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**Imagined Return: The Making of Home,  
Place and Belonging Among Palestinian  
Camp Refugees on the West Bank**

(project description)

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# Imagined Return: the Making of Home, Place and Belonging Among Palestinian Camp Refugees on the West Bank

## Aims and Relevance

The purpose of this study is to explore notions and practices of home and return among Palestinian camp refugees on the West Bank. These refugees, who make up a third of the West Bank population, are among the millions of Palestinians that were displaced from their villages at the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 (*Al Nakba*, "the Disaster"). This means they have lived as refugees in camps for over four generations. The villages from which they originally fled are today situated on Israeli territory, many of them only kilometres away from the camps. Over the years, the longing to return to the home village and the way of life it represented has remained a vivid feature in the social life of the camp residents. For example, marriage preferences, residence patterns, the naming of places in the camp are all symbolic re-creations of village life. Another way of remembering is the practice of the older generations to tell stories of the home village and life in the past to the younger ones. In the long-standing conflict with Israel over territory, such active remembering, passed on through the generations, is also at the heart of the Palestinian political struggle. This is also the main focus of this study, taking its points of departure in anthropological understandings of place (nation/home/house) and social memory and exploring these in relation to political conflict and exile.

The future of the Palestinian refugees is in fact one of the most difficult issues to be resolved in the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. There are today more than five million Palestinian refugees in the world, over one million of these live in camps in the Middle East. The Palestinian leadership has maintained the undisputable right of return (*haq al awda*) of the refugees, with reference to UN resolutions, but, in practice, demands have been modified in the peace process. For instance, they have proposed a collective return to a Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, instead of the individual's right of return to his or her specific place of origin which included return to villages and towns inside Israel (Lindholm forthcoming). Israel does not seem likely to accept any form of return of Palestinian refugees to its territory. The refugee issue has, moreover, repeatedly been postponed in the peace negotiations and was excluded in the Oslo agreement, which has created a great deal of resentment and bitterness among Palestinian refugees. In my experience, the desire among Palestinian camp refugees to return to the original villages remains strong and, at least

rhetorically, they are unwilling to accept any kind of economic compensation for losses in the past (Gren 2001). Despite Bisharat's (1994) claim that the right of return in recent years has become less important, and that a collective political identity and shared experiences of occupation have become more significant building blocks in Palestinian national identity, one can note that refugees began mobilising for return in 1995 and 1996. This occurred after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in parts of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Today, there is a worldwide network for the right of return of Palestinian refugees promoting research centres, NGOs, conferences, campaigns as well as e-mail lists and internet sites (see for example [www.badil.org](http://www.badil.org)). The return has thus caused frictions within the Palestinian community and has affected the legitimacy of the Palestinian leadership. The issue of return as vital to the resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the wider political developments form an important context for my study. How will the course of this conflict and possible future peace negotiations shape the making of 'home' for the Palestinian refugees, whether this be in the camps, or resettlement elsewhere?

Ethnographic studies about Palestinian refugees are scant, especially as for refugees in the occupied territories. Sayigh's work (1979), collecting memories of flight and of life in the home village is relevant for my study but, like Peteet (1991), studying women's political participation, it concerns Palestinian refugees in camps in Lebanon. Among the few studies concerning West Bank camp refugees, Rosenfeld has examined work migration to Israel (forthcoming). Slyomovics' (1989) work is of particular interest for my purposes, even if it mostly focuses on displaced Palestinians living inside Israel. She approaches the issue of memory of lost Palestinian villages and strategies of remembering as strategies of resistance. However, her work does not focus on camp refugees and the particular political implications of their liminal condition.<sup>1</sup> Another anthropologist, Rabinowitz (1997) has approached the construction of 'home' from a different perspective; examining the perception of territory and control by Palestinians and Israelis in the town Nazareth, he found that these perceptions deeply influence group relations. Others have studied, from different anthropological interests, the Palestinian population on the West Bank in general (Kanana'a 1998, Jean-Klein 1997, Moors 1995, Swedenburg 1989, 1990, 1991, Peteet 1994 and Bowman 2001).

