

## PREFACE

More than 120 *village memorial books*, about the more than four hundred Palestinian villages that were depopulated and largely destroyed in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, have been published.<sup>1</sup> Compiled as documentary histories and based on the accounts of those who remember their villages, they are presented as dossiers of evidence that these villages existed and were more than just “a place once on a map.”<sup>2</sup>

This book examines one facet of what it means to be a Palestinian refugee by examining how the villages and their histories are part of people’s lives today. Based in multisited research work, this book explores the roles that the village has played in people’s lives since the 1948 War. My sources are diverse: I collected village books in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, and Israel, and conducted ethnographic research and collected more village books in Jordan and Syria. My research traces how people have conceived of the textual representation of their villages in book form, from the perspectives of both the authors writing village books and the audiences reading them, and it examines the types of knowledge these books engender and what representing that part of their history means to the Palestinians.

Why do Palestinians write these village books? In cataloguing, describing, creating, and narrating their histories, the authors of village books seek to pass on information about their villages and their values to coming generations. Some books were written by older men who grew up in the village and felt that recording their family and village history was their nationalistic duty. A few books were composed by young female social activists who sought to transform their communities through connections to their heritage. The majority

of authors, middle-aged men, were born in their villages but left as children and wrote these books to ensure that their children and grandchildren will know the villages as they did.

The authors have conceived of their books as histories, often in a very local, familial, and documentary sense, borne out of their desire to record for their descendants the lives, the land, and the village culture that were lost in 1948. To record that past, they have turned to the older people who remember the village and have, most often, reconstructed a collectively held vision of what village life was like. My ethnographic research revealed the ruptures and disagreements that were sparked within the refugee communities over how their histories were presented in the village books, which provoked strong reactions from readers and calls for public apologies, reprints, and second editions.

As they constructed these texts, the authors embedded their narratives within that of the Palestinian national struggle for political rights and for a Palestinian state. The rise of these local histories, which began to appear only in the 1980s, paralleled the waning of pan-Arabism and the end of the armed struggle of the PLO following its exile in Tunis in 1982. Palestinians' interest in recording these local histories shifts the struggle of ordinary Palestinians from focusing on a distant (and now largely discredited) leadership to attending to their own voices, stories, perspectives, and histories. As Ted Swedenburg discusses in his article on the Palestinian peasant as national signifier, the *fallah* (peasant) has always carried multiple meanings as resistor to the specific form of Israeli settler-colonialism as well as maintainer of customs that "secure a national culture's timeless character."<sup>3</sup> But the village books allow the former peasants themselves to valorize their contributions to the national history of Palestinians, thus contributing to the development of the nationalist discourse that asserts a Palestinian presence on the land that is rooted in the histories of peoples' everyday lives.

The codification of this local history in the village books finds different expressions when used by Palestinian communities in commemorative events such as marches of return, plays about village life, and school assignments that concern pre-1948 Palestinian history. By analyzing the content of the books and their stories, accounts, and portrayals of Palestinian life before 1948, we can understand which subjects and events contemporary Palestinians want to include in their history and keep alive to define who they are. I also read the village books to see how the dominance of certain stories and perspectives marks the influences of various powers in both the past and the present: the

dominance of men as the voices of village history, the carryover of certain class and family hierarchies into the diaspora and the elimination of others, the re-creation among the younger generations of a particular vision of village life that romanticizes and glorifies the village, and the role of the village history in creating a land-based Palestinian identity. These books of local history also allow authors to write over or silence other narratives and subjects, which I attempt to unearth and comment on throughout. I conclude by examining how Palestinians connect across the geographies of dispossession that have characterized their contemporary lives, using the social structures of the village, family relations, and new technologies.

