

Speaking Back to a World of Checkpoints: Oral History as a Decolonizing Tool in the Study of Palestinian Refugees from Syria in Lebanon

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Abstract

This article questions the validity of conventional notions of borders as fixed territorial areas. Through oral history as a method and critique, I examine the narratives of eight persons who are Palestinian stateless refugees from Syrian who have escaped to neighboring Lebanon since 2011. Oral history has a methodological strength that allows access to narratives of past and present events, some of which link the mass eviction of people from Palestine in 1948 – known as *Al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe), to the current-day Syrian crisis, which is perceived by Palestinians from Syria as a new and ongoing *Nakba* (*al Nakba al mustamirrah* in Arabic). The narrators of this often experience border crossing as a pervasive part of their reality one that can be described as “social death,” a result of the limitations imposed by borders on the lives of stateless people. I argue that the accounts presented speak back to a world of borders whilst challenging the nation-state driven order of borders as fixed spaces. Through strategies of self-reflexivity, shared authority and maintaining relations, I open a discussion of how to use privilege, for example the privilege of possessing a European passport, and having the recourses to document experiences across geographical areas, as a way of speaking back to a world of checkpoints whilst advocating a process of research decolonization.

Keywords

Palestinians of Syria • Statelessness • Borders • Oral history • Al-Nakba • Forced migration

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In this article I interrogate the validity of conventional notions of borders as fixed territorial areas. Through oral history as method and critique, I examine the narratives of Palestinian stateless refugees from Syria who have escaped the current-day Syrian crisis to neighboring Lebanon since 2011. In particular, I reflect upon the consequences of a worldwide phenomenon of discrimination against people who have crossed borders as forced migrants. In order to do so, I focus solely on Palestinians from Syrian, a population that is often neglected in the frenzy of media and scholarly interest concerning refugees from Syria. Palestinians from Syria have escaped war-torn Syria to neighboring countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey since 2011 along with Syrian nationals and other such minorities as Syrian Kurds, Iraqis based in Syria, and Assyrians. Between December 2012 and April 2014, at least 53,070 Palestinians from Syria sought refuge in Lebanon. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) estimates that in May 2014 approximately 42,000 Palestinians from Syria remain in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2015; UNRWA, 2014a, 2014b). Estimates from the Beirut-based Palestinian Refugee Portal tells us that as of November 2016 at least 45,000 Palestinians from Syria are in Lebanon, (November 2016). In comparison, nearly 17,000 Palestinians from Syria are registered in Jordan. Jordan officially closed its borders to Palestinians in the spring of 2012. Lebanon and Turkey followed suit in 2014 (UNHCR, 2015). Palestinians from Syria have, as all forced migrants from Syria, sought refuge in neighboring areas including, Iraq, the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, Turkey, Egypt, and beyond (UNRWA, 2014c). Yet, Lebanon remains the country with the highest number of registered Palestinian Syrians. Since, however, many Palestinian from Syrian are not registered, these figures do not show the entire picture.

In the mist of the current-day Syrian crisis, stateless Palestinian refugees from Syria find themselves in a vulnerable situation with only few parallels. This would include the stateless Kurdish-Syrian population (see Eliassi, 2016). While the entire Syrian population suffers from the violence in the country and the hostility towards them in welcoming societies and multiple parallels of hardship have been created as a consequence of the on-going war, the situation of Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon remains unique due to their immobility, and their rightless and stateless situation (Qandil, 2013; Sayigh, 2013). Their situation is rightless in the sense that they enjoy no rights of protection as refugees from the international society (UNHCR and aid agencies or NGOs, other than the UNRWA) or the nation-state of Lebanon, no civic rights, and no rights to return to their place of origin (this will be explained further in the section “Understanding the Protection Gap”).

In order to conceptualize their situation, I look at the circumstances of Palestinian Syrians through the concept of “social death” (also known as “civic death”) whilst linking scholarly discourses about social death to the narratives that I uncovered

through oral history. I use the concepts “radicalized rightlessness” and *social death* to describe the consequences of processes of racialization (Cacho, 2013). Scholars such as Sherene Razack have analysed the categorically different treatment of immigrants and refugees with Muslim backgrounds in Western law through the lens of Giorgio Agamben’s “state and camps of exception” (Razack, 2008). I argue that “racialized rightlessness” and “social death” captures more precisely than “states of exception” the situation of Palestinians in Lebanon and leaves room to show that discrimination is multilevelled both in Western and non-Western societies. “Racialized rightlessness” is constructed through historical processes of legitimating a mode of racial determination through law practices: internationally, nationally and locally. “Social death” is a condition constructed by the deprivation of the right to have rights and by the use of racism as a “killing abstraction” – meaning that measures which can kill, are used against specific ethno-racially determined groups (Cacho, 2013 p. 7).

As defined by Orlando Paterson (1982), social death is a state of social negation, depersonalization, and non-being (Dance, 2016). Social death can be further understood as “ineligibility to personhood” – something that happens *before, during* and *after* border crossing (Cacho, 2013, p. 8) and that becomes representative of lives not worthy of grievance (Butler, 2014). Hence, this is an analysis of the effects of the mechanisms of state control, the politics of citizenship, and the exclusion of populations, which I examine through the narratives of the Palestinians from Syria that I encountered during my extensive research in Lebanon and on the Syrian/Lebanese frontier. For that purpose, I use oral history as a decolonizing tool whilst arguing that borders and territoriality are concepts used in commonsense ways in everyday discourses, yet they must be challenged in this period of immense transition. In the practice of decolonial research we as scholars (and part of a privileged established industry) should be frank about the before, during and after research procedures we practice, while being critical of the processes of racialization, sexualization and othering created within the institutions we work for. More than that as oral historians we must include the narrators in our interpretation of recordings and prioritize the narratives of those, whose histories have been silenced by racial and Orientalizing discourses. In that sense, my analysis is situated within an already existing critical literature on *reconceptualizing* borders and on racialization of disadvantaged populations (for example Al-Hardan, 2016; Cacho, 2013; Dance, 2016; De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Gregory, 2004; Megoran, 2006; Razack, 2008; Salih, 2016; Steinberg, 2009; Tawil-Souri, 2015).

