

THE PALESTINIAN ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

Launch and conference | **JUNE 12–13, 2019**

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, AUB



ABOUT THE PALESTINIAN ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE (POHA)

POHA is an archival collection that contains more than 1,000 hours of testimonies with first generation Palestinians and other Palestinian communities in Lebanon. The project's aim is to digitize, index, catalog, preserve, and provide access to the material through the creation of a state-of-the-art digital platform. It aims to expand and include additional oral history collections documenting varied aspects of the Palestinian experience in Lebanon and the region. The project has been completed in partnership with the AUB Libraries, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), the Nakba Archive and the Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts (AL-JANA), and is currently funded by a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant (2016–19). POHA is co-housed by IFI and AUB Libraries

The conference held on June 12 and 13, 2019 at the American University of Beirut will mark the launch of the Palestinian Oral History Archive. More than twenty scholars from different countries are participating in this event to present their research covering different aspects of the oral history. The conference is also an opportunity to honor several pioneers of oral history scholarship: Dr. Rosemary Sayigh, Dr. Bayan al-Hout, and Dr. Faiha Abdulhadi.

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 12, 2019

10:00–10:30 am

Registration

10:30 am–12:15 pm

Opening Session

Opening remarks

Fadlo R. Khuri, AUB President

Tarek Mitri, Director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), AUB

Lokman I. Meho, University Librarian and Associate Professor of Political Studies, AUB

Keynotes and Honorees

Diana Allan

Rosemary Sayigh

Bayan Nuwayhed Al-Hout

Faiha Abdulhadi

12:15–1:30 pm

Lunch

1:30–3:30 pm

Introducing the Palestinian Oral History Archive

Nakba Archive; Mahmoud Zeidan and Diana Allan

Al-Jana; Moataz Dajani

POHA Project; Kaoukab Chebaro and Hana Sleiman

Project Demo and Video; Sara Sweidan, Hana Haidar, Nourhan Shehab

3:30–3:45 pm

Coffee Break

3:45–5:30 pm

The Future of Oral History

Chair: Rayan El-Amine, Assistant Director, IFI

Using Virtual Reality Documentaries to Preserve and Exhibit Jerusalem Old City; Sohail Dahdal

Building an Interactive Map of Palestinian Oral Histories;

Ahmad Barclay

The MASRAD: Platform for Archiving Oral History; Majd Al-Shihabi

THURSDAY, JUNE 13, 2019

9:00–11:00 am

Nakba Memory

Chair: Anaheed Al-Hardan, Assistant Professor of Sociology, FAS-AUB

The Insider/Outsider Paradox of Collecting Oral History Narratives and Interviews; May Seikaly

Nakba Narratives & Critical Ethnography: Ontological and Epistemological Questions; Ahlam Muhtaseb

Intergenerational and Transregional Synergies in Palestinian Oral History; Malaka Shwaikh

A Living Archive? Reflections on an Oral History Project with Palestinian Bedouin Women in the Naqab; Sophie Richter-Devroe

11:00–11:10 am

Coffee Break

11:10 am–12:30 pm

Oral History, Pedagogy, and Culture

Chair: Rami Khouri, Senior Public Policy Fellow, IFI

Adjunct Professor of Journalism, AUB

Oral Histories of Resistance Culture as an Anti-Colonial Archive; Chandni Desai

Decolonizing Ethnography through Oral History: A Self-Study of Al Naqab Center; Nadia Younes

POHA in the Classroom: An Oral history Toolkit; Maria Bashshur Abunnasr

12:30–2:00 pm

Lunch

2:00–3:30 pm

Women's Histories

Chair: Huda Zurayk, Professor Emeritus, FHS-AUB

The Crisis of Presence : Oral History, Palestinian Women and the Remaking of the World; Cynthia Kreichati

Generational Narratives of Displacement of Palestinian Women from Syria; Isis Nusair

Storytelling and Reimagining Feminist Movements in Lebanon; Deema Kaedbey

3:30–3:45 pm

Coffee Break

3:45–5:30 pm

Oral History and Urbanity

Chair: Ismail Sheikh Hassan, Urbanist and Researcher

War-Memoryscapes and the Grassroots Agency for Justice: Re-researching the Truth Memory Practices of Palestinians in Nahr-el Bared; Azadeh Sobout

Oral Histories: Practices of Refuge and the Making of Quarantina; Diala Lteif

The Evidential Power of Personal Testimony: The Role of Nakba Oral Narratives in Asserting Palestinians' Right to their Land, Illustrated by a Specific Challenge Mounted to the JNF's Appropriation of the Land of Ajjur Village; Kholoud Al-Ajarma

