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Historicity and the *Nakba* Commemorations of 1998

Tom Hill



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Abstract

This paper examines the debates among Palestinian intellectuals concerning the functions of collective memory and the relative historicity of various modes of historical narration and commemoration, as these were deployed on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Palestinian *nakba*, or catastrophe, in 1998.

Broadly, I examine how and why debates over modes of narration and commemoration of the *nakba* ground dominant understandings of the national function of Palestinian collective memory. Specifically, I examine two major interrogations among Palestinian intellectuals concerning the adequacy, and the avowed purpose, of modes of narration of the *nakba* dominant in the commemorations in 1998. The first is the relative value of witness testimony, academic history, political discourse and literature as modes through which to narrate the *nakba*; whether the authority of these respective modes had, or ought to have, changed in the wake of the Oslo process; and the respective authority of the competing agents of narrative attached to them—survivor, historian, politician, novelist. The second concerned whether the renewed emphasis on the testimony of survivors of the 1948 expulsions enhanced, hindered or precluded historicity in the commemorative discourse—and what national role the intellectual might play in mediating the narration of such testimony.

The interpretation is framed by the literature on the uses and dangers of witness, collective and vicarious memory in commemorative contexts, and the relative authority of memory and history where the two are, or are perceived to be, in conflict. I examine how far critiques of the commemorative discourse in 1998 by Palestinian intellectuals drew on these themes—and how far they were legitimated by the identification of intellectual concerns with national ones.

Keywords

Palestinian history, historicity, intellectuals, *nakba*, commemoration

I.

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger... Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

Benjamin¹

One cannot [...] have a critical and coherent conception of the world, without having a consciousness of its historicity... How is it possible to consider the present, and quite specific present, with a mode of thought elaborated for a past that is often remote and superseded?

Gramsci

The 50th anniversary of the *nakba* in the spring of 1998 prompted an unquantifiable variety of commemorative discourse and events across the Palestinian world²—among the most notable, an enormous ‘march of the million’ in the Occupied Territories on 14 May; in Lebanon, a march to the mass graves of Sabra and Shateela on the anniversary of Deir Yassin, linking the two most resonant massacres in Palestinian national discourse; everywhere films, theatre, poetry readings, music recitals, exhibitions of art, posters and photographs; in print a new history of the war of 1948 by the doyen of Palestinian historians, Walid Khalidi, serialized in the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*,³ or the proclamation of a *Manifesto of the 1,000 [Arab intellectuals] for Palestine*. Projects to systematically elicit and record the testimonies of remaining survivors of the *nakba*, such as that run by Ramallah’s Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, were in the spotlight, part of what was portrayed as a race against the impending time when the events of 1948 would pass beyond memory.⁴ The major speeches on the anniversary itself were delivered by Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Darwish, political and cultural embodiments respectively of the nation, and the national experience, since 1964.

1 W. Benjamin 1999. ‘On the Concept of History’, in: H. Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*. London: Pimlico, p.247.

2 *Commemoration of nakba events: Lectures, Films and Exhibitions*, 1999, Ramallah: Sakakini Centre, is one attempt at a comprehensive listing, though this covers only the events in and around Ramallah. Two Israeli accounts are primarily concerned with the commemorations of the Palestinian community in Israel: H. Frisch 2003. ‘Between Ethnicity and Nationalism: Comparing the *Nakba* Narratives Amongst Arab Palestinians in Israel and Under the Palestinian Authority’, *Israel Affairs*, 9(1&2), 165-186; and B. Kimmerling 1998. ‘Between Celebration of Independence and Commemoration of *al-Nakbah*: The Controversy over the Roots of the Israeli State,’ *MESA Bulletin* (July), pp. 17-19.

3 Cf. W. Khalidi 1998. *Histoire Véridique de la Conquête de la Palestine*. Paris: Livres de la Revue d’Etudes Palestiniennes, and, in Arabic, *Al-Sahyuniyya fi mi’at am*, Beirut: Dar an-Nahar, 1997; *Khamsoun ‘aman ‘ala taqsim Filastin* and *Khamsoun ‘aman ‘ala harb Filastin*, Beirut: Dar an-Nahar, 1998.

4 The Sakakini Centre’s website for commemorative material is www.alnakba.org; a useful discussion of the various websites dedicated to memorializing the *nakba* is C. Prestel 2003. ‘The Memory of 1948 and the Internet: Voices from Below and the Uses of History’, paper presented at the Fourth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence & Montecatini Terme 19-23 March, organised by the Mediterranean programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. Others projects online include the Oral History Project of the Palestinian Diaspora and Refugee Centre (SHAML), housed at http://db.shaml.org/library/oralhistory_intro.htm and <http://www.shaml.org/projects/resaerch/palestinian%20oral%20history%20proj.htm> [sic] or Al-Jana’s at http://www.oneworld.org/al-jana/html/eng/programs/prog_oral.html.

The official commemorations took predictable nationalist forms, inflected to the political moment. Arafat's address to 'our kinsfolk in the camps and the close and remote places in the diaspora'⁵ spoke to perceptions of his frayed commitment and ability to represent a constituency beyond the Occupied Territories—least of all the camp refugees in Lebanon, who had developed their own, oppositional, grass-roots commemorative practices to compensate for their marginalization from institutional discourse in the wake of Oslo.⁶ His announcement that 'we are here to celebrate the memory of the catastrophe'—in particular, that 'I use the word "celebrate" because our being here is a show of strength'⁷—reflected the prevailing tone of the public commemorations: that of self-congratulation for half a century of refusal to be 'red-indianized',⁸ to use the favourite analogy. The dominant narrative was of endurance and success in the face of overwhelming historical odds. In this the PNA statement read by Darwish was typical, its central claim that Palestinians '*have vanquished* all attempts at our obliteration and denial and at the eradication of the name of Palestine from the map of Palestine', and were now engaged upon 'a redemptive journey into the future'.⁹

The anniversary did, however, prompt a striking counter-narrative on the part of a number of intellectuals: an urgent injunction to historicize, through uninhibited self-criticism, what was decried as the linear teleology presented in the nationalist narrative, at a time when that narrative might have been expected, on so resonant a commemoration, to be beyond the reach of scrutiny. The theme was that of exiles and returnees alike, whether they spoke from Ramallah, Beirut or New York: Yezid Sayigh, Rashid Khalidi, Hassan Khader, Elias Sanbar, Musa Budeiri, Mourid Barghouti, Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish to name but a few—none of whom held official posts within the PA, nor were defined by their rejection of such posts as opposed to prior, independent, intellectual authority. The professions of those who raised this theme—poets, historians, sociologists, journalists, essayists, literary critics—made this appeal to historicization through self-criticism read like a manifesto for the national, oppositional authority of the intellectual in Palestinian national discourse: an affirmation of his autonomy from the carriers of official nationalism, and, thereby, of his resurgent relevance in the wake of Oslo. More ambitiously, it could be interpreted as a hopeful attempt—the formulation is Richard Rorty's—'to make the special needs of the intellectual and the social needs of the community coincide':¹⁰ to make it seem, at least, as if the needs of the intellectual and those of the Palestinian were perfectly congruent at the historical juncture of this *nakba* anniversary, carrying the broader implication that these needs had been consistently congruent ever since the *nakba*—as opposed to the changing priorities of Palestine's politicians.

This analysis was everything but triumphalist. Its manifesto might have been Mourid Barghouti's diagnosis in his memoir of return, *I Saw Ramallah*, pre-empting the commemorations: that 'applauding ourselves is not a viable response to what has happened to us, and it does not help us to understand it.'¹¹ Such critics drew the line between suitable and inadequately national uses of history in commemoration and public discourse according to whether the commemorative narrative accurately represented Palestinian experience and contributed to self-understanding—or was merely used as an occasion to reaffirm nationalist pieties, or indulge nostalgia for a golden, pre-*nakba* age. The spectre

5 Y. Arafat on Palestinian television in Gaza, 0905 gmt, 14 May 1998, translation from the BBC *Summary of World News* [hereafter SWN], May 1998, ME/3228 MED/4

6 For an account of these practices cf. L. Khalili 2004. 'Grass-roots commemorations: remembering the land in the camps of Lebanon', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34(1), Autumn, pp.6-22.