Based on interviews with eight individuals collected during field work in Lebanon in the spring of 2014 (Lundsfryd, 2015), this study contests and renegotiates conventional notions of borders as fixed territorial areas, arguing for a more fluid distinction between “hard” and “soft” borders (see Tawil-Souri, 2015). Borders are

not simply neutral physical dividers, but interactive, reactive spaces that have the power to transform those who are crossing them and living within them. Through new systems of control, borders have become more diffuse and, because of that, also all the more pervasive. Yet the main argument of this article is that for people who have been stripped of their civic rights and who carry stateless legal identification documents borders are always already experienced as pervasive.

In the reminder, I discuss the problem of what is called “the protection gap” perhaps better described as the international community’s on-going failure to guarantee the access to safe territory and international protection of Palestinian refugees. I follow with a description of oral history as a methodology whilst discussing its advantages as a method for studying the juxtaposition between the victims of forced migration and border crossings. I also discuss some of the approaches used in the collection of my data and, in particular, how to access oral histories. Subsequently, I present a summarized sample of some of the narratives I have encountered in my study of border crossings whilst introducing the narrative of Palestinians who have been forced out of Syria. I conclude by arguing that the accounts of victims of forced migration presented *speak back* to a world of borders whilst challenging the nation-state driven order of borders as fixed spaces.

Understanding “the Protection Gap”

One phrase echoed through the narratives of my participants was their experience of the world as “a world of checkpoints.” At large, the phrase refers to border policies that act as pervasive power tools that have physical, mental, and social effects. For the participants in my research, borders did not seem to be limited to the fixed spaces of public international border crossing. Rather, borders both in Syria and in Lebanon were the spatial markers, which divided “us” from “them” As Walid, one of the many Palestinians from Syria I met, explains:

I escaped Syria to get away from the checkpoints and the roadblocks of the Syrian regime. Away from the fear of being captured. What I found in Lebanon is a world of checkpoints and constant fear of detention and deportation to Syria.

The narrator, using the pseudonym Walid, is a young man born in 1988 in Khan Es-Sheih.¹ Educated as a computer technician, Walid left Syria on foot one early November morning in 2013 due to the risk of being captured by the Syrian regime following his participation in anti-regime activities since February 2011.

¹ Khan Es-Sheih is a town 27 km southwest of Damascus. In 1949 the town took its form through hosting Palestinian refugees in tents. In 2011, some 20,000 registered Palestinian refugees lived in the area. Today the town is labelled “inaccessible” and “a place of active conflict” (UNRWA, 2016). In the fall of 2016, the remaining civilians in the town suffered under a governmental imposed siege and heavy Russian bombardments (Palestinian Refugees Portal, 2016; Rollins, 2016).

In order to understand this situation, I investigate the lived experiences of people trying to navigate the legal labyrinth that Palestinian refugees in the “Near East” (UNRWA²-area³) must endure under the threat of deportation for those who do not meet the status of refugee and are then sent back to war zones (De Genova & Peutz, 2010). The legal framework is relevant for the study of border crossing since illegibility to protection and much of the discrimination directed toward Palestinians is at least partly caused by the positioning of legal frameworks. Legal experts have dubbed the matter “the protection gap” (Akram, 2011; Knudsen, 2007) that is fostered by a limiting international human rights framework (Feldman & Ticktin, 2010; Moyn, 2012).

The protection gap refers to the failure of the international community to guarantee access to safe territory and international protection of Palestinian refugees (Qandil, 2013). It stems from the on-going failure of the repatriation of Palestinians to Palestine after 1948, that is, the failure to meet “the right of return” (Akram, 2011). UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for interpreting the situation of Palestinians in the Near East, was formed in December 1949, but it lacks a *protection* mandate (Chatty, 2010). In theory, UNRWA helps to provide for the material needs of refugees and does not offer legal protection (Akram, 2011). The United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) was the only UN agency with an actual protection mandate written into its principles by UNGA in 1950 (Custer, 2011, p. 47). Nevertheless, financial cuts post-1952 and the reductions of donors’ support made the UNCCP unable to function. Although this did not take away the protection mandate from the UNCCP, a consequence of the cutbacks was that, to this day, no effective agency has a protection mandate in place (Akram, 2011). The protection gap builds on the dual exclusion clauses implicit in the 1951 Refugee Convention (RC) established with the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The exclusion clauses of Article 1(2) (i) deprives stateless Palestinian refugees from legal protection both by the UNHCR and also by the 1954 Convention of the Status of Stateless Persons (CSSP), since the conventions cease to apply to persons whom are receiving protection or assistance from agencies other than the UNHCR (El-Malek, 2006, p. 194). As Palestinians in Lebanon and Syria receive assistance from UNRWA – another agency of the UN – they enjoy no protection status from the UNHCR. Also, it is prescribed in the UN body that under the international human rights law, Palestinian refugees may only seek repatriation to the territories internationally recognized to be under the authority of the Fateh led Palestinian Authority or to their birthplace in what is today Israel, not asylum in a third country (Allan, 2014, p. 169). Hence, by law, Palestinian refugees cannot be a part of the RC or the CSSP, even though

2 United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

3 Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Occupied Territories of Palestine.