There are a few non-anthropological studies of Palestinians who returned to the West Bank after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (see for example Hammer 2001 in Lindholm, forthcoming). These returnees have often spent exile in the US or in the

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<sup>1</sup> An unpublished thesis, which I do not have access to, by the anthropologist Randa Farah seems to deal with popular memory and identity among Palestinian camp refugees in Jordan.

Gulf states, and social as well as cultural and political tensions between returnees and residents have emerged (ibid). As already mentioned, the present study will, on the contrary, have as its main object the Palestinian camp refugees on the West Bank.<sup>2</sup> In my study, return is imagined, not necessarily realised, although I am open to the possible solutions which future peace negotiations may bring.

### *Palestinian Refugees and the National Discourse*

Palestinian refugees are crucial in the Palestinian national struggle since most violent clashes against the Israeli army have taken place in refugee camps and other poor neighbourhoods (Strum 1998:65). The refugees are also significant symbols in a political rhetoric which celebrates willing martyrs and which points out the refugees' right of return as an indisputable condition for peace. But, at the same time refugees are, more than any other Palestinians, marginal both within their own society and in the world, ignored or denied rights by most Israelis, and, many of them would claim, abandoned by the peace process. Both being marginal *and* part of a main issue in the conflict and in negotiations, Palestinian refugees have a contradictory status.

According to Turner (1967) liminality indicates a transition to a new status. In Palestinian political discourse, the liminal status of the refugees implies a transformative power. With the help of the refugees, the Palestinian losses are imagined to be transformed into gains; the dispersal will become a Palestinian nation. In addition, sacrifices for example in the form of martyrdom also release power, a kind of transformative energy (Gren 2001). In these ways, Palestinian refugees are contesting and complicating widespread stereotypes of refugees as helpless victims.

Moreover, Palestinian nationalism obtains its affective power from notions of the lost village and the peasants that become "national signifiers" (Slyomovics 1998:xx). Nationalistic emotional force is also drawn from domesticity and the Palestinian peasant woman. The peasant woman of pre-1948 is symbolically still alive, but she is trapped in the body of a refugee woman in a camp. Thus, camp refugee women with their rural past and their political importance symbolize, more than any other Palestinian women, the lost land.

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<sup>2</sup> They could be labelled internal refugees for whom return to the original villages appears politically impossible at present. This population are not internally displaced since they have crossed a border, but stateless refugees. Simultaneously, they often describe themselves as refugees "in their own country", still living in the non-existing state of Palestine. For the time being, I therefore use the term "internal refugees" to describe this contradictory status.

### *Place as Nation, House and Home*

Among Palestinians, there is a cultural concern with honour that seems to be intimately connected to the loss of land. For instance, Katz (1996) writes that no metaphorical phrase is more familiar to Palestinians than *ardi-'irdi'*, which means: my land is my womenfolk. This should be understood as: "the land is as important to protect as the honour of my kin-women". Not being able to protect their land in 1948 as well as later on, a sense of humiliation spread among the Palestinians, which has been reinforced by military occupation and violent conflict. In the Palestinian case "getting one's own land" may probably be understood as part of a process of reconciliation with Israel, a way to re-establish honour as well as a sense of security and to become more equal to Israel. The word *balad*, land in Arabic, both implies nation and soil, as in many other languages. To create a Palestinian nation state is only one way of "getting one's own land" and to restore Palestinian honour. The other sense of land as soil must probably in one way or the other be addressed to create a successful peace process and this will of course have implications for Palestinian refugees and the right of return.

