

## The Disguises of the Mind: Recent Palestinian Memoirs

Terri DeYoung  
University of Washington

### Abstract

This article examines developments in the memoir form in Palestinian literature over time, concentrating on the period since the Oslo Accords of 1993. It begins by briefly looking at new, general theoretical perspectives on the memoir form relevant to recognizing the importance of memoirs by Palestinians. A shift from viewing memoirs as purely the product of individuals to validating the notion of *collective* recollection occurs in the theoretical literature and can be documented in the Palestinian memoir. Similarly, attention to the idea of recollection as *fluid* and as a *process* enriches our understanding of what Palestinian memorists are trying to achieve. This section draws upon the work of such foundational figures as Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Ricoeur, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson. It also incorporates the insights of those who have focused more specifically on the Palestinian memoir form, such as Rashid Khalidi and Susan Slyomovics. These theoretical views are then tested through the examination of fourteen works using the memoir format, ranging from the time of the dissolution of the Palestinian Mandate (Sakkakini, Jabra, Boullata) to the beginning of the new millennium and the decade beyond (Darwish, Barghouti, Amiry and Karmi). The article shows that any literary history of the memoir form in modern times would be incomplete without recognizing and incorporating the Palestinian contribution to this increasingly popular literary genre.

**Keywords:** memoir, Palestinian, collective memory, Israel, literary genre

**T**o write about the memoir in an aesthetic context has always (and probably will always) invite a certain amount of explanation. Fictional representations of life experience have traditionally been given preference in the literary canon (whether Arab or Western) over any kind of retrospective narrative staking its claims to value through its truthfulness. Witness the success and influence of the novel genre since the seventeenth century in both the Arab world and the West. No other form of life writing could claim to equal it in the time of its dominance.

In the last decade, however, the boundaries between the genres of memoir, (auto-) biography, testimonial, and even the novel have become increasingly fluid (Smith and Watson 2010, 274–75). In the twentieth century, autobiography dominated as the genre of “life writing” most authors chose as a narrative framework. But, by the mid-2000s, the memoir form had displaced all these other designations on publishers’ lists in the industry worldwide

(Rak 2004, 483). This has meant that the generic presuppositions underlying the memoir form deserve (re-) consideration and a new respect from students of literature, a development that has not yet been fully actualized.

Moreover, shifting conceptions of the self (and the role played by memory in creating them) over time have changed, widening (or limiting) the scope of material acceptable for inclusion by the memoirist. In the twentieth century, again, cultural focus concentrated on the nature of the self: questions of identity, public vs. private, power and agency, personal responsibility or reflexivity. How the human mind remembers (or equally important forgets), the value of memories, whose memories are considered worthy of preservation, the nature and importance of individual vs. collective memory—all central concerns, structurally, for the memoir form—were not so much devalued as cursorily passed over. The swiftness of the shift can be seen with two of Paul Ricoeur's seminal philosophical works on what happens when “temporal experience and the narrative operation are directly placed in contact” (Ricoeur, 2006, xv), *Soi-même comme un autre* (*Oneself as Another*, 1992) and *Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, 2006). They both view the same phenomenon: the first through the lens of identity and reflexivity and then, a decade later, through the lens of memory and representation. Similarly, Seyla Benhabib explores the rise of modern consciousness in an influential 1992 work, *Situating the Self*, that barely touches on memory. A decade later, Svetlana Boym covered similar ground in a work, *The Future of Nostalgia*, whose central concept—nostalgia—is utterly dependent on a tightly focused and detailed theory of how memory works, culminating in an important distinction between *restorative nostalgia* (a belief in the possibility of absolute return to the past) and *reflective nostalgia* (an attitude that savors the signs of the past, without believing that it can ever be restored) (Boym 2001, 49). Even within the more tightly circumscribed world of Palestinian studies, there is evidence of such a sea change occurring in an even more compressed time frame. When Rashid Khalidi first published his groundbreaking *Palestinian Identity* in 1997, his account of the development of a Palestinian self awareness—though based on a reading of many memoirs—dealt not at all with the problematic of memory. Only a year later, Susan Slyomovics' award-winning *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestine Village* would make often competing varieties of remembering the centerpiece of its investigation, drawing upon the theories of collective memory articulated by Maurice Halbwachs (Slyomovics 1998, xi), neatly summarized in the latter's *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (*On Collective Memory*, 1992). Both books, in their own way, are central to the evaluation of Palestinian memoirs.

