Figure 14  Boys Playing, Shatila Camp, Lebanon, 2005.
Since their displacement from Palestine during the events of the Nakba in 1948, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have hovered in an ill-defined space—out-of-place and between states—as Lebanon denies their naturalization and Israel resists their return. In this uncertain context the political and institutional value placed on 1948 generation testimonies and practices commemorating Palestine and the history of the expulsion continues to rise. While 1948 has remained an important part of Palestinian collective memory and identity, as the event which marks the loss of Palestine as a physical entity and its birth as a national signifier, its significance as a point of historical and political orientation toward the future—as founding myth—is relatively recent. During the early years in exile, the term the Nakba had not cohered as a national symbol and 1948 was more often viewed as a moment of weakness and humiliation that needed to be exorcized than as an event to be actively commemorated. Refugees—or “returnees” as they insisted on being called—expected that their exile would be temporary, and often actively resisted using the term Nakba because they feared that it lent permanency to their situation. In the 1950s and early 1960s other more euphemistic terms were employed to describe the events of 1948, among them, al-ighted (the rape), al-ahdath (the events), al-hijra (the exodus), lamma sharna wa tla’na (when we blackened our faces and left). While Palestinian nationalism thrived in Lebanon in the 1970s under the leadership of the Palestine Liberation
Organization (PLO), the focus was on revolution and renewal, making the invocation of 1948 memory neither desirable nor appropriate. It was not, therefore, until the 1990s, largely in response to the perception that Yasir Arafat was on the point of signing away the right of 1948 refugees to return in exchange for Palestinian statehood, that a renewed interest in the Nakba developed among institutions representing Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. This interest was directly linked to the need to publicize to the international community that this right was not negotiable (Sayigh 2001).

The 1998 commemorations to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba were a politicized reminder of what celebrations of Israeli Independence were denying; the flurry of oral histories, plays, films, art exhibits, and village history books that followed have similarly sought to symbolically reclaim and reify 1948 as a constituting factor of refugee identity. Documenting and performing a history of relation to Palestine is thus intended to counter the dehistoricizing effects of recent “peace” initiatives and the “internationally circulated image of [refugees] as uprooted, temporary sojourners” (Peteet 1995: 170), keeping alive the question of responsibility for the “refugee problem.”

Seen in this light, the interest of scholars, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and activist networks in the experiences of a passing generation of witnesses appears pragmatic, with the avenues of possible inquiry tied at least implicitly to the escalating urgencies of the present and the desire for retributive justice. What is potentially problematic about this political appropriation of 1948 is that the search for recognition of refugee rights under international law can become confused with the imperative of not forgetting. The question that this essay will seek to address is whether the quest for political agency among refugees might be better served by arguments rooted in the present-day realities of life in the camps rather than those conceived in terms that imply a phantasmic undoing of history.

Even while I pose questions about the ways in which this discourse of witness may be distorting, I believe that documenting refugee memories of 1948—at this point of transition from history as lived to history as text—is critically important. Since 2002 I have been working on an archival project to record testimonies on film with first-generation refugees in camps around Lebanon about their villages prior to 1948, and their experiences during the expulsion. The ethical obligation we have to document the events of the Nakba, however, does not give us the right to speak politically for those whose lives have been determined by 1948. My understanding of the selective ways in which 1948 is being remembered and forgotten, publicly and privately,
has been informed not only by my involvement with the archive, but also by the experience of living and working in Shatila camp, where I have been conducting anthropological fieldwork. This brought into focus the residual experiences and suffering of several generations of refugees silenced or left unassimilated by this nationalist history. The ethnographic work I have done in Shatila camp has revealed with great clarity the contradictory ways that 1948 is remembered and the dialectical relations being generated between past and present, memory and motive.

**Collectivizing Memory**

Within the matrix of Palestinian memory, narratives about the Nakba have emerged as a symbolic lynchpin of collective identity and the bedrock of nationalism. As Rashid Khalidi notes, these parochial loyalties, “an attachment to place, a love of country and a local patriotism . . . were the crucial elements in the construction of nation-state nationalism” (Khalidi 1997: 21). The creation of a Palestinian diaspora and the mass displacement of people has itself been a critical component of nation formation that draws on idioms of home and homelessness. Alienation and exile enhance the need to reconstruct homeland; they generate acts of imagination believed to be essential for the forging of national identity. Writing about the Palestinian diaspora, Edward Said described the impulse to cultural creativity as deriving from this “perilous territory of not-belonging” (Said 1984: 50). In the absence of national institutions, the role of Palestinian intellectuals, activists, and scholars working in the field of Palestine studies has taken on added importance—working to consolidate this nationalist discourse and helping to fashion a vocabulary of authenticity.

Following this logic, nowhere is memory claimed to be—or rhetorically constructed to be—more authentic or vital than among refugees living in the camps. It is the camps, in spite of the poverty and powerlessness of refugees—or perhaps because of it—that emerge as the places in which “the Palestinian national spirit was, and still is, burning. They are the real Palestinians” (Klaus 2003: 129, emphasis added). The memorializing consciousness believed to structure refugee experience in exile is often characterized as a compulsive desire to map, through narrative, “every tree, every stone fence, every grave, house, mosque, every street and village square [the refugees] had left behind” (Litvak 1994: 45). Palestinian historian Elias Sanbar takes this one step further, describing this experience in terms that seem almost elegiac: “to rescue
their land . . . the refugees would gamble everything on taking it with them, gradually becoming the temporary replacement of their homeland . . . they would live as if they were everything—Palestine and Palestinians, a people and its land” (Sanbar 2001: 90).

Here, Sanbar seems to collapse the distinctions between memory as recollection and memory as cultural reproduction, making it almost indistinguishable from culture or identity. The potency of remembrance that preserves this “internal map” (Khalidi 1997: 205) of Palestine, assumed to lie at the core of refugee identity, is presumably rooted in a model of traumatic memory in which authority and authenticity are grounded in stories of extreme suffering, and where the voicing of pain has itself come to be seen as an empowering act. The rhetorical power of memory is further undergirded by the belief that disempowered communities are somehow preternaturally oriented toward remembering and have a rich, spontaneous, oral tradition—the “social glue” of identity politics—through which to record the injustices and suffering of the past. This assumption that refugees from different generations, with vastly different experiences, continue to cling tenaciously to collective memories of Palestine may, however, speak more to our own anxieties of loss and of letting go of the past—as scholars and activists in sympathy with Palestinian nationalist aims and the rights of refugees—for fear of political defeat and justice not being done.

This heightened sense of a need to bear witness to the events of the Nakba within factions, NGOs, and institutions representing refugee interests within the camps, as well as in academia and international activist networks—at the very moment when “Palestine” as a historical signifier is in danger of losing its signified—must be understood as centrally connected to politics and timing. During the last decade, the battle over the interpretation of 1948 has intensified between scholars and activists calling for further investigation into the human tragedy of 1948 and the war from an ethical perspective and traditional Zionist scholars who continue to view the events of 1948 in terms of realpolitik. The collapse of the Oslo peace process and the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada have put these “new historians” in Israel under renewed attack. Recent peace initiatives that do not recognize any comprehensive right of return have also raised the historical stakes, and the perceived importance of associating the Palestinian narrative with the question of responsibility for the expulsion in 1948.