Palestinians constitute one of the largest stateless refugee populations worldwide (UNHCR, 2014; UNRWA, 2014d).

All this leaves the responsibility of protection to the national and local hosting communities. However, Palestinians in Lebanon, whether from Syria or Lebanon itself, suffer from local discriminatory practices. For example, Lebanon refuses to abide by the Casablanca Protocol of the League of Arab States from 1965, which should guarantee Palestinians equality in employment, freedom of movement between Arab states, the right to be issued travel documents, freedom of residence, and rights to leave and to return (Knudsen, 2007). Whilst Lebanon prohibits the naturalization of Palestinians, Israel rejects their return. The Palestinian Authority legally grants repatriation to a Palestinian state, but only within the 1967 borders. Finally, one cannot return to the warzone that is Syria whilst Europe has become a *de facto* fortress (Allan, 2014; Andersson, 2014).

In recent history, entry, and visa regulations for Palestinian refugees from Syria into Lebanon have been arbitrary and since 2011, there have been incessant *ad hoc* regulations. For instance, the entry ban and visa regulations - known as the closing of the border - launched by the Lebanese authorities in May 2014 were solely targeting Palestinian Syrians (Amnesty International, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014). Such discriminatory policies play a large role in the narratives I encountered during my research which are somewhat encapsulated in the idea that for Palestinians from Syria, life is “a world of checkpoints.”

Since August 2013, Palestinian Syrians could only enter Lebanon if they had a valid airplane ticket out of Lebanon within 24 hours or were lucky enough to be granted a 15-day tourist visa. However, the tourist visa applied another hardship since it contests the refugee status. After 15 days, one needed to go to the Lebanese General Security (LGS) to renew the visa. Many feared this procedure for the imminent danger of being imprisoned and/or deported, as a result of having their visa extension denied. Only a few refugees were arbitrarily issued a three-month visa. However, today this visa is no longer issued to Palestinians from Syria. This denies Palestinians who are still in Syria access to Western Embassies in Lebanon, from where they can apply for family unification and visas, and access to safe territory. As of August 6, 2013, Lebanon implemented a pushback policy by denying Palestinian Syrians the right to enter Lebanon (Qandil, 2013). In May 2014, the LGS changed their procedures and now to have the visa issued, Palestinians from Syria were asked to pay around 17 US Dollars more for a visa than Syrian nationals. The visa was issued for 48 hours only, which means that the majority, in the eyes of the authorities, would be “illegal aliens” within 48 hours and would consequently be eligible for deportation.

Oral History as Methodology

Oral history is an ethnographic method that takes advantage of both recent and distant history in order to help interpret the present. The techniques of interpretation involved in oral history originate in archival practices aiming to contest conventional grand-narrative history writing (Portelli, 1991; Shopes, 2013). This is proven relevant in the on-going silencing of Palestinian history (Sayigh, 1994). Oral history does not seek representativity. Rather, it seeks to inject history with the subjective complexity of life experiences. It entails collecting information on the specific events, experiences, memories, and ways of life of those whose stories are often omitted from mainstream historical accounts of events, such as the subjective experiences of stateless persons, refugees, undocumented migrants, people of color, transgender individuals, and working class women (Minister, 1991). I subscribe my work to a recent version of oral history more closely connected to advocacy than to archival work that defends the use of oral history as a decolonializing tool (Al-Hardan, 2015, 2016; Doumani, 2009; Khalili, 2007; Sayigh, 2014).

The research design has developed through encounters with literature, pilot-testing, exchanges with scholars, human rights experts, activists, peers, and participants, as well as through ethnographic observations. Before embarking on field trips to Lebanon, I conducted a pilot oral history recording session in Sweden.⁴ Through the preliminary recordings, the emic-category of *pervasiveness of borders* occurred. These early interviews led me to focus on the subjective experiences of discriminatory border policies.

I chose this path out of a desire to follow a decolonizing and deterritorializing methodological approach to the study of border crossing experiences. The individuals, whose voices are echoed here, are subjects of a colonial history, a contemporary “coloniality” as a stateless community of individuals. Famously, Edward Said offered a strong critique of the discourse of orientalism and pinpointed an obligation inherited from centuries of superior Western power/knowledge production about “the other” (1978, p. 52). The obligation is to contest colonizing research practices with a commitment to a critical epistemology of decolonization and reflexive methodologies (Al-Hardan, 2014).

Driven by the participants’ strengths and capacities to resist their current “racialized rightless,” “social death” (Cacho, 2013; Patterson, 1982) and “stateless” circumstances (Arendt, 1951), the “situated knowledge” collected was shared through combining researcher and participant-ascribed categories (Haraway, 2003, p. 34). The circular process of combining researcher and participant-ascribed categories took shape in practice after collecting and transcribing the oral histories. I asked the narrators to

⁴ Initial recordings were conducted with 25 years old Mahmoud and his parents.

help me select the most central ideas, stories, and quotes in their accounts. That way, I avoided taking the powerful position of selecting what has importance and what does not. In the process, it was also very beneficial to have the narrators re-explain parts of their stories to me. Still, I was in control of the final editing of the research excerpts. It is thus with my full awareness of the inescapable patterns of powers embedded in my research that I present the narratives in this paper with an aim of revealing and also providing a venue to speak back to these very patterns of power that give us uneven privileges and our current world of checkpoints.

