

Home as a Refrain

Remembering and Living Displacement in Gaza

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This article explores the “refrain of home” among Palestinian refugees in Gaza in the first years after their displacement in 1948. Relying on narrative accounts of the 1948 war and its aftermath, it traces people’s changing relations with their lost homes. It explores people’s memories of home before 1948 and considers four principal moments in the post-displacement transformation: exile itself, returns across the armistice line to retrieve possessions, crossings to steal from Israeli settlements, and *fida’iyyin* attacks. Each of these practices of connecting with home both reveals and shapes people’s understanding of their relation with these lost places.

The first loss which the rightless suffered was the loss of their homes, and this meant the loss of the entire social texture into which they were born and in which they established for themselves a distinct place in the world.

Hannah Arendt, *On Totalitarianism*¹

Home, in the sense both of the personal space of house and village and of the national homeland, has been exceedingly vulnerable in Palestinian experience. Since 1948, the majority of Palestinians have been unable to access the places they consider home.² Memoirs written in the years since displacement are filled with lament and often reflect the authors’ anxiety about their relation to these lost places. Mourid Barghouti, away

from home during the 1967 war and subsequently refused permission to return, writes that he was “struck by displacement,” commenting that “a person gets ‘displacement’ as he gets asthma, and there is no cure for either.”³ Even if displacement strikes in an instant, it takes time for its sufferer to appreciate its magnitude. For Barghouti it was the seemingly mundane act of buying olive oil—rather than getting it from his village’s trees—that forced this recognition: “I exercised the first simple and serious humiliation when I put my hand in my pocket in a grocer’s shop and bought my first kilogram of olive oil. It was as though I confronted myself, then, with the fact that Deir Ghassanah had become distant.”⁴ Similarly vexed sentiments are echoed by most Palestinian authors, a condition of discomfort summed up by Edward Said: “The stability of geography and the continuity of land—these have completely disappeared from my life and the life of all Palestinians.”⁵

Once experienced and endured, displacement is not easily reversed. Fawaz Turki, upon returning for a visit to Haifa after being exiled for more than 40 years, describes encountering its new condition: “An awry force in history has changed the place, and my own sense of otherness has changed me.... Haifa no longer speaks to me.”⁶ Whether at a distance or close by, whether access was permitted or denied, these memoirs describe a relationship with home that is persistently discomforted. There are, of course, many circumstances that can make homes feel strange. These feelings may be particularly pronounced in the Palestinian instance, but they are not unique to it. Palestinian experiences of loss and attachment, as personal as they are, also tell us something more general about responses to displacement, about people’s efforts to remain connected with homes they can no longer touch. A sense of home is made in part in repetitive details of daily interaction and use of space. So having to do something ordinary differently—like buying olive oil for the first time—is itself a sort of displacement. With the loss of this material intimacy, people seek other ways of enacting and repeating connection, ways that, as this essay explores, join a narrative articulation of home with a material relation with place.

Because home has been both so important and so vexed in Palestinian experience, the meaning of this concept has been the subject of considerable investigation. The words used to describe it have been parsed, its appearance in literature has been tracked, its continued salience for displaced refugees has been noted.⁷ Even as many considerations of

Palestinian understandings of home make use of a diversity of sources, exploring both literary productions and oral history accounts, “ordinary lives” and “expressive imaginaries” often appear as quite separate domains. They may both appear in the same accounts, but they are marshaled for different purposes, held to serve as different sorts of evidence.

The field of ordinary lives, most often considered through oral history, appears to convey “experience”—the authentic and immediate, but often naive, condition of being Palestinian.⁸ Projects to collect oral histories, and to create what might be considered “archives of memories,” seek to preserve a lost past for future generations that will never experience pre-1948 village life. Memorial books of individual villages, websites devoted to collecting Palestinian stories, tabulations of destroyed villages, all offer ways to promote the survival of these memories.⁹ These collections stand as records of the past and often do not seek to analyze the experiences recounted. Expressive culture, on the other hand, has been tapped as a source for apprehending a complex, articulate and elegant semantic field. Palestinian poets, novelists and memoirists have written a great deal, and with great sophistication, about concepts like home, homeland, displacement and exile. In literature ordinary experience is often mobilized as a trope, though it is of course transformed in the process. Understanding this production is extremely important, but (as most writers would no doubt be the first to say) it does not account for the whole of the Palestinian condition, or even the whole of a sophisticated conceptualization of that condition.

In this essay, I suggest a somewhat different analytic approach to a consideration of the experience of “home”—an approach that joins the articulated and the enacted, that gives attention both to what people say about home and what they do with it. I turn, not to reflections on temporal distance, but to memories of the days and years immediately following dispossession. Considering the experience of displacement and its aftermath, I examine accounts that traverse the temporal boundary of the 1948 war in order to investigate the processes through which Palestinians’ relations with their homes were transformed. In this way it is possible to analyze home as a conceptual field that is both semantic and embodied. In years following what Palestinians call the *Nakba* (catastrophe), memories of the past and continued forms of engagement were both significant in shaping people’s transformed relations with their homes. No less than

words, practice illuminates a complex conceptualization of home, albeit one that may not always be articulated.

To turn one's gaze to the making of distance—to the processes that solidified displacement—entails certain analytic difficulties. Not least of these is that practice can only be apprehended through words, through people's accounts of what they did and where they went. Thus, as this essay seeks to trace conceptualizations of home that occur in multiple forms and sites, it relies on narratives that are articulated in multiple registers. I am interested both in the ways that people reflect on the meaning of home, its place in their lives, what its loss meant to them, and in the stories that they tell about what they did to survive in the immediate aftermath of their displacement, the sometimes mundane, sometimes extraordinary ways that they continued to interact with the places that had been home. The focus within the second register on the details of practice reveals further layers in the understanding of home, layers that are not always formally articulated. It is through this layering, the accumulation of narrative and experience, that home retains its potency in the wake of displacement.

The site for this investigation is the Gaza Strip, a piece of land 27 miles long and 7 miles across at its widest point, whose 80,000 original inhabitants were joined by 250,000 refugees in 1948. Gaza's refugees came primarily from nearby villages, many of which had been part of the much larger Gaza District during the British Mandate. The places where Palestinians sought refuge in 1948—in addition to Gaza, people went to the West Bank (then ruled by Jordan), Jordan, Lebanon and Syria—have necessarily shaped their post-Nakba experiences.¹⁰ Until 1967, when it was occupied by Israel, the Gaza Strip was administered by Egypt, which insisted that it governed Gaza as a Palestinian space. For Gazans, both the refugees that became Gazan in 1948 and the native inhabitants, displacement was marked by a “dispossession at home.”¹¹ This was dispossession at home in two different senses. As a result of the 1948 war many native Gazans lost their agricultural lands, which lay across the armistice line in Israeli-controlled territory. Thus, even as they remained in their homes, these Gazans lost their livelihoods. Refugees lost their homes, but did not depart the territory of historic Palestine. These particular circumstances surely contributed to the sense of unreality that accompanied the catastrophe of 1948, delaying comprehension of the magnitude of the loss. Displacement, like home, is a process marked by repetition. It

accrues in memory, shaping people's recollections of times before and of experiences since.

The establishment of a boundary separating the people living in the newly formed Gaza Strip from their homes and lands on the other side of the armistice line was among the fundamental markers of the new conditions of post-1948 Palestine. However, the political and military demarcation of a border, of a new spatial arrangement and of a new category of "outside" (and "inside") does not proceed at the same tempo as social life, as personal connection and as communal identification. That "home" is no longer accessible—and indeed might no longer be home—is a conception that requires much more than diplomatic fiat to be made real to people. Here I explore these social and personal processes, the responses of refugees in Gaza to their new conditions, their means of confronting and responding to loss.

The particular accounts that are my principal sources here are drawn from my ethnographic research. For two years, in 1998 and 1999, I lived in Gaza conducting research on the British Mandate (1917–67) and the Egyptian Administration (1948–67).¹² While the focus of my research was government and bureaucracy, as part of my discussions with people about life in Gaza over this period, we talked about their home villages, the *Nakba* of 1948 and life in the aftermath. In what follows I describe people's memories of *ayyam al-balad* (village days), stories of the *hijra* (exodus) and accounts of movements in the years that followed. These stories were told to me in the course of wide-ranging conversations. Sometimes I asked people directly about these experiences, sometimes they arose from another thread of the conversation. The particular narrative occasions of my research were, of course, part of a much broader social field in which these experiences and memories circulate and have great importance. The repetition of stories, while in these cases done partly for my benefit, is a crucial part of what I will describe as the "refrain" of home, the means through which security, community and the potency of place are produced even in displacement.

My concern with the first years after the *Nakba* means that the focus here is on people who were themselves displaced from their homes, not their children and grandchildren. The attachment that generations of Palestinian refugees have to homes they have not personally known has been much noted. In order to better understand how such attachments

persist in the face of ongoing political defeat, it is important to trace the narratives and practices of the first years after 1948.