Witnessing in this context thus appears to be both retroactive and prospective—in that it looks back to the catastrophe of 1948 and forward to the
possibility of further erasure. In thinking about witness as a way of acknowledging a violent past, calling for redress, or preventing suffering in the future, however, how might critical thinking be compromised? Based on my work with refugees in Shatila, I worry that the expedient re-framing of the past in political terms that seeks to retrieve and consolidate the 1948 narrative—portraying refugees as the human remnants of this historic tragedy that strive in their being for return —may be putting the burden of remembrance on those with the least resources to realize it. Not only does this collectivized narrative of suffering threaten to elide less legible and localized legacies of 1948 that structure the memory, experience, and hopes of refugees in the diaspora, but it may also conceal the fact that the intensity of this longing for nation may now be coming more from the elite echelons of the Palestinian diaspora than from its base.

The authenticity and legitimacy enacted—and often controlled—by this increasingly institutionalized understanding of 1948 history and its place within nationalist discourse clearly comes at a cost. This monument to an idealized past which those of us working in the field may be unintentionally co-constructing through our research—and which subsequent generations are expected to bear witness to, and even claim as their own—can be both alienating and oppressive. It is also replacing a sense of history as lived experience and practice that might evolve, organically, into future possibility. Does this kind of quasi-institutionalized coercion of memory, in searching for certain kinds of truths, effect a structural forgetting of others? In approaching eyewitnesses as living links with Palestine and their narratives as tools for regenerating collective meanings within a political field, are we in a sense preventing them from mourning their losses in more personal or permanent terms? Do institutionalized commemorative practices, or academic studies that compulsively look back to this event as the core of national identity, make it harder for subsequent generations of refugees to articulate a sense of identity and belonging in terms of present realities and their own hopes for the future? Merely to pose such questions places one in an acute ethical quandary. Israeli policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians has often been described in terms of establishing “facts on the ground”; such “facts” can be military and strategic as well as cultural and historical. The depth of attachment of the Palestinian refugee diaspora to the land of Palestine is obviously an iconic centerpiece of this struggle, so the risk exists that bringing it into the light of scrutiny may be miscast as a concession. Yet this is necessary since what is under scrutiny is as much the politics of solidarity as the politics of remembrance.
The ways that many interviewees responded to our questions about what took place in their villages in 1948 suggested that the past is, in crucial ways, being remembered through the lens of present suffering. In the process of recording several hundred hours of filmed testimony and through my ethnographic research, the gravitational pull that the meta-narrative of the Nakba exerts on personal memory became clearer, as stories fell into and out of discursive alignment with a nationalist master narrative. Particularly illuminating were the different modes of remembrance that I witnessed in Shatila and discrepancies in the way in which the same individual might remember in the course of a formal interview for the archive, and in the more idiomatic contexts of everyday life.

When I first arrived in the camp I was taken to speak with elders, widely recognized to have good or “important” memories. Among the first of these local sages that I met, and subsequently came to know well, was Abu Nayif from Majd al-Krum. After brief introductions, we were seated, and without prompting he launched into a long narrative about his village. Questions or interruptions were not permitted, so we sat and listened to his stylized memoir, which had the air of a well-paced and practiced performance. The narrative showed signs of prescriptive plotting, astutely touching on key political tropes: close relations with local Jewish communities, perfidious Albion, escalating acts of violence, a perilous journey into exile, the hardship of early years in Lebanon, and the establishment of the camp, in which his father had been a major figure. This is not to belittle these experiences or cast doubt over their veracity, more to note the ways in which this narrative—by foregrounding a rhetoric of authenticity and moral edification—seemed marked by an internalization of the protocols of testimony. It was as if Abu Nayif, anticipating the expectations and sympathies of his audience, emphasized those elements of his own history that might generate identification and empathy, and that could be understood in terms of the political interests of the collective. This was also suggested by the fact that his story was structured around episodes marked for some kind of future redemption. As he brought his narrative to a close he turned and gave us a penetrating look: “If I could go to my village tomorrow I would leave everything I have and walk,” he said. Raising his voice a notch, “I would be happy to live under a tree with the sky as my roof and the earth my bed. It would be enough just to die in Palestine.
And then as if on cue, “The right of return is our most important right—we will not give it up for anything.”

Over coffee, once the “interview” had formally finished, Abu Nayif showed me a photograph album of images of himself with various delegations, with foreign officials and volunteers from a host of different countries—joking that his house was “like the United Nations.” He is clearly proud that representatives from local NGOs regularly take their visitors to see him as part of their tour of Shatila. A local celebrity, he has fashioned his identity as a narrator of the Nakba—and does not disappoint. Through these acts of witness he is both a representative of the community, and an agent of collective identity and experience. This might be understood in terms of a poetics of maneuver that allows the “I” to speak for the “we.” Through narrative, Abu Nayif tries to evoke solidarity from his audience, interpellating the viewer as secondary witness in this “rhetorical space of intersubjectivity” (Hesford 2004: 105). On the various occasions that I saw him talking with visitors to the camp, the form his narrative took was almost identical; his guests were normally invited to ask questions at the end, sometimes prompted by the “guide”—what, for instance does Abu Nayif think about the right of return? To which his resounding answer would be, “If I could go to my village tomorrow, I would leave everything I have and walk.” These strategies of performance and persuasion point to an economy of memory, in which particular versions of the past become standardized and circulate almost as commodities; but they also illustrate the ways in which a transnational discourse of testimony may be shaping local practice, informing the processes by which individual experience becomes social text, and public past (Feldman 2004).

The dissonance between what is being said and what is being felt in the course of these acts of bearing witness must in some sense be a response on the part of the speaker to what they imagine is being—or can be—heard. As I came to know Abu Nayif better in the course of living in the camp, I began to notice how the same events could be discussed in radically different terms in other contexts. His niece became a close friend, and I would often find Abu Nayif talking with her husband when I called to visit. In these informal family settings his memories (built almost entirely around his experiences in Shatila, and rarely straying as far-a-field as Majd al-Krum) took on a fluidity and depth—at times a sharp humor—largely absent in the somewhat somber narrations given to visitors. After the Geneva Accords were made public he refused to come with us to a demonstration outside the UN building, telling
me—with a certain impatience—that it was a waste of time, and that everyone “knows” that the right of return is impossible. Through these interactions with Abu Nayif and other elders in Shatila, I became more aware of the ways in which this rhetorical language of collective dispossession, struggle, and return that has come to index “Palestinianness”—which finds voice in these more “official” contexts—has lost its resonance, not only in the minds of elders like Abu Nayif, but also, as I came to discover, and which I will discuss below, among younger generations of refugees in the camps.

In the course of everyday conversations with elders and their families, pre-1948 Palestine or the events of the expulsion—when discussed at all—emerged as anecdotal reminiscence that was supple, associative, and more deeply concerned with commenting on the present than memorializing the past. On one occasion it was the aroma of za’atar (wild thyme) that sparked a series of interconnected memories, taking Umm Salih first to Jish and the memory of picking wild za’atar in the mountains with her grandmother—describing how it was used in cooking and the memory of a particular incident when she had seen a snake in their courtyard as a child—before turning to a recent visit with her sister in ‘Ayn Hilwa camp where she had seen, and smelt, families pounding their own za’atar. That this unsystematic weaving of events and places at first appeared to me as passing anecdote rather than a narrative about the Nakba, points to my own biases and limits of imagination as to what constituted a historical narrative worth recording. It illustrated for me the way in which prescribed conventions of bearing witness were also shaping what I was listening for—for instance, emotionally charged moments in which national narrative and self-narrative intertwine. Umm Salih’s stories, like many others that I have heard since, suggest a refusal to force partial memories into an interpretational schemata—these moments that cannot be sutured into a continuous narrative of moral or cognitive coherence. The value of this fractured reminiscence, however, may lie in its ability to enact a doubling of witness, transmitting not only historical details but also the shattering effects that this history has had on the lives of those who have lived it (see Esmeir, this volume).

