

Identity in Exile: The Case of Palestinian youth refugees

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The experience of not having a home is the actual and long-term lived experience of various and growing refugee populations. For these groups, not having a home has had implications not only for a sense of belonging, but also the related notion of identity as it relates to lost homes and homelands. The Palestinians are one such refugee group. In Lebanon alone, an estimated number of over 380,000 have lived in refugee camps or among the population at large for close to 60 years.

Drawing upon Stuart Hall's notion that identity is not fixed and predetermined, but is fluid and always hybrid as a starting point, this ethnographic research seeks to address the mediated construction of a national identity among Palestinian youth –between the ages of 18 and 25 – living both inside and outside the refugee camps in Lebanon. More specifically, this research seeks to examine the ethnography of a process: how being displaced and de-territorialized shape identity and a sense of nationness in the absence of a formally recognized nation-state

The great majority of Palestinians alive today were born in exile. For the youth population, Lebanon is the only home they have known. Thus, their understanding and knowledge of Palestine has been available only through second-hand accounts, whether orally communicated or mediated constructions and representations. Through these second-hand accounts, the younger generation – the third now living as refugees – has a constructed understanding of a “home” they've never directly experienced. It is through stories and visuals – photographs and oral accounts – that the generations that have grown up in the camps have learned the details of their lost homes. What they have lost, collectively, has come, in many ways, to define their existence.

For those living inside the camps, and surrounded by older generations of Palestinian refugees, there may be a greater chance of constant and prolonged exposure to stories of lost homes and land. What role do these stories play in the Palestinian youth's identity construction as Palestinian? Does this population respond to displacement from the national order by constructing another nation? Moreover, I want to explore whether the media use by these youth serves to further compliment these stories and provide more contemporary accounts of home. That is, while older generations may, to a great extent, rely on personal memories of home, for the youth these stories may be just one source to understand Palestine, and their media use is a means to further compliment and update their knowledge and understanding of and relationship to home, to Palestine. Such an examination will allow for a richer and distinct understanding of displacement, identity formation, and a sense of home that is mediated.

I then plan to compare these identity constructions with those of Palestinian refugees living outside the camps, and therefore surrounded by communities that are largely non-Palestinian. Are they exposed to the same stories on a regular basis? Do they use media for the same ends? Do those living outside the camps ascribe to a collective identity or assimilate and inhabit shifting identities?

Moreover, because of their long-term presence in Lebanon, which has constantly refused to naturalize the Palestinian refugees, I am interested in exploring the potentially unique relationship these youth have to their host country, and if this impacts their experiences of “home.”

Through interviews, I will discover the stories the youth refugees have been told, how they subsequently use the media and what it represents to their own identity constructions, and what symbolic representations they identify with. All the while, I understand that a mediated culture is only one source youth draw on to make sense and produce knowledge of their everyday experiences, their identities.

While scholarly work on the Palestinians covers a range of multi-disciplinary topics, including limited research on the media, no investigation exists as to identity formation among the youth refugee population in Lebanon. Considering the situation in the Middle East in general, and the situation of the Palestinians specifically, this is a critical time for such research. With no apparent resolution to the refugee problem in sight, this study is significant because of the potential impact these orally communicated or mediated constructions and representations have in shaping the political and social views and perspectives of all Palestinians, including the youth.

This particular age group is being sought out because, as in most populations, it is the youth who are primarily concerned with their future and constructing their identities as adults. Moreover, the youth have no direct recollection of their lost homes and homeland. That is, the collective memory of loss has been handed down to them.

With detailed information based on observations and interviews with youth refugees about their lives, their experiences, their sense of self, and their notions of *Palestinianness*, I will be able to contrast and contextualize more effectively whether and how these refugees, after 60 years of living in the diaspora, continue to construct themselves as Palestinian, and remain connected to an absent nation-state.

