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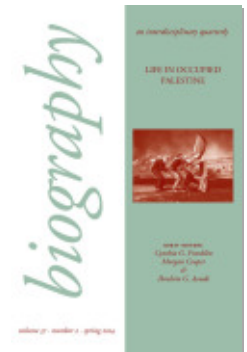
## Exiled at Home: Writing Return and the Palestinian Home

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## EXILED AT HOME: WRITING RETURN AND THE PALESTINIAN HOME

NADERA SHALHOUB-KEVORKIAN AND SARAH IHMOUD

The homespace and the homeland are critical places of being and becoming. Homing works as a powerful force that gives voice, spreads love, and maintains continuities. We, two Palestinian women, choose our home-land, affected by the Nakba of 1948,<sup>1</sup> to stage our stories. Our homes and land, in our home-land, carry our right to return to our safe-homes, as well as our identity as Palestinians, and our humanity as feminists who refuse to accept humiliations and injustice, and who affirm life for Palestinians in the context of the settler colonial Zionist entity. Our yearning and right to return home, even when present-absentees,<sup>2</sup> will be articulated through territorialized and deterritorialized stories of the Palestinian home-space. We draw on our voices as two women seeing, living, feeling, and experiencing the matrix of military occupation in Palestine, and choosing Palestine as our intellectual and political home. We honor the voices of Palestinian women who have crossed before us, who have made their journey home, or created home in spite of colonial violence and dispossession of the homeland and home-spaces. In doing so, we situate the Nakba as our point of departure in analyzing our conditions as Palestinians, while insisting on recognizing the home as not only a physical, but also a psychological and epistemological space of yearning, of belonging, and of radical thinking and becoming.

Do you know what does it mean to be *m'shatateh* [displaced] in your own home? When you leave not knowing whether you will be able to come back? When you will be back? And how? . . . At the checkpoint . . . I feel like I am uprooted [*zai il ma'toah min shajarah*] . . . at home I feel unsafe . . . *shatat*. (Firyal, qtd. in Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Counter-Spaces" 110)

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. . . . Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. (Said 365)

## CROSSING BORDERS

They detained us at the border. We waited there, two women of different generations, having grown up dispersed between the homeland and the *shatat* (diaspora), yet bound by our experiences of being Palestinians and our longing for home. We anticipated the Israeli agent's "securitized" decision. As the student deleted files from her computer and numbers from her phone, recounting all the Palestinian women she knows who were denied the right to enter their homeland, the professor fought with the border police, bureaucrats, and "guards" to let us cross.

Palestine was in sight. We could see her across the border, yet we feared not being able to reach home, being separated or deported, not knowing whether we would lose each other. It is living in this spatio-temporal state of uncertainty, insecurity, and terror, navigating militarized spaces controlled by young men and women who do not count us but as unwanted security threats, as non-human Others, which binds us closer even as we sit together in silence, yearning to reach home. Our racialization at the border, our absolute Otherness, as unacknowledged, unreadable except as monstrous entities that should be interrogated, searched, and violated, further added to our sense of dispossession and continuous injustice, but also to our sense of togetherness and rightful cause.

As we waited, a group of three white women professors passed through customs and security easily. We had all participated in a conference together in Amman on the state of Palestinian health, discussing the bodily and psycho-social effects of continued displacement, exile, and military occupation on Palestinian communities. These professors, who had just hours before professed their solidarity with our people, who had stood up with others to demand the world be attentive to Palestinian suffering, turned their backs on us at the border. As they passed through customs, on to Palestine, though we were seated in plain sight, they walked past us as if we were invisible entities. Their eyes looked in every direction but our own, so intent was their denial of witnessing the spectacle of our humiliation. To see us, to acknowledge us might have endangered their ability to reach our homeland and continue their research on us, on our people. To discover in that moment that we are still invisible, even to those who profess their solidarity with us, reinscribed our Otherization, our knowledge that as Palestinians we are visible only when convenient to the white supremacist colonial gaze.

We managed to cross. We reached the other side of the border after being humiliated, enraged, and exhausted in body and spirit, but relieved that we were back safe in our land, on our way home to Haifa, where Auntie Evelyne

(Nadera's mother), a woman who was deemed a "criminal infiltrator" by the newly formed Israeli state when she attempted return after being uprooted in 1948, was waiting. We were happy to reach the warmth and love of her home in Haifa, where we listened attentively to her story.

### RETURNING TO HAIFA

In the vast darkness of night, Evelyne walked across an apple orchard. Her uncle had warned her that the Israelis had planted bombs to frighten off Palestinian refugees like her who wanted to return home. They had built spotlights around the newly established borders to trap Palestinians who attempted return, the keys to their homes still in hand. She knew that at any moment, while walking among the apple trees, she might be blown to pieces, her seventeen-year-old life obliterated, like so many other Palestinians who were arrested or killed in the streets when the army occupied Haifa. Or, she could be seen by one of the many searchlights from a warplane that hovered up above, captured, and thrown back across the Lebanese border. Yet she continued to walk.