However lyrically suggestive these Proustian moments may be in the stories that elders tell, they are essentially deracinated and do not necessarily form good conduits of national memory. While they may form points of reference for elders, are these modes of remembrance crossing generational barriers? Although elders regularly claim—when asked by researchers like myself—to be narrating stories about life in Palestine and the events of 1948,
few children know more than the name of, and the most generic facts about, their ancestral village. Muhammad, a thirteen-year-old from Shatila whose grandfather had witnessed the massacre in Safasaf in October 1948, knew only that his relatives in Palestine had not needed money: “People didn’t even know what money looked like in those days—they were farmers and grew everything they needed—not like now.” When I later asked his grandfather, Abu Waseem, if he had ever described his experiences in detail, he admitted that his grandchildren were more interested in watching television or chatting on the Internet. “Every day my friend Abu Hamadi comes to visit me at 5—we sit and have coffee and sometimes we talk about Palestine, but my grandchildren don’t like to sit with us—they’d rather be playing pinball with their friends.” Many times when I stopped by Abu Waseem’s house in the afternoon I would find him sitting with Abu Hamadi, often in total silence. This at first struck me as odd. Over time, however, it became clear that this ritual meeting that structured their days was a form of exchange and solidarity. These silences—that at times seemed to me agonizingly long, but which they clearly both felt comfortable with—express something deliberate and shared.

Umm Muhammad, who had been sitting with us and had overheard my discussion with her father, later privately acknowledged that she had not encouraged her son to talk with her parents about the past:

Although my parents used to speak a lot about Palestine when we were young, I don’t like to hear these stories now. . . . Sometimes my mother sings to my children about Bint Jbayl, and how families were separated when they first came to Lebanon and it makes us cry. . . . These memories are too painful for her, and for us. . . . I realize it is important for the children to know about Palestine, but I feel that it’s good for us to think about how to make their future better rather than to live in the past.

(interview, December 16, 2003)

The experience of this family gestures to a shift away from historical transmission through the public performance of personal narrative, to less articulate and ever more private forms of cultural retrieval. Stories do not seem to be a retentive milieu for memory or communal solidarity, which instead appear to settle into silent practice, gestures, and repetitive rituals—meeting for coffee, a lullaby. It suggests that remembering Palestine and the events surrounding the expulsion have come to be unconsciously performed where they may have once been actively relayed. It seems also as if speaking directly about these events and experiences has come to represent a form of excess.
In the same way that I had expected to find an active narrative tradition of the Nakba, in which the intensity of verbal recollection, pace Sanbar, in some way compensates for the suffering experienced, I was also surprised to discover that many life stories began in the present and worked their way back to the past; genealogies seemed often to be constructed backward, rather than the other way around. Learning to inhabit the world again appears to involve a constant shifting between historical registers. At times this takes the form of simple comparison—like Umm Salih’s version of what Shatila is like now with what it used to be. However, this temporal shuttling also gestured to a more sustained interweaving of past and present. For instance, when I’d sit with Umm Jamal in her son’s cake shop on the edge of the camp she would begin most recollections about her childhood in Jaffa with a pointed qualification: “But as you know, my dear, I am one of those who say enough! Let’s put our hand in the hand of Israel—we’ve suffered too much and we’re tired. Let’s be realistic. If I’m not going to go back to Jaffa, then at least I want the right to live well here or somewhere else.” In our discussions she rarely spoke to me about the specific events that had led to her family’s expulsion from Jaffa—or the death of relatives, which I learned about from her niece. Instead, she took great pleasure in furnishing me with detailed descriptions of her family’s wealth and status in Jaffa. For Umm Jamal, constructing a normative picture of her past, as if to somehow draw it back into her present, trumped any narrative of accusation.

I remember how in our house we had two different kinds of bathrooms—we had a foreign one and an Arab one—we had lots of rooms. My grandfather was the president of the port and my father worked with him and they had three ships and did trade with many countries from Addis Ababa to Britain—one time when my father was in England he had a pain in his head, and he went to the doctor—he couldn’t speak much English so he said “my head hurt” or something like that, and they said he should remove all his teeth and put in false ones, so he did—it cost a lot of money! If only Jamal could fix his teeth, but we don’t have the money—look at them, it’s awful! [Jamal, her son has had ongoing problems with his teeth, most of which were broken when the butt of a rifle was smashed into his mouth at an Amal manned checkpoint during the War of the Camps.] But my uncle, now he was very educated—he went to the American University in Beirut and studied in schools in Jaffa—he was one of the first people to work at UNRWA. We came here on one of my father’s boats—we brought everything with us in boxes the size of this room—the only thing we left behind was the jarushi [stone
for grinding wheat] because it was so heavy. We had all our chairs, the old lights—chandeliers—and we had all the pots—from this big to this small [gesturing with her hands]. One tunjara [cooking pot] from my grandfather’s wedding was so big you could put two whole sheep in it—his wedding lasted for forty days and my grandmother wore a suit—she had five different ones and I would iron them and wear them on feast days and dance like Cinderella! [Pause] There were many people on the boat with us—one woman gave birth on board, so they called the boy Bahar [sea]. They were shooting at us from the port—I still remember how the bullets fell on our heads like stars and the sound they made as they hit the water, like this [she gently taps the table].

*(Interview, June 17, 2004)*

In the context of Umm Jamal’s stories, references to life in Palestine surface as disconnected fragments, and her account of the events of the expulsion hovered awkwardly at the edge of our conversations. What is striking about the way this narrative unfolds is the absence of blame: the perpetrators—the Jewish forces—that attacked Jaffa are not named, and the shooting is mentioned almost as an afterthought. The experience of expulsion seems contingent, even inexplicable, accentuating a sense of suffering as deriving from chaotic forces and without meaning. In Veena Das’s study (1994) of the ways suffering is explained and given meaning, she makes the distinction between interpretations predicated on theodicy (justifying suffering as part of a divine plan) and those that foreground contingency. The latter structures Umm Jamal’s narrative and involves both releasing the perpetrators from blame and freeing herself from responsibility. Her relation to the past is toward normalcy; she laments rather than blames. Indeed, Umm Jamal’s emphasis on transformation and continuity outweighs memories of death and violence. It not only falls short of the juridical requirements of testimony that focuses on particular events, but also seems to go against the genre of testimony in which, like Abu Nayif’s, the rhetorical appeal of the particular, of the “self,” is given meaning through its relation to the collective.

This ambivalent relation of the “I” to the “we” was a feature of a number of the interviews I conducted—both for the archive and in the course of my own fieldwork. Unwillingness to forfeit communal bonds for any other kind of identification, epitomized by the well-known saying “my story is the story of my people,” is brought into question by this refocusing on the individual. While these two strands of remembrance are clearly not irreconcilable, there is a sense that what is being foregrounded is not collective harmony or
identification with an increasingly metaphoric Palestinian nation, but rather a
longed-for sense of dignity, self-respect, and individual possibility. As a site of
collective memory and commemoration, 1948 necessarily also becomes a site
“in which individuals must come to terms not only with a prêt-à-porter past, but
also with their relationship to the collectivity in which they find themselves”
(Crapanzano 2004: 172). Umm Jamal’s desire not to be submersed in the col-
lective but to retain some sense of distinction and difference, points to the
ways in which elders may be regenerating their worlds on their own terms.