Review of Literature

The earliest anthropological-type enquiries among Palestinian refugees (Sayigh, 1979, 1994; Peteet, 1986) tended to be framed by issues of re-settlement, coping and return. For the refugees that fled to Lebanon, up until the mid 1970s, their stories had been silenced, ignored or distorted, and reconstructing a small part of those narratives and experiences was a means of correcting those silences. More recent research (Khalili, 2004, 2005, 2007; Peteet, 1991, 2005; Allen, 2007) turns its attention to the role of memory, identity, and commemorative practices in relation to identity, ‘Palestinian-ness’ and the nation, in the absence of a nation-state. Much of this work has focused on how refugee communities have related to the past, but there is a startling absence of exploration concerning refugees’ presents and futures.

Allan (2007) questions whether memories and commemorations of the past, which have demonstrated a remarkable rise in function in recent years, are not clouding the present day realities and future possibilities for the refugee population. She asks whether the refugees would not be better served by arguments rooted in their present lives rather than a constant looking back at – and in the process attempts at undoing – history.

In fact, from the early ethnographic and historic studies on refugees to the more recent attempts to understand the role of memory and commemoration and their connection to identity, place and the nation, the attention has tended to look back to the past, to understand the plight of the Palestinians, what they suffered, how they continued to suffer, and their sense of identity as connected to memories of loss. These were, for the most part, explorations dealing with generations who had a firsthand and vivid connection to those losses. When the youth were included, it was to uncover how they commemorated those losses, which had been recounted by older generations, and how these related to their identity of being Palestinian. As a third generation of the diaspora reach an age of adulthood, a generation that has no direct memory of the nation-state to which they are connected, and when other members of their own ages are looking to the future, maybe our concerns should be directed more on their futures and what lies ahead, and not exclusively on what has already past.

The present ethnographic research begins by building on these previous explorations, and attempts to address questions concerning the present-day realities of a largely neglected youth population as they construct their identities in connection to an absent nation, and as they look to their future. The youth has no firsthand memory of the experiences of being displaced. Displacement, like the accompanying memories, has been handed down to them.

Moreover, the concepts of displacement, home and mediated identity have been largely overlooked in earlier ethnographies of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Because refugees – like migrants and exiles – often have loyalties both to the spaces they currently occupy and to “home,” a rethinking of anthropological concepts of home, nation and nationness, states and statelessness is necessary.

Although more traditional ethnographic research attempted to elaborate the meaning associated with a connection to and rootedness in place, we need to perhaps expand our enquiry to ask what it means to be uprooted from a place? That is, over the past several decades, as the world faces the impact of new and robust transnational forces, there has been a growing shift of attention beyond the nation-state, incorporating a recognition that perhaps there are more effective means of “collective organization” (for example, Tololyan 1991). As many theorists have suggested (see, for example, Abu Lughod, 1988; Al-Ali and Koser, 2002; Feldman, 2006; Lavie and Swedenburg, 1986; Malkki, 1995), displacement requires different ways of thinking about anthropological concepts – such as culture, community, the nation, and identity. We need to consider the interstitial position of refugees excluded from the categorical system of nation-states, and how diaspora as a type of displacement challenges how we think about the notion of place and disrupts our “normative spatial-tempered units of analysis like nation and cultures” (Lavie and Swedenburg: 14).

Malkki (1995) has explored how the increasingly normal conditions of displacement and deterritorialization may shape how we construct our notions of nation, history, identity and ethnicity. In focusing on refugees, one type of diasporic community, Malkki argues that it is precisely their interstitial position “in the system of nation-states that makes their lives uniquely clarifying and enabling for the anthropological rethinking of nationness, of statelessness, and of the interconnections or intermediaries between historical memory and national consciousness” (Malkki: 1). As such, an exploration of the concepts of identity and nationalism among the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, who, by virtue of their displacement are liminally located, opens up new theoretical spaces of inquiry. It is such explorations that the present research proposes: the process of constructing an identity based on mediations between historical memory

and national consciousness. That is, their notions of home are based on second-hand accounts – an inherited memory – complimented by media accounts and representations.

