddi Darraj, *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 29.

<sup>65</sup> Nina Fischer, "Seeing and Unseeing the Dome of the Rock: Conflict, Memory, and Belonging in Jerusalem," in *Spatialising Peace and Conflict: Mapping the Production of Place, Sites and Scales of Violence*, ed. Annika Björkdahl and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).



shocked: “his hands shook when he saw the children playing in the open sewers, and the holes, like gaping mouths filled with jagged teeth, that opened the surfaces of many of the homes. ‘You lived like *that*?’ he seethed for days afterwards.”<sup>66</sup> For daughter Hanan, the camp is an open wound she had never seen but always envisioned: “After all, I’d spent all my life hearing about them for myself: cement shacks with hastily thatched roofs, children running barefoot on dirt paths, sidestepping donkey dung as they scampered about, old men sitting on wooden crates playing *tarneeb* with a badly worn deck of cards. The women in the camp wore clean but threadbare clothes, and flashed smiles that displayed missing teeth.”<sup>67</sup> But Huda was born in Haifa and the book concludes with her memories of the family’s hasty exodus and its traumatic aftermath. A recognizable motif of her work is that the camp “had never been our home – Haifa would always be our real home.”<sup>68</sup>

The young protagonists to whom the title refers, those born with an “inheritance of exile,” are tied to the homeland differently. Only one, Aliyah,<sup>69</sup> could ever visit:

Mama and Baba always spoke to me about “back home,” and that was why I had finally gone that summer. Mama’s parents had brought her to the States during one of the wars, but died before they could return. Sidi, Baba’s father, had never left. His land and farm outside Jerusalem had been seized to build settlements, so he moved his family to Ramallah. So I wasn’t going to the home Baba had been born in. I never could return because it had been replaced by a walled-in city to which my dark skin and last name denied me access.<sup>70</sup>

Aliyah’s visit is a complex experience not only because she encounters Palestinian life under occupation. The trip also encapsulates her sense of being a diaspora Palestinian who struggles in both her “homes” – in America she is a stranger because of her ethnicity, and in Ramallah she is a stranger because of her Americanness and accent. But one location changes this – the Dome of the Rock: “*The room was enormous, and beautiful arabesques adorned the walls and interior Dome, whose golden exterior I had seen crowning pictures of Jerusalem. Now I was here, finally inside the picture.*”<sup>71</sup> This scene, included in documentary form, in other words, presented as drawn from her travel diary, shows the significance of the Dome of the Rock as the national symbol of all Palestinians as the

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<sup>66</sup> Muaddi, *Exile*, 101.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>69</sup> For readers who are knowledgeable about Israel and Judaism, the name Aliyah, which in Hebrew is the term describing immigration to Israel, might seem surprising in an Arab context, however, it is a common feminine given name, meaning “exalted” or “praised.”

<sup>70</sup> Muaddi, *Exile*, 70.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. Emphasis in the original.

next sentence starts with “*My finger rubbed the golden cross around my neck.*”<sup>72</sup> For the Christian Palestinian-American, being here means that she is finally not only “inside the picture,” but also “the first time I felt comfortable in Palestine.”<sup>73</sup> Once again, we encounter the national positioning of these homeland texts, where even the famous Islamic building has reduced religious meaning.

During her trip, she meets a young, local man. When their engagement fails, her American-Palestinian friends explain it as an outcome of their cultural difference. Aliyah, who felt a sense of belonging in Ramallah, does not want to accept that she is primarily American: “But I want to be *more* than that,” I insisted. “That summer, I fit in. I really liked it there.”<sup>74</sup> For this young woman, both places are part of her and she belongs to both: giving up on Palestine is not an option, even if it is challenging.

The motif of the “return journey” to a former generational site, which already emerged in the writings of Elmusa and Abulhawa, can be found in much of contemporary Palestinian writing. Such transnational memory work voyages are common today, including Jewish returns to Eastern Europe, and have attracted scholarly interest. For example, Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller’s edited volume *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*<sup>75</sup> explores the dynamics of return journeys taking place in the wake of violence, including the Holocaust, the *Nakba*, and American slavery.