The perceived usefulness of practices that salvage authentic culture and
align political subjectivities with nationalist goals is at some level being un-
dermined by the community’s growing ambivalence toward these acts of
national remembrance. When I later spoke of the striking absence of detail
about the events of the Nakba in Umm Jamal’s stories with Umm Hasan—a
friend in her late thirties with whom I lodged in the camp—she laughed and
said that it was because Umm Jamal was from “ahl Yafa” (the families of Jaffa).
She continued:

These people are good at forgetting the past—throwing it away and starting a
new life. They live only for the present without thinking about the future. . . . We
have a proverb about Jaffa people, “If you have money in your pocket spend it and
God will provide later.” . . . Farmers worry about the future, and plan for it. City
dwellers have different habits from us—I know a woman from Manshiyya who
married someone from Jaffa, and she told me that when they had meat—this was
during the invasion, so it was hard to get—so it was hard to get—her husband would say “Let’s eat it
all now, don’t ration it.” But she would always hide some away. One day her hus-
band died while he was working at the port and she was beside herself because
she hadn’t made him a big meal the day before. She’d hidden some of the meat
away. She always tells me this, saying “He was right—better to enjoy what you
have when you have it.” [Pause] There are differences between us [farmers and
city dwellers]—in 1982 it was the families from Jaffa that were the first to leave the
camp. Everyone tried to persuade them to stay—“who will liberate Palestine if
you leave the resistance?” we’d say. The people who stayed to fight were farmers.

(interview, February 16, 2004)

It has been noted how relations between farmers and urbanites, defined
by mutual distrust and prejudice, shaped the way in which the physical space
of the camps was arranged (Peteet 1995). In Umm Hasan’s comments we
see how the perceived dissimilarity between rural and urban mentalities
has taken on an added twist, here framed in terms of temporal perception.
While Jaffans are seen to live in the moment—recklessly forgetting past and future—farmers (presented here, as the true nationalists) conserve the heritage of the past and struggle for future liberation.

The referential dissonance emerging from the gap between this untimely nationalist discourse and the vicissitudes of everyday life in the camp also registered in the contradictory ways that people responded to the archival project, and the invitation to be interviewed. While some elders were delighted, many were unwilling to talk. This was sometimes out of fear (and I realize that my own position as a British woman, studying at an American university, is probably a significant factor here), and occasionally indifference, or a sense of weariness with the duty to recall. “What’s the point?” said one old woman we spoke with in Badawi Camp—“I’ve done so many interviews now. I’ve even been on television, and what good has it done?” More often however, this reluctance was a reflection of the fact that for many, these are experiences that have been cordoned off. In Shatila, one friend’s mother who had fled her prosperous home outside of Haifa at the age of eleven, could not be persuaded to be interviewed. She listened patiently as we tried to justify the importance of the archive—for future generations, for justice, for historical truth—before politely, but firmly, refusing. Her son, Abu Farah, who was visiting from abroad, was not surprised:

Whenever I ask her about what happened, she always says, “One day, when I am more comfortable.” She doesn’t want to remember or talk about what happened [he pauses, visibly upset]. Eventually I had to ask my wife’s family who are from the same village—they live near Saida, but outside the camp. It’s more relaxed there so they can talk about things; here every single part of this house or alley reminds my parents of what’s gone—a reminder that they try to bury. . . . My mother focuses on us, she worries about us—that is her escape from thinking about the past and maybe the future too. . . . My grandfather had a huge amount of land, near Haifa, on the side of a mountain, very fertile land—and they built huge houses—even my mother got an equal share of it along with her brothers because there was such plenty. And then suddenly in one hit they left, leaving everything. And since then my mother has stayed an 11-year-old girl, in a frame, and whatever happens to her now is outside that frame. She brings us inside the frame, but that past is something . . . how to put it—it is the biggest trauma for her. It’s like she is looking at the world through a screen, which filters out color and reality—sometimes when I look at her I feel she is in constant pain.

(interview, July 28, 2004)
This comment illustrates the paradox that lies at the heart of traumatic experience, in which forgetfulness and a breakdown of witnessing are inextricably linked to the act of remembrance, as the event is neither fully recalled nor erased. Abu Farah describes how the condition of inhabiting a world made strange by past violence—in which one can never again feel “comfortable”—stifles memory, creating what Das vividly describes as a “kind of atmosphere that cannot be expelled to an ‘outside’” (2000: 69). According to the logic of witness that creates and classifies events as discrete objects to be examined, the necessary distance for bearing witness and the language in which to ground it are lacking. For Abu Farah’s mother, it is as if the work of mourning cannot be realized, her experiences frozen somewhere between memory and forgetting. This inability to inscribe memory through substitution in speech may not only derive from a lack of shared language through which to express, or inhabit, trauma but should perhaps also be read as a form of conserving memory, since that which has not been turned into a symbol for recall, cannot be deleted or forgotten.

What is also striking about Abu Farah’s analysis of his mother’s silence about the past are the synchronic terms he uses to describe historical consciousness; it appears to be associative, embedded in a scarred physical landscape that blends past into present. These comments allude to the ways in which the camp’s fraught history, and the structures of social and political exclusion that refugees continue to experience, have come to be seen as part of the same process of erasure that began in 1948, preventing any clear distinction between former and present suffering: Every single part of this house or alley reminds my parents of what’s gone. The context of narration inescapably inflects memories of 1948, which in turn are filtered through complex local histories that continue to shape the community. As Umm Hasan succinctly expressed it, “For us the Nakba is not a single event, but an ongoing suffering that we experience every day”—suggesting that what it means to be Palestinian may be now understood more in terms of existential bonds of suffering than through a connection to the place itself. Memories of the Nakba seem closer to a lived condition, experienced as a process of survival, rather than as historical possession. As Das suggests, the past can continue to exist as “poisonous knowledge,” a knowing by suffering in the world rather than through acts of conscious transmission (Das 2000: 69). Reflecting upon comments like these, we can begin to see how Sanbar’s formulation about the refugees having “gambled everything on taking [Palestine] with them,
gradually becoming the temporary replacement of their homeland,” is both true and untrue.

The loss of public spaces and the increasingly cramped living conditions in the camp has effected other shifts in memory practices in Shatila, as elders find themselves ever more isolated from their friends and the rest of the community. The experience of Abu Aziz, the eighty-three-year-old uncle of a friend, offers a poignant example. Following the War of the Camps in the mid-1980s, the family moved to a building outside the camp in which other former residents were also living. Abu Aziz soon became bored and depressed living in his small apartment. After a while he began to meet with other elders living in the building and they would sit on the wall facing the street and talk. In the last year three members of this impromptu, sidewalk-diwan have died, and throughout the summer my friend recounted how his uncle had begun to sit on the opposite side of the street from the remaining two, outside a barber’s shop on a borrowed chair. Every day Abu Aziz would hang his kuffiya over a nearby bush and sit in silence. When his nephew one day asked why he no longer sat with the others, he said that he was tired of listening to them reminiscing about Palestine: “No amount of talking will ever bring it back.” It is as if the collapse of the social context of memory has precipitated the realization that return to his village is extremely unlikely: his response has been to enact remembrance through an intensely private ritual, defiantly unattached to any political agenda. This attempt to reclaim strains of life from memories of overwhelming loss implies some form of redemption. While Abu Aziz may not frame his memories within a familiar language of political activism, he is not “forgiving”—he believes that justice will be done. “There will come a day when all this has to stop,” he once told me, “for it can’t go on as it is now. God will see to this.” Tellingly, he is placing his hopes not in what he regards to be the ineffectual and corrupt domain of international politics, but in the divine.