"No Mines, No Borders": Towards an Oral History of South Lebanese Border Communities; Susann Kassem

5:30 pm

Closing Remarks

BIOGRAPHIES AND ABSTRACTS

DAY 1: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 12, 2019

Keynotes and Honorees

Diana Allan is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Institute for the Study of International Development. She is an anthropologist, filmmaker and the co-founder of the Nakba Archive and Lens on Lebanon. Her ethnography, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (2014) won the 2014 MEMO Palestine book prize and the 2015 Middle East Section Award at the American Anthropological Association. She was a recipient of a 2013 Guggenheim Fellowship in anthropology and film, and her ethnographic films *Chatila, Beirut* (2001), *Still Life* (2007), *Nakba Archive Excerpts* (2008), *Terrace of the Sea* (2010), and *So Dear, So Lovely* (2018) have screened in international film festivals and as gallery installations. Her current research projects—both written and filmic—explore Palestinian littoral life, past and present.

Rosemary Sayigh is the author of *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (1979), *Too Many Enemies: the Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (1994), *Voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement*. She currently teaches oral history and anthropology at the Center for Arab and Middle East Studies, AUB.

Bayan Nuwayhed Al-Hout, holds a Ph.D. in political science; she is a Professor of the Palestine Question and the Middle Eastern Studies at the Lebanese University; and researcher and free-lance writer since her retirement (2001). Her lectures and writings focus on the Palestinian question and the Arab historical and political issues. Her publications include: *Sabra and Shatila: September 1982* (London, 2004) in addition to dozens of articles and essays in Arabic and English.

Faiha Abdulhadi, PhD, is a writer, poet, research consultant, community activist, and lecturer, with an extensive experience in various aspects of research, oral history, gender, and other issues of human interest. She is the founder and the Director General of Al Rowat for Studies and Research. Al Rowat (Narrators) seeks to accomplish a major goal: Rewriting social history by focusing on the stories of marginalized groups and documenting people stories who witnessed relevant historic events. She has published 14 books in addition to various studies and articles. She is a member of the Palestinian National Council, the Palestinian Central Council, the deputy Commissioner General for the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) in Palestine, and the regional coordinator of the “Peace Women across the Globe (PWAG)”.

Session 1: Introducing the Palestinian Oral History Archive

Nakba Archives; Mahmoud Zeidan and Diana Allan

Mahmoud Zeidan is a Palestinian refugee born in Ein el Helweih camp in Lebanon. He studied English literature at the Lebanese University and pursued his graduate studies in Human Rights and Democratization at the University of Malta. Mahmoud is a co-director of the 'Nakba Archive' with Diana Allan - an oral history project documenting narrative of the Nakba from the first Palestinian refugee generation in Lebanon. Mahmoud and Diana also founded '*Lens on Lebanon*' grassroots documentary initiative formed during the Israeli bombardment of 2006.

He is currently working as a specialist in education and human rights. Additionally, he's active in defending human rights and the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

Al-Jana; Moataz Dajani

Moataz Dajani, is an artist, cultural activist, and educator. He studied History, Art, Education, and Social Work. He is the Founder /General Coordinator of JANA Center, and Coordinator of Active Memory and People's History Program at JANA.

POHA Project; Kaoukab Chebaro and Hana Sleiman

Kaoukab Chebaro is the Head of Global Studies at the Columbia University Libraries. She previously served as Associate University Librarian for Archives and Special Collections at the Libraries of the American University of Beirut, and as the Islamic and Middle East Studies Librarian at the Columbia University Libraries. Kaoukab has served on numerous libraries, archives, and cultural heritage committees in or about the region. She currently serves as the PI for the NEH funded Palestinian Oral History Archive, POHA (2016–19).

Hana Sleiman is an archivist and a PhD student in History at the University of Cambridge. Her archival work focuses on devising open tools and methodologies for ephemera and oral history archives. Her doctoral research is on the intellectual history of the modern Middle East, focusing on two generations of scholars and educational reformers, and the professionalization of the discipline of history in early twentieth century Beirut. After receiving her MA in Middle Eastern Studies from Columbia University (2013), she worked as a Special Collections Librarian at the American University of Beirut Archives, where she co-led the Palestinian Oral History Archive.