The skirt of her dress was tattered, her legs dirty and filled with cuts after three full days of walking, of climbing mountains and traversing valleys, and sleeping among the roots of trees. When she finally reached Haifa, the city she had been evicted from just three years earlier, she was terrified of being discovered. Soldiers patrolled the streets. As she walked towards her family home, one of them said "boker tov" (good morning). Thankfully, she had learned a few words of Hebrew to help her along in times like this. "boker Or—good morning," she replied, and the soldier smiled and let her pass. She went on walking, until she arrived at her parents' house on Haddad Street.

Now an 83-year-old woman, Evelyne's face lights up as she tells us of the triumphant moment of return. We are sitting in her salon in Haifa, which overlooks the sea. "My brother Hanna," she recalls, "jumped from the balcony when he saw me walking towards the house. . . . He hugged me tightly, and took me to see our father." But the triumph was short-lived:

When arriving home, after all the terror I went through as a young seventeen-year-old woman, crossing the borders alone . . . my father was happy to see me but worried about my arrival, as the Jews used to demolish houses, imprison people, and gather entire families to deport to the Lebanese border. My father took me, while fearful, injured, and happy that I was back home, and gave me to the Jewish police. *Sallamney* [he surrendered me] to the Israelis. He apologized to me, and explained that he needed to take care of the rest of the family members, and save our house from demolition.

It is unimaginable that a father would be compelled to “surrender” his own daughter to the occupying army after her accomplishing the impossible: returning home. Yet these were times of war. Fearing the safety of the family as a whole and the home space, he surrendered Evelyne to the Israelis.

Evelyne’s story of return and surrender demonstrates how the Israeli machinery of oppression, still in its beginning formation, not only managed to trap indigenous Palestinians’ bodies, lives, and destinies, but also further activated internal resources, including family members, to “catch” “violators,” or what Israel defined legally as “infiltrators,” creating a deep sense of surveillance, mistrust, and fear.

Evelyne’s body and life were marked during her crossing, just as our own two bodies were marked at the border as unwanted, terrorist, monstrous bodies, awaiting the Israelis’ approval to let us in, to “legalize” our right to return. But that did not hinder us as Palestinians from insisting on and exercising not only our right to return, but also our right to come back to our homes and sanctuaries, to belong and express our full humanity. The walk and drive back home, the crossing of what became the borders of the settler state, living their disciplining regimes of power, and surrendering our bodies and lives to their security and surveillance devices further determined us as Palestinians to maintain *sumud* [steadfastness]. From the horrifying moments of Evelyne walking in the dark, alone, on a death road, to our present-day border-crossings as racialized Others and present-absentees, our journeys home—though many decades apart—spoke this steadfastness in the midst of the continuous Nakba.

### PLACING THE PALESTINIAN HOME

In occupied East Jerusalem, where we live and write today, and throughout historical Palestine, the Palestinian home space is under constant attack. Whether through military invasions of the home space during child arrest, evictions from and theft of homes of Palestinian families by settlers orchestrated by the settler colonial regime, home demolitions, revocations of IDs, construction of the apartheid wall, or a myriad of other means, Zionist attacks on the Palestinian home space are inseparable from attacks on the homeland. As we write this piece, the latest attacks on Gaza, from July to August 2014, which have killed over 2,000 Palestinians and destroyed or severely damaged over 100,000 homes, highlight the severity of Zionist attacks on the Palestinian home space since the 1948 Nakba.

The ongoing militarization, invasion, and destruction of the Palestinian home space are understood as a central aspect of the Zionist project’s erasure

of Palestinian history and memory, but also the dislocation of Palestinian familial and communal life (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Counter-Spaces”; Sayigh 18). According to feminist geographer Doreen Massey, “Social relationships have social form and content, which exist in space and which cross it. This is the source of the creation of a particular social relationship linked to a specific place” (168). Space is imbued with cultural meaning, and cultural practices are lived in the spatialized locations of the every day (see Lefebvre). The Palestinian home space is saturated with individual and collective, cultural and political meanings. As Fatma Kassem notes, for Palestinians, home is “the one place where history and memory are transmitted, thereby preserving the continuity of cultural and national identity” (190). As such, Israeli settler colonialism’s destruction of the Palestinian home space as an element of inscribing geopolitical, biopolitical, and necropolitical power on everyday life is strategic in disrupting the geographies of Palestinian social relations and the formation of cultural and political identities.

Yet even as the home space is targeted for demolition and destruction, it is charged with public and communal meaning as a space for the creation and transmission of Palestinian memory and cultural and political identity. The gendered aspects of the destruction of Palestinian home spaces in the context of militarization and settler colonial occupation bring women’s resilience and struggle to preserve the family structure and social bonds to the fore, which they view as a central practice of *sumud*, in “strengthening and promoting the construction of a national and a personal identity” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Counter-Spaces” 120). As Shalhoub-Kevorkian explains,

The violence of colonization on women turned home—whether at home proper or in exile—into a ‘nowhere’ home. The lost home, whether within home space or without it, transformed the Palestinian home for women into not just a home or place, but also into a psychological, social, and political location that enables and promotes the constant discovery of new modes of resistance to re-create home. (*Militarization* 196)

Palestinian women speak back to physical and symbolic attacks on their home spaces and families, with “counter-discourses that created counter-spaces and safer spaces” (“Counter-Spaces” 128). As Islah, a twenty-eight-year-old mother from a refugee camp near Jerusalem stated:

When they started demolishing the house, I hugged [my son] with his sisters . . . wrapped them all in my *deshdashah* [long, wide housedress] and we all cried. To this day, the girls still remember how the whole family stood, wrapped in my dirty home *deshdashah* . . . cried while our hearts were on fire. (qtd. in “Counter-Spaces” 110)

As Nadera explained, *Islah* recreated the home-space, a counter space, as a psycho-social space of safety for her children, even as they watched the destruction of their physical home space. Analyzing such counter-spaces of resistance places women's home-making practices as central strategies of resilience and survival.