Anderson (1983) has called for a move from a materialist or structuralist analysis of nationalism toward an approach that stresses what a sense of nationality means, and, within this approach, what connects people to the nation. As such, Anderson views identity, rather than being inherent, as being imagined through common symbols that are constructed in relation to the nation, and these systems of cultural representation produce meanings that bind peoples.

These cultural representations are deeply connected to the entertainment and news products of the mass media. Appadurai (1996) notes: “For the new power of the imagination in the fabrication of social lives is inescapably tied up with images, ideas, and opportunities that come from elsewhere, often moved around by the vehicles of mass media” (Appadurai: 199). As more people are uprooted or living far from “home,” the media becomes even more significant in offering them imaginations of what possible lives can be lived: “...as the deterritorialization of persons, images, and ideas has taken on new force... [m]ore persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives lived offered by mass media in all their forms” (Appadurai: 198). Thus, one of the questions the present research addresses is whether and how the Palestinians view the “prism of possible lives” that could be lived in Palestine via the media they access?

Methodology

An understanding of how Palestinian youth refugees use media to construct their identities and to compliment and/or update their understanding and relationship to their lost homes and homeland is best achieved through ethnographic research. More precisely, the methodology to be employed to carry out the proposed research can be considered to fall under the rubric of media anthropology, a field that has, until recently, remained fairly underdeveloped.

One reason sited for such dearth (Murphy and Kraidy, 2003) involves the challenging nature of media fieldwork. For example, it is often difficult to participate in the somewhat closed or private means (in bedrooms, in cars, using headphones) by which people consume media. In the Arab world specifically, almost no ethnographic research on media use has been undertaken, with very few exceptions, such as Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1998) investigation of how audiences consume the melodrama genre in Upper Egypt¹. Nevertheless, the ubiquity of media and media use today demands that a clearer and more detailed understanding of what media audiences rely on, and when. That is, how people make sense of television, how they relate or incorporate media representations into their everyday knowledge of the social world, and how audience interpretation is often a central part of larger stories and histories, of culture and society.

Field research in both the refugee camps and with refugees living among the population at large will allow me to address how Palestinian youth refugees interpret, experience, and use a specific medium, and how this is integrated with their prior knowledge. I am interested in investigating the different genres and media² Palestinian youth refugees use, and how their

¹ See also Armbrust, W. ed., (2000) *Mass Mediations: new approaches to popular culture in the Middle East and beyond*. Berkeley, London: University of California Press, and Kraidy, M. (forthcoming). *Screens of Contention: Arab Media and the Challenges of Modernity*.

² While I plan to investigate all media use – broadcast, print, internet – the focus of my investigation will be on television and radio, the two media that virtually all refugees have in-

choices inform their sense of identity, their relationship to the nation (or lost homeland), and constructions of what it means to be Palestinian. As Larsen and Tufte (2003) note, the “relationship between identity formation, media uses and cultural change are... increasingly the focus of attention in many audience ethnographies” (Larsen and Tufte: 90).

I plan to spend one year carrying out ethnographic field research in Lebanon, splitting my time as equally as possible between the Palestinian youth population in three refugee camps across the country (one in the north, one in the south, and one in the Beirut area) and among the refugees scattered among the Lebanese population (again in the north, south and center of the country). In each location, I intend to begin by observing the youth as they use media, and the conversations that occur before, after or during their interactions with the media, to allow for a better understanding of the context in which this population is exposed to media. I will then carry out in-depth interviews with 50 youth from the camps and 50 youth from the refugee population living outside the camps. For the interviews, I will use an interview guide with a series of set questions that will be consistent among all interviews, but that will allow the conversation to flow depending on the interviewee’s responses so as to truly access the meanings attached to the youth’s interactions with media texts.

Through previous visits to Lebanon over the last two years to carry out exploratory research, I made contacts with a number of organizations whose work is related to the Palestinian refugees. Through these groups, and through previous contacts, I have already made contact with people in the camps and outside the camps. It is these contacts – who are well connected – that will help me get in touch with Palestinian youth refugees when I return to Lebanon for my field research. To establish a social network of trust in the time available, it will be a problem to attempt to randomly select youth from different camps and different parts of the country to interview. I can secure more trust and hence deeper conversations as a result of being “vetted” by a known and respected camp member.

