# Wound Stories from the Palestinian Oral History Archive

Cynthia Kreichati

«We now know perfectly well that there is no need to be wounded by a bullet to suffer from the effects of war in body and soul.»

Frantz Fanon
*The Wretched of the Earth* (2004: p.217)

When Fanon wrote about the Algerian war, he argued that colonial violence impacted both colonizers and colonized, producing various forms of social and bodily afflictions(1). Though it referred primarily to the psychic effects of violence, his work invited a rethinking of the kinds of wounds that violence creates - not merely physical but equally historical, psychical, affective, and epistemological, all at once. From its very onset, the Nakba, with settler colonial violence as one of its defining features, comprised many such wounds and involved the continuing collective maiming, plundering, and erasing of Palestinian bodies, towns, communities, and entire ecologies. The specific injuries inflicted on the bodies of Palestinian women, who were young adolescents when

(1) Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Homi K Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004)

they were harmed, are the focus of this essay. Building on two accounts from Palestinian oral history archive, I explore how these Palestinian women (older adults when they were interviewed) recount how they experienced violence as young girls; and showcase the wounds which their young female bodies sustained and kept carrying as they grew older. I shall consider these debilitating wounds in their twofold manifestations - in the narratives of injury and in their embodied specificities - and I reflect on the distinctive ways through which they expose different modes of violent colonial subjugation. I engage the life story of Umm Faris, a woman with a peculiar history of sickness (caused by childbirth complications) and a formidable narrator of subjective experience; and turn to the oral history interview of Fatima Sirhan who was maimed in 1948, when the Israeli army bombed her village of al-Jish in Galilee(2). The narrative, embodied, and imagistic representations of these women's wounds evoke the fraught political and ethical dimensions of injuries; injuries that become enmeshed in a politics of truthful claim-making or that are negotiated in everyday life. Above all, the different figurations of their wounds reflect the inadequacy of pain sharing, in a context where violence and displacement are overbearing; and where careful listening to the archive is transformed to an act of witnessing on the margins of linguistic life(3).

While narratives of the Nakba have been suppressed (partly because of trauma and gaps in primary sources), the Palestinian Oral History Archive has contributed to the rupturing of this silence by recording and bringing within public purview not only stories of expulsion, dispossession, and ethnic cleansing, but also recollections of everyday life in Palestine - all from the point of view of those who lived, felt and experienced it(4). The

(2) Rosemary Sayigh, «Interview with Umm Faris,» 12 April 1998, http://almashriq.hiof.no/palestine/300/301/voices/Gaza/halima_hassouna.html; The Nakba Archive Collection and the AUB Palestinian Oral History Archive, Interview with Fatimah Sirhan, 29 September 2003, Lebanon; https://n2t.net/ark:/86073/b35p7h.

(3) Samar Kanafani and Zina Sawaf, «Being, doing and knowing in the field: Reflections on ethnographic practice in the Arab region.» (2017): 3-11; Elaine, Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Lisa Stevenson, *Life beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Diana Allan ed. *Voices of the Nakba: A Living Archive of Palestine* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

(4) See for e.g.: Salim Tamari, 'Special Issue on Oral History, *Al-Jana: The Harvest* (Beirut: Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts [ARCPA], 2002); Hana Sleiman and Kaoukab Chebaro. «Narrating Palestine: The =

two interviews that this essay engages are drawn from two different oral history collections: the Nakba Archive which documents the accounts of first-generation Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and the digital book, *Voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement,* part of anthropologist Rosemary Sayigh's later work recorded inside Palestine(5).

Captured on different mediums (Fatima Sirhan's on video and Umm Faris's on audio-record), the interviews underscore the continuous character of the Nakba as experienced by two Palestinian women who belong to two different generations. Having left Palestine as a teenager, Fatima Sirhan was in her eighties when she was interviewed; while Umm Faris, born several years after the Nakba, and her family likely displaced in the wake of the 1967 war, was in her early forties. These interviews meaningfully account for the transformations that occurred in their lives while also refracting the socio-political environment of the time and place in which they were recorded-around the early 2000s in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, in Lebanon and Gaza for Sirhan and Umm Faris respectively. The acoustic background to Fatima Sirhan's video is populated with the sounds, shouts, and commotions of the refugee camp of which she is a resident: «Of course I choose to sit under an olive tree in my village. This is no life we are living here», she says. As for Umm Faris, who happened to have recently returned to Gaza at the time of her interview, the stories she narrates are shaped by the various forms and temporalities of Palestinian displacement since 1948.

