people use it also, and more often in fact, to point to social spacings cured through the possession of a recognized citizenship. They exist in Lebanon from those whose place in the world is at least semi-legal strictures distinctive of the refugee regime for Palestinians. This poverty is not effectuated in the recognizable form of a “political subject of poverty”—a “I, poor”—who would emerge in the interpretative act of establishing a semiotic relationship of some kind between her malnourishment, ill health, or exposure to dampness and dust on the one hand and on the other a field of social belonging in which she would claim inclusion. In order to do so, through three brief ethnographic sketches I draw attention to processes of disclosure of self and world strung together from the everyday run-ins with the world that the lives of the refugee poor entail. If there is a politics of refugee poverty, I argue, its distinctiveness lies in shunning the category of citizenship and the manner in which this category fastens an ethical imaginary of the sovereign self to the sovereignty of the state and to the life of a population.

Hand in the Fire

There is a general sense among the Palestinian men and women I know in the camps of Tyre, South Lebanon, that one simply ought not talk too much about the poverty of refugee life, or if it is talked about, it should only be through words that convey a reticence or inadequacy to bring the raw facts of poverty, and of one’s own poverty in particular, into the sphere of discourse. One example of such words that show but decline to tell is a formula I have often heard in social occasions when “poverty” (al-fuqur) is used in speech, as a polite rejoinder to my inter-view questions, for instance, or in the flow of friends’ and neighbors’ everyday conversations, inserted as a punctuation mark of sorts signaling that there is only so much one can or should say about one’s destitution or that of other friends and neighbors: “Ele iido bil may mush zey ele iido bil nar,” which, translated literally, means “he who has his hand in the water is not like him who has his hand in the fire.” People use the phrase to point en bloc, as it were, to the material and existential spacing that separates those living within the tight legal strictures distinctive of the refugee regime for Palestinians in Lebanon from those whose place in the world is at least secured through the possession of a recognized citizenship. They use it also, and more often in fact, to point to social spacings internal to refugee life between those who succeeded in assembling a relatively stable, sometimes even almost cozy, living within these strictures and those for whom these combine with ill health, a long ongoing history of political violence, and family upheavals to hold them suddenly or chronically captive at the edge of a kind of abyss.

In context, this formula is of course always a statement about time, about a temporal spacing between two actual or potential partners in a conversation. He who has his hand in the water is not nailed to the present in the same manner as she whose hand is in the fire. Thus the formula is always a pithy reminder that for the poor there is, first and foremost, no such thing as skholè, “free time, freed from the urgencies of the world, that allows a free and liberated relation to those urgencies and to the world” (Bourdieu 2000:1). Its utterance practically serves to expose at the same time as it warns in advance against the presuppositions entailed by the situation of skholè, however flimsy and relative, of the speaker who is not poor in the vicinity of poverty. A bit like in Bourdieu’s critique of the scholastic illusion—that the formula extends, as it were, to the realm of the lay ordinary—a gap or discordance in the tempos of life and thought is shown to disjoin and stand between two speakers who do not share an equivalent relationship to poverty.

Being a statement about time, it is also in practice a statement about language, about a chasm that exists between the words, too, of the two speakers broaching the matter of the poverty besetting one of them. In the context of actual camp conversations I attended, the formula often addressed, it seems to me, the words just pronounced, or about to be
pronounced, by he or she whose hand is not caught in the same furnace: ordinary, hesitant, commiserative comments such as “yalla basita” (take it easy), “I know what it is like,” “inshallah things will get better soon.” Such words and others will have only a limited traction or grip, the proverb’s utterer gently, obliquely, declares ahead of time. At the very least, the burden is put on the speaker who is not poor to look for a breach of his own habitual language games and to reach for a nonlinguistic element or “state of things” into which the poor’s words are anchored. Yet at the same time, this nonlinguistic element seems to be declared elusive of discursive reach, because the proverb also implicitly merges poverty, in such contexts, with a corporeal substance in constant, hurtful transformation and in excess of the viable registers of the senses. Poverty talk will fall on flesh burning and already burned—on bodies being consumed, calloused, and otherwise harmfully changed while discourse was going on.