The home, as both a physical and psycho-social space targeted for invasion and destruction by the settler state, also arises as a space for the protection of the Palestinian family unit, and preservation of memory and identity. Furthering a Palestinian feminist analytics (e.g., Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Palestinian*), we center the Nakba as our point of departure for analyzing the destruction of the Palestinian home space, as well as its central importance in creating counter-spaces for liberation and struggle.

Our journey together, as two Palestinian women of different generations, bound up with the journeys of Palestinian women like Evelyne who insisted on returning home before us, maps atrocities against the geographies of our home, and our *sumud* in keeping the Palestinian homeland safe in the midst of the vicious geopolitical attacks orchestrated by the Zionist colonialists and Western imperialists. Through the stories of Palestinian women and girls, mothers, daughters, and other kin, we trace the Israeli state's machinery of power as it enacts itself as a continuous structure of eviction of the Palestinian native (see Wolfe). Our conceptions of Palestinian home are marked by shared histories of racialization and dispossession, yet also by our abilities to recreate Palestinian homes as radical spaces of re-rooting and daily survival. We seek to build on an analysis of home as a space for grounding, constructing, and rooting social relations, political imaginaries, and liberatory projects (e.g., hooks, *Teaching*; Shalhoub-Kevorkian "Counter-Spaces"). Moreover, we seek to strengthen a Palestinian feminist analytic that posits the 1948 Nakba as the initiation of a structure of settler colonial violence and dispossession of Palestinian natives that continues to shape the intimacies and everydayness of Palestinians. We read, tell, and write Palestinian women's stories of home, including our own stories and those of our loved ones, as stories of *sumud* in the midst of the denial of the continuous Nakba.

Staging HOME and homing against the atrocities since the Nakba seeks to deploy a new order that challenges the monstrous manner in which Palestinians are portrayed, read, and performed, both in local and global politics. "A monstrosity," explains Derrida,

never presents itself; or else, if you prefer, it only presents itself, that is, lets itself be recognized, by allowing itself to be reduced to what is recognizable; that is to a normality, a legitimacy which is not, hence by not letting itself be recognized as what it is—a monstrosity. A monstrosity can only be 'mis-known' (*me'connue*), that is unrecognized and misunderstood. (79; see also Pugliese 216).

In borrowing from Derrida's analysis, we hope to articulate how the deprivation of our home—both the physical and human home—opens the space for our critical thinking in challenging the rationality and ethics (or lack thereof) of Israeli and Western Eurocentric hegemony. Signifying Palestinians, their homes, and their humanity in monstrous ways acutely articulates the necropolitical order and economy of life and death that dictates who should live, be acknowledged, have a home, be considered human, and have the right to rights, and who is positioned as the always, ever monstrous terrorist Other.

### SARAH: THE INHERITANCE OF EXILE

Auntie Evelyne's story reminded me of my first attempt to reach Palestine. It was a young Jewish customs agent in Tel Aviv who, after studying the name on my passport—an Arab name!—directed me to “step aside.” She said these words abruptly, sternly, in a tone that made me feel as though I had committed some crime of which I was not yet aware but that had nonetheless been discovered. It made me think of a poem by Mahmoud Darwish: *They did not recognize me in the shadows / That suck away my color in this Passport / And to them my wound was an exhibit / For a tourist Who loves to collect photographs* (“Passport”).

I watched the white tourists who had flown with me from New York breeze through customs, greeted with an easy smile and welcoming words, as a security officer escorted me to my first segregated waiting room. The other Palestinian Americans in the room greeted me with knowing looks. While awaiting what would be the first of many interrogations about my family and identity, I thought of James Baldwin's “Letter from the South,” in which he describes his first experiences navigating the Jim Crow south. And I thought of my father's huwiyya, the green identity card he kept tucked away in his top drawer at home in Chicago, which bore a photograph of him at seventeen years old, the name of his village, his family, and an identification number that had since been deleted from the population registry. And it dawned on me then just why my father had never taken me “back home.” It was too painful for him, too humiliating, to be emasculated in front of his daughter in his own land. And I realized that I was but one generation removed from this dehumanization. Indeed, it was in this moment of racial interpolation—like that seminal moment described by Frantz Fanon (“Look, a negro!”)—when, seeing myself in the eyes of the colonizer, I was finally driven to discover the meaning of Palestinian identity as a viscerally intimate, lived experience.