Peteet (1995) claims that, among Palestinian camp refugees in Lebanon, the homeland was reconfigured as a place where trust suffused daily life and social relations. Furthermore, disjuncture between the trust one could feel in a homeland and the trust that is absent in a place of refuge fostered a sense of urgency to return. On the West Bank, the camp seemed to be experienced as an ambiguous place, both implying community and shared life experiences, as well as lack of trust and safety since the Israeli army was still perceived as threatening and "could enter the camp any day" (Gren 2001).

The competing Palestinian and Israeli discourses are perhaps most visible when it comes to battles over land and language. The intimate connection between the two is crucial to the act of conquest; the renaming of places is a well-developed strategy among both Palestinians and Israelis (see for example Slyomovics 1998). Also homes and houses are contested. Traditionally, and especially in the Palestinian rural community, houses have cultural significance since the house implies deep-rootedness, and both physical as well as social connectedness to the land. In addition, in unstable political situations, houses have economical importance as one of few options for investment (Moors 1995:45f). According to Moors, there is also a cultural centrality of home-ownership, because the Palestinian society values autonomy of each household. Moreover, nationalistic poetry often focuses on the Palestinian village house, which continues to exemplify Palestinian identity, steadfastness and resistance (Slyomovics 1998:176).

The Israelis seem to be well aware of these notions of houses; many emptied Palestinian villages have been razed and a common collective punishment by the Israeli army is the demolition of Palestinian houses in the occupied territories. The Israeli settler politics must also be understood in this light. The settlements are a way to establish Israeli deep-rootedness, physical facts of presence on and belonging to the land. Further complicating the controversy over place making and belonging, many Palestinians find work as constructors in Israel and are thereby helping Israeli localizing strategies (Tamari 1981). By using another strategy, steadfastness, *sumud*, the Palestinians have also long been opposing the Israeli settlement politics. *Sumud* means to stay on to the land, to not give it up (Swedenburg 1990). In the attitude of the refugees to camp life you often encounter a sense of *sumud*. To leave the often miserable conditions in the camp could be interpreted as an acceptance of their permanent expulsion (Warnock, 1990). The houses in the camps have frequently been called shelters (*malja'*), instead of houses, to point out their temporariness (Bisharat 1997). On the other hand, Israeli assumptions that resettlement projects for camp refugees on the Gaza Strip would diminish their urge to return have proved to be false (Hazboun 1994).

A second significance of the Arabic word for house, *beit*, is family. Thus, even in a linguistic meaning, a Palestinian house is definitely a particular kind of place, connected to kinship, identity and trust, to notions of home. A house may also be an important means to keep an extended family together, since several generations often live in the same house. This is particularly true for parents and their married sons with wives and children, but also unmarried or divorced daughters continue or return to live in the family house. The stage of events in women's stories from the Intifada, which I was told during a minor fieldwork in a West Bank refugee camp, was often their homes (Gren 2001). The memories of these women were concentrated on the violations of their homes and families. For many refugee women the political resistance to occupation seems to be a domestic affair literally speaking<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, by telling stories about the lost house and the lost village the elderly generations are trying to transmit knowledge of belonging and memory to new generations. In emotional descriptions of for example beautiful landscapes and fruits from the garden of the original family house a message of longing is uncovered, a message that reinforce the importance of return and struggle. As mentioned, the telling of such stories is a way to construct a Palestinian version of history and thereby contesting an Israeli historical discourse

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<sup>3</sup> That political resistance during the Intifada took place in the camps is not strange since curfews as well as checkpoints made it difficult for Palestinians to move. The Israeli army also enclosed this particular camp by a

(Slyomovics 1998). Thus, for the Palestinians, home seems to have multiple meanings, home is intertwined with national politics, economic survival, social bonds, belonging, emotions and memories.

How are house and home understood in a context of refugeeness and lived experience in camps? How are these notions influenced by national discourses, violent conflict as well as potential peace accords? Which expectations are connected to return? How is a future in the original villages imagined? What different views on issues of return and home may persons in diverse generations, classes, political parties, as well as men and women, hold? How are different places and times interconnected in “imagined return”?