I was struck by a similar sense of acceptance when I joined a group from Shatila—all originally from Khalisa—when they went to the border to celebrate the liberation of the south in 2004. Khalisa, now called Kiriyat Shmona, is clearly visible from various vantage points near Fatima’s Gate, and at one point we were able to make out what we thought may have been the home of one elderly woman in our group. It was the first time, in fact, that she had been to the border, having been too ill to travel in 2000. I was therefore surprised to note how the experience did not seem to stir sad memories, as one
might expect, but instead evoked a sense of real joy. She was delighted to see her house and her village, and in the car on the way home she kept smiling and saying how Palestine was even more beautiful than she had remembered. Later, when she was describing the outing to her granddaughter, she said she felt that now she could die in peace since she had seen her home again. It was as if in saying this she was commenting on her relation to the past, to her village, to Palestine as something very important but also as somehow quietly over. What might be viewed here as resigned acceptance, or forgetting, is perhaps better understood as a kind of serenity that completes the process of mourning. Experiences like this trip to the border, or Abu Aziz’s enacted ritual—rather than reliving loss—may actually free energies previously invested in marking absence and prolonging “poisonous knowledge” within the community.

The different ways in which these elders in Shatila relate to their memories of Palestine invite us to question the notion that this is a community actively transmitting and preserving local histories that restore Palestine palimpsestically in social memory, or represent a collective call for retributive justice. These various forms of witness that I have described appear to be “antiphonal” (Feldman 2004: 176), expressed in terms that not only alternate between individual and collective, but also between the duty to recall and the desire to forget, between speech and silence, sorrow and joy. These ambivalent discourses of memory and collective meaning-making do not fit extant paradigms for public witness, which presume that a narrative of “what happened” can be communicated and documented.27 My initial concern that the suffering and loss of 1948 needed to be measured and documented—as materials for political advocacy—presupposed a consensus about a shared understanding of the past and the need to bear witness to it. I was surprised—initially even disappointed—when I discovered that this need to bear witness to 1948 was not foregrounded in people’s narratives, but I came to realize how this pointed to the alternative ways that violent history and adversity in this community are being dealt with. This complicates the binary of victimization and agency and should encourage us to recognize more complex and ambiguous processes of semiosis and social action. Clearly these alternate registers of bearing witness suggest other means of coming to terms with the past, and other ways of imagining the future, than those that our own desires for justice might envisage.
Transmission and Transformation: 
Commemorating 1948 Among Shatila’s Youth

What of the younger generations of refugees in Shatila? What role does the Nakba play in their lives? The dialectical tensions that lie at the heart of this renascent nationalist interest in the history of 1948 that I outlined above were perhaps most vividly revealed to me during an event that I helped organize in Shatila to mark Nakba Day in May 2004. With the help of a local NGO we mounted a screen against one of the buildings near the main entrance to the camp, squeezed between large posters of two Hamas leaders, Shaykh Ahmad Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantisi, put up after their assassinations by the Israelis in March and April of that year. The proximity of the screen to these images proved confusing, and initially passersby thought that the event was being organized by the Islamist party, Hamas. The films we had selected—a collection of documentaries, interviews, and features about Palestine and the history of 1948—were to be shown over two evenings. For the opening night we had chosen a series of six fifteen-minute excerpts from interviews that we had filmed with elders in the camp about their memories of Palestine. The elders had enthusiastically encouraged us, and we thought the interviews would be of interest to their families and the community more generally. A small group of about twenty people gathered—mainly the stars of the show and their friends—perched on plastic chairs, or watching from the balconies that overlooked the street. Kids sat on the hoods of parked cars, enjoying the novelty of street cinema, if not altogether gripped by the subject matter.

About ten minutes into the first interview with Umm Waseem, Muhammad Hasanayn—the brother of Hasan Hasanayn, who, with Shadi Anas of Burj al-Barajna camp, was killed in a demonstration at the border in October 2000—came up to me and asked when we were planning to show “the film about Hasan.” I explained that the idea of the event was to commemorate the events of 1948 and that we did not intend to show any films about Hasan. At this point I had to leave to get an extension cable for the projector. When I returned five minutes later, I found that a large crowd had gathered. As I got closer, I realized that the tape had been changed, and instead of Umm Waseem talking about the air attack on her village of Safsaf, we were now watching news footage from Al-Manar (Hizbollah’s TV station) of the demonstration in which Hasan was killed. Among the chanting protestors projected above our heads were recognizable faces from the camp—lobbing stones and
scurrying away from the clouds of tear gas; some of the more fearless could be seen trying to climb the wire fence. Bullets were fired by panicking Israeli soldiers on the other side, and then ensued a confusion of running bodies and blood: about seventeen people were wounded, two fatally. This footage then cut to images from the camp: Hasan’s distraught mother and grieving family, lines of people coming to pay their respects, before culminating in a funeral procession in which several thousand mourners marched, carrying Hasan’s coffin through the streets on a wave of anger.

Among those who had gathered to watch and remember, some were animatedly pointing out friends and relatives, while others cursed as the Israeli jeeps darted across the screen; many were crying and visibly upset. The mood was somber—in stark contrast to the distracted manner of the crowd when we projected the first interview. The tension and grief were palpable—it was clear that the Nakba had been upstaged by the representation of these recent events in the camp’s history. When Muhammad saw that I had returned, he came over: “Look how many more people there are now” he said, grinning. “People are not interested in watching old people talk about the past—besides we’ve seen all these stories before.” Then, turning to Mahmud—a friend who had helped organize the event—he added, “I’d rather be watching Umm Kulthum [the great Egyptian singer] than these old guys! I also have a video that was made by a doctor who was at the demonstration which shows Hasan going to the hospital—even more people will come tomorrow if you show this one.” After we’d packed up, I hung around talking with friends, who, as they put it, had “come to support” me. They were not surprised that the event had not drawn a crowd, noting how few people had even remarked on the significance of the day.

Not only did this experience suggest to me that the significance of rituals that collectively remember 1948 is increasingly in doubt, but that these official forms of remembrance, rather than narrowing the gap between nationalist history and subjective memory in the community, may in fact be pushing these two modes of remembering farther apart. This event—as with others that I attended—clearly seemed to elicit boredom, with factional allegiances further complicating the ability of the community to engage collectively in memorial ceremonies. The manner in which the screening was hijacked by the interests of the audience, however, suggests that such acts of public remembering bring the lived experience of personal memory and collective history into dialogue in ways that may be reconfiguring understandings of
self and community. The sense of solidarity generated by the scenes of riot and demonstration presumably derived in part from the emotional reminders of moments where they had been actively involved in events rather than simply being distant observers. As one friend put it to me after the screening, “People like to remember how they felt at this time—there was a lot of hope in the camp then.”