Project Demo and Video; Sara Sweidan, Hana Haidar, Nourhan Shehab

Session 2: The Future of Oral History

Chair: Rayan El-Amine, Assistant Director, IFI-AUB

Using Virtual Reality Documentaries to Preserve and Exhibit Jerusalem Old City; Sohail Dahdal

Abstract

This paper explores the use of immersive media as an educational and documentation tool to preserve Jerusalem's rich Arabic history and to present it in a new innovative reimagined and accessible way for an international audience. The paper examines audiences' engagement with Kan Yama Kan in Palestine, an AR/VR documentary about Jerusalem that uses volumetric videos to reimagine life in Jerusalem pre 1948. The paper discusses the results of ethnographic observations of audience's engagement with the documentary and comparing it to the engagement of However non-interactive content. In addition, it analyzes university students' retention of the Jerusalem Arabic narrative through focus groups and interviews conducted pre and post exposure. The results indicate that while traditional media provided general picture of the Arabic heritage of Jerusalem, the AR/VR documentary was able to enhance this image as such that the audience felt as if they were in Jerusalem. This is especially important because of the restriction of physical travel to Jerusalem and the need to capture and preserve the Arabic heritage and artefact of Jerusalem for future generations of Palestinians and intellectual audiences who otherwise would not be exposed to the experience of walking physically in Jerusalem's old city. The paper concludes that augmented and virtual reality documentaries have the potential to be used as a preservation tool, especially when the content is factual and historical in nature. Furthermore, that the value of this content in its experiential form is further enhanced if the place was inaccessible to a segment of the audience as the case in Jerusalem.

Biography

Sohail Dahdal, is a professor of media at the American University of Sharjah. His research interest is about the use of new immersive media as an educational tool. He is also an award-winning documentary filmmaker creating some of Australia's pioneering digital media projects including the award-winning TV feature documentary *First Australians* and the multi award winning interactive documentaries *Long Journey*, and *Young Lives*.

Building an Interactive Map of Palestinian Oral Histories; Ahmad Barclay

Abstract

This presentation will describe the process of building an interactive map for exploring the interviews within the POHA archive. The presentation will put this project — supported by the POHA fellowship program — in the context of the author's ongoing work on Palestine Open Maps (palopenmaps.org), the project that compiled the historical map

layers on which the oral history map is based. The presentation will also include a live demonstration of the oral history map.

Biography

Ahmad Barclay is an architect, visual communicator and product designer. He is a founding partner with Visualizing Impact, and is actively engaged in a variety of projects involving data visualization, visual storytelling and learning through play. Ahmad has facilitated courses and workshops based on his practices in cities including Beirut, London, Amman, Lisbon, and Bangalore, and is a co-founder of MyToyTown, a slot-together wooden play system for kids. He is a graduate of Cambridge (MPhil 2007, PGDip 2012), Cardiff (March 2010) and Nottingham (MEng 2004) universities.

The MASRAD: Platform for Archiving Oral History; Majd Al-Shihabi

Abstract

Oral history archivists encounter both technical and epistemic decisions when turning oral history from a collection of testimonies into an accessible archive. The MASRAD platform is designed and built with a user-centered approach, accompanying the archivist through all stages of the archival process, including cataloguing, indexing, transcription/segmentation, anonymization, and publishing.

Biography

Majd Al-Shihabi is a systems design engineer, and a graduate student in urban planning at AUB. He is interested in using systems thinking for approaching problems faced by archivists. He is a co-founder of the MASRAD, an open knowledge collective working at the intersection of archives, technology, and knowledge production.

Session 3: Nakba Memory

Chair: Anaheed Al-Hardan, Assistant Professor of Sociology, FAS-AUB

The Insider/Outsider Paradox of Collecting Oral History Narratives and Interviews; May Seikaly

Abstract

The paper aims to review and analyze the dilemmas that practicing oral historians who investigate and research their own communities face, and to negotiate the paradox of being from within, and researching from without.

Theoretically, this is a major topic of concern to oral historians and is clearly stated in their analysis, debates, and established methodologies. Drawing on her personal experiences as a researcher in Palestinian social history, as a practicing oral historian, and as a teacher of oral history, the paper investigates the paradox between what the personal and the professional: On the one hand, a Palestinian tackling the thorny, highly sensitive and taxing story of Palestine since pre-1948, and the experience of expulsion/dispersal as narrated by those who lived it; on the other, maintaining the professional frames and methodologies of oral investigation, the proper interview, letting the narrator tell their story from their own perspective, and maintaining objectivity. The paper negotiates the dynamics of Saikali's role as an unbiased researcher and sympathizer, along with the ethics of reporting and analyzing investigation. It also questions conclusions on the congruence of roles one person assumes, the roles of the activist/historian in synthesizing and deciphering the subjectivity of the process and incorporating its results to further engage in the struggle for justice and equity.