Gender relations, embodied memories and the experience of exile are themes, inextricable from one another. They emerge when listening to the two women's interviews, with the violence they sustained as young adolescents, and which had irrevocably changed the course of their lives, at the very center of this entanglement. The specific analytical categories of youth and gender thus underpin the concerns of this essay, though not as a shift away from other significant broad social categories and structures, nor

= Palestinian Oral History Archive Project.» *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47, no. 2 (2018): 63-76; and Rosemary Sayigh, Afterword to *Voices of the Nakba: A Living Archive of Palestine*, ed. Diana Allan (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

(5) Fatima Sirhan's video is drawn from the collection of the Nakba Archive, an oral history collective co-founded by Diana Allan and Mahmoud Zeidan in Lebanon in 2002 and part of the Palestinian Oral History Archive at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Umm Faris's audio-recording is published in Sayigh's digital book *Voices* and part of the AUB Libraries Digital Collections.

as an attempt to reify their changing meanings[6]. Rather, in centering the narratives and physical specificities of wounds in the bodies of adolescent girls, this essay considers the political and ideological contours of particular forms of violence that target young girls and explores its personal and structural consequences. As Comaroff and Comaroff put it, «youth stands for many things at once: for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future […] a constant source of creativity, ingenuity, possibility, empowerment. A source of alternative, yet-to-be-imagined futures»[7]. At the heart of this essay then are the manners through which Israeli colonial violence shatters the world by wounding the young; and an obstinate search, in the Palestinian oral history archive, for all the creative human possibilities that aim to refashion it.

Defined as the deliberate exercise of force to inflict injury, violence is the precondition for wounding. More than a mere exercise of wounding, settler colonial violence - a form of incremental genocidal violence in the Palestinian Nakba - is the systematic method of erasure of people, their cultures, and their environment[8]. Fatima Sirhan's story is a testament to the losses and absences that such violence provokes. Born in 1927 to a family of *fellahin* in the village of al-Jish in Galilee, Fatima married Abou Ali (who was also a farmer) when she turned sixteen years old and by 1948, they already had a son together.

In her oral history interview, she describes the village customs and rituals and recounts the joys and hardships of agricultural work in Galilee. More prominent than these vignettes, however, is the story of her physical and emotional suffering. That story begins when she is wounded by an air strike during the 1948 war, and after which she was to be expelled from Palestine, never to return. Although Fatima is unable to recall the exact date of the attack, the details she provides evoke the Israeli army's «Operation Hiram», launched by David Ben-Gurion in October-November

(6) Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, *Youth Rising? The Politics of Youth in the Global Economy*, Critical Youth Studies (New York: Routledge, 2015).

(7) Jean and John Comaroff, «Reflections on Youth, from the Past to the Postcolony

(8) Nahla Abdo, «Feminism, Indigenousness and Settler Colonialism: Oral History, Memory and the Nakba.» In *An Oral History of the Palestinian Nakba*, ed. Nur Masalha and Nahla Abdo (London: Zed Books, 2018.

1948. This was a massive aerial, terrestrial and artillery attack that aimed at completing the Israeli occupation of Galilee and ousting Palestinian villagers and members of Jaysh al-Inqadh al-Arabi, the Arab Salvation Army of volunteer fighters that was led by Faouzi al-Qawuqji. During that military operation, the Israeli army committed some of the worst massacres of the war, in villages such as al-Dawayima, Safsaf, Saliha, 'Eilabun, Sa'sa', al-Hussayniyah and Hula[9]. As Fatima describes, her village of al-Jish was not spared the *qayazin*, the barrel bombs that fell on villagers, killing and wounding them, destroying their houses and burning their crops[10].