Najla Said’s *Looking for Palestine: Growing up Confused in an Arab-American Family* describes her life as Edward Said’s daughter, including a family trip to Israel and Palestine in 1992. Studying in a New York high school with a primarily Jewish student body, Najla writes that by the time of graduation “most of them had been to my ‘homeland’ (which to them was Israel), but I still had not,”<sup>76</sup> with the quotation marks indicating the complexities ingrained in the concept of the Palestinian homeland within contemporary political realities. The trip is complicated: already before landing, Najla expects that they will “end up in jail for trespassing on Israel.”<sup>77</sup> Najla’s impression of the land that has always been a presence in her family life is shaped by conflict and occupation: “everywhere that there was a small Arab town it seemed to be surrounded by concrete slabs of

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72 Ibid. Emphasis in the original

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 74.

75 Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, eds. *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

76 Najla Said, *Looking for Palestine: Growing up Confused in an Arab-American Family* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 156.

77 Said, *Looking*, 159.

unmovable earth. These, I learned, were “settlements.”<sup>78</sup> Moreover, “We visited the Arab towns of Bethlehem, Nablus, Nazareth. There were Israeli soldiers everywhere we went, on the side of every street, outside every tourist site.”<sup>79</sup>

In Jerusalem, they visit the former family home in Talbiyeh, which Edward Said had described as a “two-story stone villa with lots of rooms and a handsome garden in which my two youngest cousins, my sisters, and I would play.”<sup>80</sup> His daughter – lacking such personal memories – instead watches her father who “circled the house feverishly with my camera, shooting picture after picture of the façade.”<sup>81</sup> Opposite this lost place, her own memory work is minimal; she listens to and later documents his memories. Unlike Muaddi’s protagonist Aliyah, at the end of her trip, Najla concludes that in the current situation, neither Israel nor the Occupied Palestinian Territories are a place she can imagine herself living in, despite Palestine’s significance as the family’s homeland.

Lila Abu-Lughod, a Palestinian-American anthropologist, also accompanied her father, historian Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, to Jaffa from which he fled when he was nineteen. Her life writing essay “Return to Half-Ruins: Memory, Postmemory and Living History in Palestine”<sup>82</sup> contemplates what “return” can mean for Palestinians. Abu-Lughod starts by discussing the charged term *‘awda*, return, which has been impossible despite UN Resolution 194. Abu-Lughod also introduces her father’s initial return in 1991, followed by his return to live on Palestinian land in Ramallah with the help of his American passport and tourist visas. This passport also allowed repeated returns with visitors, including his daughter, to retrace the ghostly presence of Palestine under the Israeli topography as “his memories now became the guide to a living history and real place.”<sup>83</sup> But “Half-Ruins” also contains his ultimate return, his burial in Jaffa, the closest thing to an *‘awda*.

For the daughter, visiting Jaffa, “the heart of my father’s Palestine” meant observing him “claiming and reclaiming the city in which he had been born, the sea in which he had swum as a boy, and the home he had been forced to flee in

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**78** Ibid., 160.

**79** Ibid., 165.

**80** Ibid., 21

**81** Ibid., 164.

**82** Lila Abu-Lughod, “Return to Half-Ruins: Memory, Postmemory, and Living History in Palestine,” in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, ed. Ahmad H. Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). The chapter is reprinted in Hirsch and Miller’s collection on return journeys, serving as the Palestinian example for the cultural phenomenon. Cf. Lila Abu-Lughod, “Return to Half-Ruins: Fathers and Daughters, Memory and History in Palestine,” in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

**83** Ibid., 82.

1948.”<sup>84</sup> Referring to Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, which combines generational distance with a paradoxically close relationship to the parental past,<sup>85</sup> Abu-Lughod redefines the term for Palestinians: “What I, as the daughter of someone who lived through the *Nakba* learned from my father’s return to Palestine, was that, for Palestinians, both memory and Postmemory have a special valence because the past has not yet passed.”<sup>86</sup> The continuing pasts, whether in the ghostly presence of her father’s erased Jaffa or in the occupation, structure her visit. The father tells the story of a city that is mostly gone, but for his daughter, seeing the evidence is difficult even when “he would point out the arched windows of old Arab houses that had somehow escaped destruction. Half-ruins he built in his imagination, while I strained to make them out amidst the ugly concrete.”<sup>87</sup>