Such statements and other reserved gestures that Palestinian men and women typically use to disclose, and at once draw a veil over, the presence of poverty in their lives provides elements, I want to suggest in this paper, for an immanent critical social theory of poverty in the refugee context. This might sound like a paradoxical affirmation, at least if we take the statement to make poverty something that only those who are living it can know and talk about. To be sure, a strong claim is being made in this case to a form of separateness: the speaker that social circumstances forced to identify herself as poor only evokes for her interlocutor a raw existential spacing that, she surmises, he fails to appreciate—and she moves on at once. But in the process whereby the interlocutor’s imagination is summoned to recognize and straddle this spacing, poverty is also made sensible for him in a precise way. Or, more accurately perhaps, he is invited to make it sensible for himself under a dual modality: both as a sensorium, a material, bodily lifeworld that social circumstances forced to identify herself as poor only evokes for her interlocutor a raw existential spacing that, she surmises, he fails to appreciate—and she moves on at once. But in the process whereby the interlocutor’s imagination is summoned to recognize and straddle this spacing, poverty is also made sensible for him in a precise way. Or, more accurately perhaps, he is invited to make it sensible for himself under a dual modality: both as a sensorium, a material, bodily lifeworld that can be sensed and itself feels, and as a problematic dual modality: both as a sensorium, a material, bodily lifeworld and asedad; and of how exactly it matters to my Palestinian interlocutors. Or perhaps I should say that it is they, in fact, who forced such an approach on me with their apparent lack of interest, extreme reserve, or even explicit disavowals on the topic of refugee poverty. Palestinian men and women I know in Lebanon, and with whose lives mine has in some cases become quite intertwined over the years, expressed some perplexity, for example, when I told them that I had been invited to the conference where this paper originates to talk about Palestinian refugee lives under the rubric of global urban poverty: “Nehna gheyr, for us it is otherwise,” as though their predicament did not belong with those of the poor of South Asia, Egypt, Africa, or Latin America, which I had explained were also to be discussed at the conference. And refugee poverty proved an elusive ethnographic object, an ever-moving target of sorts, during fieldwork I conducted in the last 10 years on ordinary forms of obligations, to others and to the self, in various Palestinian communities in Lebanon (including 2 years during which I lived as member of a dar, or extended family compound, in a refugee camp in Tyre in the south of the country). While it was immediately apparent, for example, that some of the 50 families I originally visited in the camps of Tyre in 2006 to conduct a household census were living in conditions of destitution, my interlocutors’ answers would often becomestudiously evasive, equivocal, and guarded when we reached the part of the questionnaire aimed at establishing their socioeconomic status. Poverty in the refugee context, I was made to learn in such visits, is plain enough when you see it, so why the indecency of probing into its minutiae? Or else it is something made available for others to glimpse rather than see by way of statements such as the one I discussed above or brusque, concise pleas for help from friends that neither they nor I were to ever bring up again. Hardly ever did I sense, however, that poverty constituted for my Palestinian friends and acquaintances a category enclosing a well-defined discursive object ready to be interjected into their discussions of politics or a stable position of enunciation (“I, poor”) into which they were inclined to insert themselves and dwell. Thus, my goal in this paper is also to attend to the paradoxes of Palestinian refugee poverty, a poverty engineered and deliber-

1. I am referring here to the picture of language according to which “[linguistic] signs can never be separated from another kind of nonlinguistic elements, that could be named ‘states of things’” (Deleuze 2003:185), or, to put it otherwise, according to which the meaning of language games depends on their embedment in a form of life (Wittgenstein 2009).
ately perpetuated through the play of recent state sovereignties, incorporated in the material and bodily life-worlds of a majority of Lebanon’s Palestinians yet not effectuated in the recognizable form of a “political subject of poverty,” let alone in collective strategies of mobilization such as those discussed by other authors in this special issue of *Current Anthropology*.