That same afternoon, Abou Ali, who owned a *bayyara* right by the border with Lebanon, had asked Fatima to flee al-Jish with their son, head to the *bayyara* and wait for him to join her there[11]. The attack started at dusk just as Fatima was walking out of her house with her infant son. She ran for cover and, with a group of villagers, hid under a big fig tree. But the Israeli planes, menacingly roaming above their heads and relentless in their attacks, began dropping several *qayazin* on them. The fig tree was immediately hit. «There were those whose heads were separated from their bodies; those whose intestines bulged out of their abdomen or through their backs», she explains. «Me…», she continues, «I lost consciousness and it's only when I woke a few minutes later, that I saw that my son, who I had held in my arms, had been killed on the spot and that my legs were completely lacerated, with the skin hanging and the bones visible». Later that night, an ambulance, dispatched by Jaysh al-Inqadh, took her, and several other wounded, and drove past the northern border, first to Bint Jbeil then Tyre. She received basic first aid and had her bandages, «heavily soaked and dripping with blood», changed. Since her condition was unstable and she continued to bleed, she was transferred to the «Joffre Hospital», a field hospital that the League of the Red Cross Societies had set up near the Joffre

(9) Laila Parsons, *The Commander: Fawzi Al-Qawuqji and the Fight for Arab Independence, 1914-1948*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2016).

(10) Qayazin (or qawazin), term used to refer to large copper barrels stuffed with explosives that were thrown from planes on people during the attacks of Zionist militias on Palestinian towns and villages in 1947-1949. The singular form is *qizan* (or *qazan*), derived from the Ottoman Turkish, it is still used today to refer to barrels and other large containers.

(11) Bayyara: orchard of irrigated crops including citrus trees.

Army Barracks in Beirut, and where she stayed for six months[12]. Facing the camera, Fatima very graphically describes how her legs were immobilized with weights, how pus would continuously come out of her wounds and through the cast, and how she would plead to the doctor to remove it, but he would always refuse, «for your own good, he'd say».

The anthropology of wounds and wounding has considered the many facets of injuries (material, discursive, affective) in individuals and in society, underscoring their contingent techno-legal, socio-political, and ethical meanings. Mobilized in contexts of pervasive violence, wounds often involve the objectification of suffering; they shape, and are shaped by, institutional exchanges as well as in the interactions of everyday life[13]. This objectification of suffering has direct political consequences. In the specific context of ongoing settler colonial violence in Palestine, the crude, graphic and visceral representations of injuries and wounding are sometimes mobilized to make specific claims - namely a plea meant to demonstrate the humanity of Palestinians - and effect the realization of humanitarian and political projects. Such a politics of representation, in which wounds 'speak for themselves', can overlook how socio-cultural institutions and, indeed, power influence how the experience of acute suffering is articulated, communicated, and understood[14]. «Immediated» figurations of suffering, that occur 'in the moment', do not necessarily have more potential to convey an authentic truth and the representation «of damaged bodies as locus of proof and sentiment» often emerges as a process that continues to be ineffective (at best), or that detractors of the Palestinian struggle depict as a form of political machinery and cynicism (at worst)[15].

(12) The barracks are named after the French Marechal Joseph Joffre. For more information on early Palestinian exile to Lebanon, see: Jihane Sfeir, *L'exil Palestinien Au Liban: Le Temps Des Origines (1947-1952)* (Paris: Karthala, 2008).

(13) Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2019); Omar Dewachi, «When wounds travel.» *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 2, no. 3 (2015):61-82; Lamia Moghnieh, «Infrastructures of Suffering: Trauma, Sumud and the Politics of Violence and Aid in Lebanon». *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1-26.

(14) William Mazzarella, «Internet X-ray: e-governance, transparency, and the politics of immediation in India.» *Public Culture* 18, no. 3 (2006): 473-505; Lori Allen, «Martyr Bodies in the Media: Human Rights, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Immediation in the Palestinian Intifada.» *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 1 (2009): 161-80

(15) Allen, «Martyr Bodies in the Media».

In the way she remembers her ordeal, Fatima emphasizes the process of wounding more so than she attempts to express her constant physical discomfort and her pain; and she describes her wounds by the weapons used to maim her. This association weapon-wound reveals how injuries aim at human obliteration: human bodies (like Fatima Sirhan's) are purposefully harmed using tools and technologies - and these are artifacts of collective human thinking and making - to contribute to the eradication of human creative forces(16). However, this association is also ambivalent: in the way that it brings Fatima's wounds into the public realm, it can work to create a compassionate connection with her pain or, on the contrary, provoke a disconcerting distance. In the same vein, the materiality of wounds, the physical and embodied traits of injuries, are also deflected through social manifestations of various trauma. Anthropologist Omar Dewachi tells the story of another refugee in contemporary Lebanon: Hussein, an Iraqi man who had been tortured and maimed in his home country and who had sought refuge in Beirut. Focusing on the interactions Hussein has in the leftist bar where he works as a waiter, Dewachi shows how entangled local and regional histories of conflict and violence corroborate, refute, or challenge the claim-making activities that are centered around wounds, revealing for example the limits of humanitarian logic and intervention. If Hussein's wounds are key to the processing of his claims to resettle in the United States, they are conversely a target of suspicion in Beirut, a milieu where political violence, and the bodies that bear its brunt, are legitimated or delegitimated by different social actors. Hussein was indeed fired from the bar after former militants, who had been maimed, imprisoned, and tortured themselves, became annoyed with him every time he showed them his scars(17).