My conversations with Gazans, occurring as they did long after the fact, are necessarily implicated in the complex problems of memory to which so much attention has been paid.¹³ Any historical project is necessarily already distanced—at a remove from the experiences under consideration. To attempt to retrieve something about the way distance is made cannot mean to strip away that remove and access the pure experience. One can, though, attempt to explore the layers of experience that have produced this distance. These layers are not discrete, simply lying one on top of the other, but rather intersect and influence each other. The experience of a moment can change the meaning of what came before, it can even change the “facts” of an earlier moment.¹⁴ When people remember the *bijra*, it is with the knowledge of the more than 50 years of dispossession that have followed. It is with the knowledge also of more than 30 years of Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip that followed the 1967 war. These intervening years, these perpetuating sorrows, surely shape these narratives.¹⁵

As Patrick Geary suggests, all memory “is memory *for* something, and this political (in a broad sense) purpose cannot be ignored.”¹⁶ There is no doubt that memories of the past say a great deal about people’s attitudes in and towards the present. And yet, as Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler argue, we should be wary of simply “reducing acts of memory to constructions of the present.”¹⁷ They suggest, instead, paying attention to “not only *what* is remembered but *how*.” In my investigation here, memory clearly plays an important part, but it is not the primary subject of investigation. In considering how people talk about their lives at home, their displacement from these homes, and their experiences in the aftermath, my interest is less in defining memory, or understanding its relation to history, and more in exploring how the repeated articulation of memories participates in and animates a refrain of home that shapes people’s experiences of their communities, of themselves, of their past and of their future.

Much has been written on Palestinian identity in exile and on the ways that attachments to particular “homes” have been reconfigured as longings for a national “homeland.”¹⁸ In this essay I focus on the first of these terms. In so doing, I seek not to draw a contrast between home

and homeland—these are attachments that can easily coexist—but to give serious attention to the details of the transformations in people’s relations with the former.¹⁹ The personal scale of intimate relations with home does not render them less significant to the broader Palestinian experience. As we will see, these details not only generate meaning for people’s lives, they are also important in shaping encounters with homeland.

Movements in and out of place—crossings of various kinds—offer a good entrée into the Gazan experience and sense of home and highlight its imbrication in broad social and political processes. Despite the difficulties involved, movement in and out of Gaza has never ceased. In the immediate aftermath of the 1948 war, people crossed the armistice line to return to retrieve possessions, get food, harvest their crops. As time passed, and the immediate accouterments of daily life could no long be retrieved from home, some people started crossing to steal those same things from the people now occupying their homes. As Palestinian demands for resistance to these conditions grew more vociferous, some of these thieves were recruited to serve as *fidā’iyyin* (guerrilla fighters; literally “soldiers prepared to sacrifice themselves”) in the struggle against Israel. In each of these crossings, the extent to which the formation of a border, like the formation of home, is itself a process, embedded in other historical and social processes, is made clear.

HOME AS A REFRAIN

In Gazan experience, the refrain of home is formed by both the stories that people tell and the movements that they undertook. In music and poetry a refrain is a line that is repeated at intervals throughout a piece. In the experience of home a refrain is, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari suggest, a rhythmic production of security. In a child singing to keep fear at bay, in a bird singing to mark its territory, they identify the musical dispersal of chaos.²⁰ As Fawaz Turki describes it, in very similar terms: “*Home*—a mystical, healing incantation that affirms that the link between the world in me and the world around me has not been irreparably ruptured.”²¹ While narrative is one form of this incantation, practice—the transformations in experiences with home after being displaced—is another. Even if these practices are not immediately expressed as part of

a verbal lexicon of home, they do contribute to an experiential lexicon. They form a lived vocabulary, a habit of relation, that in turn affects how people talk about home.

As Deleuze and Guattari point out, home is never simply available but rather always has to be produced and delimited. And home is always both a bulwark against chaos and “in danger of breaking apart at any moment.”²² This tenuous nature of home is one reason that repetition is so important in its production; it is always in process and is never static. In this, not only is the Palestinian experience not unique, but the production of home as a refrain did not arise only in the post-1948 experience. The contours of that refrain shifted, to be sure, as did the centrality of chaos in people’s experience. These conditions further highlight the importance of refrain in the effort to keep chaos at bay.

In the post-1948 refrain, memory occupied a new place, and recollections of past conditions helped shape people’s affective ties. But, this refrain was never only about memory; new practices provided new forms of connection. With increasing distance, the balance between the material and the narrative in people’s relationships to their homes shifted, and the “told” occupied a larger place than the “touched.” As displacement persisted, the close correspondence between the material and the social was ever more disrupted.²³ There was never a complete replacement of the tactile though—as the widespread practice of keeping keys to homes long destroyed can attest—but the character of these objects was transformed. However much people might resist it, these things from home have become more “objects of memory”²⁴ than “items of use.” For Palestinians, the refrain of home always relies on a multiplicity of narratives and practices.

A refrain of home, it should be clear, does not simply give voice to material connections or memories of previous connections but helps to structure people’s experience. It can help reproduce home, even when its territory is beyond reach. It can help reintroduce a kind of security, even when chaos is all around. To a certain degree, a refrain *is* experience. That is, it is through these repetitions, incantations, circulations that people experience the security of home. The Palestinian refrain of home in the aftermath of dispossession can shed light, then, on broader conditions of displacement, insecurity and threat, and on ways that people seek to deal with these conditions. In exploring people’s stories of the *hijra* and

considering people's different efforts to cross back to home, it becomes clear that the repetitions of both narrative and practice did give some modicum of stability to even the most unstable experience of home. It was through this repetition that Palestinians were able, to a certain extent, to distinguish their situation from that described by Hannah Arendt in the epigraph to this essay. If Palestinians did not wholly lose "the entire social texture into which they were born and in which they established for themselves a distinct place in the world," it was in large part due to their articulations and enactments of a refrain of home.

In the particular instance of the Gazan refrain, these repetitions worked with, and produced, both proximity and distance. In the aftermath of 1948, home was always both near and far. While the population of Palestine has been scattered around the world, many refugees in Gaza live within sight of their former homes. In the first years after the *Nakba*, this proximity was even more pronounced, given the relative porousness of the border. Over time, as people had to deal with the continued reality of their dispossession, this geographic closeness came to seem less like contiguity. Now, of course, despite the lack of physical distance, both political conditions and the severity of Israel's closure policies have made these homes impossibly far. In examining the refrain of home in and about the first years in Gaza, I highlight this shifting interplay of proximity and distance and its consequences for the refrain's capacity to produce a sense of security. By moving between the two, by articulating and enacting relations with home that at times worked with distance and at times brought it closer, the Gazan refrain of home was able to survive the ruptures of Palestinian history and continue to work to provide some sense of security for people. In the sections that follow, I look first at narratives that self-consciously articulate an idea of home and then turn to accounts of practice that reveal an enacted understanding of this relation.

AYYAM AL-BALAD: LIFE AT HOME

The dramatic break produced by dispossession, and the extremely difficult conditions in which people found themselves afterwards, make it seem inevitable that Gazan reflections on home before 1948 would be colored with a degree of nostalgia. As Svetlana Boym describes it, nostal-

gia “is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute ... the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history.”²⁵ Tracing the modern (medical) history of nostalgia, Boym notes that it was initially seen as a curable condition, an expression of patriotism where people “loved the charm of their native land to the point of sickness,” and which could be cured by returning to that land. Over time, however, the disease became less receptive to this treatment and “doctors discovered that a return home did not always treat the symptoms.”²⁶ In the twentieth century, nostalgia seemed to become a widespread cultural condition, often brought on by the catastrophes of the century.

In many ways, this account aptly describes Palestinian memories of their homes before 1948—a longing brought on by catastrophe that cannot be cured simply by returning home. Indeed, many accounts of Palestinian memory foreground nostalgia. Carol Bardenstein, for instance, analyzing cookbooks produced in exile, highlights a Palestinian book as a particularly nostalgic example of the genre. The stories in the book, she suggests, have a generic quality that creates “a nostalgic representation of ‘back home’ as a place of idealized, simplistic harmony and coexistence, in which explicit mention of the rupture and dislocation is avoided.”²⁷ Julie Peteet identifies refugee nostalgia as a coping mechanism, a means of recreating a feeling of security: “essentializing the past through a selectively reconstituted memory narrows the distance between people, providing a narrative basis for establishing a restored inward-looking trust.”²⁸ My conversations with refugees in Gaza reflected a similar reference to the past as security. With the tremendous losses and repeated sorrows that have followed in the past fifty years, *ayyam al-balad* are remembered as a time of safety. As Samir Khaled, a refugee from al-Jura now living in Khan Yunis, told me: “It was a sweet life. I wish I could live for one day in my land and then die. Our village was paradise; it was the flower of the cities.... Now in the summer, we can hardly find fresh water to drink. Our village was a park and grapes were like gold.”²⁹

Without denying the real significance of nostalgia in shaping these memories, though, there is more to be found in them. It is necessary to complicate a view of Palestinian memories of home as *only* nostalgic.³⁰ Memories of home are not entirely disconnected from either the “real-

ity” that was or the “reality” that is. To understand the meaning of these memories, one must pay attention to what people are nostalgic for when they are nostalgic, to what values are expressed in their descriptions of “paradise,” to what understanding of home is evoked in their images of life in the *balad* (village). One must consider as well, how these articulations participate in a refrain of home that *was* transformed by 1948.