The poor attendance at the film screening and the conflict that ensued as to what history should be remembered at this event is indicative of the way in which younger generations born and raised in the diaspora are finding it difficult to absorb these originary narratives as part of their own identity or as a frame for national belonging. This was something that I came to better appreciate through my friendships with second- and third-generation refugees. Yusif, a twenty-seven-year-old from Badawi Camp now working as a teacher in an UNRWA school in Shatila, expressed the feeling of historical claustrophobia that the focus on a Palestine of the past engenders:

Although we are still living the results of the Nakba, my generation didn’t experience it, and I refuse to inherit it. . . . When I think of the Nakba and how Palestine used to be, I don’t think of it as just some beautiful place where people sat under the trees eating fruit—I think of it as a normal life that I was not part of, but now it has become almost obligatory to turn memories of Palestine into a myth. When I hear elders who lived the Nakba talk about it, and the bad things they experienced, I sympathize with them—but sympathy changes. My memories are different from my father’s—and my problems are different from his also. But it’s as if all we need know is the slogan “Palestine is ours”—but to really feel that you are from a place you need to know it. I’ve learnt about Palestine, but I know and love Lebanon—there’s a difference of experience. There is much about our history here that remains hidden and ignored—for instance, why did it take us so long to start a resistance here? We have to ask ourselves this. Why, even after the revolution came here did we fail to liberate Palestine?

(interview, November 20, 2003)

This interview is powerfully suggestive of the way in which younger generations are expected to miss keenly something that they themselves have not experienced losing. It questions the efficacy of reviving nationalist discourse through a staging of what historian and critic Mohammed Bamyeh calls a mythological “deep time” (2003: 836). Yusif reveals how this highlighting of 1948 as a productive historical moment is provoking a sense of frustration.
among second- and third-generation refugees who have developed their own forms of rootedness and belonging in Lebanon. His comments suggest that the freighted heritage of the Nakba appears, ironically, to be erasing—rather than bringing into focus—the concrete historical details of 1948. It is as if this fetishization of the national entity, as a “beautiful place in which people sat under trees eating fruit,” in which Palestine is signified synecdochically through bucolic imagery, is producing a derivative, and self-conscious sense of solidarity.  

Here again we sense the referential dissonance of a nationalist discourse out of joint with local and national realities, in which ruptures and inconsistencies are smoothed over. Interestingly, Yusif’s reference to the PLO’s failed revolution in Lebanon also points to the possibility that an intellectual shift may be taking place—in which a conscious confrontation with the past supersedes an engagement based largely on emotion. As Yusif observes, this has entailed a troubling leveling and streamlining of Palestinian history in which other chapters of violence and loss in Lebanon are obscured or willfully “forgotten” because of their political sensitivity, or because they foreground the divisive ineptitude of the PLO.

In our discussion, Yusif went on to note how the parents of some of the children he taught at UNRWA had expressed similar concerns that the emphasis on what Palestine was and what Shatila is not in many of the organized activities at school, and through local NGOs, is making it harder for children to acknowledge or appreciate the undeniable strengths of their community:

In the NGO where my wife was working in Shatila, the children were being told to draw pictures of Palestine rather than things from their own experiences, because these are the kind of activities that get money. . . . But this is wrong—it is as if all Palestinians here have to have the same memory, and the same perspective on who we are or how to resist. Now when I talk about Palestine it makes me sad—because I start to feel as if I am lying too.

(Interview, November 20, 2003)

What is particularly unsettling is that the factions and NGOs actively inculcating this feeling of loss appear to be bypassing the only members of the community with a legitimate claim to have experienced it. All the organized commemorative activities that I have attended in the camp—with the exception of the organized group visits to the homes of Abu Nayif and others mentioned earlier—are directed at youth, and rarely if ever involve the participation of camp elders. Instead of being the catalyst for discussion about
the past in which elders can share their experiences, these institutions appear
to be teaching Palestinian youth that by adopting the faculty of nostalgia in
relation to the idea of Palestine and the events of 1948 they will have memo-
ries of a loss that they have not suffered directly. On several occasions I at-
tended lectures organized by a local NGO. I was invited principally because I
owned a video camera, since the organizer was eager to put images on the
center’s website and promotion brochures, “to show the people we are mak-
ing sure the children know their history.” In the talks that I attended, rows of
ten-year-olds looked on, bewildered, fidgeting in their seats as the enthusias-
tic founder lectured on Palestine and the expulsion. It was as if this form of
“imagined nostalgia” had become a more efficient means of indexing national
authenticity within the community than the messiness of direct experience
(Appadurai 1996: 77).

In the context of Shatila this cottage industry of commemoration in-
cludes not only the Nakba and Palestinian culture, but the Sabra and Sha-
tila massacre as well. The phenomenon of internationally subsidized activi-
ties in the camps reveals the workings of a pragmatic agency on the part of
refugees. The simplified narrative of 1948 trumps the ethical quagmire of
the present reality in attracting foreign investment in the very institutions
(schools, cultural centers, etc.) that, ironically, have come to form the locus
of social agency for refugees. The commemorative practices foregrounded
by such public institutions should therefore also be understood as part of
the economic pragmatics of everyday life, and not merely as abstract models
of cultural transmission. We need to consider, however, the extent to which
these kinds of activities and our support of them—moral and material—are
contributing to a trivialization of memory and cultural practice or, in Yusif’s
case, even generating a sense of self-deception.

Solidarity, Complicity, and
the Symbolic Violence of Testimony

Let us return briefly to the house of Umm Jamal. During one of my last
visits before I returned to United States, I met her youngest son, Mahmud,
who was sitting drinking coffee with his friend Farukh. Mahmud is twenty-
two years old and works in a factory about an hour outside Beirut that makes
bread ovens. He had just returned from work and invited me to join him for
a coffee while I waited for his mother to return. Having heard a little about
the archival project from his mother, he asked about my research and then turned to me with an air of barely concealed frustration to ask: “What’s the point of your research?” As I tried to stumble into an answer, he cut me off:

What is going to come of this for us? Many foreigners like you come to the camp, and they do research—they ask us questions about the past, about the Nakba, who died, what we felt, about the massacre, about our sadness—and it’s like it’s a thrill for them. We cry and they profit from our tears, but things stay the same for us. The electricity is still shit, we have no rights and this kind of thing just makes us suffer more. For this reason I don’t think any research people like you do will make a difference. Okay, so it’s true that many people here don’t know the history of Palestine—I think that we should try to solve this through better education. But the problem is people don’t really care anymore—and they don’t have the time to care. All we do now is think about survival—this kills our desire to be a better people. We don’t have time to think about our culture or our history—we are dying in this struggle simply to exist. . . . I believe that after two years there will be no more Palestinians here. I am taking an Australian passport [through a recent marriage to a Lebanese woman living there whom he met online], and my friend Farukh is getting a German passport through his marriage to his cousin there—so you see, soon it will all be gone.

(Interview, August 10, 2004)

Like Yusif, Mahmud expresses a concern about the opportunistic ways in which the past is being used, and how suffering is the only thing that counts as history. The expectation that increased interest on the part of the international community will lead to intervention or beneficent action on their behalf is being replaced by a perception that these encounters amount to little more than empty talk. There is a sense—as Stevan Weine observes in his analysis of media coverage in Bosnia—that victims are being exposed to “an unwanted parody of genuine witnessing” (Weine 1999: 183). We see how the “victim” status that much of the research in the camps has helped to create is having the troubling effect of making legal tender of the suffering associated with 1948, as well as the massacre in 1982, while devaluing more mundane and everyday experiences of suffering linked to poverty and social and political exclusion.

In the context of my own work, these angry interventions by Yusif, Mahmud, and others forced me to reconsider the implications for younger generations of refugees of producing an archive in which witnessing is framed in such highly exclusive terms. Not only does it necessarily create a
hierarchy of admissible and inadmissible memory; it also assumes a set of criteria for what kinds of experiences of suffering have the power to interpel late witnesses. Through these comments we are made aware of the speaker’s anxiety at seeing himself outside the frame of witness, reduced to human remnant. As Mahmud explains, “We are dying in this struggle to exist.” And yet, from these new parameters of life, humans still attempt to create imaginaries, continuities, and futures. This for me suggests an important point of “resistance” to our own theoretical categorization, perhaps even de-humanization, of the informants and friends who shape our work.