Quotidian, social, and institutional frameworks thus concur to shape the meanings associated with public expressions of pain mediated through the materiality of wounds. But the embodied physical characteristics of wounds allow us to contemplate another set of equally complex relationships between the public display of suffering and the private feelings of having been harmed, on one hand, and between the social character of violence and

(16) Scarry, *The Body in Pain.*
(17) Dewachi, «When wounds travel».

the individual experience of pain, on the other. Could testimonies of wounds be attended to on these terms then? Fatima's account, as well as Umm Faris's which I engage later in this essay, seem to suggest that they can, and indeed must, be read in a different light, one that does not necessarily find its voice through the universalizing and homogenizing lens of violated human rights. Language objectifies personal pain and brings it into the world, though whatever wounding achieves, it also achieves through the un-shareability of pain, its resistance to language, and propensity to destroy it. Instead of words, sounds, and cries, and in lieu of a meaningful mode of expression that makes way with pain, it is a language that contributes to its world-shattering capacities(18). In Omar Amiralay's 1997 documentary *There are many things left to say*, playwright Saadallah Wannous, suffering from advanced throat cancer, struggles to articulate his pain. From his hospital bed in Damascus, he describes how the 1991 Gulf War was a blow so painful that he could only sense its effects in his throat - long before he was even diagnosed - and explains how he became increasingly aware of a foreign mass growing in his pharynx as American bombs fell on Iraq(19). Put differently, extreme pain eludes meaningful representation. In the process, it collapses and unmakes the world; but being in physical pain also brings one back to their own body, and it is precisely through this perpetual movement of return (to the body) that human imagination - transcending the embodied state which pain reduces oneself to - can strive to remake the world(20). A critical element is the relationship of bodily suffering to language and the world, and the connectedness of individual wounds to collective suffering(21). Fatima and Umm Faris's tenacious testimonies are thus another forceful manner by which to counter settler colonial violence and its aim to dissolve collective life through wounding.

(18) Scarry, *The Body in Pain*.

(19) Omar Amiralay, *There* Are Still So *Many Things Left to Say*, (Syria:1997), 49 min.

(20) Scarry, *The Body in Pain.*

(21) In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag explores how metaphors are used to refer to illnesses such as cancer and contends that the cultural discourses surrounding these illnesses may have detrimental consequences. In this essay, I am less concerned with how diseases or injuries become metaphors. Rather, my framing here underscores the ways in which the expression of tremendous pain, almost linguistically impossible, involves the return of oneself to the body, and how an embodied expression of pain, such as one mediated through injuries, can transcend the world-shattering effect (individual and collective) that pain has created. See: Susan Sontag. *Illness As Metaphor*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988).

«My leg still hurts very much», says Fatima as she takes her slippers off to show her scars in front of the camera. «See, what you have here», she asserts, pointing to a constellation of scars above and around her right ankle. Her skin, riddled with creases and wrinkles, looks like a crumpled blanket with a thousand tiny holes. «See, that's from surgery... and that's from another surgery, and here, you have another, and also here.». Holding the toes of her right foot in the cusp of her hand, she goes on: «here are my toes, I haven't felt, nor moved them in a very long time». She lifts her dress a little, and gesturing toward her left knee, shows two larger and longitudinal scars from other surgeries she had to have after the bombing. Fatima finally brings both her arms across her chest, and pointing at her armpits, declares: «I have nothing but shrapnel and metal inside of me». Though women reconstitute subjective feelings through their narratives, certain affects, desires, and longings find their expression in images, rather than through linguistic means: images that can «express without formulating», capturing «uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it» and that can «drag the world along with them»(22). Imagistic representations of wounds-aural, visual as in Fatima's case, or even textual-poetic-replace formal, linguistic explanations when the reality of the lived experience is too powerful, too painful and too great to express in ordered language. When descriptions of private pain are uttered linguistically, through publicly known grammar and rules, they will almost always stumble - the word 'pain' itself referring only to a sensation yet unable to describe it(23). In oral history interviews, the work of memory and recovering adds a personal subjective dimension to the collective history of the Palestinian Nakba(24). Processes of remembering through the body bring closer the concrete vividness of encounters with people, places and things. They are processes of subjectification, in and of themselves, through which women become «subjects and live their lives as a story within a history»(25). Because it is not aimed at producing a narrative structured

(22) Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself*, 10-11.