Biography

May Seikaly has been an associate professor of History at Wayne State University in the Department of Classical Languages, Literatures and Cultures (Near Eastern Studies) until September 2018. She has an M.A. from UCLA in ME History and a PhD from Oxford University. She has served on the Editorial Board of the International Journal of Middle East Studies, on the Wayne State University Press Committee, on the Editorial Committee of the Journal of Palestine Studies, on the MESA- Albert Hourani Award Committee and on the Task force for the Arab American Museum in Dearborn-MI-USA.

Her work has focused on the social history of Arab society, specifically Palestinians, and to a lesser degree on the Arabian Gulf societies. The gender dimension within social history has been significantly highlighted in her studies, research and publications.

Seikaly specializes in oral history and the methodologies of oral narratives and their collection. Her most current publication is *"The Silent Revolution: The Arab spring and the Gulf States"* Gerlach- Berlin April 2014. She has also edited the latest European Parliament Report on Gulf Women, "Study on the Situation of Women in the Gulf States" 2014.

Nakba Narratives and Critical Ethnography: Ontological and Epistemological Questions, Ahlam Muhtaseb

Abstract

This paper is based on a study that spanned from 2006 till present on Ahlam's experience in doing a critical ethnographic longitudinal study of the Palestinian refugees and their narratives of Nakba, and the role of those narratives in building and maintaining collective memory(ies) and identity(ies). The paper explores her relationship as a scholar with the site, research focus, and study population that has evolved and become more intricate and complicated with time; from a small scale ethnography, semi-structured in-depth interviews and short film, to a documentary on the year 1948, all the way to a massive oral history project.

Throughout this journey, Ahlam grappled with different ontological and epistemological questions about her approach and location in the study, and her objectives not only as a scholar, but as an activist. This was influenced by her political stance as a Palestinian American, and the social change orientation which her work has taken.

Biography

Ahlam Muhtaseb is a professor of media studies and the director of the Center for Islamic & Middle Eastern Studies at California State University, San Bernardino. She has a Master's degree in Journalism and a PhD in Digital Communication from the University of Memphis in Tennessee. Her research interests include digital communication, social media, and diasporic communities. Her most recent project is her award-winning documentary *1948: Creation & Catastrophe*. She won the 2019 Rebuilding Alliance "Story Teller" Award. In addition, most of her recent research focuses on digital media and social movements online (cyber activism), and Arab and Muslim images in the media.

Intergenerational and Transregional Synergies in Palestinian Oral History; Malaka Shwaikh

Abstract

This paper examines two initiatives from Palestine that underscore the importance of oral history in preserving the memory of the Nakba. First, the Oral History Centre of the Islamic University of Gaza, opened in 1998, where academics and students have recorded over 1,200 audio interviews with different groups in Gaza about Nakba. Second, the Tamer Institute for Community Education, founded in Jerusalem in 1998, in response to the urgent need to advance the education process and document oral stories for posterity.

Remembering the Nakba is not a choice to be selected or deselected at will. It is an existential state of being, central to the Palestinians' collective memory and national identity. Memory of the past is the fuel for Palestinians' survival, and acts as a force in maintaining and reproducing Palestinian rights. It serves to keep them and their identity alive and feeds their hope for a just future. Herein lies the importance of bringing the Nakba into intergenerational and transregional discussions.

Millions of stories comprise the Palestinian collective recollection of the Nakba: the history of their scattering, of life in exile, and of the destruction of their homes. Resistance through hope has functioned as a driving force in their commitment to return home. This is clearly symbolized in the young generation that is suffocated under settler colonialism, yet still politically active and vocal. For them, the study of Palestinian histories is not a matter of retrieving stories from the past, but is about their hope for the future, for return and for freedom.

Biography

Malaka Shwaikh teaches Arab, Islamic, and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Leeds. She received her PhD in Middle Eastern politics from the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies of the University of Exeter. Her articles have appeared in *Jerusalem Quarterly* and *Asian Affairs*, and she is the author (with Rebecca Ruth Gould) of *Prison Hunger Strikes as Civil Resistance: Protesting Imprisonment Internationally* (International Center on Nonviolent Conflict Research Monograph Series, 2019). Her research addresses prison dynamics, hunger strikes, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and oral history projects in occupied Palestine.