What struck me most forcibly about Yusif and Mahmud’s sentiments were the uncomfortable questions they provoked about what we—as privileged Westerners—are actually doing when we record narratives of violence or try to bring these subaltern histories into view. There is a sense also in both these comments that people here do not have the luxury to judge or blame—it is a simple matter of survival. If we probe the origins of the “thrill” that Mahmud speaks of, what do we find? It seems to suggest that the very people who purport to be trying to alleviate the suffering of the community—activists, scholars, researchers, etc.—may also be the ones who are minting and circulating this currency of symbolic violence. By documenting histories of violence and suffering in marginalized communities are we facilitating real change in people’s lives? Or are we just easing our own consciences—indulging in what Luc Boltanski calls a “politics of pity” (Boltanski 1999: 3)? The use of testimony as a means of mobilizing solidarity has created the troubling situation in which these intimate and painful memories are authenticated by “making their interiority ever more present, as if experiences were commodities that were being advertised” (Kleinman 2000: 4). Feldman, in his analysis of the role violence plays in “theaters” of witnessing, argues that the validity of these acts depends as much on the violence of the signifier as the signified; it depends, in other words, in part upon the processes by which we, as activists, scholars, and researchers authenticate certain moments of historical memory, or rank some kinds of violence and suffering over others (i.e., through expert knowledge, truth-claiming procedures, and mass media) (Feldman 2004). Farukh, who had been sitting silently on the other side of the room playing with Mahmud’s niece, decided at this point to join in:

Let me tell you a story. When I was a child—after my father was killed during the war—I was able to go to a center in the camp that was created to provide for orphans. Every month we were given money, and once a year some representatives
from the foreign organizations would come to visit the center. When this happened, there were people on the committee that would intentionally ask us not to put on our best clothes—because they thought that it would be better for them if we appeared poor. You could say they were begging off us. . . . You know, ever since I was young, I wanted to be a poet—and I can realize this dream, not like Mahmud who wanted to be a doctor but is not permitted to practice here. I keep my power by going on. I have tried to focus on my education because I feel that I will get another nationality—I don’t want to ignore my nationality as a Palestinian but I know that it is impossible for me to return to Jaffa and I don’t want to go to the West Bank or Gaza, so why keep talking about this? I am sure that I can do many things if I get German citizenship.

(interview, August 10, 2004)

Like Mahmud, Farukh’s comments allude to the potential for change being generated by an increasingly heterogeneous community that is being left untapped by a communal solidarity that draws on invocations of shared culture and past. Both Mahmud and Farukh are clearly invested in the lives that they hope are about to begin for them elsewhere. It as if the idea of emigration serves as an alternative myth of wholeness to the one they have been brought up with. Yusif’s identity and aspirations are shaped as much—if not more—by daily communications on email with a brother in Canada, than with his family in Badawi. Simplified representations of refugee identity and aspiration, epitomized in slogans like “return” (al-‘awda), are reductive, erasing agency and diversity of opinion. While for first-generation refugees “return” means to a physical place that has been experienced and lost, Farukh’s generation appears to understand it in more abstract terms—as a restoration of dignity and justice, the right to respect oneself and be respected (Bamyeh 2003: 841). The role of witness, oriented as it is toward “truth-telling,” must accommodate these new political identities and conflicting viewpoints.

Conclusion

In considering the collective memories of catastrophe and injustice, we are reminded that while the political objectives of legal accountability, justice, and restitution may lie at the heart of much of the work being done on memories of the Nakba, social memory in the Palestinian context cannot
be reduced to formula. Collective memory is necessarily made up of a constellation of personal experiences: as such it is dynamic and consists of conflicting temporalities and impulses that find different ways of interacting with their contexts. In the case of Shatila, memory is being configured both within and between generations, creating spaces of remembrance marked by renewal and adaptation. The comments by Umm Hasan, Yusif, Mahmud, Farukh, Abu Farah, and the many others that I have either cited or held in mind while writing, call on us to reflect on the meaning of witness and the politics that inform it. Empathy may draw us to history and a desire that 1948 be neither denied nor forgotten. Empathy, however, may also cause us to lose sight of distinctions—the ways in which the past does, and does not, continue to shape the present. There is clearly a need to move beyond the coercive harmony of a national identity rooted in past history to include emergent forms of subjectivity, which increasingly privilege individual aspiration over collective, nationalist imperatives. This suggests a need to rethink the politics of what we witness, and what we regard as constituting testimony.

While much writing on the Palestinian experience—particularly in Shatila—has examined how this community relates to its past, few have explored how refugees imagine the future and what their hopes and aspirations might be. By foregrounding, for political reasons, the need to bear witness to the violent history of 1948, not only are such studies obscuring from view seemingly more mundane—though no less devastating—everyday forms of suffering in the present; they may be eliding the creative ways in which refugees deal with their traumatic past, their sense of hopefulness for the future, and the new subject positions being created in relation to it. This was memorably expressed by Yusif when, during the twentieth anniversary commemorations for the Sabra and Shatila massacre, he led a group of his students in the march to the burial grounds, proudly wearing T-shirts that read, “We are still alive.”

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NOTES

1. The repressive measures of the Lebanese Sûreté Générale, and later the Deuxième Bureau, also muted nationalist expression and politically motivated remembrance of the Nakba at this time.

2. See Khalili (2004a and b); Sayigh (1998); Roberts (1999).

3. The Nakba archive, co-directed by myself and Mahmoud Zeidan, funded by the Ford Foundation, the Welfare Foundation, and through private donations, has been conducted in all twelve refugee camps in Lebanon, as well as with unregistered refugees in “gatherings.” The project has been undertaken by refugees from the camps and is a collaborative endeavor. For more information, visit our website: www.Nakba-archive.org.

4. Edward Said along with other intellectuals, artists, and poets—among them Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, Raja Shehadeh, Fadwa Tuqan, Salim Jubran, Naji Ali, Ismail Shammout—has played a crucial role in reinforcing collective identity and the creation of national mythologies. Mahmoud Darwish’s poems are perhaps the best example of this phenomenon, where Palestine and the collective suffering of its people are lyrically transformed into indomitable archetypes.

5. See also Slyomovics 1998; Swedenburg 1991; Sa’di 2002.

6. Sayigh (1979: 107) also refers to this phenomenon: “The village—with its special arrangements of house and orchards, its open meeting places, its burial ground, its collective identity—was built into the personality of each individual villager to a degree that made separation like an obliteration of self.”

7. For a discussion of this phenomenon in oral history see Dakhlia (2001).

8. See the work of ‘Aidun (“We will return”) founded in 1998; the Al-Jana oral history publications and the work of the Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts (ARCPA); Hoqooq, a magazine, produced by the Palestinian Human Rights Organization; the research conducted by CERMOC.