(23) Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. E. M Anscombe, P. M. S Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. *Philosophical Investigations*. Revised 4th edition. (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

(24) Ruba Salih, «When Women Remember: Gender, Trauma and Counter-memories» In *Voices of the Nakba: A Living Archive of Palestine*, ed. Diana Allan (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

(25) Ruba Salih, «Bodies That Walk, Bodies That Talk, Bodies That Love: Palestinian Women Refugees, Affectivity, and the Politics of the Ordinary» *Antipode* 49, no. 3 (2017): 747.

around proof, symptomatologic or medical discourses, Fatima's testimony stands in stark contrast with the authorizing predispositions that wounds can assume(26). The way her story unfolds is political, though it does not attempt to draw immediate links with a well-ordered and coherent political plot like a revolution, an anti-colonial struggle, or a nationalist project. When the interviewers prompt her to provide dates or to name specific political actors, she replies with «I don't know», «I don't recall», «I am not sure who they were, just armed men». Nevertheless, she draws another horizon for politics, one that is grounded in her propensity to attend to the things, people, and places that matter. She remembers in explicit details the journey of the ambulance that transported her from al-Jish to the Joffre Hospital in Beirut, as well as all the stops it made along the way. Grateful for the people she loved and who loved her back, Fatima also displays a commitment to a politics that is also grounded in female solidarity. She recalls the names of two women friends who were injured during the barrel bomb strike and who survived: Neda and Najiyyeh, who moved to Aleppo and Hama. An older woman when she is interviewed, Fatima conjures her younger self. The scars from her injuries, that she displays in front of the camera, are signs that construct and help construe our understanding of time(27). They are literal, visceral and temporal configurations that point both backward and forward, bringing under sharper focus the processes and transformations through which settler colonial violence seeks to eliminate and mutilate native bodies. From the moment Fatima's adolescent body was wounded, her life was irreversibly altered. As her young body grew - and female bodies bear a metonymic relation to life, social reproduction, and care - it continued to carry the imprint of the 1948 war.

Similarly, listening to Umm Faris's audio-record makes clear her desires to address her personal pain instead of mere 'political sufferings'. When Rosemary Sayigh interviews her in 1998, part of the Palestinian Voice Archive project, Umm Faris had relocated to the new, low-rent, residential district of Sheikh Radwan in Gaza city from the nearby al-Shati' refugee

(26) For e.g.: wound narratives mobilized to effect certain humanitarian claims, or the medical language used to describe wounds and lacerations.

(27) Scarry, *The Body in Pain.*

camp that the Israeli army had bombed to the ground[28]. In the conversation she has with Sayigh, she highlights the terrific scars on her body and evokes the past as the site of an original wound - physical, personal, and historical - that shapes her present and the possible trajectories of the future she imagines for herself[29]. «I want to talk about my own personal sufferings, is it ok?», she asks. She recalls her marriage, when she was a young adolescent, to a resistance fighter (and high-ranked member of Fatah) in 1978 in Baghdad and stresses her subsequent peripatetic, difficult, and very lonely travels to a multitude of places and cities - from Damascus to Geneva. Umm Faris' momentary encounter with Sayigh, though embedded in a long and familiar history of violence, is also suspended in a political time during which the Israeli military had begun the progressive transfer of control of the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority (P.A.), in addition to the concomitant construction of the barrier which helped transform the strip into the world's largest, open-air, prison. As Sayigh describes, a friend she had in common with Umm Faris had suggested she meets with her because of the singularity of her experience: Umm Faris who had been working with UNRWA as a social worker had returned to Gaza - her birthplace - following several years as an exile from Lebanon, a context that had always been particularly violent for Palestinians. Beyond her wounds, Umm Faris's testimony historicizes gender relations, sexual and reproductive health, sociopolitical dynamics, and the contested meanings of home from the perspective of a woman who was made a refugee and whose body was maimed when she was a young adolescent mother.