### Theoretical points of departure

According to Gupta & Ferguson (1997), perceptions of locality and identity are both discursively and historically constructed; *place making*, as well as identity formation, is dependent on processes of exclusion and otherness. This could be assumed to have interesting implications for Palestinian camp refugees, since any place, accordingly also a refugee camp, is a particular place set apart from and opposed to other places. In Palestinian refugee camps, there seem to be at least three sorts of significant place as well as significant time; a remembered and imagined lost place (in this case; the villages in present Israel which were lost in *Al Nakba*, 1948), a lived present day place (the refugee camp), and a future imagined and reconquered place (the original villages after return). These places and times seem to overlap/superimpose each other when the social structures of the lost villages are recreated in the camp.

Gupta and Ferguson (ibid:7) further argue that “/.../ it is fundamentally mistaken to conceptualise different kinds of non- or supralocal identities (diasporic, refugee, migrant, national, and so forth) as spatial and temporal extensions of a prior, natural identity rooted in locality and community. ”Such assumptions imply that “the local” is more authentic than “the global”, the latter understood as artificially imposed. Although such theoretical rethinking is significant, we need to remember that according to most Palestinian refugees, their natural place is understood to be the original villages and “refugee-ness” is a kind of “non-identity”. Neither the present local place of the refugees, the refugee camp, nor their refugee identity, is seen as natural or authentic by refugees themselves. Moreover, as in the discourse of repatriation of the international refugee regime (Eastmond 2002), return for Palestinians is

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fence, making it even more difficult. Cultural notions about a woman’s rightful place in her home have also

depicted as a vital component in the healing of the social body, torn by violence and exile, even though recent return studies shows the complexity of return and the many tensions between Palestinian returnees and residents. Despite the post-modern notions of home as nowhere and everywhere, home remains a salient imperative.

According to Malkki (1995), refugees occupy a problematic liminal position in *the national order of things*, since in this present world order, having a nation-state and a nationality is considered to be “natural”. Loss is moreover a common theme in the refugee experience, as well as in the writing about refugees. Malkki (1995:11) criticizes research and policy that define the refugees’ loss of for example culture, identity and ”roots”. She argues that losses cannot be taken for granted and may be of different kinds. In addition, what losses that will come to define the experience and to be symbolically elaborated may also be very different for different groups of refugees. Neither is loss automatically followed by powerlessness, but may, on the contrary, provide a sense of empowerment. Furthermore, Malkki argues that refugee camps on the one hand objectify collectivities of people as ”the refugees”, denying them subjectivity. On the other hand, this objectification is not completely out of control of the camp residents. By subverting the label “refugee” and introducing competing images of “refugee-ness”, camps may ”become generative, productive sites for social and political invention and transformation” (1995:238). and thereby offer a sense of empowerment. This view also concurs with that of the Palestinian leadership, which sees the refugee camps as centres of resistance (Hazboun 1999).

For the Palestinians, having an identity connected to loss to such a great extent could make them feel powerless. However, as Malkki claims writing about Hutu refugees in Tanzania, in the frequent politicisation of the refugee experience, losses are made into sacrifices, transformed into political force. As I have shown elsewhere (Gren 2001), this sense of empowerment is also present among Palestinian refugee women whose losses are frequently interpreted as political sacrifices which are able to transform experiences of humiliation to moral superiority.

Remembering has increasingly come to be understood as a social and cultural process.<sup>4</sup> In the conflict, there is also a fierce contest over history. As Slyomovics (1998:207) remarks, the authoritative version of history in ”Palestine” is defined by Israeli versions and the Palestinian production of history is still in process. In this study the memories about the original villages and the flight of the refugees will be examined in the light of these

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implications on this issue.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion and overview, see Bohlin (2001).