Some people I knew in Gaza spoke quite soberly about the difficulties of life before 1948, even as they described it as better than their lives afterwards. Even where descriptions appear idealized, there seems to be considerable continuity in the ways that people talked about home before 1948 and after, suggesting this idealization was also part of a more general way of talking about home. Tania Forte, for instance, has recorded panegyric poetry from the 1920s about village life that shares much with what I heard from Gazans about their memories of life before 1948.³¹ Valorization of one’s village—compared to other villages or other times—appears to be an important part of the refrain of home, defining this space not only as secure, but as socially potent.³² One of the ways that this social potency, which suggests the possibility of both distinction and stability, was not entirely lost in the aftermath of 1948 (though it clearly was disrupted) was through precisely the sort of reiterations that look like nostalgia.

In their descriptions, people do sometimes talk about their particular houses, but it is the *balad* as home that is most strongly evoked. As much as land and property, then, what was lost in the loss of home was society and community, the security of relations with neighbors.³³ To note this is not to oppose a “collective” understanding of home to an “individual” one. Individual houses mattered to people; their particular place within the village was important. These individual homes were not, though, sufficient unto themselves. People depended upon a constellation of relations—upon the life of the village—to provide the security and safety of home.

In their recollections, people articulate a possibility that they desire, as much as an actuality that they have lost. As Samir Khaled said: “Love, harmony and cordiality prevailed in the village. Nobody dared to say a bad word to anyone and nobody dared to look at your daughter if she went to the orchards. Life was sweet and full of happiness.” There is no doubt that the dispersal of people and the subsequent transformations in social relations accord particular importance to these networks of relations.

Life today is described as worse than *ayyam al-balad* in part because of changes in social mores and relations. As Im Mahmoud, a refugee from Majdal, put it: “Our life now is worth nothing in comparison with the life we had during *ayyam al-balad*. We had land, worked in weaving, and were comfortable and loved each other. The atmosphere was different from that of today. Life now is not good. The world has become corrupt ... and someone who adheres to his religion is ... called backward.”³⁴ That people helped each other then, but now everyone must care for himself was another sentiment I heard frequently.

In addition to memories of strong community, descriptions of *ayyam al-balad* emphasize this community’s ability to be self-sufficient. As Nawal Dina, originally from Hamama, recalled: “Our life was good. We ploughed, planted and ate from our land.... We spent the summers in our orchards and fields.... They were our land and farms ... I wish I had them again.”³⁵ Memories of living off what they grew, of not needing to purchase many of their daily requirements, are common among refugees in Gaza. Describing life in her village as being “like gold,” Amina explained: “We were prosperous, living on our land, eating figs, prickly pear, grapes and everything. Nowadays if you have money you eat; if you have no money you cannot eat. Then there was prosperity; now we live in need even if we live in palaces.”³⁶ Self-sufficiency, like community, provides security.

People’s memories of the luxuriousness of their land’s bounty may not always be accurate and, certainly, self-sufficiency was not a universal condition. The Palestinian peasantry faced many hardships during the Mandate, due in part to pressures created by Zionist immigration. Landlessness and impoverishment were serious problems, and significant portions of the rural population worked on other people’s land or left rural areas entirely to work in cities. Amina was from a wealthy family, which owned a lot of land. As she recalled: “We worked our lands ... and we had also workers who harvested the land with us. We hired people to help in harvesting because we had a lot of land.” Even if not a universal condition, and even if closely connected to relations of inequality among the Palestinian population, the memory of the possibility of self-sufficiency has widespread importance in people’s ideas of home. Such memories took on particular significance in the dramatically dependent conditions after 1948. Almost the entire refugee population was dependent on rations to survive, a far cry from their conditions before, whatever they may have

been. Quaker relief workers in Gaza noted the stark differences in people's lives. A report on the Mughazi refugee camp described a refugee who "was a farmer in Iqir [‘Aqir] before they fled. He owned a bit of fruit trees too and on his earnings they lived in relative comfort in the little village before fright scattered them and their neighbors."³⁷

There is nothing particularly startlingly about Gazans' ways of describing home. One can imagine similar reminiscences accompanying any condition of loss—even when what is being lamented is simply the passage of time. This typicality in no way undermines the importance of these recollections for the Gazan refrain of home. It suggests, rather, that this refrain is not isolated—that the repetitions, the incantations, which kept Gazans tied both to each other and to their senses of self are of general significance. With the loss of the actual village, articulation of the mores and patterns of life there helped people define what a good life might be, even when their lives were often extremely difficult. The security provided by village life—a security that was certainly not identical to prosperity or equality—lay partly in its familiarity and predictability. Repeating stories about that life reinvigorated that sense of comfort.

Doreen Massey cautions against "readings of place as home, where there is imagined to be the security of a (false, as we have seen) stability and an apparently reassuring boundedness."³⁸ Her concern about such approaches to place and home is that they require ignoring the histories of interrelations and dynamic changes that mark any place. Taking this caution seriously, how can we understand Gazan memories of home that are expressed precisely in terms of security and community? One thing that seems clear from these descriptions is that a view of home as a space of safety does not have to imply a naive vision of a completely bounded space. To the contrary, these memories evoke no sense of the village as an impermeable boundary keeping the world out. Gazans remember a multiplicity of relations from *ayyam al-balad*, with neighboring villages, with British administrators and with Jews in the area. Penetrations from the "outside" did not in and of themselves appear threatening to security and community. Intention and power mattered for how people understood the meaning of such interactions. It was when such penetrations sought to disrupt the life of the village (and the nation), the apex of such disruption being the *Nakba* of course, that they were seen as a problem.

One thing that was universal in people's recollections of the *balad* was their ongoing attachment to it. Despite the distance, despite their recognition that they would almost certainly never be allowed to return, people remain deeply connected with their homes. As Abu Ayub, a refugee from Yibna, said: "Until now I know my *balad* and I dream of it, and everybody is like me. I did not leave my *balad*, but it was taken by force from me. Now I live here in Gaza not in Yibna, but the owners of this land are the people of Gaza."³⁹ The desire to return, even if only to see their homes once again, remains strong. In the years after 1967, when Israel occupied Gaza and opened the borders, many people did go back to see their villages, or the places where they had been. This possibility produced a shift in the refrain.

Often this experience meant reliving the feeling of displacement, as they saw others occupying their former homes or found those homes entirely destroyed. Mahdi Ayub remembered: "I once went to Lyd and cried. I remembered the bygone days when I used to sit under the trees—palm trees and orange trees."⁴⁰ Im Mahmoud recalled her visit: "We had two houses in Majdal ... [after 1967] I went there ... a Jewish woman looked out of the door and cried, 'an Arab, an Arab.' I said to her. 'This is my house'... we will never forget our lands and homes."⁴¹ Understanding the strength of these attachments, which coexist with a recognition of dispossession, requires exploring the processes through which people left their homes and the ways in which they learned to relate to them from afar.

CROSSING INTO GAZA: STORIES OF DISPOSSESSION AND DISPERSAL IN THE *NAKBA*

When Palestinians became refugees in Gaza, it happened almost without awareness. To get there, they crossed no international border, but simply went down the road. This crossing was a temporal rather than a spatial one, as a border was *ex post facto* established between this territory and the rest of Mandate Palestine. Further, even as they left their homes, few people imagined that they would be gone for longer than a few days or weeks. The stories that people tell about this time, with their attendant chaos and confusion, suggest that for many people departure was not

a one-time event, and certainly did not produce a clear trajectory from home to place of exile. Some people left their homes and then went back only to be expelled later, as happened in Majdal (now Ashkelon), which was not entirely emptied of its native inhabitants until 1950, when Israel ordered their removal.⁴² More commonly, people left their villages and moved through many places—from Gaza, to Rafah, into Egypt and back—before finally “settling” into one of the many refugee camps that sprang up on the Gazan landscape. In these camps, often former British military bases transformed for a new purpose, refugees were housed in tents and provided aid by the American Friends Service Committee. This modicum of stability took time however, and the first few months of people’s displacement were chaotic.