I also take my cue in this paper from other anthropologists and critical social theorists who have argued that poverty should be conceptualized as a specific way of being in (or being encountered by) the world and for considering carefully what this entails for politics. Arjun Appadurai (2002:26–30), for example, wrote of the “tyranny of emergency” besetting pavement and slum dwellers in turn-of-the-century Mumbai, to which local urban poverty activists sought to respond with a distinct style of politics. Because the everyday of Mumbai’s poor, Appadurai argues, involves “a barrage of real threats to life and space” and is “dominated by ever-present forms of risks” (demolition, expulsion, torrential rains, ill health, etc.), it encloses them in a perpetually intrusive, futureless present. For the grassroots activists Appadurai worked with, a politics of poverty, in this context, entails first and foremost a delicate “politics of patience,” the reintroduction of futurity through the cultivation of an imaginary of and a disposition toward a long-term temporal horizon of slowly built capacities at odds with the short-term logics of the development “project” (Appadurai 2002:30). 2 For Pierre Bourdieu (2000), too, writing of the “subproletarians” in the context of late colonial Algeria, the very poor, “living at the mercy of what each day brings,” are *des hommes sans avenir* (people without a future; 221–223). This is so, according to Bourdieu, because the most deprived meet an unstructured world that does not allow for the structuration of a habitus and the practical reference to a forthcoming it encases. The very poor, whose “life [has been] turned into a ‘game of chance’” (Bourdieu 2000:221), cannot grow into beings of habits, and for Bourdieu—in agreement, on this point, with American pragmatist C. S. Peirce (see Povinelli 2012:469)—only beings of habits have futurity. Unlike Appadurai, Bourdieu (2000) never seems to have put much stock in the political valence of procuring patience in this context, but he writes, interestingly, of “virtues” (223) immanent in the first place to a social localization that reveals “the economic and social conditions which make possible the ordinary order of practices” (221). In other words, the experience of the very poor—a “limiting-case” (Bourdieu 2000:223) where Bourdieu’s central theoretical hinge, the habitus, seems to come apart at the seams—opens up a space for the most far-reaching form of critique and, one might add, for a sort of ethical practice in Foucault’s sense, because it capacitates “a kind of radical doubt” by “requiring one” (221), “forcing one” (223) to “break with the self-evidences of the ordinary order” (221), such as the universal availability of the future as a category for organizing experience. For Bourdieu, however, those thus ethically enabled by the lived experience of poverty to think and see otherwise cannot be the subjects of this experience themselves. If extreme poverty has “virtues” for the critical social theorist, for those who suffer and are it, poverty cannot result in anything resembling a discipline or ethics, let alone in a politics—on the contrary, it brings about disordered selves, “a generalized and lasting disorganization of behavior and thought” (Bourdieu 2000:221) apparent in “all the lotteries and gambling systems of all the bidonvilles and favelas of the world” (223) and in the “dream-like ambitions and millenarian hopes” (222) whose encounter seems to have haunted Bourdieu from the *camps de regroupement* of colonial Algeria to the *banlieues* of 1990s Paris.

More recently, Elizabeth Povinelli (2011), in a series of reflections inspired in part by Charles Burnett’s neorealist film *Killer of Sheep* (1977), remarked that for the disenfranchised African American residents of Watts (Los Angeles) portrayed in the movie, as for the indigenous men and women she has been living and working with in Australia for more than two decades, everything tends to become “a self-conscious encounter with the world” because “nothing is ready to hand in the Heideggerian sense” (102). Poverty in such spaces of abandonment appears as a condition in which “nothing simply works”—the long-coveted car that heralded access to better jobs has a broken-down engine, the washing machine secured against all odds to clean clothes of the bacteria that cause infections is missing its lid—and this takes place in a cumulative manner that ushers in both the slow exhaustion of bodies and wills and experimentations in new forms of life. Indeed, like Bourdieu, Povinelli argues that the recurrence of this type of self-conscious encounters with the world opens up spaces of potentiality for a radical ethical otherwise. A world that is hardly ready to hand is a world that harvests the unconcealment of a different (way of being in) the world. This is so, if I understand Povinelli well, because a specific habituated relation to the world is unavailable and, with it, specific conceptual-interpretive habits, or ways of making sense of the world, with which practical comportment is (metapragmatically) coordinated (Povinelli 2012:465–471). Poverty’s interruptions and effects make or contain room, then, for alternative interpretative moves, offbeat patterns of effort and conduct, even radically heterodox ways of telling what is to endure or emerge diagonally to the governmentality through which current

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2. In a beautiful paper, Valeria Procupez (2015) fleshes out what "patience" may come to mean for those of whom it is demanded in a similar context of a struggle for access to stable housing in Argentina and carefully discusses the appeal of the moral language of patience in relation to politics of the urban poor.
social spacings of life and death are perpetuated or expanded. Povinelli warns at this turn of a creeping "division within ethical work" that tends to open between those on the one hand who point out the virtues for critical social theory of the off-kilter experience of the poor and those on the other hand confronted with the actual challenge of enduring poverty’s disjointedness and of assembling alternate techniques and disciplines of the self from within its recesses (Povinelli 2011:110). We saw how Bourdieu (2000), for example, readily abides by such a division as he makes of the experience of the very poor a world-shattering, transformative "analysér" (221) of the ordinary order of practices while rendering their very practices and voices as (mostly) the noise of gamblers and daydreamers. At the other end of the spectrum, we would find authors who celebrate unintegrated social spaces and experiences for fostering alternative worlds without interrogating the conditions of physical, psychic, and social endurance on which such a promise depends. Both approaches fail to confront the paradox that it is precisely when the hiatuses of the poor’s experience seem to open “heterotopic” (Foucault 1984) spaces of critique and living otherwise that the question of the sustainability of immanent social critique and emergent forms of life poses itself with utmost acuity. What habituated relations to the world, what practical references to what alternate futures, can grow out of a present interrupted at every turn? Can the cumulated effects of such interruptions ever “produce anything that anyone could or would want to live within” (Povinelli 2006:85)? And how to know when the sounds let off by those who “have their hand in the fire” are noise, phonos, devoid of the grip that brings new worlds into being, and when they have the potential to transform the background assumptions of logos, public rationality, and to claim intelligibility for other ways of being in the world (Povinelli 2011:50; Rancière 1995)?