Driving past the checkpoint and across the border later that evening from Tel Aviv to the occupied West Bank, I was transfixed by the agricultural terraces carved into the sides of mountains, each stone carefully placed, upon which olive trees stood with a dignified pose. How long had my ancestors labored to build those walls, to plant those trees, and to what acts had they borne witness? As we drove past the palm-tree-lined entrance to Turmos 'Ayya, I remembered my father's stories about growing up in his village. His favorite pastime was exploring these very hills, discovering ancient artifacts and wandering in my grandparents' garden, overflowing with olive groves and fig and pomegranate trees. It was dusk and a pink light danced along the hilltops, illuminating both the beauty and the terror of that place. My father's boyhood memories of playing in the hills were transposed by the reality that those hills were no longer ours; they had been stolen from our family and our community by a nearby settlement.

The next morning I was taken to visit an uncle I had not seen since I was a child. Nobody dares visit my uncle's house because it is nearest to the settler road—the road separating our village, Turmos 'Ayya, from the Israeli settlement of Shiloh. “Do you like to walk?” my uncle asks. “I want to show you something.”

We walk along a dirt path towards the road. The left side of the path is covered with olive groves; the right, scattered with trees, is mainly moss-covered rocky farmland. I follow as he points to various plots of the grove, marked only with a stick in the ground or a pile of stones. “This belongs to your uncle Ahmed, this piece is for Waleed. . . .” We continue walking through the groves as he motions towards the land inherited by each of my father's siblings, stopping only to admire a particularly large olive tree, which must have been grafted many times over many years, and the ruins, opposite the grove, of an old Palestinian house, even closer than my uncle's to the settler road.

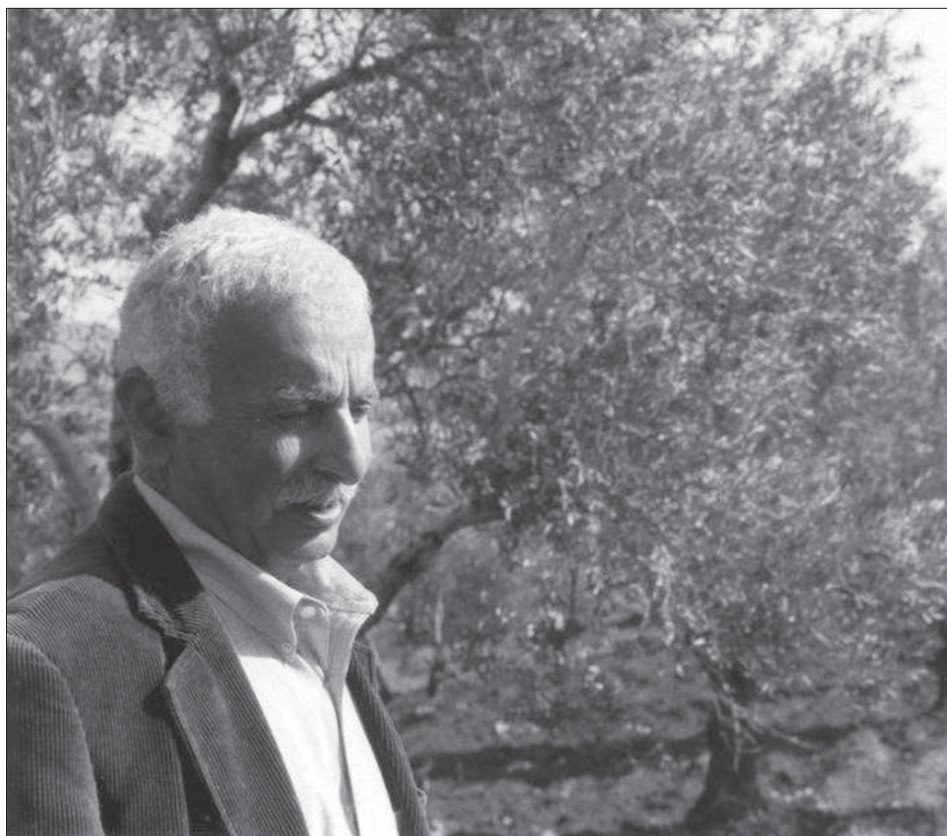
“What happened to that family?” I ask.

“The settlers came down one day, went into that house and shot the man who lived there.” He motions as if pulling the trigger of a pistol. “And he died, just like that. Right in front of his mother.”

“Just like that?” I ask, trying to hide my astonishment.

“Just like that,” he shrugs. “Do they need a reason?”

We stray off the dirt road onto a path that winds through the olive trees until we come upon a clearing. Here sit the ruins of another house. This one is bigger. Blocks of Jerusalem stone encircle its cement foundation, which is cracked by small trees and overgrown with weeds. Rusted ends of thick steel wire jut out of its edges, worn by the elements.



Walking through our family's olive grove in Turmosayya, Palestine (35 mm, B&W photograph by the author).

My uncle wanders off for a moment, so I climb onto the foundation of the old house, walking through the dividers of what I imagine were its rooms: the living room, salon, master bedroom, children's room, guest room, kitchen, bathroom. I am admiring the view of the village from the living room—the magnificent stone villas made with remittances from the United States, Latin America, or Dubai, the two mosques, their minarets reaching beyond the highest buildings, and the rolling hills beyond which lie the neighboring villages of Sajjel and Abu Falah—when my uncle returns.

“And this house?” I ask. “Who did this house belong to, ‘Ammo?”