Preparation for Field Research

Media Studies is an interdisciplinary program and, as such, students are exposed to and trained in a number of methodological approaches. As both a Master’s student and now a PhD student, I have focused my own research on a qualitative approach, and more specifically on ethnography. This may be an extension of my training as a journalist, where through being immersed in an event or space and in carrying out interviews, we arrive at a better understanding of the stories we are reporting. Throughout my course work, I took a number of courses in anthropology departments, where this approach was reinforced.

Two committee members, whose research interests overlap with mine, are supervising this research: Helga Tawil-Souri is a media specialist whose focus is on Palestinian media; Ilana Feldman is an anthropologist whose ethnographies of Palestinian communities in the Occupied Territories have dealt with similar themes of displacement, citizenship, home and the nation.

Having been a Beirut-based journalist for 10 years, I have an intimate understanding of Lebanon and its culture, as well as access to and contacts with various Palestinian communities, living both inside and outside the camps. Moreover, being of Lebanese-Palestinian descent, I am also fluent in Arabic and therefore can communicate with my interviewees in their native tongue.

home access to thanks to illegally obtained cable. Print and the internet, while available, are not as widely used because of the relatively high costs involved.

As I will be dealing with human subjects, the university requires that students complete a survey and submit a detailed application for review by the University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects. I have already completed these requirements, and my research has received approval of the Committee.

Over the past two years, I have spent two months each summer in Lebanon making contacts with Palestinian refugee-affiliated non-governmental organizations and UN agencies. I also carried out exploratory ethnographic research with youth living in one of the refugee camps in Beirut and among the Palestinian refugee population living in the greater Beirut area. From the 28 interviews conducted, it became evident that these youth access the media to make sense and produce knowledge of their experiences, to help construct their identities, to maintain a connection to their “homes” and their sense of Palestinianness, and often to help them look to the future positively. The degree to which these were accomplished varied depending on whether they had spent their lives living in the refugee camp or among the Lebanese population. My preliminary findings suggest that more interviews with youth refugees from across Lebanon are necessary to help demonstrate whether there is a far-reaching pattern among Palestinian refugee youth to use media as a means of constructing their identities, maintaining a sense of nationalism and connection to Palestine, as well as fostering hope for a better future back “home.”

After completing my fieldwork, which I have estimated will take one year, I plan to return to New York University for one further year to complete writing my dissertation. I also plan to write up parts of my research as separate journal articles and conference papers, which I will submit for consideration to both national and international publications and conferences. After graduating, I hope to return to teach and research in Beirut, Lebanon.

Relevance of research

I believe my research will contribute both to theory and method. The ethnographical enquiry to be undertaken for this research will contribute to the growing but still underdeveloped area of media anthropology. There has been virtually little exploration of the role of media in shaping identity, a sense of nationness, and its use to supplement second-hand accounts of past places and events. My solid background in media studies, an interdisciplinary field, along with my sound exposure to anthropology, makes me well suited to carry out the present research.

Moreover, my interests are to examine the ethnography of a process: how being displaced and deterritorialized shape identity and a sense of nationness in the absence of a formally recognized nation-state. Displacement requires different ways of thinking about a number of concepts – such as culture, community, the nation, and identity. It requires a consideration of the interstitial position of refugees excluded from the categorical system of nation-states. As such, a rethinking of the concepts of nation and nationness, states and statelessness is also necessary.

We need to move beyond the limited relationship between historical memory and national consciousness as not all experience a sense of nationalism based on firsthand memory. The youth population is the ideal site for such an expansion. Their connections to the past are not necessarily based on their own memories, but on those handed down from previous generations. Although similarly displaced, the act of being born into displacement potentially means a different process by which they relate to or understand the nation to which they belong, but to which they are no longer and have never been spatially connected. It is this relationship, this process of becoming identified as a Palestinian through second-hand accounts of home -- whether orally communicated or mediated constructions and representations – that I will explore.

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