A Living Archive? Reflections on an Oral History Project with Palestinian Bedouin women in the Naqab; Sophie Richter-Devroe

Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges faced by the author when conducting a two year long oral history project, from 2014 to 2016 with Palestinian Bedouin women in the Naqab, Historic Southern Palestine.

Oral history can challenge and even counter written colonial narratives by recuperating indigenous histories. However, both as historiographical method, and as political/activist tool, it also faces limitations especially in oral communities. In Naqab Bedouin culture historical events, until recently, were rarely written down.

The paper criticizes celebratory stances that praise oral history archives for recuperating and preserving ‘authentic’ or ‘indigenous’ voices and instead relies on anthropologist James Clifford’s understanding of indigeneity as a “process of becoming” (2013) and performance studies scholar Diane Taylor’s (2003) notion of ‘the repertoire’ of embodied performances as sources and modes of historical knowledge to open a discussion on the potentials, pitfalls and perils of using ‘classic’ oral history methodologies, including archiving, in the context of indigenous communities.

Biography

Sophie Richter-Devroe is Associate Professor in the Women, Society and Development Program in the Middle East Studies Department at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar, and an Honorary Fellow at the European Centre for Palestine Studies at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. She is interested in exploring everyday politics and women’s activism in the Middle East. Her research is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork

in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Greece. She has done research and published work on Palestinian and Iranian women's activism, Palestinian refugees, Palestinian cultural production, Syrian refugees, and the oral histories of the Palestinian Bedouin in the Naqab. She is the author of *Women's Political Activism in Palestine: Peacebuilding, Resistance and Survival* (University of Illinois Press, 2018).

Session 4: Oral History, Pedagogy, and Culture

Chair: Rami Khouri, Senior Public Policy Fellow, IFI Adjunct Professor of Journalism, AUB

Oral History Resistance Culture as an Anti-Colonial Archive; Chandni Desai

Abstract

This paper analyzes the oral history interviews conducted across three generations with Palestinian revolutionaries that were/have been part of producing, organizing, preserving and circulating various cultural texts – repertoire – across multiple geographies.

It discusses how oral histories are used in artistic practices by Palestinian cultural workers in producing resistance culture, a revolutionary consciousness; while also archiving political events, documenting intergenerational stories, transmitting memory across fragmented geographies and generations, critiquing settler colonial, capitalist imperialism, and expressing solidarity with global political struggles through the use of the repertoire.

Considering the Palestinian repertoire of resistance culture as an oral history archival site is methodically significant in-light of the Zionist destruction of Palestinian material culture; the pillaging and theft of Palestinian books, films, art; the displacement and abandonment of Palestinian archives by the Israeli state and the Palestinian Authority (ex: Palestinian Research Center Archives); the fragmentation of the Palestinian population; and the absence of a revolution and state. As well as the Zionist states systematic erasure, and in some instances replacement of Palestinian history with its settler mythologies and colonial imperialist knowledge production and archives. Such a repertoire is an important site of resistance and knowledge production which has allowed for an anti-colonial perspective of historical processes to be recorded and expressed by Palestinian cultural producers.

Biography

Chandni Desai is an Assistant Professor in the Critical Studies of Equity and Solidarity at the University of Toronto. She is currently writing her first book on the history of radical tradition of Palestinian resistance culture, its production and circulation across geographies in the 20th and 21st century and archiving the politics of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist thought. She has published on the following: The captivity and state of Palestinian visual archives, Palestinian hip hop, Nakba narratives in Palestinian cultural repertoires, and more. She has been part of the BDS movement for over a decade and played a central role in developing the divestment campaign at the University of Toronto, served on the IAW International Coordinating Committee, USACBI, Indigenous Land Defense across Borders, and is currently a member of Faculty for Palestine in Toronto.

Decolonizing Ethnography through Oral History: A Self-Study of Al Naqab Center; Nadia Younes

Abstract

This paper explores the process of developing an oral history methodology for a project with the Palestinian community in Lebanon, articulating the necessity of individuals to carry out community efforts and grant them a voice in research that is for and about them. Nadia describes how the development of a participatory oral history methodology for research with historically oppressed communities involves limitations imposed by the academy. She argues that the research-researched binaries imposed by the academy need to be disrupted in order to advance new histories for Palestinians in Lebanon. Although there have been calls demanding that education play a role in the Palestinian liberation struggle, there is a serious lack of literature that highlights efforts to do so from within the Palestinian community (Qato, 2019). This research aims to document the efforts of an evolving community initiative through a decolonial framework, in an effort to decolonize research being done on Palestinians of the camps, enabling the youth at the Niqab center to speak on their own terms and allowing this research to be a collective process. After spending the six years actively working on becoming a functioning community center in Burj el Barajneh camp that addresses the needs and desires of youth in the camp, this an opportunity to reflect, not only to highlight the centrality of community work to Palestinian communities, but to envision a future that builds on the lessons learned in this process.