The chaos of the *hijra*—as this experience is known—is reflected in the stories that people tell about their experiences. Fear, danger, hunger—these are the dominant tropes in all the stories of the *hijra* I heard in Gaza. “If we had not seen the shelling and the human flesh on the walls, we would have remained and never left Majdal,” Im Mahmud told me one day as we sat in the small house in the Jabalya refugee camp where she has lived for the past fifty years. “My father said, let’s go to Hiribya village. We left Majdal for the orchards and from the orchards [we went] to Hiribya and then to Gaza.... Now we stay in Jabalya and here we built and lived. This is what I have seen in my life.” That it was fear that drove people out of their homes was an oft-repeated sentiment as people remembered the confusion of 1948. As Im Tariq put it succinctly: “When they started to fire at us from planes and huge shells fell on us, we were terrified and slept in the orchards. We did not dare sleep in the village and fled to the orchards. When the Jews entered Majdal we left and went to Gaza.”⁴³ In these narratives of flight and confusion, as people express their loss and define what was lost in the loss of home, home itself is conceptualized (and reconceptualized). While these stories form part of a broader national narrative, they are also of course profoundly personal. And the refrain of home they articulate is both communal and individual.

Im ‘Amir, now living in Khan Yunis, told me the story of her family’s *hijra* experience one afternoon when I, along with her grandson and another friend of mine, visited her at home.⁴⁴ She told the story as much to her grandson as to me, often addressing him directly as she narrated. This occasion then, was not only a reporting of the refrain, but was itself

part of the practice of reiteration that connected not only those personally dispossessed, but subsequent generations, to homes that had been lost. Im ‘Amir’s story of repeated departures, of frequent moving around trying to escape bad conditions and look for better ones, is typical of other *hijra* stories I heard in Gaza and serves as an exemplar of a broader narrative refrain. Hers is both a personal story and a national account, and it was told as such.

Her tale began in her hometown of Yibna, a destroyed village in what is now Israel. As she remembers it, Yibna was the last village in the area occupied by Israeli forces during the course of the war:

We were sleeping at sunset time when we heard shooting—we asked what was going on. They said that the Jews had taken al-Qubayba.... The people of al-Qubayba had fled. We wanted to escape but they said that we shouldn’t leave. The Jews entered ‘Aqir village and the people of ‘Aqir escaped. Then they entered Qatra and the people of Qatra also fled from the village and came to Yibna. They said that the people of Bashshit village also escaped.... All the people congregated in Yibna. The Jews surrounded Yibna from all sides.... Then we heard from the megaphone a call that people of Yibna should leave the village and go to the orchards, so we slept there ... we did not take a mattress or a quilt, only a blanket on my husband’s shoulder.

Im ‘Amir’s story begins with security disrupted—as shooting intruded on the evening rest. As each village near Yibna was captured and its inhabitants fled, the layers of this security were progressively peeled away. Each town attacked and lost is named in this narrative, a recounting that both recalls the magnitude of dispossession and keeps alive the memory of these towns. It also reinforces the location of Im ‘Amir’s personal experience of displacement within a shared national experience.

As Im ‘Amir went on to recall, escape was a process, one that was itself traumatic and introduced new insecurities:

At dawn, they said you people of Yibna have to leave, so we walked from Yibna and went through four or five villages. People left the elderly behind in Yibna.... We walked until we reached Isdud [now Ashdod].... I left Rasmia [her daughter] because I could not carry

her and your father [speaking to her grandson] was not able to carry her ... she started crying and I felt sorry for her and I left the flour and took her instead.... We went to Isdud then to al-Jura, Majdal, Ni'ilya, Hiribya, then to Jabalya, and then we lived in Gaza. The people of Gaza did not tolerate us and kicked us out.... They wanted money for renting houses, and we had no money. We left Gaza for Nuseirat, Maghazi, Rafah, and from Rafah we went to al-Arish ... [then] we came back here [Khan Yunis].

At repeated moments in this narrative of movement Im 'Amir, and others like her, was faced with difficult choices about what to take and what to leave, whether to stay put or move on. Her initial decision to leave her daughter Rasmia and her subsequent reconsideration—choosing instead to leave the flour—was the most dramatic and poignant of these choices, and it was by no means unusual.⁴⁵ Sometimes a “choice” to move again was imposed—as when native Gazans demanded rent for further use of their property. At other times it was internally driven—as when Im 'Amir objected to one stopping point: “I told my husband that I do not want to stay.” Each “choice,” each movement, reconfigured people’s relationships with their homes. Objects that might have been equally significant—or insignificant—acquired new and distinct value when they were left behind or taken with. Having to pay rent for the first time, or not being able to do so, introduced a new factor into thinking about home. And, each time people had to move on again, to seek another space of refuge, their original homes were that much further away.

Im 'Amir’s description of how she and her family lived when they first came to Gaza further participates in a refrain of home—in part through its contrast with what home was like before:

The Egyptian army brought tents for us—the tent was like a room with pillars. Each family had a part of a tent.... It was raining heavily.... They moved us to a camp, which was full of lice. When we slept, lice, bedbugs and fleas crawled on us. Then they sprayed us with disinfectant. We left for Rafah. I said that I wanted to remain in Rafah and I told my husband that we shouldn’t stay in an open tent. We made bricks of clay and put the bricks together and surrounded

the tent with them.... We had no bread or food to cook. Our living conditions were difficult.

This stop in Rafah was only one of many before her family eventually settled in Khan Yunis. No food, no privacy, no house—these were the living conditions in Gaza in the aftermath of the *Nakba*. While food relief began relatively quickly (within a few months), people lived in tents for several years until UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency) replaced them with more permanent structures. Im ‘Amir’s recollections of the discomforts of this time were not contrasted with an idealized view of life at home. She spoke quite soberly about the conditions of life in Yibna, recalling an absence of services and a lack of amenities in the home.⁴⁶ The security of life at home was not, then, that of a presumed perfection, a “false ... stability and an apparently reassuring boundedness.”⁴⁷ This security was derived both from the fact of some predictability in life—that one could make judgments based on past experience and have a reasonable expectation that they would have some relevance for future conditions—and from the capacity to have influence over one’s life. From Im ‘Amir’s description of making and putting bricks around the tent, it is clear that she did attempt to exert some control over their living conditions—to make the refuge more like home. That her family did not stay long in Rafah is a reminder of the tenuous nature of these efforts.

That the spaces of refuge were not in fact home was difficult to forget. In addition to their own longings, native Gazans reminded refugees that they did not belong. As Im ‘Amir recalled about the reception by natives: “They made us sleep under the olive trees. In the morning we told them that we want water to wash and drink, but they told us that we had to leave them—that we were the Palestinians who had left our villages and come here, and that we had to leave them.” The sense of accusation in this comment was not accidental. Many refugees told me that Gazans initially viewed them almost as traitors because they had left their villages, letting them fall into Israeli hands.

In Im ‘Amir’s account, as well as in other stories of dispossession I heard in Gaza, the description of the loss of home—a loss that was a process of encroaching threat and repeated upheavals—continues to enact a connection to that home. These stories are told urgently, as if within the moment, a style that not only reflects the trauma of these events (though

it surely does reflect this trauma) but also indicates the extent to which these stories of loss are part of today's refrain of home.⁴⁸ By returning the tellers to the time of loss, these narratives help preserve an ongoing connection with that time's home. That connection then animates this time's refrain—a refrain that cannot rely on a physical relation with the territory.

Even as *hijra* narratives offer a memory of home that articulates a continuing connection to lost land, the fifty years of dispossession have necessarily produced enormous changes in Gazans' sense of home as well as in their relations with their lands left behind. The refrain of home incorporated both memory and practice and was dependent on both repetition and the capacity for transformation. In this way it forged a connection with home, not only as it had been in the past, but as it came to be in the present. In the sections that follow I trace accounts of different post-1948 trajectories of movement, accounts which illuminate the conditions in which these relations were re-formed and the practices through which they were enacted.⁴⁹ These narratives of practice give further shape to the meaning of home, even as their focus is on the details of what people did. They enact an understanding of home that sheds light back on the articulated ideas of home this essay has considered thus far. One can see, for instance, how ideas of home as security played out in people's attempts to manage the dramatic change in their lives.

DETERRITORIALIZATION DENIED: CROSSING THE ARMISTICE LINE FOR FOOD AND PROPERTY

Nineteen forty-eight created a fundamental rupture in Palestinians' lives, but they did not know the extent of it right away. For quite some time, refugees thought they would be going home and hence did not necessarily feel displaced or dispossessed. People's active relationships with their homes were also not always severed in an instant. For some time there was considerable diversity of relations with these homes. In considering post-*Nakba* movements in territory and in relation to home, I begin with the attempt to retrieve possessions. When Palestinians left their homes in 1948, they assumed they would return as soon as the fighting was over. Consequently, they left most of their possessions behind. As Quaker

relief workers commented about conditions in one camp: “In this tent as through-out the camp there is scarcely a stick of furniture. Most of the refugees took flight, in a panic, at a moment’s notice, running off in just what they had on and bringing only the little cash they could scrape together at the moment of departure.”⁵⁰

As time went on and a full return continued to be impossible, Palestinian refugees in Gaza began to cross the armistice line to retrieve their possessions and, especially, to harvest their crops. As the Quakers also noted, such crossings were extremely high risk ventures: “Some have managed to slip back to their homes during the night—a long and highly dangerous journey—but these have not managed to bring anything out as bulky as clothes or furnishings of any sort.”⁵¹ Im ‘Amir recalled this experience in her story: “People wanted to return to Yibna because the wheat was ready. They bought donkeys and went back to bring wheat. The Jews fired at the donkeys. And people came back disappointed, having neither their donkeys nor wheat, nor anything else.” Ibrahim Mahmud, a Gazan teacher whose family land lay on the other side of the armistice line, told me that he did not attempt the crossing, but that many others did: “They used to store their crops—wheat or barley—in a well and close it up. So, they knew the place where they stored it and the Jews didn’t. People infiltrated and dug out what they had stored and took it because they were in need.... Many of these people were shot dead when the Jews met them.”⁵² When people attempted to return to harvest wheat they enacted a continuing and present relationship with home, and when they were rebuffed and shot at, the near impossibility of such continuity was made clear. And yet, people continued to cross.