Collecting oral histories. The strategies used to access the narrators were through the use of a personal network established in Lebanon and Syria, in camp and non-camp settings, during visits I made between 2011 and 2014. The eight main narrators were encountered through networks and three gatekeepers: one in a refugee camp setting, one in a local grassroots organization, and one through private networks. I conducted the oral history recordings, rapport building, and observations in areas where Palestinians from Syria have settled, mostly pre-established Palestinian refugee camps, squats, and private homes. Through periodic fieldwork and volunteer work in these areas since 2011, I had an already established network and knowledge about the camps and the conditions of Palestinians in Lebanon in general. All communication was conducted in spoken colloquial Arabic - the mother tongue of the narrators and therefore, I required no assistance from an external interpreter. Through methods of shared authority (Frisch, 1990), I invited the narrators to co-interpret the recordings. Through asking individuals what they think is important that others be told about their experience, an inter-subjective process paved the way for choosing the main subjects of analysis, i.e. experiences of pervasive borders and the ongoing Nakba.

The narrators chose the time and locations of recordings. This gave them control, which in turn created trust in the otherwise insecure and hostile setting of the refugee camps. Although oral history emphasizes conducting face-to-face individual interviews, this was at times impossible due to the circumstances of camp and family life. Most of the camp dwellers have one or two rooms in their houses. Often the bedroom room is made into a living room during the day where piles of mattresses gather in the corner. Therefore at times, entire families were together in one room for the recording session or for one of my numerous visits and most often the women stayed inside because of their more vulnerable situation.

I was momentarily dubbed as “an insider” by the participants, amongst other signs showed through them by calling me *khayta* (sister). Nonetheless I am a privileged outsider and there will always be a sense of otherness toward me. The privileged position of being a white female scholar with a European passport imposed certain responsibilities on me toward my participants. The narratives I am about to present

need to be understood in the light of the participants' emphasis on certain aspects about me based on their understanding of my interests and how I framed my questions (Allan, 2007).

Through informed consent, the narrators were guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Anonymity was secured through pseudonyms. However, by request of participants themselves, I kept the names of their places of residence in Syria and their families' origin in Palestine, since these places have significant meaning for the narrators. In that sense, the omission of place names would be yet another step toward the silencing of Palestinian narratives. The narrators of this study were born, grew up, and lived until their escape in Yarmouk Camp⁵ placed in the Southern part of Damascus and the Khan Es-Sheih Camp southwest of Damascus. Both areas have since 2014 been labeled by UNRWA as "not accessible" due to siege and violence in addition to lack of water, food, and electricity (UNRWA, 2014). As for the rest of Syria, the situation in both places has deteriorated. Yarmouk Camp is today a battlefield between the militant groups known as ISIL and al-Nusra, who are fighting amongst the remaining civilians in the camp (Strickland, 2016). Khan Es-Shieh camp still experiences massive shelling and destruction and has been cut from Damascus by a government-imposed siege since June 2015 (Moghli, Bitarie, & Gabiam, 2015).

"A World of Checkpoints": Analyzing Oral Histories

Pervasive borders as markers of social death. Borders become pervasive not only as a metaphor in the mind of the narrators, but also as a concrete barrier since they are – *a'la hawia* (by legal identity) - always outside of the framework of the law. The Palestinian legal identity - *al-fisha* (the chip) - establishes specific sets of regulatory constraints on the living body that carries it. All narrators expressed the sentiment that "*al filastinieen mamnuua adtaeech*" (the lives of Palestinians are forbidden). The institutionalized racism based on national, sectorial, and racial origin within the legal identity, or being forced not to have one, combined with the surveillance and checkpoint strategy applied by the Lebanese authorities are the main elements forming their pervasive border experiences. Balsam, a young Palestinian Syrian man born in 1986 who finished vocational training as an engineer assistant in Damascus, expressed the burden as follows:

Palestinians are refugees. They do not have a passport. We do not have a Palestinian identity. We do not have personal national numbers. We only have the refugee cards which say that you are a Palestinian refugee in the eyes of UNRWA. That is my only identity. If

5 Yarmouk Camp was established in 1957 as an unofficial camp. Until 2012, it was a lively neighborhood of Damascus as well as the largest Palestinian community in Syria inhabited by more than 200,000 civilians, among which at least 148,500 were registered Palestinian refugees (UNRWA, 2016). Today, less than 3,000 civilians remain in Yarmouk Camp.

someone asks me: are you a Palestinian from Palestine? I say yes, and then he says, what is your identity? And I say that is my identity. It's written on my Palestinian identity card. And then he says, but that is not your identity, where is your passport? And I say that I do not have a passport. A passport is *muwaqqat* (temporary) for Palestinian refugees. This is not a passport this is *muwaqqat*.

Legal identities create a person's bureaucratic label and determine their eligibility for services, or right to movement; all of which could mean the difference between life and death (Feldman, 2012). Social death in a Lebanese context is a result of carrying a Palestinian legal identity, and physical death is a possible result of the treatment one is subjected to due to that legal identity, e.g. through detention and deportation to Syria and due to personal qualities such as dialect, clothing, skin-color, and education. The narrators' stories work to illuminate circumstances in which unfolding "the good life" becomes forbidden through legal identities and ethno-racial targeting.

Experiences of Khanaq. The border crossing experiences are constructed out of what I label memories of the pre-crossing, crossing, and the post-crossing narratives. The three levels of storytelling are interwoven and at once connected to the near past and to collective memories of atrocities since 1948. When investigating border-crossings experiences, I found, that the narratives were connected to the memories of what was immediately left behind (e.g. family members, living places, significant objects and childhood memories). Moreover, the participants' narratives were built on experiences of how the road walked and the path ahead enclosed them, creating a rightless vacuum that most narrators articulated as a feeling of *khanaq* (strangulation). The experiences of Khaled illustrate this well. Born in 1964, Khaled, a father of three, gained a high school education and has since been engaged in political community work. He fled to Lebanon by car twice and crossed the official border crossing at Al-Masnaa in January and August 2013, since then he has been living in a camp in Southern Beirut. He was forced to leave his family in Syria since they could not pay for the entire families' life in Lebanon. He hoped to be able to reach Europe and seek asylum and be reunited with his family there. Khaled poignantly explained his experience of what he called "imprisonment in Lebanon."