This is not even to consider the effect of nomenclature in different languages on the way memoir is conceived. For example, in *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur initiates his investigation of modern philosophical accounts of the human thought (implicitly including memory) through the observation that such accounts seem to proceed predominantly through the medium of the first-person pronoun “I”: thus introducing, initially, a distortion that ultimately may damage the validity of the argument. Do other traditions, for example, follow different, more dialogic models? There is evidence that Arabic is not so egotistical, since the default form of the verb is third-person, not first-person (which the latter is derivative from). Similarly, does use of the noun *mudhakkirat* (memories) in the title of so many of these works in Arabic—derived from a verb that means both “to remember” and “to mention”—have an effect on how the authors conceive of their project? Can memories exist without the act of verbal witness? Certainly in modern times memory is frequently presented as an unstable construct—always shifting between a torrent of unbidden and uncategorizable recollections and the regimentation and limited structures of easily accessible items that most of us feel more comfortable mentioning as we construct our pasts—and the Arabic *mudhakkirāt* neatly subsumes both extremes.

In the case of memoirs written by Palestinian authors at the close of the twentieth century and into the third millennium (sometimes coinciding, but not limited to, the various anniversaries of the traumatic events of 1948 and the displacement of Palestinians from their native land) the answer to this question of the relevance of the term *mudhakkirāt* would seem to be a qualified “yes.” Remembering and mentioning become inextricably commingled. In fact, Palestinian memoirists may have much to teach their counterparts both in other Arab countries and in the West because of the creativity they have brought to bear on the memoir form. Over and over again, we can best enter into an empathetic understanding of these works—and what actuates them—by seeing them both as a “mentioning”—or a testimonial—to what was and is Palestinians’ experience, and simultaneously as a “remembering” of a past that no longer exists (Slyomowics 1998, 28). In this latter respect, it may be wise for us to remember L.P. Hartley’s almost cliché admonition from the opening pages of the modernist classic *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” This motto both highlights what Paul Ricoeur has termed memory as “not-now,” so that “the past and now exclude one another” (2006, 35) and the irretrievable imbrication of certain functions of memory with place (2004, 41). For Palestinians, their identity is eternally called into question when the temporal (the past is “not-now”) and the spatial (“your place no longer exists”) are invoked.

One of the most recent noteworthy entries into this evolving category of the Palestinian memoir is Issa J. Boullata's English-language work, *The Bells of Memory* (2014). In this work, Professor Boullata recounts, in a crisp, focused, straightforward style, his upbringing in a Jerusalem that had already been changed following World War I into the capital of the British Mandate of Palestine and was shortly to undergo another transformation into the symbolic center of the Israeli State founded in 1948. Boullata is one of the few individuals who can still invoke these memories from a personal standpoint and thus the book has a special value appearing now, on the eve of the seventieth anniversary of the *Nakba* (catastrophe).

Charting the effects, on Boullata and his family, of the abrupt transformation in 1948 is largely confined to the last chapter of the memoir. Nevertheless, just as we see in many works from this period, Boullata does not soften the personal impact of the *Nakba*—the foundation of the state of Israel—on his already-formed Palestinian identity. As Boullata himself makes clear, the sudden transformation of a whole educated generation of Palestinians from citizens of a state in the making (mandatory Palestine) to stateless individuals, forced to make their way (with more or less success) in a new, often friendless, world, was a profound blow whose impact continues to resonate to this day. Yet, on the other hand, Boullata in the course of chronicling the events of the *Nakba*, recounts at length the story of his co-worker at the British Mandate Central Prison (where Boullata worked as an accountant), Khalil Janho. Janho would become a hero of sorts for killing a number of Jewish civilians in a daring explosive attack. As Boullata notes, however, this same Janho had earlier sought Boullata's help in stealing the prison monthly payroll (about \$35,000 dollars) destined for the pockets of the Arab and Jewish policeman employed there. Boullata recounts his reaction: "Despite the atmosphere of lawlessness and the increasing loss of government control, I refused to have anything to do with his scheme, preferring to do my official duty and pay the policemen their deserved salaries as I did at the end of every month" (78). Here, we can see how a strong sense of identity as a citizen was being undermined and moral ambiguity as a factor in life was being introduced even before the outcome of the *Nakba*.

The memoir has seven chapters, in which the middle chapter, "The Bookworm" (chapter 4)—by accident or design—has the most detailed and finely calibrated exposition of Boullata's introduction, while a high school student at the Jerusalem Collège des Frères, to the diverse worlds of knowledge and literature that lay beyond his familiar horizons. Earlier on (in chapter 2, "The Lady Teachers") we see the beginnings of his educational journey, where he is introduced to Muslim scripture alongside his

family's Christian prayers and customs (his family lives in a majority-Muslim neighborhood at the time), and where he is acquainted with the idea that the Arabic language is an ideal vehicle to bring together Muslim, Christian, Jewish and even secular individuals in a common appreciation of the specialness of the place and society to which they all belonged. A belief in the power of such an education to create a flourishing and vital society was the birthright of the Palestinians, like Boullata, brought up in this milieu, as it would be for several decades afterward.