My uncle stares at the ground, then meets my gaze. His green eyes and graying curly hair make me feel as though I've happened upon my father fifteen years from now. I have never before seen this look of shame on an elder's face. Though it pains his seventy-year-old frame, he climbs onto the foundation beside me.



The destroyed foundation of what was to be my family home in Turmosayya, Palestine, with Shiloh settlement in the background (35 mm, B&W photograph by the author).

“This is *your* house.” [Silence]

“My house?”

“It was *supposed* to be your house.” [Pause]

“Until the settlers came . . . Do you understand?”

It was there, standing on the ruined foundations of a house, that I began to comprehend the incomprehensible. In 1969, my eighteen-year-old father left Turmos ‘Ayya, a small village between Nablus and Ramallah, to attend college in the United States. When he returned, four years later, he was denied entry at the airport. Unbeknownst to him, the Israeli military had deleted him and thousands of others from the population registry. As part of a new policy to enact a kinder, gentler, and quieter form of ethnically cleansing Palestinians from their land—a “silent transfer”—at least 140,000 Palestinians lost their residency status and were deprived of the privilege of permanently living in the occupied West Bank.<sup>3</sup> Stripped of the hope of building families, communities, and livelihoods in their native lands, these “deleted” people became part of an ever-growing Palestinian diaspora heavy with despair and longing and the dream of returning home.

When the settlers came to claim the land they now call Shiloh, it belonged to my family. This was not a personal belonging, though my great

grandfather possessed the deeds, but a communal Waqf belonging. My father, his identity card revoked by the Israeli authorities, returned to his home, his family, and his land in 1984 on a tourist visa to build a home for us on the land he had inherited. But a group of Jewish Israeli settlers from the recently founded settlement of Shiloh came down from the hilltop and threatened the workers. If he continued to build this house, the settlers warned my father, they would come back for him and his family. One night, to prove their intent, the settlers set the foundation and the field around it aflame. This was their way not only of warning my family, but also the village, that they intended to continue laying claim to the land, that they would expand the settlement. The settler road, I learned, is a border zone like any other, the West Bank a frontier-like space where the rule of law does not apply. At least not to Palestinians.

They say in some cultures that a mother passes her suffering to her child through her breast milk. Can a father pass his longing to his daughter? Can I be nostalgic for a time and place I never knew? Secretly I have shared my father's longing for his homeland all my life, perhaps because my longing for Palestine has also been, in part, a longing for my father. It is a longing to know him and his home intimately, perhaps in the hopes of recovering some lost or vacant part of myself. Somehow, being here now, I feel closer to him.

The ruins of my unfinished family house in Turmos 'Ayya, the painful realization of losing a home I never knew I could have possessed in Palestine, haunt me to this day. They point to the wide-ranging effects of settler colonial violence on the Palestinian diaspora. My ability to have a childhood and a future in Palestine, a Palestinian identity based in the homeland, was uprooted even before my birth, and replaced by the settlers in Shiloh who set fire to my family's foundations, while they claim a secure, protected, home space and identity on my ancestors' land. Yet, coming to terms with these ruins, both physical and psychological, has also been a healing process. They inspire my desire to rebuild a home space in Palestine, to learn the stories of my people, to keep on returning, and as a politically engaged anthropologist, to tell my stories and to write against terror.

In recalling my own border crossings and return to Palestine, I also recall my maternal great grandmother and namesake, who crossed the Rio Grande from Northern Mexico with my infant grandmother Guadalupe wrapped in a bundle on her back. They walked across the desert alone, clinging only to each other, and waded through water to cross the US/Mexico borderlands. As my grandmother Guadalupe and my mother, Emilia, often reminded me in the telling of this story, "we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us." A mere century before the Palestinian catastrophe, the Mexican people contended with their own Nakba, which resulted in the dispossession of half

their national territory, energized by the occupation, militarization, and racialized violence inherent in the US settler colonial structure. The construction of Mexicans as archetypal figures of “illegality” in the US today, and of Palestinians as archetypal “terrorists” in the Israeli imagination, discourses framing “national security” agendas that enable continued state violence against racialized Others, suggest articulation between processes of militarized bordering embedded in settler colonial projects. Yet it also points to articulation between Mexican/Palestinian border crossings and the reclaiming of home as forms of resistance that contest settler colonial violence, dispossession, and erasure. Without my Mexican ancestors’ crossings of *la frontera*, and the crossings of Auntie Evelyne and other Palestinians who made the perilous journey across borders, I would not be here making my own crossings today.

Becoming a Palestinian scholar has been grounded in the processes of defining and building home in Palestine. It is the home that has been opened by my family in Turmos ‘Ayya, who have embraced me with open arms. It is the home I find in building collectivity with Palestinians from Jerusalem, Haifa, Gaza City, Birzeit, Nablus, Ramallah, and others, and those throughout the diaspora, in becoming fluent in each other’s stories, sharing our pain and our joys, in discussing difficult questions and daring to imagine and create with each other. It is the home I find in the mentorship of Nadera, a Palestinian feminist scholar whose decades of intellectual and political work, and deep commitment to our people, are a testament to the power and strength of love as a force for building counter-hegemonic knowledge. It is her work and guidance, and the voices of those I have met along this journey, that remind me constantly, as Jacqui Alexander writes, that “We can not afford to cease yearning for each others’ company” (269). Indeed, we cannot afford to cease yearning for home in each other, to cease yearning for home in Palestine.