Gazans who crossed the armistice line were, in fact, in danger from two sides. Egyptian authorities also tried to put a stop to these crossings, in part because of fears about Israeli reprisals against violations of the armistice agreement. The Egyptian concern that Gazans might act as spies for Israel indicates another reason they wished to control these crossings. As one Gazan told me, “anyone they caught they considered a spy.”⁵³ Border-crossers were thus “targets of Egyptian bullets on suspicion of being a ‘spy’ or Israeli bullets [as] an ‘infiltrator’ or ‘fida’i.”⁵⁴ Accusations of spying had multiple sources. Some Gazans saw such charges as part of an Egyptian effort to deflect responsibility for their failures in the 1948 war: “One always looks for a scapegoat. So, they said ‘the Palestinians cheated

us. The Palestinians were conspiring with the Jews against us.’ When the Egyptian army was routed, they started to say that the Palestinians were collaborators with the Jews. They blamed us for their defeat.”⁵⁵ Additionally, and as part of the same discourse of betrayal I noted above, native Gazans sometimes accused refugees. As Abu Khalil, a refugee living in Rafah, described: “They used to say we sold our land and came to ruin theirs. They accused us of being spies.”⁵⁶ If going home raised suspicions that one was a spy, then home was surely no longer a site of security. If one’s daily living subjected one to charges of betrayal, then the space of refuge could not keep chaos at bay either. Caught amidst these various accusations, and still in desperate need for their goods left behind, home must have felt very tenuous for Gaza’s new inhabitants.

The awareness of risk was prominent in all the stories people told me about these ventures, as were the debilitating conditions that made people willing to face these risks. As Abu Nizar, originally from the village of Hamama, told me:

When we first left our villages there was starvation and hunger ... people had fled and left everything behind. We remained about four or five months with no food or supplies or anything. So, we started to go home to our villages where our stores and houses were to bring grain, flour, wheat and oil in order to eat. The Jews put ambushes on the road.... Yet people were compelled to go, because of hunger. This happened in the first part of 1949.⁵⁷

Just as *hijra* narratives recall an ongoing connection with home, these early movements across the armistice line reflect an everyday practice in which home was still present. The danger that was involved in these attempts to go home, however, indicates the extent to which they were no longer simply “ordinary” everyday practice. In the wake of dispossession, people’s usual patterns, usual ways of securing their livelihoods, were dramatically disrupted.

Efforts to return home in part reflect the liminality of this period. New ways of living in exile had not yet emerged, but old ways were no longer secure. These attempts to return to physical homes seem to inject the possibility of security—of having enough food, of gathering one’s possessions—into conditions of tremendous risk. Doing nothing entailed

its own risks, of course, as food sources were scarce in Gaza. The chaos of this time made it difficult to manage the present, let alone plan for the future. These early crossings show people attempting to work with the past—with their familiar rhythms of harvesting crops—to help stabilize their present. That past practices could not provide material security for the present further underscores the trauma of this period. At the same time, these practices did participate in the shifting refrain of home that helped keep this trauma from overwhelming everything.

If home can be understood as the organizing of space such that “the forces of chaos are kept outside as much as possible”⁵⁸ then what kind of refrain of home can be found in encounters with danger and deprivation? In the case of Gazan refugees crossing back to their land, it was precisely the confrontation with these forces that worked to keep the full extent of that chaos at bay. These early crossings were not a strategic response to chaos, an organized effort to reconstitute a stable home. Rather, walking through risk constituted a practice—rather than a plan, or a strategy—of denial of the dispossession that was underway. This denial was not necessarily a conscious response but was rather a condition of getting by. At this early point, lands that were now occupied by Israel were not yet experienced as separate from the territory where people were (temporarily, they assumed) living. The relationship of Palestinians to their land was not yet transformed into a longing for what had been lost but remained embedded in the realm of the practical and the mundane. Even as getting there had become dangerous, going there (and especially going there for “everyday” purposes) helped keep home close.

Still, even as these early illicit border crossings indicated a practice of denial of deterritorialization, there were at the same time a multiplicity of other forces that produced a growing awareness of precisely that loss of territoriality. These contradictory—but always mutually constitutive—conditions of being highlight the confusion that marked the first months, and even years, after the *Nakba*. These early crossings, unlike later ones, are not remembered as an explicit challenge to the occupation of their land. The constitution of a sociological border, or an experiential territory, follows a different rhythm than does the political demarcation of a boundary line. The early crossings of the armistice line by Gazans—which were not experienced as a border crossing and in which people seemed to

be working with multiple temporalities—are a concrete instance of this different rhythm.

STEALING FROM “HOME”

As time passed, and the conditions of displacement continued unabated, refugee practices in relation to their homes shifted. Along with Egyptian efforts to insist on respect for the conditions of the armistice—which demanded that no one cross the line—the mere fact of continued distance worked its way into people’s consciousness and into their ways of being with(out) home. Under these circumstances, denial gave way to acknowledgment, but not acceptance, of displacement and deterritorialization. And, just as *hijra* narratives worked to reconnect with home through an articulated refrain, new practices emerged which sought a material connection with lost homes and produced a different register of refrain. There were at least two distinct sorts of new practices that participated in the shift away from denial toward opposition, each with its own inflection. Each continued a crossing of the armistice line and each, even as it recognized, also rejected the legitimacy of displacement. Crossing the border to steal from nearby Israeli settlements remained a somewhat ad hoc response to the conditions of displacement. It differed from the earlier crossings to retrieve possessions primarily in the provenance of the goods retrieved. However, the second sort of crossing—*fiḍa’iyyin* attacks—was a communal and increasingly organized action on behalf of a “right.”

Given the desperate poverty in Gaza, a condition that was mitigated but not alleviated by the relief provided first by international aid agencies, and then by UNRWA and the Egyptian government, it made sense that people continued to look to their old homes as a source of sustenance. As time passed, however, that sustenance could not be provided by their own crops or their own goods—long since disappeared—but only by those of the new inhabitants. It is not surprising that some Gazans tried to eke out a meager living through the sale of stolen goods, however risky the venture. Benny Morris records a regular flow of refugees across the border to steal, both as individual ventures and as a form of employment (merchants sometimes paid people to bring back equipment).⁵⁹ The vibrant market in stolen goods was made possible by the existence of the

boundary line, which rendered the recovery of such goods through policing impossible. That the occupation of their lands by new Israeli settlers was not accepted as legitimate is reflected in people's apparent comfort with this trade. Just as people's efforts to retrieve possessions from home indicated efforts to produce a new security under conditions of acute threat, crossings to steal indicate new configurations of managing one's livelihood—configurations that were both required because of the new border and made possible by it.

Describing the severity of unemployment in Gaza, Sami Ibrahim—a retired teacher and amateur historian—linked both stealing practices and some people's participation in *fida'iyyin* units to these difficult conditions. Recalling an instance of stealing to which he had some connection, Ibrahim highlighted the normality of this practice for Gazans:

I remember that I was the vice-principal of al-Zahra Secondary School. The headmistress, said to me: "If we want to make a garden, we need a hose. How can we get one?" I asked someone, who said: "A bedouin man will bring me a good hose from the Jews—from the settlements." He brought the hose ... and the headmistress attached it to the tap.... But she found holes in it. She told me that it was broken and couldn't be used for the garden. We called the man and he changed it. Finally we discovered that the hose was not broken, but that it was a special kind of pipe, one we didn't know, used for irrigation. This is to say that there were many people who got by on stealing. Until today there are workers who steal from the Jews.⁶⁰

Dating this story is a bit difficult. Based on what Ibrahim told me about his career trajectory, it would seem to have happened in the mid-1950s, but drip irrigation (to which the pipe with holes refers) was not developed until the 1960s. He may be conflating memories of different events, certainly possible given the prevalence of stealing as a practice. For my purposes here, the significance of the story lies in what it reveals both about the ordinariness of this practice and about changing relations with lost lands. In highlighting the surprise of the hose with holes, Ibrahim illuminated a broader transformation in people's familiarity with their former homes. That other people now possessed these homes of course meant that they would change. Encountering new sorts of objects coming from these

homes forced a confrontation with the fact of this change. The unfamiliarity of new objects underscored, and produced, distance. At the same time, the stealing of these objects, even if motivated by other concerns, also helped bring this space closer.