At the Collège des Frères, under the tutelage of committed and caring teachers like the Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (who lived mostly in Baghdad post-1948) and the Lebanese-born Mounah Khouri (later professor of Arabic literature at the University of California at Berkeley), Boullata documents his "intellectual blossoming" (41) as he became better acquainted with works like Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* alongside the Arabic writings of the Egyptian Salāma Mūsā (a Fabian socialist born of a Coptic Christian family) and the Arab-American Gibran Kahlil Gibran. These two joined the earlier intellectual influence of the Lebanese Christian writer and novelist Jurjī Zaydān. For this introduction to the world of Arabic literature beyond the confines of mandate Palestine, and its inclusion in the category of world literature, Boullata credits his father's unwavering interest and support, while at the same time indicating enough independence of thinking to observe: "I was certain that the Christian Brothers at my school would not approve of my readings, but I did not let the thought deter me" (44). This chapter, along with chapter 2, provides much valuable information for any scholar concerned with the development of modern educational practice in the Arab world generally.

In constructing his memoir, Boullata draws on two works that certainly must stand alongside his own as milestones in the construction of a strong, cohesive Palestinian identity, a project that would take root and develop both before 1948 and after. The first is Khalīl al-Sakkākīnī's *Kadhā anā yā dunyā* (Here am I, O world) (1955). In mandate Palestine, Al-Sakkakini was an important educator and theoretician of Arab nationalism (Khalidi 2010, 65). He was the author of a series of graded readers used widely in the Arabic school system and on one memorable occasion (24), he visited—in his role as educational inspector—Boullata's class, where he asked the young boy to read a lesson to him and patiently used question and example to lead the whole group to a better understanding of the text. Al-Sakakini's heartfelt blend of personal testimony and social/political analysis—especially in his later works, like his memoir—left a lasting imprint on the young Boullata,

both personally and professionally. It is unfortunate that the early examples of Sakakini's Palestinian memoir (as well as the more recently published collection of his complete diaries) has never been completely rendered into English (parts were translated in Salma Jayyusi's 1992 *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*), though it was translated thoroughly and professionally into Hebrew in 1990.

Sakkakini's work provides a valuable referent point, not only for Boullata's own *Bells of Memory*, but also for another two-volume set of memoirs (translated into English by Professor Boullata in 1995 and 2005) penned by one of the great Palestinian novelists, poets, and critics, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. These were titled respectively (although intellectually they form a seamless whole) *The First Well* (*Al-Bi'r al-Ūlā*, 1987) and *Princesses' Street* (*Shāri' al-amīrāt*, 1994). Both the originals and their translations, when they came out, were not recognized for their importance, a lapse that the future will surely remedy. Since Jabra combined an erudite Arabic literary background with deep familiarity with European (especially English) imaginative works, his excursions into the memoir genre have particular relevance to contemporary notions of multiculturalism. Boullata has done great justice to this aspect of the original in his translation, producing works that read clearly and seamlessly in English, yet omitting none of the nuances found in the Arabic text. And these texts deserve a sensitive translator, for they constitute—as culminations of the subjective idealism found in early Palestinian memoirs—some of the finest contributions to this genre (where Palestinian authors have excelled) post-1948.

*The First Well* (which won the inaugural University of Arkansas Press Award for Arabic Literature in Translation) covers the first thirteen years (1920–1934) of Jabra's life, divided into 21 chapters of varying lengths. In addition, Jabra provides an indispensable introduction to the work, in which he lays down some principles that are of relevance to *Princesses' Street* as well. In particular, it is here that Jabra declares his allegiance to a subjectivist approach to the memoir, indicating that he was directly influenced by the English Romantic Wordsworth's line that "the Child is father of the Man." As he says (xv): "my approach has been to focus on the self [*al-dhāt*], as its awareness increased, its perception grew, its sensibility deepened, and its bewilderment did not necessarily end." That Jabra sometimes adhered more rigorously to this commitment to record his remembrance of impressions as they happened (rather than filter them through adult ratiocination) in the second memoir volume, *Princesses' Street*, does not invalidate the underlying importance of the principle articulated here. Instead, one should supplement its validity with an awareness that another precedent operates



in *The First Well*, to give it an additional poignancy and force. These are the allusions, introduced very deliberately in the middle of the book (in chapter 12), to the story of Aladdin from *The Thousand and One Nights*. There is a constant dynamic introduced throughout the book between the world of mundane reality and the one of wonder and folktale. Similarly, the allusion to Wordsworth and the use of Aladdin as another kind of counterpoint to the author's reconstruction of his past is equally essential to the memoir's quality.