It's a bad and lamentable feeling to begin with. The freedom to move is one of man's most basic rights. When this basic right is taken away from you, you're actually being ripped of your humanity. What more can one say? You feel you've been imprisoned and you're being strangled.

The act of border crossing and the border control practices separated them from their families and loved ones. All narrators used the word *khanaq* as a metaphor describing their lived experiences. The word did not refer to physical strangulation, but was used instead to describe the feelings of distress caused by immediate material concerns, the lack of legal protection, and the experiences of regulated immobility all connected to the idea of social death.

A present history. By addressing experiences of border crossing into Lebanon, a gateway was opened to memories of life in pre-war Syria, and via the connection of these memories to life in, and displacement from, Palestine. Thus, when talking about the past, two levels of post-memory occurred. One was the memory of the narrators' own personal life in Palestinian communities within Syria and the other was the memory of the stories handed down by family members and the community about Palestine. In the recordings, the latter is manifested through the memories of the participants' parents and grandparents of Al-Nakba and other displacement stories since 1948.

Balsam's legal identity is labeled a "Palestinian refugee." However, he possesses both Palestinian and Syrian travel documents⁶ and carries a Syrian passport marked with a ف (fa) for *filastinee* (Palestinian nationality). Balsam first attempted to escape Syria to Jordan in 2012, but was denied entry and then escaped to Lebanon and then from Lebanon by airplane to Jordan. However, his expired work visa forced him to return to Lebanon in January 2013.

During a one-on-one recording-session, Balsam told me about the name of the Palestinian community into which he was born in Syria. He did so while telling me about his own departure from the community of Khan Es-Sheih:

I feel disconnected not just to Palestine, but also to my childhood, which was in Syria. Like the flower of my childhood has been killed. The area that we call Khan Es-Sheih, was an area called al-Khan. And what does Al-Khan mean? A long time ago, it was a place for merchants and travelers who came from Saudi Arabia, they came to Jordan and Palestine and then to Golan. From Golan they went to Khan before they reached Damascus. So Khan (which means an Inn) is a place you come and rest and the Khan is very old. There are still ruins of the old buildings of the Khan today. It was like a place to come and rest and take a break on the way to Damascus. It was a huge intermission area. There were stables for the cattle so they could eat and drink water. So during the break you could have lunch or whatever you like. So this was the meaning of Khan. And Sheih was a flower which existed in the area and its name was Sheih. So the name of the place was Khan to symbolize the existence of the ancient resting place, which was there. But as time went by, the place has disappeared. When my family was separated into two parts in Palestine, my mother's family went to Jordan and my father's new family went to Syria, in Golan. For two years they were in al-Ghazalia, al-Hemme, and al-Aal. Then they moved to an area called Al-'Artebeh. After Ghazalia... and then they went to the camp, to Khan Es-Sheih. This place was my childhood, and now they (the regime) killed the flower.

Balsam's narrative about Khan Es-Sheih tells us about the knowledge of history connected to the places of living and the places to which his family has been displaced. His story is at once described in a historical perspective that goes further back than

⁶ Balsam inherited his legal status from his grandfather who by chance received a Syrian passport when he escaped to Damascus during the Battle of the Golan Heights in 1973.

the current history of the Palestinian population in Syria. At the same time, it tells us about his current situation and feeling of being uprooted, his parents' separation under flight from Palestine to Jordan and Syria and his own connection to all of the places mentioned.

Another example of experiences of the past and of *Al-Nakba* can be seen in a conversation between Mahmoud and his father during their exile in Sweden. A 25-year old man born in Yarmouk Camp, Mahmoud studied law until he was forced to leave Damascus in 2011. Escaping Syria to Lebanon, he used a student visa to arrive in Sweden in 2013 where he enjoys political asylum today. During a recording, Mahmoud asked his father a seemingly simple question.

Mahmoud: I always forget your age, dad. Or I imagine that you are 60 years old.

Father: Officially, I am 68 years old, 67 in reality. In fact I don't know what my actual age is. Because families used to borrow kids from each other, so they could present them in front of UNRWA and receive relief, so I was borrowed many times.

Mahmoud: Who borrowed you?

Father: Many people from our neighborhood. We borrowed (kids) as well. We have a kid whom we "killed" on paper and later, it gave us a lot of headaches to let the kid "die" (I mean on paper). Your uncle, Abo Khaled, also borrowed a kid. Sometimes there was a direct borrow and other times there was a fake borrow.

Mahmoud: What does borrow mean? What do you mean by borrowing a child?

Father: For example, when there is a statistical mission by UNRWA, because in 1948 people were displaced, they had no documents or anything, UNRWA as you may know, was founded in 1951 and they wanted to distribute relief to people. How could they distribute relief to people? They have to do counting of some sort. They came to families and asked how many you had. I have five kids, I have four kids, I have ... So if someone wants more rations, he borrows kids from the neighbors.

Mahmoud: And he shows them to the UNRWA?

Father: He shows them to the UNRWA (laughter).

Father: Now, where is the problem? The problem is that you borrow those and receive relief money for them, but they grow up and according to Syrian laws, at the age of 18 they should go to military service, so they get trapped (nervous laughter).

Mahmoud: They want to drag them to the army?

Father: Therefore there are a lot of people who escaped their military service. You see? For example, the persons who are registered to be born in the 50s, they are supposed to join the army in the 70s, right?

