Introduction

Historiography and History of Missing Palestinian Bodies

"Past and future inhabit the present. History could be a hall of mirrors, a spiral maze . . . a door that swings back and forth on its hinges."

Miriam Ghani, 2012

Miriam Ghani makes this point in an interview about her filmic installation "A Brief History of Collapses," a two-screened, floor-to-ceiling visual memoir produced from the perspectives of two iconic buildings, one in Kassel, Germany, and the second in Kabul, Afghanistan, for Documenta 13. Rather than being linear, she argues, time "bends around the tale or the story's will" (Ghani 2012). *Buried in the Red Dirt* shows, to use Ghani's words, how "past and future inhabit the present" in the paradoxical peripheralization and hyperbolization of Palestinian sexual and reproductive life. It makes the case that racism was central to the colonial and settler-colonial order and to the distribution of health, life, and death in British Palestine. Following Ghani's approach to reconstructing the Afghan film archive, in 2016 I entered research on reproduction and quotidian death in Palestine "slantwise," "as if approaching a horse with an uncertain temper" (Ghani 2015, 43, 45).

The 1948 establishment of Israel as a settler-colonial state was radical in its psychic and material impact on Palestinians, most of whom were dispossessed and expelled; more than 150,000 were internally displaced within the borders of the new state (Doumani 2009, 4; Masalha 2008, 127–129). For Palestinian generations living under multiple jurisdictions, 1948 is "not a moment but a process that continues" (Doumani 2009, 4–5). The events of 1948 came to be understood as "the foundational station in an unfolding and continuing saga of dispossession, negations, and erasure" (Jayyusi 2007, 109–110). I sought to avoid such cataclysmic historical points to tell a story

about life and death, and about missing bodies and experiences, that exceeds authorized frames of collective pain and heroism. This required pursuing the "non-eventful quality" (Stoler 2009, 107) of archival and other coeval sources and creating new ones, and using transnational feminist reading practices to analyze different kinds of texts.

I imagined a primarily document-based research project on reproductive death during the British colonial period in Palestine (1917–1948). I ultimately conducted substantial archival research, analyzing British vital records, Department of Health and Colonial Office reports, news stories from the Hebrew press, thousands of pages of correspondence in Palestine Department of Health files, and Palestinian oral history interviews conducted by activists and researchers since the 1990s. A brainstorming meeting in Jerusalem with Anita Vitullo in July 2016 made clear to both of us that original interviews with elderly women would be necessary to address Palestinian abortion practices during the British colonial period given the non-archival nature of the subject and deliberate lack of record-keeping.

Palestinian historians I consulted similarly believed that existing government archives held in Israel and England provided limited information on Palestinian abortion practices given abortion's stigmatization and illegality. I ultimately conversed with dozens of informants in person, and hundreds more electronically, and conducted formal interviews in cities, towns, and refugee camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon with more than sixty people on matters of healthcare, reproduction, and birth control, including twenty-six Palestinian women born between 1917 and 1933 who met my marital and reproductive criteria.[1]

Since death had thinned the ranks of Palestinian women born in 1933 or earlier, Palestinian communities are dispersed throughout the world, and historic Palestine is difficult to navigate given its apartheid segmentations by Israel, I turned to analog and digital oral history (*al-tarikh al-shafawi*) archives on the Web or held in Beirut, Ramallah,

[1] I interviewed other elderly women who ultimately did not fit these criteria, but whose thoughts and experiences I integrate at various points. I gained entrée with little difficulty to refugee camps in Jordan and the West Bank, but in 2017 and 2018 Palestinian refugee camp entrances in Lebanon were extremely militarized, requiring high-level permission to enter, and Gaza was completely inaccessible due to an Israeli blockade.

Birzeit, and Amman to deepen my understanding of Palestinian daily life during the British Mandate period. I learned much of value from the oral history projects, which proliferated from the 1990s as Palestinian activists and scholars interviewed elders before they died in an effort to record Palestinian life before the establishment of Israel in 1948. The oral histories, which recuperate loss and build narrative memory archives, are valuable but limited by the impulse to tell a collective Palestinian story, which by definition is oriented toward historical events considered geopolitically and nationally salient.