How to understand practices such as stealing was a question that concerned many observers of refugee conditions. Descriptions by outsiders of these practices, and of refugee behavior more generally, often portray Palestinians as buffeted by circumstance, brutishly responding to deprivation. Morris cites the comments of General Glubb (head of Jordan's army, the Arab Legion): "barely enough for subsistence.... People living without employment, with nothing to do.... The nuisance of infiltration is the price the Jews are paying for the brutality with which they liquidated the Arab residents in their country."⁶¹ Egyptians expressed concern that the refugee population was untethered from social regulation. The Egyptian press reported, as did foreign observers and aid workers, on the conniving among refugees. Manipulation of the refugee rolls—particularly by not reporting deaths—as well as the sale of donated foodstuffs was seen as common.⁶² While this kind of behavior might be an understandable result of the terrible conditions in which refugees were living, it constituted a serious problem in the eyes of Egyptian authorities. It did not, though, appear to Egyptian observers to be a political action. It was, rather, the result of social and political absence. As the newspaper *Al-Abram* put it, Gazans were "living in a society with no religion, no morals and no sociality,"⁶³ a condition that made them unpredictable and potentially threatening.

These explanations of refugee behavior reflect a view of refugees as being reduced to, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, "bare life."⁶⁴ Apparently unable to reflect, to act politically, from these perspectives Gazans seemed to be concerned with only the bare act of survival. Refugees in Gaza certainly *were* concerned with survival and, especially before foreign relief operations began, this survival *was* potentially under threat. Still, these early border crossings evidence more than bare life. Both the retrieval of left-behind possessions and the stealing of those of the new occupiers also constitute an enacted claim to home. As the crossings changed, the character of that claim, and its register, shifted, but it was a claim nonetheless. The first crossings made a claim of continuity and sought to maintain a material connection to homes momentarily abandoned. The second

necessarily acknowledged the rupture of the new border—and in fact relied on that rupture to make keeping stolen possessions possible—but did not accept its legitimacy. In the Palestinian context, any claim to home—whether enacted or expressed, emotional or logical—has political implications. As the many efforts to “settle” the Palestinian refugee problem by permanently settling the refugees, and the persistent refusals of those efforts, make clear, for Palestinians the very fact of continued attachment to home is political. These practices then, which (like narrative) repeat a refrain that produces home, did represent a political claim. They were not yet, though, fully *articulated* political actions. For this one must turn to *fida’iyyin* raids.⁶⁵

FROM DENIAL TO STRUGGLE: HOME AS A RIGHT

It is widely recognized that the most significant event in transforming the Egyptian policy of controlling movement across the armistice line to one of support for and organization of *fida’iyyin* was the 1955 Israeli raid on Gaza.⁶⁶ On 28 February, Israeli forces attacked an Egyptian army camp north of Gaza City, killing nearly forty Egyptian soldiers and a Palestinian boy.⁶⁷ This event proved to be a crucial turning point for several reasons. It mobilized Egyptian public opinion and transformed Nasser’s attitude about Gaza policy.⁶⁸ Inside Gaza, it served to confirm many Palestinians’ belief that they must be allowed to participate in their own defense. While they saw the attack as part of an Israeli strategy to compel them to accept their dispossession, they charged both UNRWA and the Egyptian Administration with failing to defend their rights.⁶⁹ For this reason, the demonstrations that erupted in Gaza after the raid were directed against these ruling bodies.⁷⁰ Responding to this changed political climate, the Egyptians began to train and arm Palestinians.

The *fida’iyyin* raids had a significant effect on the political and military landscape of Palestine and the region, but my interest here is in their more intimate effects on people’s transforming relations with home. In this process, the border crossings which had previously landed Gazans in jail became a credential in the recruitment drive for *fida’iyyin*. One Gazan remembered the transition:

Before people were sneaking into Israel in order to steal. People would go to steal a hose or something like that and the Egyptians arrested and jailed them. Mustafa Hafez [the commander of the *fida'iyyin*] was clever. He came to these prisoners. He asked them if they knew places [inside] well. They would tell him that they knew, for example, Hamama, its roads, vineyards and the settlements there. Mustafa Hafez told them: "Let's work together. Instead of being thieves, you will become *fida'iyyin*. And you will receive a salary as a member of the organization. But this time you will not go to steal; you will put a mine in the way of an Israeli patrol. You can explode a bridge, a factory, or a cinema to frighten the Jews."⁷¹

Fida'iyyin border crossings differed from earlier crossings to retrieve possessions or to steal from Israeli settlements in more than simply their objective. Gazans' relationship with their lands was reformulated as well. This relationship was removed from the realm of the immediate—the knowledge of home that enables one to collect one's things—and was reconstituted as political knowledge, a tool in a struggle.

Abu Nizar, a former *fida'i*, remembered: "They said to one *fida'i*, 'you are from Jaffa, so you go to Jaffa.' Someone from Askelon will go there. Someone who knows al-Faluja will go to al-Faluja—and so on. Anyone who knew a place would go to that place to attack the Jews there. The Jews, of course, inhabited all these places."⁷² People's connections to their home villages were made to matter at a national level. Knowledge of al-Faluja, of Hamama, of Majdal, became a node in a larger communal knowledge of Palestine. Both proximity and distance were crucial to this practice. It relied upon the detailed knowledge of territory and home that could only come from closeness to these places. At the same time, it was precisely the confirmation of the loss of this home, and the consolidation of new social and communal relations within the boundaries of Gaza, that made possible organized national activity to attempt to regain that which was lost. As Abu Nizar recalled, it was the increasing realization that they were not about to return that strengthened the demand for *fida'iyyin*: "A long time had passed. People feared that their cause was lost. They said to the Egyptians, 'you have to [create *fida'iyyin* units] so we can fight these people and restore our homeland.'"

Unlike the earliest border crossings, *fida'iyyin* raids had to recognize displacement. But, also unlike the earliest crossings, they made an explicit claim to their land. They were a statement of rights. As Abu Nizar told me:

What made me a *fida'i*, and made me sacrifice myself, was that the Jews took our land and villages and we could not regain them.... This upset us and made us want to be soldiers to fight those people. We wanted to force them recognize our rights and life.... We have rights the same as they have rights, we have dignity like them. This is what bothered us and made us fight them—they took our homeland, said that you are strangers and you have nothing, and expelled us.

Now an old man many years removed from his military service, Abu Nizar continued to stress his right to fight for his homeland, even as he expressed his desire for a just peace: “The Israeli Jewish people should reconcile with the Arab Palestinian people and the whole Arab people in order for peace and safety to prevail; do not take my right and displace me from my village and homeland and say that you have nothing.”

The war of the *fida'iyyin* did not last long—it ended with the Israeli invasion and four-month occupation of Gaza in the course of the 1956 Suez War (an Israeli-British-French attack on Egypt)—but it had a profound effect on how Gazans understood their role in the struggle for Palestine and in their relations with their homes. Abu Nizar spoke with tremendous bitterness about the failure of the neighboring Arab countries to effectively defend Palestine in 1948:

The Arab armies told the Palestinians, “you stand aside and do not fight the Jews and we will fight” ... five months after the Arab armies had entered Palestine they handed Palestine to the Jews and then retreated. The Palestinians who were still in their villages said to them, “where are you going?” They said “we want to withdraw from here”.... They handed all the villages, the rest of Hamama, Majdal, Askelan, Barbara, Burayr, Bir al-Saba and all these villages to the Jews without fighting. The people, of course, were miserable and had nothing to fight with. The people relied on the army, but the army retreated.

Being a *fida'i* enabled him to feel that at least he was taking action on his own, rather than relying on others for help that might not come. Crossing the armistice line as a soldier not only enabled dispossessed Palestinians to make a claim for their right to their homes, it enabled an active connection with that home—even if from a distance. By refusing to accept a position of passivity, to wait for others to facilitate their return, Gazans may have felt that they redeemed themselves for their failure to stay in their villages in 1948. Abu Nizar directly connected being a *fida'i* to the restoration of dignity, saying he was obliged to fight because “one cannot live in humiliation.”

Just as recollections of life in the *balad* and *hijra* narratives of displacement repeated refrains that highlight security, community and self-sufficiency as lying at the heart of “home,” *fida'iyyin* raids repeated—through practice—an intimate knowledge of home that affirmed its connection to community. They sought, further, to reintroduce security into the lives of Palestinians by taking action toward the end of reclaiming home—a practice that also invoked self-sufficiency. Still, even as being a *fida'i* offered people a source of pride, and even as it affirmed their claims to their occupied homes, these raids were also part of a process through which people came to terms with their dispossession—not accepting its legitimacy, but acknowledging its actuality and its tenacity. That *fida'iyyin* were unable to recover home also contributed to the recognition of displacement. Even as they claimed the “right” to home, both the passage of time and the transformation of practice introduced distance into people’s relations with their homes.