And since the 70s up until today (laughter) 45 years, those who couldn't get rid of the registration of their fakely bowered children have found another solution, like issue an official death certificate for him.

Mahmoud: Oh my God.

Father: Of course, so do you want the truth? Between the two of us, I don't know my real age, and this is the story, I was a borrowed child and my real birth certificate is long lost.

Mahmoud: But you were born in Oum Al Zainat, right?

Father: Yes, in Palestine, I am sure I was born in 1947.

Crossing border zones. At the borders, the participants' experienced acts of discrimination and harassment which were manifested through intersectional components and differed according to class, gender, age, profession, and social connections. Nonetheless, all shared the experience of being targeted due to national legal identity (Palestinian) and ethno-racial determination (Palestinian from Syria). Born and raised in Yarmouk Camp in 1986, Omar is a musician, dancer and actor. Before the conflict, he worked as a music and drama teacher at an UNRWA youth and women's center. Omar explained his experience as the border zone Al-Masna'a:

There was discrimination against all Syrians and Palestinians alike because the border zone was very crowded. So because of the immense amount of people, there the Lebanese General Security would start shouting at the people words like "you animals" or curse as in "get in line you animals." I mean nasty words that should not be spoken. Regardless, of whether this treatment is fair, after you stand in line all the way to the window, you can see from the look on their faces that they do not like you or even want you to enter Lebanon.

In July 2013, Omar had to renew his Palestinian-Syrian documents since the LGS had destroyed his picture when issuing his visa permit – a discriminatory and allegedly unlawful tactic used by the LGS to "lawfully" deport persons, a practice that has also been documented by [Amnesty International \(2014\)](#) ([Al-Akhbar, 2014](#)). Omar was thus forced to return to the warzone.

In contrast to the description of the border zone, Walid's account tells us about the borders as a mountain and not as the controlled conventional borders zone. Walid escaped on foot, without a passport, and was smuggled to the Sheih Mountain border by the Free Syrian Army. His story mimics the disposition and performances of power that make borders and regulate behavior even when there is no border ([Gregory, 2004](#)). When I asked Walid about what happened at the border, he answered:

There is no border. It's a mountain. There were Lebanese army checkpoints later on [...]. We started to go down. The road was like this. Very steep! (Showing by hand gesture). This road is controlled by the Lebanese Army. The road was divided like this (Shows how the road splits into two paths). We, the young men, went this way [...] to avoid the Lebanese Army and Secret Intelligence Services. We were something like 25 young men. The women and children went to the army post. So we didn't see them (the army). So this road was very horrible. The mountain was so steep. We arrived and were completely exhausted. [...] If I had had any idea that the road from Syria to Lebanon was this, I would have stayed in Khan Es-Sheih, because the road was like dying. Death, death.

Walid's paperless and stateless legal status exposed him to possible death while his fear of the Syrian Army and the LGS forced him to actually risk death by attempting a clandestine escape. His narrative is a sign of the discrimination of border regulations that force individuals fleeing war to embark on extremely dangerous routes, whether by sea or land, to escape warzones.

The participants of my research told me that they had been either internally or externally displaced up to four times before reaching their current place of temporary residence. This tells us that escape and border crossing is not a simple linear process from A to B. Further, all participants mentioned that the first border crossed was at the outskirts of the camps (i.e. Yarmouk camp or Khan Es-Sheih camp), which used to be their homes. The experience of border crossing is thereby extended in and beyond border territory, and the roadblocks and checkpoints inside an imagined geography are transformed to new imagined borders. Their accounts exemplify the complexity of border crossing, containing numerous confrontations with borders and boundaries inside geographies of states and at borderlines. The numerous displacements indicate that movement depends on the level of violence. Yet, movement involves both escaping death whilst staying close to one's home and family in order to enable return. In fact, this is what happened when Palestinians left their villages in 1948, as [Nafez Nazzal's 1978-study](#) shows—a validation of the experiences of an ongoing catastrophe.

Domestic Insecurity: “Let's stay between the walls.” The following dwells on the daily struggles shown in post-crossing narratives and focuses on border regulations moving into private spaces. Both male and female narrators reported perpetual experiences of surveillance, which resulted in fear-regulated patterns of movement and behavior. Experiences of surveillance occurred when the border control mechanisms and performances of the Lebanese Army and the LGS moved beyond border spaces and into “places of living,” such as private homes and close neighborhoods. The feeling also occurred at the inter-personal level when the narrators felt that other camp dwellers harassed them in their shelters.

For example, Omar expressed how the practices of the LGS created a constant presence of a furtive surveillance that has paralyzed him since the time he crossed the border. Likewise, the other male narrators explained their fear of walking on the streets outside of the camps due to checkpoint, violence, and secret police services. This taught me that when the experiences of border regulations moved into places of living, the narrators' behaviors were regulated as if they were physically at the borderline. Nonetheless, there was a significant difference in the experiences of my informants regarding discrimination and regulatory border experiences beyond borders. The differences were particularly accentuated among the female and male narrators.

A young woman born in 1984, Roula is a mother of five children, the eldest of which is a 16 year old. Roula is an elementary school graduate. Her husband and son, escaped the siege of Yarmouk camp to Germany via Turkey in 2012. Roula and her remaining four children escaped to Lebanon in April 2014 by car via the Al-Masnaa border crossing.⁷ I wish to honor Roula's request to me to include a focus on her daily struggles and the borders that in her experience, start at the doorstep of her shelter. She told me:

[...] the most important thing is...to see the situation here in Lebanon and what they are doing to us now. How they are separating us. I feel I have a shrinking private space. The border is there (pointing at the door). The border is everywhere. I have my dad in Syria and he wants to come to Lebanon, but he doesn't know how. He went to the border and was sent back. He is in Yarmouk! They sent him back to Syria! He was not allowed to go to Lebanon!