In Gaza, Umm Faris lived in a home she had progressively built herself with the help of her neighbours and her two sons on a small plot of land she obtained through a grant from the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs. In her interview, she thoroughly describes how she had borne her two children (Youssef, born 1979 at Baghdad Medical City; and Mohammad, born 1981

(28) Sayigh began this archive in the early 1970s. The interviews she conducted in Gaza at a later stage were audio-recorded then published in the digital book *Voices: Palestinian Women narrate displacement*, accessible online at the al-Mashriq digital archival database.

(29) I develop how Umm Faris' oral history interview makes way for a different form of engagement with the archival record of the Palestinian Nakba in an upcoming volume dedicated to the Nakba Archive collection. For more information, see Diana Allan Ed., *Voices of the Nakba*: *A living Archive of Palestine* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2021).

at al-Shifa hospital in Gaza - both delivered by cesarean section) and recalls how, physically worn out and exhausted from displacement and illness, she had become a young widow when, in 1991, the Majlis al-Thawri (the revolutionary council) of the Abu Nidal Organization had assassinated her husband, forcing her away from the city of Saida, first to Badawi Camp in north Lebanon, then back to her native Gaza, via Amman, with her two sons. Umm Faris was raising her children alone; she had little contact with her husband's family (he was from another part of Palestine) and her ties with her own Gazan family were not solid either. The life-threatening complications she developed after giving birth to her second son Mohammad at al-Shifa hospital in Gaza had provoked many of her travels. During her cesarean section, «cotton and gauze were left inside [her] belly» causing «[her] guts and [her] intestines to decay». «*mʿafneen*», she says(30). Back in Baghdad, and suffering from excruciating pain, she underwent a series of surgical interventions where doctors «cleaned and removed everything and tied all [her] intestines and put them back inside [her]». Unfortunately, these multiple surgeries caused her to develop further complications: several intestinal occlusions and a hernia through which the food she ate would repeatedly «burst out of [her] abdomen, through the skin». Weighing a mere 35 kg by then, she would be urgently transferred to Switzerland, thanks to her husband's connections and with the support of Fatah. In Geneva, an American surgeon would perform multiple operations on her body, installing a colostomy bag, before removing it and re-attaching her colon to her rectum.

Umm Faris' body registered her physical sufferings from the complicated childbirth, as well as her experience with displacement across the different countries of the region. Some facets of her life can be linked to broader sociopolitical and historical conjunctures. She had momentarily settled in Iraq with her husband who had been stationed there as a senior member of Fatah. Their living situation had turned quite arduous as Iraq waged war with Iran (1980-1988) and Palestinian-Iraqi relationships subsequently deteriorated. «I was sick and alone in Baghdad with no one to take care of me or ask about me, or my children. I only had my husband and he only had me», she told Sayigh. Both al-Shifa' hospital and the Baghdad Medical

(30) Rotten and to be discarded.

City had been built by the British during the period of the Mandate and had subsequently been transformed over time, responding to, and shaped by, war, occupation, and besiegement. The staff at Baghdad Medical city, already working under hardship and duress because of the Iran-Iraq War, were unable to provide Umm Faris with proper care. With armed conflicts prevalent in the region, healthcare professionals are forced to repeatedly deal with mass casualties and work with little resources and under tremendous levels of stress. They do not manage, however, to retain and institutionalize the knowledge and practices they produce and develop. Every time a renewed episode of violence erupts, doctors, nurses and hospital personnel must relearn everything(31).

If genocidal violence is one logic through which to characterize the ongoing process of the Nakba, then maiming, where force and power aim to harm just short of killing, is another(32). The «right to maim», a form of violence that emerges from a conjunctural relationship between ethnicity, political economy, and history, contributes to the creation of infrastructures that provoke a 'slow death', a state in which people exist only in as much as they constitute a source of value that can be extracted(33). Umm Faris's illness, as a form of injury that arises from overdetermined configurations of structural exclusion and violence, disallows death, yet enables the production and reproduction of unlivable conditions of life, work, and love(34). Despite it all, Sayigh asserts that the Umm Faris she met was a woman who has had to rely entirely on herself to survive but who had also managed to build strong kinship ties with neighbors, friends and benevolent members of the community who supported her along the way. After her husband disappeared in Saida, friends helped forge identification papers for her and her two sons to allow them to return to Gaza. In the district of Sheikh Radwan, neighbors also often dropped by her house to check on her and make sure she always had everything she needed. Conversely, Sayigh contends that Umm Faris,

(31) Ghassan Abu Sittah, Omar Dewachi and Nabil Al-Tikriti, «The Evolution of Conflict Medicine in the Middle East-An Interview with Ghassan Abu Sittah,» *Middle East Report* no. 297 (Winter 2020).