While Abu-Lughod literally strains to see her father’s Palestine in contemporary Jaffa, other authors acknowledge the difficulty of engaging with a lost place by presenting a physical absence of land- and cityscapes. Selma Dabbagh barely depicts the landscapes, as if authors born far from historical Palestine – in time and space – are too, cut off from the land to which they are nonetheless linked. Dabbagh has visited Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza but both her short story “Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji”<sup>88</sup> set in the Kuwaiti-Palestinian community and her novel *Out of It*,<sup>89</sup> though depicting Gaza, remain obscure when it comes to place descriptions of Palestine. In her Gaza-set novel, we learn only about the same human and urban scars of the second Intifada readers might recognize from news reports. Dabbagh’s city is primarily a place of human connections, family, and different ways in which Palestinians are engaged in their national struggle. She aimed to “present a state of war, a state of being, a state of pressure, of siege.”<sup>90</sup> London, the novel’s other setting and Dabbagh’s hometown, however, is recognizable in its cityscape.

Similarly, British-Palestinian Mischa Hiller sets *Sabra Zoo*<sup>91</sup> in the Sabra refugee camp in Beirut against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war and the 1982 massacre in the camp; Palestine only functions as a present absence and refugees’ place of longing. In *Shake Off*<sup>92</sup> the protagonist, a London-based

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**84** Ibid.

**85** Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

**86** Abu-Lughod, “Return,” 79.

**87** Ibid., 83.

**88** Selma Dabbagh, “Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji,” in *Qissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women*, ed. Jo Glanville (London: Saqi, 2006).

**89** Selma Dabbagh, *Out of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

**90** Green, “A Conversation with British-Palestinian Writer Selma Dabbagh.”

**91** Mischa Hiller, *Sabra Zoo* (London: Telegram Books, 2010).

**92** Mischa Hiller, *Shake Off* (London: Mulholland Books, 2011).

PLO operative, is also born and raised in the camp. Unsurprisingly, Palestine's national struggle is the heart of the narrative and the center of the protagonist's identity, but no landscapes are imagined. That his handler ultimately turns out to be a Mossad double agent adds depth and complexity to the novel: Palestine and Israel are interconnected entities.

Hiller's essay "Onions and Diamonds" explicates his stance on the land today: historical Palestine is gone and the current political situation dismantles its remnants. The fact that Hiller did not personally lose his homeland also means that it is not his to return to; after all, that would make him no different from Jewish immigrants to Israel who reclaim a land that they have only a spiritual, and not personal-biographical, connection to and where other people live. The Palestinian option now is a state in the West Bank and Gaza: "We can only move forwards, not backwards. We are already re-imagining a Palestine that reflects who we are now and who we hope to become."<sup>93</sup> But since this state has yet to be built, Hiller and his people's identity are still that of a displaced community, but "when that [state founding] happens, I reserve the right to graduate from being dispossessed to becoming an exile."<sup>94</sup> Today, the Palestinian diaspora is one that results from involuntary displacement, but with a politically confirmed homeland, Hiller would live in the diaspora, or exile, as he defines it, by choice. While he does not necessarily imagine living as a self-imposed exile from a future country in which he might not want to live, he still leaves his options open and acknowledges his complex identity and legacy.

My final example, which offers another take on the Palestinian homeland, is by British-Palestinian Samir el-Youssef. Unlike the other authors and most Palestinians, el-Youssef refutes a Palestinian right of return, his novel is even entitled *The Illusion of Return*. Opening the book, the narrator, like the author originally from a refugee camp in Lebanon and now living in London, wants to demonstrate in his doctoral thesis that the refugees have left behind the dream of return because they have entered middle-class Lebanese society. He says: "we ought to be realistic and forget about an actual return;"<sup>95</sup> for this, other Palestinians attack him. The novel only contains memories of the refugee camp and while many are negative, Lebanon is the narrator's place of origin and roots, whereas historical Palestine is Israel. This understanding of place mirrors the opinion of the author who said in an interview: "The idea that every single person whose parents came from Palestine should have an automatic right of return is ridicu-

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<sup>93</sup> Hiller, "Onions," 185.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>95</sup> Samir El-Youssef, *The Illusion of Return* (London: Halban, 2007), 13.

lous ... I don't believe in the right of return, ... and don't want to return, but I do want an acknowledgment from the Israelis that I don't come from nowhere."<sup>96</sup> El-Youssef thus engages with the refugee camp as a significant Palestinian space, but also offers a take on the homeland that shows the range of stances across the exilic generations.