#### **NADERA: PRESERVATION OF HOME, EXILED AT HOME**

“Do not open my wounds, Ya immi.” This was the phrase my mother often repeated when I asked her to share her story of return with me. I wanted to understand her decision to leave three little children, aged two, four, and five years old, in Lebanon and attempt to reach home in Palestine after the Nakba. All I got from her, as a young woman was, “Who would agree to live in Thull (humiliation and disgrace)?”

She explained how her life was a pure erasure of her humanity, as a young fifteen-year-old woman who missed her family’s support, who felt lost in a place that refused to accept her or her three children. (She had previously had three children who were born before 1948. I am one of six siblings who

were born in Haifa, following her return and marriage to my late father.) She described how starvation, refugee life, and shatat filled her lungs:

I used to sit in that refugee camp, alone, trying to breastfeed your brother, but there was no milk, and not even the ability to breathe. I had no power to even hold him, so I would put him on my lap and look at him, wondering, why did I leave home? Why did I leave Haifa? What will happen to us next? And how much can I take the violence of my husband who was living shame and hurt, after being a member of the Palestinian army, fighting the Zionists in Haifa?

My mom's stories of living with cruelty and violence filled her with determination to come back home, because as a refugee, outside her home, there was no life, only loss of dignity and integrity.

I grew up hearing my parents' stories about their return home. As my late father said: "I was with Haj Tanki and Sweidan when they came and arrested us. They loaded us with other shabab [young men] on trucks, and dumped us on the borders." My father showed me his wounds many times, and described how he was shot at from close proximity, how he himself was a target of Israel's "shoot to kill" policies. After being hospitalized twice in Sur and Saida (two cities in Lebanon), he made it back home. My father often told us as children that although he walks with a limp, as the bullets were still in his body, hip, and ankle, he managed to return back home with his friend Haj Tanki.

Both of my parents are returnees who insisted on preserving home, each in their own way. My father, who became a lawyer, believed that learning the techniques and laws of the new state authorities would prevent the displacement and uprooting of returnees like him and my mother. This is precisely how he met my mother. His unprecedented love for my



Mom and Dad at their first New Year's celebration, Haifa, 1957 (photograph courtesy of the author's family).



A birthday celebration in the Shalhoub home, Haifa, 1970 (photograph courtesy of the author's family).

mother (who was older than he was) challenged the world, including his own mother, who disapproved of having my mother as a daughter in law, as she accused her of abandoning her three children in Lebanon after failing to accept poverty, cruelty, and violence, and for leaving these children to her beloved mother-in-law, who supported her return home. My father's love for my mother grew out of his insistence that stripping dignity and humanity from people is not something that should be accepted as normal, and that life during the Nakba period was about surviving the shoot-to-kill policy, which reflected a larger general effort to accommodate the erasure of Palestinians.

My mother and father insisted not only on returning home, but also on building a new home for us, their six children (not including my two brothers and sister who were left in Lebanon, to be raised by their grandmother). Their speakable and unspeakable story of love, fear, shame, confusion, and humanity made me question them, challenge them, get upset at them, love them, embrace their pain, wonder what went on in their minds, and question what coming back entailed when home was really just a place in ruins. Every time I rode in a car with my late father he pointed to what is now Habankim Street, telling me that my grandmother was buried under one of the newly constructed buildings. "I can't believe it," he always said:

How could they build a country over our dead bodies? But, Ya baba, don't get upset, as when you walk anywhere in Haifa, the smell of the Za'atar, the olive trees, the mint, the bar'o (small red flowers), the shops, the streets, the buildings . . . everything around you tells our story. Just build your future and your education, as they could take everything from you, as they took from us. They took our homes, our land, our families, even our graveyards, but were never able to take our minds and hearts, nor our pens and writings.

I left home at an early age, fell in love with my Armenian husband, my Gaby. We live among a very supportive Armenian community in occupied East Jerusalem, where home is invaded in every aspect of life. We've confronted a series of challenges within this space, including the expansion of the Jewish Quarter, which keeps encroaching further into historically Armenian home spaces, as the transformation of architecture and urban space in the old city into Judaized areas changes geography to erase Palestinian history and insist on an exclusively Jewish history. This erasure included changing Arabic street names and signs to point to historical Jewish places; our street, for example, became Habad Street. Even the parking lot that Armenians used for years was transformed into a Jewish only parking lot, serving the quarter's Jewish residents. Palestinian Armenians like us, who resided in Armenian buildings built before the Israeli occupation, were not defined as residents of the quarter, and therefore were forcibly evicted from parking situated exactly opposite our building.

We have endured an ongoing battle simply to stay within our home, as vicious attacks from Zionists indicate that they want us removed from the area entirely. When I was pregnant, I feared having my babies in Israeli hospitals, as I worried that someone would mix my babies with others, or maybe even steal them. As a young mother continuing my education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, I carried my infant children close to my body, fearing for their safety. I breastfed them while in class at the Hebrew University, as if telling my occupiers: I carry home with me, in my body, in my milk, with my love and care for my offspring. Perhaps unconsciously, by carrying my baby girls with me, I wanted to tell the occupiers that though they made my mother suffer from her refugee life, from her loss of everything, forcing her to leave her children to return home, they couldn't force this on me. Raising my daughters—Maro, Tamar, and Salpy—in the old city of Jerusalem turned me into a neurotic Mama who felt the urge to follow all their steps as they grew up, making sure they could always come safely home, doing all I could to protect them.