(32) Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

(33) Ibid.

(34) João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

though back in her native town, in a home she owned, still felt unsafe as she told Sayigh that she did not want her real name revealed, feared repercussions in her workplace because of any information she might disclose in the interview, and worried about the future of her sons(35).

By way of an intimate ethnographic engagement with women who suffered from various illnesses in the south of Italy, anthropologist Mariella Pandolfi shows how the bodies of women are both a historical and a phenomenological memoir through which distress can be interpreted(36). Describing oneself through one's own body confirms a particular sense of being present in the world, a presence also configurated by social and historical structures that produce specific cultural roles and forms. Regardless of how these cultural expectations sought to discipline female expressions, feelings and behaviors, they still refracted a world in which women strived to face uncertainty and alienation. Pandolfi writes about the case of Maria, a peasant woman who regularly visited a doctor (instead of the traditional healers as is the custom in her village) to obtain medicine to alleviate her pains from living in a rapidly changing world. Though Maria resorted to a professional healthcare practitioner, she spoke of her suffering not as illnesses but in terms of the sick parts of her body, a discourse characteristic of the historical peasant customs of her village(37). Likewise, in the audio-recording, Umm Faris does not hesitate to make explicit and felt for her listeners all the manners with which she's dealt with her own world. Right as she is recounting all the surgeries she had, Umm Faris interrupts the conversation with Sayigh to ask her if she would get close to see her abdomen. Listening to that segment of the audio-recording, we intuit that Umm Faris had lifted her clothes to reveal her scars. Sayigh's response is one of surprise, but also illumination: «this scar goes straight into your heart», she tells Umm

(35) Rosemary Sayigh, *Voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement*, (Beirut: Al Mashriq site, 2005). https://lib-webarchive.aub.edu.lb/BorreLudvigsen/http://almashriq.hiof.no/palestine/300/301/voices/index2.html

(36) Drawing from the works of Croce, De Martino and Gramsci, Pandolfi attempts to reconcile two philosophical traditions which have dominated the study of Italian southern societies: historicism and phenomenology. Mariella Pandolfi, «Boundaries Inside the Body: Women's Sufferings in Southern Peasant Italy.» *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry: An International Journal of Comparative Cross-Cultural Research* 14, no. 2 (1990): 255-73.

(37) Pandolfi, «Boundaries Inside the Body».

Faris, revealing how the material, the physical, the psychosocial and the political cannot be disentangled. Umm Faris's embodied pain had thus linearly erupted into public domain. Her embodied performance, as she lifts her dress and shows her scars, invited a deeply intimate, perhaps even uncomfortable, engagement with her suffering. Her voice, asking Sayigh to come closer, followed by Sayigh's comment, had enabled her to project her embodied experience in both space and time and similarly extend the expanse of her wounds, beyond the physical confines of her body, to other spaces and moments that define collective life.

In her literary, vivid, and often quite graphic discussion of torture, Elaine Scarry shows that the greater the pain inflicted by the torturer, the smaller the wounded's world become(38). And as the wounded's world continues to shrink, the larger the wounder's world becomes and the stronger their power. What does it mean then to speak on behalf of those who have been wounded or those who are in pain? In their social dimensions, wounds are the «interstitial tissues» that bring people together or further drifts them apart, through a competing wound economy - a property that can underscore the contingent character of the values attributed to suffering(39). If wounds are indeed this connecting tissue through which relations are made and unmade, then tending to women's testimonies in the Palestinian oral history archive is very much like looking at the photograph of a person we love and lost. It is a wounding encounter that «fills the sight by force, because in it nothing can be refused or transformed»(40). From this encounter emerges the full ambivalent character of a testimony of wounds that holds the marks of both the perpetrator (what they did) and the survivor (how they were maimed). Even if a testimony exceeds its own representation («it fills the sight by force»), it remains a practice that develops because of cultures of witnessing that encompass promises of redemption (for the perpetrators) or redress and restorative justice (for the survivors). Besides, these cultures of