7 Y. Arafat, cited in B.McCann, 'View From The West Bank', reproduced at <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1998/israel/palestinian.view/>

8 E.W. Said 2000. *The End of the Peace Process*, 2nd edn., London: Granta, p.xxiv.

9 M. Darwish 1998. 'The Appeal of the Palestinian People on the 50th Anniversary of the Nakba', 14 May, www.pna.org/mininfo/nakba (italics mine).

10 Cited in B. Robbins 1993. *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture*. London: Verso, p.xiii.

11 M. Barghouti 2003. *I Saw Ramallah*. [trans. Ahdaf Soueif], New York: Anchor Books, p.123.

that, underlying these critiques, gave them national potency, was that Palestinians, like any ‘who have not understood the lessons of the past,’ would forever ‘remain mired in the repetition of the mistakes of that past’.¹² that a *nakba* not understood would be without end.

Debate over how the Palestinians have narrated the *nakba*, their central national *lieu de mémoire*,¹³ has a long history beginning with Constantine Zurayk’s *The Meaning of the Nakba* in 1948, the most potent statement of the idea that Palestinian survival is bound up in an adequate understanding of the complexity of the *nakba* and, thereby, of its meaning. Abdallah Laroui’s gloss on Zurayk enumerates the stringent standards of historicity that critics of discourse on the *nakba* in 1998 demanded of it: a warning that:

the failure to understand catastrophes is more fatal to a people than the catastrophes themselves. To understand them, however, one must be prepared to study the causes (thus believe in the chain of events), judge those responsible (thus believe in the freedom of agents), and, lastly, turn this understanding into the basis for action (thus believe in the possibility of continually reformulating the past event)... To cling to the narrative of one’s ancestors... and to hope nonetheless to change the meaning and the weight of the past is *parler pour ne rien dire* [empty talk].¹⁴

Half a century after the *nakba* Palestinian discourse on the event, on this understanding, remained typified, and shackled, by its refusal to study the event’s causes, on the assumption that Palestinians were the guiltless objects of historical forces beyond their ability to influence, and could not have prevented their expulsion—thus that calls for self-criticism were meaningless, attempts to make the victims partly responsible for the crimes of the perpetrator. The critiques of the commemorative discourse displayed in 1998, with or without token prior congratulation for the historical achievements of the nationalist discourse, targeted these dominant terms of national discourse on the *nakba* for urgent revision, collective renegotiation or wholesale abandonment as a ‘blind language’, to borrow Ghassan Kanafani’s characterization of Arab political discourse in the wake of 1967.¹⁵ The implication was that these terms had not only run their course but now actively impeded the national purpose—the preservation of Palestinian identity—they had been designed to fulfil. Rather than individual Palestinian politicians, institutions, political factions, generations or social classes, it was the national metanarrative of the *nakba* itself that was called into question—with some critics openly dubious of the adequacy of 1948, or the very concept of *nakba*, to provide any metanarrative appropriate to the collective identity of Palestinians in either present or future.

The claim that national discourse on the *nakba* lacked historicity denied its memory and commemoration intrinsic value, undermining the dominant representation of memory in Palestinian discourse as the means by which Palestine had been saved, and by which it could, and, inevitably, would, be redeemed. Underpinning these critiques was the notion that Palestinian memory, while it should be preserved, could be not only dangerous but fatal if preserved uncritically. Memory of the *nakba* would, instead, have to be sifted and edited if it were to retain the national function for which it had been rightly valued since 1948. This understanding of the function of collective memory, wary of the unconditional praise of memory typical of the commemorative events of 1998, is analogous to that of such critics of memory discourse as Jacques Le Goff, Tzvetan Todorov or Paul Ricoeur. The manifesto of Palestinian intellectuals critical of discourse on the *nakba* on its 50th anniversary could

12 H. Khader 1998. ‘One Event, Two Signs’, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 2 April.

13 Cf. the characterisation of the *nakba* enumerated by Ahmad Sa’ di: ‘For Palestinians al-Nakbah represents... the loss of their homeland, the disintegration of society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of a hasty process of destruction of their culture... [It] is a Palestinian event and a site of collective Palestinian memory; it connects all Palestinians to a specific point in time that has become for them “an eternal present”’—A.H.Sa’ di 2002. ‘Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity’, *Israel Studies* 7(2) Summer, pp.175, 177.

14 Abdallah Laroui 1974. *La Crise des Intellectuels Arabes: traditionalisme ou historicisme?* Paris: Maspéro, pp.40-1.

15 G. Kanafani 1968. ‘Thoughts on Change and the Blind Language’, *Muhadarat an-nadwa* 1, June. Translated by Barbara Harlow, 1990, in *Alif* 10.

equally well have been Le Goff's injunction: 'Let us ensure that collective memory serves the liberation of men and not their enslavement.'¹⁶ The assumption was that collective memory of the *nakba* had the potential to be the instrument of self-enslavement, whether to nationalism or nostalgia or both—and that the anniversary was a precious occasion to ensure that a resurgent collective memory succumbed to neither.

Far from fighting the resurgence of memories of the *nakba per se*, this understanding of the purpose of memory asserted instead the authority of intellectuals to edit and contextualize the outpouring of memories prompted by the anniversary, thereby endowing them with meaning: to transform them, through critical interpretation, into memory as distinct from, if not necessarily opposed to, mere recollection. Such a sense of the function of memory affirmed, in Todorov's framework, the need to transform merely 'literal' memory of the *nakba* into 'exemplary' memory, symbolic of the past and present omissions and evasions of nationalist discourse—the difference being that 'literal memory, especially pushed to its extreme' as this anniversary invited it to be, 'carries risks, whereas exemplary memory is potentially liberating... Literal usage [of memory], that makes it impossible to go beyond the past event, amounts to the subjugation of the present to the past.'¹⁷ Exemplary memory, *a contrario*, would use such memories exclusively to serve the needs and purposes of the present. This distinction between 'good' and 'bad' collective memory of the *nakba* contrasts, not memory and history, but *mémoire* and *souvenir*, as Ricoeur and others have done. Ricoeur jokes that 'the difference between the young and the old is that the old have many more *souvenirs* and much less *mémoire*'.¹⁸ The ambition of critics of discourse on the *nakba* was, using this distinction, to (re-) edit the un- or sloppily-edited *souvenirs* of the *jeel an-nakba* into a *mémoire* suited to national purpose: to deconstruct nationalist discourse and reconstruct what was portrayed as a more authentic and representative national history.

The implications of this understanding of the function of collective memory far outstripped the issue of how the *nakba* was to be represented. The centrality of *nakba* to national and nationalist discourse gave a critique of its uses—indeed, of whether it had any use at all—potential to forge a space in national discourse from which to critique other, similarly sacred signs of Palestinian identity that intellectuals perceived to be in urgent need of revision after Oslo: an ambitious attempt on their part to affirm a right to critical reflection in, and on, the national discourse. At stake was not only the content of Palestinian national identity but the authority of the modes by which it had been narrated and, by extension, long-established and jealously guarded discursive and political claims to the authority to narrate it. Bourdieu points out that 'even the aim of deconstructing the sacred has something of the sacrilegious about it.'¹⁹ This attempt to deconstruct the sacred, during the most resonant commemoration in the history of the nationalist discourse, had to portray itself as national in order to conceal its sacrilegiousness. It had, that is, to be couched in the idiom of nationalism to challenge that very idiom—at the very least, to portray itself as performing a more urgent national duty than the objects of its critique, be they nationalist discourse or survivor testimony. A common feature of this critique was, then, the identification of intellectual notions of the privileged social role of criticism with existing notions of self-criticism as necessary to national survival. In this context intellectual responses to the commemorations were elements of a broader, post-Oslo attempt to redefine the limits of the permissible in national discourse, for which the anniversary provided a rare opportunity—and which its commemorations sorely disappointed.