10. The intensification of debate over 1948 and the explicit linking of history to current political events was well illustrated in the conflicts sparked by Teddy Katz’s thesis on the massacre at Tantura, and the disciplinary action taken against his adviser, Ilan Pappé, at the University of Haifa between December 2000–November 2001 (see Esmeir this volume); and also by Benny Morris’ (2002) recantation of his former position regarding the war of 1948 published in The Guardian and Shlaim’s (2002) response published in the same paper the following day. See Sa’di and Slyomovics (this volume) for more detail on Morris’ new position.
11. Klaus makes the important observation in her study of middle-class Palestinians in Lebanon that they “are comfortable enough to consider the possibility for a return . . . privately financed sometime in the future. For them . . . individual memories of lost villas, conserved in black and white photographs, upheld individualistic thoughts about strategies for a homecoming on civilian grounds, perhaps through business relations. Ironically, then, the relations between intensity of national identity and the notion of return has taken on an inverted logic” (2003: 148).

12. The sense of strain and confusion that people feel toward irredentist, nationalist discourse was vividly revealed to me at a rally outside the UN building in Beirut to protest the Geneva Accord in the spring of 2004. After various elders and camp representatives had spoken about the sacredness of return and their love for their homeland, a woman in the group from Shatila that I had come with, was reprimanded by a representative of a Palestinian faction because she had been overhead saying “khara ‘al-’awda– bidna n’ish!” (“shit to the right of return—we want to live!”). Such vehemence—verging on a kind of political blasphemy—may seem paradoxical; she was there, after all, as a willing participant in a rally the very purpose of which was to protest the abrogation of return. Her outburst is less puzzling, however, when we consider the way in which the symbolism of 1948—and the rhetoric of return, as the only right of Palestinians in Lebanon to have featured on the stage of international consciousness and to have been campaigned for by activists—has come to signify all and nothing: not only the affirmation of refugee rights under international law but also the negation of their civil rights within their host country. Demonstrations for return, in other words, have come to represent the only “legitimate” public arena in which refugees can make visible to a larger audience, other less legible—though no less devastating—forms of suffering.

13. Not his real name. Where requested, or where I have felt that the interests of friends and informants might be adversely affected, I have used pseudonyms.

14. This narrative of harmonious relations between Jews and Palestinians prior to the events of 1948 is a phenomenon noted by several scholars who have worked on this period (Sayigh 1979; Swedenburg 1995). Clearly there were close economic and social ties between Palestinian and Jewish communities, particularly those of Arab descent. I would suggest, however, that the theme of coexistence is often foregrounded to accentuate the sense of surprise and betrayal, and to emphasize that this was an event that people were completely unprepared for psychologically, as well as materially. It is also presumably intended to challenge the common stereotype that Palestinians were, and still are, anti-Semitic.
15. Both Sayigh (1998: 50; this volume) and Slyomovics (1998) note how performance of stories is made more arresting and memorable through the appropriation of mnemonic techniques and the embellishing language of Palestinian folklore. Far from being delegitimating traces of the fantastic, the speaker’s ability to build on the expectations of the audience conferred authority by showing them to be adept storytellers.

16. This stands in contrast to the claims often made by scholars and sympathetic commentators that the identity of refugees—even those born in the diaspora, with no direct knowledge of Palestine—remains inseparable from their places of origin. Proof of this affective attachment is frequently adduced by the fact that when asked where they are from, children will invariably respond by naming the communities from which their parents or their grandparents originated, rather than the camp in which they now live. Much of my research suggests that while children may know the name of their ancestral village, the strength of this attachment to place of origin is perhaps more tenuous than is often assumed.

17. These findings contrast to those of Rosemary Sayigh, who in her study of life histories of Palestinian women in Shatila camp found that the starting point of narratives was invariably 1948, not only among those who had actually experienced the events of the expulsion, but also among the younger generation who would have been too young to have personal recollections. If, as I suggest, the political context of remembering is central to what is foregrounded, this political context for Sayigh’s piece published in 1998—when the commemoration of the Nakba was at its height—might in part explain the discrepancies in our results (Sayigh 1998: 45).

18. Daniel (1996: 174) and Malkki (1995) both argue that this is an essential component of political agency for refugees—who by foregrounding who they were prior to displacement challenge official representations of what they have become.

19. Das suggests that this emphasis on contingency, in which existence itself is seen as “blameworthy,” often “masks the real sources of . . . oppression” (Das 1994: 140).

20. See Paul Ricoeur’s distinction between lament and blame, where the former derives from external causes, and the latter is a response to suffering that has an identifiable human source (Ricoeur 1995: 250).

21. In the search for causal relations, an event-based, linear view of history is normally called for—one that differentiates between the past and present. According to this linear model of history the authority and legal value of testimony depend on this distancing as a precondition for objectivity (Feldman 1999).
22. Clara Han’s work on the “untimely” language of socialism in La Pincoya, a poor working-class community in Chile, has been very helpful to my thinking here (Han 2004).

23. Among the key theorists of trauma, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman argue that the Shoah is an event without witnesses—beyond representability—a quagmire of aporias. In this rather circular argument, in which these lacunae appear almost fetishized, all that can be witnessed is the fact of the breakdown of witnessing (Felman and Laub 1992). Cathy Caruth describes this latency of traumatic memory more helpfully, as positioned “between the elision of memory and the precision of recall” (Caruth 1995: 153). See Bresheeth, this volume, for more on trauma and memory.

24. As Das reminds us, in translating suffering into words, we may deny its reality as effectively as censorship and repression, since discourse all too readily dissolves “the concrete and existential reality of the suffering victim” (Das 1995: 143).

25. It is important to bear in mind that the estrangement of the physical and social spaces of memory is particularly advanced in Shatila because of the violent disruptions that followed the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, the “War of the Camps” between 1985–87, and internal intra-factional disputes during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

26. Debbora Battaglia has argued persuasively that theories of memory need to accommodate the idea of “forgetting as willed transformation of memory”—not in terms of loss, but as carrying its own constructive force” (Battaglia 1992: 14).

27. As Leslie Dwyer notes in her study of memories of violence in Bali (1965–66), “The social effects of violence and the realist discourses deployed to address them are often discontinuous, with programs of reconciliation or recovery or social repair faced with more complex cultural forms that may be recognized” (Dwyer 2004: 1–2).

28. This is similar to comments made by Raja Shehadeh about how a standardized vocabulary of national belonging engenders an altered perception of homeland: “Sometimes when I am walking in the hills, say Batn el-Hawa, unselfconsciously enjoying the touch of the hard land under my feet, the smell of thyme and the hills and trees around me, I find myself looking at it, it transforms itself before my eyes into a symbol of samadin, of our struggle, of our loss. And at that very moment, I am robbed of that tree; instead, there is a hollow space into which anger and pain flow” (cited in Parmenter 1994: 86–87).

29. Among them, the Israeli air raid that destroyed Nabatiyya (1973), the attack on Tel al-Za’tar—carried out by Lebanese Christians, with Syrian backing (1976); the “War of the Camps” (1983–1987) when Amal militias besieged Beirut camps—also
with Syrian support; and the “Internal Wars” (1989) when Arafat loyalists were pitted against Syrian-backed Palestinian factions.

30. Giorgio Agamben identifies this mode of subjection as central to the logic of twentieth-century bio-power: “no longer to make die or to make live, but to make survive. The decisive activity of bio-power in our time consists in the production not of life or death, but of a mutable and virtually infinite survival” (Agamben 1999: 155).

31. Efrat Ben-Ze’ev makes the point, elegantly, when she says that “Palestinians are a “classic” diaspora, and yet they also embody post-modern features” (Ben-Ze’ev 2005: 127).

32. The shifting attitude of Farukh’s generations toward “return” resonates with the controversial claims made by Sari Hanafi about its diminishing significance in refugee communities (Hanafi, 2002; 2005).