The reminder of this paper consists in two brief ethnographic sketches of Palestinian refugee poverty in which I draw attention to processes of disclosure of self and world strung together from everyday run-ins with the world. One argument I pursue through these descriptions is that for a large segment of the Palestinians in Lebanon, life does resemble a permanent state of noise, at least as it entails “living at the mercy of what each day brings” (Bourdieu 2000:221) in a manner that hardly favors the formation of a habitus attuned to and socially absorbable in the political “configuration of the sensible” (Rancière 1995:52–53) upheld by late-modern Arab states. Indeed, the continual effects of the refugee poor’s life do not even precipitate a political subject of poverty—a “I, poor”—who would emerge in the interpretative act of establishing a semiotic relationship of some kind between her malnourishment, ill health, or exposure to dampness and dust on the one hand and a field of social belonging in which she would claim inclusion on the other.

Many recent formulations of “the politics of poverty” (e.g., Holston 2009) take for granted, it seems to me, at the same time as they depend for their possibility on this operation whereby sensible elements of a lifeworld have become indexes of one’s assignation to an inequitable location and share relative to a larger field of social belonging. Such a semiotic feat continues to hinge, in the world as it is currently organized, on the availability of the legal and discursive category of citizenship and on the specific manner in which it fastens an ethical imaginary of the sovereign self to the sovereignty of the state (Arendt 1958; Berlant 2007). Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that we do not find a recognizable politics of poverty among stateless refugees whose poverty, far from being experientially mediated by the category of citizenship, instead is the substantive, material, and continuing effect of the intractable contradictions set in motion by the politics of empire, nationhood, and sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean in the last century. This does not make, however, what we find in the Palestinian camps of Lebanon a “bare life” separated, by the sovereign ban, from any kind of cohering form and voided of the potential to coordinate its own emergent context (Agamben 2000). Rather, the politics of refugee poverty lie, I argue, in specific processes of political semiosis at the end of which stand—however unsteadily—refugee selves sovereign on their own, alternate set of terms.

Poverty, Sovereignty, Potentiality

An estimated 300,000 Palestinian refugees are currently living in Lebanon. Most of these refugees’ origins lie in the Galilee (al-Jalil) and the areas surrounding and including the northern coastal cities (Hayfa and ‘Akka) captured by Israel in 1948 at the end of the British Mandate on Palestine. Since its inception, the state of Israel has adamantly opposed their return on the grounds that it would alter its Jewish character. On similar grounds of biopolitical arithmetic, the Lebanese state forcefully opposes their “implantation” (al-lawteen) in Lebanon. For the Lebanese state, the naturalization of the refugees—an overwhelmingly Sunni population that makes up about 10% of the country’s inhabitants—would not only jeopardize the right, guaranteed by international law and UN resolutions, of refugees to return to their home, it would also alter Lebanon’s fragile national fabric and its constitutional regime, inherited from French colonial governance and built on a fetishized “sectarian balance” of Maronite, Orthodox, Shia, Sunni, Druze, and other constituencies. It is also widely assumed that their settlement in the overpopulated and truncated areas of the territory once projected for the Palestinian state (in the ever more chimerical framework of a “two-state solution”) would further compromise its already dubious social and political viability.

A vast majority of these refugees (62%) live in 12 overcrowded camps under the nominal responsibility of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), created in 1949 as a temporary measure to alleviate the refugee crisis. The
greater part of the rest reside in a number of smaller, unofficial, and often illegal squatter settlements locally referred to as *tajammu‘at*, or “gatherings.” The latest data made available through a survey conducted jointly by UNRWA and the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 2010 (Chaaban et al. 2010) indicate that in these areas two-thirds (66.4%) of Palestinian men and women lived below the poverty line, here defined as the US$6 necessary per person per day to cover basic food and nonfood requirements (transport, utilities, rent) in Lebanon at the time. It also revealed, using the same money metric indicator, that poverty incidence among Palestinian refugees was 89% higher than that of Lebanese nationals (35.1%) and that Palestinian men and women were four times more likely to be extremely poor (US$2.17 or less a day) than the citizens of Lebanon. Since this survey was conducted, the ongoing war in neighboring Syria has driven an additional tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the camps of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and other Syrian cities to seek refuge in the camps of Lebanon. Accounts from a number of NGO sources and my own recent conversations in the camps of Tyre (South Lebanon) indicate that this sudden, steady influx of “Syrians”—most of whom also happen to be in-laws and cousins—is putting a considerable economic strain on camp society and threatens to upset in a catastrophic fashion the fragile livings that the previous figures covered.