The story of Aladdin was not part of the oldest manuscript of *The Thousand and One Nights*, and seems to have been added to the collection by its French translator Antoine Galland. Galland tells us in his letters that he heard it in Paris from an oral storyteller, the Syrian Hanna. Yet this provenance has never detracted from its subsequent popularity. It has appeared since the 1700s in Arabic as well as European versions of the *Nights*. Jabra's account of his introduction to the story pays indirect homage to its cosmopolitan origin: "One evening [my brother Yusuf] sat me next to him and opened his English [school]book to read me the story of 'Aladdin and the Lamp.' We were sitting on the mat, thumbing through the pages of *New Method Readers* book in the light of the kerosene lamp, our imagination flying from our dim lamp to Aladdin's magic lamp which, as soon as he rubbed it, made a genie appear who realized miracles for him. I said, 'I want to enter the National School like you.' By doing that, I felt as though I would obtain Aladdin's lamp" (100). Jabra subtly ties his own story to that of Aladdin through the naturalistic comparison of his own lamp to Aladdin's, the mark of a great storyteller. But more than that, Jabra links the story of Aladdin (read by him and his brother in English) to frameworks of the nation and of education as a key component leading to an individual's functional membership in a nation.

Aladdin is actually not a true folktale, as it is so often portrayed. It was one of the first examples of a fictional *bildungsroman* (novel of education) in world literature where the growth (and education) of the protagonist over time transforms him from a marginalized street urchin to someone fully capable of assuming the highest position in society, the role of his father-in-law the king. Aladdin, unlike many other *Nights* characters (and characters in traditional narrative in general), is not static, but grows and develops over time as a direct result of his life experiences. Jabra aspires to do the same through the medium of his own education at al-Sakkakini's National School (108).

The certainty that childhood experience creates the adult self very much echoes the basic attitude of Wordsworth when he says: "the Child is father of the Man"—invoked by Jabra in his introduction (xvii) as a guiding principle of his own work. Yet, Jabra is also ambivalent in his allegiance to this principle of the *bildungsroman* in his memoir. After he leaves Palestine in the wake of

the Nakba and goes to Iraq, he continues to chart a definite evolution of his concept of self, principally through his lengthy treatment in the second half of the book of the relationship, entwined in desire and ultimately mature love, that envelopes him and his wife-to-be, Lami'a. Jabra's final entry into mature adulthood would be inconceivable without this relationship—like that of Aladdin and Princess Budur in the *Nights* tale. Without Budur Aladdin could not grow up and claim his proper place in society. Without Lami'a, Jabra could not have accomplished his own transformation. Love gives him the certain knowledge that allows him to be creative and overcome any lingering paralysis of identity associated with being Palestinian and therefore stateless and homeless. Love, whether romantic or through the medium of kinship, recurs often as a cornerstone of Palestinian identity. Fittingly, Jabra's memoir ends with a tribute to his wife, where he says: "As far as I was concerned, writing and occasional painting were as necessary to me as love, friendship, and bread and water. Lami'a knew all that and eagerly made sure I could do them . . . With her wide reading in Arabic and English, her very Iraqi and yet cosmopolitan views, and her critical eye that was not easily satisfied, she followed all that I wrote and all that I painted, and she always had her own enthusiastic and learned opinion . . . But she never lost her ability to tolerate and forgive, and she always gave love the highest place in her life, day after day and year after year" (184–185). For Jabra, Lami'a represented not only someone who supported him, but also a strong personality in her own right, one whose development as a strong and determinedly independent intellect matched his own.

In the years immediately following the Nakba, many important intellectual voices contributed to the growing body of memoirs, some of which (like the Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan's *Mountainous Journey*, 1990) represented important variations on the prototypically masculine narrative of a strong self, always imbued—no matter the challenges laid before the author—with a consistent point of view. Tuqan recounts her struggle as a Palestinian woman to develop an identity not dependent on others, a struggle in which she is powerfully supported by her brother Ibrahim, himself a poet. Like Jabra, kinship and love, together, become the keystone on which an identity may be built.

In more recent years, the perspectives represented in Palestinian women's memoirs have widened. Ordinary women's voices were given a unique airing in Fatma Kassem's *Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memory* (2011) about the struggles of women from Palestinian villages, challenging both Israeli ethnographic accounts that stress Palestinian women's lack of agency and similar official accounts by the Palestinian elite institutions that



minimize the social role of all who have not foregrounded their support for the nationalist struggle. The testimonies Kassem includes in her book exhibit both a more collective (yet less public) sense of memory, and one that is more representative of the concept of *restorative nostalgia* articulated by Svetlana Boym. Thus they problematize a sense of memories (*mudhakkirāt*) as smoothly flowing narratives or testimonies leading to a predetermined conclusion. As Kassem says of her own mother's reminiscences "When reflecting on my experiences with my mother sometimes flashbacks of memory pop up about how my mother brought certain events from 1948 alive in my adolescence. These flashbacks make me realize something that was not so obvious to me at the time—that my mother contributed to shaping my life and identity, along with my views of history, as much as my father did. Her 'trivial' sentences were equally powerful and significant" (Kassem 2011, 31). Memory here is a developing process (a flashback), not a finished product, which must be viewed through the lens of how it is shaped and constantly revised in the present as well as the past of Kassem's adolescence.