16 Cited in T.Todorov 1995. *Les Abus de la Mémoire*. Paris: Arléa, p.7.

17 *ibid.*, p.31.

18 P. Ricoeur, interview with Jean Blain, *Lire* (October 2000), reproduced at <http://www.lire.fr/entretien.asp?idC=36471&idTC=4&idR=201&idG=>

19 P. Bourdieu 1992. *Les Règles de l'Art: Genèse et Structure du Champ Littéraire*, Paris: Seuil, p.304.

II.

‘Rarely can so historical a commemoration have been so lacking in historicity.’²⁰ This opening set the tone, and the agenda, of the critique of the commemorative discourse by the Palestinian-Lebanese historian and journalist Samir Kassir in the *Revue d’Etudes Palestiniennes*, prompted by the commemorations in Lebanon—a critique more sweeping and polemical than most, its assumptions over the function of commemoration and the historicity or otherwise of discourse on the *nakba* a useful index of themes that others with similar reservations introduced more subtly or warily.

Kassir charged that the discursive climate that had surrounded the commemorations had proved wholly inadequate to Palestinian needs, and that this inadequacy threatened Palestinians with ‘forever having to start from scratch’²¹—hence the ominous title of his polemic, ‘*La nakba recommencée?*’, implying that all that had been achieved since 1948 could yet be lost by the kind of discursive complacency he identified in 1998. Palestinians would fail to overcome the consequences of the *nakba* for as long as they failed to understand its meaning in the present; commemorative discourse had precluded such a search for meaning by sanctifying the obstacles to self-criticism. To aspire to such an understanding, the terms of national discourse would need to be radically historicized, its most sacred symbols, *nakba* first among them, ‘subjugated’ to Kassir’s understanding of ‘historical criticism’:²²

Of course, the 50th anniversary of the *nakba*... prompted various historical *recapitulations*... But as for all that touches on the *meanings* of the *nakba*—and of its 50th anniversary—the balance sheet is unedifying... [I]n all that has been said and written on the commemoration of the *nakba*, the only thing that belongs to 1998 is the fragmentation of a political discourse at a loss without referents. Nor is the historicity of the present moment the only thing lacking. That of the event being commemorated is no less inadequate... as if today’s historical consciousness had accumulated nothing in fifty years!²³

The alleged flaws are read into a successful campaign to prevent the participation of Arab Jews in a symposium to commemorate the *nakba*, part of a season organised by Beirut intellectuals, Kassir and Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury among them, at the Théâtre de Beyrouth, that promised, and was prevented from delivering, a ‘critical reading of the last 50 years’ of Palestinian history.²⁴ The frustration of this attempt to incorporate Jews, be they Arab Jews, in public debate on the meaning of the *nakba* is ascribed to a broader immaturity in Palestinian historical understanding: an insistence that the experience of the *nakba* was incommensurable, incomparable and, in some sense, inexplicable; and a naïvely ideological, and, thereby, unhistorical approach to Jewish history, usually expressed by a failure or refusal to engage with it at all as a relevant component of the Palestinian experience.

The anniversary had, in Kassir’s analysis, failed to prompt difficult but necessary interrogations on the past and future of the national discourse, or to lay that discourse open to critical evaluation, as the Théâtre de Beyrouth season had invited it to do—with the threat-laden proviso that ‘the sole guarantees for a culture’s authenticity and survival lie in its capacity at critical thinking.’²⁵ Old, anti-historical habits had triumphed instead, their revival all the more distressing for the fact that they had been overcome in the past in such affirmations of Palestinian historical agency as the Revolution and the first *intifada*. Instead the temptation to ‘project evil outside oneself’ had resurfaced, denying

20 S. Kassir 1998. ‘*La Nakba Recommencée?*’, *Revue d’Etudes Palestiniennes* 17 (Autumn), p.59.

21 *ibid.*, p.65.

22 *ibid.*, p.63.

23 *ibid.*, p.64 (italics mine).

24 Extracts from the manifesto of the Théâtre de Beyrouth programme are at <http://www.alnakba.org/nakba/leb-english.htm>. The panel, entitled ‘Arab Jews: Exile and Roots’, was cancelled after threats from the Syrian Nationalist Socialist Party (SNSP), the Abu Nidal group and a ‘Permanent Committee Against Zionist Cultural Invasion’; the contributions of the Jewish participants were nonetheless read, in protest, by the organizers.

25 Théâtre de Beyrouth Statement of Purpose, <http://www.alnakba.org/nakba/leb-english.htm>

Palestinians any responsibility for or agency in their own history, dismissing introspection or self-evaluation as irrelevant since the historical forces that had determined Palestinian fate since 1948 lay outside their control. The broader flaw is identified as a national habit of reifying the *nakba* that precluded its interpretation as a moment of history, abstracted it from any historical context and, ultimately, literally, ‘obliterated’ its meaning and any possibility of understanding it.²⁶ Kassir extends this logic to other signs of ‘irredentism’ in Palestinian discourse: a generalized obliteration of the historical meaning of the major events in Palestinian history, calculated to sustain a defensive, teleological and religious understanding of history as an implausible, profoundly unhistorical series of unavoidable defeats, with those defeats since the advent of the Revolution portrayed as triumphant successes.

The call to historicize the *nakba* is, then, a means to a far broader critique of the use and status of symbolic events in Palestinian discourse. Kassir calls for the first *intifada* to be reduced from the status of a ‘conceptual antithesis’ to the Oslo process to being ‘a moment of history’; vicarious glorification of Hezbollah’s armed struggle is dismissed as infantile escapism from the hard truth of the idea’s failure in Palestinian historical context, and the need to seek answers to national dilemmas elsewhere than in the fantasy of military victory; a ‘revolution of Copernican dimensions’ will be needed to ‘adapt [Palestinian discourse] to the reality of a conflict that lingers on into the discourse of peace.’²⁷ The challenge is Oslo, the tone of the commemorations of 1998 a refusal to engage with Oslo as a defeat of the national movement requiring critical rethinking of every element of national discourse. The flaws Kassir enumerates mark, he says, a regression to modes of thought that predate, and could unmake, the achievements not only of the first *intifada* but of the Revolution itself. The injunction to national discourse is that it must become self-critical enough to demand that its symbols be historicized or lose the—undisputed—achievements of the national struggle to date.

The stringent notion of historicity defended here would be a harsh judge of the value of any national commemoration. In effect it denies the commemorating community the right to judge the appropriateness of its own commemorative discourse as history, imposing on it demands inappropriate to public commemorative discourse in which, as Eric Hobsbawm puts it, ‘our kind of history’—that of the historian—is ‘not merely incompatible’ with the uses of history to the commemorating community, but ‘destructive of it’.²⁸ Historicity is not the purpose of commemoration, much less of nationalist commemoration, and was scarcely to be expected of that of 1998. It is because these requirements of commemorative discourse were so self-consciously unrealistic that the wide echo among Palestinian intellectuals of similar assumptions about the adequacy of uses of history on this anniversary suggests a more ambitious agenda on their behalf.

III.

Kassir’s critique extends to the symbolic commemorations. The March of the Million was ‘in and of itself a major moment of Palestinian history’, even ‘a conclusive symbol’²⁹—but the ‘lack of echo’ it encountered, like that of the Manifesto of the Thousand, is the mark of ‘lost opportunities’, opportunities whose loss the urgency of the present crisis could not afford. His ostensible focus on ‘all that has been said and written on the commemoration’³⁰ is, though, primarily discursive, concerned with what could not be said, and what had not been written: with the limits of the permissible in discourse on the successes and failures of Palestinian nationalism, and the dangers of allowing these

26 Kassir, ‘La Nakba Recommencée?’, p.64.

27 *ibid.*, p.67.