It is not the place here for a thorough historical account of the political and economical making of Palestinian refugee poverty in contemporary Lebanon (for some elements of this history, see Asad 1975). In its broad outlines, such an account would have to cover at least five developments or moments in the last century and a half: (1) the dismantlement of the *musha‘a*, or village-based, collective land-tenure system in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century by an Ottoman administration burdened with debts toward Western great powers and bent on maximizing tax revenue for this reason; (2) the ensuing growing debt of individual Palestinian farmers during the British Mandate (1920–1948), leading in many cases to the sale of their lands to affluent land owners based in distant urban centers, including Beirut, who in turn sold some of these lands to the Jewish Agency; (3) the campaign of ethnic cleansing that accompanied the Arab-Jewish war and the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 and brought about the loss of livelihoods in the form of cultivated fields, olive and citrus trees, cattle and pastures, businesses, or positions in the embryonic state administration put into place by the mandatory power; (4) the institution by the Lebanese state, from 1949 onward and with a renewed vigor in the late 1990s, of a legal and administrative apparatus geared toward maintaining Palestinian refugees in a situation of perpetual social and economic disenfranchisement in the host country, including laws and decrees excluding Palestinians from extensive segments of the labor market and legal employment more generally, limiting their access to education and health care, and prohibiting them from securing home ownership outside of the camps; and (5) massive human and material losses sustained by refugee communities in local and regional conflicts from the late 1960s up to the mid–2000s, most dramatically during Lebanon’s war (1975–1990) and the Israeli invasions and subsequent occupation of parts of Lebanon (1978–2000) involving the destruction and plunder of a number of camps and gatherings at the changing hands of the Israeli military, the Lebanese army, and various Lebanese militias and a death and disability toll peculiarly high among males of working age.

The accumulative effects of this history brought forth a distinct social and material world with complex variations from one camp to the other and within the same camps. Cramped, stacked-up homes partially connected to a partially working infrastructure sometimes harbor the attainment of at least some lower-middle-class aspirations (a nice TV, a reception room for visitors, a fully automatic washing machine), more often (especially in the camps of Tyre) only the barest form of household equipment. Adult bodies move around at different paces, some vitalized by modest success stories (e.g., securing employment in UNRWA or operating a mechanics or carpentry workshop on the edge of the camp), many slowed down by poorly treated illness, the fatigue of habituated joblessness, or memories of war one cannot learn to live with. Young teenagers quarrel with their parents who struggle to make sure that they attend UNRWA schools in light of the knowledge that most education achievements will be out of kilter with their chances for employment. For most of the families I have come to know well in the camps of Tyre, making do in this environment at the current historical juncture implies keeping together, on a collective basis, an ever unsteady assemblage that combines various fragments of income: mostly, the wages of at least some family members from what the UNRWA-AUB survey calls “low, precarious and casual” forms of employment; in some cases, occasional remittances from relatives who settled abroad in the Gulf countries or northern Europe; and paltry, always-to-be-rekindled bits of humanitarian aid, in nature or in cash, directed to eligible members—such as seniors, widows, the disabled, or the suddenly sick—from a number of sources including UNRWA, the PLO social services, local and international NGOs, and, for widows and orphans, Islamic charities. The collective basis of these fragile assemblages entails that you are very vulnerable if there is no position for you to secure in even a small network of close relatives or if you lose such a position for an alleged failure to comply with the disciplines that underlie them.

Dense but succinct acts of interpretation routinely emerge from this social and material world, contributing in essential ways to its distinct texture and temporality. Thus, I have


6. As of March 2014, serious frictions are developing, e.g., in the camps of Tyre, because Palestinians from Syria accept work in the citrus and banana groves of South Lebanon for half the daily wage that local Palestinian refugees could previously obtain for the same work.
heard over the years various Palestinian women and men describe such everyday events or particulars as a leaking wall, failing heart arteries, or even a sluggish husband in conversations woven in their vicinity as not just what they are but also at the same time tokens through which something else, a “political something” (shi syassi), is made sensible and to which they relate, in the manner of indexicals, as smoke relates to fire. They, however, rarely named or described this “political something” much further in everyday conversations I attended. And while it is tempting, and it can be apposite, to fill up this silence with elaborations on the topology of the sovereign ban (Agamben 1998) or of the two poles (making live/letting die) that distribute the operations of biopower in modernity (Foucault 1978), it is also critical, I believe, to attend ethnographically and theoretically to the fact that the refugee poor themselves, when moved to make larger sense of the actual ramifications of poverty in their lives, initiate interpretative moves that they abstain from bringing to too-well-rounded a resolution.