Kassem's view of memory as a dynamic process that emerges out of a shared collective consciousness, based ultimately on kinship, complements the strategies of two more conventional female memoirists from the elite who ended up criticizing both the leaders of Fatah and Israel in a rigorously family-based framework: Suad Amiry in her 2004 *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* and Ghada Karmi in her powerful "memoirs of return" to the land she left as a child for London, *In Search of Fatima* (2002) and *The Return* (2015). Amiry reaches out more openly in her book, as well, to a sense of *recollective nostalgia* that privileges juxtapositions that lead to (a salutary) sense of the absurd as she chronicles her attempts to live and care for her mother-in-law during the intermittent Israeli siege of the Palestinian Authority's headquarters in Ramallah from the end of 2001 through autumn of 2002. As she herself points out, she undertook these "diary" entries (thus using a more traditional characterization that points to a sense of narrative cohesion than Kassem's "flashbacks") as therapy in the form of e-mails to absent family and friends, writing becoming a release from "the tension caused and compounded by Ariel Sharon and my mother-in-law" (Amiry 2004, x). Public and personal are juxtaposed rather than integrated.

At first glance, however, Ghada Karmi's two volumes of memoirs follow more in the mold developed by Fadwa Tuqan. They narrate the life story of a young upper-class woman eager to establish a personal identity that is strong and cohesive, using the perspective of outside historical events to situate and often control the flow of personal experiences recounted in the memoir. In this way, they form a valuable supplement to the sort of cohesive

story told in Rashid Khalidi's *Palestinian Identity*. In *The Search for Fatima*, Karmi divides the book into three parts. The first, "Leaving Palestine in 1948," recounts the withdrawal of the British from the Palestinian mandate, the chaos that ensues and the armed confrontations between the Jewish and Arab inhabitants that end in the foundation of the Israeli state and the relegation of Palestinians living in the old Mandate territories to a stateless status. During this final phase of the British withdrawal Karmi and her family leave, first for Damascus, then for England, where Karmi's father Hasan obtains a job with the BBC. Karmi was a ten-year-old when these events took place and their impact is told from her defamiliarizing child's perspective, which clearly places a different emphasis on the elements of the narrative than would be found with an adult voice. In addition, we are introduced to Fatima, a Palestinian village woman, who works for the Karmi family and takes care of Ghada and her siblings. Fatima will be left behind when the family leaves, but her perspective (so different from that of the elite, and elite women in particular) becomes a valuable counterpoint to the other voices in the narrative. In addition, narratives of historical events provide a consistent frame for recollections of a more personal nature, thus giving them a greater definition and distance.

This initial section is followed by a much longer one chronicling the successes and failures attendant upon young Ghada's assimilation into English life. Most notably—unlike the memoirs of Jabra and Boullata—academic achievement is not automatic for her, and she has to constantly strive to be prepared for unexpected challenges. After one such early, humiliating failure, Karmi tells us: "I turned away, filled with misery, and went outside where I found Leslie Benenson waiting by the door. She said nothing, but stood with me in the school yard and, although she never mentioned the mathematics test, I felt that she was on my side. From that moment on we became friends. She was the first Jewish friend I made, not that I ever thought of her as such. In fact, the only reason I knew she was Jewish at all was that the sisters made such a point of telling everyone to which religions the non-Catholic girls in the class belonged. There was myself as the only Muslim, Leslie as the only Jew and four others who were Protestants. All the rest were Catholics" (Karmi 2002, 198). This shared sense of identity, however, is not maintainable in Karmi's world, and by her adulthood she has presented sufficient examples of missed opportunities to reach out and be reached out to by others for her to make a persuasive case that assimilation is not an unproblematic solution to the creation of an identity.

Interestingly, it is when Ghada returns to her homeland in 1991 (as a British citizen) that she begins to find herself encountering others who challenge

her rejection of the concept of assimilation. She gets to know a woman named Samira, whose father is Palestinian and whose mother is a Polish Jew who met and married her husband because both were Communists. Samira, encounters a Jordanian woman whose cruel and crude generalizations about Jews make Samira weep as Ghada looks on: “There were tears in her eyes and all I could do was reach out silently and hold her hand. How much better it would have been if none of it had ever happened: neither what was done to them or what they did to us” (Karmi 2002, 432).