28 E. Hobsbawm 1998. *On History*. London: Abacus, p.353.

29 Kassir, ‘La Nakba Recommencée?’, p.65.

30 *ibid.*

limits to be drawn by political actors whose investment in the dominant terms of the discourse made them both inapt and fiercely resistant to self-criticism.

The same concern underlies Salim Tamari's critique of 1998's 'endless lectures and essays analyzing the past and reinterpreting it in the light of the present,'³¹ with his narrower focus on the discursive dynamics of the commemorations organised in Ramallah, Jerusalem and Bethlehem by the Sakakini Centre, al-Bireh's Popular Arts Centre and the local universities. Tamari's target—an alarming lack of historicity, not in nationalist discourse, but in the testimony of *nakba* survivors—is more sensitive and problematic. At these events and others like them the world over, pride of place went, as it had on previous *nakba* days, to the inherently poignant testimony of the eyewitness, almost invariably a feature of any panel discussion. The scale of the anniversary only comforted this place, stressing the imminence of the moment when the *nakba* would pass beyond memory, thus the rarity and value of the testimony of those who could still recollect the expulsions of 1948, regardless of how comprehensive, consecutive or historically accurate their narrative might be. Given the value accorded to memory in Palestinian discourse as the defence mechanism of an identity denied, the sacrilegiousness of questioning, or even attempting to redefine, the terms on which survivor testimony was to be valued, as Tamari's critique does, was exacerbated. In his case, critique of sacred items of discourse again suggests the ambitious assertion that the intellectual (in this case the academic) would be indispensable to deconstruct—at the very least, to contextualize—witness testimony if such testimony were to be a means to historical understanding. The voices of the previously voiceless should be elicited and heard in public, but the national meaning of what they were saying could only be drawn out if these voices both were not shielded and did not shield themselves from the interrogations of an audience that Tamari characterises as perplexed at the narrators for having failed to explain their stories adequately.

The typical testimony of the typical testifier, the 1948 refugee, was, says Tamari, local rather than national; dramatic rather than didactic; and, consequently, insufficiently historical to endow these memories of the *nakba*, many of them recounted for the first time, with meaning. The claims are emphatic: the 'absence of the overall picture' in survivor testimony was 'astounding', the 'fabric of daily life that could have *explained*' the events of 1948 'absent', the localism of the experience recounted 'overriding', the testimonies of 1998 unintellectualized fragments of recollection, commemorative memory devoid of history. The academic moderators of these testimonies 'tried in vain to provide the social and political background that engulfed the dramatic moment' of the expulsion: 'to give it the *necessary* interpretation'.³² Far from such interpretation being recognized as a necessary, historicizing complement to a survivor narrative repeatedly recoded by nationalist discourse, academics, in Tamari's version, 'invariably collided against a barrier of astonishment, denial or forgetfulness'³³ on the part of the witnesses whom they prompted for context. Implicit in the critique is frustration that the audience failed to echo the frustration of the academic, accepting too easily that the felt hollowness of nationalist discourse could be countered by an uncritical embrace of the discourse of survivors of the 1948 expulsions, superficially more authentic but no less coloured by official nationalism, self-justifying or lacking in historicity.

The oral testimony reproduced in the anniversary *Revue d'Etudes Palestiniennes* is one contemporary anthology³⁴ abundant with national referents—'exoduses across the whole of Palestine',³⁵ 'we the Palestinians'; survivors who 'wept for Palestine'³⁶ as well as, or as opposed to,

31 S. Tamari 2003. 'Bourgeois Nostalgia and the Abandoned City', *Critical Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23c(1&2), p.173.

32 Tamari, 'Bourgeois nostalgia and the Abandoned City', p.173 (my italics).

33 *ibid.*

34 'Ceux de 1948: Les Palestiniennes et les Palestiniens qui ont vécu la *nakba* racontent', *Revue d'Etudes Palestiniennes* 15 (Spring 1998), pp.30-67.

35 Jamil Abd al-Haqq, from the village of Ayn Ghazal, cited in *ibid.*, p.34.

their village as they fled; mentions of the Arab Higher Committee and Partition Plan—but these can be construed as token, evidently coloured by retrospection and a certain defensiveness on the part of survivors anxious to avoid blame. Retrospection to the effect that ‘it was as if the fate of the whole of Palestine was not in play’³⁷ does, though, suggest a certain self-awareness—if not an implicit admission of generational culpability—from the survivors concerning the predominance of the local in their experience of a national catastrophe. Much testimony was, then, imbued with the national; it was, it seems, the wrong kind of national in Tamari’s estimation, gestures to later, nationalist discourse that obscured rather than explained how the *nakba* was experienced as opposed to how it was later recoded.

The features of testimony Tamari identifies and objects to in the discourse of 1998 do, though, strongly resemble those of history-telling by Palestinian camp women of the *nakba* generation identified by Rosemary Sayigh,³⁸ in which only events that affect the speakers personally are recalled and, for all their clarity and detail, recollections are not connected in the national metanarrative that male speakers, or younger ones of the PLO generation, would tend to give them. These kinds of stories—*qissas*—are denied the status of history—*tarikh*—by either speaker or audience, partly due to a presumption that history is what is told by men—but also partly for lack of being framed in a broader chronological or ideological narrative. The memories of survivors of the *nakba* generation that were excavated in 1998 were indeed atypical of dominant Palestinian narrative to the extent that, because they pre-dated nationalist narrative, they could not be relied upon to cohere with it, leaving open the possibility that undesirable or repressed memories might be inappropriately brought to the surface—notwithstanding that, in the vast majority of cases, they were not. Neither, however, could such testimony be used by the historians and intellectuals present at its excavation as some would have wished: as a means to historicize the nationalist narrative by deconstructing it, pointing out its flaws and bringing to the surface memories it had until now successfully overwritten or hidden from public view.

Tamari’s plea is for the voice of ‘average people’ to be heard without ideological nationalist self-censorship. His caveat is that such self-censorship cannot be overcome without mediation and ‘appropriate tools... so that it can articulate its own experience.’³⁹ It is for ‘new [academic] researchers’ to provide both these and suitable fora for testimony, since, for obvious reason, the public stage was not the arena best suited to the breaking of taboos. The academic’s moderating role is here premised on a portrayal of a professional competence that overlaps with a national need: that the voice of the voiceless—the *jeel al-nakba*, more broadly the refugees as those Palestinians abandoned by Oslo—would have to be interpreted if their experience were to be understood, and their claims pressed in a present in which they were perceived to be under greater threat than ever before. The imperatives Tamari invokes are, then, the same as Kassir’s: not to indulge nostalgia but to transcend it, to undermine the story told by the received nationalist narrative—in short, to ‘de-mystify the whole ideological discourse.’⁴⁰

The commemorative events are ostensibly both target of and evidence for Tamari and Kassir’s critiques. Their function, though, is to vindicate critiques of the dominant national discourse’s ability to represent Palestinian experience that long predated both this anniversary and Oslo. Criticism on the part of intellectuals self-consciously speaking in their role as such targeted the commemorations primarily to the extent that these could be deplored as enhancing, and, perversely, sanctifying, existing flaws in the protocols of discourse—flaws for which a dearth of historicity was the encompassing label. The plea was not that the voice of the intellectual should be listened to, but that it was indispensable that the voice of the refugees should be rescued from discourses that failed to represent

(Contd.) _____

36 Bahjat Abou Gharbiyye, from the villages of al-Qastal and Deir Yassin, cited in *ibid*, p.56.

37 Spiro Munayyer, from Lydda, cited in *ibid.*, p.67.

38 R. Sayigh 1998. ‘Palestinian Camp Women as Tellers of History’, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27(2) (Winter).