The historiography of Palestine similarly continues to be most concerned with the unfolding Palestine Question, and thus with the many dimensions of anti-colonialism, colonialism, settler-colonialism, and national identity. Reproduction and infant and child death are addressed as side notes in some accounts of the 1936–1939 Revolt and the 1948 Nakba (Disaster), usually within authorized registers of traumatic loss, mourning, and resistance. It is unsurprising that the Nakba and its antecedents, which ended a way of life and set in motion multiple situations, sovereignties, and existential crises for Palestinian communities, is overrepresented to a degree that "simultaneously silences" other "lines of inquiry" (Doumani 2009, 6).[2] The historical moment continues to exert its powerful will because it bent time, reshaped space, and ruptured life trajectories on a massive scale. Even feminist scholars who study Mandate Palestine, whose works I reference, do so in a political and discursive context overdetermined by the need to make the case for Palestinian justice. *Buried in the Red Dirt* is not immune from this impulse. Nevertheless, I ask questions on scales less examined, mobilize sources that include literature and film, and rely on my interdisciplinary reading and analytical skills to tell a slantwise story about race, reproduction, and death during and since the British colonial period in Palestine.

Buried in the Red Dirt highlights historical actors such as British Zionist Arthur Felix, who led an antityphoid serum experiment in Palestine; US Zionist nurse matron Bertha Landesman, who led Hadassah's infant and maternal health program in Palestine for decades; and British nurse matron Vena Rogers, who supervised the

[2] The term *Nakba* was first used to describe the 1948 war by Constantin Zurayk in his 1948 book, *Ma`na al-nakbah* (*The Meaning of the Disaster*). Honaida Ghanim offers an incisive critique of the word's implications in the Palestine context (Ghanim 2009, 25–28).

nurse-midwifery program in the Jerusalem district. It calls attention to ordinary colonial subjects such as Palestinian nurse-midwife Alice Butros, who unsuccessfully battled with British Department of Health officials as they refused to provide healthcare for a severely ill indigent child at the Jerusalem Government Hospital; Bahiya Afifi El-Jaby, a Palestinian midwife who crossed colonial boundaries by internally examining pregnant women and giving ill women and children injections; Yona Tsadok, the Yemeni Jewish lover of Palestinian driver `Adel Sha`on, who died in Jerusalem after she received a wanted abortion conducted by a Jewish German woman physician; and the many Palestinian women I interviewed whose embodied, affective, and analytical reflections are woven in throughout to reorient our understanding of Palestinian reproduction, birth control, illness, and death in modern Palestine.

Buried in the Red Dirt "bring[s] out [the Palestinian] dead" (to appropriate James Baldwin's phrase) (Hong 2015, 126–127) in ways that scholarship on Palestine has not. A dominant motif foregrounds the *racialized* distribution of ill health and death in Palestine, attenuated by class and gendered/sexual embodiments and positionalities. I show how ideologically and practically, racism and eugenics shaped British colonialism and Zionist settler-colonialism in Palestine in different ways, informing their health policies, investments, and discourses. The book is influenced by Grace Kyungwon Hong's *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, which challenges the disavowal of responsibility for the "exacerbated production of premature death" (7). Hong calls for a politics of life that acknowledges "the uneven but connected dispersion of death and devaluation that make self-protective politics threaten to render others precarious," especially "occluded and debased subjects" (5–6, 65–66). *Buried in the Red Dirt* also takes seriously Palestinian anti-reproductive desires and practices, including abortion, and critically engages with demographic scholarship that either takes for granted a Palestinian commitment to reproductive futurity or sloppily projects onto Palestinians existing Zionist commitments to Jewish reproduction to fulfill a racialized demographic settler-colonial project in Palestine.