This more nuanced view of the importance of recognizing collective experiences and the permeability of boundaries between self and other very much controls Ghada’s quest for Fatima (or her descendents) in the last section of *In Search of Fatima*. The notion of seeking out her old nurse is part of what sets Ghada’s first journey to Israel in motion in 1991, but she does not find success until the end of the second volume of her memoirs, *The Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (Karmi 2015, 314–316). In this sense, as in Jabra’s case, it is worth considering this volume as more of a continuation of *Search* than a separate work. Toward the end of the second volume, Karmi finally finds Fatima’s nephew, who shows her an old photograph of his aunt, who had died in 1987:

It was a black-and-white photograph, its edges a pale ochre color due to its age. Looking straight at the camera were a man and a woman . . . . Next to [Muhammad, her brother] was Fatima. I stared and stared at her face, avidly searching her features for familiar traces that would evoke my memory of her. I could not believe I had finally recovered her elusive image, so hidden and unreachable for years, and could see her at last. Her expression was serious and unsmiling. She wore a loose head covering under which her dark hairline was visible, and her features were fine with an aquiline nose and thinnish lips. Her eyes were dark and soft as they looked into the camera. From her face it was impossible to know what sort of person she was beyond the fact that that she looked kind, but purposeful and mature. (Karmi 2015, 273)

This set piece of the photograph neatly captures a commonplace of modern memory work: its instability and tense relationship with the past (Terdiman 1993, 31). The haunting elusiveness of memory—even with the evidence of a photograph to fix it—is the legacy that Karmi’s memoir leaves, and it surely provides a different perspective in its embrace of indeterminacy than many more “official” memorials to the Palestinian past. It is worthwhile viewing Karmi’s (re)-construction of the ties between Fatima and her brother Muhammad, so deliberately vague, with the more straightforward picture

given us by Fadwa Tuqan when she talks about the defining nature of her relationship with her brother Ibrahim.

Other modern Palestinian memoirs (like Mahmoud Darwish's trilogy, begun in 1973 with *Yawmiyyāt al-ḥuzn al-`ādī* (*Journal of an Ordinary Grief*, 2010), continued in 1982 with *Dhākira lil-nisyān* (*Memory for Forgetfulness*, 1995) and concluded in 2006 with *Fī Ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* (*In the Presence of Absence*, 2011)) also represent the self as increasingly more provisional, subject to an array of outside forces that play an evolving role in determining how subjectivity may be expressed. In this, we can see the more modernistic (and even post-modern) concepts of identity, ones where the forces of collective identity, the provisionality of competing identities, and even the necessity of forgetting play a definitive role. Darwish's memoirs, especially the last one, *Presence*, foreground these new issues and explore their impact on identity formation. Darwish can declare unproblematically as a Palestinian in his *Journal*: "Your cause and your life are one. And before all this and beyond it—it is your identity. It would be the simplest thing to say, my homeland was where I was born" (Darwish 2010, 25). By the end of *Presence* his tone is much less assured: "My memory is a pomegranate. Shall I open it over you and let it scatter, seed by seed: red pearls befitting a farewell that asks nothing of me except forgetfulness? Forgetfulness is the training of the imagination to respect reality by letting language rise above it" (Darwish 2011, 157). Here, the dynamic and selective nature of forgetting is exactly what Richard Terdiman has described as the characteristic approach of modern writers to memory: "The past as past is gone without recourse. It then becomes clear that [for these authors] *the most constant element of recollection is forgetting*, discarding the nonretained so that retention, remembrance can occur . . . Loss is what makes our memory of the past possible at all" (emphasis in the original) (Terdiman 1993, 22).

Elsewhere, Darwish drives this point home by using techniques like dialogue, indeterminacy of deictic reference—particularly in the case of pronouns—or the juxtaposition of memoir's subjectivity with historical claims to objectivity in long stretches of each of his volumes to problematize the relationship between individual memory and reality. Yet, in the end Darwish's memoirs continue to owe their greatest allegiance to a single historical event, 1948 and the circumstances surrounding the original Nakba. They could not exist without the changes set in motion by that event. Ibrahim Muhawi, and in the final volume Sinaan Antoon, translate the scintillating Arabic of these volumes lucidly (yet sacrificing nothing of the original) and perceptively into English.