39 Tamari, ‘Bourgeois Nostalgia’, p.178.

40 *ibid.*, p.179.

them, and that the voice of the intellectual would be necessary, albeit perhaps not sufficient, to rescue that of the refugee. The refugees, sidelined by Oslo, would need help to reclaim a nationalist discourse that misrepresented their experience, and threatened their existence, at the moment of pretending to defend and celebrate both; they could not be allowed to squander a rare moment when their experience could be restored where it belonged: to the centre of national discourse. The authority invoked to deconstruct the Palestinian national metanarrative as unsound would, however, require a consensus between critic and audience on the national value of criticism—in this case secular, historical criticism—and the national authority of the intellectual as prophetic critic. Critique of the lack of historicity in the testimonies of *nakba* survivors, could, then, be interpreted primarily as a shortcut to targeting the sanctity of the later nationalist metanarrative that had shaped and censored their memories. More broadly, the claim was that criticism and self-criticism were in themselves national values, or should be perceived—should always have been perceived—as such; and that nationalism’s critics were fulfilling a national role valid beyond any personal or political frustration that might have provided other, less evocative grounds for their critique.

IV.

Such assumptions pervaded intellectual interventions around the *nakba* anniversary and its commemorations. Self-criticism was explained and justified as a national value by reference to what its absence has precluded, and would preclude in the future: the self-understanding required for survival; the ability of Palestinians to ‘come to terms with themselves’ or ‘with their own history’, where historical understanding was invariably associated with maturity and self-realization—in other words, with an end to the misfortune brought on by a *nakba* perceived not in the past but in the present continuous.

This dimension of the call to historicity through self-criticism was especially pronounced in critiques in which academic diagnosis took the tone, form, authority and liberty of personal reflection. Yezid Sayigh’s portrayal of the value and necessity of self-criticism, part of the series of reflections by prominent intellectuals in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, was among the most intricate, its key theme that the potential for the experiences of the *nakba* to be adequately articulated had been hitherto denied by the mode, and the protocols, of nationalist discourse. ‘All along’—that is, ever since 1948—‘it has been possible to be critical of the role of this class or that leader, yet too often this uses a levelling, nationalist measure that... suppresses other claims to 1948.’⁴¹ It had, that is, been possible to be critical of everything but the metanarrative that was the feature of Palestinian discourse most in need of criticism. Portrayed as a personal revolt against the ‘tyranny’ this nationalist measure had imposed on female, subaltern and non-institutional voices, an essentially intellectual claim, rejecting the sanctification of any nationalist discourse (in line with the author’s professed post-nationalism), paints the self-congratulatory public grandstanding of nationalist discourse in the present as inherently incapable of encompassing the personal in Palestinian experience. The deconstruction of the experience of the *nakba* that is the centrepiece to this wider dissatisfaction is portrayed as a national imperative on the grounds that those with suppressed claims to 1948 have, and must be entitled to, the ‘varied and layered memories, feelings and even readings of 1948’⁴² denied them by dominant nationalist discourse. National discourse would have to grow mature enough to reflect and accommodate the personal experience of any and every Palestinian—the Palestinian fragment, to borrow Gyanendra Pandey’s term⁴³—including disillusion with, and felt exclusion from, the dominant narrative. Hassan Khader’s condemnation of its inability to do so, in Darwish’s *Al-Karmel*, was harsher still: ‘Self-criticism was not absent [in the wake of Oslo]; it was downright impossible,

41 Y. Sayigh 1998. ‘Reflections on al-Nakba’, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28(1) (Autumn), p.22.

42 *ibid.*

43 Cf. G. Pandey 1992. ‘In Defence of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today’, *Representations* 37 (Winter), pp.27-35.

because it had never been present', forever postponed to an easing of the state of emergency that never came⁴⁴. By impairing its ability to represent national experience, the historical cost of elevating the nationalist narrative above criticism had, Khader continued, been 'exorbitant'.⁴⁵

Of these critics Rashid Khalidi and Edward Said were, on the anniversary, the voices most insistent that Palestinians should 'accept at least partial responsibility for their fate'⁴⁶ rather than be content with a narrative that portrayed them as perpetual but resilient victims, their misfortune to be stoically endured while waiting for the inevitable arrival of historical justice. Yezid Sayigh's exhortation was similar: 'Palestinians must see themselves as agents in their own history, secure in the knowledge that it is possible to evaluate critically the role of various Palestinian individuals, groups and strata and to acknowledge their contribution to undesirable historical outcomes.'⁴⁷ In this sense the call to historicity was in part a call to re-establish the Palestinians as subjects rather than mere objects of their own history, by reformulating the discursive sign—*nakba*—that had come to its critics to symbolize and perpetuate Palestinian objecthood.

The primary characteristics of *nakba* as discursive sign across the previous half-century indicate how profoundly against national and nationalist habit this injunction to self-criticism was. The historical currency of the term was, in Khader's analysis, premised on three themes, each of them militating against the assumption of historical agency: deference to nature, resignation to fate, and a collective relinquishment of responsibility. That the sign should have survived through to 1998 as a combination of these features is, again, ascribed to a single cause: 'the absence of critical Palestinian self-analysis' that would have long ago pronounced these connotations of *nakba* inadequate to the Palestinian present.⁴⁸ Mourid Barghouti, again in a personal memoir, is blunter still: 'disasters do not fall on people's heads',⁴⁹ and colluding in the fantasy that they could preclude their ever being overcome.

An open scepticism that 1948 even deserves to be considered as the source of common national experience underlies several of these critiques. Sayigh, circumspectly, acknowledges 1948 as 'just... a landmark and a turning point'⁵⁰ as opposed to the vanishing point of Palestinian experience, or as radical a break from the history that preceded it as it was usually portrayed, to the extent that the *nakba* had ever been portrayed as a moment of a historical process at all. This personal dissatisfaction with the ability of the dominant narrative to represent legitimates what is evidently a professional, and would-be national, diagnosis: 'I cannot conceive of understanding 1948, nor its meaning for Palestinians today, unless it is bound internally to what went before and what came after'; 'viewing it... statically as fixed in time and space fails completely to satisfy me.'⁵¹ Sayigh's demand is for a 'critical reinterpretation of self',⁵² Rashid Khalidi's for explicit acknowledgement of the Palestinians' own pre-*nakba* historical failures as a community as a means to understand and address the history that resulted from them. The failure to historicize is, again, portrayed as mortal: Palestinians 'must' historicize, recognize and acknowledge their own agency if they are 'ever to put forth a credible demand for recognition of the injury they have suffered', let alone have that injury addressed or repaired.⁵³ The language is urgently imperative: self-criticism 'will be necessary'; history 'has to be let

44 H. Khader 1997. 'Confessions of a Palestinian Returnee', *Al-Karmel*, as translated in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27(1), (Autumn 1997), p.90.

45 *ibid.*

46 R. Khalidi 1998. 'Fifty Years After 1948: a Universal Jubilee?', *Palestine-Israel Journal* 5(2), p.14.

47 Y. Sayigh, 'Reflections on al-Nakba', p.21.

48 H. Khader 1998. 'One Event, Two Signs', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 2 April.

49 Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, p.41.

50 Y. Sayigh, 'Reflections on al-Nakba', p.21.

51 *ibid.*

52 *ibid.*

53 Khalidi, '50 Years after 1948: a Universal Jubilee?', p.16.

back in [to national discourse]'. Palestinians 'must understand' Jewish history; narratives and signs 'will have to evolve'.⁵⁴

The elements of this assumption of prophetic authority are gathered in Edward Said's intervention on the anniversary, identifying historicization through self-criticism as a perfectly congruent intellectual, political and national duty:

As intellectuals and historians we have a duty to look at our history, the history of our leaderships, and of our institutions with a new critical eye... These are serious, and even crucial matters, and they cannot either be left unanswered or postponed indefinitely under the guise of national defence and national unity.⁵⁵

The implication is that intellectuals were—potentially the only—plausible producers and guardians of a historical understanding appropriate to the present state of national emergency, because they were, by virtue of their professional adherence to intellectual values, uniquely open to, and competent for, the required task of self-criticism. A similar sense of self-representation of the intellectual as keeper of a national cause betrayed by the political class underlies many of these critiques of *nakba* discourse. Arafat is reported to have told Hanan Ashwari at the outset of the Oslo process that 'the next phase is not one for poets and intellectuals. It's the era of hard-core politicians.'⁵⁶ The implication of intellectual discourse on and around this *nakba* anniversary was that the current phase was precisely one in which Palestinian poets and intellectuals would be called upon to repair the desertions of the politicians.