Biography

Nadia Younes is a community organizer and currently a Doctoral Student in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her research interests lie in decolonizing education for Palestinians in Lebanon. Her work blurs the line between academia and community, as evidenced by her involvement in the Palestinian community over the past decade. After receiving her MA in Middle Eastern Studies from the American University of Beirut in 2013, she co-founded Al Naqab Center for Youth Activities, a youth-led community center in Burj el Barajneh camp.

POHA in the Classroom: An Oral History Toolkit; Maria Bashshur Abunnasr

Abstract

This presentation will showcase a preliminary oral history toolkit designed for use with the POHA collection, to bring both the field of oral history and the Palestinian experience into the learning space of the classroom. Such a toolkit would provide a much needed alternative, both in content and in approach, to the dependency on 'traditional' historical narratives, and would reverse the narrative lens from top-down to bottom-up providing a multi-vocal, multi-perspective narrative that in its immediacy and personality has the power to amplify the historical experience and infuse history with life. Not only would a POHA toolkit encourage the dissemination of the oral histories through classroom use,

but it would also bring the Palestinian experience into sharp focus, with a face and a voice, to both those who need to hear it most and to those who have never heard it.

Biography

Maria Bashshur Abunnasr is an independent scholar whose fields of study include the history of the modern Middle East and public history, with a particular interest in and emphasis on oral history. In recent years, she has led several oral history projects in both the public sphere in collaboration with local and international NGOs and in academia in collaboration with the AUB Neighborhood Initiative for the Ras Beirut Oral History project, AUB's 150th Anniversary Oral History Project, and as a fellow at Columbia University's Center for Oral History Research. Her publications include *46 Streets, AUB's Imprint on the Streets of Ras Beirut* (2017), *AUB and Ras Beirut in 150 Years of Photographs* (2018), and *We Are In This Together: The Ras Beirut Oral History Project* (forthcoming 2019).

Session 5: Women's Histories

Chair: Huda Zurayk, Professor Emeritus, FHS-AUB

The Crisis of Presence: Oral history, Palestinian Women and the Remaking of the World; Cynthia Kreichati

Abstract

How do we work with oral histories ethnographically, in a way that is not concerned with how best to read or interpret oral history, but rather committed to rethinking it as encounter, as contingent, and as inextricably related to the circumstances and the people that compose it? How do we explode the definition of oral history beyond that of the historical method that is against the grain, that gives voice to the silenced and that “brings light to the hidden, suppressed, or marginalized narratives”?

In attending to the personal experiences of Umm Faris and Fatima Shaaban, this paper argues that thinking and writing oral histories as ethnography entails a particular register of attunement, both in terms of listening and seeing. It thus puts forth methodological considerations when conducting secondary analysis of oral history videos and audio recordings, which are important in the sense that they also contemplate how women's voices can re-write or alter not historical records but our understanding of the perpetual present.

Biography

Cynthia Kriechati is currently a PhD student in Anthropology at McGill. Her project explores the relationships between representations, practices, and politics of health and medicine in the Middle East. Trained as a pharmacist in Lebanon, Cynthia holds a Masters in sociology from the American University in Beirut and has work experience in various health related fields in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. She contributes regularly to online and print media on topics related to arts and culture in the Middle East. Her work has appeared in *Arteeast*, *Rusted Radishes*, and *Bidayat*.

Generational Narratives of Displacement of Palestinian Women from Syria; Isis Nusair

Abstract

This project emerged out of the researcher's personal interest while conducting research with Syrian refugees in Germany in 2015. Many of the people that Isis interviewed were Palestinian women who came to Germany from different parts of Syria in the last three years. The research focuses on generational intersections and departures in the narratives of these women, and how they challenge and reimagine our conception of what it means to be a "double refugee" first in Syria, and now in Germany. The focus on generational intersections is crucial for understanding the ways women from different generations speak about their displacement from Palestine in 1948, and the stories and oral histories they carried with them over the years.

The paper sheds light on how women from the younger generation imagine Palestine, and in that a relation to a place they know only through the memories of their parents and grandparents and, of course, through the internet. This seeks to underscore the gendered nature of memory and the language used to depict it. It also includes an analysis on how these narratives of crossing different borders intertwine with the layered narratives of forced exile from Palestine. These narratives become a site for processing the past and working through its current multiple displacements, and how they are embedded in power structures and the social and political events, memories and locations that are particular to each generation.