Re-rooting and building a home under such ruins and attacks has never been an easy task. Challenging Zionist erasure strategies was extremely terrorizing. I will never forget how they used to throw stones at us and call us names when we were children walking home from school. They used to spit



on us in Haifa, spitting on the cross that was on the wall of our home (as my house in Haifa was previously a church known as The Savior's Church), calling us "dirty Arabs." And now in Jerusalem, they write "Arabs out," "Christians out," and "death to Arabs" on the walls surrounding our homes. I confronted their efforts to uproot me by building a very close-knit family, an acutely aware academic and psycho-social home. Even when my Gaby, who doesn't know or speak Hebrew, reminds me of the horrific sentiments carved out in Hebrew onto our building's physical façade, I know that we've created an impenetrable place of love and support on the inside. Refusing to accept an exilic monstrous status while at home has affected my writing, such as my two latest manuscripts. One examines the criminalization of Palestinian returnees, or what Israel defines as "infiltrators," and the other looks at the mode in which the Zionist state structure steals the childhood of Palestinians in Jerusalem. Stealing childhood is exactly what Zionism did to both my parents, as they attacked and disturbed their familial lives. It is against this stolen childhood and the Israeli state's inherently eliminatory structure and policies that I built my home as a loving space and place, as a young mother, a wife, and a scholar/mentor to Sarah, Suhad, Sana, Himmat, Saeda, Anan, Diana, Yara, and many others, who insist on resisting our monsterization, producing counter-hegemonic activism and scholarship that refuses to accept humiliation and disdain as normal.

Resisting our monsterization prompted me to argue with my own parents about what kind of political activism is required to maintain our families and homes. It made me challenge my Zionist colleagues when discussing "anti-terrorism" or using concepts such as "procedural justice" to further frame Palestinians in zoological terms and in doing so, violate my home, as well as my right to safety and to live a dignified life. The violence of settler colonialism—be it that of Zionism, international imperialism, or a non-organized academic form—operates in a racialized mode, far beyond the inscription of pain on bodies, homes, and lives. This violence is a clear marker of institutional powers that encourage demonization and oppression, which embeds the definition of Palestinians as a "terrorist monstrous" other. It mobilizes and creates new political global and local spaces of danger and insecurity that allowed the attack on Gaza in 2014, and turned a blind eye to genocidal violence, while insisting on denying Palestinians the right to a safe home and land. Marking the Palestinian home as outside the realm of humanity, as seen in the shared narratives, leaves Palestinians in a constant state of exhaustible refuging—in a state of Otherness that maintains and guarantees the impossibility of dignified life. Writing our stories of return and home, taking the ruins of the Nakba as our analytical point of departure, is a step towards defying those powers that have denied the continuous Nakba, our humanity, and our love as

Palestinians to take our place in historical memory. Such memories are dangerous to geopolitical terrorists who fear our right to return.

### POSITIONING HOME

As we write this piece, the latest attacks on our people in Gaza, which targeted a primarily civilian population already suffering collective punishment inflicted by a brutal siege, demonstrate that Palestinians may be killed and eliminated even within the safety of their own homes. The Israeli state's logic of genocidal violence and dispossession positions Palestinians everywhere, including women and children, as criminal, terrorist Others. The international community's dangerous compliance with such acts, by not intervening to immediately halt such attacks, and by refusing to hold the Israeli state accountable for its war crimes in Gaza, occupied Jerusalem, and elsewhere, underscores the geopolitical denial of Palestinians' right to life, even when at home.

Palestinian geographies of home are not easily mapped, not only because the ongoing matrix of settler colonial dispossession, elimination, and surveillance renders them invisible, but also because of the geopolitical denial of Palestinian rights. Our past and present geographies, while distinguishable and particular, are enmeshed in our bodily, psychic, social, and political experiences. The Nakba, as present history, memory, and colonial structure, infuses our daily lives with material and visceral force. Violence and dispossession, and eviction from our home-land, saturate our experiences and bind us together across the "borders" of the still-expanding settler colonial state and the diaspora. The Palestinian body is a borderland; our bodies as/and our home/land offer a knowable, Otherized racial history. Yet in telling our stories, we endlessly reject our interpellation by the Zionist state as "present-absentees," and recreate our identities and selves, re-rooting what has been uprooted, and reconstructing home over the ruins of a stolen homeland.