Hassan Khader's was the most aggressive form of the critique of the concept of *nakba* itself, as a linguistic sign incapable of representing the complexity of Palestinian identity as opposed to producing endlessly similar, undifferentiated memory in an artificially nationalist key. It is no coincidence that he should also have published among the most critical of the essays on the experience of return in the wake of Oslo that appeared in *Al-Karmel* in the year leading up to the 50th anniversary, its plaintive theme 'I did not find my homeland in the homeland.'⁵⁷ Having been drawn by his own, disappointing return to reformulate the terms of the promise embodied in the discursive sign of '*awda*, Khader's sober deconstruction of *nakba* is the nearest these pieces come to an explicit attack on the value of pre-Oslo national symbols generally, as irredeemable signs of immaturity: 'While *nakba* may have shrouded'—shrouded, not articulated—'what the Palestinians were incapable of doing or expressing five decades ago... [the event is] in need of a revision of its signs'—a task 'more urgent than ever' on its 50th anniversary. The will, and the courage, to engage in the task of revision would be 'proof that the Palestinian narrative has reached the age of maturity' for the first time since 1948—but such will and courage would require a comprehensive 'backlash'⁵⁸ against all that had been previously invested in the *nakba* as sign and, by extension, in the dominant narrative that was predictably recycled, and exaggerated, on this anniversary.

Immaturity, on the other hand, would be displayed by going through the motions of previous commemorations—Khader's example is the public recitation of the names of the destroyed Palestinian villages that was as typical a feature of worldwide commemorations of the *nakba* in 1998 as it had been on previous anniversaries. What is needed, the implication runs, is a radical historicization of memory: a war against nostalgia and the insufficiently sophisticated praise of memory as an unconditional good. Khader's stark conclusion is that the continued absence of self-criticism of national discourse on the *nakba* would be unsustainable, however valid or necessary the reasons for its suppression may or may not once have been.

54 *ibid.*, p.17.

55 E. Said 1998. 'New History, Old Ideas', *Al-Ahram Weekly* 378, 21 May.

56 C. Hitchens, preface to E.W. Said 1996. *Peace and its Discontents: Gaza-Jericho 1993-95*. New York: Vintage, p.9.

57 Khader, 'Confessions of a Palestinian Returnee', p.88.

58 Khader, 'One Event, Two Signs'.

Local and individual political agendas were evidently not absent from these critiques. The coincidence and forcefulness of their respective conclusions can easily be traced to causes more personal than national or intellectual, and the appeal to self-criticism portrayed as a useful means to assert or redeem the oppositional status of individual critics, in particular those critics involved in the Oslo negotiations, or perceived as overly close to the PA since. The rhetoric of self-criticism had a political resonance particularly appropriate to a moment when whatever optimism had accompanied the early years of the Oslo process had evaporated, and the legitimacy of the carriers of the dominant nationalist discourse was in acute crisis. Since the aims and outlook of Palestinian nationalism were widely felt to have lost what congruence they had with Palestinian identity in the present, the appeal to criticize the traditional formulations of nationalism could claim, and convey, national as opposed to partisan purpose by painting such signs as *nakba* as too important, and too perishable, to be formulated by a PA that had ceased to merit the PLO's claim to represent the Palestinian people rather than that arbitrary minority of it which the PA pretended to rule over. Critiques of the dominant narrative were, then, as much discursive power claims on the part of intellectuals as political actors as on behalf of the marginalized voices they claimed to represent; self-criticism, more than an intellectual value, could be the keystone of an oppositional political discourse capable and amenable of portrayal as free of partisan intent or political ambition.

To target nationalist narrative was, of course, inseparable from targeting its carriers in the present; personal, academic or intellectual reflections were inevitably political. The commemorations were a rare opportunity for these political critiques to be cast in personal tones: for oppositional intellectuals to be able to speak on the same terms, and with the same, personal authority, as any other Palestinian invited to excavate their own memory on the public stage—rather than as the negotiators, politicians, or intellectuals with a duty of loyalty to nationalist discourse that they had been for all or part of the previous three decades. If the official commemorations were an occasion for the PA to buy itself time by spending some of the remaining capital nationalist discourse invested it with, the commemorative modes of the reflective essay and reminiscence temporarily lifted the intellectual's duties towards that discourse. Personalized critique no longer needed to be prefaced with a paean to the historical achievements of the PLO to be admissible.

The potential for running political, intellectual and personal argument concurrently is especially apparent in the piece by Yezid Sayigh cited above. This deprecates the representativeness of his own, privileged experience of the *nakba*, highlights the 'narcissism of intellectuals' and the hollowness of their claims to represent the subaltern, acknowledges the author's own 'intellectualization' of 1948 and 'middle-class' upbringing, and the part of this untypically 'cosmopolitan' upbringing in shaping his beliefs, ability and eagerness for criticism—yet still it ends with a thoroughly prescriptive call for 'rethinking, decoupling and reclaiming 1948' as a 'necessity': a challenge to all Palestinians because a distinct challenge to himself as a Palestinian. The call is for an insurrection against the traditional carriers and mediators of Palestinian memory and history: a call that would be valid regardless of the motives or background of its author because prompted by the inability of nationalist discourse to represent, not only the middle-class intelligentsia's experience of the *nakba*, but that of any Palestinian ill-served by nationalist discourse.

A different fusion between tentative but radical claims grounded in the lived experience of being a Palestinian, and as such beyond criticism, but coincident with intellectual beliefs expressed in the critic's academic work and political opposition to the PA, is Musa Budeiri's. As a political commentator, Budeiri holds that 'it is clear... that the constituency of the PA is not the Palestinians',⁵⁹ as a historian, that a Palestinian national identity was forged in exile and not in Palestine itself. The same assumptions are displayed in his role as a reminiscing Palestinian: Budeiri is 'not sure that 1948

59 M. Budeiri 1999. 'The Territorial Question is Crucial', *Palestine-Israel Journal* 6(2).

constitutes a watershed' for all Palestinians, and deems the ring of the word *nakba* 'hollow'. An especially revealing sentence—revealing because so awake to the sacrilegiousness of the sentiment it expresses—runs: 'although I hesitate even to allow myself to think this (at least most of the time), I sometimes imagine that after 1948 there was not a single Palestinian people, but numerous ones... without much in common'.⁶⁰ an interpretation discouraged, if not prohibited, by nationalist discourse on the *nakba* but, portrayed as a courageous surmounting of nationalist habits of thought and speech for the sake of accurately establishing the author's personal experience, one that aspires to the undisputed discursive authority of survivor testimony.

Self-criticism as the prerequisite to a necessary process of historicization was, then, the guiding theme of intellectual discourse on the anniversary, not only in reaction to a commemorative discourse portrayed as disappointing and dangerous, but in anticipation of the anniversary as a rare moment of opportunity, and as an indirect verdict on the dangers of Oslo five years on. The assumption of such a theme had to be that the Oslo process, meaningful or otherwise, had changed the rules, perhaps even the purpose, of Palestinian national discourse in general, and the discourse of Palestinian intellectuals in particular. Darwish later portrayed Oslo as having inaugurated a new era: 'the right time' for 'contemplating the self, expressing disappointment, self-criticism... even sarcasm... towards the national flag.'⁶¹ The reasons for such sarcasm on the anniversary of the *nakba* gestured at a broader sense of role: the assumption that the ambition of any intellectual, be he poet, novelist or historian, should be to free his work from determination by national rather than universal standards. Darwish, again, expresses the position best: 'Our country has certain rights over us [intellectuals], but these rights must not be exercised at the expense of [intellectual work] for ever.'⁶² Oslo could, then, be understood as a step towards the normalization of Palestinian existence that had altered the previous balance of power between the claims of national emergency on Palestinian intellectuals and the autonomy that they aspired to *sui generis*. To be merciless towards the failures of the national metanarrative was to exercise this newfound autonomy.