No memoir, however, is more worthy of note or all-encompassing in respect of the entire Palestinian experience than the two volumes

produced by the Palestinian-Egyptian poet Murīd Barghūthī (hereafter, Mourid Barghouti) in the past twenty years. Barghouti's 1997 work, *Ra 'aytu Rām Allāh* (*I Saw Ramallah*, 2000), followed by 2009's *Walidtu hunāk, walidtu hunā* (*I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, 2011) take the history of the Palestinian memoir firmly into new territory, focusing the reader's attention on the period following the 1967 war between Israel and the Arab countries, when the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank (of the Jordan River) slipped from Arab to Israeli administration and control. In fact, Barghouti's first volume begins with the news of the defeat of the combined Arab armies by Israeli forces filtering into the halls of Cairo University at the end of the school year when Barghouti is sitting for his final BA exams. Though education had been for the earlier generations a key component in forging a distinctive Palestinian identity (they were the most educated and sophisticated group in the Arab world), now for Barghouti his education has become a haunting reminder of his impotence. As he waits to cross into the West Bank, the new Palestinian State, in 1997, he recalls the subjects he was tested on in 1967—poetry, the novel, drama, translation, literary criticism, history of European civilization and Latin—only to say bitterly, in spare and unflinching prose, at the end of his reverie: “The examinations are suspended for weeks. They resume. I graduate. I am awarded a BA from the Department of English Language and Literature, and I fail to find a wall on which to hang my certificate (Barghuthi, 2000, 3).” The reality is that all his learning does not guarantee him a place in the world.

This is the first taste he has of displacement, the sense of dislocation and disorientation which recurs again and again in both books and is one of their major themes. As he says at one point: “Displacements are always multiple. Displacements that collect around you and close the circle. You run, but the circle surrounds you. When it happens you become a stranger *in* your places and *to* your places at the same time. The displaced person becomes a stranger to his memories and so he tries to cling to them. He places himself above the actual and the passing” (emphasis in the original) (Barghuthi 2000, 131). Here, Barghouti highlights one of the epiphanies of the modern understanding of memory; its duplicitous nature. You believe, because you remember, that you are retrieving the truth yet, in fact, memory and reality may have only the most tenuous of connections. For modern intellectuals and literary figures, memory is a construct, which can be molded according to the goals, the teleological narrative, of the memoirist's viewpoint. It is no surprise, then, that in the first chapter of the second volume, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, this foregrounding of displacement is literalized. Barghouti and his fellow passengers in a taxi are lifted over a trench dug in a road to make

it impassable by a crane that picks up the taxi and deposits it on the other side of the trench (19–21). Barghouti—thanks to his superior education in both Western and Arabic literature—is able to contextualize the experience in an appropriately exalted context. He calls the crane operators “the two Greek gods” (recalling the clichéd *deus ex machina* of Greek dramatic tradition) and rounds off his allusions with an invocation of some appropriate lines from the great poet of the *nahḍa* (Arab cultural renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), Muhammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī. Yet, in the end, he acknowledges that the literal “displacement” that made their journey possible was the product of the enterprise and cleverness of their driver Mahmoud—a figure more reminiscent of Aladdin—the street child who becomes king because his actions result in justice—than a typical modern intellectual.

Barghouti’s memoir—particularly its second volume—has many moments of disillusion, where it becomes clear that the solution of older problems only generates new ones. Mahmoud Darwish, for example, had sought the validation of self in an identity card (or, more to the point, a passport) in one of his early poems. Barghouti, on the other hand, obtains an identity card from the Palestinian Authority only to find that this does not have any impact on his sense of self, much less his ability to pass from one place to another: “The soldier at the checkpoint confiscates my papers because he doesn’t like the look of me for some reason and the distance between me and my identity becomes the distance between his pleasure and his displeasure” (Barghuthi 2011, 80). Though the soldier here is Israeli, the scene is, of course not limited to there, as anyone who has run afoul of a TSA screener in a modern American airport can attest.

Similarly, bitter humor and the awareness of unreality it valorizes, is the only psychological weapon Barghouti can muster on a number of occasions, as when he is confronted for the first time with the Wall being (at that time) constructed to separate Palestine from Israel. “The Wall makes you long for colors. It makes you feel that you are living in a stage set, not in real life. It imprisons time inside place. The Wall is a word that has no definition except in the dictionary of death. It is the fear felt by our children and the fear felt by the other’s state, for the Wall is the fear of both its sides.... I tell myself that I have lost all feeling. I tell myself, if nothing makes me cry any more, perhaps I would do better to laugh. And laughter would be easy: the victims of the ghettos of the West reintroducing them in the East! In the third millennium, the Jews putting themselves in a ghetto again! And of their own free will, this time. Some of Israel’s more intelligent politicians have said the same but no one has paid any attention” (129).



What lurks behind this pessimism, of course, is the fact that this is one particular instance of a much more general return to past models that seemed to have been superseded. After all, the American intellectuals who celebrated the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989 now watch helplessly as walls—literal and figurative—have become a ubiquitous new feature of the American Southwest. Barghouti, as a Palestinian whose entire existence is caught up in an endless cycling between identity/freedom and border/repression, is simply more exquisitely sensitive to, and more adept at, registering the issue within his own recollection.