Speaking of a crumbling home, of a sick body, or of a demotivated child as also, or at least partly, shi syassi, something political, is certainly a way in which to underlie that refugee poverty was organized and is being perpetuated through a deliberate use of modern law as opposed to those hardships that are assumed to be in the order of things for being predicated on a presumption of universal access to legal forms of self-subsistence, health, and security. Fundamentally, it is to register, I believe, and as it were vocally inscribe onto the world that the ordinary cal- lamaity of a damp sleeping room that will give children asthma or of a worried father’s heart exhausted before its time could so evidently in this case have not been, that it is cruel and contingent, cruel because contingent on a bundle of political technologies, historically set into action by the politics of empire, nationhood, and sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean in the twentieth century. A failing heart is shi syassi because it directs attention to specific arts of governance that brought its sickness into being. Its corporeality is of a kind to elicit an interpretative process by way of which a dubious economy of ethical goods becomes visible and available for critique along with the practicality of bearing witness (shuhada) to a claim to self-rule. A body failed by poverty points physically along such lines to “a place in the world which makes opinion significant and actions effective” — in the words Hannah Arendt (1958:296) used to speak of that which the refugee is deprived of — located in a indefinite, but this-worldly, future.

To be clear, the previous account does not pretend to correspond to a fully articulated discourse by my Palestinian friends on refugee poverty. Rather, it is an attempt to piece together the background conditions of intuitive moments of interpretation folded in, and hardly isolable from, the self-conscious encounters with the world that refugee poverty appears to foster and precipitate. Nor should the two interpretative courses or moments I have briefly delineated be taken to constitute successive stages of a dialectic. The aggravations of day-to-day living may lose some of their edges if they sustain and make quasi sensible in the present a future where Palestinians will have been recognized as subjects deserving justice and self-determination. But the sense that there is such a temporal horizon may also founder altogether at times in the face of the sheer horror of, say, one’s incapacity to provide a sick parent or child with the health care she needs. Perhaps this constant oscillation explains the guarded indifference, in vast segments of the refugee community, to recent activist efforts aimed at rescinding the legal

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apparatus excluding Palestinians from full participation in Lebanon’s social and economic life. Since the early 2000s, a campaign has been waged to this effect by local and international NGOs, which achieved some modest results with the creation in 2005 of an interministerial “Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee” tasked with “achieving progress . . . to enhance the living conditions of Palestinian refugees” and the passing of legislation in 2010 that facilitates the extension of work permits to refugees.1 I do not know any Palestinian man or woman who downright opposes the continuation of these efforts, but I know many who look at them with skepticism not only because of their very low prospect of success in the face of rampant Lebanese opposition (not to mention increased local and regional instability) but also because of a hunch that success, if it were to be achieved on this plane, might catalyze the liquidation of ethical goods (i.e., elements of the life worth living) they also strive to lay claim to and that concern another part of their being. But then, what other part of one’s being could be concerned, others retort to these skeptics, for those whose hand is in the fire? And poverty remains in this manner an odd quotidian encounter with something else than what it is—a flickering, ambiguous “political something.”

Being Poor but Not Feeling It

Consider a remark made by T., a Palestinian woman I know well, in order to explain her own uncertainty, loss of words even, about how to answer my queries on growing up poor in the social world of the refugee camps in the 1970s. A young child at the time, T. was living with her mother and five older siblings in Borj al-Barajne camp on the outskirts of Beirut. She has no recollections of her father, who died from a mysterious ailment while she was two. For her mother, the tragedy of finding herself in her early thirties a widow with six children aged 2 to 13 was compounded by the family’s unexceptional situation. T.’s only paternal uncle was barely fending for his own family in the distant camps of Tyre, where he had relocated from Borj al-Barajne a few years into exile. The single daughter of the first wife in a polygynous marriage back in Palestine, T.’s mother had no siblings of her own in Lebanon and too much self-respect (al-karame) to seek support from her unsympathetic relatives through her father’s second marriage in the host country. Part of the family income in this period came from renting for a small fee the shelter next to their own—that vacated by T.’s uncle when he moved to the south—to short-term tenants, usually war-displaced Lebanese villagers from the south. The other, greater part was generated collectively in the form of homemade paper bags that T.’s mother would then sell to shopkeepers she knew in the small town adjacent to the camp. Starting at the age of five, T. would, like her older siblings, sit on the ground and fold and glue reams of kraft paper upon coming back from school. Each family member had a daily quota of bags to achieve depending on age and dexterity.