Roula's quote indicates two things. First, the feeling of "a shrinking private space" and, second, the feeling Roula has is expressed in her being separated from her father. The direct move in her account from her door to her father in Yarmouk camp indicates that he should be with her in her domestic space whereas multiple borders separate them. Their experiences must be problematized and understood through their particularities as war-refugees; stateless persons with low income, wives, and mothers unaccompanied by husbands and in one case, an unmarried teenage girl. The women are all living with specific social struggles based in poverty and ethno-racial labeling in a predominantly patriarchal society. This is exacerbated by the feeling of "a shrinking private space" resultant from all of the previously mentioned limitations of having a habitual everyday life and being exposed as deportable aliens.

The female speakers all expressed fear of being approached by unfamiliar males, both civilians of either Lebanese, Syrian, or Palestinian origin and by Lebanese or Syria intelligence personnel, both in the narrow streets of the refugee camp and in the city. This fear made Sarah, Roula's cousin, suggest *fa khalina bein al-khitaan. Ahsan!* (So, let's stay between the walls! It's better!) The fear stemmed from anxieties connected to the local community's perceptions of them (both women and men), as single mothers and women with no male caretaker in Lebanon. Secondly, the fear stemmed from the vulnerability of being a female Palestinian refugee from Syria. The women explained that they were subjected to such treatment because of misconceptions and were labeled as Syrian *sharamit* (prostitute) by the people already living in the camp because of the way they wore their *hijab* (headscarves), the way they cleaned their houses, and their colloquial Arabic. Both civilians and intelligence personnel targeted them on the street. Since most of these experiences were sensitive, they were told to me in confidence and off the record and for this reason I will not share them here.

⁷ During the recordings she lived in a refugee camp in Southern Beirut and was waiting for family unification with her husband and son in Germany. In the recording sessions with Roula the voices of Nariman, her 16-year-old daughter and Sarah her 32-year-old cousin (mother of two) are included.

Yet, I did record one of Nariman and Sarah's dialogs, which expresses the domestic insecurity they experienced.

Nariman: Now, if I open the door a little, like this, they (the men) can look in and see me.

Sarah: If this were to happen in Damascus and a man walked by, they would yell, "Close the door. Close the door. Close the door, oh sister." Out of respect. But here.... they say nothing ... and then they stare at us.

Nariman: Yesterday we were having dinner. The door opened a bit and they were all looking at me. I was not wearing my scarf and did not have it near me and it was only a few seconds. They walked by and one looked like this at me (eyes wide open). And because of that I am very scared. I'm very scared here. Very much.

The women expressed severe worries for their children and their general domestic insecurity of living in camp conditions, and the continuation of daily small traumas following the traumas of the war in Syria. The women noticed their children incessantly biting their nails and fingers. Further, Sarah told me that her 3-year old daughter had suffered an accident in which she was burnt in her mouth by electric equipment hanging from the walls and lost the ability to speak. These types of accidents became cornerstones in the women's narratives since the surrounding community did not support their grievances, even though they may share similar insecurities in their own domestic lives.

Although the women did not mention experiences of "hard" border regulations, I see these women's fear to be a result of the regulations and their situation of immobility and their "stuckness" to be part of their on-going experience of border crossing, where Lebanon is their current transit point. The female voices show how borders are transformed into frontiers in life in a camp setting. The women feel the power of surveillance both through Lebanese regulations at checkpoints and agents on the streets, and also through male gazes into their living spaces. Both the male and female accounts reveal the insecurity and oppression, which is reinforced through intersections of age, gender, and societal position.

A lingering catastrophe. Several participants expressed how the scenes of the eviction from Palestine shared with them by grandparents, parents, and at commemorations (Khalili, 2007) revisited them at least once during their flight from Syria and while in Lebanon. The following extract from an interview I conducted with Khaled reflects how the repetitiveness of displacement interweaves the two historical events and the subjective experiences attached to them:

My parents used to tell us about Palestine and the history of our village and how they left and what road they took on their journey. When I left the camp with my family back in 2012, when they were shelling and bombing us very heavily using the air force, families were fleeing by the thousands and I was looking at that scene and started remembering

(silence) my mother and father when they told me how they left Palestine. [...]. When we were leaving the camp by the thousands I remembered my parents when they were telling us about the days when they had left Palestine. That same scene was replaying and at the last moment when I was leaving the camp, I remember thinking whether or not I would return. But now I can see this crisis to be very long, and I may return to find nothing but ashes and no houses standing.

Like Khaled, Omar escaped the besieged Yarmouk camp to Lebanon, but was forced to return to Syria to renew his passport in June 2013. He left by car through the official border crossing at Al-Masnaa. Omar's interpretation of the event includes a distinction between what he calls the small and the big Nakba referring to the "small Nakba" as the one he experienced during the Assad regime's siege of Yarmouk Camp since 2012 and the "big Nakba" as the experiences of his grandparents who were displaced from Palestine in 1948. Other participants echo this and a similar distinction can be found in *Sa'di and Abu-Lughod's Nakba (2007)*. Omar explained:

[...] the small Nakba is the siege on Yarmouk camp, the largest gathering of Palestinians. It really was a Nakba. I mean, it was a huge shock and a literal catastrophe because that camp was the biggest gathering of Palestinian refugees in the countries around Palestine. That camp was a place unlike any other camp. [...]