Despite the fact that, in many places of his memoir, Barghouti seems to surrender to despair, especially despair at the ability to construct a strong, consistent identity as his predecessors in the genre of memoir had done, he never does completely. As he exclaims at one point late in *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*: “Am I contradicting myself here? Yes! I’m contradicting myself and it amazes me that people are terrified of exposing their contradictions, flying off the handle in dismay at such an ‘ugly’ charge and defending themselves as vehemently as if their honor had been attacked . . . Sometimes I apologize for my contradictions and sometimes I don’t” (Barghuthi 2011, 209). In this last acknowledgment, Barghouti embraces an essential element of modernist identity: the recognition that identity is an evolving process, and when it comes to an end, the subject is no longer alive in any meaningful way. The other element that is operative throughout both memoirs—and thus provides the necessary thread of continuity—is Barghouti’s constant evocation of his wife Radwa ‘Ashore and his son Tamim as figures who give meaning to his personal experience. In this, in a sense, he is evoking the same sense of collective identity formed through desire and mutual love, that Jabra used so effectively at the end of *Princesses’ Street*. when he spoke of his wife Lami ‘a. Kinship (alongside the more affiliative relationship of marriage) plays a decisive role in the generation of a collective identity.

In fact, at the end of his ruminations, Barghouti goes even farther than this embrace of contradiction as a means to self-development, tempered by the power of love for others. He calls for an active, mindful recognition that the “past is prologue” to a new beginning: “The Palestinian cause is starting over again, from the beginning. Wasn’t the beginning that a land was occupied and has to be reclaimed? And that a people was expelled from its land and has to return? Is the end that we have to today anything other than that beginning?” (Barghuthi 2011, 214). In this spirit, Boullata’s memoir calls us to the same project, and even more to the point, his and Barghouti’s work, should inspire us to re-read all the past Palestinian memoirs discussed here (and all that are to come in the future) with new eyes and a new sensibility.

Of necessity, this has been only a selective, and not a comprehensive, reading of Palestinian interventions in the genre of memoir that have emerged since the early 1990s. But even this limited selection shows that Palestinian authors have much to communicate to other students and practitioners of the genre in these rapidly changing times.

## Memoirs Cited

- Amiry, Suad. 2004. *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law: Ramallah Diaries*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Barghūthī, Murīd (Barghouti, Mourid). 2000. *I Saw Ramallah (Ra'aytu Rām Allāh)*. Translated by Ahdaf Soueif, forward by Edward W. Said. New York: Anchor Books.
- Barghūthī, Murīd (Barghouti, Mourid). 2011. *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here. (Walidtu hunāk, walidtu hunā)*. Translated by Humphrey Davies, forward by John Berger. New York: Walker Publishing Company.
- Boullata, Issa J. 2014. *The Bells of Memory: A Palestinian Boyhood in Jerusalem*. Westmount, Quebec: Linda Leith Publishing.
- Darwīsh, Maḥmūd (Darwish, Mahmoud). 1995. *Memory for Forgetfulness (Dhakira li-al-nisyañ)*. Translated and introduction by Ibrahim Muhawi, foreword by Sinan Antoon. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2010. *Journal of an Ordinary Grief (Yawmiyyāt al-ḥuzn al-ādī)*, Translated and introduction by Ibrahim Muhawi. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books.
- . 2011. *In the Presence of Absence (Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb)*. Translated by Sinaan Antoon. Brooklyn NY: Archipelago Books.
- Jabrā, Jabrā Ibrāhīm. (Jabra, Jabra Ibrahim). 1995. *The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood (Al-Bi'r al-Ūlā)*. Translated by Issa J. Boullata. Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press,
- . 2005. *Princesses' Street: Baghdad Memories (Shāri' al-amīrāt)*. Translated by Issa J. Boullata. Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press.
- Karmi, Ghada. 2002. *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*. London: Verso.
- . 2015. *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*. London: Verso.
- Kassem, Fatma. 2011. *Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memory*. London: Zed Books.
- Sakkākīnī, Khalīl al-. 2003. *Yawmiyyāt Khalīl al-Sakkākīnī*. Edited by Akram Musallam with an introduction by Fayṣal Darrāj. Ramallah: Khalīl al-Sakkākīnī Cultural Center.
- Ṭūqān, Fadwā (Tuqan, Fadwa). 1990. *A Mountainous Journey: An Autobiography*. Translated by Olive Kenny. Poetry translated by Naomi Shihab Nye and Salma Khadra Jayyusi, foreword by Salma Khadra Jayyusi, introduction by Fedwa Malti-Douglas. London: Women's Press.

## Other Works Cited

- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Edited, translated, and introduction by Lewis Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Khalidi, Rashid. 2010. *Palestinian Identity*, 2nd Edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Rak, Julie. 2004. "Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity." *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 37 (3-4): 483–504.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2006. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Slyomovics, Susan. 1998. *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. 2010. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd Edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Terdiman, Richard. 1993. *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.