The significance of the past and its ruins starts from our responsibility to build a home for our humanity, our psyches, and our communities. Our shared voices dispatch the eviction of our families from their right to home across multiple generations, revealing the structure of evicting the Palestinian native and fragmenting the Palestinian family across space and time. The magnitude of the terror unleashed over the many years of attacks fails to register in Western colonial minds and politics. That is, even as the Israeli state continues to act in defiance of international law, the United States and other global powers continue to deny Palestinians the right to rights. Such a politics of denial is energized by the totalizing violence deployed in constructing Palestinians as monstrous, terrorist others, beyond the realm of ethical consideration. As Pugliese writes, the "monstrous" refers to the "normalising,

doxic strategies that are insistently deployed in order to render the absolutely other unreadable and unspeakable except as monstrous” (216). As monstrous others, our pain, our suffering, and our loss are unreadable and invisible to Western powers, who refuse to hold the Israeli state accountable for its crimes against humanity. Moreover, the hegemony of Zionist ideology in academia continues to corroborate settler colonial claims to Palestinian land, and rationalize continued state violence. Even our body count statistics, and the overwhelming loss of lives, homes, and continuity, with the millions of refugees still dispersed, fail to figure a space in Western and settler colonial thinking and liberal politics. As racialized others who are the embodiment of violence, we act and write against defining us as “no-bodies” (see Ferreira da Silva).

It is against this racialization of our right to return and right to home that we theorize and position HOME, as we refuse the serial order of stereotyping and monsterizing us. The loss of home, the shatat, and uprooting are emptied of substance, and reduced to unethical discussions of sacred and profane monstrous entities. Such violence and suffering, experienced by our families and loved ones, continues to be read and named in invisible, racialized manners. It is against this ontological, philosophical, and physical violence, this dangerous racialization, that we situate the matrix of geopolitical and historical forces that constitute Palestinians as always ever homeless and disembodied monsters. It is against what Pugliese calls a “Hauntology of Necroethics” that we write our right to home.

Palestinian liberation has always been motivated by a determination to return home. Writing our stories of return, we help keep the memory of the Nakba and our right to return alive even as the Zionist authorities criminalize such acts of remembrance (inside ’48 through the “Nakba Law,” and by censoring school curriculum in the occupied territories). We commemorate the Nakba, an inherent part of which has always entailed renewing a commitment to Palestinian liberation, by centering our stories of return and building home.

As bell hooks notes, “Home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference . . .” (*Yearning* 149). Echoing hooks, we raise the importance of home as a site of resistance and radical becoming in the midst of ongoing settler colonial oppression and violence. While the Nakba structures our intimately lived experiences of the everyday as Palestinians, we posit an analytics of returning to our home/land as a space of reconstructing Palestinian socialities and identities, of re-rooting through a radical praxis of love that can give birth to new forms of resistance (see Sandoval). Our geographies of home transcend territorial borders and nation states and a symbolics of national struggle, even as we insist on our belonging to the homeland we call Palestine,

on justice for our people, on survival and life. Home is a space where we remember who we are and where we have been, from our multiple locations across the homeland and the shatat.

In considering our stories of exile in relation to righting home, we are reminded of Edward Said's words:

exile can produce rancour and regret, as well as a sharpened vision. What has been left behind may either be mourned, or it can be used to provide a different set of lenses. Since almost by definition exile and memory go together, it is what one remembers of the past and how one remembers it that determines how one sees the future. (xxxv)

As the Zionist state continues its logic of elimination, invading and destroying our homes in its attempt to destroy our social fabric and family ties and erase our memory and identity as a people, we center home as a site of the "struggle of memory against forgetting." We remember Deir Yassin and Kufur Qasim. We remember Sabra and Shatila, Yarmouk and Shejaiyya. We remember and honor Auntie Evelyne's story of return, marked by state terror, the stories of those who were able to make the crossing back home as well as those who never made it across the death roads. These stories sustain us as heroic acts to challenge their uprooting and re-create home so that we, the next generations, can feel a sense of belonging to Palestine. Home, then, is a place where, through the very act of remembering and telling our stories, we renew our political commitment to Palestinian liberation in its myriad forms; a place where we affirm our full humanity as Palestinians and our love for each other as a fundamental element of resistance.



Lea, George, and Nadera playing with Chant, a neighbor, Haifa, in the early 1960s (photograph courtesy of the author's family).

## NOTES

AUTHORS' NOTE: Nadera and Sarah wrote this piece together in the old city, occupied East Jerusalem, overlooking the Mount of Olives.

1. The 1948 Nakba ("catastrophe" in Arabic) refers to the events that initiated the Israeli settler colonial state, in which hundreds of thousands of indigenous Palestinians were killed or forced into exile from their land and home spaces.
2. The term "present absentees" originated with the Absentees Property Law, a legal mechanism established in 1948 that enabled the Israeli state to confiscate Palestinian land and properties. This law created a citizenship category of "present absentees," which refers to Palestinians who were expelled from their home spaces, but who remained within the boundaries of what became the state of Israel. That is, they were present within the Israeli state, yet considered absent for the purposes of law. Our understanding of this term is not limited to those "internally displaced" Palestinians whose land and property were confiscated by the settler state, but also extends to those of us in the occupied Palestinian territories and throughout the diaspora who have been denied a home space and right to return to Palestine. In invoking the term "present absentees," we also refer to the dubious terms with which the Israeli settler state has defined us, as present absences, as non-human Others, and as unwanted entities. In raising this term, we also refer to the ways in which the "absence" of native peoples in the colonial imagination reinforces, as Andrea Smith notes, the claim that native peoples are vanishing and that conquest of native lands is justified (9).
3. Between 1967 and 1994, at least 140,000 Palestinians were deleted by Israel from the population registry (Human Rights Watch).

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