The British colonization of Palestine began late in British colonial history and exhibited path dependence in many ways. The imperial relationship with colonized subjects aimed to assure that on balance much more was extracted than invested. The colonial enterprise was

expected to pay for itself, which meant the colonized were required to subsidize their colonization. Colonial authorities were typically concerned with health and wellbeing in the colonies as conditions harmed their officials and civilian professionals or their labor and economic priorities. Imperial scientific endeavors also motivated interventions. British investment in healthcare in Palestine was limited and infrastructures (water, sanitation, roads, electricity) were built only when they directly served colonial or imperial priorities. Predatory policies, the raison d'être of colonial and imperial projects, exacerbated Palestinians' poverty and hunger and facilitated their disproportionate and premature death. British austerity with respect to Palestinian maternal, infant, and child health was at least partly influenced by a usually unstated concern to maintain a balance between Muslim birth and death rates. British authorities certainly imposed the most brutal direct violence they could get away with on Palestinian subjects when they rebelled, but in their day-to-day lives Palestinians suffered most as a result of poverty, illness, and high levels of infant and child mortality.

British policies produced consequential patterns that were not mitigated, I insist, by differences of opinion or tensions among specific colonial officials and civil servants in Palestine, the Colonial Office, or other government offices in London. Whatever their ideological, ethical, or strategic disagreements, multiple examples show that British medical practitioners and civilian employees in the Palestine Department of Health and other colonial offices were crucial to the functioning of the colonial project. Moreover, they benefited economically and professionally from their positions. I do not understand them as largely well-intentioned experts caught up in the empire's unfortunate goals.

The Palestinian colonial experience differs from others of the same period because an important third player was in the mix – the Zionist settler-colonial movement, a racialized project whose goals British authorities largely facilitated. Zionist elites understood that investments in science and healthcare in Mandate Palestine strengthened their case to Western powers as a worthy settler-colonial "national" project. Such investments not incidentally improved the "quality" and quantity of the Jewish population in Palestine. Colonized Palestinians were forced to fight two relatively well-resourced Western projects that for thirty years worked simultaneously even if they were not always in

harmony. The differential impact of funding, infrastructure, and political agency on health and wellbeing was clear.

The section that follows considers dilemmas in Palestinian archives and archive-based research and discusses my archival sources and practices. The second section explores historiography on the British colonial period in Palestine, which is largely silent on quotidian experiences of reproduction and infant and child death. The third section shows how Palestinian women's lives within their natal and marital families, as well as their reproductive experiences, were crucially shaped by often unremitting physical labor to reproduce households without electricity or running water, class status (that often but not invariably mapped onto urban/rural residency), family gender dynamics, gender inequality in collective beliefs and normative practices, and individual personality. It explores as well Palestinian spiritual and metaphysical explanations and practices related to childbirth, illness, and death. The fourth section discusses the global color line and international discourse on race and racism as relevant to Palestine and Zionism in the twentieth century before the British invasion and colonization of Palestine. The final section briefly summarizes the focus of the remaining chapters.

Value and Vexation: Textual and Oral Archives

I turned to archival research with much trepidation after twenty years as an interpretive and ethnographic feminist scholar primarily working with human subjects and informants and textual and visual sources on contemporary questions. As a late adopter of archival research, I approached the work queerly – that is, by refusing a totalizing methodological or theoretical frame, informed by the Pad.ma collective's "10 Theses on the Archive," which defines "archive" broadly. Recognizing the fragmentary nature of records, members of Pad.ma consider archival work fluid and creative by definition, challenge the bounded and fortress-like model of an archive, and argue for diffusion and distribution rather than "consolidation" and "conservation" (Pad.ma 2010).

Archival researchers in historic Palestine face myriad barriers, much more so for Palestinian researchers with West Bank and Gaza Strip identifications, whose mobility is drastically restricted and who are denied access on the basis of being Palestinian (Banko 2012). As a US

citizen from a major university and an experienced researcher in the region, I largely successfully navigated a number of archives and libraries in Beirut, Amman, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethesda, Maryland.[3] In Israeli contexts, my focus on mothers, infants, and abortion seemed benign and even interesting to gatekeepers in comparison to studying Palestinian collaborators or property records during the Mandate, except I was denied access to a Hadassah folder at the Central Zionist Archives from the second decade of the twentieth century for reasons of security. Palestine Department of Health documents held at the Israel State Archives (ISA) were only available in electronic form since all researchers were excluded from accessing the physical material in Jerusalem. From a studio apartment in Ramallah in 2017 and an ACOR: American Center of Research residency in Amman in 2018, I used tens of keyword searches to research ISA material online and made many requests for indexed but unscanned material that was almost always provided electronically after a few weeks. I downloaded and closely analyzed ninety-four such electronic files from the ISA, the large majority of which were hundreds of pages long, with memos and letters bearing the initials of multiple officials as they moved through colonial offices in Palestine. The usually dry formulaic language used in these documents and the many colonial reports I analyzed hid as much as it revealed, although I occasionally ran into documents that produced a shiver of the unusual, what Arlette Farge calls "a sensation" of catching "hold of the real" (2013, 8, 65), always in fragments.