Asked about these early years in her life, T. says: “We were poor, but we did not feel that we were poor” (kenna fuqara, bas ma kenna nhees enna fuqara). She says it with a mix of amusement and wonder, directed at herself and her two siblings closest to her in age, for missing at the time this aspect of the family’s situation. In the context of our conversation, the statement is primarily meant as a manner of excuse. T. acknowledges that, at least applying camp criteria then and now, the family certainly counted among the ranks of the poor. But not “feeling” poverty in those years, a part of her struggles to entertain the possibility in hindsight that it was indeed the case, and my questions fill her with embarrassment. If one did not feel that one was poor, this cannot have been poverty, and she is not qualified to answer my questions.

The mood or tone that T. conjures up in her recollections of her childhood in Borj al-Barajne in the 1970s is consonant with my impressions of the manner in which my young neighbors in al-Bass camp in Tyre in the mid-2000s (some of whom, especially in the Palestinian Bedouin gathering of Jal al-Bahar immediately adjacent to the camp, hailed from households local and international NGOs consider the poorest of the refugee poor) seemed to go about their lives. It raises the intriguing question of the place of children in and of their contribution to the politics of poverty, understood here as socially coordinated processes of self-disclosure and public identification. Taking our cue from T.’s paradoxical formulation, we should not assume that refugee children find within the embodied lifeworld of refugee poverty itself what poverty is as a recognizable kind of obstacle or disadvantage in relation to which to understand and live their lives. Something that, like poverty in T.’s evocation of her childhood, “is” but is not “felt”—is not (yet) the object of some experience—corresponds to the definition of what C. S. Peirce (1934), in his classification of the categories or structures of being and consciousness, calls a First. For it to become the object of some experience, a First must, according to Peirce (1958), take on the quality of “active oppugnancy” (202), or impinging force that demarcates existents or phenomena from one another, and that makes it a Second. This the object does not in all but only in some “respect or capacity” (what Peirce calls “the ground” of the experience of something) relative to an emergent perceptual-interpretive field or “interpretant.”20 Being already partially organized, the

7. http://www.lpdc.gov.lb. This law, however, continues to treat Palestinians as foreigners falling under the Ministry of Labor’s regulations for nonnationals, and as such it excludes them from an array of professions either subject to the reciprocity clause (e.g., medical doctor, engineer, nurse, teacher, etc.) or restricted to Lebanese citizens (e.g., law, journalism, hairdresser, taxi driver, etc.).

8. For the importance of the notion of “ground,” see, e.g., one of Peirce’s (1932) famous triadic definitions of the sign: “A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity: It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant or the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object.
interpellant moves the object of the encounter into a more expansive realm of existential coordination and intelligibility, or Thirdness. This is what happens, for example, when some aspect of human existence, say, sexual desire, is transformed from an object of experience into a topic of knowledge or an object of ethical conduct.

How to understand, along those lines, the paradox that one could be poor but that refugee poverty is not the object of one’s “feeling” or experience? To be sure, such a claim by itself still entails the prior disclosure “in some respect of capacity” of what it means to be poor. T. mentions a specific set of educational scenes when asked how the young child whom she was started to grasp the meaning of poverty. She speaks of seeing her older brothers and her mother hardly containing emotions frightful to her while politely declining gifts of clothes, money, or meat neighbors and acquaintances would present to the family during Ramadan and the ’Eid. She recounts disputes at home between the same family members when one such gift was occasionally found out to have been accepted by one of them with no consultation with the others. She remembers being scolded by her mother for going out in a rundown pair of shoes to be used only in the inner yard or to the UNRWA school in a dirty uniform. She also speaks of learning nuances of sociality and from whom, when, and why it was in fact permissible to accept certain kinds of goods offered in the appropriate, subdued manner. For example, it was allowable to receive even secondhand clothes from Husayn, the best friend of her older brother who hailed from the more prosperous camp of Nahr al-Bared in the North and who was intimate enough to sleep in their house while in Beirut. T. was definitely not as sure of what to do regarding the playful routine of another friend of the boys who on his regular visits to their house would place a coin behind her ear and pretend that the coin was calling her (“T! Take me, take me!”); up to this day she remembers anxiously interrogating the faces of her mother and older siblings for a cue that was not forthcoming.