Biography

Isis Nusair is an Associate Professor of International Studies & Women's and Gender Studies at Denison University. She received her PhD in Women's and Gender Studies from Clark University. She teaches courses on transnational feminism; gendered migration; feminism in the Middle East and North Africa; gender, war and conflict; and gender and empire. Isis is the co-editor with Rhoda Kanaaneh of *Displaced at Home: Ethnicity and Gender Among Palestinians in Israel*. Her forthcoming book is tentatively titled *Permanent Transients: Iraqi Women Refugees in Jordan and the USA*. She previously served as a researcher on women's human rights in the Middle East and North Africa at Human Rights Watch and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network. She served on the editorial committee of the Middle East Research and Information Project and is a member of Jadaliyya and the Transnational Feminist Collective.

Storytelling and Reimagining Feminist Movements in Lebanon; Deema Kaedbey

Abstract

This paper is a critical self-reflection on the Dima's experiences in the Knowledge Workshop (KW), as the project manager of its feminist oral history project, the Storytellers Project. Her presentation will emphasize and analyze both the inter-generationality, and inclusivity of this archive.

First, KW started building the feminist archive with an assumption of existing intergenerational tensions and disconnections within the feminist movement in Lebanon. KW sought to better understand these conflicts and ruptures, and through that, to work towards bridging and reconnecting.

The researcher's intervention will therefore reflect on the process of working on an intergenerational archive as a process of constructing an intergenerational and multi-layered movement, with various recurrent patterns, issues and themes, as well as newly articulated concerns. She also argues that it is simplistic to always categorize young feminists and older feminists with preset concerns, discourse, or ways of organizing.

Secondly, KW was intentional in collecting oral histories in Lebanon that are not only Lebanese. Feminist oral histories show the changes in geographic, political and social realities, as experienced by women. The paper will analyze how the incorporation of Palestinian and Syrian women, of migrant domestic workers and of queer women within the stories of Lebanon, can drastically change this history.

Biography

Deema Kaedbey is the co-founder and the managing partner of the feminist organization in Beirut, the Knowledge Workshop. She is also a member of the feminist collective, Sawt al Niswa, where she has also served as a co-editor of its webspace. She has a PhD in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies from Ohio State University. She is currently consultant at the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, coordinating the Critiques of Power working group.

Session 6: Oral History and Urbanity

Chair: Ismail Sheikh Hassan, Urbanist and Researcher

War-Memoryscapes and the Grassroots Agency for Justice: Re-searching the Truth Memory Practices of Palestinians in Nahr-el Bared; Azadeh Sobout

Abstract

This paper reflects on the imageries and processes by which people of Nahr el Bared have created meaning about the past violations of their individual and collective rights. It incorporates a multi-method model in which ethnographies, oral histories, and creative expressions shed light on the grassroots perspectives of truth, loss, reparation, and justice.

The ethnographies of urbicide in Nahr el Bared and the analysis of sites of resistance within the camp expose counterstrategies and local infrastructures that were formed in response to systematic destruction of the camp, as well as the process for continuous reconstitution of the past. The paper contends that by giving voice to the community, grassroots justice practices have engaged in 'the act of truth-telling to power' as a form of resistance against destruction and forgetting.

Moreover, the paper highlights the engagement of local researchers with architects, and activists in the production of knowledge, exploring the potential of grassroots transitional justice in developing a research praxis that is diverse, justice oriented and embodied based on Transitional Justice Toolkit approach (Rooney, 2012) and exploring the conceptions of justice that engage with restoration of space, identity, memorialization and governance in the post-war reconstruction process.

Biography

Azadeh Sobout is a Postdoctoral researcher at the University of Manchester. During the past six years Dr. Azadeh has created visual and ethnographic account into the exploration of post-war geographies and narratives of displacement in Palestinian camps, bringing a new paradigmatic shift to the study of post-war reconstruction and (in)justice. She is currently leading a research project on the intersection of arts and peace building in Lebanon. Working with artists on a research project to explore the art that has emerged since the beginning of Syrian war, she is exploring how different affected communities reflect and present their own histories and identities through varied artistic or literary mediums and how different forms of arts can create avenues for peace activism.