conflicting historical discourses. In addition, how and why we remember is often politicised. According to Gillis (1994:3), “[t]he core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity.” In the Palestinian context, what Gillis refers to as the *commemorative activity*, linking memory to nationalism, materializes in for example embroidered maps of Palestine, folk dance performances and memorial books over lost villages. Also Nora (1989) want to denote the role played by memory to construct a nation and a community. To identify the specific and symbolic sites where memory resides, Nora introduces the concept *lieux de mémoires* which is the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. These sites have both a material, symbolic and functional sense. Nora gives the example of an archive which becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if imagination has invested it with symbolic connotations. In a similar way, Palestinian memorial books is not merely a practice of documentation of the destruction of places, but symbolically meaningful.<sup>5</sup> As Slyomovics (1998) writes about on-going Palestinian projects, “[a] memorializing consciousness, clearly manifested as the force behind memorial books, becomes, therefore, the principal strategem to promote social cohesion for a group’s endangered identity.” This is also a means to identify the lost place, the original village, which is supposed to be reconquered with return.

But how is the lived present day place, the camp, remembered? “Everything in the camp reminds me of this injustice [that the Palestinians experienced], for example the doors which were broken by the soldiers” claimed one of my informants in a West Bank refugee camp (Gren 2001:32). At least this camp seems to be remembered as a place of injustice and suffering, but also of resistance and struggle. The way the Palestinian refugees commemorate *Al Nakba* 1948 and the villages they originally were displaced from have great implications for their political, social and emotional life. Memory and the telling of memories will also affect how new generations in this refugee population come to imagine home, place and belonging.

Home is not only a physical place, but is, for instance, also understood as an important basis for developing and maintaining identities. As recent ethnographic studies (see Fog Olwig 1998) show, *home* is not always a place of harmony providing refuge from external conflict, but may, on the contrary, be a contested domain. Home demarcates relations of inclusion and exclusion which reflect structures of power beyond those persons living in a

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<sup>5</sup> According to Slyomovics (1998), the practice of creating memorial books to document the destruction of place is found among several Diaspora groups.

specific home (Fog Olwig 1998:230). Moral discourses, ethnicity, class, gender as well as nationalistic rhetoric influence these relations. It is reasonable to believe that when power relations are manifested in violence inside or nearby a person's home this may influence and interact with identity formation. As Fog Olwig (*ibid*) notes, it might be useful to distinguish between home as a place involving social and economic rights and obligations, and home as an abstract entity, which is expressed through narratives and symbolic interchange, although these two aspects of home mutually reinforce and implicate one another. Accordingly, in the Palestinian case, the national home of Palestine may reinforce and implicate the home of a family, and vice versa. How the many intrusions of the Israeli army on Palestinian homes in camps may effect identity formation is yet to be investigated.

### Implementation and Ethical Considerations: "Field Work under Fire"

Anthropological field work in a violent war-like context *and* with refugees demands special considerations, both ethically and methodologically. As Omidian (2000:172) writes, refugee research sometimes deeply affects the anthropologist. "[Working with refugees] puts the researcher at risk of emotional bombardment, feeling acutely the losses, deaths and seemingly endless struggle to cope with life [...]".<sup>6</sup> It is therefore important for anthropologists working in such circumstances to be prepared for field work as a turbulent and emotional period of their lives. It may for instance become significant to keep a journal to document gradual shifts in consciousness and changes in perspective of the researcher (this could be regarded as a natural result of any field work but is more critical in some studies because of emotional issues). As I already have some briefer experience of doing field work among Palestinian refugees I can at least partly imagine what field work in the current political situation will imply. Except from handling my own worries of being physically injured and under long-term pressure, and, not least, handling the fears of my family and friends, I must be prepared to listen to and record stories about different kinds of assaults and losses.<sup>7</sup>

Equally important is dealing with mistrust and lack of confidence among informants. In the current situation, it will most probably be impossible to find informants in any random manner; recruiting informants will heavily depend on my capacity to build networks and to

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<sup>6</sup> Although my experience with Palestinian refugees have many similarities with those of Omidian, Omidian generalizes about field work among refugees in a way I would not. She seems to assume all refugees to be victims in all contexts, a view which I do not share.