CONCLUSION

The narratives and practices that have been my focus here describe movements and crossings that occurred between 1948 and 1956, in the first years after the *Nakba*. Gazan refrains of home in these first years were shaped by proximity to the dispossession from their physical homes as well as by the social and political conditions prevailing in Gaza at the time. The refrain offered a means of remaining connected to home and not being entirely consumed by nostalgia in the process. Each of the practices that connected to home were forged in the existing conditions of that home.

They did not accept those conditions as legitimate, but they came to recognize them as actual. These practices frequently sought to transform these conditions, at least in people's imaginaries, but they were not disconnected from them. This recognition also meant that people's relations to home were changing substantively as they articulated new connections.

Home was increasingly removed from the realm of the everyday; it became less the space of unthinking comfort and more the site and source of struggle. People derived strength to fight, to persist, from their felt connections with home. In this process, the broad terms in which home was defined remained largely the same—security, community, self-sufficiency—but the “content” of these terms, their enactment, was transformed. Security increasingly came, not from being in/at home, but from claiming the right of home. This claim also enabled a kind of self-sufficiency as Palestinians took on responsibility for their struggle themselves. The community that had been dispersed in the *Nakba* was recreated in exile, as villages of origin have remained important in defining social relations and personal identities. At the same time, refugees have built new forms of community in Gaza.

As their relationships with lost homes were transformed, refugees in Gaza had to reshape their connections with Gaza—the place where they live. Coming to terms with Gaza—and Gazans coming to terms with refugees—has been an ongoing process. Reflecting on his life now, Abu Ayub talked about the interconnections. Even as he asserted that “the *balad* cannot be forgotten” and stressed about refugees living in Gaza that “it is not their land, but government land that they live on,” Abu Ayub noted that refugees are also part of Gaza:

I am someone from Gaza. I and the Gazan are Palestinian.... Abroad, for example in Amman, they don't say that I am from Yibna. They call me Gazan—in Saudi Arabia Gazan, in Egypt Gazan.... I say I live in Gaza. If you ask me about my name, I will answer [Abu Ayub] from the people of Yibna.... I don't say I live in Yibna but I say “from the people of Yibna.”... In the UNRWA file we are registered as being from Yibna. Everyone has his *balad* registered.... A refugee remains a refugee, but the Gazan is Palestinian and I am Palestinian too.⁷³

What is repeated in this refrain is the idea of connection both to original homes and communities and to the new community of Gaza. Even as he asserted his active connection to Yibna, Abu Ayub also stressed that he feels tied to Gazans and to Gaza. Just as the passage of time introduces distance even in the midst of repeated attachment, time also creates relations, even in the most unstable conditions.⁷⁴ People have built homes in Gaza and have in many ways become “at home” there, even as they still acutely feel the absence of what was *really* home. Both displaced and rooted, with community both disrupted and persisting, Palestinians in Gaza have managed to keep a refrain of home alive, even as it has changed.⁷⁵

This refrain has been forged in the particular conditions of Gaza where home has been both alluringly near and devastatingly far. The first responses to dispossession, in a moment where people did not fully realize that they had indeed been dispossessed, sought to reproduce the proximity of an earlier time. As conditions made this earlier closeness impossible, other ways of enacting and talking about home sought, through an acknowledgment of distance, to form new means of bringing home close. Both the practices that drew people across the new border and the “home-based” community relations they maintained and developed within their new living space helped to give people some of the security of home, even under very difficult conditions.

Critics of Palestinian political positions will often say that the continued focus by Palestinians on their memories of home has obstructed their ability both to cope with the reality of the present and to acquiesce to resolutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that do not involve the right of return. What is overlooked in the critique (among other things) is the extent to which this circulation of memory through refrain has in fact helped to keep the tragic realities of Palestinian history from utterly destroying Palestinian community and political life. If Palestinian experience has not been entirely reduced to the “bare life” described by Agamben, and if they have not suffered a “loss of the entire social texture,” as Arendt saw the plight of refugees, it is in no small part due to the way the refrain of home incorporates both past and present, both territoriality and deterritorialization. The way that the refrain makes possible a new relation to home from distance, and at the same time brings near much of what had been most important about home before, helps sustain its potency. It is a fragile potency to be sure—as the territory, the objects

and the encounters in which it was once embedded seem irretrievably lost—but repetitions of narrative and practice *have* helped hold chaos at bay. It is precisely this refrain that has kept the loss of home from being the loss of everything for Palestinians.

NOTES

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1. Hannah Arendt, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” in idem, *On Totalitarianism* (1951; New York, 1973), 293.

2. The year 1948 is obviously a crucial turning point in Palestinian history. For an exploration of its place in Palestinian identity, see Ahmad H. Sa’di “Catastrophe, Memory, and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity” *Israel Studies* 7, no. 2 (2002): 175–98.

3. Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, trans. Ahdaf Soueif (Cairo, 2000), 4.

4. Ibid., 58.

5. Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York, 1986), 19.

6. Fawaz Turki, *Exile’s Return: The Making of a Palestinian American* (New York, 1994), 4. Ghassan Kanafani’s well-known novella *Return to Haifa* (1970) comments on the same transformation of place and people that acts as a double displacement.

7. See, for example, Barbara Parmenter *Giving Voice to Stones: Place and Identity in Palestinian Literature* (Austin, TX, 1994); Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *The Palestinians: People of the Olive Tree* (Amman, 1995); and references below.

8. This presentation of Palestinian naiveté is evident in Danny Rubinstein, *The People of Nowhere: The Palestinian Vision of Home* (New York, 1991), in which there are repeated references to people’s inability, even 40 years on, to even com-

prehend their condition. He describes a beggar in the Jabalya refugee camp who was wandering outside during a curfew. An Israeli soldier told him “Everyone’s gone home. You must go too. Where is your home?” Rubinstein describes how, “in perfect innocence and sincerity,” he told the soldier that “my house is in Majdal.” Rubinstein comments: “Majdal is now the Israeli town of Ashkelon. It hasn’t existed for over forty years. But the beggar automatically gave the answer common to most refugees of his generation: the name of a lost village” (38).

9. Rochelle Davis explores this variety of memory collections in her dissertation “The Attar of History: Palestinian Narratives of Life before 1948” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2002). Susan Slyomovics has written about memorial books in *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia, 1998).

10. Considerably more work has been done on Palestinian refugee experiences in the West Bank and the diaspora than in Gaza. Refugee experiences share many similarities across territory, but the distinctions render investigation of these different locales important. For discussion of “refugee identity” in the West Bank, see Shimon Shamir, “West Bank Refugees—Between Camp and Society,” in Joel S. Migdal, ed., *Palestinian Society and Politics* (Princeton, 1980), 146–65; and George Bisharat, “Exile to Compatriot: Transformations in the Social Identity of Palestinian Refugees in the West Bank,” in Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds., *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham, NC, 1997), 203–33. For Lebanon see Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York, 1991); and Rosemary Sayigh, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London, 1979). For Jordan see Randa Farah, “Popular Memory and Reconstructions of Palestinian Identity: Al-Baq’a Refugee Camp, Jordan” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1999). While this essay focuses on articulations and experiences of home in Gaza, comparative research in other areas would further enrich our understanding of the Palestinian sense of home.

11. Throughout, I refer to both natives and refugees as Gazans—reflecting post-1948 conditions. Where relevant, I discuss the important distinctions between the two groups.

12. The British entered Palestine in 1917 and for the first years governed the country under military rule. While the Mandate did not technically begin until 1922, many of its mechanisms began to be put in place during the first phase of British rule.

13. Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler, “Castings for the Colonial: Memory Work in ‘New Order’ Java,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 1 (2000): 4–48; Paul Thompson, “Believe It or Not: Rethinking the Historical Interpretation of Memory,” in Jaclyn Jeffrey and Glenace Edwall, eds., *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience* (New York, 1994), 1–16; Peter

Burke, "History as Social Memory," in Thomas Butler, ed., *Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind* (Oxford, 1989), 97–115. On oral history, see Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1994); Luisa Passerini, "Introduction: Oral Sources and the Historical Study of Culture," and "Memories of Self: Autobiography and Self-Representation," in idem, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge, 1988); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (New York, 1982). On Palestine specifically, see Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory*, and Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Minneapolis, 1995).

14. I don't mean primarily that people misremember certain things because of subsequent events—though this clearly happens—but that succeeding events can actually exert a change on the past. In 1948, for instance, people fled their villages for neighboring towns. After the armistice agreement was signed, they had crossed a border.

15. See Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt* for a discussion of the politics of memory in Palestine.

16. Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994), 12.