## 4 Conclusion

Historian Simon Schama contends that, "landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock,"<sup>97</sup> highlighting that neither landscapes nor memory exist as a stable reality; they are always created and recreated. In the context of Palestinian memory and imagination of the homeland, this means that we encounter many "Palestines," which sometimes have little to do with the contemporary landscape. Migration scholarship has started exploring how migrants are "simultaneously embedded in the multiple sites and layers of the transnational social fields in which they live."<sup>98</sup> In the Palestinian case of forced displacement and ongoing conflict, such multiplicity stays virulent: the status of the lost home is still embattled. Thus, the portrayals between experience, memory, and the imagination, by authors who are far removed in time and space from historical Palestine and often also from today's Israel and Palestinian Territories, add another layer to the landscape long imagined by believers of Abrahamic faiths and today given intense media attention.

My corpus shows a generational development from a Palestine remembered to one imagined, from a place that connotes "home" to a lost place, defined by transgenerationally transmitted narratives and knowledge of loaded sites such as Jerusalem or the refugee camps. In "Memory, Invention, and Place," Edward Said shows how Zionism has realized a narrative of return, whereas by 2000, when he was writing, Palestinians, while observing this Jewish return, had yet to publicly uphold a narrative in which they belong to this land.<sup>99</sup> The proliferation of literary voices telling a story of the Palestinian homeland attests to a "powerful re-emergence of Palestine as a cultural force" and a collective effort to establish

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<sup>96</sup> Mathew J. Reisz, "Samir el-Youssef: At Home with the Heretic," *The Independent*, January 18, 2007 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/samir-el-youssef-at-home-with-the-heretic-432650.html>.

<sup>97</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 6–7.

<sup>98</sup> Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky, "Transnational Migration Studies: Past Developments and Future Trends," *The Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 130.

<sup>99</sup> Edward Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 184.

this narrative.<sup>100</sup> But more than that, the Palestinian homeland, even if often spiritual and barely a physical location, is also an open wound and central to the national identity that spans the fragmented community.

Both Jews and Palestinians have experienced exile, and the loss of the people-land bond is central to their collective identities and cultural memories.<sup>101</sup> As indicated in the introduction, Sidra Ezrahi has pointed to the importance of literature in upholding the meaning of Zion for Jews in the diaspora for thousands of years. The recent wave of publications in which Palestine features so prominently shows that diaspora Palestinians will not give up on their homeland. Instead, within the unresolved conflict, memories become a claim to existence in place: “*al-Quds al-Sharif*, noble Jerusalem, is not to me merely a mythical location, a historical metaphor, but a real place, where my father was born and grew up, where my brother Edward and I were born.”<sup>102</sup>

The next generations might not have these personal memories, and yet Palestine, no matter how diffuse as an actual space, is still a generational site, even if lost; it calls on connection, structures identities, and provides the material for writing. Or, in the words of Palestinian-Canadian Danah Abdulla: “After all, I was told that if I let go of Palestine it would no longer exist.”<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the absence of Palestine as a landscape in the next generation’s texts, or as a livable place in cases such as Najla Said, speaks loudly, as it brings this homeland to a Western audience. Additionally, the notion of the “homeland,” so prominent in Palestinian diaspora texts, evokes a universal human experience the meaning of which is understandable to us all, or to use the words of philosopher Simone Weil: “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the soul.”<sup>104</sup> Here, the political charge of this corpus once again becomes prominent: the texts can speak to readers, not only because they engage with the “Holy Land,” but also with eternal question of home, belonging, and rootedness.

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**100** Samar H. Al-Jahdali, “Venturing into a Vanishing Space: The Chronotope in Representing Palestinian Postcoloniality,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50, no. 5 (2014): 226.

**101** Cf. Carol Bardenstein, “Trees, Forests, and the Shaping of Palestinian and Israeli Collective Memory,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999).

**102** Makdisi, “Palestinian,” 162.

**103** Danah Abdulla, “Only Icons,” in *Being Palestinian: Personal Reflections on Palestinian Identity in the Diaspora*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 23.

**104** Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of a Duty Towards Mankind* (London: ARK, 1987 [1949]), 41.

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