The account of the significance of the anniversary by the then director of Ramallah's Sakakini Centre, Adila Laidi, combined the themes implicit in each of the major critiques, from the claim that 'now, because the primary concern is not survival, there is time to reflect' to a conclusion of studied ambiguity: 'now that we are lucky enough to control part of the land, it is a great time for people to remember what happened in 1948.'⁶³ The shared assumption is that the territorialization of the national movement had inaugurated both the possibility of self-criticism and the urgency of it. Oslo's blurring of the hitherto clearly defined lines between homeland and exile had necessarily affected the appropriateness of the concepts that had sustained national discourse, and warranted their reformulation, regardless of how appropriate these concepts now seemed. The argument that the 'imagined constructs of the homeland had to be reformulated'⁶⁴ needed not imply that these constructs had always—that they had ever—been inadequate, though in practice the implication was usually present—merely that Oslo had changed the circumstances that had previously imposed deference to nationalist rhetoric, and its symbols.

Had Oslo really reunited Palestinians—albeit some, untypically privileged Palestinians—with their land in significant enough a fashion to override the fear of disappearance that had hitherto determined

60 M. Budeiri, 'Reflections on al-Nakba', p.32.

61 M. Darwish 2002. 'Siesta in the Midst of Siege', interview with Amina Elbendary, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 19 December.

62 M. Darwish 1996. interview with Liana Badr, Zakariyya Muhammad and Munther Jaber in *Dafatir Thaqaifiyya* 3 (June), reprinted in M. Darwish 1997. *La Palestine Comme Métaphore* (Paris: Actes Sud), p.104.

63 Cited in McCann, 'View from the West Bank'.

64 Tamari, 'Bourgeois Nostalgia and the Abandoned City', p.176.

the terms of national discourse—thus to allow for, let alone require, the new era of self-criticism that these Palestinians called for? The answer implicit in much of the discourse was that the qualified return of Oslo did indeed mark the beginning of a reintegration into place and, thereby, into historical time. Darwish's speech on the anniversary assumed that with Oslo Palestine, though it had not yet 'returned' in any meaningful sense, had nonetheless changed direction: that it had begun the process of 'returning to contemporary history after 50 years', reversing the dynamic of the previous half-century.⁶⁵ Self-criticism had been inappropriate while the primary concern of the Palestinian was survival as such, and the primary function of Palestinian narrative—especially that of the historian or poet tasked with preserving national memory—to provide the tools for national survival. Since partial reintegration into territory and history had secured the recognized national status of the Palestinians within the territory of Palestine more firmly than at any time since the *nakba*, the barriers to self-examination, self-imposed to sustain national unity in time of perpetual crisis, had been lifted. Far from a new argument at odds with previous nationalist discourse, the right to self-criticism could be conceived of as one that the total quality of absence from the homeland had unjustly denied Palestinian discourse until Oslo, that had been won back through the achievement of a partial repatriation, no matter how imperfect—and that needed to be exercised if this initial step towards 'return' were to have meaning, and other steps towards a more significant return were to follow.

Whether this portrayal could convince any but the intellectuals who drew this lesson from Oslo, or found it politically useful to draw it, is doubtful. Its appeal is best explained by the need, among disappointed returnees and those who resigned from political positions during or after Oslo, to reformulate their former roles in the national movement. One means of doing so was to reinterpret the culture of national emergency that had hitherto demanded solidarity above criticism as now, for the same reasons as before, requiring criticism above solidarity, enabling intellectuals to engage in a role more congenial to them than loyalty to the PLO had ever been: that of unbridled critical opposition. This presumption that the role and duty of the intellectual was to be critical and oppositional, and to strive to create the circumstances required to free his criticism from national constraints, had long been a prominent part of Said and Darwish's self-fashioning. The perception of a normalized role for the intellectual in the new era that Oslo had begun was characteristic of the intelligentsia that returned with the PLO in 1994 and was swiftly disabused by the PA, the product of a collective sense that the symbols of nationalist discourse were no longer convincing or viable to those who had accomplished an imperfect return, and who thus felt both entitled and obliged to subject these symbols to analysis on terms that might previously have been deemed heretical.

V.

The dynamics of this commemoration, like those of any commemoration, were far less favourable to the expression of qualified uncertainty and doubt than they were to the loud certainties of nationalist rhetoric. On the one hand was the celebratory rhetoric of the PA, jealously guarding its authority to monopolize the meaning of national symbols from those seeking, for whatever purpose, to redefine them. On the other, and, arguably, a reaction to the PA's perceived inadequacy, was a resurgent discursive authority for witness testimony, expressed in a form and public fora that scarcely allowed for, let alone invited, the mediation that intellectuals wished to provide it with.

The central role of witness memory in *nakba* commemoration was scarcely new, though the quantity, novelty and poignancy of it and, perhaps, the scale and number of the public fora in which it was elicited, materially affected its discursive power. The primary discursive phenomenon in 1998, as reported by Tamari, was, to cite Ilana Bet-Al on the power of memory in last years of the former Yugoslavia, an overwhelming power to the words 'I remember'—words that in the Palestinian context

65 Darwish, 'The Appeal of the Palestinian People on the 50th Anniversary of the Nakba'.

of 1998 shared enough of the traits listed below to frustrate intellectuals' ambitions to interpret the experiences remembered, contextualize and historicize them:

'I remember' [is] the power of an event long past, exerting itself upon the present, the power of an individual over a collective, the power of opinion over fact [which cannot] easily be discredited as untrue... 'I remember' is not an exchange—it is an authoritative statement, based on the stark power of personal conviction... [and] resistant to contestation by others.'⁶⁶

In Bet-Al's account, memories 'poured out in an incessant stream' in Yugoslavia from the mid-1980s onwards, as the artificial constructions of nationalism unravelled and other, older sources of authority were sought to fill the gap.⁶⁷ The testimonies Tamari responded to 'kept on flowing in a manner that confounded both narrators and listeners',⁶⁸ to an extent unparalleled on previous *nakba* days. No academic understanding of the social function of history, or of the academic mediation of these memories as necessary, could reasonably be superimposed upon so powerful a set of discursive dynamics.

While the commemorations were, then, a thankless moment for the critiques I have outlined, they could nonetheless be seen as valuable for the opportunity they provided to confirm the post-Oslo reformulation of the role of the Palestinian intellectual. Arguably the most interesting thesis to account for this reformulation is that of the Franco-Palestinian historian Elias Sanbar, who holds that the fundamental change to occur as a direct consequence of partial reterritorialization was in the role of the historian and, more generally, of those intellectuals, poets and novelists included, tasked with articulating Palestinian experience. Oslo, in Sanbar's account of Palestinian historiography, modified, not the purpose of the national discourse, but the historian's ability to define the modes of his work rather than have them dictated to him by the national state of emergency. 'With reintegration into the land it was as if, freed from his political duties, the historian could, *without renouncing his national engagement...* outgrow the registers of defence and illustration'⁶⁹ of the legitimacy of the national cause. Sanbar characterises the plural sources of authority for the role of history and the historian in national discourse prior to Oslo as follows. Beginning with the *nakba*:

history, insofar as it is supposed to ward off disappearance, is a 'science of urgency', [hence] the central, even disproportionate, place now occupied by the historian [in national discourse]. An emblematic figure leading the 'scientific' and the national struggle *concurrently*, the historian is he who knows, all at once, how to draw the lessons of history, to safeguard the past that is denied from its assailants, and, most importantly of all, to provide the scientific arguments necessary to establish the accuracy and the legitimacy of [national] aspirations.⁷⁰

On this account, perhaps the major lesson of the commemorations of 1998 was that not only historians but intellectuals in general were newly emboldened to demand that the modes appropriate to fulfilling their national responsibilities be rethought on terms determined, not by loyalty to any political ideology, but by professional duties as historians and intellectuals that outstripped the duties of loyalty because they fulfilled these better than loyalty ever could. The results of such boldness had, in Sanbar's account, become amply visible by 1998:

After Oslo... finally it [has become] possible to leave behind the defensive approach [to history writing]. A parallel and hugely important phenomenon, albeit unrelated to history *stricto sensu*, is also emerging in the field of the novel! It concerns works whose substance is composed of narratives of the *nakba*... Well might this surprise many. Could it really be that the Palestinians have never actually recounted what happened to them?... Paradoxical as it may seem, the

66 I.R. Bet-Al 2002. 'Unimagined communities: the power of memory and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia' in J-W. Müller (ed.), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.206.