Oral histories: Practices of Refuge and the Making of Quarantina; Diala Lteif

Abstract

This research explores oral history as a tool to counter the erasure from collective memory of the everyday and political life of Quarantina, a Beirut neighborhood that figured powerfully in the lives of successive waves of refugees to Lebanon. Mixing methods of cognitive mapping and story collection, the project aims to gather spatialized narratives of the everyday life of refugees interacting with locals.

From the early 1950s and until the start of the Lebanese civil war, this neighborhood evolved into a space of collaboration and cohesion between the native population and the Palestinian, Armenian, and Kurdish refugees who had settled in the area. Within the same time frame, Quarantina also fell victim to a series of disastrous events, which started with multiple fires in the 1960s and culminated with a massacre of the Muslim population of the area in January of 1976 led by the Christian Lebanese militias. These incidents have led to the destruction of most archival sources of the area's institutions and organization, making oral histories that much more important for the reconstruction and preservation of the narratives from that era.

The overall goal of this project is to counter some of the dominant narratives about refugee populations, by emphasizing their role as producers and contributors to the urban fabric. While addressing the lack of research about the neighborhood of Quarantina, a forgotten and marginalized district of Beirut's history and present, which however offers an invaluable window into the life of refugees as real if not legal citizens, subjects of what Henri Lefebvre (1970) called 'the right to the city'.

Biography

Diala Lteif is a Doctoral Candidate at the Geography and Planning department at the University of Toronto. She is currently a Pierre Elliot Trudeau Foundation doctoral scholar, and holds an Ontario Trillium award. She also has an MFA in transdisciplinary Design from Parsons, the New School for Design, which she pursued as a Fulbright scholar. Her research focuses on displacement due to conflict through an urban historical study of the Quarantina neighborhood in Beirut, Lebanon.

The Evidential Power of Personal Testimony: The Role of Nakba Oral Narratives in Asserting Palestinians' Right to their Land, Illustrated by a Specific Challenge Mounted to the JNF's Appropriation of the Land of Ajjur Village; Khoulood Al-Ajarma

Abstract

This paper regards oral history and personal testimonies of Nakba survivors as a powerful tool in holding colonial organizations, such as the Jewish National Fund (JNF), accountable for their actions against Palestinian refugees. It uses a case study from the village of Ajjur, today an allegedly national Israeli park named 'the British Park' established by the JNF.

The case study employs two strands of evidence against the colonial claims of the JNF: firstly, the spoken narratives of Nakba survivors, testifying to their intimate personal and proprietary relationship with the land before 1948. Secondly, the documentary proof of their ownership of the land in the form of title deeds, salvaged, and preserved by many Nakba survivors.

Moreover, academic research has cast a light on the labyrinthine legal tools devised by the new state of Israel to subvert the internationally accepted legal principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war.

Biography

Khoulood Al-Ajarma is a Doctoral Researcher in the fields of Anthropology, Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Groningen, a graduate of International Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution (MA), and Anthropology and Development Studies (Mphil). She was a visiting scholar at Oxford Center for Islamic Studies and a researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute. She won the Mediterranean Water Heroes Contest in 2018, in recognition for her work and research in the fields of climate justice, forced migration, and water. In 2019, Khoulood led a legal case against the charitable status of the JNF in the UK together with Palestine solidarity groups and Nakba survivors from the village of Ajjur. She is currently documenting the oral testimonies of Palestinian refugees in Palestine, Jordan, and Chile.

“No Mines, No Borders”: Towards an Oral History of South Lebanese Border Communities; Susann Kassem

Abstract

This paper reflects the collection of oral histories of southern Lebanese border communities by underlining the importance of connecting the oral histories of southern Lebanese to that of the Palestinians.

Sussan’s research aims to study multiple and constant spatial reorganizations of everyday life and forced migrations under the shifting borders and systems of rule in south Lebanese frontier villages. One of the major goals of this research is to investigate the strong links and active networks that existed between south Lebanon and north Palestine through the stories of the village communities. It looks at and beyond the imposed boundaries through the eyes of the people that were directly affected by them. The paper provides a brief historical overview and addresses key methodological and theoretical considerations about the recording of peasant history in the absence of written sources. It aims to further reflect on the positionality and contribution of the researcher when oral history interviews are conducted by a diaspora member of the community.

Biography

Susann Kassem is a Postdoctoral Research Officer in Middle East Studies at the University of Oxford. She holds a PhD in Anthropology from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. Her research examines the role of international interventions carried out in the name of peace in the post-Cold War era. Her current research project uses methods of oral history and historical ethnography to explore the formation of political subjectivities during the multiple reorganizations of everyday life and forced migrations under the shifting borders and systems of rule in south Lebanese frontier villages.

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