In all such scenes, refugee poverty moves from Firstness (something that there, and one, “is,” but one does not “feel”) to Secondness (an oppugnant something that interrupts a field of consciousness) so that a peculiar thinness of poverty is formed. But it does so through the mediation and by virtue of the inner momentum of a specific set of ordinary signs that bring together a variety of cascading interpellants. In the first type of episode mentioned, which T. remembers today as the most effective and determinant, it is a tension in the face, body, and voice of primary others as they decline charity that impinges on the child. Of course, this tension of face, posture, and tone is by itself a moment of interpretation—what Peirce would call an affective/energetic interpercting (Povinelli 2011:87–88)—relative to yet other moments of interpretation—a sense of pity, perhaps, on the part of neighbors for the widow and orphans next door or a more self-centered reflective judgment as to who would qualify as a right beneficiary for one’s performance of zakat to be felicitous. In other words, the facial, bodily, and vocal tension of a mother or older sibling opens up the child to and projects her into a “spiraling matrix of interpretation” (Povinelli 2011:87–88) that interdigitates various orders and grounds, including but not limited to textually based accounts internal to the discursive tradition of Islam as to the part of poverty in the affairs of this world and the next, the micropolitics attendant to a shared neighborhood history in the context of exile, the force and momentum of affect within the relationality of kinship, and a practical ethics of the conduct to demonstrate when dealt with as poor.

The global significate effect of this semiotic matrix, or sum total of its interpellants, culminates in a practical-ethical understanding that sets “feeling poor” against the being of what Palestinians call al-raheem, or sphere of those most intimate “ties of the womb” that join parents and children, siblings and siblings, spouse and spouse. For the sensate ground on which the child makes out the meaning of “feeling poor” is not, in T.’s account, the pinch of hunger or cold in her own body but the trembling of older primary others upon being presented with acts of charity. Of course the child’s receptiveness to others’ affects in this case hinges on what M. Sahlins (2013:ix) felicitously calls kinship’s “mutuality of being”—on the world’s having already been disclosed to her in such a manner that “relatives . . . live each other’s lives and die each other’s death.” In other words, it is not, in T.’s precise account of her education into poverty, the future possible state of obligation incurred if charity was accepted that appears immediately to the child. Rather, or even before that, what is made sensible to her is her actual participation in the others’ trembling and an ensuing obligation to abide by the performative refusal of charity through which this trembling is absorbed. The disclosure of poverty, in such scenes, thus becomes an occasion for the intensification of the “transbodily being” (Sahlins 2013:2) of al-raheem rather than for its dissolution into individualized units of bare life. As she grew up, T. would later learn concepts, such as al-karame (“dignity”), under which camp Palestinians thematize the social imaginary of joint practical sovereignty and self-nurturance enacted in such scenes of instruction.

Of course, the semiotic feat of “being poor but not feeling it” depends, in this context, on the child’s being fed, sheltered, and healthy enough. Thus it hinges, for one thing, on a volatile calculus on the adults’ part of who can bear what and where the line passes between harnessing frugality to intensify the “mutuality of being” and just being callous to some family members’ needs and stress. And it also depends on there being an infrastructure in place that makes this calculus possible in the first place: the resources, however deficient, provided by (and acceptable from) UNRWA and other refugee relief organizations; the interstices, however tight, that state regulations leave open, in law or in practice, for Palestinian households to provide a something of some kind for their members. Does it make the process of self-disclosure, whereby one can be poor yet not feel it, and the other reserved gestures that

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It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen’ (135, italics in original).
Palestinian men and women use, to reveal and at once draw a veil over the presence of poverty in their lives, too suspect, too compromised with impoverishment as a form of refugee governmentality, to constitute anything resembling an effective politics of poverty?

Surely it is not easy to say what other world such semiotic habits can bring into being and whether one would want to live in such a world. And for good reason. When Palestinian refugees evoke but do not fill out the existential spacing that separates “he who has his hand in the water” from “she who has her hand in the fire,” when some of them insist that “for us it is otherwise” than what poverty is commonly understood to be but leave this otherness unspecified, they speak in a manner that stymies the system of reference on which the possibility to speak of poverty on a descriptive, compassionate, or activist mode largely depends. Indeed, their refusal to say “I, poor” seems to stymie the possibility of social justice itself, if, that is, we take social justice to require acquiescence to a prior operation whereby one is assigned a location and role relative to a field of social belonging defined elsewhere. But one can also be attentive, with Gilles Deleuze (1997), to the radical “democratic contribution” intrinsic to a type of utterances disruptive of the “logic of presuppositions” that makes it possible for a boss to give a command and be obeyed, for a “kind friend” to offer commiseration and advice and be listened to, and even for a rebel to be recognized as such when he defies an order. For Deleuze (1997), the emergence of such a speech genre in the writings of Melville, Musil, Kafka, and others participated of a “morality of life” diagonal to the “morality of salvation and charity” and called into being a “new community, whose members are capable of trust or ‘confidence,’ that is, of a belief in themselves, in the world and in becoming” (88). It is not the least paradox that sabr, this heaven-bound patient endurance that Palestinian women and men say they find in the embodied lifeworld of refugee poverty, might also be one name for just such a belief in the world.

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