Because a clear historiographical picture of pre-1948 village history has not yet developed, my contribution seeks to raise awareness of issues related to the writing of history, the ways in which peasant history is recorded in the absence of written sources, refugee understandings of home, the pull of local and familial concerns, the attraction of memory, the forces that silence and repress, and ways of commemorating the past. These local histories are shifting away from oral narratives and toward written forms, and away from familial knowledge and toward public spheres; my analyses therefore focus on these transitions in terms of inspiration, publication, content, narrative form, authority, and reception during the embryonic creation of a genre of local history. My suppositions and surmising here are meant to contribute to long-standing discussions of these issues and, hopefully, to generate new ideas. Given the difficulties in understanding the context of the production of the village books in all of the places in which they are produced and how they are received by the village communities in the diaspora and in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel, and given the difficulties in dating the writing of these publications, I am reluctant to make definitive declarations. To use the words with which Ijzim village book author Marwan al-Madi closes his book, “I am aware that the information I was able to collect remains fragmentary [ . . . ], therefore I ask that people [ . . . ] write to me and provide me with missing information that they have so that I can include it [in the next work].”<sup>4</sup>

#### **MY OWN GEOGRAPHIES AND POSITIONALITY**

I have been collecting Palestinian village books off and on since 1990, when I found the first two village books in the Birzeit University series, with their distinctive black and red covers, in an east Jerusalem bookstore on Salah al-din Street. I struggled through reading them, because of their mix of Modern

Standard and colloquial Arabic, but also because I was only in my third year of Arabic study. When I lived in Jerusalem in 1995, Sahira Dirbas gave me her 1993 book on Salama village and I pored over it, loving its bricolage of photos from the village, reproductions of a diary, and astute summarizing of village life. During this time, through edifying conversations with Susan Slyomovics while she was conducting research for her book *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian village*, on the once Palestinian and now Israeli village of 'Ayn Hawd/Ein Houd, I also began to understand the scope of village books as local productions on a national scale. While in Jordan in 1998, I found that the Abdul Hameed Shoman Library in Amman had a collection of thirty or so village books. Hooked on their stories of village life, in 2002 I began in earnest to pursue research on the village books. I now have in my collection more than 112 books on destroyed villages (and know of 10 more that I do not have), more than 30 on Palestinian cities, and 40 or more books that are histories of still extant villages in Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. To complement the textual material I work with, I began ethnographic research in 2005, and interviews with village book authors took me to Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, where I lived for almost eight months spread over multiple years.

My position as an American researcher figured at all times into this research—a result of the world we have created. My American passport allowed me to travel easily to all of the places where Palestinians live today, something that a Palestinian (even with an American passport) might find challenging. I lived in Egypt while studying Arabic for three years in the late 1980s and 1990s, while a university student (undergraduate and graduate), and I spent four years in Jordan—in Amman, Irbid, and in a village in the south—living, studying, conducting research, and volunteering in grassroots social development organizations. I also spent more than three years living in the West Bank, where I began my first research project, collecting oral histories of Palestinians who lived in Jerusalem before 1948.

Although I am fluent in Arabic, both written and spoken, and speak a Palestinian dialect almost without an accent, my Americanness informed all of my interactions with Palestinians and Arabs, whether living among them or interviewing them. At the most basic level this meant they knew that the stories they were telling me were for consumption by others, by people outside of their communities. Rhoda Kanaaneh, who grew up as a Palestinian-American inside Israel and writes about Palestinian-Israelis, found that “people were aware that my narrative about them would eventually travel in global cir-

circuits—circuits that have not been too kind to them.”<sup>5</sup> At the outset of interviews, often my interviewees would give me lectures about American foreign policy and the history of Palestine. Because I am an educated, white American, I would be told to make sure that my people understood how Palestinians (and Jordanians, Lebanese, and Syrians) viewed these subjects. I was seen as the conduit for telling their stories and having their perspectives reach America—both its people and its halls of political decision making.

I am grateful for these interactions because they provided the opportunity for people to tell me what concerned them and not just to answer my questions. I understand these interactions partly as their speaking to someone who represents the power of the United States. On a more methodological level, these interactions allowed for a situation in which not all of the questions were driven by me and in which people could tell me in their own language what they thought about my country and my government. These opportunities allowed them to see that I wanted to hear their perspectives as individuals and as Palestinians. I always listened (although sometimes with an eye on the diminishing time left on the recorder), and often responded with my own perspectives. I was always honest with them about my work and background, forthcoming about my position, and forthright about what I believe. I saw them as colleagues, and argued with them over ideas, their opinions, and mine, and expressed myself freely. I mention this here because researchers are often either seen to be passive absorbers of information or, worse, accused of hiding information about ourselves in order to get what we need or want from informants. I did neither. I also took time and made the effort to engage with scholars and communities in the Arab world, presenting my research in Arabic in public talks and written publications, which has been possible thanks to my wonderful colleagues there.