Ethnographic, triangulation, and analytical practices helped me situate and theorize documents that were difficult to understand on their own, as was the case with the antityphoid serum letters discussed in Chapter 3. I walked into this research project recognizing that "the archive plays with truth as with reality" and would include the colonized on the terms of the colonizer (Farge 2013, 27). I puzzled through bits of evidence as researchers always must and built an argument by focusing on their "condition of . . . appearance," even as I was alert to absences and attempts to obscure (Farge 2013, 30, 71; Stoler 2009, 25). I found most useful what Ann Laura Stoler calls archival "surfeits,"

[3] During this project I acquired the Jordanian citizenship and passport I was deemed eligible for based on patrimony because of border and residency difficulties I faced in Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.

excesses the material itself did not explain (Stoler 2009, 10, 47) because they were central to the ideological and material workings of British colonialism and Zionist settler-colonialism in Palestine.

The 1993 Oslo Accords and the fiftieth anniversary of the 1948 Palestinian Nakba led to a proliferation of oral history projects concerned to document the pre-1948 collective history of Palestine by interviewing particularly Palestinian refugees from villages and communities that Zionist forces ethnically cleansed and appropriated. The oral history projects were partly designed to stave off "forgetfulness" and "growing amnesia" in the present among younger Palestinian generations, as well as to challenge Palestinian "bourgeois nostalgia" (Abu-Lughod and Sa`di 2007, 17, 18, 20). Even earlier, researchers used the oral history method to "recover" and "unsilence" marginalized Palestinian voices given the ideological elisions critical to Zionist and to some degree authorized Palestinian nationalist histories (Masalha 2008, 135–136).

The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee, 1948 by Nafez Nazzal, based on his 1970s interviews with men refugees in Lebanon, is one of the earliest results of Palestinian oral history research (Nazzal 1978). Soon after, Rosemary Sayigh published *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* using oral histories she conducted in 1970s Lebanon with women refugees (Sayigh 1979). Sayigh argues that Palestinian national discourse was at the time biased toward "history," or male memories, activities, and accounts. Women refugees were assumed not to know "the plots," which resulted in researchers excluding their experiences and voices (Sayigh 2007, 138, 139). Sonia El-Nimr is another early adopter of the oral history method in Palestinian scholarship. Her 1990 dissertation is based on a massive study conducted in 1980s historic Palestine with Palestinian men who were rebels in the 1936–1939 Revolt and with British police officers from the period (El-Nimr 1990).

I translated and analyzed interviews in the Jana, Shaml, Al-Musahama al-Siyasiyya (Palestinian Women's Political Participation Oral History Project), Nakba, and PalestineRemembered.com oral history projects with women born in 1933 or earlier, listening for discussion of health, death, illness, and reproduction. I discuss notable characteristics of each of these oral history projects in what follows. As a rule, interviewers did not follow up on expressions of quotidian pain unless they fit within a pre-given collective narrative frame. Lena Jayyusi writes that the collective or "communal voice" is a "feature"

in Palestinian accounts of the 1948 expulsions (Jayyusi 2007, 111). Because Palestinians are geopolitically illegible as victims of a collective trauma, the oral narratives make a case for recognition, ending the continuing catastrophe, and undoing "the mythic Israeli narrative" (Abu-Lughod and Sa`di 2007, 11, 12, 23). I learned a great deal about Palestinian life during the Mandate period as well as the commitments guiding scholars and activists involved in these projects. The interviews shaped my analysis of British colonial discourse and its silences, and illustrate the diversity of Palestinian women's experiences based on class, urban or rural residency, region, family of origin, and personality.