<sup>7</sup> In my experience it is for example not wise to rewrite or work with such stories before going to (trying to go to!) sleep. Omidian also notes how experimenting with the spacing and number of interviews per week helped her to "survive" field work. It might as well become possible to develop a more hardened attitude as Malkki (1995) did working with Hutu refugees.

use already established contacts in the camp. As I have stated elsewhere (Gren 2001), it is urgent to take precautions towards lack of safety and feelings of mistrust among informants when working in Palestinian refugee camps; this includes to underline anonymity, not to note names and where informants live, not to record or take photos without asking permission and only when relations have been well-established, to avoid direct questions about political affiliations and personal experiences with the Israeli army and not to consciously bring up stressful subjects. Participation in the study will be based on the informed consent of the persons being studied. It is moreover understood that informed consent is a dynamic and continuous process which in the Palestinian context involve a constant negotiation of safety and risk-taking; if informants who earlier agreed to be part of the study get second thoughts, this will be fully respected. Notes and transcribed interviews will be coded and handle with care.<sup>8</sup>

In a society at war, plans are constantly changed due to the political situation. As Kovats-Bernat (2002) reports, dangerous fields frequently demand improvised field strategies which should be reflected upon. He also underlines the importance of listening to the experts of the field, the locals, whose advice and recommendations should be acknowledged when it comes to decide what information is too costly to gather, which questions are too dangerous to ask etcetera. Considering the dramatic shift in power between the anthropologist and the locals in dangerous fields, Kovats-Bernat also questions the AAA's code of ethics since it assumes that the anthropologist is fully able to control or, at least, to mediate or negotiate dangers away from informants. The ability to protect against harm must accordingly be regarded as shared among the actors in this kind of field toward the well-being of everyone concerned.

I am also trying to be prepared for the possibility of being under curfew and how to handle not only danger, but also the boredom and impatience which might follow.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, I will be prepared to interrupt field work and get out of the field if the situation aggravates or if I consider my work so stressful that I need a break. Omidian notes the need researchers might feel to take action to overcome feelings of helplessness, and, for instance, she started a project to help elderly isolated women to meet during her field work. I partly plan to work with children in the camp to keep them busy and away from dangerous situations in the streets.

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<sup>8</sup> I will take the advice of local scholars to figure out how to practically handle sensitive data.

<sup>9</sup> For me personally, some practical adaptive strategies, such as keeping a journal, practicing yoga, listening to music (to cheer me up or to calm me down!), eating chocolate, reading books, will be helpful in coping with the situation in the field.

It is moreover valuable to reflect on the role of the researcher and on how the researcher may be perceived at the field site. A person of Swedish nationality is often judged to be harmless or, thanks to former Swedish foreign politics, positively charged. In the Palestinian context “Swedish-ness” is definitely an advantage. As an unmarried female Christian outsider with dubious moral and unknown family background I may of course be questioned. I am, however, also a student who is coming back to know more about the Palestinian issue, a fact which will probably be appreciated.

Apart from these possible biases, field work will include the usual anthropological methods of participant observation, informal conversations and more formal interviews. Due to my still insufficient knowledge of Arabic an interpreter will initially be engaged in the study. Focus groups as well as narratives will be used. I hope to collect a kind of “home narratives” among refugee families. The narratives will include both visits to and stories, drawings and photos of the original villages and the camp as well as of the houses of the refugees. Such anthropological approach searches for narrative truth, rather than historical truth. This implies that “home stories” will tell us more about how Palestinian refugees imbue their past and present experiences with meaning, as well as how they imagine the future and how different places and times may interconnect in these narratives, than about how things “really” happened. When possible, relevant events and interviews will be recorded or filmed. Data about the political context will be collected from local newspapers, internet sites, NGOs and local universities. Initial field work will be conducted during six months, starting during 2003. Additional field work will be carried out in 2004.

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