Beyond my Americanness, I engendered no small amount of consternation among many people because of my name. Was I Jewish? I would explain that I spent every Sunday morning of the first eighteen years of my life going to a very warm, open, progressive Christian church in my small hometown in northern California, a church that gave me a sense of community, an anchor for my family, and a humanist perspective. Because Protestants do not wear crosses with the same vigor as Arab Christians who are Catholic and Orthodox, I did not wear the outward symbols of Christians that my interviewees knew. One author of a village book in Jordan (may God be generous to him) even came to see me a week after I interviewed him to ask me “*mitakdeh innik*

*mish yahudiyya?*” [Are you sure you’re not Jewish?]. The Palestinians in Jordan were unique both in this suspicion of me and in the religious conservatism of some of the older male authors. I found that it was only they who would not shake my hand (or any other woman’s hand), following a newfangled trend of religious conservatism that encourages people to avoid any physical contact between the sexes outside of the family. They did, however, invite me into their homes; answer my questions; ply me with tea, coffee, fruit, and nuts; and share their trials and successes as authors. Their religiosity in no way impacted our intellectual exchange.

Palestinians living in Lebanon, the West Bank, Israel, and Syria did not share these ultraconservative norms or have as many suspicions about me. I remember a slight trepidation when going to interview an author on my very first visit to one of Lebanon’s refugee camps. The posters of Palestinian and Lebanese martyrs, new and old, hung from the walls, and children’s kite strings were braided into the thick masses of electrical wires strung in the tiny, dark alleys. I had just finished reading the author’s book the night before and had noted that the introduction was written by the general secretary of the Islamic Jihad in Lebanon. I had grown accustomed to Jordan’s social religious conservatism; now I contemplated how a particular political-religious bent in Lebanon might affect this elderly author’s perception of me. At the end of our very warm interview, he walked me out to the main street, his arm linked in mine, patted my hand, and invited me to come back to visit again. He was not conservative in the ways I had come to expect when living in Jordan. I continue to exchange greetings with him via a female mutual acquaintance in the camp.

One of the advantages of doing research over a long period is the ability to witness change. In my interactions with Palestinian people in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I found that the verbal dressing down of American foreign policy was always prefaced or followed by “but we have no problems with the American people.” Following the increased violence in Palestine/Israel and the isolation of Palestinians on the world stage, the complete lack of U.S. initiatives to address Palestinian issues, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the 2004 re-election of George W. Bush as president of the United States, these pro forma denials of anger toward the American people diminished. People saw the complicity of the American population in the dispiriting policies of the United States and made sure I knew it. Whereas many of them live in autocratic regimes in which they have no say in politics or are from a politically

disenfranchised minority, they saw me as coming from a country that touts itself around the world as the greatest democracy. In their minds, so many years of U.S. citizens voting for presidents and congresses who clearly have failing relations with and policies toward the Middle East signals to Middle Easterners that the policies that Americans have been exporting to the world are what the American people are choosing. Needless to say, we had many interesting discussions. I must be sure to emphasize, however, that despite their attacks on America's foreign policy and on the American people's fairly silent complicity with it, the Arabs and Palestinians with whom I interacted as interviewees and colleagues were unfailingly kind and generous to me.

My own history has taken me across borders and into cultures, religions, and languages in ways that are informed by the global pressures and forces of politics, patriotism, class, race, gender, fear, and belief. When I was a child, my two grandmothers told me stories of their lives that fascinated me. One homesteaded in southern Colorado in the early 1900s, made butter, cut hay, and put up jam each summer; the other was a working-class San Franciscan who lifeguarded at Seal Point, painted her nails red, and smoked Camel cigarettes. They both gifted me with the love of stories and everyday life, which I brought to this study of Palestinian village history. This book is my attempt to explore what the living memory and recorded history of the Palestinian geography of dispossession that took shape in the twentieth century means for Palestinians today.