It really was our little Palestine from which we were demanding our return to Palestine. And it was threatened and targeted a long time ago. So I think what really happened in Yarmouk camp wasn't born all of a sudden. No, it was rather a planned scheme to hit the largest Palestinian gathering. The biggest proof of this is our current state of loss and spreading all over. [...] By disabling this human energy, this energy was crushed, and the gathering destroyed. It was a real Nakba just like that of 1948, a small Nakba.

The *Nakba* is for the five narrators, both a past still present and a present given meaning through the past. It is ongoing, since there has been no return to Palestine and a result of the level of violence experienced through four generations. Al-Hardan likewise found how particular engagements with the past come to answer predicaments in the present (*Al-Hardan, 2015*). The pending solution, the perpetual experiences of displacement, border crossings, and the inherited statelessness cement the temporariness of Palestinian identity documents and is part of the experience of the *Nakba* as a present reality through re-lived memories and through seeing the horrific scenes of their families' past come true in front of their eyes. Thereby, "the catastrophe" is reawakened.

Conclusion: Can Oral History Let Us Speak Back?

The accounts presented in this article give us a sense in which we (the participants and myself) can perhaps *speak back* to a world of borders, challenging the nation-state order of borders as fixed spaces. My inquiry has, in part, been an effort to rethink and renegotiate the already existing ideas of borders and border-crossing experiences.

While the narratives of the participants also speak back to and challenge the European-led elitist political discourses on how refugees are “better served staying in the region” – since the narratives show that people are not better served with staying in the neighboring countries of Syria. I contest conventional dogmas of borders and suggest that border-crossing experiences are *de facto* pervasive for stateless and rightless persons. For Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon, borders construct *de facto* discriminatory power exercised through checkpoints, visa regulations, and *ad hoc* acts including arbitrary detentions and forced deportations to warzones. Furthermore, persons who are holders of Palestinian refugee legal identity documents experience their lives as forbidden, which I classify as experiences which lead to “social death,” implying that their narratives are largely silenced and the tragedy that shapes their restricted lives as not worthy of grief. Yet I saw, like the accounts presented in this article show, that all narrators managed to continue life and maintain hope and resist the condition of social and civic exclusion.

I was left with great discomfort when I started writing down the narratives of the participants far away from the persons with the actual experiences I had captured. The fieldwork, my rich exchange with the participants as opposed to the process of essentializing “their voices” into a thesis made me curious toward my discomfort. Here, I was armed with all my methodological, ethical, and self-reflexive considerations, all the sound bites and notebooks, the ethical guidelines and oral history framework and still I felt I had no legitimate way of telling their stories. I know that I am not the victim of the discrimination of the borders that I have captured. Quite the contrary, I have benefited from my freedom of movement and no matter how much I wish to share my privilege with the participants of the study, I cannot. Am I then entitled to write about the racism of borders when it is not directed at me?

The answer is yes! I have to share the discomfort of a world where I can freely travel while my counterparts cannot. My position as a white, female scholar from wealthy Scandinavia (a destination region where hundreds of thousands have pled asylum) cannot be neglected. Only by becoming aware and by taking responsibility for the benefits I have, by seeing the true order of the world as ruled by the racist logic of nation states, can we – together - start to speak back to it in order to find new ways of existing and sharing.

Power relations between the participants and the researcher, are not undone by emphasizing researchers’ privilege and power over the interpretation. Yet, by realizing the obligations, sharing privileges, which accompany power, and aligning with struggles of inequities, we can attempt to transform disadvantaged positions into more empowered ones. This includes maintaining relationships with participants and assisting in situations of border crossing also *after* the research has ended. And it includes calling out racial act of violence and hate wherever we witness it within our studies and our lives.

We have been made to believe in myths about “the weak sex,” “the non-human other,” “the orient,” “the Harem,” “the mystified,” “the borders that separate us,” and the hierarchies of power and knowledge as the “founding myth of original wholeness” (Haraway, 2004, p. 33; Lugones, 2010; Mernissi, 1994). Without a research philosophy that enables me to show how Palestinian-Syrian heritage historically has been racialized and sexualized through contemporary modes of gendered orientalism, while identifying the colonial relations of power it becomes difficult to show the double or triple binds of each particularity. This approach allows me to include a critical view of my own body-political-positionality and to show how it is possible to at once be oppressed (as a woman) and oppressor (as a white academic European) while being complicit in my own oppression (e.g. accepting wages of gender, being victim of gender based violence, gendered codes of strength and weakness, suffering from gender specific health issues) (Mendez, 2015, p. 51).

Al-Hardan emphasizes, “(t)hose of us who intend to research the colonized or stateless others from within imperialist states’ academia while upholding decolonizing commitments have a decided disadvantage” (Al-Hardan, 2014, pp. 64–65). The disadvantage is implicit in the paradox of wanting to abide by decolonizing epistemologies knowing that the very structures we stand on are built on a claim about the “universal” right of a researcher to access knowledge and thus to move. We attempt to bridge this disadvantage by critical self-reflection. However, this will evidently not help dismantle the fabric of such inequalities. My freedom to *exit* as well as my privilege to cross borders and the language-barrier are the three poignant signifiers of my outsider-position. This limited my ability to comprehend circumstances of persons who cannot leave and who carry histories of four generations of displacement, despite my efforts. Yet, my privileged position gave me the power to maintain my relationship not only with all the narrators to this day, but also their friends and families whom I have assisted on their way to safer territory. I can never speak with *their voices*, since their subjugation is displayed by my very presence and freedom to *exit* (Spivak, 1995, p. 28). *Their voices* have been selected by me, distorted through me, and transformed in my interpretation and are *no longer* theirs. Still, our numerous encounters taught me to let the narrators *speak back* through me to a world of borders, which denies them protection while ever delaying their right to return to Palestine.

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