67 *ibid.*

68 Tamari, 'Bourgeois Nostalgia and the Abandoned City', p.173.

69 E. Sanbar 2001. 'Hors du Lieu, Hors Du Temps: Pratiques Palestiniennes de l'histoire' in F.Hartog and J.Revel (eds.), *Les Usages Politiques du Passé* (Paris: EHESS), p.124 (my italics).

70 *ibid* (my italics).

Palestinians, for so long as their exile remained absolute, have scarcely recounted their exodus, as opposed to its consequences... As if the absolute quality of their absence from their land forbade the narration of the genesis of that absence *for so long as a return to the land had not been set in motion*.⁷¹

Sanbar's evidence that Oslo had partially liberated intellectual work from the shackles of nationalist efficiency includes the post-Oslo works of Faisal Hourani and the—Lebanese—novelist Elias Khoury,⁷² or the histories of Yezid Sayigh and Walid Khalidi. Limited though the phenomenon might be to a very few exemplary works, not all of them by Palestinians, Sanbar's is as coherent an explanation as any for changes in the self-representation, and the work, of Palestinian intellectuals since Oslo, to the extent that it encompasses all registers of intellectual work, any of which could conceive of themselves as newly entitled—even duty-bound—to rethink how it might serve the national cause most efficiently, thus the mode in which Palestinian history, fiction or poetry should be written. The pervasive call to self-criticism might, then, be interpreted as a phenomenon whereby intellectuals persuaded themselves that national protocols of discourse and narration, designed for a state of national emergency in which absence from the land was total and the constant, articulate affirmation of Palestinian presence a duty outstripping any other, were newly amenable to revision. Tamari had seen Oslo as the opportunity to free Palestinian sociology from being a *discipline de combat*, its purpose and remit defined by nationalism, to define itself on its own, disciplinary terms.⁷³ The parallel trends in historiography equally suit such an interpretation, with representations of the *nakba* seen as especially ripe for criticism because the *nakba* was that *lieu de mémoire* through which modes of thinking about the purposes of memory might be most searchingly and effectively questioned.

The starkest account of the intellectual's frustrations with the ahistorical nature of national discourse in 1998 is to be found in the fiction that Sanbar cites as hopeful evidence of change—in particular, in the discourse of the narrator of Elias Khoury's novel of the *nakba*, *Bab ash-Shams*, a novel whose ambitions to historicize collective memory of the *nakba* rest as much on its extensive critique of national and nationalist discourse as in its claim to be the first large-scale fictional attempt to narrate the *nakba*. Khoury's narrator, Khalil, is easily interpreted as the suppressed voice in every Palestinian, rebelling against the two dominant discourses that had, by 1998, become empty and unsatisfactory. The first is that of Younes the *fida'i*, symbol of the Revolution, who spends the novel in a coma and eventually dies in what it is tempting but far too crude to interpret as an allegory of nationalist discourse and faith therein. The second is that of Khalil's grandmother, who endlessly repeats stories of the *nakba* from the beginning, *min al-awwal*, never organising them into a coherent narrative. The first is a nationalist discourse that has long ceased to represent Khalil's experience as an average Palestinian, camp refugee and sometime *fida'i moyen sensuel*, neither hero nor traitor. The second is a private one that has prevented Khalil's understanding the *nakba* that he, like the vast majority of Palestinians alive in 1998, suffered the consequences of without living through.

Of Younes, Khalil demands the recognition that “the old language is dead” and must be buried. Of his grandmother, he complains that her recollections “told me nothing”, that she “drowned” and “submerged” him beneath her stories of the *nakba*, that as a result he “knows no *complete* story” as opposed to incoherent fragments, signifying nothing. (His mother, similarly, “told [him] nothing”, “abandoning history”⁷⁴ to the grandmother who alone knew that history first-hand, but failed to convey it.) The critiques of nationalist and survivor discourse meet in Khalil's despairing question of both his grandmother and Younes: “Why do your stories all sound the same?”⁷⁵

71 *ibid.* (Sanbar's italics).

72 Khoury 1998. *Bab Ash-Shams*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab; F. Hourani 1996-2003. *Durub al-Manfa*. Damascus: Kanaan, vol 1; Amman: Dar Sindbad, vols.2&3; Ramallah: Muwatin, vol.4.

73 S. Tamari 1994. 'Problems of Social Science Research in Palestine', *Current Sociology* 42(2) Summer, p.80.

74 E. Khoury 1998. *Bab al-Shams*. Beirut: Dar Al Adab, p.322.

75 *ibid.*, p.600.

Ultimately the appeal to both discourses—that of the revolutionary and that of the survivor—is the same: “I don’t want to hear the same story again. I want to understand!... Let us not return to Ain El-Zeitoun [a village destroyed by Israel in 1948]! Our history begins where Ain El-Zeitoun came to an end.”⁷⁶ Younes the *fida’i* insists that “We mustn’t count the years, we must forget. The years go by, and it doesn’t count! Twenty, thirty, fifty or a hundred, what difference does it make?”⁷⁷ The mortal danger of such an insistence on the irrelevance of historical time—the impermeability to historical change, the consequent inability to react to it—is at the heart of Khalil’s critique of discourse on the *nakba* and, by extension, of Khoury’s. Fifty years of *nakba* mattered, not because they were fifty, but because the historical moment of the anniversary required historicity in Palestinian discourse more urgently than at any other point in those fifty years.

Khoury’s thesis is that literature might be able, as political discourse had not been, to give voice to experiences of the *nakba* not determined by or recoded to fit the nationalist narrative—for instance by putting such experiences into the mouth of fictional characters immune from political admonishment or reprisals. Literature might thus be the only form adequate to prompt the recovery of memories buried and proscribed by nationalist narrative, enabling a new discourse truer to the complexity of Palestinian experience. In Khoury’s interpretation, “since the image of the Palestinian portrayed in literature and the dominant ideology was of heroism and martyrdom, I think the novel [*Bab ash-Shams*] helped liberate people by telling the stories of humiliation and interior defeat that they never told”⁷⁸. The purpose of the intellectual call to historicization as portrayed here is to free authentic memories of the *nakba* from the editing of nationalism: to provide Palestinians with the tools to overthrow the tyranny of nationalist discourse, self-imposed and otherwise, were they only to accept these tools fashioned on their behalf by intellectuals; to embrace rather than repress feelings and memories of defeat, disunity and scandals, the better to incorporate them into an authentically representative narrative. The implication of *Bab ash-Shams*, like that of other intellectual discourse on the anniversary, was that experience of the *nakba* was, fifty years on, too sophisticated to be articulated by political discourse—and that historians and novelists were now those called upon to remedy this deficit of historicity.

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76 *ibid.* p.235.

77 *ibid.*, p.192.

78 E. Khoury 2002. Interview, *The Village Voice*, 18 March.

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