17. Stoler and Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial," 9.

18. See for example, Helena Lindholm Schulz, *The Palestinian Diaspora: Formation of Identities and Politics of Homeland* (New York, 2003); Carol Bardenstein, "Trees, Forests, and the Shaping of Palestinian and Israeli Collective Memory," in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH, 1999), 148–68; Glenn Bowman "Tales of the Lost Land: Palestinian Identity and the Formation of Nationalist Consciousness," in Erica Cater, James Donald and Judith Squires, eds., *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London, 1993), 73–99.

19. *The People of Nowhere* is an example of a work that tends to describe these two terms as distinct, rather than overlapping. Rubinstein describes the power of people's ongoing connections to their pre-1948 homes. In his analysis this attachment to locality appears as a contrast to national identity (suggesting that for Palestinians the former is more "authentic"). For this reason he suggests that Palestinians before 1948 were willing to live under Jewish rule as long as they remained in their homes: "Political regimes were ephemeral in their eyes; the centuries of living on their land were far more compelling than shifting political sovereignties" (19).

20. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987), 311–12.

21. Turki, *Exile's Return*, 5.

22. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311.
23. Describing a very different place and moment, Nancy D. Munn notes a similar disconnect in “The ‘Becoming-Past’ of Places: Spacetime and Memory in 19th Century, Pre-Civil War New York,” *Suomen Antropologi* (Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society) 29, no. 1 (2004): 2–19.
24. Cf. the title of Slyomovics’s book on Palestinian and Israeli memories of place (n. 9 above).
25. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), 8.
26. *Ibid.*, 4, 6.
27. Carol Bardenstein, “Transmissions Interrupted: Reconfiguring Food, Memory, and Gender in the Cookbook Memoirs of Middle Eastern Exiles,” *Signs* 28, no. 1 (2002): 366.
28. Julie Peteet, “Transforming Trust: Dispossession and Empowerment among Palestinian Refugees,” in E. Valentine Daniel and John Chr. Knudsen, eds., *Mistrusting Refugees* (Berkeley, 1995), 180.
29. Interview, Khan Yunis, 17 July 1999. All names of people I interviewed have been changed.
30. It is important to recognize that even when memories were “idealized,” pre-1948 home very well may have been “ideal” in comparison to life after the *Nakba*. As Rochelle Davis notes, “for many refugees, life in their villages, no matter how difficult, was far superior to the life in the camps they had to lead after 1948” (*The Attar of History*, 254).
31. Tania Forte, “On the Making of Village: Transactions, Land, and History in the Galilee” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000).
32. I thank Tania Forte for suggesting this phrase.
33. Julie Peteet describes how “the homeland was reconfigured as a place where trust suffused daily life and social relations” (“Transforming Trust,” 181).
34. Interview, Jabalya Camp, 14 May 1999.
35. Interview, Shati Camp, 16 March 1999.
36. Interview, Khan Yunis, 15 June 1999.
37. American Friends Service Committee Archives (hereafter AFSC), Philadelphia, PA, FS Sect Palestine #36, “Background Material on Magazy [Maghazi],” 16 Feb. 1949.
38. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, 1994), 169.
39. Interview, Shati Camp, 15 March 1999.
40. Interview, Gaza City, 5 April 1999.
41. Interview, Gaza City, 15 May 1999. As Gaza’s borders have been ever more hermetically sealed, yet another refrain of home has emerged, as many young Palestinians who have never left Gaza rely on their parents’ and grandparents’

memories and on the objects—such as keys and land deeds—that remain from their homes to shape their own relations with the *balad*.

42. Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford, 1993), 111. Im Yahya told me that she went back to Majdal after leaving during the fighting, only later to be expelled: “I went back and I gave birth there, we had a birth certificate and he was registered.... They took my son’s birth certificate before we left. We did not think of it, we did not think why they took his birth certificate, they were afraid that he would demand his rights because he was born in the Israeli state. They took all birth certificates, and did not allow anyone to go without giving the birth certificate.” Interview, Jabalya Camp, 13 May 1999.

43. Interview, Jabalya Camp, 13 May 1999.

44. Interview, Khan Yunis, 15 June 1999.

45. Im ‘Amir and many others told me that people, unable to manage the burdens of their departure, left their young children behind. The fate of a child left when his parents fled their home in Haifa is the subject of Kanafani’s *Return to Haifa*.

46. In this respect her narrative differed from some of the others I heard, in which people did reflect on the lost home as a lost Eden.

47. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 169.

48. Farah has noted similar narrative tendencies in her oral histories with Palestinian refugees in Jordan in “Popular Memory and Reconstructions of Palestinian Identity.”

49. Benny Morris describes the different sorts of “infiltrations” across the new border between Israel and the neighboring Arab states which were common in the early 1950s (*Israel's Border Wars*, 28–98). I discuss similar sorts of crossings here, but with a different analytical purpose. Rather than tracing the conflict and causes of warfare, I am interested in the impact of these crossings on both participants and the broader Palestinian population.

50. AFSC Archives, “Background Material on Magazy [Maghazi].”

51. Ibid.

52. Interview, Gaza City, 20 March 1999.

53. Still, the same man insisted to me that “this thing with the Egyptians did not last long, for about one year or less. When they really knew us, they became good to us.” Interview, Rafah, 2 May 1999.

54. Hussein Abu Naml, *Qita‘ Ghazzah, 1948-1967: Tatawwarat iqtisadiyya wa-siyasiyya wa-ijtima‘iyya wa-‘askariyya* (The Gaza Strip, 1948–1967: Economic, political, social, and military developments) (Beirut, 1979), 44.

55. Interview, Gaza City, 14 Feb. 1999.

56. Interview, Rafah, 29 Oct. 1999.

57. Interview, Shati Camp, 22 Feb. 1999.

58. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311.

59. Morris, *Israel's Border Wars*, 40–42.

60. Interview, Gaza City, 14 Feb. 1999. Certainly when I was in Gaza there was an extremely vibrant market in stolen goods, especially cars and car parts.

61. Cited in Morris, *Israel's Border Wars*, 41. An American diplomat offered a more “cultural” explanation for the border crossings, suggesting that “demarcation lines are somewhat foreign to the Arab’s make-up” (cited in *ibid.*, 46).

62. *Al-Abram*, 11 June 1951.

63. *Al-Abram*, 18 Aug. 1951.

64. Agamben argues that the reduction of human life to bare life—biological only and not political—is an increasing condition of the modern world. Humanitarian organizations, which he argues “can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life,” are thus complicit with the forces they should seek to fight. In this configuration, the refugee becomes a paradigmatic figure of the modern condition. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, 1998), 133–34.

65. For an overview of *fidā'iyyin* activities, see Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993* (Oxford, 1997), 60–65.

66. Ann Mosely-Lesch, “Gaza: History and Politics,” in *idem* and Mark Tessler, eds., *Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinians: From Camp David to Intifada* (Bloomington, IN, 1989), 226.

67. Morris, *Israel's Border Wars*, 340–43.

68. Husayn Abu Niml, “Harb al-fidā'iyyin fi Qitah Ghazzah” (The war of the guerrillas in the Gaza Strip), *Shu'un Filistiniyya* 62 (Jan. 1979): 171.

69. While Israel claimed that the raid was a response to the problem of Palestinian infiltration across the armistice line, Gazans felt it was designed to “bring Gazans to their knees, to push them to accept resettlement” (*ibid.*, 170).

70. Gaza erupted into demonstrations against Egyptian authorities and UNRWA officials, with people shouting slogans such as: “No settlement! No relocation! Oh, you American agents!” (*ibid.*, 170). Mu'in Basisu, a Palestinian poet and activist who was a leader of the demonstrations, describes the confrontations with Egyptian authorities: “The demonstration had to advance or be broken like an egg on a steel helmet. We marched to within 20 meters of the [military] truck, which stood in the middle of the street obstructing the demonstration—10 meters—5 meters. Then the order was given, and we were sprayed with bullets from behind the truck and the orange trees.” Mu'in Basisu, *Descent into the Water: Palestinian Notes from Arab Exile*, trans. Saleh Omar (Wilmette, IL, 1980), 33–34.

71. Interview, Gaza City, 14 Feb. 1999.

72. Interview, Shati Camp, 22 Feb. 1999.

73. Interview, Shati Camp, 15 March 1999.

74. These connections and relations are also connected to a variety of governing practices in Gaza in the years since 1948, both those of the Egyptian Administration and later the Israeli occupying forces and those of international agencies like the AFSC and UNRWA. I explore these sorts of practice elsewhere. See my “Difficult Distinctions: Refugee Law, Humanitarian Practice, and Political Identification in Gaza,” forthcoming in *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no.1 (2007); and *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule (1917–1967)* (forthcoming, Duke University Press).

75. As in the aftermath of 1948, in the past few years life in Palestine has once again been in crisis. What refrain will emerge from the current conditions, where it has become unclear what would even constitute security? Even under conditions of radical insecurity, I suspect that people will continue to articulate, through their stories and their practices, a refrain that in its tenuous repetitions seeks to create a “calming and stabilizing” space (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311) that offers some protection from the forces of chaos.