(38) Scarry, *The Body in Pain*.
(39) Dewachi, «When wounds travel»; Moghnieh, «Infrastructures of Suffering».
(40) Roland Barthes, Trans. Geoff Dyer. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 91.

witnessing can sometimes be complicit in historical violence(41). For instance, in the case of the Mohawk nation, the consolidation of salvage ethnography, known today as the anthropological recording of social practices and cultures threatened with extinction, corresponded with the incremental continuation and transformation of settler colonial violence(42). In other contexts, and through ritualized patterns, colonizers also sought healing from the very same people which had been the targets of prior forms of colonial violence(43). «Europe is doomed», wrote Sartre in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, «our victims know us by their wounds and shackles: that is what makes their testimony irrefutable», he added(44). Irrefutable to whom, and why, we might cynically ask.

Medical descriptions and diagnoses, reports of international organizations like Amnesty or Médecins Sans Frontières, transcripts of human rights trials, and artists' poems and prose bring pain into the public realm and represent, through language, different types of wounds and injuries on behalf of those who were wounded(45). Because they are composites of words, images, and embodied, aural, visual, and linguistic insignia, Palestinian women's oral history accounts prompt another kind of ethnographic engagement with wound narratives, where the intimate experience of sharing one's scars becomes the basis for relation, and for a way of knowing violence and remaking the subject in the wake of violent injury. If this essay engages the Palestinian oral history archive to explore how, and if, pain's world-shattering capacities can be undone, it is likewise inevitably haunted by the recent heightened episode of ethnic cleansing in Palestine, the unrelenting Israeli bombing of Gaza, and the subsequent deaths and injuries that this violence continues to produce. Over the past two months, like millions of people across the planet, I read stories of grief, death and loss and I

(41) Allen, Feldman. «Memory Theatres, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma Aesthetic» *Biography* 27, no. 1 (2004): 163-202.

(42) Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014)

(43) Michael, Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

(44) Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 48.

(45) Scarry, *The Body in Pain*.

scrolled endlessly through my social media timeline glaring at moving and still images of decimated and wounded bodies of Palestinians, young and old. Much like what happened to Fatima Sirhan and Umm Faris, children and young adolescents who were injured will likely suffer from various forms of lifelong disabilities and will require repeat surgeries as their bodies continue to grow. In the words of Ghassan Abu-Sitta, a Palestinian surgeon who's been treating and operating on the wounded since the First Intifada: «What if re-injury in future wars is a probability? […] This is the future that awaits kids in Gaza»(46).

Drawing on the narrative, embodied and imagistic forms through which Umm Faris and Fatima Sirhan have represented their experiences with injuries, this essay has attempted to outline what wounds might look like, unravel, or conceal in the oral history record. As «wounds travel» in space and time, they invite a rethinking of historiographic and anthropological practices, and question how subjects attempt, or not, to dislodge their suffering, express it, or become invested in various political projects(47). In a context marred by conflicts and wars, wound testimonies exist because of the difficulties of articulating terror, and pain through speech. If violence is overbearing to the point of becoming almost uneventful, and in all cases inseparable from the lived experience of everyday life, can and must it be squarely named?(48) And how? The political impasse lies here: it is directly proportional to our incapacity to formulate the pain of living in a present while simultaneously imagining a future already foreclosed. Engaging the accounts of Umm Faris and Fatima Sirhan means both «living-in-violence» and experiencing it in the form of an encounter(49). In the Palestinian oral history archive, the testimonies of wounds do several things at once: they do not rescind the violence, nor do they explicitly name it; and yet, they transcend it. Through their interviews, these women's accounts resist normative testimonial modes of naming violence while also articulating an alternative subjectivity through

(46) Ghassan Abu-Sitta, Twitter Post, May 26, 2021. https://twitter.com/GhassanAbuSitt1/status/1397477624604237824?s=20

(47) Dewachi, «When wounds travel».

(48) Lamia Moghnieh, «'The violence we live in': reading and experiencing violence in the field.» *Contemporary Levant* 2, no. 1 (2017): 24-36; Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

(49) Moghnieh, «The violence we live in».

their pain - one that actively resists assimilation or dissolution; and one in which the struggle to remake and reinvent the world is both inevitable and constant. This tension, and movement, between the individual and the social, the private and the public, the unuttered and the inaudible, and the forms of subjectivities forged through pain, recreates in each instance the collective life that dominant socio-political orders seek to obliterate.

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