In 1989 Moataz Dajani worked with Sayigh and other intellectuals and activists in Beirut to found the Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts (Al-Jana) (http://al-jana.org) as a volunteer project.[4] Al-Jana developed into a continuing multipronged endeavor of "popular arts and heritage" (*al-funun al-turathiyya*) with Palestinian children in Lebanon to raise their consciousness (*shughul taw`awi*) using active learning methods to teach history, creative expression (theater, film), and critical inquiry/journalism. The project was intended to address the alienation and despair of younger Palestinian generations. Al-Jana eventually published a magazine, widely read beyond Lebanon, and oversaw multiple oral history projects designed to remap with first-generation refugees and to re-enliven for the generations born in Lebanon the wedding songs, folklore, superstitions, saint and sanctuary practices, and embroidery in pre-1948 Palestine.[5]

[4] Dajani, a Jerusalemite banned from returning to Palestine in 1971 after completing his A-levels at Brumanna High School in Beirut, studied child psychology in Egypt for two years and returned to volunteer in the Lebanon Palestinian refugee camps and to work at the Institute for Palestine Studies. He studied history at the American University of Beirut (AUB) until he was forced to leave in 1983, after which he completed a degree in arts and arts education at George Washington University between 1984 and 1988. Interview with Moataz Dajani on May 17, 2018, in Amman, Jordan.

[5] Al-Jana conducted four kinds of oral histories: first-generation refugee narrations of uprooting and displacement, first-generation narrations of "folktales" and other aspects of "intangible culture," refugee women in South Lebanon narrations of their camp lives and work establishing the refugee camps, and biographical interviews with men and women considered important in their refugee communities (Sleiman and Chebaro 2018, 64–65). I read most issues of *Al-Jana: The Harvest*, a magazine published between 1994 and 2009, which are archived at the AUB Jafet Library.

I transcribed three recommended Al-Jana interviews with four Palestinian women refugees born in my period of interest to get a sense of narrative structure and content.[6] Four prominent themes are worth highlighting from these interviews. First, women reported regular interaction between Jews and Palestinians before the *hijra* (forced migration) of 1948 if they lived in towns and cities that included Jewish neighborhoods or nearby Jewish colonies, with narrators distinguishing between Yemeni and other indigenous or long-settled Jews, and the mostly European Jewish migrants who "changed everything" from the early 1930s as the Nazis rose to power in Europe. Palestinian respondents reported Jewish women who married Palestinian men, Jewish neighbors and school friends, Palestinian women working in Jewish colonies as nannies and domestics, and everyday commerce between Palestinians and Jews. Second, there is an inexorable weightiness in the narratives to experiences of suffering in 1948 and the years that followed. Third, the interviewers, all men who were younger than the interviewees in these cases, were eager to elicit narratives that remapped places and lifeways they believed they would never be able to see or experience. Fourth, questions and answers were often in the collective mode – how "people" grew food, where they marketed it, how they celebrated feasts, and how they interacted with British colonizers and Jewish settlers. Discussion of intimate and personal matters was often truncated by the narrator or the interviewer.

About two hundred Palestinian refugees were interviewed between the mid-1990s and 2004 in the Shaml (in-gathering) oral history project, with material stored at the Palestinian Diaspora and Refugee Center in the Birzeit University Digital Palestine Archive.[7] The interviews reflect great variation in technical quality (digital recordings that were inaudible, too fast, or blank). Most were missing metadata (such as date of interview) and the questions differed by interviewer. Shaml questions about pre-1948 Palestine aimed to remap collective life in destroyed communities. Women were asked to describe healthcare

[6] Interview with Amina Hasan Banat (born 1931 in Shaykh Daud, Palestine), residing in the Burj al-Barajneh refugee camp in Lebanon, on December 6, 1997. Interview with Radiya Muhammad Hammad (born 1918 in Saffuriyya, Palestine) and Ghazalah Ibrahim `Abd al-Ba`ti (born 1927 in Bethlehem, Palestine), in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in Lebanon on December 2, 1998. Interview with Watfa `Abd al-Mu`ti (born 1925 in Tantura, Palestine) in the al-Baddawi refugee camp in Lebanon on May 9, 2009.

[7] I am grateful to Suzan Da`na, who helped me access this archive, titled Arshif Mu'assasat Shaml, found here: www.awraq.birzeit.edu/ar/taxonomy/term/943.